

## Southern Africa trip report, July-December 2008

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(written in January 2016)

In 2008 I conducted a study of Nile crocodile behavior in Southern Africa, and had a chance to travel extensively around the region with my two invaluable volunteers, Alex Bernstein and Sarit Reizin. We flew to Johannesburg, rented a small car, drove to Cape Town, spent some time exploring the area, rented a Toyota Hilux truck, went north to Kgalagadi, into Namibia and eventually to Etosha, turned east through Caprivi Strip, explored parts of Botswana and Zambia (unfortunately, we had to skip Zimbabwe because the crisis there was at its worst), got through Malawi to the coast of Mozambique, returned to South Africa, spent some time in Kruger, and followed the coast back to Cape Town, spending only a day in Swaziland and a few hours in Lesotho. By the time we got to Cape Town our truck was very literally falling apart and the company we rented it from (with a deposit exceeding its full cost) had disappeared, so we had to waste some time on legal proceedings and other unpleasant activities. Then we flew to Durban, rented another small car, drove to Johannesburg, and did quick side trips to Pilanesberg and Madagascar (the latter not included here). After that I had another day to explore Johannesburg area and my volunteers had to stay in Cape Town for two more months to sort out the truck situation.

Since it's been a while, I will not provide many access details and other logistics information: all that is probably outdated. Also, please note that we had unlimited access to most parks in the area, including permissions to explore the entire territory on foot and at night, drive off roads (we tried not to do that unless absolutely necessary), and live-trap whatever animals we wanted to live-trap. We also could use the services of most lodges, dive centers, whalewatching operators and tour guides for free. Explaining how we got such exclusive access is outside the scope of this report; those interested can find all details in my book *Dragon Songs*, available on Amazon. For more info on particular locations and species just email me (dinets@gmail.com).

The month(s) of visit(s) is (are) listed for each location.

### South Africa

A relatively developed country with all attributes of capitalism (excellent roads, working services, good food, and ghettos for the unlucky), South Africa is blessed with unbelievable biological diversity, particularly of flowering plants. I wish I had at least a full year to spend there. But our visit would be much less enjoyable if we didn't have special access permits in most parks: the "safety" rules are way too strict and sometimes look more like extortion schemes.

Johannesburg and Pretoria (11, 12) are surrounded by multitude of small nature reserves, covering the entire spectrum from typical zoos to unfenced nature reserves; deciding which sightings are countable can be tricky. Lion and Rhino Reserve is certainly not kosher for large mammals, but there and at adjacent Cradle of Humankind Archeological Site are lots of caves, some of which have bats. I explored four and found a bunch of **Percival's trident bats**. I also

saw a **South African hedgehog**, a lone **meerkat** and lots of interesting snakes while driving between them. Driving from Johannesburg to Cape Town is best done at night, when some stretches of the road have almost no traffic. We saw a rare **Free State pygmy mouse** and some nice owls near Bloemfontain (07); other people have seen **aardvarks** and **black-footed cats**.

Karoo National Park (07) is a beautiful, severely underappreciated park on the same road. During the day we found **vervet monkeys**, **plains zebras**, **mountain zebras**, **red hartebeests**, **tsessebes**, **black wildebeests**, **springboks**, **klipspringers**, **gemsboks**, **rheboks**, and **mountain reedbucks**. A short night drive netted an **aardwolf**, **Cape hares**, and **Hewitt's red rock hares**. Walking with flashlights around the campsite and up the road into the mountains, we found a **Karoo sengi** and **Grant's rock mouse**. At the time of our visit there was a place where you could easily see **riverine rabbit** by driving along the road on the outside of the park fence, but this population is now considered extinct.

Cape Town (07, 11) has lots of wildlife, mostly in richer neighborhoods (you can tell them by the presence of wild guineafowl walking around). **Cape grey mongoose** is common in larger parks and the (highly recommended) Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden. You can dive or snorkel with **African fur seals** in False Bay (local dive shops run fantastic trips to see them and other marine life). Rondevlei Nature Reserve had **hippo**, **marsh mongoose**, and **South African laminated vlei rats**, but you need to arrange a nighttime visit to see them (and even that didn't get us the elusive hippos). The tepui-like Table Mountain had **southern forest shrew** and **Cape sengi** on forested upper slopes (both seen at dusk). Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve had small herds of **bontebok** and **eland**. **Chacma baboons** occur on the outskirts of the city; a good place to look for them is Grabouw Pass a few miles to the east (above Gordons Bay). At the pass there is also a railroad tunnel where we found a few **lesser** and **Natal long-fingered bats**, plus a very scared **four-striped grass mouse**. Finally, the endless ghetto called Cape Flats has huge populations of **Cape dune mole-rat** (in sandy areas; try Macassar Dunes Reserve or Driftsands Nature Reserve) and **Cape mole-rat** (in harder soils; try Zeekoevlei shores). In spring, when there is a lot of new grass, you can sometimes see them fearlessly walking around, but an easier way is to find a particularly fresh molehill, remove it, and cover the opening with a leafy shrub to create shadow and lure the animal out. Locals use this method to hunt them with air guns.

Western Cape Province (08) has something like 5% of global flowering plant diversity; one botanist friend of mine left a will requesting for his ashes to be scattered there. West Coast National Park had **mountain zebra**, **bontebok**, **black wildebeest**, **gemsbok**, **steenbok**, and **Cape grysbok** (the latter two can be difficult to tell apart as local steenboks are also greyish and fluffy), **Krebs's fat mouse**, **Cape spiny mouse**, and **Cape gerbil**. Cedarberg Wilderness Area (08) is mostly interesting for its plants (particularly in winter) and herps (particularly in summer), but we also found **Cape hyrax**, **eland**, **Barbour's rock mouse** and **Verreaux's mouse** there. Lambert's Bay had a huge gannet colony and an operator running **Heaviside's dolphin** viewing tours (with near 100% success rate). We found a place with extremely rare **Van Zyl's golden moles** and actually saw one. Namaqua National Park is another botanical delight. We drove through on a morning after a very cold night and saw a **round-eared sengi** and a few **Littledale's whistling rats** sunning themselves.

Goegap Nature Reserve (08) near Springbok has the world's best desert wildflower displays in August, but the only mammals we saw were – you guessed it – **springboks**. The road from Springbok to Pofadder (08) goes through nice open desert; we drove it during the day, but later learned that **aardvarks** are sometimes seen there at night. We continued east from Pofadder after sunset and saw an **aardwolf**.

Augrabies National Park (08) is very scenic, and has nice night drives (we saw a **small-spotted genet**, a **wildcat**, a **highveld gerbil**, a few **scrub hares**, and two **Smith's red rock hares**. **Black-tailed tree rats** were easy to see around the campground. During the day there were lots of **chacma baboons**, **vervet monkeys**, **Cape hyaxes**, **klipspringers**, and **greater kudu**.

Spitzkop Nature Reserve (08) near Upington is a nice area of open grassland; the owner didn't object to us driving and walking around at night. The reserve had herds of **plains zebra**, **blesbok**, **black wildebeest**, and **springbok** (including many almost-black individuals). At night we found a few **bat-eared** and **Cape foxes** and a **desert pygmy mouse**. We spent the rest of the night driving north towards Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park and saw lots of **bat-eared foxes** and **springhares**, plus one **striped polecat**.

Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park (08) is a great place to see lots of animals against the background of tall sand dunes. We spent three days there and met lots of **cheetahs**, **lions**, **yellow mongooses** (some very tame), **common slender mongooses**, **black-backed jackals**, **southern giraffes**, **blue wildebeests**, **springboks**, **steenboks**, **gemsboks**, and **Cape ground squirrels**, but no **meerkats** (they are said to be easy to find during the rainy season). In this park we didn't get a night driving permit; the director took us on a long night drive, but all we saw was another **Cape fox**, a few **springhares**, one **gerbil mouse**, and two species of **eagle owls**.

Pilanesberg National Park (11) has lots of more common game species (including large herds of **elephants** and plenty of **lions**); it is a good place to see **blesbok**. In two days and one night we got neither **wild dogs** nor **brown hyenas** (despite finding a roadkill zebra and checking on it a few times during the night), but saw a **caracal**, a **rock dormouse**, a few **white-tailed rats**, a **Tete veld mouse** and a few **Jameson's red rock hares** (all of them at night except the caracal).

Kruger National Park (10) is, in my opinion, somewhat overrated. Almost every large species is more easily seen elsewhere; the landscapes are boring, the rules are way too strict and the southern part is a bit overcrowded. We spent a long time there studying crocodiles and looking for other wildlife, but most of our best sightings were made in situations impossible for a regular visitor, particularly while walking at night along lakeshores and streambeds, where lots of animals were waiting out the last weeks of the dry season. There we saw two **bicolored musk shrews**, an **eastern rock sengi**, a **Nyika climbing mouse**, a **common fat mouse**, a **South African spiny mouse**, many **single-striped grass mice** and **African marsh rats**, a **Mozambique thicket rat**, and lots of **southern multimammate mice**. We had a night driving permit, too, but night drives weren't terribly good: we saw a **reddish-gray musk shrew**, some **African civets** and **wildcats**, a **honey badger**, **bushveld gerbils**, **Cape** and **scrub hares**, and lots of large animals, but the best sighting was of a **striped weasel**... unfortunately, it was so far down the road that I wasn't even 100% sure it wasn't a striped polecat. During the day we saw plenty of **chacma baboons**, **vervet monkeys**, **cheetahs**, **leopards**, **lions**, **spotted hyenas**,

**yellow, common slender and dwarf mongooses, elephants** (Kruger is probably the best place to see old males with huge tusks), **bush and Cape hyraxes, plains zebras, white rhinos, common warthogs, hippos, southern giraffes, blue wildebeests, waterbucks, steenboks, klipspringers, and Cape buffalo**, plus a few **nyalas, imbabalas, common duikers, Smith's bush squirrels**, but no **wild dogs, smaller cats**, or locally rare antelopes such as **roan and Lichtenstein's hartebeest**. **Peters's and Wahlberg's epauletted fruit bats** were roosting in isolated trees in camps, while one of the buildings in the headquarters had a colony of **Anchieta's and rusty pipistrelles** under the roof (you could see them inside, but not very well). I checked every hollow tree I could find, but didn't see a single bat there, just a couple **acacia rats**. One **Welwitsch's myotis** was night-roosting under Luwuwu River bridge in the far north. **Natal multimammate mice** occurred around the headquarters.

iSimangaliso Wetlands Park (11) is a large coastal protected area on the coast of Natal. Moist forests around Sodwana Bay are an excellent place to look for shrews: in two nights we found a **Makwassie musk shrew** and a **Sclater's mouse shrew**, as well as a **woodland dormouse** and a blue **duiker**. We then spent a few days studying crocodiles in the southern part of the park, where **Krebs's fat mouse, African marsh rat, and Angoni and laminated vlei rats** were all common around Santa Lucia Lagoon (which had a few **hippos**). In the campground there were **Mauritian tomb bats** (in the showers building), **brown greater galagos**, and very aggressive **vervet monkeys**. A **banana pipistrelle** roosted in the office of the crocodile breeding center. The park had relatively few large mammals, but one night we met an incredibly friendly large **leopard** that almost jumped inside the car. We took a whalewatching tour and saw **humpback whales** and **bottlenose dolphins**.

Hluhluwe-iMfolosi Game Reserve (11) is a delightful place amidst verdant hills. We were there in October when the rains had just started, so there were plenty of baby **southern giraffes, impalas, plains zebras, nyalas, waterbucks, and white and black rhinos**. Night drives weren't very good because of the guides' obsession with **lions**, but night walks around the hilltop camp got us **red forest duikers** and a **common mole-rat**. Both **vervet** and **Sykes' blue monkeys** were common there during the day. We finally found **wild dogs** there, but they were difficult to follow in rough terrain.

Drakensberg (11) is one of the most scenic places in Africa, with an extensive network of hiking trails, but mammals are not particularly numerous there. We mostly spent time in Giant Castle area, and saw **Cape grey mongoose, Cape hyrax, steenbok, klipspringer, Natal red rock hare, and Ansorge's freetail** (there was a small colony near the rock art museum). We also saw a **black-footed cat** on a road near Stepmore, an **African pygmy mouse** near the turnoff to Sani Pass, and a **southern forest shrew** in a pile of rotten aloe leaves on the way to the pass.

Umkomaas (11) is mostly a diving destination, famous for the sardine run. We were there for tiger shark diving, but found **greater red musk shrew** in our host's garden, and got underwater views of a **humpback whale** female with calf on the way back from a dive. We saw the only **oribi** of the trip in Oribi Gorge Nature Reserve (if you can't find them along the canyon, try nearby Lake Eland Game Reserve – they had a few in a very large fenced area). We also saw a **Brant's climbing mouse** and a rare **dark-footed mouse shrew** in the canyon at night.

The southern coast of South Africa (07, 11) has an endless selection of scenic routes with dozens of nature reserves worth exploring. Addo Elephant National Park is the southernmost place to see **elephant**, **springbok**, **yellow mongoose** and other savanna species; we also saw a **Cape genet** there during a short night drive, and found a roost of **Cape** and **Geoffroy's horseshoe bats** under a bridge on the road to Port Elizabeth. Garden Route National Park has gorgeous subtropical rainforests where we saw a **common duiker** and a stunningly beautiful **spectacled dormouse**. Plettenberg Bay is the best place for whalewatching, with **Bryde's whales** reportedly common in April. We took three trips with different operators, all on the same day in late October, and saw **African fur seals** (there is a rookery on Robberg Peninsula), **southern right** and **humpback whales**, **short-beaked common**, **bottlenose** and **humpback dolphins**, and a bunch of **killer whales** happily mating after killing a common dolphin. Locals told us that it was easy to see **fynbos golden moles** foraging on surface in city parks on cold rainy nights; we spent five hours looking for them on just such a night, and briefly saw one in a ravine below Catty Sark Ave. It is probably easier in mid-winter when nights are even colder. Farther west, we saw **Saunder's vlei rat** in a large floodplain patch near Hwy 2 bridge over Knysna River in Knysna. Even better rainforests are preserved in Wilderness National Park; we explored it for one evening and part of the night, and got a **blue duiker** and a **long-tailed forest shrew**. We also spent some time in De Hoop Nature Reserve and saw lots of **bonteboks** and **rheboks**, plus **southern right whales** very close to the beach. Agulhas National Park at the southernmost tip of Africa had lots of **African marsh rats** in wetlands, easy to see at dusk.

Little Karoo (11) is an arid valley separated from the wet coast by a mountain ridge. We heard that **meerkats** were very common around Oudtshoorn and spent a whole day looking for them, but saw only a **Karoo bush rat** in the evening and a few hundred species of succulents, most of them blooming.

Gansbaai and Hermanus (07) are the best places to see **Southern right whales** up close; there is also an **African fur seal colony** on Dyer Island off Gansbaai (don't miss the chance to dive with great white sharks there). Very tame **Cape hyraxes** live along Hermanus seafront. Fernkloof Nature Reserve has some of the best fynbos (protea-dominated shrubland with uniquely diverse flora); look for **lesser dwarf shrews** under streamside logs, and for **Saunder's vlei rats** along the upper edge of the shrubland at night.

## Namibia

A perfect country for travel with children (I can't wait until my daughter turns four and I can take her there knowing that she wouldn't forget it), Namibia has decent (although mostly unpaved) roads, beautiful almost-pristine landscapes and hundreds of private game reserves covering much of the country.

Fish River Canyon (08) in the south of the country is good for hiking (especially if you need to lose weight before continuing the trip), but wildlife is rather thin. There were **mountain ground squirrels** along the rim and **Brants's whistling rats** on the bottom. Nearby Gondwana Canyon Nature Reserve was a bit livelier; it is a good place to see **Hartmann's mountain zebra**,

**Brukkaros rock mouse** (among boulders on the hillslopes at night) and **bushy-tailed hairy-footed gerbil** (in sandy patches, also at night).

Rehoboth (08) is located on the northern side of Oanob River where **common hairy-footed gerbils** live on sandy banks.

Arnhem Cave (08), easily accessible by paved road, has lots of bats. The ones I identified with some certainty were **Dent's** and **Geoffroy's horseshoe bats**, **Sundevall's roundleaf bat**, **Egyptian slit-faced bat**, **long-tailed house bat** (we saw only one), and **Natal long-fingered bat**. **Giant leaf-nosed bat** has also been reported, but we didn't see any. The cave is located in a nice rocky area where we saw a **reddish-gray musk shrew** (under a rock), a **bushveld sengi** (on top of a rock), a few **Cape ground squirrels**, and a **stone dormouse**. About two miles west is a much smaller cave with **Rüppell's horseshoe bats**.

Namib Naukluft National Park (08) is a huge area of beautiful deserts. Most visitors come to see tall red dunes at Sossusvlei. The road to the dunes is open only during daylight hours, so officially you can't see the sunrise or the sunset unless you stay at expensive Sossus View Lodge which has its own entrance, never locked. In 2008 anyone could actually use the lodge entrance if they knew about it. Driving the road to the dunes at night was a good way to see **dune hairy-footed gerbil** and some cool geckos; **gemsbok** were also frequently seen but not by us. Within walking distance from the lodge (to the S and SE) is a slot canyon where we found a splendid **Namib long-eared bat** in a deep niche. **Cape grey mongoose** visited the campground at Sesriem (the main entrance). Most of the national park is actually rocky desert; look for **Hartmann's mountain zebra** and **mountain ground squirrel** during the day, and **Jameson's red rock hare** at night.

Walvis Bay (08) is where you go whalewatching in Namibia. In September we got **African fur seals** (one tame enough to jump into the boat and be petted), **humpback whales** (one hit the boat so hard that one of my friends almost fell out; the whale got even more scared), and **Heaviside's**,  **dusky** and **bottlenose dolphins** on the same trip. If you want to get Heaviside's for certain, better plan on two-three trips. Nearby Swakopmund is mostly interesting because of many fascinating herps occurring in the area, but there are **dune hairy-footed gerbils** and **Littledale's whistling rats** living on the outskirts of the town.

A scenic granite massif called Brandberg (08) has a great assortment of rock specialists. **Dassie rats** greet you at the parking lot; in rocky canyons you can find **Roberts's flat-headed bats**, **western rock sengis**, **Kaokoveld rock hyraxes**, **klipspringers**, **pygmy rock mice**, and **Namaqua rock rats**. If you drive west towards the coast via Messum Crater (an exhilarating drive through lifeless gravel flats, Welwitschia groves and lichen fields), look for little sengis occurring for the first few miles from Brandberg – they've been recently split as **Namib round-eared sengi**.

Cape Cross (08) has a huge **African fur seal** rookery, usually patrolled by a few **black-backed jackals**. **Brown hyenas** also used to visit, but folks at the reserve headquarters said they hadn't seen any for months.

Skeleton Coast (08) is a huge reserve, but the access to most of it has been monopolized by one company with government connections, and the whole place is ridiculously overpriced.

**Springbok** and **gemsbok** occur in areas with vegetation. **Brown hyenas** are said to visit fish cleaning stations in the more accessible part on weekends when many fishermen come from Windhoek. We were there on a weekday, spent a whole night trying to lure them (hyenas, not fishermen) with a pile of bones from the restaurant, but got only **black-backed jackals**. We also found a **Namib brush-tailed gerbil** at a garbage dump, and saw a **Cape fox** after leaving the reserve and turning inland. Nearby Twyfelfontein is a good place to look for “desert” **elephants** (expect to spend a few hours driving around), and also for **Shortridge's rock mice** on rocky slopes.

Visiting Etosha National Park (08) during the dry season is a unique experience because of the numbers and diversity of animals visiting watering holes, particularly the one at Okaukuejo Camp. Expect an endless procession of **plains zebras**, **Angola giraffes**, **black-faced impalas**, **red hartebeests**, **springboks**, **greater kudus**, **eland**s, **blue wildebeests**, and **gemsboks**, occasionally interrupted by **lions**. At night the waterholes are often visited by **leopards**, **spotted hyenas**, **black-backed jackals**, **white** and **black rhinos** (black rhinos and leopards are much more common at and around Halali Camp). Small animals commonly seen during the day include **vervet monkey**, **Angolan slender mongoose**, **mountain ground squirrel**, **Smith's bush squirrel** (at Halali Camp), **Damara dik-dik** (in one particular area near Namutoni Camp) and tame **banded mongooses** and **common warthogs** (inside Namutoni Camp). More difficult to find are **Congo rope squirrel**, **side-striped jackal** and **cheetah** (we never saw the latter). Regular night drives usually produce plenty of **bat-eared foxes** and **springhares**, sometimes also **wildcats** and **common genets**. In the far west is a grassy plain known as Etosha Restricted Area; we got the much-coveted permit to enter it, but the only mammals we saw there and not elsewhere were a **South African hedgehog** and a **Damaraland mole-rat**. Rodents we found in other parts of the park included a **black-tailed tree rat** and many **southern** and **Natal multimammate mice** (the latter common at night in Okaukuejo Camp). In the “dik-dik” area near Namutoni there was an old hollow tree with a few **striped leaf-nosed bats** and **greater long-fingered bats**; we accidentally found it because we happened to be driving by at dawn when the bats were returning to the roost. We also saw one **Natal long-fingered bat** in an old water cistern at Okaukuejo.

Caprivi Strip (09) is very different from the rest of Namibia: it has extensive seasonal wetlands and is generally similar to Okavango Delta, but with very few visitors, near-zero park fees and delightfully symbolic park rules. It is also the only part of the country where you are likely to need a 4wd car with high clearance, and the only place in Namibia to see **hippos**. We were there in September; it was the dry season, but there was extensive flooding from rains upstream (in Angola). The best mammal we found in Caprivi was a **ground pangolin**. Mahango Game Reserve had sizeable herds of **sable**, **roan**, **impala**, **tsessebe**, **red lechwe**, and **southern reedbuck**; almost every hollow baobab tree had **Cape serotines** inside; **Angolan marsh rat** was very common. Mudumu National Park had excellent gallery forests with lots of **Mohol galagos** (we once found fifteen of them mobbing a python), **African civets**, **common duikers**, and **Smith's bush squirrels**. The park lodge ran boat cruises where **Cape clawless otters** and **sitatungas** were seen almost daily; we also saw a few while watching crocodiles at dawn. **Swamp musk shrews** were common at night along the river. Mamili National Park (since

renamed Nkasa Rupara National Park) had huge herds of **elephants** and unusually numerous **common duikers**. Much of the park was flooded, and the remaining dry patches had lots of rodents: **tiny fat mice**, **single-striped grass mice**, and **Shortridge's multimammate mice**. We also found a **desert pygmy mouse** on the road in.

## **Botswana** (09)

Botswana has a nice combination of desert and wetlands, but the policy of encouraging only high-end tourism means that accessing the best locations can be too expensive; look for cheaper alternatives in Namibia whenever possible. Note that the best roads are often the ones following the infamous game fences across the country; they are not shown on maps.

Maun is the base for trips to Okavango Delta (where we didn't go). We saw a **Selous' mongoose** while driving at night west of town. Instead of going to the Delta, we spent a few days observing crocodiles in the so-called Panhandle (the area upstream), but saw only two mammals worth mentioning, a **common fat mouse** and an **Angoni vlei rat**, both trapped near Shakawe. Nearby Tsodilo Hills are said to be the only place in Africa where **giant wildebeest** survived long enough to be seen by Europeans; I haven't been able to track the source of this claim. The place was particularly good for reptiles, but we also saw **Schlieffen's bats**, a **Botswanan long-eared bat**, and **Midas freetails** in rock crevasses and niches, a very shy **bushveld sengi**, a **Brant's climbing mouse**, and a few **scrub hares**.

Chobe National Park is the most visited park in the country; most people drive along the river to see huge herds of **plains zebra**, **impala**, **red lechwe**, **puku**, **blue wildebeest**, **Cape buffalo**, and **hippo**. **Angola giraffe** and **Smith's bush squirrel** are common in riverside groves. We bush-camped near the main entrance and got some friendly **elephants** grazing around the tent, as well as splendid views of **African giant shrew** and **brown greater galago**. We trapped a **Krebs's fat mouse** there, and **Angolan marsh rat** near the river. The town of Kasane near the main entrance has **elephants** and **spotted hyenas** visiting the main garbage dump; we also saw another **Selous' mongoose** at night along the road to the airport.

Khama Rhino Sanctuary had both **black** and **white rhinos** in good numbers and easily approachable. We drove there to see a **brown hyena** that was reported to visit the campground. After a long night's vigil we saw it only briefly, but our pile of meat leftovers attracted a **Namaqua rock rat**. **Mohol galago**, **South African pouched mouse**, **red rock rat** and **Cape hare** were very common. Small Tachila Nature Reserve near Francistown had **klipspringers**.

The best place we visited in Botswana was Central Kalahari Game Reserve. You need to be fully self-sufficient and have enough water to walk out in case of car breakdown to visit it. Highlights of our visit included something like a dozen **honey badgers** in one day (we lost count), hundreds of **gemsbok**, a huge migrating herd of **springbok**, lots of **Cape porcupines** around campsites, a **caracal**, a male **lion** claimed to be the largest in Africa at the time (the area is famous for large black-maned lions), and a tame **Woosnam's broad-headed mouse**. There were also **Cape ground squirrels** and **Namaqualand gerbils**. We missed on **wild dogs** and **brown hyenas**, but they are seen regularly, and we found tracks of both.



## Zambia (09)

A fascinating country with outstanding national parks and some of the best wetlands in Africa. Unfortunately, we didn't get to the far northwest (where numerous endemics co-occur with a bunch of species shared only with Katanga Province of DRC) or to the famous Bangweulu Swamps. But it was still almost too good to be true; the only problem was the roads, which were mostly very bad.

Victoria Falls is the tourist capital of the country. **Blasius's** and **Lander's horseshoe bats** roosted in an abandoned military building near the bridge to Zimbabwe. Nearby Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park had common game species; the only small mammal we saw there was **African pygmy mouse**. The walls of Zambezi Canyon have caves with bat roosts, but they are difficult to access, and rafting through the canyon is only allowed during daylight hours. We managed to get into one rock crevasse below the rimside hamlet of Chipata and found a few **white-bellied freetails** there. The bottom of the canyon had a few tiny wetland patches along the calmer stretches of the river; we found a **greater dwarf shrew** under some flotsam in one of such patches on the Zimbabwe side.

Lochinwar National Park is the most accessible part of huge Kafue Wetlands. "Accessible" means that the roads are survivable, but poorly installed dental fillings will fall out. **Nigerian freetails** roosted in a huge baobab tree near the access road. We spent a day and a night driving and walking around the park, and got a **short-snouted sengi**, **yellow-backed** and **blue duikers**, a few **puku**, hundreds of **Kafue lechwe** in large herds, lots of **impalas** and **waterbucks**, a **savanna gerbil**, a few **single-striped grass mice**, an **African marsh rat**, and a couple **lesser cane rats**. All of them except the duikers were along the lakeshores.

There is a small private wetland near Lusaka with a tiny introduced herd of **black lechwe** (you have to get to Bangweulu Swamps to see more of them). While driving there we bought a live **Ansell's mole-rat** from a kid on the roadside, and released it near a mole-rat colony down the road. Unfortunately there was so much dust constantly blanketing the road that we couldn't even photograph the rarity.

Lower Zambezi National Park was beautiful and pristine, but the access road through almost-lifeless miombo forests to the riverside lodge was so bad that all sane visitors got there by plane or boat. **Rüppell's pipistrelles** and **Rendall's serotines** roosted in cabin roofs. At the time of our visit a semi-tame **leopard** visited the lodge nightly, excessively fearless **elephants** were often grazing between cabins, and **Neave's mice** lived around the kitchen. We took a regular game drive around the lodge and saw **common dwarf mongooses**, a **honey badger**, an **imbabala**, lots of **waterbucks** and **impalas**, and a **single-striped grass mouse** (plus a huge colony of Southern carmine bee-eaters). There were lots of **hippos** in the river.

South Luangwa National Park is another one of my favorite places in Africa. We spent ten days there and saw over forty species of mammals. Most of big game and all tourists were concentrated along the river, where you could see huge herds of **Cape buffalo**, lots of **puku**,

**eland, impala and waterbuck** (intermediate between common and defassa), endemic subspecies of **giraffe** and **plains zebra**, as well as **klipspringer, Sharpe's grysbok, vervet monkey, and yellow baboon** of Kinda subspecies. Night drives were great, with **leopards, Angolan and rusty-spotted genets, and African civets** seen almost every night, and five species of mongoose in one night (**marsh, Egyptian, white-tailed, bushy-tailed, and Meller's mongooses**).

Upstream from most lodges were grasslands where **slender and banded mongooses** and **black-backed jackal** occurred during the day and **four-toed sengi, South African spiny mouse and scrub hare** at night. For some reason, during daytime drives we often saw **giraffes and elephants** sleeping on the ground, which is almost impossible to see elsewhere. **Wood's and Egyptian slit-faced bats** and **lesser woolly bats** roosted in lodge buildings, while **Dobson's epauletted fruit bats** roosted in trees around the lodges, and **Natal multimammate mice** lived under cabins. The river contains one of Africa's largest **hippo** herds (inquire about the possibility of using the "hippo hide"). The huge territory away from the river, covered with endless miombo woodland with a few grassy openings, sees almost no visitors and had few large mammals (it was the dry season), although sometimes we saw an **imbabala**, a small herd of **blue wildebeest** (also of an endemic subspecies), a **Lichtenstein's hartebeest** or a **common duiker** there. But these forests were full of interesting rodents: look for **Smith's bush squirrel, mutable sun squirrel, small-eared dormouse, grey and chestnut climbing mice, woodland thicket rat, Acacia rat, and Nyika rock rat. African black shrew** was common in deep, shady ravines. The steep slopes bordering the valley (accessible only by foot) had **Kaiser's rock rats** and a small cave with **Hildebrandt's horseshoe bat, Noack's roundleaf bat, striped leaf-nosed bat, hairy and large-eared slit-faced bats, and Pitman's shrews** feeding on cockroaches. On our last morning in the park a pride of **lions** killed a buffalo in front of our truck.

## Malawi (10)

A beautiful country, verdant and delightfully compact, Malawi is definitely worth a long trip. There are lots of endemics in the lush northern highlands, but we only had time to explore the more arid southern part.

Lilongwe, the capital, has a forest reserve in the center of the city. Half a night of spotlighting there produced a **blue duiker** and a **Kellen's dormouse**. Folks at the forestry department showed us an abandoned building with a colony of **Angolan fretails**.

Lake Malawi National Park is mostly a diving destination (highly recommended, even if you can only snorkel), but there are rocky islands offshore where **Rudd's mouse** and **Nyika rock rat** are common, and **African civets** visit campsites at night. One house in the village of Monkey Bay had a **Mauritian tomb bat** colony.

Zomba Plateau is the most accessible of numerous "sky islands" of southern Malawi and Mozambique. During the day the only mammal you are likely to see is **red bush squirrel** (although birding is pretty good), but at night there was plenty of small stuff running around: we saw a **greater grey-brown musk shrew, a dusky sengi, a grey-bellied pygmy mouse, and what I think was a delectable soft-furred mouse**.

Liwonde National Park has excellent habitat diversity. In addition to more commonly seen big game, it had lots of **imbabala**, **sable** (you needed a guide to find them) and **southern reedbuck**. Small species we saw in two days and one night included **swamp marsh shrew**, **Damara woolly bat** (roosting in the lodge), **Angolan genet**, **striped bush squirrel**, and **red rock rat**. All except the rock rat were within 200 m of the lodge. We also found a tiny colony of **Persian trident bats** in a baobab tree.

Lengwe NP is famous for its waterholes. A few hours of waiting in a blind set up at one of those produced dozens of **imbabalas**, **nyalas** and **greater kudu**, over a hundred **vervet monkeys**, a few **yellow baboons**, and a huge male **black bushpig**. Hyraxes living in rocky outcrops are **Johnston's rock hyraxes**. Small mammals seemed a bit scarce, but we ended up seeing **mutable sun squirrel**, **Johnston's dormouse** (it jumped out when I looked into a hollow tree), and **single-striped grass mouse**.

### Mozambique (10)

In addition to nice diving locations (in Tofo we saw dozens of giant mantas and whale sharks in one dive), the southern half of the country (the only one we visited) has one famous national park and a few isolated mountains with cloud forests and lots of endemics. We didn't have time to explore these mountains, but tried to get to montane forests by driving up to the border with Zimbabwe, where we found only badly deteriorated shrubland with a couple interesting birds and no mammals. The famous national park, Gorongosa, charged exorbitant fees at the time of our visit, so we mostly explored the access road. There we saw the only **sun** of the trip and a few **red bush squirrels**.

South of Zambezi River crossing called Mutarara (the one you get to if you leave Malawi through the southernmost border crossing) we drove along a beautiful road through forested hills, and explored the woods for part of the night. Here we got **Gorongosa gerbil**, **single-striped grass mouse**, and **Mashona mole-rat** (calmly walking across the road)

At the time of our visit it was still easy to cross the border between Kruger National Park in South Africa and Limpopo National Park in Mozambique. While in Kruger, we got a tip from a ranger and hiked from Shingwedzi Camp to a small cave located about five miles inside Mozambique. There we found a few **Dent's horseshoe bats** of Swinny's subspecies, one **Darling's horseshoe bat**, lots of **bushveld horseshoe bats** and **Sundevall's roundleaf bats**, plus a **woodland thicket rat** along the trail.

Other species seen in Mozambique included **Grant's galago** (in a roadside forest near Xai-Xai), **South African spiny mouse** (trapped in the same forest), **lesser gray-brown musk shrew** (in a marsh near the access road to Tofo), **mutable sun squirrel** (on hotel grounds in Tofo), and **Smith's bush squirrel** (on the outskirts of Vilanculos). **Dugongs** are occasionally seen during diving trips to Bazaruto Archipelago from Vilanculos, but we didn't see any.

### Swaziland (11)

We very briefly visited the country's only national park, Hlane, and easily saw some **black wildebeest** and **vervet monkeys**. The park gets few visitors and is definitely worth exploring.

### **Lesotho** (11)

We did not have visas to Lesotho, but heavy fog at Sani Pass allowed us to enter the country without stopping at the checkpoint and spend a couple hours exploring the beautiful Tibet-like plateau adjacent to the border. The only mammal we saw was a very plumpy **Slogget's vlei rat** perching on top of a rock pile near the summit of one of roadside hills.