

Trip Report – Namibia & South Africa, Oct 2017

We went on a 12 day self-drive around Namibia and saw 51 mammals, including 11 for our life list. Before we started, we spent 4 days on the Cape in search of otters.



The **cape clawless otter** has been a target species of ours on 2 prior trips and we've missed it both times. Which is crazy, given we've found all the much rarer otter species we've looked for around the globe. So we decided to spend 3 nights in Kommetjie where local B&B owners told us they saw otters on "most" morning walks on the beach. We'd also be able to check out plenty of other spots around the cape.

Kommetjie beach is beautiful, but it is right in front of the village, there were plenty of surfers in the waves by 6am and couples still walking their dogs at sunset, so basically the otters here are effectively nocturnal. Not very promising, and we had two fruitless days of walking the beach at dawn and dusk. I reckon if our hosts paid attention to the tides and the days in the month when they actually see the otters returning home at dawn, they'd notice a correlation. At dawn on day 3 we found a set of tracks from the sea up into a reed-bed by a stream, and noticed that the tracks had come up through the high tide mark – which meant we'd missed the otter by less than an hour. We concluded it would be back out again that evening, and settled in to wait near dusk. We got a 15 second sighting but the otter headed straight back into the reeds, obviously deciding not to emerge until after it was full dark. Given it was raining and bitterly cold, we called that a pyrrhic victory and left it at that!



On to Namibia...

From Windhoek airport we spotted **giraffe**, **chacma baboons** and **southern African ground squirrel** on the transfer to our car hire place in town. We took a jaunt out to Sossusvlei and Swakupmond first, seeing only **oryx**, **springbok**, **black-backed jackal** and then **cape fur seal** at Walvis Bay. The Heaviside dolphins are apparently never seen from shore at Walvis Bay, unless you have time for the long 4WD drive out to Pelican Point (which we didn't).

Our next stop in Namibia was Erongo Wilderness Lodge. An afternoon drive out to Paula's Cave only showed **klipspringer** (they don't claim it's good for wildlife) and I couldn't see any sign of a bat roost, perhaps because rock kestrels nest in there now? Night spotlighting for 2.5 hours, we saw nothing on the boulder slopes and just a **small-spotted genet** and many **desert pygmy mice** in the grass. An early morning walk was better: there are currently a pair of **Damara dik-dik** living in the scrub near the car park. We then sat patiently on a good lookout over the boulder slopes (go a short way down the end part of the blue Gecko Trail), and saw a **dassie rat** very well and then watched two **black mongooses** slinking and scampering across the rocks. During the morning **rock hyrax** are all around camp.



The dirt roads between Erongo and Toko Lodge added **steenbok**, **kudu** and **warthog** to the list.

At Toko you have **Congo rope squirrels** visiting the bird feeders behind the dining room, and game like giraffe and springbok visible out on the grassland. A morning walk showed klipspringer, rock hyrax and **grey duiker**. Night spotlighting was disappointing compared with other trip reports, especially given we'd got a new moon. Night 1: one **aardwolf**, 2 **scrub hare**, 1 grey duiker, 1 black-backed jackal, 1 **spring hare**. Night 2: one **cape fox**, one **African wild cat**, 2 aardwolf, 3 scrub hare, 1 spring hare. There was a strong breeze both nights and the guide admitted this was probably keeping the animals away.

We entered Etosha by the west Galton Gate at dawn and headed to Okaukuejo. Saw a nice group of **Hartmaan zebra**, also steenbok, grey duiker and at Olifantsrus a single male **eland** at the waterhole among all the other game. You literally can't move in Etosha without tripping over **Burchell's zebra**, oryx, springbok, **blue wildebeest** and giraffe. **Elephants** are also easily seen. Also black-backed jackals at every waterhole. Next day we saw **bat-eared foxes** on the Leeubron road near dawn, then toured the waterholes. We saw a total of 23 different **lions** in 24 hours! Also a handful of **spotted hyenas** and a **yellow mongoose**. On two nights at the Okaukuejo waterhole we saw 7+ **black rhino**, several elephants,

spotted hyena and black-backed jackals. By spotlighting the thorn trees around the viewing area we found a number of **black-tailed tree rats** and also confused the tourists. The rats were still there in the pre-dawn.



Generally in Etosha we found the waterholes all deserted before about 9am, so early morning is best used for cruising the roads in the hope of something interesting. From 9am the waterholes get busy, until some time around 1pm when they empty out, and then the quiet heat-of-the-day lasts until at least 5pm; we certainly never saw anything on an afternoon drive earlier than 5:30. The waterholes in Etosha are wonderful for the opportunity to watch different species interacting, much more so than anywhere else I've ever been.



Heading to Halali we started seeing lots more **black-faced impala**, **red hartebeest** and warthogs. Also less lions. We saw 2 different **white rhino** in the grasslands. At the Halali waterhole at night we saw black rhino, elephant, spotted hyena, jackals, and a great view of a small-spotted genet hunting the rocks right below the viewing area. We also saw a **bush squirrel** here. We waited until the campsite was asleep to look for honey badger but found none after over an hour searching. We learned later from a guide at Erindi that the honey badgers are actually active (scrounging) right when people are still barbecuing dinner, so if you do the obvious thing and wait until it's quiet you may have missed them.

Another good Etosha tip: each camp reception has a Sightings Book (totally overlooked and unadvertised, I'm amazed anyone ever finds them). We found 2 notes from the last week saying basically "Leopard at 17:30 beside the road about 1km before Rietfontein waterhole". So we started cruising that bit of road at 17:20 and at 17:34 there was the **leopard** walking beside the road, right on cue!



Similarly, the Namutoni book had 3 recent mentions of cheetah around the Klein Okevi/Fischers Pan area in the early morning, so we explored there doggedly and found a young pair of **cheetah** right on 8am (as an aside, I'm pretty sure the guides in Etosha keep each other well updated on sightings but are deliberately vague when answering enquiries from visitors). We found a troop of **banded mongooses** at Namutoni camp in the late afternoon, scrounging around the camp ground. We also found a young male lion with the carcass of a young giraffe. And really surprisingly, 24 hours later there was still just the one lion there and no more of the carcass gone. Final Etosha note: at dusk and dawn you are guaranteed Damara dik-dik on the road to the Anderson Gate, on both sides of the gate.

The game drive onto the Waterberg Plateau from the Waterberg Resort was surprisingly productive: **sable antelope** (glimpse), **roan antelope**, **Cape buffalo**, giraffe, black rhino, white rhino, red hartebeest, steenbok, kudu, warthog, rock hyrax. We also spotlighted for an hour along the resort roads and found 5 **lesser galago** and 2 small-spotted genet, along with many Damara dik-dik still there in the morning.



Erindi Old Traders Lodge is deluxe and packed with tourists. Right on dusk we walked into the restaurant overlooking the waterhole and saw a **brown hyena** just trotting away from the water - in another few seconds it was lost in undergrowth, what an unlucky miss! But all the folks already there seemed to have missed it entirely, cameras trained on the elephants and **hippopotamus**!

Taking the self-guided walk from the camp at dawn and dusk we saw (introduced) **blesbok** and **waterbuck**, as well as more impala, springbok, red hartebeest, kudu, steenbok, banded mongoose, oryx and Damara dik-dik. giraffe, warthog, black-backed jackal and spotted hyena were all visible from the restaurant. As were the pack of **African wild dogs** that were currently resident around the waterhole. They do an excellent night drive at Erindi, but although we were lucky enough to see a leopard and a brown hyena we otherwise only saw 3 bat-eared foxes, 2 scrub hare and 1 small-spotted genet, which seemed amazingly quiet for 3 hours under a nearly new moon with no wind. Back at our balcony at 1am we got a great look at the brown hyena in the floodlight from the waterhole! I don't think Erindi is a new brown hyena hotspot, though, I think we were just lucky (our night drive guide reckoned on 2 or 3 times a month).



So that's it. We've seen **51 species** of wild mammals in Namibia and added **11 life list** species, although I guess we ought to decide what rules to apply to game reserve introductions. There's no doubt that Erindi is in the historic range of African wild dogs, but probably not blesbok or waterbuck. It looks like it might just be in the historic range for hippos too, but the waterholes are artificial so if the lodge closed those hippos are toast. The Waterberg is definitely in the right range for roan antelope, but probably not sable, and though it might be in the range for cape buffalo I'm not convinced it's the right environment. Make of that what you will!

Our top targets were cape clawless otter and brown hyena, so it's great that we saw those. I would have loved to find rock elephant shrew, porcupine and caracal, and was also disappointed not to see honey badger or armadillo this trip. Generally we found the staff at all our lodges – and especially in national parks – were utterly useless for questions related to wildlife. And Etosha is a truly astonishing place for watching animals interact, though I do wonder if its artificially supported waterholes have become so successful that the park is becoming a bit of a “lion factory” at the expense of some other species? We kept being told that cheetah are really rare now, and every attempt to re-introduce wild dogs apparently fails.

Species list (X = several seen, didn't count)

#	Species	Erongo	Toko	Etosha	Waterberg	Erindi
1	Aardwolf		3			
2	African wild dog					10
3	African wildcat		1			

4	Banded mongoose			X		X
5	Bat-eared fox			2		3
6	Black mongoose	2				
7	Black rhino			X	1	
8	Black-backed jackal		2	X	1	4
9	Black-faced impala			X	X	X
10	Black-tailed tree rat			5	1	
11	Blue wildebeest			X		X
12	Blesbok					1
13	Brown hyena					2
14	Burchell's zebra			X		X
15	Bush squirrel			3		
16	Cape buffalo				X	
17	Cape fox		1			
18	Chacma baboon		X		X	
19	Cheetah			2		
20	Grey duiker		2	1		
21	Congo rope squirrel		3			
22	Damara dik-dik	2		X	8	2
23	Dassie rat	2				
24	Desert pygmy mouse	4				
25	Eland			1		
26	Elephant			X		2
27	Giraffe		4	X		X
28	Greater kudu			X	4	6
29	Hippopotamus					7
30	Haartman's zebra			X		X
31	Klipspringer	2	1			
32	Leopard			1		1
33	Lesser galago				5	
34	Lion			28!		
35	Oryx			X	X	X
36	Red hartebeest			X	4	2
37	Roan antelope				3	
38	Rock hyrax	X	1		2	
39	Sable antelope				1	
40	Scrub hare		4		1	2
41	Small-spotted genet	1		1	2	1

42	South African fur seal	(Walvis Bay 1)				
43	S. African ground squirrel			X		
44	Spotted hyena			X		2
45	Spring hare		2			
46	Springbok		X	X		X
47	Steenbok		1	X	1	2
48	Warthog			X	X	3
49	Waterbuck					2
50	White rhino			2	2	
51	Yellow mongoose			3		

