

South Africa and Namibia, 20 July - 12 August 2017.

VLADIMIR DINETS

This trip was an introduction to Africa for my wife and daughter; the latter was two and a half years old at the time and enjoyed it a lot. We had three weeks to kill while a container with our stuff was traveling from New Jersey to our new home in Okinawa. We started from Cape Town, drove east to Hermanus and then north to Oranjemund, flew to Windhoek, briefly explored a few locations up to Etosha, returned to Windhoek and spent one day and two nights in Johannesburg.

In 2017, Cape Town area, Namaqualand and Namibia were experiencing a major drought. Full moon was on August 7; that made finding small mammals difficult during the Namibian part of the trip. I had six Sherman traps and caught only twelve rodents of two species (two pygmy mice in the far south and Namaqua rock rats almost everywhere else). Bats seemed absent with few exceptions. I saw almost a hundred species, all but four of which I had seen before (see my 2008 trip report), and removed a few species from my “better view much desired” list.

South Africa

Simon's Town is a convenient base for exploring the area; M4 south from it is a good place to look for **chacma baboons**, while **humpback whales** are often feeding offshore (we saw one, and heard a few while scuba diving). Watch for **South African fur seals**, too. **Four-striped grass mice** (locally called “field mice”) were abundant in wooded parts of penguin colonies.

Glencairn is a residential area sandwiched before Simon's Town and Fishhoek. An unmarked turnoff from M4 (34.17558 S, 18.42655E) leads to a semi-abandoned navy battery with lots of empty concrete buildings. The entrances marked by red tape lead to underground chambers where two species of bats were hibernating in deep crevices; I think they were **Temmink's myotis** and very rare **Leuseur's wing-gland bat**. I also found one **lesser long-fingered bat** hanging down from a ceiling. There is a small wetland reserve (34.15672S, 18.42871E) where **African marsh rat** and **lamineate vlei rat** were relatively easy to see at night. A couple minutes up M6 is a trailhead (34.146S, 18.403E) leading into rocky hills; I caught a **pygmy mouse** there.

Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden had **four-striped grass mice**, too (even in greenhouses), plus insane density of **Cape golden moles**. At the upper end of Fynbos Trail there was an area where young moles were building dense networks of very shallow tunnels; after just five minutes of watching one such network I saw one of the tunnels being extended, quickly opened it by hand and enjoyed watching a gorgeous young mole for a full half second.

Table Mountain summit is always a great place to visit (I saw a **Cape rock sengi** there in 2008). The last cable car down is officially at sunset, but on weekends there are long queues so you can do up to an hour of spotlighting without having to walk down. This time we saw a **Cape spiny mouse** near the restaurant. **Klipspringers** have been reintroduced, but we didn't see them.

Cape of Good Hope is usually a reliable place for **bontebok** and **eland**, but we somehow missed them and saw only a few **Cape grey mongooses** plus one **fin whale** far offshore.

Roos Eis, a settlement west of Betty's Bay, used to be a popular site for Cape rockjumper (a bird), but its habitat has recently burned and become a great place to see **klipspringers** on the semi-barren slopes (walk east from the gate on Porter Rd.).

Betty's Bay has a large penguin colony where tame **rock hyraxes** and less tame **Cape grey mongooses** can be seen after hours (entering is still legal, even at night).

Kogelberg Nature Reserve is very large, but with few roads; one is signposted (34.33239S, 18.98802E) on R44 east of Betty's Bay. At night the gate is closed, but the access road is good for drives or walks: I saw a **Cape genet**, a **white-tailed mouse**, and a **scrub hare**.

Rooisand Nature Reserve is a large wetland with few mammals, but the access road (signposted at 34.32896S, 19.08809E on R44) is worth checking at night: I saw a **common duiker** and a **woodland dormouse**, plus a Cape eagle owl. The parking area is surrounded by dunes with insanely high density of two species of molerats; I was there on the night of the first rain after a prolonged drought and during an hour of spotlighting saw a few **Cape dune molerats** and **Cape molerats** running across trails. I also trapped a **pygmy mouse** there.

Hermanus is usually a great place to see **southern right whales** right offshore; we were there on a stormy day and saw two whales repeatedly surfing giant waves and breaching about 300 m out, but they couldn't get any closer. Fernkloof Nature Reserve was very dry, with only a few proteas blooming; we saw a **fybos golden mole** briefly poking out of its burrow to grab a bypassing caterpillar. At night there was a **gray African climbing mouse** in a tree near the entrance.

Worcester area was also very dry; we didn't see a single mammal in Karoo Botanical Garden which had a lot of them in 2008. We stayed in Aan de Doorns Guesthouse; the owner told us that in summer numerous bats come to drink from the small pool – should be a good place for mistnetting. I saw a **Krebs's fat mouse** near a small ditch along the eastern wall.

Redelighuys is on R366 east of Elands Bay; the road crosses and then follows a river floodplain where at dusk we saw a **Cape clawless otter** and a **Cape grysbok** plus another Cape eagle owl.

Lambert's Bay is great for night drives; roads have no traffic from midnight to 4:00. In addition to a few **common genets**, I saw a **Grant's golden mole** on a shoulder while driving out of town to check my traps before sunrise; alas, it was gone by the time I stopped the car and sprinted back. North of the town is a small wetland (follow signs for "bird blind" which was once located at 32.08842S, 18.31755E) where I saw an **Egyptian mongoose** and an **African molerat**. There is a **South African fur seal** rookery behind the gannet colony, but the views are not good.

Knersvlakte Nature Reserve on Hwy 7 was recently created to protect unique succulents; look for minuscule but gorgeous stone plants blooming in the fields of white quartz crystals. The landscape was so barren that there were no birds of prey, which was probably why we saw a **Cape gerbil** in broad daylight.

Namaqua National Park is famous for wildflowers, but in 2017 there were no rains at all so instead of a 300 km-wide flower bed we found bleached desert. We stayed in one of the chalets on "Skilpad wildflower loop" where **red hartebeest**, **springbok**, **gemsbok** and **Cape hare** were easy to see and we also saw a **common duiker** and a **steenbok**. Lack of vegetation made it easy to see bands of **meerkats** and occasionally a **yellow mongoose**; this might be the best place to see meerkats in winter. A **Natal long-fingered bat** was occasionally night-roosting at the office veranda at night. **Namaqua rock rats** were easy to see and trap around the chalets; there were also **rock hyraxes** during the day and **Cape short-eared gerbils** at night. One night I drove down the road into the main part of the park and saw an **aardvark**, a pair of **honey badgers**, a

Cape fox, two **klipspringers**, and a few **scrub hares**. About half an hour down the road are farm ruins (30.14486S, 17.703E) where a **Cape horseshoe bat** was roosting at night; just before that place the road follows a dry river where I found a **hairy-footed gerbil** and a **Karoo bush rat**.

Springbok is a nice base for exploring Namaqualand; it was full of jeeps carrying tour groups to Richtersfeld National Park which we didn't risk visiting with a small child. At dusk we saw a freetail bat flying over the town; according to IUCN range maps the only species in the area is **Egyptian freetail**. We spent a night at Sperrgebiet Lodge which is located near a nice bunch of boulder hills with **Smith's rock hares**, **Barbour's rock mice** and abundant **Namaqua rock rats**. I even saw fresh **leopard** tracks there. **South African ground squirrels** occurred along the access road. Night drives on surrounding roads were totally unproductive in striking contrast with 2008. Goegap Nature Reserve, normally the place to see the planet's best wildflower blooms in August, was painfully lifeless except for a few **springboks**.

Port Nolloth once had an endemic golden mole but it hasn't been seen for over fifty years; the only mammal we saw was a **Namaqua dune molerat** that ran across the road in early afternoon.

Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve outside Johannesburg is a nice place to spend your last day before leaving Africa: it's a 40 min drive to the airport. We were there in early afternoon and saw only a **yellow mongoose**, **chacma baboons**, **black wildebeests**, **springboks**, **blesboks**, **common elands**, and an **oribi**. However, the reserve closes for entry at 16:00 and for exit at 18:00, so even if you don't stay overnight you can do a night drive in other times of year. Species listed on the reserve's website include **Cape fox**, **brown hyena**, **black-backed jackal**, **common genet**, **plains zebra**, **grey rhebok**, **common** and **mountain reedbucks**, **steenbok**, **greater kudu**, **common** and **grey duikers**, **red hartebeest**, **aardvark**, and **Cape porcupine**; I am sure there's also a lot of smaller mammals. **African molerat** burrows were plentiful around the visitor center.

In Booksburg near Johannesburg Airport we stayed in a hotel called Muse on Griessel where **long-tailed serotines** were roosting under roof tiles and hunted overhead just after sunset.

Namibia

Oranjemund was the greatest surprise of our trip. We visited it simply to return our rental car and fly to Windhoek, but were fascinated to find **gemsbok** and **springbok** grazing in city streets (the former were particularly common at playgrounds and the latter at the golf course). At night **brown hyenas** were easy to spotlight along peripheral streets, and **black-backed jackals** were everywhere (when the owner of our hotel put out a bowl of food for his dog, a jackal appeared out of nowhere, provoked the dog into a chase around a concrete pool, and then stole the bowl – it all looked like a Disney cartoon). I also saw a **Namaqua dune molerat** running across a street late at night. Just outside the town is Orange River; there were large herds of **gemsbok** and **springbok** plus some **marsh mongooses** and **Brant's whistling rats** in the floodplain and I saw a **Karoo bush rat** in the shrubs along its edge. Dunes on the other side of town didn't have many mammals; I saw only one **bushy-tailed hairy-footed gerbil** there. The road past the airport ends at the river mouth; this was another good place for **marsh mongoose** and we saw a pair of **southern right whales** just offshore, they were sleeping but soon woke up and started courting.

Windhoek is surrounded by countless lodges and game farms that all have fenced-in **springbok**, **impala** and sometimes **southern giraffe** plus a few non-natives. For some reason, **chacma baboons** were abundant along B6 (the road to the airport) both times we drove it, while

numerous **common warthogs** were grazing on the shoulders of B1 all the way to Outjo. **Damara molerats** were common around the airport.

Dorob National Park was recently created to close the gap between Skeleton Coast NP in the north and Namib-Naukluft NP in the south. One easily accessible part is the so-called Lunar Landscape, a bunch of rocky canyons that you can walk to from the end of D1901 (22.63945S, 14.73815E). The canyons look magical on a moonlit night when the fog slowly rolls in. The only mammals I saw there were a **Namib round-eared sengi** and a **gerbil mouse**. Below the canyons is Swakop River (normally dry) where you can find **common genet** (I only saw tracks), **black-backed jackal**, **brown hyena** (tracks were common), **springbok**, **Littledale's whistling rat**, and **scrub hare**. An easier place to access the floodplain is on C28 1.7 km south of its intersection with B1 (just past Swakopmund Airport turnoff). Sand dunes stretch from Swakopmund to Walvis Bay between B2 and D1984; they are inhabited by **Setzer's hairy-footed gerbils**. We stayed at Gecko Ridge lodge where I once saw a small dark bat flying over the pool; if IUCN range maps are right, the only possible candidate is the rare **Seabra's wing-gland bat**.

Walvis Bay now has multiple operators running "whale and dolphin" trips. In 2008 our boat was rammed by a **humpback**; in 2017 we didn't see any whales, but learned that **Heaviside's dolphins** had become so common that they were rarely missed. The tour boats sailed close to a small **South African fur seal** rookery; a few male seals jumped into the boats to be fed and hugged. **Black-backed jackals** were easy to see at night outside town. As you drive on M36 into Namib-Naukluft National Park, look for Vogelfederberg, a rocky outcrop south of the road (23.055S, 15E). I saw a **Cape fox** there late at night; IUCN range map doesn't show it occurring so close to the coast, but I also saw it within 20 km of the coast in another place back in 2008.

Gobabeb, a research station inside Namib-Naukluft NP, is a little paradise located on a spectacular border between rather lifeless gravel plains to the north and huge dunes to the south; that dune field stretches all the way to Luderitz 350 km away. The *namibiensis* race of **Grant's golden mole** (an almost certain split) is supposedly common in these dunes; I looked for it for a few hours before and after sunset but saw only **dune hairy-footed gerbils** and no mole tracks.

Erongo Mountains are a fenced and gated conservation area; the lodges inside are also separately fenced but their gates are open, so you can stay at cheaper ones and visit the ones with better habitat. We stayed at Otjohotozu Guestfarm; it has a small boulder hill near the access road (21.46817S, 15.83E) where **Damara ground squirrels** lived. I spent three hours spotlighting at the gorgeous boulder slopes around Erongo Wilderness Lodge and got great views of the very rare **stone dormouse**. Late at night I drove along D2315 and D2316 (a bumpy road crossing the plateau) and saw **mountain zebras**, **southern giraffes**, **impalas**, **springboks**, **greater kudus**, and **scrub hares** (I'm pretty sure they were not Cape hares, and IUCN range maps concur).

Etosha National Park was very dry; immense flocks of quelea finches were flying to waterholes every morning and evening. By the time we got there my family was a bit fed up with long drives, so we stayed within 30 km of Okaukuejo and didn't see any cats or rhinos. In addition to the expected **black-backed jackals**, **yellow mongooses**, **common slender mongooses**, **bush elephants**, **plains zebras**, **southern giraffes**, **steenboks**, **springboks**, **impalas**, **greater kudus**, **gemsboks**, **blue wildebeests**, and **South African ground squirrels**, we saw one **single-striped lemniscomys** at approximately 19S, 15.8665E.

Taleni Etosha Village is the closest place to stay to Okaukuejo if the latter is all booked (which is now usually the case). It is catering to general public (when there was a power outage, we were the only ones among 50+ guests to have flashlights) and its personnel is not a useful source of information on wildlife. Behind the main parking lot is a concrete shed where food leftovers from the restaurant are held; at night it is visited by **honey badgers** and **Cape porcupines**. Once when I checked it a porcupine blocked the only exit, the badgers found themselves cornered and attacked me; fortunately my daughter was not with me that time. **Greater kudu** and **Damara dik-diks** grazed around the cabins; one pair of dik-diks was spending every night across the parking lot from the garbage shed. **Namaqua rock rats** were abundant in the restaurant area and often caused mild panic by entering the dining halls. The adjacent campsite had **desert pygmy mice** and **scrub hares**. Past the campsite the main road forks and follows the electric fence of Ongava Game Reserve in both directions; theoretically it is possible to see **black** and **white rhinos** on the other side of the fence during night walks, but I walked there a lot and saw only one **bicolored musk shrew**, one **bushveld gerbil**, and a pair of **black-backed jackals**. The southern fork eventually reaches a tiny rocky outcrop where I saw a **red rock rat** in a hole in a termite mound, while the northern fork gets close enough to Etosha NP to hear **lions** at night.

Sophienhof Lodge near Outjo is located at the foot of a boulder hill; if you stay at their largest house (\$250 per night, officially up to 6 people but it shouldn't be a problem to fit a larger tour group there) you can watch the slope from one of your windows. I watched it for about an hour in the morning and got distant views of **western rock sengi** and brief but good views of **black slender mongoose**. The latter can be difficult to spot between rocks – watch for small birds mobbing it. **Small-eared dormice** and **Namaqua rock rats** live in the house; after we left we found a **desert pygmy mouse** in one of our suitcases. A few **rusty pipistrelles** roosted in the roof, while a **freetail bat** drank from the pool (according to IUCN range maps, the only species in the area is **Nigerian freetail**). The balcony overlooks a waterhole visited by various ungulates; the grounds are populated by **plains zebra**, **common warthog**, **southern giraffe**, **Damara dik-dik** (very common), **springbok**, **impala**, **greater kudu**, **common eland**, **gemsbok**, and **blue** and **black wildebeest** (the latter probably non-native to the area), plus introduced **waterbuck**; all of these can be seen on game drives. There are also captive Cape porcupines that even small children can hand-feed and pet. The only small mammal I saw in the savanna during a night walk was a **highveld gerbil**, but there should be a lot more when there's less moonlight.