

## Mission Impossible, an epic road trip in search of some of South Africa's rarest mammals

When people have asked me how my last safari went, I reply,  
*"We saw lots of amazing wildlife, but we had to sack the guide!"*

Obviously, this is not a statement I ever expected to open with, but it was sadly true with this safari. We were let down, badly. The company we used is based in Uppington. We had been planning this trip with him for nearly a year and had naturally requested a wildlife guide with broad knowledge of the flora and fauna. A couple of names had received good reviews and we stated a preference for one of those guys to guide us. This didn't happen.

For those of you who are familiar with British sitcoms, what we ended up with was the South African equivalent of an aging Basil Fawlty! This guide turned out to be a city tour guide and B&B owner based in Cape Town. He was not a naturalist guide, and, despite some pre-tour email exchanges to clarify our expectations for the tour which were initially quite reassuring, it quickly became apparent that he was not prepared to handle a tour covering nearly 4000km to our expectations. It was not until 30/9 that we were able to replace the first unacceptable guide with a different guide. Whilst still not a naturalist guide, our new guide was a significant improvement and we were able to end our tour on a high point with him.

At the present time the safari company has sent me a written apology stating that he regrets employing the guide for our tour, that he was not up to standard but no offer of recompense has been forthcoming.. At the moment I have complaints lodged with a number of bodies in South Africa. Sadly the safari company is not a member of SATSA from what I can see.

I will make reference to issues that forced us to curtail planned activities and/or make alternative arrangements for our activities where this is appropriate. My mum also fell ill with a nasty cold.

Despite all the issues we had, my mum definitely got the safari bug and is keen to travel with me again!

I set out my tour plan in an earlier thread, [here](#):

To recap our original plan was:

- 15 Sept- We arrive 2120 overnight at Road Lodge Cape Town International Airport
- 16-18 The Cape Peninsula. Simonstad Seadeville BB (Simonstown)  
<http://www.seadevilla.co.za/simonstown-activities.php>  
Visiting some of the main botanical and natural history destinations such as Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens, Cape Point and the south-western tip of the African Continent, Betty's Bay, Stony Point, Boulder's Beach and others. possibly Table Mountain, depending on weather. Staying in Simon's Town.
- 19 and 20 Swellendam and the Agulhas Plain. Swellendam BB Aan de Oewer BB  
<http://www.aandeoever.com> to visit Bontebok NP and De Hoop NP.

- 21 Karoo National Park.
- 22-24 Dunedin Farm (double room on this farm) - Riverine Rabbit Retreat
- 25-27 Marrick safari camp & Mokala Park
- 28 – 29 Kamfers Dam then Augrabies Falls National Park.
- 30 Sept Kalahari trails meerkat sanctuary (morning walk with meerkats) .

#### Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park

- 1 Oct Twee Rivieren
- 2 Oct Mata Mata riverfront lux chalet
- 3 Oct Kalahari tented camp unfenced 3 km from Mata Mata
- 4 Oct TBC Hopefully Nossob
- 5 Oct tbc
- 6 Oct Jo & Mum depart on the 17:10 flight from Upington to Johannesburg SA8770 to connect with the 2315 from Johannesburg KLM 592.

#### What we ended up with was:

- 15 Sept- We arrive 2120 overnight at Road Lodge Cape Town International Airport
- 16 Sept- West Coast National Park (our choice) overnight Table View B&B (FOC)
- 17 Sept- Whale watching out of Gansbaai with Dyer Island Cruises (our choice, booked directly ) and evening trip up Table Mountain - overnight at Simonstad Seadeville BB (Simonstown)  
<http://www.seadevilla.co.za/simonstown-activities.php>
- 18 Sept - sightseeing, Groot Constantia, Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens, Cape Point, overnight at Simonstad Seadeville BB (Simonstown)  
<http://www.seadevilla.co.za/simonstown-activities.php> (breakfast only)
- 19 Sept Boulder's Beach, drive to Swellendam. Overnight Swellendam BB Aan de Oewer BB  
<http://www.aandoeover.com>
- 20 Sept Witsand, De Hoop NP. (Breakfast only)
- 21 Karoo National Park (self catering )
- 22-24 Dunedin Farm (double room on this farm) - Riverine Rabbit Retreat
- 25-27 Marrick safari camp & Mokala Park ( full board)
- 28 – 29 Kamfers Dam then Augrabies Falls National Park. (Self catering )
- 30 Sept Kalahari trails meerkat sanctuary (self catering) .

#### Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park all self catering.

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All meals, accommodation, guiding fees and fuel were to be included in the cost of our tour, including all daily game drives in the national parks, and all transfers between sites. We also agreed that at the Riverine Rabbit Retreat the guide would take us out for sunset/night drives as

well as morning excursions, as the farm does not normally run organised night drives. the safari company also agreed they would organise a spotlight for this activity.

We agreed we would pay for park/entrance fees and any additional costs of excursions such as the boat trip and night drives at Marrick and in the national parks.

I can provide quite a detailed breakdown of costs:

We paid the safari company: £7106 approx between us. (Paid in Euros)  
Of that, the total accommodation bill, including any accommodation and meals booked for the guide amounted to: £1860 based on an exchange rate of 16 Rand to the £.

the safari company paid the guide approx £3125 to cover all fuel/transport, food not already paid for in the accommodation and guiding fees. This guide then paid our new guide about £625 to cover our last six nights of guiding. Both guides were expected to provide their own transport for the tour.

No discussions were had with us about the guide's accommodation, as this was left to the safari company to sort out the details. We did state our expectation that we would make the most of dawn and dusk wildlife viewing and our expectation therefore was that the guide would be co-located with us at all times.

However, to keep costs to us down, at most of the places we stayed, we discovered that the guide was expected to either make their own arrangements for accommodation (where we stayed in B&B), or camp (at most national parks). The exceptions to this were Riverine Rabbit Retreat, Marrick, and two nights in Kgalagadi where a room was provided due to a lack of camping spaces. Lack of guide accommodation and food budget became a major source of disagreement between our guide and the safari company.

Park fees came to R4478. I was planning to buy a wild card, but was advised against doing so by our guide on the understanding that paying as we went along would be cheaper. This advice turned out to be incorrect. It would have cost only R3455 for the Wild Card.

We booked night drives most places we could, including three at Marrick. For the first two nights there we had to pay the whole cost of R2700 between us each night. On our third night we were able to share the cost with another couple.

Flights were extra.

So onto Day 1.

## 16/09/17 West Coast National Park

After a pleasant flight the day before, changing a little cash and a bit of faffing around when our transfer didn't seem to have been arranged, we finally checked into Road Lodge just by Cape Town Airport around 11 PM. On arrival we were advised that our guide had rung to say he

would be late collecting us at 9.00 instead of the agreed time of 08.30. So we had a more leisurely start than planned.

Ahead of our arrival our guide had informed us that he had swapped our accommodation for the 16th from Simonstown to his B&B at Table View at no charge to us, as it was more convenient for where we wanted to visit on our first two days. I thought this was kind of him and good planning on his part. He then informed me that as it was very windy around the Cape and the sun was shining West Coast National Park should be our target plan for the day. This suited us just fine as I knew that Mum would be delighted to see the flowers in bloom and we should also have a chance of seeing some of the mammals, such as Cape Mountain Zebra.

I was somewhat staggered to see that we had a minibus for our tour, being only two guests! I began to wonder how this vehicle would cope with the sand that we would face in Kgalagadi as well as the possibly rugged terrain in the Karoo. Our guide explained that his normal bakkie had developed a fault and he'd had to make other arrangements. We had a hairy moment when the back wheel hit a curb on a busy road on our first day, it certainly put the wind up my mum!

After dropping our bags at their B&B and picking up our guide's lovely wife, we were finally on our way to West Coast National Park. The entrance to the park is some 100km north of Cape Town, off the R27 highway. Most internal routes are tarred.

#### About West Coast National Park

Description from Sanparks website: Though the thousands of migrating birds is one the main reasons for the conservation of the West Coast National Park, the showy plants of the area, usually growing on granite or limestone rocks, especially during spring time, are what attracts most of its visitors to this fascinating park.

WCNP contains mostly strandveld vegetation (24,025 ha), which was previously classified as West Coast Strandveld and Langebaan Fynbos /Thicket Mosaic. In recent years the park has expanded incorporating substantial areas (6,382 ha) of an additional vegetation type /broad habitat unit i.e. Hopefield Sand Plain Fynbos, previously called Coastal Fynbos. Both these habitat units were given a 50 % irreplaceability rating, however, sand plain fynbos is regarded to be of higher conservation value than strandveld, due to very little being formally conserved and it being more threatened by alien plant invasion.

The strandveld vegetation of WCNP occurs on the Langebaan peninsula and east of the Langebaan lagoon on deep calcareous sands of the Langebaan formation. Sand plain fynbos occurs inland of the strandveld on deep acidic light-grey to pale-red sands of the Springfontyn formation. Extensive marshes, dominated by *Sarcocornia*, *Salicornia*, *Spartina*, *Limonium*, *Phragmites*, *Typha*, *Juncus*, and *Scirpus* species, occur on the fringes of the Langebaan lagoon.

The vegetation of the park, excluding the newly acquired properties such as Van Niekerks Hoop, Kalkklipfontein, Langefontein and Elandsfontein, may be divided into 36 associations (or communities), having some 482 plant species (including salt marsh species), of which 21 are Red Data Book species. A further 14 Red Data species have been recorded, or are likely to occur on the newly acquired sections of land.

We arrived around 11:40 and spent a lot of our time around the dunes, which were covered in a variety of flowers.

Much to our surprise, our guide and his wife stayed with the minibus whenever we stopped to look at all the wonderful flowers. As a result, I have no idea what any of the flowers are called, and it was quite disappointing not to have a knowledgeable guide to show us around the lovely park. Perhaps someone on here could help us I.D. them?

We stopped in at the Geelbek visitor centre to look at Eve's footprints. Discovered in 1995 at Kraalbaai, these are unmistakable human footfalls in rock (formerly sea sand) and are said to have belonged to a young woman who lived 117 000 years ago. The original footprints are housed at the Iziko South African Museum in Cape Town, but a replica can be seen inside the Visitors Centre.

Close to the Visitor Centre are a couple of bird hides. Mum and I decided to investigate. The one hide we visited was accessible via a boardwalk that goes out over the marsh. We saw a few nice birds, including **Great White Pelican, Great White Egret, Black Harrier, Yellow-billed Kite, Black-winged Stilt, Curlew Sandpiper, Greenshank, Kittlitz Plover, Blacksmith Plover, Cape Wagtail** and **Lesser Flamingos**.

Other than the distant flamingos, not much was visible from the hide, the walk up there being more productive. The tide was probably a bit too high to get many waders, except for the few on the saltmarsh.

Having looked in the bird hide we continued on, A **Small Grey Mongoose** ran across the road. stopping at a little tuck shop for a few bits to tide us over, only really crisps and chocolates were on offer there, so we missed having a proper lunch, but our breakfast had been filling.

We almost turned back before the famous Postberg section, thankfully I took time to consult the [map](#) and asked advice from the staff at the little snack shop, from which we were directed to the jewel of the park. Around 14:30 we reached the Postberg section. This area was carpeted in swathes of pink and yellow flowers.

In the distance we could see some game, including my first lifers of the trip, **Cape Mountain Zebra**, behind them, **Springbok** and **Bontebok**. **Ostrich** were also present.

Driving around we were able to approach the Zebra herd more closely, they were clearly a frisky bunch with a couple of them rearing up, biting and chasing each other. We also spotted our first **Eland** of the trip, these being of the pale form seen along the south and west coast. With these sightings in the bag we began our journey back to Cape Town.

Our guide took us to one of the local restaurants, Catch 22, for dinner with his wife. I had the Kingclip in a shrimp and brandy sauce with a cold savannah cider, which was very tasty. He said he wanted to "treat us" as a kind of welcome dinner, although given we had already paid the safari company for all meals, this seemed a little odd.

After dinner, we retired for the night as we had an early start the next day in order to get to Gansbaai for our whale watching trip.

## 17/09/17 Gansbaai and Table Mountain

We had kept our plans for our first days around the Cape quite open, as many of the excursions we wanted to do were weather dependent, like West Coast. It was just over a month before our trip when my mum decided that she would actually like to do the whale watching trip. Until then, she had been on the fence about it because she doesn't much care for being out on the open water after a terrifying childhood experience on a river in India.

I contacted the safari company in advance and asked him if he could book us the whale watching trip or if we should ask our guide to do that for us. He advised we should ask our guide and it was around that time that we were introduced to our guide. Unfortunately, the early communication I had was with his wife who advised that our guide was away guiding another group. As availability was fast diminishing, I asked our guide's wife if we should book it directly and she advised to go ahead and get the booking in. Once I'd done that, I let our guide know what date we'd booked for.

We left Table View at 0615 after a light breakfast of muesli and yoghurt. A few birds were seen en route including **Hadedas** and our first sighting of **Blue Cranes**. We drove via Hermanus to Dyer Island Cruises in Gansbaai. This is the same company my Dad and I used for our shark dives in 2010. We had some light refreshments and a video presentation before getting sou'westers and lifejackets and boarding the boat.

There was quite a swell on the ocean and my mum was clearly perturbed by this, clinging to me like a limpet! The crew put down a cover over our side of the boat to avoid the worst of the spray. We first stopped by the shark divers, but no sharks were seen at that time. So we carried on along the bay east until we came across our first of several groups of **Southern Right Whales**. Sadly the whales didn't breach, but a few times we saw a significant part of the head and upper body above the waves and a few occasions of tails coming out of the water as these ocean giants dived down. The swell did make photography more challenging than my last whale watching trip in Hermanus and I don't think I managed to get any better shots.

I sadly missed the only humpback dolphin sighting (but have seen these before in Mozambique).

We stopped off at the **Cape Fur Seal** colony at Dyer Island and made a couple of passes to watch the thousands of playful young seals in the ocean, and larger adults resting on the rocks. Sadly no "air jaws" moments presented themselves (much to mum's relief).

We did see a single **Humpback Whale**, only the small dorsal fin and part of the back was visible.

We then returned to the cage divers, where it wasn't long before there was some action, not just a **Great White Shark**, but also a **Bronze Whaler Shark** visited the bait when we were there.

**Cape Gulls**, **Bank Cormorants** and a **Sub-antarctic Skua** were also seen. We didn't see any albatrosses this trip as we didn't do a specific pelagic tour, unlike last time.

We arrived back later than expected at around 12:50. Dyer Island Crusies include a light lunch of soup and rolls, (while they edit the souvenir video that they like to hawk to punters), but we were hurried out by our guide who wanted to get us up Table Mountain that afternoon. We managed to grab a few bread rolls and, with a bit of cheese from our guide's wife, that was our lunch for the day.

We got back to Cape Town, Mum had come down with a cold and wasn't feeling too well so our guide's wife took her to a Pharmacy to stock up on flu remedies. We carried on to Table Mountain arriving around 17:00. The queue to get up there was horrendous and we almost decided to give it a miss. But we did persevere and eventually got to the top around 1800. There wasn't much time to walk around before the sun started to set. Our guide stayed behind at the cafe near the cable car whilst we explored the trails, admired the stunning vistas as the sun set.

It was no surprise that the queue to get down was just as horrendous! Despite the lengthy wait, everyone was in a really jovial atmosphere with lots of spontaneous singing as we queued to get down. We finally made it back down at around 2015. From there we still had a long drive to get to Simon's Town. We stopped for a KFC before struggling to find our B&B, spotting an **African Penguin** in town.

Tiredness was clearly getting to our guide and he bumped the curb several times trying to manoeuvre the bus up the windy road as he attempted to locate to our B&B. We arrived around 2130. Our accommodation was stunning and turned out to be just in front of Port of Call, where my Dad and I had stayed last time we were there.

Our guide dropped us off unceremoniously and headed back to Table View. I was rather shocked about this as I expected our guide to be located with us to make an early start the next day. We collapsed into bed, but sleep didn't come easily for me.

## 18/09/17 Kirstenbosch and Cape Point

I woke up at 0300 worrying about how the rest of the tour would go. Our guide had already been making some worrying complaints, particularly around what was and wasn't included in our tour.

So I drafted an email to the safari company asking him to speak to our guide to clarify what we had already paid for in terms of meals and to ensure that our guide was happy with his accommodation arrangements.

I also raised concerns about the suitability of the minibus and reiterated my expectations for the spotlight and night drives that we would need our guide to conduct at Riverine Rabbit Retreat.

Afterwards, I tried to get back to sleep, but eventually gave up and got up around 7 am. I watched the dawn break over the ocean whilst scanning for cetaceans. As the sun rose, the birdlife got going, and I managed to photograph some beautiful sunbirds, including **orange-breasted sunbirds**, **Southern Double-collared sunbirds** and **Malachite sunbird**, the latter being a lifer that I'd failed to nail last time I was here. Also present were **Cape Sugarbird**,

**Helmeted Guineafowl, Common Waxbill, Speckled Pigeon, Cape Bulbul, Speckled Mousebird, Karoo Prinia and Pin-tailed Whydah.**

We enjoyed a leisurely, and indeed deliciously plentiful, breakfast whilst we waited for our guide to arrive. We finally got picked up at 09:45. Our guide stopped off a few times to point out some of the historical sights of Simon's Town and the Cape.

We were booked onto a motorised tour at Kirstenbosch at 1100, so our guide was really just killing time before taking us there. We had expressed an interest in doing a wine tasting and our guide drove us to Groot Constantia to show us around. One of the buildings was displaying a beautiful gallery of wildlife art, which I enjoyed viewing. Given that the sun was not yet above the yardarm and given my mum was suffering from a heavy cold, tasting wine was not really top of our minds and we really only had time for a flying visit, so I felt sorely disappointed that I didn't get a chance to sample any of the local grapes. We almost came a cropper leaving Constantia as we very nearly collided with a coach heading down the winding exit lane.

We arrived about 15 minutes before our tour was scheduled to depart so we had time to collect our tickets before boarding the little buggy. The carpets of flowers were truly spectacular. We were shown some of the sculptures that are dotted around, firstly Nelson Mandela. A bust of Nelson Mandela stands beside the pepper-bark tree (*Warburgia salutaris*) that Nelson Mandela planted on his visit to Kirstenbosch on 21 August 1996. The bust was sculpted by John Francis Gardner and donated to Kirstenbosch by the sculptor in January 2010. It portrays Nelson Mandela during the pivotal years of his presidency and captures his radiance and generosity of spirit the world has grown to love. Mandela's bust and tree can be found just inside the Visitors' Centre entrance to the Garden, at the bottom of the main lawn.

We also saw "Cheetah Sitting in a Tree" by Dylan Lewis, a beautiful bronze statue.

I expressed my interest in birds to the guide who said he had something special in store. I pretty much knew what that was going to be and sure enough, we were soon enjoying views of the resident **Spotted Eagle Owl**.

Stopping at the protea garden, I spotted another **Cape Sugarbird** and made a swift exit to snap off some shots.

Taking the motorised tour is a good way to get an overview of the main gardens of Kirstenbosch, but it didn't allow much opportunity for a deeper exploration of the park, except when we were encouraged to walk the "canopy walkway" bridge which was quite impressive.

We stopped for coffee and cake, expecting to explore the park further on foot, but our guide urged us to press on, as it was already 13:40, so that we could fit in Cape Point and even Boulders Beach that afternoon. In hindsight, as we never made it to Boulders that afternoon, an extra hour or so at Kirstenbosch wouldn't have impacted too much on our schedule and Mum's biggest regret of the trip was not being able to explore these gardens in more depth.

So we took the scenic route via Hout Bay and Chapman's Peak, stopping in Hout Bay for fish and chips for lunch. Then it was on to Cape Point for the rest of the afternoon. We entered the park and immediately encountered a large troop of **Chacma Baboons**, we enjoyed watching the troop cross the road in front of us, especially the little babies riding on the backs of their mothers.

A **Small Grey Mongoose** and some unidentified rodents were also seen along the way. We stopped and took a ride up on the flying Dutchman Funicular to see the lighthouse. **White-breasted Cormorants** and **Cape Cormorants** nest on the cliffs around the lighthouse.

Also seen were **Cape Siskin**, **Red-winged Starling** and **Southern Double-collared Sunbirds**, zipped around the fynbos.

Mammals were also in evidence with excellent views on the way back out of the park of **Eland** and **Bontebok** with a couple of Bonteboklets in tow.

After stopping to get a takeaway pizza in Simonstown, we arrived back at our B&B and our host Mirinda informed us of the possibility of porcupine after dark. We staked out the garden and were rewarded when a large **Porcupine** wandered through at 20:00. Unfortunately I didn't manage to get a shot off before it continued on it's mission across the cliff terraces.

## 19/09/17 Boulders Beach to Swellendam

We had another very leisurely start waiting for our guide and the day started very differently to the previous one with overcast skies and very few birds. We did however, see a pod of three **Southern Right Whales** with a calf and a distant school of **Dolphins** (not sure what species).

Our guide phoned at 0930 to say he was only just leaving. This was taking the proverbial and I decided to take matters into my own hands and asked Mirinda if she could arrange a taxi to Boulders for us. Instead, she kindly offered to drive us there herself and we were very grateful for her kind offer.

We walked along the boardwalk to the entrance, seeing more **African Penguins** and some lovely **Dassies** along the way. Having visited Betty's Bay in 2010 it was nice to be able to compare it with Boulders. Betty's bay is more rocky in the sense that the rocks are much more jagged and there seemed to be a much more densely packed colony there.

Boulders beach in contrast is dominated by, naturally, some very large smooth boulders and a sandy beach. So they are both very different settings and I'm pleased to have visited both locations.

African Penguins are not doing well here. They were reclassified on 26 May 2010 from a Vulnerable to now Endangered status. In 1956 when the first full census was conducted on the African Penguin, there were approximately 150 000 breeding pairs counted. In 2009 there were only 26 000 breeding pairs left in the world. These numbers indicate a loss of more than 80% of breeding pairs in just over 50 years.

The Boulders Penguin Colony was established in 1983 and numbers increased from surrounding island colonies to bring breeding numbers to 3 900 birds in 2005. Since then there has been a decrease. The 2011 figures sit at around 2100 birds at Boulders Penguin Colony. The decline at Boulders and the global decline is the suspected result of:

- habitat destruction
- effects of oil spills and other marine pollution
- impacts of global warming on fish stocks and fish movement
- over fishing
- irresponsible tourism activities
- domestic pets/animals

For more information on how to help the plight of the African Penguin, contact SANCCOB on +27(0) 21 557 6155.

So we spent about an hour with the Penguins before we saw Our guide gesticulating to us and pointing back towards the car park. We headed that way but somehow completely missed our guide. We arrived at the minibus and were waiting there for at least 20 to 30 minutes, I even went to get us a couple of cups of tea, before our guide finally reappeared.

We then drove direct to Swellendam, well I say direct, we actually seemed to take the wrong road and we had to stop a couple of times to ask for directions. We had planned to visit Bontebok National Park that afternoon and then De Hoop the following day.

From some advice I received from @Safaridude when finalising our plans a couple of months before, I asked if we should try and swap our accommodation to stay in De Hoop and forget Bontebok. I did float this suggestion with the safari company and again with our guide but neither of them were responsive on that point and, as Aan D'Oevre B&B seemed like a lovely place to stay, with close access to Bontebok NP I decided not to push the matter. In hindsight, I think this was a mistake. As lovely as the B&B was, our two nights here turned out not to be as well-spent as we might have liked and a night at De Hoop would have given us the, probably very remote, chance of glimpsing a caracal, zorilla or other rare mammal.

As it happened, we didn't get to visit Bontebok NP for two reasons:

1. We didn't arrive at Swellendam until 15:30 and the B&B is unmanned in the evenings which means we had to check in before 5pm
2. Our guide had been advised that De Hoop had everything that Bontebok NP has in spades and as a result he was very reluctant to take us there.

On the way into Swellendam we passed some clear signage to De Hoop, so I thought that if we made an early start the next day we should be able to get a full day in. As we'd had already good sightings of Bontebok and Cape Mountain Zebra at Cape Point, skipping a few hours at Bontebok park did not seem to be a big deal, but I personally wished we could have fit it in. We therefore reluctantly agreed to drop Bontebok and head straight to the B&B.

The B&B itself was absolutely lovely, we had a well stocked minibar and complimentary sherry in our room. Lots of bird feeders attracted an array of avian delights, including **Laughing Dove**, **Cape Weaver**, **Southern Grey-headed Sparrow**, **Streaky-headed Seed-eater**, **Cape Robin-Chat**, **Greater double-collared Sunbird**, and **Southern Masked Weaver**. A flock of **Cape White-eye** were feeding in a huge bottlebrush tree.

Our guide asked about restaurants and our hosts pointed us to a copy of their welcome pack which contains details of a number of restaurants and their menus. We settled on one that was closeby called Drostdy, it's a heritage building as well as a restaurant, a very nice setting.

We had an eventful time just trying to leave the car park through the electric gate when our guide reversed into it before it was fully open, deftly knocking it off it's hinges! It was just as well the staff had gone home for the night as he managed to put it back and get it working before anyone noticed.

We only had a main course and I chose the trio of venison, which was delicious. Unfortunately the atmosphere of the meal was completely spoilt by our guide, whose complaints about the cost of the food were very vocal when the bill arrived and personally I found this to be hugely embarrassing. So with that parting shot we returned to our accommodation and headed to bed.

## 20/09/17 De Hoop Nature Reserve

De Hoop Nature Reserve has the largest conserved area of lowland fynbos in the Western Cape. Of the 9 000 plant species found in the Cape floral region, the reserve and its surrounds have an estimated 1 500 species.

De Hoop has 86 mammal species, such as the rare bontebok and Cape mountain zebra, as well as eland, grey rhebok, baboon, yellow mongoose, caracal and the occasional leopard. The nature reserve also has more than 260 bird species, including many water birds living around the De Hoop vlei. Potberg is home to the only remaining breeding colony of the rare Cape vulture in the Western Cape. The De Hoop MPA does not only protect the reserve and the coastline. It also stretches three nautical miles into the sea, protecting dolphins, seals, southern right whales and at least 250 species of fish.

I asked to make an early start so that we could get a full day in at De Hoop and so we left at 06:05, after I'd sighted a **Giant Kingfisher** along the stream that backs onto the property. Unfortunately, instead of taking the direct route to De Hoop (the one that had been signposted) Our guide took us on a magical mystery tour across the Malgas Pontoon down to Witsand, which was nowhere near the actual nature reserve so we then had to return back via the pontoon, got lost trying to find a route across farmland and eventually got to De Hoop around 11:30. Not quite the early start that I had in mind and our guide insisted on heading back at 16:30.

Our magical mystery tour was not devoid of wildlife and we sighted many little birds perched on the wire fences around the farmland, mainly these were chats and **Capped Wheatears**- they seemed so common I didn't ask to stop to take photos. This was a mistake, as we didn't see any elsewhere, or on the way back.

We did, however stop to take photographs of the magnificent **Blue Cranes** that were present in good numbers. Also present in little ponds were **Spur-winged Geese** and **Egyptian Geese** and a **Hammerkop** struggling with a large toad or frog.

When we crossed the Malgas Pontoon we saw several **Southern Red Bishops** noisily flitting about the reeds and **White-throated Swallows** perched on the cables of the pontoon. Also seen were **African Pipit** and **African Pied Starling**.

We stopped briefly in Witsand to whale watch but it was incredibly windy and exposed. I'm not quite sure what was in our guide's mind about Witsand, I think he was under the impression that we couldn't whale watch at De Hoop, or maybe he thought that Witsand was part of De Hoop or there was a route through to De Hoop? Whatever the reason, and for the benefit of anyone else who might be planning a visit, it is not necessary to go to Witsand if one wants to whale watch, as De Hoop also has excellent coastal views. We saw whales at both locations. At De Hoop they were closer to the shore. From De Hoop we saw a mother and a calf **Southern Right Whale**.

Once we finally made our way to De Hoop we first encountered some more **Chacma Baboons**. **Bontebok**, **Ostriches** and **Cape Mountain Zebra** were all present. The Fynbos and white dunes provided a beautiful backdrop to the pied buck. A **Cape Grassbird** was singing its heart out from the top of a bush.

Whilst whalewatching, a trio of **African Black Oystercatchers** flew past. Mum was also fascinated to see a pair of dung beetles fighting over a ball of dung.

We left the park at 16:30 and headed back to Swellendam. As our guide had made us feel so uncomfortable about having a meal in the restaurant, we looked at options for a takeaway. We found a pub that served takeaway pizza and decided to share one.

Ordering dinner was delayed by a few hours as our guide decided he wanted to go and clean the minibus and told us he would come and get us to go to order the take away when he got back. The problem was, due to the setup of the rooms, there was a locked gate that our guide couldn't open between his room at the front, and our room at the back. So it was only when I went to find him later that evening, that I discovered that he'd be back for hours.

Again, he misjudged the gate and knocked it a couple of times before we managed to get out of the B&B. After ordering the pizza at the pub, our guide was pacing around like a caged tiger whilst we waited for it to be prepared. After this faffing around, we ended up eating quite late, but the pizza was very tasty.

## 21/09/17 Karoo National Park

It was a long drive to Karoo National Park, we left at 06:00 and drove through the scenic Grootswartberg Mountain Catchment Area towards Beaufort West. This would be a geologist's field day! The Swartberg mountains (black mountain in Afrikaans) are a mountain range in the Western Cape province of South Africa. It is composed of two main mountain chains running roughly east-west along the northern edge of the semi-arid Little Karoo. To the north of the range lies the other large semi-arid area in South Africa, the Great Karoo. Most of the Swartberg Mountains are above 2000 m high, making them the tallest mountains in the Western Cape. It is also one of the longest, spanning some 230 km from south of Laingsburg in the west to between Willowmore and Uniondale in the east. Geologically, these mountains are part of the Cape Fold Belt.

The Greater Swartberg is located to the east, with the dividing line between the two ranges being the Gouritz River, which cuts a gorge directly through the range with the Tierberg (Leopard Mountain) at 2132 m being the highest. These mountains are home to the Cango Caves in the exposed limestone basement rocks exposed by upliftment along a 300 km fault line that runs along the southern flank of the Swartberg ranges. These are the most famous subterranean system in South Africa, located just north of Oudtshoorn.

Our route took us through the spectacular Meiringspoort pass. Until the first pass was cut, these mountains were virtually insurmountable, and cut the Great Karoo off from the Little Karoo and from the coast. John Molteno, Beaufort West businessman (and later Prime Minister) first surveyed the range for a pass with Andrew Bain, Thomas Bain. They rode out from Beaufort West on horseback, in 1854, for a week-long ride to traverse the range and plan the routes.

The pass was cut and the route completed in only 223 working days, comprising one of the era's most extraordinary feats of engineering. It was also a huge economic step for the interior of the Cape Colony. For example, by 1870, an eighth of the country's wool exports passed through the Meiringspoort.

The Meiringspoort provides paved road transit through the Swartberg range, using the route largely carved by a river. The poort connects the town of De Rust in the south, with the town of Klaarstroom in the north. It also offers a spectacular drive through incredible rock formations.

We arrived at Karoo National Park at around 13:30. The Karoo National Park was founded in 1979. This semi-desert area covers an area of 750 square kilometres (290 sq mi). The Nuweveld portion of the Great Escarpment runs through the Park. It is therefore partly in the Lower Karoo, at about 850 m above sea level, and partly in the Upper Karoo at over 1300 m altitude.

There are two main game viewing drives that do not require a four-wheel drive vehicle: the one to the east remains on the "Lammertjiesleegte" plains of the Lower Karoo; the other is the 49 km long circular route to the west which ascends the Klipspringer Pass on to the plateau (Upper Karoo), and eventually returns to the plains at the "Doornhoek" picnic site at the western extremity of the loop. From there it follows a south-easterly course across the plains to the beginning of the Klipspringer Pass, near the camp site and chalets. At the top of the Klipspringer Pass the Rooivalle View Point presents a magnificent panorama of the Lower Karoo.

The middle portion of the park, to the west of the Klipspringer Pass circular route, was off limits to us but is easily accessible in 4x4 vehicles, and covers an extensive area, with rewarding game viewing opportunities.

An important point to note about the national parks in South Africa, check in seems to universally be after 14:00. This is really a bit later than one would ideally like, it would be nice to get checked in at lunch time in order to relax for a while before starting a PM game drive. The provision of only a camping spot set our guide off again, frustrating and embarrassing us in front of the park staff.

I had hoped we might do a night drive here but when I contacted the park I was advised that they did not have a working vehicle, so night drives were not available for the time we were there. This was a shame, because a number of the mammals I was hoping to see were

nocturnal. The Karoo National Park holds springbok, gemsbok (or Oryx), Cape mountain zebra, Cape buffalo, red hartebeest, black rhinoceros, eland, kudu, klipspringer, bat-eared foxes, black-backed jackal, ostriches, and, since fairly recently, lions. It also has the greatest number of tortoise species of any park in the world - five in total. The endangered riverine rabbit has been successfully resettled here. A large number of Verreaux's eagles have nests on the cliffs of the Escarpment. Martial eagles, booted eagles and the shy Cape eagle-owl are other raptors that can be seen in the Park.

Our first sighting at the entrance was a nice big **Leopard Tortoise** and then our first **Red Hartebeest**, (another lifer) that was sleeping. Over the course of the afternoon, we tried Klipspringer Pass without success and we didn't cover the full loop as our guide had concerns about the suitability of the minibus on this mountain pass. We then drove the Potlekkertjie loop, we saw very little on this loop and after a while our guide started to complain that we were just wasting petrol being out there, so we turned back and spent the rest of the afternoon trying the Lammertjiesleegte loop.

Over the course of those two loops we had further sightings of **Cape Mountain Zebra** including one with a tiny foal, and our first sightings of **Kudu**, **Vervet Monkeys**, and, a species I was really looking forward to seeing, the majestic **Gemsbok (Oryx)**. A few birds were also in evidence, **Karoo Chat**, more **Ostrich** and at a bird hide displaying **Southern Masked Weaver**.

Given the issues we'd have with our guide and restaurants we suggested he might like to cook for us, since we had a kitchen and plenty of food in the bus. But he decided to take us to the restaurant for dinner instead and then proceeded to opine about the server being too gobby! I had the game pie, which was quite tasty. It was becoming quite wearing having to listen to this constant negative attitude.

## 22/09/17 Karoo National Park to Riverine Rabbit Retreat

We once again took the Klipspringer Pass looking for it's namesake. We caught sight of a **Black-backed Jackal** making its way up the cliffside and then I spotted two distant **Klipspringer** foraging with a troop of **Chacma Baboons**. We turned around before we should have because another gentleman we spoke to later advised us that he'd sighted one right by the road just after the place where we'd turned back.

We then took breakfast whilst watching a **Red Hartebeest** at the waterhole in front of the restaurant. I had a stack of delicious pancakes. On the way out we drove the Lammertjiesleegte loop, seeing the same as the previous day.

We had been having trouble with the sliding door on the minibus which kept jamming so we stopped off in Beaufort West to try and get it resolved. I also took the opportunity to look for a spotlight, since neither the safari company nor our guide had managed to satisfactorily resolve my concerns on that score. We later found out that the Moolmans who own Dunedin Farm where the Retreat is located are stockists of a torch brand called O-light, so if anyone is visiting the area and is short of a decent spotlight there is that option to consider. Alas, I did not know this at the time.

The garage could only assist with a temporary fix on the door and eventually we were on our way again. The drive to Dunedin Farm took us along the border of the Karoo National Park and on the way I spotted two closer **Klipsspringer** in the river bed who then deftly scaled the cliffs up the other side of the gorge.

We were starting to wonder if we'd got lost, but we couldn't see how that was possible with the road being long and straight, so we pulled into the next farm to ask how close we were to Dunedin. It turned out it was a bit further up the road and sure enough we soon found a farm sporting a nifty little image of our main target, the critically endangered Riverine Rabbit.

Dunedin Farm is run by Johan and Marietha with their two sons. We called at the farmhouse and the Moolman's answered with welcoming smiles. Smiles, which soon turned to looks of concern and mild alarm when they looked past us towards our minibus. Some conversations were exchanged, and we were directed to the retreat, down a 5.5 KM track on the property.

Now it should be said that this place is a little off the beaten track. I know that, which is why I made a point of providing a [very detailed set of site notes](#) months in advance from Paul Carter who had previously done a recce to the area. As the safari company booked the accommodation, I had the expectation that he would have taken the opportunity to get the lay of the land. I also checked that the safari company had forwarded the site notes on to our guide and further checked with our guide in advance of our arrival that he was fully briefed on this section of the tour and prepared to conduct the night drives. Assurances were given all would be well. Nothing could have been further from the truth!!!!

The problem was encountered with the drive to the Retreat. The track follows some fairly hilly ground up and down to the retreat, in addition, there are a number of large mounds that have been put into the road, like oversized speed bumps to help with drainage. Due to the low clearance and long wheelbase of the minibus, the vehicle barely made it over these hillocks. By the time we got to Riverine Rabbit Retreat, our guide's nerves were frayed to breaking point and he refused to drive anywhere for our three night stay. I was absolutely devastated that we had been left in this terrible situation. The riverine rabbit was the whole central target for this tour, it's what I'd built the tour around, and without any transport, how were we even going to be able to look for it? Let alone see it??

Johan, the owner could see how upset I was getting at the situation we were in and, like a knight in shining armour he came to our rescue, offering that his boys Manus and Hans-Willem would come back that evening and take us out to look for the rabbits and other wildlife. We were ever so grateful to Johan and his boys that they were going to get us out of such a tight spot and we thanked them profusely for their help.

With that settled, we got all our gear inside and settled in. The bedrooms at the Retreat are beautifully appointed with a different theme for each one. Of course, I bagsied the Riverine Rabbit room, hoping it would bring luck to our quest for the holy rabbit. It is a self catering property, so we brought supplies with us.

Last Chance to See?

One of the so-called "Impossible Five, alongside, Aardvark, Pangolin, Cape Mountain Leopard, and naturally occurring White Lion, the Riverine Rabbit (*Bunolagus monticularis*) is also known as the Bushman Rabbit is in real trouble. It has been classified as critically endangered and is listed as number 10 on the EDGE register of endangered mammal species (EDGE stands for

Evolutionary Distinct, Globally Endangered), sandwiched between Sumatran Rhino at 9 and Black Rhino at 11.

The order Lagomorpha contains two families, the Ochotonidae (pikas) and Leporidae (rabbits and hares). These families are thought to have diverged during the late Eocene, 35-38 million years ago. The Leporidae comprises two groups: the jackrabbits and hares of the genus *Lepus*, and the rabbits in the remaining ten genera. Recent molecular data indicates that most rabbit and hare genera arose from a single rapid diversification event during the Miocene (between 12 and 16 million years ago). *Bunolagus monticularis* is the sole species in the genus *Bunolagus*.

Predominantly a browser, feeding on wild flowers and leaves from the riparian vegetation found along seasonal rivers in the Karoo Desert. Grass is included in the diet during the wet season. The species is nocturnal, avoiding predators by spending its days resting in a form (a shallow scrape made in the soil under a bush). Individuals are solitary and have a polygamous mating system. Males and females maintain intrasexually exclusive home ranges, with male ranges overlapping those of the female. Unusually for rabbits, this species breeds very slowly, with females giving birth to only one or two young each year. Since they rarely live for more than three years, this means that only around four offspring are produced during each rabbit's lifetime.

This rabbit lives in one of the few areas of the Karoo Desert suitable for conversion to agriculture, and as a result has lost virtually all its habitat to farming. Less than 250 individuals survive, and all occur on privately owned land where they come under further pressure from hunting, trapping, and predation by feral dogs and cats, roads are also a hazard. As an extremely slow breeder (for a rabbit), the species is finding it almost impossible to recover from these losses, and is in desperate need of conservation attention.

The Moolmans are active conservationists of the rabbits on their property, but even they couldn't say how many occur there. There were researchers there the night before we arrived who had hoped to set up a drone to look for the rabbits, however it was too windy for them to proceed and we unfortunately didn't get to meet them.

Literature will tell you that they are nocturnal, however recent research is showing them to be more crepuscular than strictly nocturnal. As a result, we hoped to go out an hour or so before sundown, however, due to an emergency with an abandoned lamb, the boys were a little later than they planned.

Nevertheless we made the most of our time with them. Riverine Rabbits are habitat specialists, occupying a very restricted niche. Living amongst the dense riparian vegetation along the seasonal rivers of the central and southern Karoo, they depend on the fine alluvial soil of the floodplains, the only soil in the area suitable for making stable burrows.

This habitat is to be found primarily about halfway back along the track to the entrance gate, beyond the wind pump, down a hill and just past the first white-posted gate coming from the Retreat (R1 in Paul's site notes). With the gate to the back, looking to the left the rabbit's habitat is identified by slightly taller and thicker bushes, interspersed with longer grasses along the dried up sandy riverbeds.

We pulled off the road in the bakkie and got out to search on foot, making our way around the thick scrubby bushes. Manus managed to get sight of one **Riverine Rabbit** as I came up behind

him quickly. I managed to catch an all-too-brief glimpse of the head with its huge hare-like ears, diagnostic dark brown stripe running from the corner of the mouth and across the cheek towards the base of the ear. No sooner had I got onto it then it hopped away, clearly showing it's all brown woolly (not black and white) tail and thickly furred hind legs. According to Manus, Riverine Rabbits are slow and stupid. Well, not too slow or stupid to evade us it seemed! Whilst I was delighted to have seen it at all, I was sad that we were not able to relocate it, nor were we able to see any others.

The night however was still productive as soon after we saw the rabbit we had, according to Manus an even rarer sight for him, a tiny baby **Porcupine** with its mum. We spent a considerable amount of time watching this miniature wonder of a porcupine around their burrow, obtaining fabulous views! The baby was already developing the distinctive spines but they looked much thinner and more hair-like than its mum.

Riverine rabbits are not the only Lagomorphs on this property as it boasts an impressive four species. We managed to see two of the other three, both **Scrub Hare** and **Cape Hare**. This Cape Hare was demonstrating the difficulties lagomorphs have with the Jackal proof fencing, the poor thing struggled to get across into the field. It finally managed it after these shots were taken, but shows quite distinctive traits, the black stripe on the long pointed tail, graceful legs and hare-like appearance.

We also sighted two more **porcupines**, and a pair of distant **bat-eared foxes**- another lifer for me! Yet another lifer came as we returned to base spotting a **Round-eared Sengi** in a bush just by the gate at the retreat. Sadly it evaded my camera, despite my returning later to try and tempt it with some cheese. I'm not sure if sengis even eat cheese??

Paul also mentioned night roosting **Long-tailed Serotine Bats** in the outbuildings, and sure enough I located these later on after we said our thanks to the boys for helping us achieve our quest (well, me, Mum sadly didn't get the rabbit but she was delighted to see the porcupines).

After searching briefly and unsuccessfully for the fourth lagomorph species on the property, this being Hewitt's Red Rock Rabbit, I finally called it a night at the urging of my mum.

## 23/09/17 Riverine Rabbit Retreat

I woke up at 4am to find mum was also awake, she'd had a disruptive night's sleep due to her room having a little visitor. This was no siberian hamster, but a **Namaqua Rock Mouse** that was doing circuits of her room, unable to get out, it seemed. After spending a bit of time trying to photograph the little blighter, I eventually set to evicting mum's little friend. The rodent gave us the runaround for a little while but I managed to secure its capture by herding it into the bathroom whereupon I managed to trap it in an upended waste paper basket on top of the bath mat.

Rodent evicted, I knew I wasn't going to get back to sleep, so I decided to try and find the rabbit on my own. I got dressed and headed out on the road before dawn, hoping to get to the rabbit's habitat that we'd searched the previous night. I saw a couple of **rufous-cheeked nightjars** churring overhead on my walk out. In the beginning I struggled to pinpoint exactly where we had

been looking, but as I slowly got the lay of the land I began to see familiar features and was able to focus my search on the most likely areas.

This did me little good however, as I failed to locate the rabbits on my own, despite clocking up over 40 Kilometers in two days. I was also conscious that I didn't want mum to worry about me, so I did head back after a while, once the sun was firmly up, perhaps if I had continued searching I might have got lucky. Had I known that we would not do a night drive the evening, I might have given the search another hour. On the way back, I spotted a **Ground Woodpecker**, **Karoo Chat** and **Yellow Canary**.

On arrival I had a cooked breakfast before taking a walk with my mum down the pumphouse track to the dam. On the way, we spied many **Dassies** foraging on the cultivated fields, who seemed to be associated with a pair of **Yellow Mongooses**. Lots of evidence of Cape Clawless Otter spraint at the dam, sadly we didn't catch sight of the owner. On the water we could see a flock of **Egyptian Geese** and **African Shelducks**. We scanned the rocks looking unsuccessfully for sengis. **Rock Kestrel** and **Jackal Buzzards** soared above the clifftops.

When we returned to Riverine Rabbit Retreat for lunch, we heard from Johan that we couldn't do a night drive that night. So mum and I made a plan to walk back out to the dam late afternoon, search for sengis until it got dark and then spotlight for rabbits on the way back. **African Stonechats** were present in the cultivated areas, along with **Streaky-headed Seed-eater** and **Karoo Robin-chat**. We then came across the dassies again, one was rolling around in a little puddle.

Our plans didn't really come to fruition as we dipped the sengis and the rabbits, but we did managed to spot a **Porcupine** on the way back. After dinner, I continued to spotlight close to the retreat looking for rock rabbits up on the Windmill Hill, behind the retreat- there was evidence of a midden, but no rock rabbits or sengis were seen. Eventually I gave up and headed to bed.

## 24/09/17 Riverine Rabbit Retreat

I woke at 4 am again and headed out to the Riverine Rabbit site in the dark, spotlighting as I went along. This was the R1 area as specified in Paul Carter's trip notes. A hard copy of these notes was available in the Retreat. It was not especially rewarding again as very little of note was seen, a few **Steenbok**, a few **Cape** and **Scrub Hares**, but the sunrise was beautiful. I got back around 9am, after bashing the bush from 6-8am.

During breakfast I spotted a **Small Grey Mongoose**. Mum and I then took a walk to Eagle Cliffs to look for the nesting **Verreaux's Eagles**. We had good views of the eagles and also spotted some smaller birds en route. These included, **Cape Sparrow**, **Malachite Sunbird**, **Mountain Wheatear**. We spent a bit of time just sitting on the rocks, taking in the view. Back around the retreat we saw **Karoo Thrush** and **Cape Robin-chat**, but not much else.

Later that afternoon we walked down towards the dam again, but we didn't go all the way there. I spotted another of the **Yellow Mongooses** and on the way back a **Small Grey Mongoose**. We had an early tea before being picked up at 6pm by the Moolman boys for a night drive around the property. After hearing that I'd already been searching for the rabbits in the area closest to the Retreat, the boys decided to avoid searching that area and instead took us around

the other parts of their property. This may have been also due to there being a lot of sheep now in that area.

A huge electrical storm was also building up and we were treated to an amazing display of forked lightning. We were told by Johan not to leave the vehicle during the storm and we almost had to turn back. Thankfully there was very little rain and the storm moved away sufficiently for us to be able to continue our last night drive on the property.

Not being able to search very much on foot in the R2 area certainly didn't do us any favours when looking for Riverine Rabbits and sadly we didn't see any at all. However we were able to cover a bigger area in the vehicle and as a result we found that this area was far more productive for **Bat-eared Foxes**, seeing so many of these cute little canines that we lost count.

We flushed several **Cape Hares** and **Scrub Hares**, Cape Hares being smaller and having more elegant legs. Several **Steenboks**, with their large rabbit-like ears caused some confusing moments. Distant eyeshine betrayed the presence of an **African Wildcat** and we also spotted an unwelcome **Black-backed Jackal**. Seen as a threat to sheep, these and Caracal are controlled on this property. **Springbok** were also seen.

Sighting of the night however goes to a stonking **Aardvark**, my first ever, as we returned up the track towards the Retreat, nearing the summit of the hill between the NW windmill and the Retreat. It was close enough to obtain an excellent, if brief view of this unusual looking mammal before it sauntered away over the brow of the hill and out of sight.

## 25/09/17 Riverine Rabbit Retreat to Marrick Safari Camp

I was up early so took a short walk along the pumphouse track, where a feeding **Scrub Hare** in a burned patch of long grass along the river initially caused a little flutter of the heart, sadly no, it wasn't a Riverine Rabbit. I returned for a quick breakfast before the Moolmans arrived to rescue us.

We piled everything into their Bakkie to enable the minibus to have as much clearance as possible in order to get it out along the precarious track. Our guide arrived back without any incident. We followed with the Moolmans, stopping to have one final look for the rabbits, but with no luck. We once again thanked the family for getting us out of a tight spot and for enabling us to really enjoy the wonderful wildlife on their property.

So ended our time at the Riverine Rabbit Retreat as we then set off on our long journey of 500km to Marrick Safari Camp in Kimberley.

Over the course of the past few days we had had some frank discussions with our guide about his continuing our tour as it had become very clear to us that our guide was not best placed, nor did he really want, to guide us on this tour. As soon as I was able to get a signal I contacted the safari company to ask him to support our guide in making the appropriate arrangements to enable a different guide to take over. The safari company was not at all helpful and it seems it was left entirely up to our guide to pay for this new guide out of the fee he had been paid. Thankfully arrangements were made to swap guides, but the bad news was that we would still have to put up with our current guide for another five nights before this would happen.

At least at our next stop we would all be on a full board basis and the night drives would be conducted by the staff there. So I thought there would be less to worry about, but our guide still managed to immediately create a bad atmosphere at Marrick, despite all of this. This was quite a feat, where, on our arrival he complained rudely to a poor young intern called Pascal that, in his view, Marrick should have put up some signs to direct us miles away from where their property was located. I was so embarrassed and quite incredulous at this outburst when in fact a cursory look on Marrick's website would have delivered a very clear and detailed map to their lodge.

We got settled in and then had a delicious dinner of oxtail stew at 1830 followed by a night drive from 1930 to 2130. The conditions were cold and still. We had Johnny as our guide. He explained that the conditions were not too favourable for aardvark, you need a bit of wind for that. No worries, we replied, we've already seen our aardvark. So I asked Johnny if he could find us a Smith's Red Rock Rabbit. He agreed to give it a good try! We first encountered a mammal that I have wanted to see since my childhood, the fascinating **Springhare**, which seemed to be all over the place for the first 20 minutes of our game drive. These cute little rodents are not hares at all and they bounce around like little kangaroos on their powerful hind legs. Unfortunately I found it very hard to get a decent shot of them in motion. They have a very bright eyeshine. A **Barn Owl** peered out at us from its nest box.

We searched Koppies in the paddocks unsuccessfully for rock rabbits, well, Johnny spotted one, but it legged it before he could get us onto it. One of the paddocks contained a herd of Black Wildebeests. We spotted a few distant **Bat-eared Foxes**, an **African Wild Cat** (purebred), two **Porcupines**, a **Black-backed Jackal** and another lifer, this time an **Aardwolf**, sadly both too distant and running away so didn't really get a good look at it. We got a good view of a **Burchell's Courser**, brief views of a **Sharp-shinned Lark** and the diminutive **African Pygmy Mouse**, but the main mammals of the show eluded us this night.

## 26/09/17 Mokala National Park

This is South Africa's newest park. Proclaimed as recently as June 2007, it is situated 80km south west of Kimberley. It is therefore a regular inclusion as a day trip for anyone visiting Marrick Safari Camp and we had planned to make at least one day trip there, perhaps two. In the end, I had to fight with our guide just to get the one visit in, despite the one visit clearly being included in our itinerary. We arranged for a packed breakfast and lunch to be provided and were able to reach the park by around 8 am.

Mokala is the Setswana name for a Camelthorn tree (Kameeldoring) (*Acacia erioloba*), and we saw several magnificent specimens of these picturesquely gnarled and twisted trees dotted throughout the park. Mokala National Park's 28 414ha landscape varies between koppieveld (hills) and large open plains with the isolated dolerite hills giving the place a feeling of calm seclusion that contrasts with the large open sandy plains in the north and west of the Park.

Mokala is an important area for the regeneration of valuable species and is home to, amongst other species, Buffalo, Tsessebe, Roan Antelope, Sable Antelope, Giraffe, Gemsbok, Eland, Zebra, Red Hartebeest, Blue Wildebeest, Black Wildebeest, Kudu, Ostrich, Steenbok, Duiker and Springbok. Both species of rhino occur here and I really hoped we might be able to show mum some of these magnificent beasts.

Situated in the transition zone between the Nama-Karoo and Savanna biome, Mokala's thornveld savanna, dolerite outcrops and riverine vegetation attract a prolific number of bird species, including: the black-chested prinia, blacksmith lapwing, melodious lark, cinnamon-breasted bunting, freckled nightjar, short-toed rock thrush, pygmy falcon and northern black korhaan.

We entered via the main gate and drove through the park exiting at the Lilydale Gate, closer to Kimberley. A map of the park can be found [here](#). Even before entering the park we saw many buck as the park borders onto a number of private game farms. This is a really little gem of a park. Our first sighting as we entered were some magnificent **Sable Antelope**.

We stopped at the small reception shop where we found some lovely A4 sized park guides for Mokala, Augrabies and Kgalagadi. They were very reasonably priced and contained detailed maps, and information about the flora, fauna and other features of each park. These all came in very handy.

We carried on and spotted **Greater Striped Swallows**. Stopping at a waterhole a herd of **Springbok** seemed to be guarded by an impressive **Gemsbok**. A pair of **Ostriches** were backlit in the morning sun. Carrying on we encountered further Oryx, and Springbok and then a family of **Warthogs**. We also spotted a beautiful **European Bee-eater**. We then came across some **Tsessebe**. Coming up to the Museum, we spotted a few **South African Ground Squirrels** and a **Short-toed Rock Thrush**, along with another **Yellow Mongoose**. Mokala Park is known for being part of the Quagga Project, which was started in 1987. DNA analysis has shown that the Quagga was not a separate species of zebra but in fact a subspecies of the Plains Zebra (*Equus Quagga*) The Quagga, formerly inhabited the Karoo and southern Free State of South Africa. Like other grazing mammals, Quaggas had been ruthlessly hunted. They were seen by the settlers as competitors for the grazing of their livestock, mainly sheep and goats.

By selective breeding from a selected founder population of southern Plains Zebras an attempt is being made to retrieve at least the genes responsible for the Quagga's characteristic striping pattern. We saw quite a few of these special **Quagga Project Zebra**, along with **Greater Kudu**.

Stopping off at a bird hide we saw **Greenshank**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Three-banded Plover**, pretty little **Namaqua Doves**, **Cape Turtle Doves** and **Laughing Doves**, **Southern Grey-headed Sparrows** and **Cape Bulbul**. A nervous flock of **Red-billed Queleas** swooped in to drink in waves, always on the move, not risking staying still for any longer than necessary to snatch a quick drink. A pair of **African Shelduck** were taking a much more leisurely approach, dabbling in the water.

We then encountered some majestic **Southern Giraffes**, browsing in the tall camelthorns, herds of **Springbok**, a cute little **Steenbok** and more zebras. We were delighted to spot our first **Meerkats** periscoping in the tall grass. A herd of **Blue Wildebeest** was next. Then back to the meerkats, but wait! This little meerkat seems confused? Looking behind him, what's this? An imposter? Yes, it's a yellow mongoose masquerading as a meerkat!

Other birds seen on the way included, **Cinnamon-breasted Bunting**, **Red-crested Korhaan**, **Red-billed Hornbill**, **Kori Bustard** and **Pale Chanting Goshawk**.

We did not, however see any rhinos and I was disappointed for mum that she hadn't seen them. I asked her if she wanted to come back again tomorrow, even though I knew that we would probably have an uphill battle persuading our guide to go along with the idea. But in the end Mum wasn't too bothered about having another drive, and so we decided to spend the day locally around Marrick instead.

We had another lovely dinner of T-bone steak. A group of hunters had arrived but we dined separately. We had another night drive, it was still and cold again and we once again almost saw a red rock rabbit, with Johnny spotlighting on one but it once again disappearing before he could get us onto it. We first spotted a **Fiery-necked Nightjar**. Then, Johnny picked out the eyeshine of a tiny feline, the much sought-after **Black-footed Cat** a beautiful, yet diminutive cat. It gave us a merry runaround, disappearing into the long grass, then reappearing again but we managed to approach fairly close to it so that we could admire its heavily spotted features.

In one of the paddocks was a herd of Cape Buffalo, who followed us behind a fence line as we searched in an adjoining enclosure. Mum was quite nervous that the herd was taking a keen interest in our activities. A **Cape Eagle Owl**, **Black-backed Jackal**, several **Bat-eared Foxes** and dozens of **Springhares** were also seen, plus a single **Karoo Rock Mouse**. But the "aards" were elusive that night and I was beginning to think that we had been very lucky to have seen our aardvark at the Retreat, because at this rate we were going to strike out here.

## 27/09/17 Marrick Safari Camp

The hunting party left very early on to set up in some blinds at the far end of the camp. Pascal, the intern, had mentioned that Marrick had a colony of meerkats with some young babies. So I made a beeline to see them first thing in the morning. Before I got to them, I stopped to photograph a **Golden-tailed Woodpecker**, **Neddicky** and **African Hoopoes**.

Seeing the meerkats was a wonderful sighting, as the whole family were sun-worshipping in the golden rays of the morning light. Youngsters cavorted and played rough games with each other whilst the adults were on sentry duty. The stars of the show were four tiny kits that emerged later than the rest of the group and then pestered one of the adult females (the mum?) for a drink. I spent quite a while with them and then at 8am we joined Pascal to feed the game animals that Marrick breeds on their property.

This afforded a excellent opportunity to get some nice shots of Roan, including a tiny calf, Sable and Nyala as well as mum's nemesis, the Buffalo! Marrick also have some rather exotic colour morphs, Black Impala and Copper Springbok being amongst these. We sadly didn't get to see the Black Wildebeest up close.

We had breakfast at 0930 and then Mum and I took a short walk around the property. We spotted **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater**, **Crimson-breasted Shrike**, **Kalahari Scrub-robin**, **Fiscal Flycatcher**, **Southern Masked Weaver** nest building and a **Yellow Mongoose**.

Later on we relaxed during the heat of the day and had a lovely lunch before I tried unsuccessfully to scan the rocks late afternoon for a couple of hours before dinner in the hope of seen a rabbit or sengi.

Marrick had got a bit busy with the hunters, a party of birders from Lawson and another couple from the US, Susan and Glen. We were sat for dinner with the couple, and they indicated that they were expecting to do a night drive. However, this didn't seem to have been arranged, so we offered to share our vehicle. This wasn't entirely an altruistic gesture, as it meant that we'd be splitting the high cost of the night drive between four rather than two. Obviously the couple jumped at the chance. The downside to this arrangement was that there was only room for two people on the back of the truck so Sue and I took the back whilst Mum and Glen took the inside cabin.

Our first sighting, other than springhares, was an African Wildcat. Then, the one I had been waiting for as we searched the Koppies again, **Smith's Red Rock Rabbit** posing on a red rock! Yes!!

But the sightings didn't stop there! Susan and Glen had brought the good luck with them because we then saw a fairly distant **Aardvark**. We saw the Lawson's vehicle some way away and Johnny tried to beckon them over to the aardvark we were watching - directing them with his torch. They failed to heed our directions before we lost sight of the aardvark, so we carried on. **Black-backed Jackal**, **Fiery-necked** and **Rufous-cheeked Nightjars** were also seen.

Then we rounded a corner and I exclaimed, "oh my God!" because right in front of us was a second **Aardvark**! This guy was so close and super hairy! We got such a great view of this individual and watched it for quite some time. Marrick was delivering in spades tonight!

Then we had a tantalising glimpse of another distant **Aardwolf** running away. We might have given chase, were it not for the fact that we got distracted by a third **Aardvark** which crossed in front of the vehicle, heading in the opposite direction! What a night! We could hardly believe it was time to head back to base and our time at Marrick was almost over.

## 28/09/17 Marrick to Augrabies Falls

This was another long day of travel, before leaving marrick I searched for the meerkats but they were not up before we had to leave. We said our goodbyes and headed on our way. Our first stop was Kamfers Dam to see the flocks of **Lesser Flamingos**. It seemed that the only place to view the lake was from a railway line so we clambered up onto the embankment to view. The flamingos were in good numbers, painting the edges of the lake a bright fuschia. They were a little distant to get any decent closeups, but it was a spectacular sight nonetheless.

We then headed on to Upington where we stopped to pick up the remaining paperwork that had been left at a rather swish-looking B&B. Its 523 Km from Marrick to Augrabies Falls so we didn't arrive until 1630.

Established in 1966, The Augrabies Falls National Park covers an area of 820 km<sup>2</sup> and stretches along the Orange River. The area is very arid. The waterfall is about 60 metres high and would probably be awe-inspiring when the river is in flood. There is a single big fall when not in flood and this is accessed by a number of boardwalks to different viewpoints. The gorge below the falls averages about 240 m deep and runs for 18 kilometres. The gorge provides an impressive example of erosion into a granitic basement.

The original Khoikhoi people named the waterfall Ankoerebis, meaning the "place of big noises". The Trekboers who later settled in the area derived the name Augrabies. The name is sometimes spelt Aughrabies. There are many deposits of alluvial diamonds along the Orange River and legend has it that the biggest cache of diamonds in the world lies in the swirl-hole eroded into the granite at the foot of the waterfall by the thundering waters.

After the usual Fawltiesque outbursts and general shenanigans, our guide got himself a room for the night and then we enquired with Reception about night drives. Sadly the guide was having a day off that night but we were able to book one for the following night. Then we got settled into our rooms.

I went for a chilly swim in the small pool before settling down with a nice cold Hunters Gold to watch the birds around our chalet. **Familiar Chats**, **Cape Robin-chat** hopping about on the ground whilst in a grand tree, a **Cardinal Woodpecker** was seeking out some hidden treasures.

Later on, Mum and I took a walk to the falls. These were unsurprisingly not in full flood, but one large fall was still quite a sight. **Dassies** entertained us along the way. A **Dusky Sunbird** perched up on a granite outcrop whilst I spotted a very distant **Klipspringer** hiding amongst the rocks.

One of the most stunning beasts that make the falls their home are the **Augrabies Flat Lizard**. The male lizards are bedecked in all the colours of the rainbow from a rich azure blue on the head, through turquoise and green, yellow arms fading to russet tones and greys further down the body and tail.

We spotted a **Goliath Heron** flying over, before pondering whether an abandoned panama hat was evidence of our guide's 's last disgruntled client. The falls are lit up at night so we decided to scout out the best platform from which to take a photograph for later that evening. A **Grey Mongoose** was seen briefly. We then went to have dinner at 1930.

We returned to the falls to take our night shots and spotted **Bibron's Thick-toed Gecko** running across the sand.

## 29/09/17 Augrabies Falls Dassie Trail

Mum wanted to do some walking for a change so we decided to do the self-guided trail. Our own guide did no offer to join us, so we left on the hike on our own, armed with this [pdf of the trail](#). The Sanparks website describes the Dassie Trail as being this 5km self-guided hiking trail that leads you on a circular route starting at the Rest Camp, following along the gorge to Arrow Point, then heading out into the veld by the Potholes and Moonrock before heading back to the Rest Camp.

We started off well enough following the train markers, and ticking off the points of interest as we went along. A pair of amorous **Chacma Baboons** were not in the tour brochure but we entertaining nonetheless. We started with some camelthorns, clinging awkwardly to the

boulders, seemingly growing out of the rock itself. Then a patch of Phragmites, the common reed. Point 1 on the nature trail.

We stopped at the scenic Arrow Point to admire the views over the gorge. We had to scramble over several boulder fields across the gorges and over various streams. We didn't see an awful lot of wildlife, a few birds like Pale-winged Starling, Crested Barbet, little else.

The geology was fascinating, potholes ground by swirling rocks carved out the granite, whilst elsewhere the granite has been folded and deformed under tremendous pressure.

The Moon Rock is a huge exfoliation dome made of Augrabies Gneiss. Exfoliation domes are formed when the uniform composition of granite (before it turns into gneiss) is extremely resistant to weathering because water, needed for chemical weathering, cannot penetrate the granite easily. Moon Rock consists of two oblong, east-west aligned domes connected in the middle. The northern dome is larger and is approximately 700m long and 100m high. The current weathering process on Moon Rock is known as onion-skin weathering: layers of rock, from as thin as a few centimeters to as thick as a meters, wear away. This happens in all rocks that are mineralogically and texturally uniform.

The most characteristic plant in the park is the giant tree aloe (*Aloidendron dichotomum*) known locally as the quiver tree or kokerboom. It is perfectly adapted to the dry semi-desert rocky areas found in the Nama-Karoo, able to withstand the extreme temperatures and the infertile soil. This tree, which grows up to five metres high, gets its name from the fact that the Bushmen (San) used the soft branches to make quivers for their arrows. The eye-catching silhouette of the quiver tree is typical of this part of Northern Cape landscape. When the tree flowers in the winter flocks of birds are attracted to their copious nectar, and baboons can be seen tearing the flowers apart to get the sweet liquor.

I think we must have gone a bit wrong somewhere as we clocked up over 8km. By this point we were getting very concerned, thinking we might have got turned around. We emerged onto the game road and started walking in the wrong direction, but a quick check on google maps set me right, the only issue was that the road crossed two deep fords. After cross-checking against the Dassie trail map I was able to get my bearings and worked out that we needed to go back over the rocks, across a stream a little bit away from the game road before rejoining it closer to the camp. With that sorted out it didn't take us more than 20 minutes to get back.

Just as well because we were both ready for breakfast, it being around 0945. Back around the chalet we were visited by a hungry **Common Scimitarbill**, which rather successfully wheedled out various grubs from the tree bark, whilst **Cape Glossy Starlings** foraged on the ground. **Yellow Mongooses**, always on the lookout for scraps and **Cape Ground Squirrels** frequented the chalet grounds whilst **Ashy Tits** flitted through the trees. I spent a while chasing after a **Cape Grey Mongoose** that was doing the rounds.

We took a drive from 3pm to 5.30pm but I believe we only visited the main viewpoints and as a result saw very little game. We did get a nice view of the gorge from Ararat, and a very distant **African Fish Eagle** was perched down in the gorge. A pair of **Verreaux Eagles** soared in and landed on the other side of the gorge to sunbathe, their wings spread wide, soaking up the late afternoon sun.

A group of vervet monkeys came to drink from one of the ponds.

After an early dinner we took a night drive with the camp, from 1900 to 2130. With me spotlighting in the back we saw a good selection, but because I was spotlighting I did not manage to get any decent photographs! The selection included several more **Smith's Red Rock Rabbits, African Wildcat, Spring Hare, Bat-eared Fox** and **Gemsbok**.

## 30/09/2017 Kalahari Trails Meerkat Sanctuary

We had breakfast and a final look at the falls.

This was another long travel day as we drove first to Upington to meet our new guide, and send the old one on his way. We then carried on in a little Suzuki Jimny, with a trailer on the back for our luggage, towards the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. I immediately felt a tremendous relief as our new guide seemed far more amiable with a "can-do" attitude. On our way we saw **Lilac-breasted Roller**, and a **White-backed Vulture**.

We overnighted outside the park at Kalahari Trails Meerkat Sanctuary. This sanctuary lies just 35km before the Park entrance at Twee Rivieren and provides a home for meerkats that have been confiscated for cruelty, orphans and unwanted pets – which, now rehabilitated, have formed their own family group. As we were getting settled into our rooms, we were visited by some of the residents who proved to be very entertaining.

A walk around the grounds produced **Black-chested Prinia, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill** and **Brubru**.

We were treated to a tasty Braai, thanks to our new guide before we embarked on a night drive on the property. These are organised by the sanctuary. The spotlights are not hand held, but mounted on the vehicle, not the best set-up. Despite this we saw a **Barn Owl, Cape Fox, Spring Hares, Bat-eared fox, Porcupine** and **Black-backed Jackal**. The guide stopped at one point and appeared to be searching intently for something that he was unable to relocate, this turned out to be a mammal that was much sought-after by myself, a Zorilla! Alas, it eluded us this time.

## 01/10/17 Kalahari Trails to Twee Rivieren

We were supposed to have a morning walk with the meerkats, but we'd already spent the afternoon enjoying their company and we were keen to get to the Kgalagadi so we headed off at 0730. We arrived at Twee Rivieren but we were too early to check in. So after deflating the tyres for the drive ahead we went for a game drive straight away, beginning on the Twee Riv to Nossob road. We felt really grateful to have someone who clearly knew how to drive on the sandy roads, even if our transport was a little cramped.

Straight out of the gate a large herd of **gemsbok** started to stampede. The reason for their consternation soon became apparent when we discovered two young **lion** brothers resting up,

mum was delighted, her first lions! What a treat! One of the boys got up and made his way towards his brother, before settling down in the shade of an acacia tree.

Making our way along the Nossob river bed, we encountered further Gemsbok and Blue Wildebeest, as well as numerous Southern Pale Chanting Goshawks. Kori Bustard, more Ostriches strutted their stuff. A cape cobra was our next sighting, conspicuous with its bright yellow scales.

Then we encountered a coalition of five male lions, resting up in the shade between Rooiputs and Kijkij. Unfortunately most were quite well obscured by the vegetation and long grass of the dunes.

A more interesting sighting, behaviourally speaking was a young pale chanting goshawk tentatively hunting a mole snake. We enjoyed seeing who might get the upper hand as the hawk swooped down upon the snake which in turn would rear up aggressively, deterring the would-be attack. Eventually this inexperienced hawk seemed to give up.

A Black-shouldered Kite surveyed its domain from atop a bush as we passed by. Then we came across a beautiful Black-backed Jackal at the picnic site whilst stopping for a comfort break, seemingly very common in this part of the park. Also at the picnic site were ground agamas and striped grass mice. Also present, fork-tailed drongo and Namaqua Sandgrouse.

We crossed the dunes down to the Mata Mata to Twee Rivieren road, a good choice, first spotting a mole snake crossing the road, then a picturesque sighting of a steenbok nestled in the lee of a dune. We even encountered a bonafide unicorn!

The sighting of the day was yet to come when we got word of a cheetah in a tree. As we arrived on scene we struggled to see the cat initially, but we persevered and were soon able to pick out some bits of spotty coat. But this was no cheetah as this cat seemed well at home up the tree. It was the beautiful leopard Mofhenyi, one of Miera's grown up cubs. She is approx 16 months old.

We waited in anticipation of a better view, and she, being the starlet that she is, obliged us when she got up and positioned herself in a better spot for us. We snapped away she posed really nicely between around 1318 and 1330 in one of the big trees between Montrose and Batulama before settling down with her back to us and at that point we moved on. I don't think we could have asked for a better sighting, and Mum was absolutely delighted!

We spotted a small group of **meerkats** foraging, obviously we had to stop for those.

The **Crimson-breasted Shrike**, a stunning bird, seemed quite common in the Kgalagadi and we saw several pairs. We also saw a distant **Black-chested Snake Eagle**.

At the picnic spot on the way back along the Mata Mata to Twee Rivieren road we saw more **Striped Mice, White-browed Sparrow Weaver** and **Scaly Feathered Finch**. As the afternoon drew on we began to see pairs of elegant **Secretary Birds**, strutting around on the hunt for snakes.

We then got word of a sleepy **cheetah** up a 4x4 track near Batulama. The cheetah fairly flat, with a rather soporific head peering lazily up to see what all the fuss was about.

A **Northern Black Korhaan**, conspicuous in the golden grass with his jet black neck and head was a welcome appearance.

Close to camp, **Verreaux's Eagle Owls** had nested and one chick could be seen. Returning to camp we checked in and had dinner, enjoying the company of a **Yellow Mongoose**.

We had managed to book a sunset drive for this evening so after an early dinner we headed out. Our first sighting was an obscured **Pearl-spotted Owlet**. We stopped to watch the **Verreaux's Eagle Owls**. The two lion brothers were still in the area, but obscured from view. **Red Hartebeest** were not fooled though and were keeping a wary eye out for them. **Spotted Eagle Owls** were a common sight on the night drives.

We had a nice view of a **Cape Fox** and more distant views of two porcupines on a dune ridge, together with an **African Wild Cat**.

A **Southern White-faced Scops Owl** showed beautifully with his bright orange eyes glowing like two hot coals in the night.

We returned via the **lions**, who had started to get active. Unfortunately they began walking towards us and the camp entrance, so, instead of being able to sit and watch them for a while, we had to retreat to the gate so that our ranger could close it before the lions arrives. For me it was a bit disappointing that this was the end of our sunset drive.

## 02/10/17 Twee Rivieren to Mata Mata

We drove from Twee Rivieren to Mata Mata, starting on the Nossob Road and then cutting across the dunes again to join the road to Mata Mata. We first encountered a **Purple Roller** and then a **Tawny Eagle**.

In the dunes, we came across a distant pride of **lions** on the ridgeline feeding on a Wildebeest. There were at least three males and several females.

Once we'd had our fill of the lions, we carried on, stopping next to watch some playful meerkats at the side of the road.

Our next sighting was a beautiful **cheetah** walking along the riverbed towards a waterhole. She seemed very skittish as she approached to take a drink. Our guide thought she might have spotted a snake or something. We had hoped she might look to hunt afterwards, but she decided a nap was a better idea and went to rest up in the shade. So we carried on.

We stopped for a lone **springbok** and a **white-backed vulture** before encountering some **giraffes** close to camp. We watched them for a while before heading into camp at Mata Mata. But it was too early to check in, so I went for a quick swim and then we took a walk to the hide. We finally got the key to our lovely riverfront chalet, which looks out to one of the waterholes.

We settled in and, as it was Mum's birthday Jeanrie offered to cook a delicious braai for us that evening. We enjoyed watching ostriches and Gemsbok at the waterhole before we headed out again late afternoon for another drive. On our drive we encountered a **Spotted Eagle Owl**, a distant **African Wildcat**, the giraffes again, and then on the way back, another african wildcat that was much closer this time.

As the sun sets, we started to hear the familiar clicking noises of the **barking geckos**, but seeing one proves to be very tricky. Patience was the key and being quick with a flashlight. I staked out one of the burrows and was able to capture an image of one of the courting males.

As we enjoyed our dinner we kept watch over the waterhole and enjoyed watching a stream of animals visiting, including oryx and another African Wildcat, which raised it's shackles as a jackal approached.

## 03/10/17 Mata Mata Kalahari Tented Camp

We headed out on our drive, first encountering a **Gabar Goshawk**. Then a **black-backed jackal**- very common in this part of the park. We pulled up next to a couple of other cars, which were watching a Cape Fox den. The mother was busily digging, kicking up a load of sand. Occasionally we were allowed a glimpse of one of her young cubs.

**White-backed vultures** seemed more common here, and we also encountered a **steenbok** that seemed to try to keep pace with our car. A female **Kudu** was browsing in some shrubs and we then came across a juvenile **Bateleur**. More Jackals were also seen, then another **cape cobra**. We stopped at a picnic spot, photographing some crows and then carried on.

A pair of **Gemsbok** were really battling it out, their horns cracking loudly as they butted heads. We watched them fighting until they seemed to calm down and then we moved on.

More **Kudu** and a lone **warthog** were seen. We drove up to a viewpoint and had some nice sightings of **Gemsbok** and **Blue Wildebeest**. We stopped in at Twee Rivieren to have lunch at the snack shop and book our sunset/night drives for our next couple of nights when we were due to be back there, and then headed back up the Mata Mata Road.

Another Verreaux's Eagle Owl with chick were spotted on a nest and then further on a young **Martial Eagle** was roosting next to a nest.

We had fantastic views of a pair of **Secretary Birds** in the afternoon before we stopped at Reception in Mata Mata to book a sunset drive and book into our next accommodation and collect our provisions from our guide's chalet. We then headed to our new camp, the rustic Kalahari Tented Camp located just outside Mata Mata, our guide dropped us off and we planned to cook for ourselves this night as he was staying in Mata Mata. Unfortunately we realised a slight problem with this plan, no matches for the gas cooker! A quick word with our neighbours and we had been kindly donated a lighter to get us going.

Kalahari Tented camp has a lovely view over the dry riverbed, much like the riverfront chalets at Mata Mata itself.

We were picked up from the camp for our sunset drive which started with a talk about **sociable weaver** nests. We were hoping that a pygmy falcon might make an appearance but sadly this species eluded us. After a while we moved on. An **African Wildcat** crossed the road in front of us.

Stopping at a waterhole we watched four **Black-backed Jackals**. Then we had a great sighting of yet another **Cape Cobra**, in the road, with his hood up! Very impressive!

The reptiles kept coming with a, probable, female **barking gecko** out in the open. Arachnids were also out and about with several **scorpions** sighted in the road. The weather seemed to be changing and a front was rolling in and another **Spotted Eagle Owl** was sighted.

A pair of distant **Bat-eared Foxes** were also seen. Heading back we spotted a rather laid back **African Wildcat** to finish.

Back at our chalet, a Jackal walked right by me as I watched the waterhole, later, two **Eland** could be made out by the moonlight.

## 04/10/17 Mata Mata Kalahari Tented Camp

The weather had closed in overnight and we awoke to a wet, blustery day. We had Jackals and Kori Bustards around camp as we had breakfast and then, after packing up, we left around 8 am and drove from Kalahari Tented Camp towards Twee Rivieren.

We had some lovely views of Giraffes on the ridge line sunlit against the brooding sky. A Pale Chanting Goshawk struggled against the wind, whilst A Tawny Eagle judiciously roosted with its wings firmly braced against its body.

A pair of Spotted Thick-knees were seen along the riverbed and a Gabar Goshawk was perched in a tree. Then a real treat, a gorgeous black-maned lion sauntering along the riverbed with an attendant parade of vehicles following along. We watched for a while as he paced along.

We saw a few more birds, nothing else new and checked back into to Twee Rivieren. There was a short debate about whether to drive out that afternoon as the weather was really set in. But we had nothing to lose by going out and little really to gain from staying in, so off we went back up the Nossob road again.

This proved to be an excellent decision as we encountered another group of vehicles all seemingly watching something on the left in the dunes. Mum was first to spot that it was a beautiful leopard!

The Leopard was making her way along the dunes bordering the riverbank. She occasionally stopped to groom herself, but remained restless and eventually bolted over the dune, not for any noticeable reason that we could deduce.

Our guide spotted a huge puff adder on the road and carefully coaxed it to move off the road with his vehicle.

The rain kept coming and our sightings became increasingly soggy, including jackals shaking off the worst of the rain from their coats. A disheveled Spotted Hyena, seemed to be following a jackal. I had really hoped we would get to see a Brown Hyena, but sadly it wasn't to be. Still, it was nice to see our only spotty of the trip.

Common Fiscals and Marico Flycatchers represented the few small birds that we saw. A Kori Bustard seemed to be getting turned on by the cool rain, strutting around in display.

Springbok were also in a strange mood, pronking about in the rain, whilst a Martial Eagle surveyed the land with apparent disdain.

After dinner we took a night drive. It was freezing cold but at least dry. We saw quite a few animals, Springhares, Black Backed Jackals, Bat-eared foxes, Cape Fox, Scrub Hare and a probable Small Spotted Genet, but mostly at a distance so I didn't manage to get any new photos other than one of a Rufous-cheeked Nightjar.

## 05/10/17 Twee Rivieren

It was our last full day in the park. The sun was shining, the rain had passed and we headed out on the Nossob road. Our first sighting was of a colony of **Brants's Whistling Rats**. We watched them foraging for a while and then carried on.

A **Jackal** was drinking at a water hole. An **ostrich** wandered past.

Peering out of its den, a **Cape Fox** watched the world go by.

We carried on, and came across a party of foraging **meerkats**. Always a delight to watch.

A **Lanner Falcon** shot overhead and then we came up to some **Springbok** resting in the shade.

The rain had left its mark as ants had started an emergence. This brought out their predators who didn't want to miss an opportunity for a good feed. We were treated to fabulous views of a pair of **Bat-eared Foxes** foraging in the riverbed. It was a wonderful opportunity to get a good look at this usually nocturnal mammal.

Another Southern Pale-chanting Goshawk posed on the riverbed, and then we spotted a more distant **Black-shouldered Kite** and another **Ostrich**.

Foraging in the shade was an **African Hoopoe**, its mohican standing to attention.

Continuing on, we came up to a waterhole where a herd of **Gemsbok** were hanging out.

We cut back across the dunes onto the Mata Mata road and headed back towards Twee Rivieren. We encountered a herd of **Giraffes**, one was particularly dark in colour.

More **Tawny Eagles** perched in the trees and then we sighted a beautiful russet coloured **Slender Mongoose**. Quick as a flash, it was gone!

A rather photogenic pair of **jackals** seemed at ease with our presence and we spent some quality time with them.

Then another **meerkat**, digging a hole.

We took a sunset drive and first stopped for the Verreaux's Eagle Owls on the Nossob Road. The chick was on the ground and seemed to be temporarily stuck in a burrow of some kind, but it eventually worked its talons free and seemed to be fine, the parents looking on with disdain.

It was a supermoon that rose over the Kgalagadi. It was a cold night and the best we could manage, despite a long, chilly drive over the dunes to search for honey badgers was a **Cape Hare** and another **Bat-eared Fox**.

## 06/10/17 Twee Rivieren

Our flight out of Upington wasn't until 1710 so we had time enough for a drive in the park. We first spotted a pair of **Black-shouldered Kites**, then a distant **Cape Fox** along the Nossob road. A **Yellow mongoose** was on the hunt for some breakfast, and then we passed the **Verreaux's Eagle Owl** nest, the chick was back.

As we carried on we came across a few cars, all watching something. This turned out to be our two male **lions** that we'd seen on our first day. But they were a lot closer this time! One of them walked right by the side of the vehicle, giving mum a near heart attack! She started squealing like a startled dikdik at me to wind the window up as this big lion peered at her through the back window.. Now I am not normally nervous around lions, but I was certainly getting a little concerned at the racket she was making in the back! I had to tell her to pipe down a bit, lest the lions think she was on the menu!

Well after spending quite some time watching these two boys, once they decided to take a nap we carried on. There wasn't a lot else of note before it was time for us to go, just a couple more **Northern Black Korhaans**.

We stopped for lunch at a lodge en route to Upington spotting a nice **Groundscraper Thrush** and then were dropped off at Upington a few hours before our flight. This ended our epic road trip in South Africa and our journey home was quite uneventful.