South Africa's Rare Mammals

Naturetrek Tour Report

19 - 29 April 2016



Meerkat

African Wild Cat

Report and images by Toby Esplin



Tour participants: John Davies & Toby Esplin (leaders) with 10 Naturetrek clients

Summary

Day 1

Tuesday 19th April

Wednesday 20th April

Langberg Guest Farm - Kimberley

After a well-received tea and coffee break on arrival into Kimberley airport, we had an opportunity to briefly meet our tour guides, John and Toby and the rest of the participants on the tour, before heading down to the Kamfers Dam to see what sightings were available of the Lesser and Greater Flamingos that reside there. While this region of South Africa has recently received good rains, in recent months significantly lower than average rainfall meant there were lots of temporary rain pools around, but larger permanent water sources were running dry. Unfortunately this meant that not only had the Kamfers Dam water level receded to levels that kept the Flamingos at a great distance from the best view point, it also meant that the number of birds was much less than was normally seen, with many of the birds having moved to pans and feeding grounds many kilometres away.

After a quick scan with the binoculars, we headed back into the small town of Kimberley to visit the Big Hole, taking extra time to look through the Diamond display vault before enjoying a light lunch. Taking a relaxed walk into the rocky outcrops at the back of the rooms, shortly after our arrival at Langberg Guest Farm, we set up the camera traps in the hope of capturing the movement of any wildlife species that might move through the area while we stayed there. While on the walk, we learnt about several different trees, including the Buffalo Thorn and Camel Thorn, and Toby also shared some interesting information on how we can observe and interpret wildlife movements, behaviour and feeding habits by paying attention to the tracks and signs that are left in the bush. While reading some of these signs at an old Aardvark burrow, we were very briefly rewarded with a glimpse of a Thick-tailed Scorpion (*Parabuthus* sp.) that was utilizing a small excavation inside the entrance as its residence.

Mammal Count: 5 species

Day 2

Langberg Guest Farm - Kimberley

Heading into the Mokala National Park after breakfast, we had some nice sightings of the typical species such as the Giraffe, Zebra, Blue Wildebeest, Warthog and Red Hartebeest, but also some special sightings of Roan and Tsessebe. For the few people on the tour who had an interest in reptiles, we also had a rather special sighting of a large Boomslang and several Karoo Girdled Lizards basking on the rocks in the cool weather.

We enjoyed a filling lunch at Mosu, where the size of 'small' meals in South Africa was challenged, before heading back to camp for an afternoon siesta and, while many of us questioned what the weather would do as it had started raining late in the afternoon, we all committed to brave the night drive at Marrick Safari. On arrival at Marrick, this proved to be the right decision for multiple reasons; to start off with, five minutes into the drive the rain ceased, then the sightings picked up, and after a rather unexpected sighting of a Black-footed Cat, the sightings just seemed to get better! African Wild Cat, South African Hedgehog, Aardwolf and finally the animal most members of the group had as their most sought-after species, the Aardvark.

Mammal Count: 32 species

Day 3

Langberg Guest Farm - Kimberley

With such a cool morning and the ground wet from the previous night's rain, game viewing tended to be a little less exciting as the previous day but, although we didn't see as many individual animals, several species were added to the list, such as Eland and White Rhinoceros. Until recently, apart from a few isolated incidents, the Northern Cape where this tour takes place, was absent from the list of provinces facing major Rhinoceros-poaching problems. However, only days before the tour, a single White Rhinoceros was poached on a neighbouring private game farm to the Mokala National Park. Since January 2010 (to 30th April 2016), there have been 3,799 reported Rhinoceros poached for their horns in South Africa alone. After a relatively quiet day in Mokala, the evening night drive proved to be the highlight of everybody's trip so far, with exceptional sightings of Black-footed Cat, creeping slowly within photo range, and several more Aardvark.

Mammal Count: 25 species

Day 4

Augrabies Falls National Park

On arrival at Augrabies Falls, several people took a walk down to the main falls viewing area and, while admiring the falls, had some nice sightings of the resident Augrabies Flat Lizards and the Rock Hyrax. As much of the day had been spent travelling, everybody opted in to an early dinner and then headed out on a night drive to find Klipspringer, Cape Fox (a great find for the area) and several Spotted Eagle-Owl. On returning back to the rest camp, a few people again took a short walk down to the falls to view them under floodlight, before retiring to bed earlier than the 11.30pm that had been the norm so far.

Mammal Count: 12 species

Day 5

Augrabies Falls National Park

Heading out for an early morning drive to beat the heat of the day, we enjoyed a lovely sunrise at the Oranjekom Lookout, while enjoying a cup of tea and some rusks. Scanning the walls of the gorge, we were able to find the resident pair of Verreaux's Eagles, and then in the water a great sighting of a Cape Clawless Otter. With the heat building up early in the day in this region, much of the wildlife tends to be more active in the cooler parts of the day, so having sightings of Eland, Klipspringer, Western Rock Elephant Shrew and Dassie Rat while out on our drive was quite special.

After a late breakfast, Jackie joined John and Toby for a walk down to the falls, and we were fortunate enough to have a great sighting of a Black-necked Spitting Cobra and several of the other resident Lizard species, such as the Augrabies Flat Lizard and the Southern Rock Agama.

Thursday 21st April

Friday 22nd April

Saturday 23rd April

1-

We took an afternoon drive out to the Echo Point lookout, then had an early dinner and another night drive, where we had a very distant view in the spotlight of a Leopard resting with his kill in a tree, and more Smith's Red Rock Rabbits than we cared to count.

Mammal Count: 17 species

Day 6

Sunday 24th April

Tweerivieren – Kgalagadi National Park

Although we thought we had seen our fill of Smith's Red Rock Rabbits on our night drive, while enjoying our morning coffee at the Arrarat lookout point, we were visited by another two individuals. This of course gave a few keen observers an opportunity to try to quickly get a photo of these beautiful little creatures in reasonable light, while the rest of the group admired this stunning part of the Augrabies Falls National Park as the sun started to rise (along with the temperatures), and the colours of the large granite outcrops that have been carved into an impressive gorge over thousands of years intensified in colour.

Heading back to the camp, we enjoyed a relaxed breakfast before heading on toward the Kgalagadi National Park. After checking in to our accommodation for the night, we took a short afternoon drive and noticed a lone Oryx bull staring rather intently at the ground, only to realise that he was actually watching a Caracal that was resting in the sparse grass cover! While the Caracal didn't stick around for long, or give anybody a good photo opportunity, it was truly an amazing sighting, and a first for the Rare Mammal tours! Caracal are formidable hunters and are able to take down prey two to three times their size; however, it is their ability to leap over 3 metres into the air and snatch a bird as it is flying by, that is truly amazing!

Mammal Count: 18 species

Day 7

Monday 25th April

!Xaus Lodge - Kgalagadi National Park

Finding a Tawny Eagle feeding on a Springbok carcass that had been killed by Cheetah the night before was quite an exciting event before breakfast; unfortunately however, the Cheetah were nowhere to be seen. Heading back down to camp, we had a some nice bird sightings, including African Black Swifts, Lanner Falcon, Kori Bustards and a pair of Secretarybirds drinking. After breakfast, on our way to !Xaus Lodge, we had some nice up-close sightings of general game species, such as the Oryx, Blue Wildebeest and Springbok. There is a big advantage in spending time driving in the river beds of the Kgalagadi, as this is generally speaking the only place the animals can find drinking water.

After meeting the lodge guides, Andries and Melissa at the Kamqua picnic site, we all jumped into the Open Safari Vehicles and headed over the dunes to !Xaus Lodge, where we would spend the next three nights. On our way to the lodge, we had several more sightings of Oryx, but mostly lone males in their isolated dune territories, and a rather large number of Steenbok, an antelope species that is perfectly adapted to life in such a harsh environment, being almost entirely independent of water, gaining all the water they need through their food. Most people spent the afternoon relaxing on their private balconies overlooking the large salt pan in front of the

lodge, and then, after dinner, we headed out on a night drive, having sightings of Cape Fox, Bat-eared Fox, African Wildcat and a distant view of an Aardwolf.

Mammal Count: 19 species

Day 8

Tuesday 26th April

!Xaus Lodge - Kgalagadi National Park

While Toby awoke to the sounds of a Lion calling out in the distance, nobody believed him, until we returned from our bushwalk and saw Erik's amazing photos of a lion drinking at the waterhole in the saltpan while we were away. While waiting for breakfast, John and Toby scanned the dunes around the lodge with the spotting scope and managed to find him resting under the trees nearby.

After breakfast, we made a quick visit to the local crafters village, before heading out on a short drive to see if we could find any other Lions in the area, or get a better view of the male that had visited the waterhole earlier in the day; however, the only cat we managed to find was a single African Wild Cat that Toby flushed from beneath a bush.

Enjoying a sundowner on the dunes at the opposite end of the saltpan in front of the lodge was a nice way to reflect on the tour up until now, as we all stood in silence, admiring the last rays of sunshine over the red sands of the Kalahari. Returning to camp for a boma dinner, we were greeted by the male Lion at the waterhole again, his voice echoing through the dunes as he called for his colleagues. After dinner, several people jumped back into the open vehicles and took a short drive down to the pan to get a closer look at him, enjoying some more sightings of Black-backed Jackal, Cape Fox, Bat-eared Fox and African Wild Cat while they were out.

Mammal Count: 13 species

Day 9

Wednesday 27th April

!Xaus Lodge – Kgalagadi National Park

Rising for an early departure from camp, we headed down to the river bed where, aside from some really nice general game species, we were fortunate to find three male Lions near a several-day-old Giraffe carcass. Two of the males were lying so close to the road that some people with large zoom lenses were able to get photos with clear reflections of the Open Safari Vehicles in the eyes of the Lions. While the Lions all appeared to be quite lazy, having had a good meal allowance for the last few days, the young Leopard that we found after lunch wasn't so lucky. A young 18-month-old female known as Masego, had been struggling with the independent life of a Leopard away from her mother. She had not been able to capture any large prey on her own since leaving her mother only two or three months ago, and has had to survive on small prey animals such as mice, springhares and snakes. While we followed her, she managed to capture and eat a juvenile Mole Snake, but even after that, she took a rather dangerous interest in the movement of passengers onboard the Open Safari Vehicles. Seeing that she was paying a little too much attention to us, Toby and John made the call to move on from the sighting and, as Toby would discover several days after our sighting, this was the right thing to do. After reporting the details of the Leopard to authorities and raising the concern of her lack of fear toward humans, Toby was told that she had attacked a tourist vehicle several days later. Fortunately nobody was injured, but seeing movement

in the back of a vehicle and an open window, the Leopard obviously getting desperate for food, took a chance and leapt towards the young boy who was sitting in the back seat. Fortunately the parents got away from the situation quickly and the young boy only suffered the shock of being hit by a Leopard's paw.

Mammal Count: 17 species

Day 10

Thursday 28th April

Tweerivieren – Kgalagadi National Park

After a pleasant breakfast, and leaving !Xaus Lodge, we spent the morning driving over the dunes in search of some of the smaller mammals species, such as Brandt's Whistling Rat, of which we had not had good sightings thus far. We left the dunes and entered the Nossob River bed, where we saw some rather large herds of Oryx gathering at the fresh rainwater pools. Much of the bore-water that is pumped into drinking troughs throughout the two rivers (Auob and Nossob) in the Kgalagadi is very salty, so on the rare occasion that there is enough rain in the Kgalagadi to create rain pools, the wildlife rush to it before it gets soaked into the thirsty ground. On our last night drive, we had some nice sightings of the Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, Barn Owl and Spotted Eagle-Owl as well as the Kangaroo of the Kalahari, the Springhare.

Mammal Count: 18 species

Day 11

Friday 29th April

Departure

Admiring our last African sunrise over the red dunes, we packed our bags and, after a short journey back to Upington, we bid farewell to John and Toby and made our way home.

Mammal Count: 1

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Species Lists

Mmmals (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	April										
			19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
1	Aardvark	Orycteropus afer		~	✓								
2	Aardwolf	Proteles cristata		✓					✓				
3	Antelope, Roan	Hippotragus equines		✓	✓								
4	Antelope, Sable	Hippotragus niger		✓									
5	Baboon, Chacma	Papio ursinus		 ✓ 		 ✓ 	✓						
6	Bat, Cape Serotine	Neoromicia capensis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	Blesbok	Damaliscus pygargus pygargus		✓	✓								
8	Caracal	Caracal caracal						✓					
9	Cat, African Wild	Felis lybica		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	 ✓ 	
10	Cat, Black-footed	Felis nigripes		 ✓ 	 ✓ 								
11	Dassie Rat	Petromus typicus					✓						
12	Duiker, Common	Sylvicapra grimmia										 ✓ 	
13	Eland	Taurotragus oryx		 ✓ 	 ✓ 		✓						
14	Elephant-shrew, Western Rock	Elephantulus rupestris					 ✓ 						
15	Fox, Bat-eared	Otocyon megalotis		✓	✓			✓	\checkmark		✓	✓	
16	Fox, Cape	Vulpes chama				✓		✓	\checkmark		✓	✓	
17	Gemsbok (Oryx)	Oryx gazelle		\checkmark	\checkmark		✓	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
18	Genet, Small-spotted (Common)	Genetta genetta		\checkmark									
19	Giraffe, Southern	Giraffa camelopardalis		\checkmark			✓				\checkmark	\checkmark	
20	Hare, Cape	Lepus capensis		\checkmark	\checkmark								
21	Hare, Scrub	Lepus saxatilis		✓	✓	✓		✓				✓	
22	Hare (Rabbit), Smith's Red Rock	Pronolagus rupestris					✓	✓					
23	Hartebeest, Red	Alcelaphus buselaphus caama		\checkmark	\checkmark		✓	✓	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	\checkmark	
24	Hedgehog, Southern African	Atelerix frontalis		✓									
25	Hyaena, Brown	Hyaena brunnea						✓					
26	Hyaena, Spotted	Crocuta crocuta										\checkmark	
27	Hyrax, Rock	Procavia capensis capensis				 ✓ 	✓	 ✓ 					
28	Impala	Aepyceros melampus		✓	✓								

	Scientific name	April										
Common name		19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
29 Jackal, Black-backed	Canis mesomelas		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
30 Klipspringer	Oreotragus oreotragus				✓	✓						
31 Kudu, Greater	Tragelaphus strepsiceros		✓	✓								
32 Leopard	Panthera pardus									✓		
33 Lion	Pathera leo							✓	✓	✓		
34 Meerkat (Suricate)	Suricata suricatta		✓					✓	✓			
35 Mongoose, Slender	Galerella sanguinea							✓				
36 Mongoose, Small Grey	Herpestes pulverulentus					✓						
37 Mongoose, Yellow	Atilax paludinosis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
38 Monkey, Vervet	Cercopithecus aethiops				✓	✓						
39 Nyala	Tragelaphus angasii	✓	✓	✓	✓							
40 Otter, Cape Clawless	Aonyx capensis					✓						
41 Porcupine, Cape	Hystrix africaeaustralis		✓									
42 Rat, Brants Whistling	Parotomys brantsii							✓	✓		✓	
43 Rat, Four-striped Grass	Rhabdomys pumilio						✓					
44 Rhebok, Grey	Pelea capreolus	✓										
45 Rhinoceros, White	Ceratotherium simum			✓								
46 Springbok	Antidorcas marsupialis		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
47 Springhare	Pedetes capensis		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
48 Squirrel, South African Ground	Xerus inauris	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
49 Steenbok	Raphicerus campestris		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
50 Tsessebe, Common	Damaliscus lunatus lunatus		✓	✓								
51 Warthog	Phacochoerus aethiopicus		✓	✓				✓		✓		
52 Wildebeest, Black	Connochaetes gnou			✓								
53 Wildebeest, Blue	Connochaetes taurinus		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
54 Zebra, Plains	Equus quagga		✓	✓								

Birds

Common Ostrich, Struthio camelus Spur-winged Goose, Plectropterus gambensis South African Shelduck, Tadorna cana Lesser Flamingo, Phoeniconaias minor Western Cattle Egret, Bubulcus ibis Hamerkop, Scopus umbretta White-breasted Cormorant, Phalacrocorax lucidus Secretarybird, Sagittarius serpentes White-backed Vulture, Gyps africanus Martial Eagle, Polemaetus bellicosus Verreaux's Eagle, Aquila verreauxii Pale Chanting Goshawk, Melierax canorus Pygmy Falcon, Polihierax semiitorquatus Rock Kestrel, Falco rupicolus Lanner Falcon, Falco biarmicus Kori Bustard, Ardeotis kori Northern Black Korhaan, Afrotis afraoides Blacksmith Lapwing, Vanellus armatus Three-banded Plover, Charadrius tricollaris Double-banded Courser, Rhinoptilus africanus Double-banded Sandgrouse, Pterocles bicintus Speckled Pigeon, Columba guinea Laughing Dove, Streptopelia senegalensis Western Barn Owl, Tyto alba Spotted Eagle-Owl, Bubo africanus Rufous-cheeked Nightjar, Caprimulgus rufigena Alpine Swift, Apus melba White-rumped Swift, Apus caffer Red-faced Mousebird, Urocolius indicus Pied Kingfisher, Ceryle rudis African Hoopoe, Upupa Africana Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Tockus leucomelas Crested Barbet, Trachyphonus vaillantii Pririt Batis, Batis pririt

Helmeted Guineafowl, Numida meleagris Egyptian Goose, Alopochen aegyptiacus Greater Flamingo, Phoenicopterus roseus Hadeda Ibis, Bostrychia hagedash Grey Heron, Ardea cinerea Reed Cormorant, Microcarbo africanus African Darter, Anhinga rufa Black-winged Kite, Elanus caeruleus Black-chested Snake Eagle, Circaetus pectoralis Tawny Eagle, Aquila rapax Gabar Goshawk, Micronisus gabar African Fish Eagle, Haliaeetus vocifer Lesser Kestrel, Falco naumanni Greater Kestrel, Falco rupicoloides Peregrine Falcon, Falco peregrinus Red-crested Korhaan, Lophotis ruficrista Spotted Thick-knee, Burhinus capensis Crowned Lapwing, Vanellus coronatus Wood Sandpiper, Tringa glareola Namagua Sandgrouse, Pterocles namagua Burchell's Sandgrouse, Pterocles burchelli Cape Turtle Dove, Streptopelia capicola Namaqua Dove, Oena capensis Southern White-faced Owl, Ptilopsis granti Verreaux's Eagle-Owl, Bubo lacteus African Palm Swift, Cypsiurus parvus Little Swift, Apus affinis White-backed Mousebird, Colius colius Giant Kingfisher, Megaceryle maxima Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Merops hirundineus Common Scimitarbill, Rhinopomastus cyanomelas Acacia Pied Barbet, Tricholaema leucomelas Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Campethera abingoni Crimson-breasted Shrike, Laniarius atrococcineus

Southern Fiscal, Lanius collaris Cape Crow, Corvus capensis Ashy Tit, Parus cinerascens Sabota Lark, Calendulauda sabota Spike-heeled Lark, Chersomanes albofasciata Black-eared Sparrow-Lark, Eremopterix australis White-throated Swallow, Hirundo albigularis Greater-striped Swallow, Cecropis cucullata Orange River White-eye, Zosterops pallidus Pale-winged Starling, Onychognathus nabouroup Cape Robin-chat, Cossypha caffra Karoo Scrub Robin, Erythropygia coryphoeus Familiar Chat, Oenanthe familiaris Marico Flycatcher, Bradornis mariquensis Dusky Sunbird, Cinnyris fuscus Sociable Weaver, Philetairus socius Cape Sparrow, Passer melanurus Green-winged Pytilia, Pytilia melba Violet-eared Waxbill, Uraeginthus granatinus African Pipit, Anthus cinnamomeus Black-throated Canary, Crithagra atrogularis White-throated Canary, Crithagra albogularis Cape Bunting, Emberiza capensis

Pied Crow, Corvus albus Fawn-coloured Lark, Calendulauda africanoides Karoo Long-billed Lark, Certhilauda subcoronata Pink-billed Lark, Spizocorys conirostris African Red-eyed Bulbul, Pycnonotus nigricans Common House Martin, Delichon urbicum Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, Sylvia subcaerulea Cape Starling, Lamprotornis nitens Karoo Thrush, Turdus smithi Kalahari Scrub Robin, Erythropygia paena Mountain Wheatear, Oenanthe monticola Ant-eating Chat, Myrmecocichla formicivora Marico Sunbird, Cinnyris mariquensis White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, Plocepasser mahali House Sparrow, Passer domesticus Scaly-feathered Weaver, Sporopipes squamifrons Red-headed Finch, Amadina erythrocephala Cape Wagtail, Motacilla capensis Plain-backed Pipit, Anthus leucophrys Yellow Canary, Crithagra flaviventris Lark-like Bunting, Emberiza impetuani

Fork-tailed Drongo, Dicrurus adsimilis

Reptiles

Leopard Tortoise, Stigmochelys pardalis Turner's Gecko, Chondrodactylus turneri Boomslang, Dispholidus typus Augrabies Flat Lizard, Platysaurus broadleyi Western Rock Skink, Trachylepis sulcata sulcata Western Ground Agama, Agama aculeata aculeata Southern Rock Agama, Agama atra Black Spitting Cobra, Naja nigricincta Spotted Sand Lizard, Pedioplanis lineoocellata lineoocellata

Bibron's Gecko, *Chondrodactylus bibronii* Cape Gecko, *Pachydactylus capensis* Southern Karusa Lizard, *Karusasaurus polyzonus* Karasburg Tree Skink, *Trachylepis sparsa* Variegated Skink, *Trachylepis variegata* Anchieta's Agama, *Agama anchietae* Mole Snake, *Pseudaspis cana* Cape Cobra, *Naja nivea*