

SOUTH AFRICA – MALAMALA AND MARRICK

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A Leopard female along the Sand River, MalaMala

What an AMAZING trip to South Africa! I always prefer to visit few places, but for long time, so I chose to spend one full week in MalaMala Game Reserve, and four nights in Marrick Game Farm. The first day was dedicated to Johannesburg, with the Apartheid Museum, Mandela House and Soweto.

MalaMala Game Reserve (www.malamala.com) is the largest individual private reserve in the Sabi Sands, just west of Kruger National Park. It's one of the very best place for safaris, thanks to management that places emphasis to top-quality game viewing rather than useless luxury. It's a 130 km² of prime wildlife territory that includes 20 km of Sand River frontage, with an unfenced border with Kruger National Park and with other reserves (except at the southern border). MalaMala has one of the highest concentration of predators (especially Leopards) and herbivores in Africa during the dry season, when herds and prides come from southern Kruger to the Sand River. Jeeps are not overloaded, and the Camp Managers try to put as few people as possible in every car. I was lucky enough to be alone, or with no more than two other people, during my 14 game drives! Each drive finished well after dark, ensuring almost an hour of spotlighting. My guide was Daniel Bailey, and I can't recommend him enough for his passion and knowledge. Sometimes we stayed in the bush

much longer than the usual timetables, and once even all day! MalaMala is usually quite expensive, but thanks to a special offer, the cost was reasonable, and WELL worth.

Marrick Game Farm (www.marricksafari.com) is a known place among mammalwatchers, the best in the world for many strange mammals active almost only at night. They have even many antelopes species, some native and some introduced, and a good birdlife. The guide was the incredible sharp-eyed Jonnie, the only man in the world able to distinguish an eating Aardvark from a termite mound in the dark!

MalaMala is the Paradise for **LEOPARDS**! I experienced 11 wonderful encounters with Leopards, involving 9 different individuals: 4 adult females, 2 adult males, one young female and 2 cubs! One late morning an adult female hunted and killed an Impala in front of the lodge, another day we spent three hours watching the courtship and rough mating between a male and a female! An afternoon we followed a mother searching and calling her 10-month old cub, until she found the cub, and they greeted each other! Another afternoon we followed a young female during her attempts to catch a Duiker or a Hare. Leopards are well habituated to cars, so the views are almost always long and close, without to change the behaviors of the cats.



Leopard female, MalaMala

Another marvel of MalaMala, this time a very rare one, almost unbelievable: a family of **CHEETAHS**, mother and two grown cubs, in a cooperative hunt: the cubs ran toward west, a Bushbuck escaped in the opposite direction, just in the mouth of the mother that killed him after a short run of 50 meters! The Cheetah female, blind from one eye, grabbed the prey by the throat, suffocating it. In the meantime, the cubs were lost, and they began to call the mother with a strange bird-like chirp. The mother answered, until both came. The family then feasted on that banquet, and in just two hours the entire prey was eaten, including the head.



Cheetah mother grabbing the Bushbuck by the throat

Other predators of MalaMala: two different **LION** prides, one with 3 males, 6 females and 6 very young and playful cubs, just 2-3 months old, that gifted us with great shows. The other pack, with 11 members, tried to hunt Buffaloes at sunset. Even **WILD DOGS** were seen very well: twice a pack with 12 members, and once another pack, with very small (still with floppy ears) pups, coming out just briefly from the den. The alpha pair chased away a Spotted Hyena that came too close.



The future king(s) of Africa!

The best herbivore sighting was a moving herd of 21 **SABLE ANTELOPES**, that we followed from the border with Kruger NP to the Sand River, where they drank for just a few minutes, before immediately returning along the same way back to the Park.



A wild Sable buck from MalaMala, maybe the most beautiful Antelope

SAVANNA ELEPHANTS and **GIRAFFES** were very common, much less the **WHITE RHINO**. In the dark: **WHITE-TAILED MONGOOSE** once, **AFRICAN CIVET** twice, **LARGE-SPOTTED GENET** twice, and a couple of **SIDE-STRIPED JACKALS** once.

In Marrick Game Farm, during the night drives, I was delighted to see 3 times the incredible **AARDVARK**, one of them for one hour, eating no more than 10 meters from us, and interacting with a Bat-eared Fox! **AARDWOLF** was seen 6 times, and the rare **BLACK-FOOTED CAT** once, but very well licking paws and fur after emerging from a den. **AFRICAN WILDCAT** is much easier. **SOUTH AFRICAN PORCUPINES** are quite common, and the **SOUTHERN AFRICAN SPRINGHARE** and **BAT-EARED FOX** widespread. We found even a **SOUTHERN AFRICAN HEDGEHOG**, the first seen in the farm for seven months, and, during daylight, two wonderful **WESTERN ROCK SENGIS**! During days, many **MEERKATS** and **YELLOW MONGOOSES**.

I saw 57 mammal species, without to count the introduced antelopes in Marrick outside range (such Roan), and to search for small rodents or bats!

The complete list:

1. **CAPE ROCK HYRAX** – A few in Marrick
2. **SAVANNA ELEPHANT** – Very common in MalaMala. Many interesting behaviors observed, like the digging of a well in the sand with trunk, in search of fresh water

3. AARDVARK – 3 times seen in Marrick, one good, one briefly and one unforgettable: close and with interactions with a Bat-eared Fox. What a strange mammal!
4. WESTERN ROCK SENGI – 2 in the kopjes of Marrick



The Sengi

5. CHACMA BABOON – Troops in MalaMala, even near the lodge
6. VERVET MONKEY – Less common than Baboons, but widespread
7. SOUTHERN GALAGO – One, very briefly, in MalaMala during night
8. SOUTH AFRICAN PORCUPINE – At least 4 every night drive in Marrick
9. SMITH'S BUSH SQUIRREL – Common in the bush of MalaMala
10. SOUTH AFRICAN GROUND SQUIRREL – Common in the arid places of Marrick
11. SOUTHERN AFRICAN SPRINGHARE – 20, or more, every night drive in Marrick
12. LONG-EARED DESERT MOUSE – One seen at the end of the last night drive in Marrick
13. BUSHVELD GERBIL (?) – A Gerbil that crossed the road in MalaMala should be this species
14. CAPE HARE – The Hare of Marrick's open places
15. SCRUB HARE – The Hare of Marrick's bushy places, abundant even in MalaMala
16. SOUTHERN AFRICAN HEDGEHOG – One during the 1st night drive in Marrick



An unexpected bonus!

17. AFRICAN WILD DOG – 3 sightings, twice a big pack with 12 members, and once a smaller pack near the den in MalaMala, with 4-5 very young pups



Wild Dog, the alpha male

18. SIDE-STRIPED JACKAL – Not easy to see in MalaMala, but we found a pair near the lodge after dark
19. BLACK-BACKED JACKAL – Some in Marrick during night drives
20. BAT-EARED FOX – Common after sunset in Marrick, seen even in the daylight

21. LION – Seen several times in MalaMala, one pride with 6 small cubs and 3 adult males, and another bigger pride (11 Lions) in Buffalo-hunting mood
22. LEOPARD – The mammal of the trip! 11 wonderful encounters involving 9 different individuals! I can't count how many hours I spent watching this fabulous and elegant cat!



Leopard female calling the cub

23. CHEETAH – The sighting of the trip! A cooperative hunt of a mother and two grown cubs, and the feasting on the prey! Unbelievable!
24. AFRICAN WILDCAT – 3 sightings in Marrick during night drives
25. BLACK-FOOTED CAT – The most difficult Marrick's treasure! Seen only once, but very well and for more than ten minutes
26. AFRICAN CIVET – In MalaMala twice after sunset
27. LARGE-SPOTTED GENET – This beautiful genet was not too difficult in MalaMala, with two encounters
28. SPOTTED HYENA – In MalaMala only when dark approaches. One seen drinking, another Hyena was chased away by the Wild Dogs when came too close to their den
29. AARDWOLF – Seen on every night drive in Marrick. A restless mammal, always on the move
30. SLENDER MONGOOSE – 4 times, briefly, in MalaMala
31. YELLOW MONGOOSE – Common in Marrick, even near the farm
32. WHITE-TAILED MONGOOSE – One at night in MalaMala

33. MEERKAT – A funny habituated group near the Marrick farm, and other individuals elsewhere in the property



The now wild, but very tame, Merkaat troop near Marrick farm

34. BANDED MONGOOSE - Some troops in MalaMala
35. DWARF MONGOOSE – Common in MalaMala
36. COMMON ZEBRA – Easy to see in MalaMala
37. WHITE RHINOCEROS – Present in MalaMala.



A trio of White Rhinos

38. COMMON WARTHOG – Few in MalaMala and Marrick
39. HIPPOPOTAMUS – Just 3 individuals in MalaMala, because of the dry season
40. GIRAFFE – Common in MalaMala
41. AFRICAN BUFFALO – In MalaMala a huge herd of 300 individuals, and another smaller herd.
42. NYALA – Abundant in MalaMala, where they graze even in the lodge
43. GREATER KUDU – Widespread in MalaMala, present in Marrick
44. BUSHBUCK – Common in MalaMala
45. COMMON ELAND – Seen only in Marrick. A native species of the area
46. BUSH DUIKER – Widespread in MalaMala
47. STEENBOK – Some in MalaMala, especially near the Kruger NP border
48. SPRINGBOK – Abundant in Marrick
49. WATERBUCK – Widespread in MalaMala
50. KLIPSPRINGER – Singletons and a pair in the kopjes of MalaMala
51. IMPALA – The preferred dinner of Leopards! Abundant in MalaMala
52. RED HARTEBEEST – Rare in Marrick
53. BLESBOK – Uncommon in Marrick. Don't sure if it's a native species
54. BRINDLED GNU – Widespread, but uncommon, in MalaMala
55. WHITE-TAILED GNU – Common in Marrick
56. SABLE ANTELOPE – A wonderful herd of 21 individuals, including 2 black adult bulls, came from Kruger NP to the Sand River for drinking! Once common in MalaMala, they are now a rare sighting
57. SOUTHERN ORYX – Many in Marrick.

Honorary mammals: the huge VERRAUX'S EAGLE OWL and GIANT KINGFISHER, plus the colorful LILAC-BREASTED ROLLER in MalaMala; SPOTTED EAGLE OWL in Marrick.



A relaxed (?) Leopard male



The preferred toy: mom's tail!