



ROYLE SAFARIS

Kalahari Wildlife

Destination: Western & Northern Cape, South Africa

Duration: 8 Days **Dates:** 4th August – 11th August 2015

-  Watching many Great White Sharks including natural predations & breaches
-  Seeing the rare Aardvark, Aardwolf, Black-footed Cat & James's Red-rock Hare
-  Watching a Black-footed Cat eat a Spike-heeled Lark next to the vehicle at night
-  Seeing nearly 190 different species of birds throughout the tour
-  Coming across a family of South African porcupines including tiny babies
-  Enjoying game drives at day and night in the Karoo and Kalahari of South Africa
-  Having a whale and shark watching experience from a chartered Cessna
-  Watching in awe as a 4.5m Great White Shark visited our boat numerous times
-  Seeing a total of 63 species of mammals including some of Africa's most elusive
-  Having 2 Southern Right Whales come next to the boat for over 1 incredible hour

Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
Rob Lawrence (Cage Diving Boat Operator)
Kim, Luke, Gary & Wellington (Cage Diving Boat Crew)
Thabo, Serge & Nzoki (Robben Island Driver & Guides)
Ken (Whale Watching Guide)
David Austin (Cessna Pilot)
Billy (Overberg Birding Guide)
John Tinkler & Brian (Kalahari & Karoo Guide)
Jared Wright (Mokala National Park Night Safari Guide)
Steri, Peter & Martina (Guides & Black-footed Cat Scientist in Karoo)

Participants

Mr. Derek Howes
Mrs. Sally Howes
Mrs. Joyce Hoy

Overview

Days 1-8: Western Cape

Days 9-11: Hermanus

Day 12: Cape Town

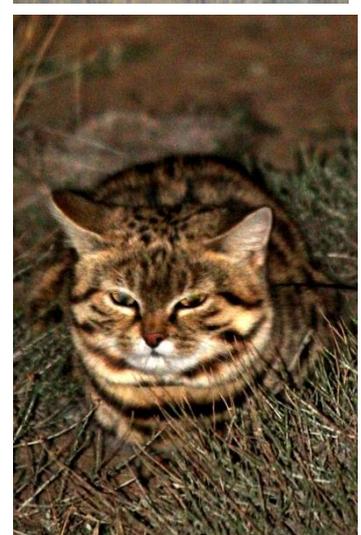
Day 13: Witsand

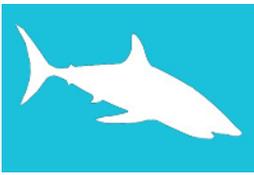
Days 14-15: Marrick Farm

Days 16-17: Mokala NP

Days 18-19: Karoo Farm

Day 20: Cape Town





Day by Day Breakdown

Overview

Before 1976 not many people knew of the Great-white Shark, the Spielberg film *Jaws* made the animal infamous and scared a generation out of the water. The real great-white is very different from the marauding, blood-thirsty killing machine that the film portrays; but it has taken until very recently for this view to be shared with the wider public. South Africa is one of only 3-4 places in the world where you are able to come face to face with this incredible animal. But it is the only place where you can witness natural predations and behaviour on a regular basis. One of the amazing behaviours that is commonly displayed here being the spectacular polaris breach hunting technique. This trip focused heavily on the breaching behaviour and the great-white shark as a whole for the first week or so. Whilst focused on the sharks around False Bay, south of Cape Town we would explore the city and its vast environs, some of which are home to stunning scenery and wonderful wildlife. From here we would head further east along the coast to Hermanus and the best land-based whale watching in the world, but we would not only watch the whales from the land but also the sea and air. The whales in question the once nearly extinct Southern Right Whale; now coming back in numbers this whale is one of the world's largest ever organisms and comes in large numbers to the bays of South Africa in winter to calve and breed. Also around here are various bird watching destinations and we would take these in too before traveling back to Cape Town and further onwards. This time north-east and into the Kalahari. This dry ecosystem stretches from norther-east South Africa into Botswana and Namibia and is home to huge numbers of wildlife, but it was not the 'normal' big five and other typical safari animals that we would be targeting here. We would also be visiting an ascetically similar (although ecologically distinct) ecosystem called the Karoo. With the help of a local specialist guide we would be visiting some farms that are well off the beaten track in search of rarities like Aardvark, Aardwolf, Red-rock Hares and Pangolins. All of these animals are very elusive, usually endangered and very difficult to see elsewhere.

On the face of it South Africa is a very typical and common safari or wildlife watching destination and a 3 week tour here would be of no surprise to anyone, but when you mention the wildlife that this particular is hoping for and targeting, it becomes a wildlife watching trip with a difference. Great-white sharks, southern right whales, blue cranes, aardvarks and elephant-shrews all in one trip is not the normal return from a safari in Southern Africa. And it is that which makes the country of South Africa such an incredible and wonderful place to visit for wildlife. With many of the amenities of the modern world and great food and hospitality we were very confident before the trip that this would a success and with the various sightings we had I think the trip couldn't have gone much better.

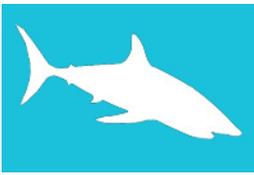
Navigating the perils of bad weather (as so much of this tour is weather dependant), long distances of travelling, sea sickness and late nights in the cold windy air of the Karoo would be a challenge for Martin and John to overcome, but with so many options and so much wildlife to do and see in South Africa the trip barely skipped a beat when the storms, wind or a cold front stepped in. A great attitude from our clients also helped as the long hours and sometimes unfavourable conditions threatened to take its toll. But by persevering and the visiting the well-researched locations we were able to see the vast majority of what we targeted (no mean feat for such a specialist tour).



Day 1 **Simonstown**

Arrival & Wildlife Watching

The arrival flight for Derek and Sally was delayed by an hour, which is not too bad and we still had the best part of a full day to explore the area around Simonstown. They shared their flight with their friend Joyce who would be joining the trip for the final week or so. For now there was a brief introduction to Martin at the airport and then she would spend the time preceding joining us with her sister in the town of Onrus River. We then left Joyce with her sister at the airport and Martin, Derek and Sally loaded the luggage into the hire car and headed south through the suburbs of Cape Town towards the large bay on the southern edge of the sprawling city, False Bay. Driving from Kommetje to Fishoek took us over a rise and the bay lay out in front of us. After driving from Fishoek around the bay to Simsonstown and checking into the accommodation we decided to visit Cape Point inside Table Mountain National Park as we had made such good time. On the way to the park we had a very brief view of a southern right whale in False Bay, the whale only surfaced once and fluked but we would be spending more time later in the trip with the southern right whales and so we didn't wait for the whale to surface again and headed to the park's entrance. The park is a vast expanse of limestone and fynbos. The fynbos being one of the world's 6 floral kingdoms and the only one confined to one country and by default by far the smallest floral kingdom. Comprising

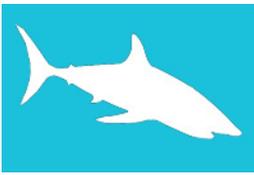


some 9,000 plus species of plants the fynbos is unique to the Western Cape of South Africa, this high level of plant endemism has led to speciation on a vast scale and many of the species of invertebrate, amphibian, reptile and bird (as well as surprising number of mammals) are endemic to the Western and Northern Capes of South Africa. The fynbos is defined by the protea, a group of plants that are the national emblem of South Africa and grow the largest of the fynbos. They have very brightly coloured blooms and attract many of the region's most colourful bird species. But the larger protea species aside the plants here are all small, usually lower than 30cm and that is ideal for the very windswept coastal plains and rocky points that they inhabit. We arrived during the height of the winter and as a result many of the fynbos was not in flower, the park is also subject to natural (and manmade) fires to help fertilise the soil and continue the natural cycle of the region; the combination of low and usually dull coloured vegetation and burn sections gives a barren and desolate appearance, an appearance which vanishes when you spend a good amount of time moving slowly through the park. By doing this you can see the occasional burst of colour of some of the fynbos that flower during the winter, as well as the iridescent sunbirds as they move from flower to flower collecting the sweet nectar. We moved slowly through the park and visited a couple of the bays, firstly Buffles Bay. This is a nice sandy beach with a rocky spit of land, baboons sometimes come down to this beach and comb the rocks exposed by the low tide for food and also during the Austral autumn it is possible to see aggregations of spotted-gully sharks in the breakers as they come together to breed. Whilst we didn't see the baboons or sharks in Buffles Bay we did have lots of bird sightings today including the omnipresent Hartlaub's gull, Cape gull, great cormorant, Cape cormorant, hadeda ibis, African sacred ibis, Cape wagtail as well as nice sightings of rock kestrels, southern double-collared sunbirds, greater flamingos and white-necked ravens. We then went to the world famous Cape of Good Hope on the south-west coast of Africa, around here we found a pair of ostriches, male and female and we had a great sighting as they walked close to the car and away into the fynbos. Also around here was a small herd of eland, the largest antelope in the world seems a little out of place in this windswept and rain battered low vegetation but the eland are naturally found here and have survived the extinctions of several other species as Europeans started to hunt the lions, leopards, elephants, rhinos, giraffes and other animals from the Cape region around 400 years ago (up until as recently as the 1940's). Rain started to fall a little as we left the park at around sunset, we headed back to the accommodation and then left for dinner in the evening. We dined in a seafood restaurant near the famous Boulder's Beach penguin colony and we had several penguins around the entrance of the restaurant. The heavy rain that fell overnight was not a problem to the penguins, however the wind was picking up and more importantly from the south-east and these conditions are very bad for the shark diving trips. We had an email at the guest house confirming that the trips had been cancelled for tomorrow. This is unfortunate but not unexpected news and was the reason we budgeted many trips out onto the boat for the sharks. We would further explore the park tomorrow and see if we could find some of the other wildlife that eluded us this afternoon.

Day 2 **Cape Point**

Wildlife Watching

With the weather making shark trips today impossible we decided instead to visit Cape Point once again. It was a wet and windy day but it didn't stop us from seeing a beautiful malachite sunbird as well as the usual bird species in the park. Today we drove direct to the Cape Point which is a little way further on from the Cape of Good Hope. We took the funicular up the last hundred meters or so and then walked around some of the lookouts, including one that offered a great view over an endemic Cape cormorant colony. These small black birds with a red knob on the top of their bill make their nests on the steepest and seemingly slipperiest narrow rock ledges high up and overlooking the Cape of Good Hope. Nearly the entire world's population of Cape cormorants lives in the Table Mountain National Park and this is one of the largest colonies. We also climbed to the lighthouse that marks Cape Point itself and offers views both east and west, east into False Bay, west into the Atlantic and of course south out over the rocky peninsular of Cape Point and then to the South Atlantic, Southern Ocean and Antarctica the further south you go. The rain closed in on us here, we watched the advancing rain as it moved over the raging ocean and once it reached us we headed down to the café and had some tea and coffee to warm up. After arriving here early and having the park to ourselves when we arrived the car park was now chock-a-block with vehicles and tour buses, the funicular being full on each journey and viewpoints we had to ourselves now occupied by hordes of people. This is one of the busiest parks in the whole of Africa and today was no exception. We then drove around to the Cape of Good Hope again and found a group of 7 ostriches, including 4 chicks, they were around half of the size of the adults and had lost most of their stripy feathers. They were accompanied by an adult male, which is normal in ostrich society. The females in a group will lay their eggs in a communal nest and the resident male (or sometimes males) will take over the incubation and protect the clutch and the chicks once they hatch. We watched the chicks following the male and also the other adults (two females) feeding just next to the road, picking up seeds, insects and anything edible really. Ostriches are not very fussy eaters and have been found with all sorts of objects in their stomachs. They are known to swallow large objects which is down to their rock eating behaviour, by swallowing rocks they are stored in their gizzard and used to help digestion by physically breaking down the plant material in the gizzard as they cannot chew their food into smaller pieces before swallowing. We then went to Diaz monument which marks the spot where the Portuguese explorer Bartolemu Diaz landed in the late 1400's, that was the first time a European was documented to have landed in South Africa. Around the monument were some



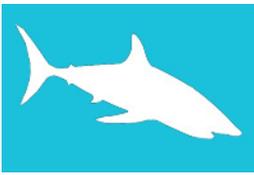
nice birds including Cape grassbird, Egyptian geese, hadeda ibis, African sacred ibis, Cape francolins, orange-bellied sunbirds and southern double-collared sunbirds. From there we tried Buffles Bay again and this time found the resident troop of chacma baboons. But after the high profile removal of Titus (the dominant male of the largest and most famous troop in Cape Town) a few years back the baboons have been under a regime of intimidation. The attempt to reinstall the fear of people into the baboon population with a hope that the home raids, car raids, ambush food snatches and the rare human attack come to an end. As a result the usually very confident baboons were very wary of our vehicle and we were not allowed very close to them before they moved off and into deeper vegetation. Further around in Buffles Bay we found a pair of ostriches and a small family of Cape mountain zebra. We approached the zebra to see if we could get closer looks and were amazed at how close we were able to get to them as they fed on the grass growing around the fynbos. The group composed of a male and female and their two foals. It was amazing that they tolerated our presence for as long as they did and remained very calm and ignored us. Eventually we did outstay our welcome and the stallion snorted and positioned himself between us and the foals and we took this polite signal as a sign to move off. So we left the small zebra family to their foraging and carried on around the park. We then enjoyed very nice sightings of an orange-bellied sunbird feeding on fynbos flowers next to the road, following the small nectar feeding bird as it patrolled the flowers in its roadside territory we got a very close up view and also some great pictures. We had nice views of a pair of white-necked ravens in the car park of Buffles Bay before leaving and heading to the opposite side of the peninsula and to Olifontbos, here we had more ostriches and also a group of 3 endemic bontebok. This very endangered antelope only has a range around 250 kilometres along the Western Cape and the Table Mountain National Park is one of the last strongholds of the species that did very well to survive amidst much hunting for food and trophies over the years. Up on the hillside were a couple of huge eland, their enormous size further exemplified in comparison to the dainty bontebok. Getting out of the vehicle at Olifontbos and walking along the beach we had some time photographing the waves breaking on the shore as well as close up views of a small colony of sandwich terns, rock martins, many African sacred ibis and some interesting fynbos species such as Cape grassbirds, southern tchagra, southern boubou and Cape rock thrushes. From here we headed back to the guest house and despite the weather having cleared up a lot the swell and wind was still not favourable and unsurprisingly the disappointing note from the shark boat met our arrival and we were informed that tomorrow's shark trips were cancelled again. The forecast for the following days was much improved and we were very confident that we would be out on the water with the magnificent sharks of False Bay in no time.



Day 3 Boulders Beach & Rondevlei

Wildlife Watching

This morning we once again breakfasted at the guest house, looking out over the bay at the increasing swell, but the skies were clearer today and we decided to head to Boulders Beach. This is a section of Table Mountain National Park located inside Simonstown and dedicated to a colony of African penguins. In 1982 a pair of African penguins arrived at the rocky beach and bred, since then the area has seen a rapid rise in the number of penguins and reached a peak of over 4,000 at one point. The area being a great location as it is sheltered, close to the deep waters off Cape Point and also free from terrestrial predators because of its proximity to human habitation (that is until cats and dogs started to take their toll). But the largest threat to the penguins currently is the decline in their natural food, the shrimp around the Cape. Increases in the shrimp farming around the Cape have seen drastic declines in their numbers. This has resulted in equally large declines in the penguins numbers. In fact one of the most reliable theories as to why the penguins arrived here in the first place (penguins were a rare occurrence here before 1982) is because of the shrimp fisheries along the west coast of South Africa and southern Namibia had seen them abandon their formers colonies in search of new ones. The population is declining at a slower rate that previously now and there is pressure building on the fisheries to introduce tighter quotas and also off seasons to allow the stocks to naturally recover from the harvests. Since the birds started to arrive in the early 80's and their international status as an endangered species the beach was incorporated into the national park. We arrived in the morning, being only around 300m downhill from our guesthouse we didn't have to get up at the crack of dawn to get there in time for the early morning light. As usual the area around the beach was full of penguins, it was the beginning of the nesting season and we watched as the penguins were in various stages of their courtship, nesting and there were also around 12 of last years chicks still with their down. These chicks must have hatched late on and were well behind the other yearlings who played and surfed in the water just off the beach. So we sat and watched the different age classes of penguins (the black and white adults; most of which were running back and forth from the ocean and entering into courtship rituals; the slate blue subadults and then the downy chicks huddling together and hoping for the day when they have their waterproof feathers and they can enter the water), we also walked the boardwalks and saw some of the nests had eggs already in them with attentive parents keeping an eye on them. We left the main breeding area and went to another beach nearby, this is where we can go onto the beach itself with the penguins, there are usually some penguins here but as people can go here too there are usually less.

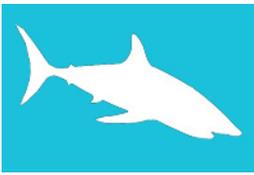


But we thought it was worth a try and also the rock hyraxes are often seen sunbathing around the beach huts. When we entered the beach there were some penguins but they left (as a family with children came running onto the beach) and swam away (presumably to the other side of the colony, where the noisy primates have to stick to the boardwalk). But we did get nice close up views of the hyrax using the benches for their own sunbathing and, being very used to people, allowing us to get very close. We then left and spotted a malachite sunbird and Cape rock thrush in the vegetation before heading into Simonstown centre for some lunch. After lunch we headed further east around the bay to Rondevlei wetlands, this small wetland sanctuary just between Muizenberg and Maccassar Beach is a haven for water birds, as well as some hippos, Cape grysbok, marsh mongoose, caracal and reptiles and amphibians. The wind was picking up considerably and we could understand why the shark trips had been cancelled. Even when the water looked calm from Simonstown and Fishoek the wind and swell could be massive at the island. The island is in a straight line from Maccassar Beach and the opening of False Bay and when the wind is blowing from the south-west the wind brings swell from the south Atlantic / Southern Oceans and the effects can be very disconcerting when on a small boat surrounded by large great-white sharks. Because we were now in the line of the wind we were chilled a bit and the strong winds blowing across the water and reeds also affected the birds. We saw some birds including yellow-billed duck, Cape shoveler, red-knobbed coot, African purple gallinule, greater flamingo, hadeda ibis, African spoonbill, red-billed teal and grey heron amongst others, we didn't see the numbers that are often present at Rondevlei. On the way back to the guest house we stopped at Sunrise beach and Derek went to photograph some of the acrobatic kite surfers that were some of the few taking advantage of the strong winds. They were sailing back and forth along the surf before jumping high into the air and hoping to land gracefully back on the waves, but often splashing back down into the breakers. At sunset we arrived back at the guesthouse, changed and showered and then headed out for dinner. The best news being that we had no news on cancellations, so tomorrow we would be out on the water and better still the forecast looked very good for the next few days.

Day 4 Seal Island

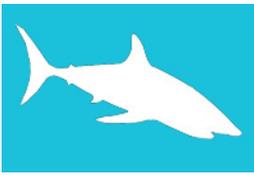
Shark Watching

This morning we rose earlier than usual and with packed breakfast from the guest house in hand we headed down to the harbour. We were greeted by Kim, who would be one of the crew on the boat and we waited for the rest of the group to get there. Once everyone was assembled we headed onto the boat and met Rob (the skipper and old acquaintance of Martin's), Gary and Luke who would make up the rest of the crew. A short safety briefing was done and we departed for the island. The sky was still inky dark when we set off, but as we got nearer and nearer to the island the sun started to peer from the eastern hills overlooking the bay and then the golden glow started to fill the sky. The sunrises over the bay can be spectacular and this was no exception. The conditions were pretty good, not perfect as the wind was a northerly and really a south-easterly is the one that gets the sharks really active. But there were some seals in the water and around the Launchpad. The Launchpad is the area around the south tip of the island, this is very shallow, with large waves regularly breaking over it. Here the seals aggregate and play in the surf until they pluck up enough courage and leave en masse to the safety of the open ocean and their offshore fishing grounds. However this dash for freedom comes at a cost, for around 50m around the island there is a deep channel, this is the gauntlet that the seals have to run. This channel allows the sharks the perfect ambush location and the sharks here have perfected the polaris breach. Most great-white sharks attack fast moving fur seals and sea lions with a powerful and quick hit from below and behind; aiming to incapacitate the seal in one hit and then feed on the dead or dying seal at its leisure. The sharks here have the added advantage of a deeper channel than most other populations and so the speed they can muster in their vertical attack is phenomenal and often enough to propel even the largest shark clear out of the water in a breach that rivals any predatory behaviour in the natural world. Because this hunting is best done in the first hour or two around sunrise (because the sun's rays do not penetrate deep enough into the water for the seals to see the sharks but the sharks can see the silhouette of the seals well and therefore the shark shave all of the advantages), we wait on the boat and scan the island and waters for breaches, chases at the surface (which occur if the shark misses the seal and then attempts to grab the seal at the surface, this only usually lasts a short while as the shark is not very manoeuvrable (well compared to a seal) and tires quicker than the seal) or flocks of gulls which often indicate a successful hunt. At any of these three things we will speed over and see what is going on and hopefully see the action close up. On a very good day there could be up to 50 of these events per morning, on average during this time of year there are between 20-30 predations per morning. However the wind not being perfect we didn't have those numbers. But Rob did see one breach, however it was very far away and from his experience by the time we get there the shark and seal would be gone and we could be missing the potential of more predations around the island. So we stayed a while longer; after a while the seals didn't look like they were in the mood to leave the Launchpad and no groups were coming back to the island after a few days out at sea, so we decided to try the decoy. If the sharks are not very cooperative with the live seals and the seals are not coming and going freely from the island we have a trick up our selves. A large rubber seal decoy (made to look like a seal pup) is towed behind the boat at the speed of the average travelling seal. We ten all train our eyes and cameras on the decoy and wait for the explosive eruption of a 1-2 tonne white and grey missile out of the sea. We tried the decoy around the island twice and then went out to York shoals a little further off, this is a shallow reef where sharks are also known to aggregate and is close to where Rob saw the breach this morning. We then went back to the Launchpad and set the cage, the visibility was not very good, the



wind was not clearing lots of the debris from the island, so we didn't hope for great underwater sightings but we could see well enough from the top deck, looking down into the gloom. The chum and baits went into the water, the chum used now is only water and frozen flathead and tuna heads, and the baits were one tuna head and one flathead. Neither of the baits was allowed to be eaten by the shark and the chum is designed to not have any nutritional value, as so not to lead the sharks to associate boats and people etc with food. Of course this is not always abided by every operator. But Rob is very conscientious in his approach and very vocal about people who break these simple rules. Having been established in the bay for around 20 years and the first person to run shark trips in False Bay he feels like he has a sense of ownership and of responsibility. When shark cage diving is done properly the sharks are left uninjured (from not being led by the bait into the cages) and they are also left (if anything) a little frustrated and hungry, so if the sharks learn to associate anything with humans and boats it would be that they are not edible and that all of the effort they exert in trying to get some of the food that they can see and smell they get nothing in return. For everyone who thinks cage diving is leading to an increase in shark attacks, one has to consider that they are not 'training' sharks to attack people (even if sharks did associate boats and cage diving with food, this is no correlation to surfers and swimmers getting attacked as neither cage diving operation and surfer or swimming look or act alike in anyway), and instead what they are doing is showcasing sharks (an animal very misunderstood and difficult to see in the wild) doing what they do (which is usually just swimming gracefully around like any major top predator and minding their own business); this is increasing the good feeling towards sharks and also educating people to the realities of sharks which is that they are definitely not mindless man-eating killing machines; but intelligent predators which have the same roles and social structures as any other large carnivores such as wolves, big cats and dolphins.

After around 15 minutes of the baits being in and chum slick being established we were 'buzzed' by our first shark, the huge 4.6m female known as Prop Guard. This particular shark is one of the larger sharks that is regularly seen at Seal Island, the name comes from last season when she was sporting scars on her back and leading edge of the dorsal fin that were made from a run in with a boat propeller. The scars were only just visible and the massive gashes that were present last year had pretty much healed. This is a great example of the healing power of sharks, which is now subject of great scientific investigation, as the ramifications for the medicinal world are fantastic. After skirting by the back of the boat a couple of times she left and it was another 20 minutes before a smaller (2.5m) shark came past for a few minutes. This shark then disappeared, another one of the 3-4 operators out of Simonstown had a shark with their boat for a short while, but in general it was quiet. But as we collected the cage and started to come back to Simonstown we considered that we had 5 different sharks (measuring between 2.5 – 4.6m) come and visit our boat this morning, we had a couple that stayed around the baits for a few minutes and others that did little more than swim past us. It was a nice introduction to the sharks and the island but we hoped for better in the coming trips. One of which was coming up this afternoon, so back on shore we headed to the café next door to Rob's shop and had some tea and coffee before meeting up with the next group and going back out. The sun as very high in the sky and the day was turning out to be a very good one. Conditions in the water had not improved very much but we still hoped for more activity around the boat and baits. On the way out we heard of two southern right whales that were in the bay and we would have a little look for them on the way back in. The pattern of the afternoon is slightly different than the morning as the sharks do not naturally hunt very much after around 9am, so we didn't wait and watch for natural predations instead we went straight for the cage diving (trying a different spot to this morning) and then after this we would tow the decoy for a while before departing for home. Early on we had a playful shark around the boat, this shark was very quick (around 2.3m long) and she was only interested in the bait and after realising she wasn't going to get any she left and was quickly replaced by a slightly larger shark (2.8m) who stayed around a little longer, this second shark was very pale and appeared to be grey all over, a nice distinguishing feature. This shark was then in turn scared off by a larger shark (3m) who stayed around a while longer. When the sharks come and stay a while they typically circle the boat near the surface and then deeper (just out of view from the surface) and then go underneath, before coming up and trying to get at the baits, it is then the job of the bait boy (in this case Gary) to keep the shark away from the bait but leading the shark towards the boat and then parallel with the cage. Some operators (including one we saw every day doing this) would lead the shark into the cage, so that the divers see the open mouth and teeth coming right at them. This is of course an incredible sight and experience but one that comes at the cost of abrasions, lost teeth, injured noses and eyes from the shark that swims fast into metal and fibreglass expecting a tasty lump of tuna. If people did the same thing with tigers in India or lions in the Serengeti they would be in court being sued and imprisoned, but with sharks it seems to be acceptable. Well not from our boat and Rob is very vocal about its disapproval of such practises, practises he says come from the more competitive and 'showy' cage diving industry around Gaansbai and Mossel Bay further east along the coast. It was by sheer luck that Martin and a couple of other people were watching the other boat and cursing their approach when they got a breach just off to the side of the boat, no one on their boat had seen it and the shark was probably only 10m off the port side. Back at our boat the pale shark was back but not for long as another larger shark (around 3m) came and spooked her. That was about it for today and whilst we had seen another 2-3 new sharks and had sharks near and around the boat nearly continuously this afternoon we still wanted the breach shot and to get some more activity around our cage.

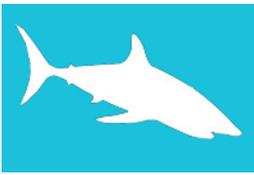


Day 5 Seal Island & Cape Point

Shark & Wildlife Watching

This morning we met up at the harbour the same as yesterday and made it to the island in time for another great sunrise, this time however we spotted a breach almost straight away and rushed over to it. We arrived in time to see a short chase, the seal will do its best to stay as close to the sharks dorsal fin as possible. From here the seal will turn in tight circles and force the shark into a tired submission. Despite the cartilaginous skeleton of sharks being very flexible they cannot turn so sharply as to catch an animal on their backs. With this tactic and if the seal was not hit by the shark during the initial breach the seal will nearly always get away. However the polaris breach is so effective here that around 55% of attempts are successful in providing the shark with a meal. This is in stark comparison with lions who average around 10-15% and tigers even lower than that. So when we arrived at the scene we found that the 'chase' was going to be a very short one, the seal was severely injured, with a huge bite revealing most of the internal organs of the poor thing. The seal was struggling to get to our boat, knowing that any land (even the 'land' of a moving fibreglass boat) was a refuge, but before the seal even got close the shark came up from the deep and with one cavernous mouthful took the whole seal down to the depths. The sight of the shark's huge mouth coming up and engulfing the seal was incredible and another reminder of the predatory power of this otherwise serene and graceful denizen of the deep blue. As we had just finished with this incredible predation a second was spotted and we raced to this one, this one had the opposite result to the first, the seal pup had not been hit in the first attack and whilst now separated from the rest of its group the seal pup managed to get away to safety. This was then followed by a real lull in seal activity around the island, we towed the decoy with no joy and then deployed the cage. The visibility was still bad as the wind was still blowing from the 'wrong' direction but we did have some shark activity around the cage this morning. Three different sharks came (between 2 and 3.5m long) before we had another visit from the colossal Prop Guard. Today we had a couple of sharks spending around 15-20 minutes around the boat and chasing down the bait (skilfully kept at bay by Gary), Derek managed to get a good shot of one of the sharks coming up from below and mouthing towards the bait. Today we were able to notice more of the behaviour of the sharks and also begin to predict the movements and possible patterns that they would do when approaching the boat and the bait. All of this would serve well as we had more trips upcoming. On our way back from the island we had a brief (but good view of one of the most elusive marine mammals the Bryde's whale. This tropical roqual (meaning that their throat is grooved (with roquals) which allows their mouth to open to a huge size when lunging at prey items) is part of a species complex that is not currently fully understood. At present there are three recognised species, the Bryde's whale, the Omauri's whale and Eden's whale. The latter two are found around Japan and the eastern Pacific and the former in more general tropical waters worldwide, however it is suggested that the resident population that is coastal in South Africa may be a separate species that has not bred with the other species of hundred of thousands of years. So we may have seen South Africa's largest endemic species. But for now a good view of a Bryde's whale is more than enough to satisfy us. They often only show a little part of the back and then the heavily hooked dorsal fin when breathing and do it very stealthy but we managed to get photographs of the whale which is rare for this species. This afternoon we returned to a terrestrial ecosystem and once again made our way around the western side of False Bay to Table Mountain National Park and Cape Point. This was our first time visiting this park in the glorious sunshine and the colours of the few fynbos in flower made a considerable difference to the appearance of the park. We had some nice birds along the roads including a very nice sighting of an orange-breasted sunbird and some olive thrushes, fiscal flycatcher, red-winged starlings and Cape grassbirds amongst others. We also managed to see ostrich and eland in the sun and had three very nice bontebok in the sunshine as they grazed the short grass near the beach. Other than that it was a quiet afternoon and we returned to the guest house around sunset, showered and changed and headed into Simonstown for dinner, before an early night sue to another day with the sharks tomorrow.

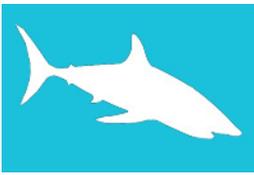




Day 6 Seal Island

Shark Watching

The day started with another nice clear morning, the south wind was blowing stronger than yesterday but the conditions were still very good. On arrival at the island we quickly saw three predations in which one was successful. This was very close to the boat by the time we got to the breach site. We saw the end of the chase and the shark take the seal. When we arrived the blood in the water indicated that the seal had been fatally wounded and then we saw the shark thrashing at the surface and realised it had the carcass in its mouth and was sawing off chunks to eat. We watched as the last section of seal (a floating fat rich piece) was swallowed by the colossal grey and white shape from the deep, before the shark silently glided back under the waves and away. At this point we decided to tow the decoy, knowing that at least two sharks were in hunting mode and had not made successful hunts this morning. We did get a little nip at the decoy but nothing more than a bump, before we noticed a natural predation. We reeled the decoy in quickly and made our way to the breach site. The chase was on, the seal was clinging as well it could to the back of the shark and the shark twisted and turned with incredible and surprising flexibility. Despite understanding that the shark's skeleton is made of cartilage and allows the kind of bone defying turns that a shark can make it is still hard to believe your eyes when a 3-4m long animal is turning on a six pence. Eventually the seal's extra capacity for energy storage paid off and the seal made the short dash for freedom back to the island, before the shark realised the seal had gone. After this we made a second run with the decoy, hoping to peak the interest in this particular shark, but realised that it is likely this shark had little energy left to continue the hunt at the moment. Whilst being warm bodied (meaning that they have a heat exchange system in their muscles that allows them to maintain a body temperature above that of the surrounding water), they are not capable of sustained bouts of intense activity and need rest periods to recharge. On towing the second decoy we had a Cape cormorants fishing nearby and a second boat also towing their decoy (and to be honest a little too close to ours – whilst there are no hard and fast rules for how the boats interact with each other at the island, the general code of conduct is not to be too close and not to 'poach' other boats sharks when they have them around the cages.) they got a full breach on their decoy. Luckily it was right in front of our decoy and many of us got great views of the white belly bursting out of the water and landing in a white spray. We were just pulling our decoy in and about to move to another part of the island for a third tow (with the action still so hot we were confident of getting a shark on the decoy this morning), we did get a shark on the decoy. However it was not a breach, instead a huge 4m plus shark came out from nowhere and took the decoy and dived down. Luke managed to get the decoy at the surface and onto the boat, the shark spitting it out once it realised that it was only rubber and neoprene and not nutritious fat and protein. The damage was significant but didn't affect the structure or shape of the decoy and so he was not in any need of repair. But the teeth puncture marks were evident and large. Whilst all of this was going on another boat (the third operator) had a natural predation occur very close to them. It was on the other side of the island and as we had seen a very close predation and a close chase in which the seal won and we had a shark at the back of the boat and take the decoy we decided to leave this predation to the other boat and not surround the shark and seal. At this point we throw the cage in and started chumming. We had three sharks around the cage this morning, including (the now regular) Prop Guard. We enjoyed similar behaviour to what we had seen the preceding days and the visibility still not being great we were not treated to the fantastic experiences that can be possible here. This afternoon Sally stayed at the guest house, Derek and Martin left on the boat for the afternoon trip with Sally staying in Simonstown. We would meet up with her later this afternoon before dinner. On our return to the island we went straight to the north tip of the island, where a lot of the activity this morning was centred and straight away we had a shark around the boat. It was a brief visit but then followed up by two other sharks, one of which grabbed the bait (coming straight up from below and blindsiding Wellington – who was on the bait today) and a little tug of war ensued. Trying his best to not lose the bait Wellington tried as he might and did manage to get the majority of the bait back. The shark taking a little, I think this was a victory to us, however only a small one as the shark had used its millions of years of evolution to launch the perfect vertical attack and surprise a boat full of people who were all focused on looking out for sharks. The tug of war, did provide a nice show, the splashing and triangular head thrashing at the surface with flashes of white teeth is the typical image we have of great whites (other than the black triangular dorsal fin). However this behaviour is rarely mirrored in the natural life of the shark. We saw a shark attack, kill and eat a seal only this morning and at no point was this behaviour seen, yes the shark did trash a little at the surface, but the chomping down to break the prey apart was done horizontally to the water, only when a human is holding the bait vertically does the shark show this impressive behaviour. It is images and footage such as this which is a major reason behind the sharks bad reputation. Which is unjust as it is us humans that induce this non-natural behaviours to 'showcase' the predatory 'instincts' of the shark. It was at this stage that the mass flock of Cape cormorants started to arrive back to the island from a day out fishing in the open ocean. This procession of around 100,000 cormorants (nearly in neat single file) took at least 30 minutes to file past our boat to their roosts on the island. The island is called Seal island after the 60,000-70,000 Cape fur seals that live here however at times it really should be called cormorant island, but then I guess it doesn't have the same ring to it and it certainly doesn't have the same sharky connotations as seals and sharks are so inextricably linked together. The rest of the afternoon went very well with 4 more sharks coming around the boat, most of which interacted with the bait and gave the cage divers great views as they turned and 'pursued' the bait being towed parallel with the cage. We even had another visit from Prop Guard who once again didn't stay around very long, this was beginning to be the pattern with this particular large female. Coming in and scaring the other sharks away and not staying around



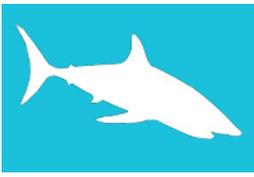
herself. We do not mind a larger shark coming in and scaring the smaller ones away, as long the bigger one stays around and takes their place. Prop Guard seemed to always have other ideas. Then last but not least we had a huge male (around 4.3m long) cruise past the boat, turn around, show his claspers (to confirm his sex) and then swim nice and close by the cage, allowing everyone by far the best views of a shark from the cage we had on our time on the boat so far. With this and the fading sunlight we packed up the cage, hoisted the anchor and departed for Simonstown. Meeting up with Sally at the guest house we then had our dinner.

Day 7 Seal Island & Fishoek

Wildlife Watching & Rest

This morning the northerly wind was still blowing and the sea was a little bumpy on our way out to the island, but the weather was producing perfect winter conditions and with the relatively low predation activity recently and the change to normal winter conditions we were expecting a good amount of shark activity around the island. We were also very hopeful of lots of action as this was likely to be our last trip as a front was coming in at around 11am, so we would likely have to call the trip early and also the next two or three days were likely to be cancelled, we were due to leave for Hermanus the day after tomorrow so we would not be too badly affected (assuming we got the breach today). We still had not seen or photographed the breach on our decoy and despite having lots of sharks all around the boat and seeing natural predations, it was the breach we were really keen on seeing. As soon as we arrived we started seeing activity and a total of 5 predations, 2 resulted in kills and one we saw very well and close as the shark rose to the surface and started to take chunks from the carcass. We happened to have the decoy in the water at this stage and the predation occurred nearby and the shark (after feeding on the seal) came by and nosed the decoy. Following the decoy for a few seconds as Gary tried his best to tow it in quickly so we didn't lose the decoy. The visibility was very poor and this was affecting the seal movement, the combination of a northerly wind and a front coming in was stirring up the water and creating conditions that were excellent for the sharks and not very good for the seals. This resulted in more seals leaving the island than we had seen recently but not in the massive numbers that are usually common at this time of year. So we were getting much more activity and hunting around the island compared to recent days but it still was way down on the averages for this time of year. Whether this would turn out to be an anomaly or another marker of global climate change we would not know for a while. But the weather had had a severe impact on the amount of shark predation activity we had seen. Just the subtle change in conditions today had dramatically increased the hunting rates of the sharks. We continued to tow the decoy around the island, the second tow had a shark come up quickly behind the decoy and take nibble. However this was very quick and only the nose and a flicker of the dorsal fin was seen. We then took a break from the decoy towing as a large group of seals left the island, they were acting very nervously and we stayed and watched and then one of the smaller seals on the outside of the group was taken. It wasn't a full polaris breach, but the seal was snatched just at the surface and taken down. The seal or shark never came up again and so presumably the seal was small enough to be swallowed whole (or the shark so large that any seal could have been swallowed whole). We then towed the decoy for a third time, we were doing more decoy tows today as we would not have time to get the cage in the water as the front was visibly coming in from the mouth of the bay. This third decoy run finally resulted in a breach, the 4m shark came bursting out of the water around 20kmph and fully exposed itself out of the water. The shark came down vertically and we all got shots of the breach. This is what we had been waiting for and is one of the most incredible natural hunting behaviours in the world. Whether it was the same shark who had investigated the decoy earlier we do not know, but it was a large shark and almost as large as they get and still breach so quickly and come clear of the water. In fact before the breach we had a shark investigate the decoy again, this time the whole tail came out and Martin even got some pictures. These pictures show that this shark was not the same as the one who launched the full breach, so at least 2 different sharks investigated our decoy on the third tow. We were so buoyed by this success and looking at the weather had a little more time, we decided to run the decoy a fourth time. We didn't get another breach and so anchored briefly and spent around 1 hour to try and get a shark around the boat before the weather started to come in strong. We didn't get any sharks coming around the boat, only a couple of sharks briefly skirting the periphery of the boat. So we called it a day and headed inshore towards Macassar beach in an attempt to see if we could find any whales, there are sometimes southern right whales that come close to the sandy shore when storms are brewing. We didn't see any whales as it is was still very early in the season for southern right whales to be in False Bay. They tend to travel from the east to the west at this time of year as they find their birthing and mating bays and usually get to False Bay late on. Once back at the harbour we went back to the guest house and changed and then travelled to Fishoek for lunch and also to visit a couple of camera shops. We then had the rest of the afternoon to rest and relax before dinner in Simonstown.





Day 8 **Kommetjie, Hout Bay& Camp's Bay**

Sightseeing

Today was Sally's birthday and with the weather closing in and the shark trips cancelled (which was fully expected) we decided to explore some areas we had not visited yet. A storm had blown overnight and whilst the rain and wind had picked up and the swell was increasing throughout the morning the rain and skies cleared a little and so we headed to Kommetjie on the north side of the Cape Point Peninsula. As we had breakfast in the guesthouse we had a brief flyby from a peregrine falcon, these rapid avian predators are non-unusually to be seen around the rocky coastal areas of most of the world, but recently they have been found more commonly in urban areas, with buildings being perfect manmade nesting cliffs and the proliferation of feral pigeons forming a huge and constant food source. After breakfast we left Simonstown and drove around the bay towards Fishoek and from here north and over the shallow hills and new housing estates towards the long and windswept beach of Kommetjie. With Derek getting some good success with photographing the kite surfers the other day we went to see if there are any around on Kommetjie and the Soetwater beach which is usually a good haunt for kite surfers. However there were none here today and only a couple of pairs of rare bank cormorants feeding in the surfzone and a small flock of rock martins feeding on sand flies and sand hoppers feeding on the decaying kelp. With no kite surfers around we left after some photography of the rolling waves that make this beach famous we left and headed towards the Slangkop Point Lighthouse, the lighthouse is located through a campsite which are this time of year was closed. So we drove and walked around the coast to the lighthouse, various birds were around including lots of African sacred ibis, Cape gulls, helmeted guineafowl, Cape cormorants, great cormorants as well as some lots common birds such as olive thrush, orange-backed thrush, cape francolin, green ibis and Cape white-eye. The greens around the campsite were dotted with many mole hills and the sign of some of the regions most unusual and highly endemic species. The Cape region of South Africa is home to a large number of golden moles, blesmols and typical moles. Most of which are never seen and some are only known from a handful of observations by scientists. We didn't spend any time trying to get views of the moles as whilst some of the hills looked fresh there were no obvious signs of current activity. On leaving the lighthouse and driving towards Hout Bay and the scenic road of Chapman's Peak we had one more chance to see if Table Mountain was visible from Soetwater beach, but the cloud cover was pretty low and we didn't hold much hope until later in the day. the drive around Chapman's Peak takes in some of the best views out over Kommetjie and then Hout Bay. The 9km route is one of the most spectacular marine routes in the world and with 114 curves and lined with olive trees and the occasional southern right whale or humpback whale in the bay it is must for anyone visiting the Western Cape. We stopped at the various view points and continued around to Hout Bay, from here we carried on around the coast road towards Cape Town. This road takes us on the western side of Table Mountain National Park and around some of the more upmarket and modern suburbs of Cape Town including Camp's Bay. Once at Cape Town we visited the Victoria & Albert Docks (V&A Docks) and had our first good views of Table Mountain, the clouds had cleared by now and the views were nice, we spent a bit of time around the V&A Docks before heading back south towards Simonstown, along the way we stopped at a small beach (Clifton beach) just south of Camp's Bay. Derek was keen to try wave photography and before it got too late and dark with the setting sun we had some good photography on this perfect little beach located in between a few roads containing some of Cape Town's most desirable houses. On arrival back at Simonstown we rested for a while before heading to the nearby and award winning sea-food restaurant, Harbour House in Kalk Bay. After a spectacular meal and some really good local wine we turned in for the night and our final night in Simonstown, tomorrow we would visit Cape Town again and then head east around the bay to Hermanus and hopefully the whales would be there after their migration west along the coast.

Day 9 **Robben Island & Hermanus**

Sightseeing & Travelling

This morning we left the guesthouse early and drove up to Cape Town and the V&A Docks once again taking in the scenic Chapman's Peak drive, on arrival at the docks Table Mountain had its table cloth on once again, as is so often the case on winter mornings. We got to Nelson Mandela Gate and boarded the Thembekile (meaning Trustworthy) ferry and began to head over to Robben Island. Located just 6.7km off the coast in Table Bay this small island has had a very infamous history and one that we would explore some of this morning. After the 20 minute journey over the bay to the island we disembarked and boarded the coach to take us around some of the sites. Our guide was Thabo and our driver was called Serge, and they started by taking us out of the harbour and to a sacred Muslim pilgrimage site on the island. The Moturu Kramat was built in 1969 to commemorate Sayed Abdurahman Moturu, the Prince of Madura. He was one of Cape Town's first imams, who was exiled to the island in the mid-1740s and died there in 1754. After its construction Muslim political prisoners would pay homage at the shrine before leaving the island. We then went pass the old maximum security prison and the leper cemetery, the island's history of exile from the mainland started well before the apartheid era and in the 1800's the island was used as a leper colony and also an animal quarantine station, in fact it was the Dutch in the 1600's who first used the island as a prison and even then it was mainly used for political prisoners with political leaders of various overseas Dutch colonies being kept here (particularly from Indonesia – hence the establishment of the Moturu Kramat). The leper cemetery is in surprisingly good condition, as are many of the places on the island. However most of the visit today was focusing on the modern history of the island and this includes the private prison for Robert Sobukwe. This political prisoner was kept in solitary confinement and in fact his own personal prison, he was



deemed so dangerous for his leadership of the Pan African Congress which was a very vocal and active group trying to destabilise the apartheid government. Next we went past the church built especially for the lepers in the 19th Century and which is still used occasionally today. Around the convict prison is the main village on the island, the island's population is around 200 people. Most of which are former political prisoners, guards and their families. There was a functioning community on the island until quite recently when the local economy dried up and the school closed, shops closed more and more and many of the residents have to travel to the mainland for jobs and most of the youngsters nowadays do not want to live isolated on the island permanently. Travelling further around the island we passed the lighthouse, old War World II gun battlements and other derelict buildings. The lighthouse has always been critical for the island as the waters around are very treacherous, there are many shipwrecks around the island and we passed on from as recent as August 2014, the *Claremont*. The island is also home to some interesting wildlife and we had distant views of springbok, a Cape grysbok, blue cranes and eland before arriving at the limestone quarry. This quarry was where many of the political prisoners worked, including Nelson Mandela and in the years spent working in the quarry with the bright sun shining off the white limestone his eyes were permanently damaged. We then came to the prison where Nelson Mandela himself was incarcerated, our guide was Nzoki who was also imprisoned here between 1984-1988 after a two year sentence served in Paarl prison on the mainland. Like many of the guides he was a political prisoner who worked tirelessly for equality throughout Southern Africa. We were shown around the prison including the mess hall (including the different meal allocations for the white, black and coloured prisoners), courtyard (in which Mandela grew plants and wrote many of his letters) and then of course his cell, number 7 and complete with all of the furniture and supplies that were given to each prisoner as standard. After visiting this prison the tour was completed and we made our way back to the harbour and boarded the ferry back to the mainland. Once back at the V&A Docks we had dinner and then started our journey east, first out of Cape Town and back to False Bay and then around and beyond Macassar beach, over the Cape Hills and then down to Hermanus. We checked into our accommodation and then went into the town for our dinner.



Day 10 **Hermanus / Walker Bay**

Whale Watching & Scenic Flight

This morning after breakfast we went to the harbour and after a briefing from Ken (our whale watching guide); which included being shown baleen plates, how to identify different whales and a little on the distinctive callosities that grow on the faces and flukes of southern right whales; we boarded the Mirosha boat. With the way of the weather at the moment it was likely that the whales in the bay would be aggregated around the sandy beaches to the far east and towards the famous shark diving hotspot of Gaansbai. Along the way we passed a couple of Cape fur seals before our guides spotted the first whales. We were treated to 3 southern right whales over sandy beaches, there was one female and two males and the males were eagerly trying to engage in courtship. The courtship involves lots of body contact and the males will wrestle each other in shows of strength to win over the females and establish mating and dominance hierarchies. The mating of southern right whales is not as violent as other whale species and instead the males are likely to mate with many females and the female with many males so that the main form of competition is sperm competition and not male-male competition. As we watched the whales at the surface they started to move closer and closer to the boat, the whales here are very used to boats and are very curious and come close to boats often to look to see the people on board. One of the males seemed to lose out in the unseen below surface battle of the males and we then had the male and female at the surface involved in lots of rubbing, we had nice views of the pectoral fins and some tail lobbing, but mostly the whales were poking their noses out of the water, one of the whales had a whitish chin, making it easier to identify the two different whales. Whilst we rolled on the swell and watched this pair of whales another pair of whales were involved in a far more energetic behaviour, including a couple of breaches and tail lobbing displays around 700m away. We did go a little closer to these whales and one our way (they had stopped displaying at this stage) we found another whale near the beach. We only had a quick view of this whale before we decided to head out to deeper water to try and find a humpback whales. We didn't see any humpbacks but on the way back to the harbour we saw a few African penguins. Once we returned to the harbour we left and grabbed some lunch in one of the ocean front cafes, Hermanus is world famous for having the best land based whale watching in the world, in fact many times during our drives around the coast, too and from the harbour we saw several whales just below the cliffs that line the coastline here. Then after lunch we headed out of Hermanus and into the wine growing lands just inland and to a small airstrip. Here we met David Austin our pilot and departed in an hour long scenic flight over the bay, this chartered flight in the small Cessna would give us a very different view of the whales and maybe other wildlife in the



region. Setting off we started on a course that took us over Pearly beach and then onto Dyer Island, this island is adjacent to Seal Island (a different one to the one in False Bay) and the channel of water in between is called Shark Alley and is reported to have the highest density of great white sharks in the world. They do not breach here and to observe natural predations here is very unlikely (which is why we didn't come here for our shark watching), but we hoped to see some from the plane. We could already make out several cage diving boats around the islands and lots of seals basking all over Seal Island (but very few on the similar looking Dyer Island). Just leaving Pearly beach we found a very shy southern right whale and then around Shark Alley we spotted several great-whites as they swam between the cage diving boats (all trying hard to get them to their boat and the cage), and some interacting with the bait handlers. Having spent so long on the shark boat in False Bay it was great to see the sharks and the whole cage diving operation from this angle. Giving a very different perspective as the sharks casually and gracefully cruised between the boats and often diving just out of visibility when approaching the boats at first, to go underneath and then come to the surface on the other side of the boat and launch a deeper assault on the bait and hopefully not be seen by the bait handler. We then flew over Gaansbai and into Walker Bay, here we quickly found a group of 4 mating southern right whales, whilst this is one more than we had around the boat this morning the behaviour was much the same. However from the air we were able to see the whales clearly and see their whole bodies (something which is very difficult from the boat and with more than one whale it can also be hard to identify the different anatomy of the whales from the boat). The whales were all jostling for position and the larger female seemed to be being buffeted from pillar to post by the three males, there was no mating observed and we left the group to find another. On the way we found a Cape fur seal and a common bottle-nosed dolphin travelling together. Further around and into the bay we saw many more whales including another breeding group of 4 males and a female as well as several pairs. These pairs are what happens after the male have established the breeding hierarchy and one gets the first breeding rites. Many of these pairs were shyer than the groups and wouldn't let us get lower down in the sky to see them. The visibility of the water from the air looks very good but it was amazing how the whales didn't have to dive down very far to be completely obscured from view. Dave and Martin then spotted a whale breaching a little way off and whilst the whale did do this more than once by the time we got there the whale had stopped. At this point we were in danger of running out of fuel and so we headed back towards the airstrip, along the way we passed over the brackish lagoon that at the right time of year (a little later in the year) can be full of flamingos and other migrating birds as well as different farm land and vineyards. On the way back huge scars on the landscape were visible from the many fires that occur here annually. Some of which are manmade and some of which are natural, however all have impacts on the vegetation and the wildlife, including the many birds here. This is part of the famous Overberg region and a birding hotspot in the world and tomorrow we would see if we could encounter some of these birds after another whale watching trip.

On arrival back at the guest house Sally and Derek went down to the beach just at the front of the guesthouse before dinner and just as if we top of a whale filled day there was a southern right whale in the water, just beyond the breakers.

Day 11 **Hermanus / Walker Bay**

Whale Watching

This morning we had breakfast in the guesthouse, looking out onto the bay we had two southern right whales visible before setting off for another whale watching trip. As the Mirosha cruised away from the harbour and into the bay the sea mists were rolling in along the coast and blanketing the cliffs in a very atmospheric view back towards the shore. In fact before we left the harbour we had a very photogenic grey heron in silhouetted in the mist of the early morning. The sunrise was very pretty this morning, rising over the peninsular that forms the eastern edge of Walker Bay, as the sun was rising higher we had brief views of a whale travelling along the shallows, the whale was not hanging around and so we moved on. We then saw a mother and her calf near the beach, the calf was from 2015 and very small. To reduce our impact on the young whale we kept a good distance and whilst we could see them through binoculars we didn't stay very long and left them to find other whales that we could approach closer. This was the 5th calf that the whale watching operators had seen this season and with it being quite early in the whale season this was a good sign of many babies to be born this morning. Around the eastern edge of the bay we came across two travelling humpback whales. The humpbacks are not usually as forthcoming when it comes to staying close to the boats here and so we had to keep moving as they came up to breath regularly. We had nice close views of the two humpbacks as they swam eastwards, they didn't breach for us but before they carried on and swam out to deeper water they did give us nice views of their tail flukes as they dived down. Turning around and slowly coming back towards the harbour we had 3 southern right whales, this mating group included a male brindled whale, brindled whales are paler in colour and appear brown or bronze. It is just a mutation and doesn't stop them from living a full and normal life, but there are not many in the population so to see one and get nice close views was special. It also meant we could easily identify the different parts of the whale as they all came to the surface in contact with each other and flukes and tails flying everywhere. They were very accommodating of our boat and as we idled they swam closer and closer until they were only around 10m away from us. Being this close we could see the whales eyes very clearly, the eye is located flush on the side of the head at the end of the mouth and so to raise the eye out of the water the whale must either lift his entire head clear of the water (rare – mostly spy-hopping is only raising the nose out of the water) or by lying on the whales side drifting up to the surface. This is what the female and the brindled whale did lots during this very close and curious encounter. By now the third whale (the



black male) had left the group and swam off. Whether this was because the brindled whale had wooed the female successfully and beaten off the other male's challenge or if the black male was just not confident enough to be that close to our boat we do not know. But the female and particularly the brindled male hung around for a long time and allowed us to get such good views of the eyes. A whale's eye is a very unusual sight, they are large and very mobile, swivelling in the huge socket to take in as much as possible. After around 30 minutes with these whales we departed and slowly made our way back to the harbour. The weather (wind mainly) was looking bad for tomorrow and so we rearranged our activities to have another whale watching trip this afternoon and the our birding tour of the western Overberg tomorrow morning. So we returned to the town and had lunch before going back to the harbour and our second whale watching tour of the day. This was to be our last trip on a boat for this tour and for land loving Derek and Sally this was very welcome news, so far the experience at being out at sea had paid off with fantastic sightings of the sharks and currently some nice and close whale watching, but we were hoping for a special whale encounter and this afternoon would be our last chance. As we left the harbour many swift terns were flying around and we did not need to go very far as a fishing boat had radioed the Mirosha to let the captain know that a pair of whales had been spotted just near the harbour only a few minutes before. So we stopped around the entrance to the harbour and searched, alongside a couple of Cape fur seals we then found the whales, however there were 3 instead of the 2 the fisherman had seen. They hung around the boat for over an hour and came so close that it would have been possible to touch them as they came up and spy hopped at the back of the boat and near the dive step (at water level). Being this close (within 2m of us) and at eye (water) level with the huge whales is an unforgettable and magical wildlife experience and one that words cannot do justice to. The water was so clear here that we could see the whales moving towards the boat and then swimming underneath, this was a great way to see the true size of the whale, the tail being around 5m across and the enormous body weighing between 40-50 tonnes. The whole whale experience is different when the whales are this curious and playful and the views are this close, everything is amplified, the blows are loud and the spray ejected many metres into the air. The cloud of water vapour spraying over the boat and covering people stood down wind. The flippers when raised out of the water being larger than a double bed mattress and weighing more than a fully grown cow (each) and the tip of the noses being a good 4m away from the end of the mouth and the eye. These were the two parts of the animals that we saw the most as the whales put on the show around the boat. After spending over an hour in the presence of these two denizens of the deep we made the short journey back to the harbour and over dinner revelled in the incredible encounter with the whales. Tomorrow we would begin our new land based wildlife watching section of the trip and leave the sea behind and with the spy hopping and tail lobbing display we were treated to this afternoon we felt like we had achieved the vast majority of what we set out to do on the ocean wildlife section of this tour.



Day 12 **Hermanus / Walker Bay & Overberg** *Whale & Bird Watching*

This morning we met Billy our birding guide and departed straight to Fernkloof Nature Reserve, which is just on the north-east side of Hermanus and stretches high into the hills and onto the Overberg. This is one of the best reserves for the endemic fynbos of the Western Cape and is a birding hotspot. We would start here and then head around the farmland to find as many of the local and hopefully endemic bird species as possible. We first explored the gardens of Fernkloof, here nearly every species of fynbos is planted and Billy took us through some of the more spectacular and unusual examples, including the species that uses ants to collect seeds by housing nectar pods on the ends of its leaves to help protect them from fires (which are common here). The seeds that are collected by the ants that have to walk all of the way to the end of the leaves to get the nectar then take the seeds underground and into the food store. Here some may be eaten but many will be left over and begin to germinate. Even when the seed starts to germinate the ants cannot get rid of the seed, as it begins to fill up the food store because the seed pod excretes a waxy substance that makes it too slippery to be carried by out to the surface. The proteas which are one of the largest groups of plants in the fynbos and also probably the largest and most famous are a major source of sugar for many birds, mammals and invertebrates as well as for the first peoples to inhabit the Western Cape. Amongst the unusual looking fynbos are some more familiar looking plants belonging to the *ericea* genus that heather belongs. South Africa has over 700 species of heath plant whilst Scotland for example has a mere 8. The huge diversity of plant life is just one of the reasons for the high numbers of birds and after a quick look in the visitor centre, which has a very good display of the different flowers here and we had a quick look before beginning our



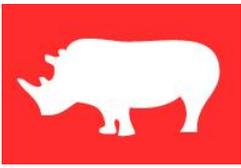
quest for birds. We walked through the gardens and the up one of the trails a short distance into the fynbos, we had some sunbirds (orange-bellied and southern double-collared) and great but distant views of a southern pale-chanting goshawk perched in glorious morning light as the sun rose above the hills. We then tried to get the endemic sugarbirds to us and had nice views of a female who came quite close to the pathway. We then looked to depart and try another area as the birds were not as prolific here as we would have hoped for. On leaving we did see a peregrine falcon flying overhead, maybe this is the reason why there were relatively fewer birds than usual. When leaving we drove towards Rotary Way and a view point high above Hermanus and on the way to the wine growing regions. On this drive we had brief views of a Cape grey mongoose as well as some chacma baboons that often wait around the view point in hope for picnickers coming here and leaving behind some snacks. As we took in the views down over Walker Bay we had nice views of a female orange-bellied sunbird. We then visited the Hamilton Russel Vineyard, they have a large vineyard, olive orchard and small manmade lake that sometimes has good bird life. The lake was quiet but we took advantage and had a wine tasting. We then carried on towards the wheat growing fields and a different set of bird species. Along the way we had great views of a male orange-bellied sunbird complete with his yellow epaulets, these colourful patches are a breeding plumage and this male was clearly in full breeding mood. In the fields we found a herd of grey rhebok, a small antelope that inhabits the hills of the Western Cape and resembles a small goat more than an antelope, also nearby the rhebok was a small flock of 6 blue cranes. This is South Africa's national bird and one of the most impressive and beautiful birds in the whole of Africa. However they are still illegally hunted and poisoned around farmland as they are believed to be large seed feeders and therefore pests. The reality is that whilst they do take some seed their main diet are insects, including grasshoppers, crickets and also small vertebrates like lizards, frogs and rodents. Most of which are genuine pests to the farmer's crops. So they form a good service for the farmers more often than not, but they are still killed. As a result of this persecution they are quite skittish and we were unable to get very close, but we were able to get nice views and photographs of them as they foraged in the fields. Carrying on around the agricultural area we had a great sighting of a black-winged kite typically perched on the roadside wires looking for prey in the grass below, we also saw many smaller birds such as Cape canaries, Karoo prinia, yellow bishop, Cape siskin, African stonechat and zitting cisticolas as well as larger species like the African marsh harrier, black crows, African darter and the rare and stunning black harrier that Billy and Derek saw flying close to a small conifer plantation. Heading back to Hermanus we made one last stop at Steven's Point, one of the many view points along Hermanus's coastline. We found a couple of rock hyrax resting here, but no whales below in the surf.

We then went to collect our luggage from the guesthouse before loading up the vehicle and heading the short way west to Onrus River to pick up Joyce. After getting Joyce we had lunch in Onrus River and then departed back to Cape Town. Tomorrow we would leave the coast and head inland to the dry and seldom visited regions of the Karoo and Kalahari around the old gold mining towns of Upington and Kimberley. The drive up and over the hills was very windy and the traffic not too bad and we made it to the hotel in time to rest and relax before having dinner before turning in for the night.

Day 13 **Witsand**

Travelling & Wildlife Watching

This morning we departed for the airport early and caught our flight to Upington at 07:10, the plane made good time and we arrived a little early, after collecting our luggage we met our new guide / driver John Tinkler. He would be taking us through the Karoo / Kalahari ecosystem in search of some of Africa's most elusive species. John has spent a long time painstakingly researched and built up working relationships with the various farmsteads and local researchers who either have these elusive species on their properties or are working with them in their line of research. This work would enable us to try and get views of animals like aardvarks, aardwolves, black-footed cats and other species. Today we would be travelling into the Kalahari and towards the red sand dunes of Witsands, this drive would be a long one today and heading through the Kalahari. After leaving the small town of Upington and the subsequent highway we entered dirt roads and started to see many species of birds perched on the fence posts and wires alongside the road. We stopped a few times, the highlights being Burchell's sandgrouse, Cape glossy starlings, African grey hornbills, southern yellow-billed hornbills as well as a group of South African ground squirrels, one of which ran across the road and the rest of the group disappeared off into the bush, occasionally stopped and standing up to observe us as they departed into the Karoo scrub. A further highlight was a huge social weaver nest, one that is so large it had brought down a huge branch which must have weighed a good tonne. Close to the reserve we had a steenbok on the side of the road and then on arrival had our lunch. In the grounds of the reserve we saw common duiker, many springbok and a troop of vervet monkeys. As we were having lunch at one of the chalets we were joined by familiar chats and a pair of very friendly yellow mongooses. After lunch and after settling in and when the sun had gone down a little and the temperature dropped we walked down to the bird hide. We set up the camera traps around the waterhole near the bird hide and at the hide we had some good birds including southern anteater chats, Cape glossy starlings, Karoo robin, long-billed crombec, red-faced mousebirds, Orange-river white-eye, Acacia pied barbet, white-throated canary, scaly-feathered finch, laughing doves, golden-breasted bunting, black-throated prinia and golden-tailed woodpeckers to name a few of the birds that we spotted from the hide this afternoon. On leaving the hide and heading down the short pathway to the vehicle we found a fresh (from last night) aardvark tracks and a hole dug down to get underground termites. The tell-tale marks (apart from massive hole that could have only been made by a few species) was the long, flat and round impression in the sand

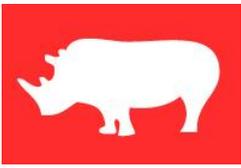


that was where the naked and muscular tail of the armadillo had been dug into the ground and used as an anchor as the animal ripped into the earth and nest using its very powerful claws and forearms. We then headed back to the chalets, spotting a gemsbok lying next to the road in the glorious evening sunshine, once back at the chalets Zaki made our food for the night and we had dinner. After dinner we went on our first night drive and began our search for some of Africa's most elusive species. There are so many common duiker here and also South African springhares and these two species made up the majority of the animals seen. The small, solitary forest dwelling antelope are usually quite difficult to see but we must have seen over a dozen this evening alone and the springhares are very cute and unusual animals. Related to rodents and not hares they are like enlarged gerbils but are in a family all on their own. Other than these species we did see several diurnal species such as springboks, gemsbok and red hartebeest but the nocturnal species were our main focus and along with the high number of Cape hares as spotted a couple of scrub hare and a very rare Smith's red rock-hare. The difference between the Cape hare and the scrub hare is the rusty coloured nape that the scrub hares have compared to the dark or pale (but never rusty) coloured nape of the Cape hare and the red rock-hare being a small hare and more like a rabbit identifying itself with smaller ears, shorter legs, a more rabbit like run than the typical hares and of course a different and more rufous colouration all over. Along with a couple of spotted thick-knees this was a good night drive and a nice introduction to the wealth of life that can be seen in the South African rural landscape after dark. Yes we didn't see the main targets of armadillo, armadillo, pangolin or black-footed cat but the Smith's red rock-hare was a very unexpected and wonderful surprise.

Day 14 **Kalahari**

Travelling & Wildlife Watching

This morning we had a dawn game drive which included many common duiker again as well as a Cape hare and as the sun rose higher and higher familiar chats and other birds. We then went to the bird hide and settled in for a couple of hours of birding here, the first birds around were laughing and Eurasian collared doves, the still water and the morning sun rays make photography of these birds just perfect with near perfect reflections. A little later other birds began to come along including red-headed finches, red-faced mousebirds, yellow canaries, Acacia pied barbet, Orange River white-eye, Cape glossy starlings, African red-eyed bulbuls, rufous-vented tit-babblers and white-browed sparrow-weavers. We also watched as a flock of red-headed mousebirds in a tree all warming themselves in the sun, the berries that the mousebirds like to eat are hard to digest and the warmth of the sun speeds along the process. More species began to arrive, including violet-eared and black-headed waxbills, a golden-breasted bunting and many unidentifiable female weavers. In between the bird sighting a common duiker came down to drink, he didn't hang around, but twice came down and we had nice views of this usually hard to see antelope. On our way back to the chalet and breakfast Martin collected the camera traps and we had a common duiker come and drink as well as a couple of gemsbok overnight. Before getting back we had further birding highlights including common scimitarbill, ashy tit and the stunning crimson-breasted shrike. At breakfast the yellow mongoose and familiar chats were around again and expectant of food and then after breakfast a South African ground squirrel came and paid us a visit. At around 11am we left the reserve and began the 280km journey to our next stop, we stopped at the town of Pietermaritzburg for lunch at an old colonial post office building. We crossed the Vaal River and entered the Northern Cape and met Brian, one of John's friends and a passionate birder who would be helping us out whilst here. After a brief stop in the town of Murrumbidgee itself we then went to the farm, checked and took our rooms in the huge old farm house. The farm is a hunting and game farm, where they raise springbok, zebra, black wildebeest, blue wildebeest, red hartebeest and ostrich for game meat (which can either be purchased by hunters who want to go out and shoot their own animal or rounded up, slaughtered and sold by the farm). But in keeping huge areas of veld free from predators and over eating domestic livestock the smaller wildlife abounds here and at night we would head out with hopes of some special species. The farm also has 3 very friendly and overweight dogs as well as two orphaned and semi-tamed meerkats. These meerkats made were good fun to spend time with and photograph, it is not every day you get close to meerkats like this. Before dinner we also had a night golden-tailed woodpecker sighting around the garden and a pair of pretty Gabar goshawks. Martin was then taken out briefly with the farm manager Trevor to set the camera traps up around a couple of waterholes. We then dined and prepared to head out into the chilly / cold night in search of the speciality species for the farm, the armadillo. Excluding the many springbok and South African springhares that we saw the first animal was a snuffling and foraging armadillo. We watched and quietly followed the largely naked and strange looking animal as it ambled across the ground. Stopped every now and again to dig a little into the earth, perhaps picking up a few termites or just investigating a potential nest by scent. The armadillo looks like a strangely designed animal, but every aspect has been honed to perform one task and it does that task very well indeed. The armadillo is a champion termite and ant eater, the large and powerful forearms and huge curved claws are capable of digging down into earth as tough as concrete, the sparsely haired skin is great for not accumulating dirt and dust from constant digging. The arched back and short round and heavy tail is a perfect anchor when the animal needs leverage for digging, the characteristic long nose and elongated, sticky tongue need no real explanation for an ant-eating species and the large ears help to locate the subterranean nests of many species of ants and termites. We were allowed to follow the armadillo for around 10-15 minutes before he trotted off and away into the night. We then went on to see 2 African wild cats (one of which ran and climbed onto a small termite mound and almost pose for us perfectly), 2 black-footed cats (both seen distantly for their markings and size being recognisable indicators), 2 bat-eared foxes



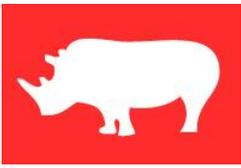
(that both emerged from a small termite mound (a mound that could barely have been big enough for a pair of bat-eared foxes. As the night drive continued we saw many more bat-eared foxes and a family of Cape porcupines including 3 very young and small babies, complete with smaller black and white banded quills. They are by far the smallest and youngest porcupines anyone with us had ever seen and being little miniatures of the adults it was a very nice and interesting sighting. At this point we called it a night and headed back to the farmstead for a good night's sleep.



Day 15 **Kalahari**

Wildlife Watching

This morning after breakfast we left the farm and met Brian at Kamfers Dam, here one of only 3 less flamingo breeding grounds in Africa is found and the vast numbers were clear to see as we approached the lake. We walked along the banks of the lake and along the railway to get to the area of the lake where the tens of thousands of lesser flamingos and smaller number of greater flamingos were feeding. The breeding population was lost here around 20 years ago when a nearby mine allowed all of the chemicals and population leak down into the lake and kill off many of the animals that the flamingos feed on. Since then the outrage of this forced the mine to clean up their act and also forced the local government to take affect and clean up the lake. To help encourage the return of breeding flamingos a manmade island and concrete nests were built. These worked with great affect and on good years there can be over 80,000 flamingos here. Today there were around 40,000 and the sight was breath-taking. As we walked closer we had very nice views of the birds, so many and moving all coordinated that they appeared as a pink slick moving along the surface of the lake. Over the years of the flamingos coming back and growing in number they have now made their own natural mud nests and have expanded their breeding ground to nearly all banks of the lake. Including near to where we were and we could see the mud nests very clearly from our vantage point. From here we went to another wetland area located on the property Springbok Farm. This is one of Brian's favourite birding spots and we were not disappointed with the wealth of bird life. We had only just started in the farmland when red-knobbed coots, African snipes, black-winged kites, black-headed herons, reed cormorants, lesser swamp warblers, cattle egrets, African stonechats, Cape shovelers, Spur-winged geese, common moorhen and many other birds all became very abundant. From the wetland areas we continued to the wheat fields were we saw an African marsh harrier flying low, hunting over the fields as well as a common quail. The latter being one of the hardest birds to find in the old field due to their incredible camouflage and habit of remaining perfectly still. On our way to a salt pan on the farm we had great views of a pair of black-winged kites perched and then taking off and flying together off and away over the farm. The salt pan had many greater flamingos, little grebes, chestnut-banded plover, kittlitz plover and a wood sandpiper all around, the diversity of habitats in such a small area of farm was amazing and the resultant bird life was spectacular. We then began to depart having further views of black-throated canary, red-capped larks, neddicky, plain-backed pipit and southern anteater chats. On leaving the farm we watched as an African fish eagle called out and then circled above us and then we split up, with Derek going with Brian to try and see if he can get his camera fixed in the town whilst the rest of us went back to Marrick for lunch. The way back to Marrick we spotted a very nice male Namaqua dove and then a slender mongoose crossed the road. The road we took back took us through some hunting farms and we found some animals on both sides of the such as roan, nyala, lesser kudu and then there were some species are not confined to the fenced in paddocks such as meerkats, common warthog and slender mongooses. On arrival back at the farm the two semi-tame meerkats were walking through the corridors of the house and wonderful sight of one of the meerkat standing up and peering at himself in the mirror greeted us as we headed to our rooms before lunch. Martin then nipped out to collect the camera traps and see if we had seen anything. We did manage to get a family of bat-eared foxes who had come down to the waterhole to drink, plenty of springbok, red hartebeest, horses and plain's zebras and then an aardvark. So little is known about aardvarks and their wild behaviour that many of the books say that they seldom ever drink, however we have camera trap footage of the same aardvark coming to the same waterhole 2 nights in a row (at almost the same time both nights) and drinking. The sound of the tongue flicking in and out of the water quickly as the aardvark drank for over 30 minutes. Then back at the farm we waited for the evening game drive and in the afternoon we milled around the farm house and particularly tried to get nice and close photographs of the meerkats. Then at around 16:00 we left for Brian's house, changed into 2 smaller cars and then drove to back to Kamfers Dam. The flamingos will be flying from the lake to their roost sites just before sunset and if we positioned ourselves on the opposite side of the lake (in which we would need a smaller vehicle than John's to get under the low railway bridge) then we may be able to get good shots and views of the birds as they come flying into across the pastel coloured sky to their roosts. We did see the flamingos closer and also got them as they were flying across the lake and to their roost. They were closer to us on this side of the lake and whilst they were more skittish than we expected and the flamingos didn't fly en masse (in their thousands) for us as we hoped, it was nonetheless a good wildlife experience. On the way to Rancher's farm (the farmer whose land most of the lake is located on) we had a large

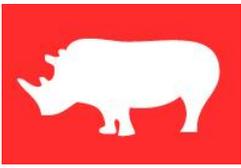


meerkat clan run across the road. The fully wild meerkats never stop moving and spend so much time travelling from one feeding ground to another and then back to their network of dens. With their speed and the failing light we didn't try and pursue the clan and instead headed straight to the lake. We left when the sun had drifted away beyond the horizon and on the drive back to the farm the golden sky was filled with the large black silhouettes of hundreds of flamingos. Back at the farm and after dinner we went back out for a spotlighting safari, almost straight away we had an armadillo come and cross the road and pretty close. The armadillo then carried on foraging and feeding in much the same way as the one yesterday. They move so quickly along the uneven ground and watching the armadillo amble across, stopping and starting at every termite mound was amazing again. It seemed that Marrick Game Farm really is the place for armadillos. It was in a very similar location to yesterday and being a similar time, it was a very good chance that this is the same armadillo and this is its nightly routine. It is also quite close by the waterhole that Martin had his camera traps set up on and so again it was a good bet that this was the same one we had drinking. Later on we saw another armadillo, this one a little more distant and so the views not as good, but no one is complaining at seeing 3 armadillos in 2 nights here! There were also more views of bat-eared foxes including one digging into the road ahead of us and allowing us to get quite close before running off. We also had brief views of a Cape porcupine, black-backed jackal near the farm house and of course many South African springhares as was becoming usual at night here. Then as we returned to the lodge we found 10 stunningly coloured sleeping swallow-tailed bee-eaters perched in a tree above the road. They were all huddled together for warmth as the nights get rather cold here during winter.

Day 16 Mokala National Park

Travelling & Wildlife Watching

Today started warm and progressively got hotter and hotter and was by far the hottest day so far on the tour. At sunrise we took a drive around some of the rockier parts of the farm in search of the red rock-hare, these hares live amongst the rocks most of the time and in the morning they can sometimes be seen basking in the morning sun. We scanned the ancient lava flow and the basalt rocks for an hour or so and then headed out into the fields. We watched a herd of springboks pronging away in the distance, when they prong they raise their hairs on their backs and show off a white pouch and release pheromones which alert other springboks of the potential threat that they are pronging away from. This pouch is where the animal gets its scientific name from; *Antidorcas marsupialis*; the marsupialis meaning pouched and not the fact that the springbok is known for jumping. Also around the grasslands this morning was a family of spike-heeled larks feeding next to the road. On our way around towards the camera traps we also had nice views of a family of zebra including some very young foals as well as close views of a small flock of double-banded couriers. These terrestrial birds are so well camouflaged it is very difficult to get good views of them, but we persevered and we rewarded with nice views close to the vehicle. On our way back to the farm for breakfast after collecting the camera traps we had sightings of various birds including pririt batis, mourning dove, laughing dove, Cape sparrow, Cape wagtail, crowned lapwing, yellow canary, kori bustard, red-headed finch, spike-heeled lark, black-bellied korhaans, white-browed sparrow-weaver, southern anteater chat, African pipits and other arid region birds. The camera traps revealed the armadillo back drinking once again as well as (presumably the same) family of bat-eared foxes, Cape porcupine and springbok. We then had brunch and left the farm for Mokala National Park at around 12:30. As we were prepared for leaving and loading up our luggage into the vehicle we had an African striped skink, the two meerkats and a golden-tailed woodpecker all around the farm house. Mokala is one of the newest national parks in South Africa, being established in 2007 the park is continually growing as SAN Parks are buying up neighbouring farms and expanding. The park is used principally as a breeding centre for rare and endangered herbivores as the park doesn't have spotted hyena or lions present. This means it is a good place to see roan antelope, sable antelope and the population of plains zebra that are being bred back to the extinct quagga, but also a good place to try and see smaller carnivores that are under no competition from larger predators. On the way to the Mokala Mosi gate we drove alongside the boundary fence of a large game farm, this farm had all of the different species and morphs (golden, black, white, red springboks etc) in all different pens and the sight of black and white springboks was a little strange. There was also a pen containing white rhino babies, this is the wildlife conservation of South Africa conundrum in front of us. On one side of the road is a national park set up to breed wildlife back, including white rhinos and then on the other side of the road is a farm with rhinos and many different (non-natural) morphs of animals specifically bred to be shot. We carried on down this road until we reached the gate and then entered the park and headed to our camp. Along the way we had more bird sightings including red-eared warblers, violet-eared waxbills, scaly-feathered finches and rare short-toed rock thrushes. As far as mammals we had sightings of common warthogs, blue wildebeest and tsessebe. After settling into the rooms we went back out for an afternoon game drive where we had close views of gemsbok, springbok, great views of impala resting underneath acacia trees next to the road and many families of foraging common warthogs. As the sun became lower in the sky we spotted another pair of short-toed rock thrushes, the glowing sunlight showing their colours very well. Continuing on and before it was too dark and we came across roan antelope and greater kudu all around the more rocky areas of the park and the kudu in particular being mostly obstructed by thick vegetation. The greater kudu are usually in single sex herds at this time of year and as well as seeing some females including young and mature females we watched a bachelor group including some males with very large horns. We also visited a birding hide overlooking a muddy waterhole, the glare of the sun was very harsh and there were not many birds around, just a handful of doves and black-winged stilts so we left and continued around the loop route. Shortly before arriving back to the camp we spotted giraffes and tsessebe moving across the more open savanna habitat



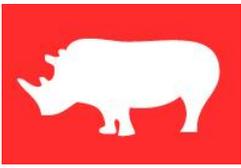
of the park in the glorious golden light of pre-sunset. Back at the camp we had some time to get some warmer clothes on and have dinner before heading out on our night drive, Jared Wright was our national park driver and we told him our major target was the aardwolf. So he decided that he would drive quickly through the first part of the park and then head straight to the grassland where he has seen aardwolf in the past. As soon as we arrived here we found an aardwolf, the smallest member of the hyena family feeds exclusively on termites (of the *Trinervitermes* genus) and they are active only at night as they walk from termite mound to termite mound licking away several hundred or sometimes thousands from each one and then moving on. We got decent views of the skittish aardwolf before it bounded off across the grassland, and once we could not find the aardwolf again we headed back slowly. Along with many diurnal species such as blesbok (a subspecies of the bontebok from the Western Cape coastline) we had brief views of a striped polecat and a feline genet as they ran away from our vehicle and into the dense bush. We could see both species well enough to positively identify them but they are not very used to vehicles at night. One with the park being so new and also with so few people visiting the park and then even fewer taking the option of the night drives, the animals are just not very used to vehicles and spotlighting and so are skittish. We then arrived back to the camp and got retired to bed for a good nights sleep.



Day 17 Mokala National Park

Wildlife Watching

Today started in a similar vane as yesterday with high temperatures once again. We went out at dawn in the vehicle and found large male greater kudu with very impressive spiralled horns, after photographing the male kudu we then came across a common duiker quickly running away from us and across the road. Carrying on around we watched a large family herd of zebra walking alongside the road and feeding sporadically as they went; many of the zebra here are very pale and have far much brown and white than black on their coats. This is a result of the breeding project trying to breed back the subspecies of zebra called the quagga. We didn't see any 'true' quagga but the zebras were certainly not the 'normal' plains zebras that we are used to seeing. The sun continued to rise and on a more open area of vegetation we had great views of backlit giraffes and common ostriches. We also visited the bird hide again, there was not much difference than yesterday with doves and stilts being the only birds around, other than a solitary Cape wagtail. Moving off from the hide there was a large herd of buffalo nearby, the rocky hillsides were dotted with euphorbia bushes and in the absence of black rhinos the only herbivore that has a tolerance for this poisonous plant is the greater kudu and we spotted several kudu along the rocky ridges. This very large antelope (the second largest in Africa and third in the world) was dwarfed by common eland which were also around the rocky slopes this morning. Scanning the hillsides we also spotted a baboon right on the top of the ridge and soaking in the morning sun. On the road back to the camp we found a small group of four-striped grass mice feeding on seed underneath a couple of bushes next to the road, we had great views of a male and female short-toed rock thrush close to the road and John was able to call them closer for better views of this Kalahari endemic bird. Our last sightings this morning were close by ostriches and common eland crossing the road. This afternoon we stayed around the camp, with some bice birds including jackal buzzards, rock martins, speckled pigeons around the lodge and also a large troop of baboons and a small group of warthogs coming down to the waterhole near the cottages. Martin spotted a fairy flycatcher through the window of the bar whilst John had taken Derek, Sally and Joyce out to try and find this species. We had brunch in the restaurant before meeting up with Jared again and heading out to the far end of the park and to the large grasslands where we hoped to find the sable antelope. So at 15:45 we set off for Lilydale at the far end of the park, we drove quite quickly to get there and so we didn't see too much along the way. On the way we had another very quick view of a clan of meerkats as the crossed the road and then once again didn't hang around and disappeared into the vegetation. On the savanna we started to see larger numbers of animals than we had seen in the thicker vegetation; large herd of buffalo, tsessebe and red hartebeest, groups of black wildebeest and oryx as well solitary ostriches were all becoming more and more common along the road. We drove out into the savanna and watched as the sun began to set, we had further views of a pair of spotted thick-knees and a few black-backed jackals walking through the long grass. In the evening light we targeted good photography of red hartebeest, springbok, roan antelope, eland as well as black-bellied korhaan too. Having dinner at the vehicle as the sun set was a great experience and after dark we started to head back to the camp, the only antelope species to have eluded us being the sable. But then shortly after dark we found all 34 sable antelope that are known in the park, they were sleeping in a small thicket and whilst we had found them it was not great for photography as it was pretty dark by now. We decided we would try and find the herd tomorrow on our way out of the park. The official park number of 34 seemed to be inaccurate as there were a handful of young calves in this group, which is a good sign that this rare species is doing well again; animals from this herd will be relocated to other parks and reserves around South Africa to help increase their lost range. Further along we found a group of 4



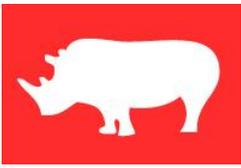
white rhinos and then another 3 white rhinos, another very protected and secretive animal that is doing quite well in Mokala. We also had sightings of a huge lone bull buffalo, a common genet running and then climbing a tree, striped polecat, great views of a male mountain reedbeek many springhares (once again) and then a female nyala close to the camp.



Day 18 **De Aar Karoo**

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

This morning we had a short drive around the camp area, it was quite quiet this morning with a male ostrich dancing, eland, springbok and zebra feeding by the side of the road all easily seen. Then we found a huge male greater kudu walking towards the road. We decided to wait and position ourselves to get good pictures if the kudu continued its pathway down and onto the road in front of us. However the kudu had other ideas and just remained in the bush half hidden and watching us until we left. In fact a little while after we came by this area again and the kudu had not got very far, clearly it had remained in the bush hiding for quite a long time and we were justified in not waiting for him to come out. We did spot a couple of new birds on our way to the hide such as yellow-bellied eremomela and Karoo lark, the hide didn't produce anything once again and so we didn't stay there very long. We then went to Kameeldooring picnic site to see what birds we could find there as picnic sites are often very good places for birds. Whilst we were all taking in the birds Martin spotted the distinctive rounded back of a pangolin moving around 75m away through the scrub bush. Without thinking about the potential buffalo or rhinos that could be around, Martin just ran off in the direction of the pangolin, getting within around 20m and then seeing a large flock of helmeted guineafowl in the same area. Martin convinced himself that it was a guineafowl and turned to come back to the group. Explaining what he saw and what he thought, looking back at the spot where the pangolin had been seen and realising then that the guineafowl were nowhere near that spot and then seeing the guineafowl at this distance and it being plainly obvious that it was not a guineafowl that was seen. Just the rareness of the pangolin making Martin doubt his initial thoughts. So then Martin and Derek walked back over to the spot to where the pangolin was seen, the pangolin had gone. They are deceptive quick across the ground when they want to be and there were plenty of thick bushes around for the pangolin to hide in. But there were some tracks and also the very tell-tale signs of pangolin feeding, the round holes dug into the ground and where termite mounds were. They are the perfect hallmark of the pangolin feeding. We searched for a few minutes but we couldn't find where the pangolin had gone. Being such a rare animal (an almost once in a lifetime animal) Martin was kicking himself for days after, but it was a view albeit brief and partial. But a good sign that there are pangolins here. We then had to begin our journey back to the camp so we could breakfast and then leave, on the way back we had more great ostrich sightings, including males with the white parts of their plumage being stained red with the colour of the earth here. As we watched the ostrich at the waterhole a herd of 23 buffalo came down and we watched the adults and young babies drink, socialise and a couple of young bulls play fighting. Before breakfast we had further sightings of giraffe and feeding red hartebeest. We decided to give the sable another shot and leave the park via the Lilydale gate which would give us a nice game drive out through the savanna area of the park. We were in a bit of a rush and we were focused solely on the sable so we didn't stop for the black wildebeest, buffalo, giraffes and other herbivores and then came across a male sable sat in the grass. We couldn't find the larger herd we had seen last night but this beautiful male did pose well for us and allow for nice close up views. We then left and with some vervet monkeys near the gate of the park we headed across the Kalahari / Karoo biome border and towards the small town of De Aar and our next location. This is one of the main locations in the only black-footed cat research project in the world and we would hopefully team up with one of the researchers to find this elusive and tiny predator. Along the way we found another clan of meerkats close to the side of the road including some on sentry duty, we had brief (but so far our best) views of meerkats. We then crossed the Orange River and back into the Western Cape Province and then we left the main roads and headed deep into the Karoo lamb and game farming areas. The lamb here is so famous because of its rich flavour, there is a species of Karoo fynbos that has a strong rosemary flavour and as this is one of the main foods that the sheep eat here they are naturally 'seasoned' with the wonderful flavour of rosemary. Nearer to the farm we had a red morph slender mongoose run across the road, they are distinctively red and very different, but are not a different species. The redder colour of the earth around here obviously selecting for a redder colouration of the animal for better camouflage. We arrived late in the afternoon but the colder temperatures here (the Karoo is slightly higher in altitude in attitude and during the winter is very cold) force the usually nocturnal species to emerge earlier to take advantage of the warmer temperatures in the daytime. This was evident when we saw three bat-eared foxes at the side of the road. At the farm we met the owner and Martin went out with him to set up the camera traps, we found a small pond where blue cranes often come and overnight, there were also tracks of spot-necked and Cape clawless otters here but there was not anywhere very

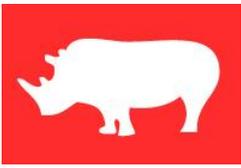


good to set the camera up and so we were not sure if the camera positions would result in any images. At dinner we met the owners wife and cook as well as Martina, who is a researcher for the Black-Footed Cat Working Group and who would hopefully be able to find some of the radio collared cats for us to see over the next couple of nights. Then after dark we went out into the cold, it was very cold tonight but the wildlife was still around, including many bat-eared foxes. They were everywhere and very curious, the owner would play the call of an injured rabbit or antelope calf and they would come very close to the vehicle. We also saw mountain reedbuck as well as great sightings of an aardwolf, this target animal was coming out of a termite mound, presumably its den for the day and started out very close to the road before running away and off into the night. We were very unlucky with the lack of aardwolf sightings as in the warmer times of year they often see dozens of aardwolves every night. But we were not that lucky with aardwolves, we did spot another common genet running in and out of the koppies, we followed the genet for a short while before it returned to the bushy rocks and disappeared. All the while we were out in the farmlands looking for wildlife Martina was out with the VHF antenna trying to locate the radio collared cats. We then made a phone call and found out that she had located one of the research animals, a very well habituated female and so we went to meet her. We found the cat feeding on a spike-heeled lark and the fierce little cat allowed us to get within 2m of her as she ate the small bird. She finished the bird, not leaving very much at all and then moved off to find another prey item. They are very small and have high metabolisms and have to hunt throughout the night, we followed her but had to use the antenna again to find her. We did locate her and had more incredible views as she just sat in front of our vehicle and seemed to be completely ambivalent to our presence. The confidence and aura of such a small predator was awesome to behold, they certainly are one of the most incredible animals in Southern Africa and thanks to Martina we were able to have the best possible views at such close quarters. We then made our way back to the farm, defrosted (as it was very cold today and with the wind chill from being in an open vehicle it was well below freezing) and prepared for another day around the farm, where we would look for some of the smaller diurnal mammals such as rock-hares and elephant shrews.

Day 19 **De Aar Karoo**

Wildlife Watching

In order to have a good chance for some of the smaller mammals we had to wait around for the sun to come up and the air temperatures rise high enough that the elephant shrews and rock-hares start to bask in the sunlight. We started our search at a prominent and large koppie in the main springbok breeding paddock. This huge field had many springboks in it but they were spread thin over the vast farm, we did have views of a flock of blue cranes that often come into the fields to feed on the grain that is used to supplement the livestock's diet. We tried to get close to the cranes but they were even more skittish here than around Hermanus. The reason for this being that some of these farmers in their huge and unpoliceable farms poison and shoot the cranes as they are seen as large problems (much bigger than they actually are) and so the cranes are very wary of people. One of the farmers around here is currently in a police investigation after killing over a dozen or so. When we arrived at the koppie we scanned the rocks in the sunlight for with a scope. Whilst scanning, Martin spotted a Karoo round-eared elephant-shrew twice, just be being in the right place at the right time with the scope. The elephant-shrew came out and stood still on a rock in the sunlight for a few seconds before disappearing again, then keeping the scope in the same place the elephant-shrew back to the same place. They use the same pathways and are very habitual, so we waiting a while longer for the elephant-shrew to come around again, but this individual didn't make a third pass. As the day got hotter and hotter we moved to the small dam where Martin had his camera traps set up, we sneaked around the backside of the dam as to not disturb any birds or other wildlife that may still be there this morning. We were too late for the blue cranes (that often leave just before dawn) but we did see a couple of new birds for the trip including mountain wheatear and lark-like bunting, but at the dam itself there were only a couple of plovers. We then returned to the farm house for brunch and then afterwards heading out to see if we could get any closer to the cranes again. We struggled to get close once again, the cranes only ever allowing us to get around 100m from them before flying off and landing further away. We decided not to stress them out any more and gave up on the cranes and then did some birding around the various farm tracks, here many larks, warblers and pipits (of which this region is famous for) we did stop for nice views of black-headed canaries as well as a few large black girdled lizards basking on the rocks. These large lizards are flat and have overlapping sharp scales that give a girdled appearance. As we were watching the lizards on the koppie Martin spotted another elephant shrew, this one being smaller and darker with relatively large and pointed ears; this was a different species, the Karoo rock-elephant shrew. This time though at least Derek also had brief views of the elephant shrew as it moved quickly amongst the rocks searching for invertebrates. We carried on and found a yellow mongoose, three Karoo korhaans which took off and flew above us and near to the road. They are one of the largest birds in the Karoo region and beautifully patterned. The rest of the afternoon was relaxed before an early evening drive, this time we were joined by the owner's son as Martina once again went looking for the black-footed cats and would let us know later if she had managed to find one on the right property (whilst she has permission from the surrounding farms to visit their land for the research, she would not be able to take us onto their land, should the cats be out of the farm). Early on during the drive we found a displaying Karoo korhaan, the male showing off his prominent black beard which is usually very hard to see in no-breeding display. We then saw one of the korhaan's bigger cousins as a Ludwig's bustard was spotted and took off and fly away. Once again the huge population of bat-eared foxes was out in force and we had several great views. After dark we met up with Martina and she told us that a male and female collared cat were on a neighbouring farm and that there was another female cat with a collar that is rarely seen, after dinner she would go out and try and find that



particular cat. After dinner the decision was made that Derek, Sally and Joyce would stay at the farm and Martin and John would join Martina and have a quick look for the cat and also a hibernating South African hedgehog that Martina had spotted yesterday in an open termite mound. We did find the hedgehog and how Martina managed to find the particular termite mound in the field in the dark was incredible, but we didn't manage to find the third cat. So Martin and Jon returned to the farm for the night and left Martina to carry on her nocturnal research.



Day 20 **De Aar (Karoo) - Cape Town**

Wildlife Watching & Travelling

This morning we started at 08:30am again and went out looking for wildlife before completely our packing, having brunch and departing for the large gold mining town of Kimberley. Driving around the farm roads Derek spotted a meerkat sentry standing on top of a termite mound with the rest of the group running off with tails held high above their backs. They stopped periodically to turn and look at us and then carried on as they moved away and into the bush. We then went to the dam to collect the camera traps (which unfortunately (but not unexpectedly here) didn't result in any images), leaving the little dam we had great views of four Ludwig's bustards taking off and flying away over the fields. At a small koppie Martin and Joyce spotted a Karoo rock elephant-shrew scurrying around, again this tiny mammal didn't hang around for prolonged views and we then departed for the farm house. We left at 11:45am and began the drive 350km to Kimberley. Along the way and before we joined the main highway we had views of southern pale-chanting goshawks circling around the farmhouses, cranes in the springbok breeding paddock, another clan of meerkats running away, a few pretty steenboks, Ludwig bustards and then a meerkat right next to the road. Whilst this one was close and not running head long into the bush away from us, we had all packed our cameras away in preparation for our flight from Kimberley. Then on the highway and travelling past the many game farms around here we saw a helicopter chasing game with the view of darting it for capture, it was quite intense and not the usual everyday sighting. We then met up with Brian again and had lunch in one of the malls in Kimberley before arriving at the airport in time to fly back to Cape Town, on arrival we were shuttled back to the hotel the short distance away and then had dinner there.

Day 21 **Home**

Departure

This morning we had breakfast at the hotel, Joyce was due to be picked up by a driver and taken back to her sister's house in Onrus River and we were all able to say our goodbyes before Martin had to leave for the airport for his afternoon flight back to the UK and the Derek and Sally left for the airport a little later on that day.

Species List

Cape Wildlife & Kalahari – July - August 2015

Mammals (* = heard or signs only / CT = camera trap only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name	July							August												
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>															13	10	3			
2	Grant's rock mouse	<i>Aethomys granti</i>														1						
3	Red hartebeest	<i>Alcelaphus buselaphus</i>											~15 (CT)	4 (CT)	28	~105	17					
4	Springbok	<i>Antidorcas marsupialis</i>								7			37	~300	100's	~135	~210	~481	~230	~210		
5	Cape fur seal	<i>Arctocephalus pusillus</i>	6	4		~40k	~40k	~40k	~40k		2	~5k	4									
6	Cape clawless otter	<i>Aonyx capensis</i>														*						
7	South African hedgehog	<i>Atelerix frontalis</i>																		1		
8	Bryde's whale	<i>Balaenoptera brydei</i>					1															
9	Black-backed jackal	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>													1	1	1	9	1			
10	White rhino	<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>															4	7				
11	Vervet monkey	<i>Chlorocebus pygerythrus</i>												2	3				4			
12	Sclater's golden mole	<i>Chlorochloris sclateri</i>														*	*	34	*	*	*	
13	Cape golden mole	<i>Chrysochloris asiatica</i>								*												
14	Black wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes gnou</i>													20		~25	68	18		2	
15	Blue wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>															14	17	13			
16	Yellow mongoose	<i>Cynictis penicillata</i>												2	6	1	1		1	2	4	
17	Tsessebe	<i>Damaliscus korrigum</i>															47	~75				
18	Bontebok	<i>Damaliscus pygargus</i>		5			3										32					
19	Karoo rock elephant shrew	<i>Elephantulus pilicaudus</i>																		1	1	
20	Plain's zebra	<i>Equus quagga</i>																				
21	Mountain zebra	<i>Equus zebra</i>		4											4 (CT)	23	25	44	4			
22	Southern right whale	<i>Eubalaena australis</i>				1		*				25	16	3								
23	African wild cat	<i>Felis lybica</i>													2							
24	Black-footed cat	<i>Felis nigripes</i>													2				1	2		
25	Cape grey mongoose	<i>Galerella pulverulenta</i>												2								
26	Slender mongoose	<i>Galerella sanguinea</i>													1	1				2		
27	Feline genet	<i>Genetta felina</i>																1				
28	Common genet	<i>Genetta genetta</i>																	1			
29	Giraffe	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis</i>															3	4	5			

