

## Namibia (18<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> November 2023) & South Africa (29<sup>th</sup> November – 5<sup>th</sup> December 2023)

*Ben Balmford, Marina Altoè, Jonah Balmford, Frankie Balmford*

It was our parents' 60<sup>th</sup> birthdays this year, and they were keen on a family trip to Cape Town to celebrate. We chose to turn it into an extended stay, with the two children and partners going for a tour around Namibia, before a few days in South Africa. Mum and Dad extended their stay afterwards in South Africa, with details of that trip written up in a separate short report. Our trip was a combination of mammal- and non-mammal stops, and we hope that helps in case of planning a family holiday with a mammal-y slant. Indeed, Namibia is extremely easy to travel around, therefore great for a family trip, although we did experience one corrupt police officer (see Okonjima section for details) and there were notices in all the lodges about police corruption. In general, all the sites covered here are probably fairly well known, and the route we took ended up being quite a popular one with tourists.

We chose Okonjima as our final stop, even if it's more expensive than what we would normally go for, because we wanted to get dad pangolin tracking as a birthday present. Just to note, we did look at joining up with the [Pangolin Conservation and Research Foundation](https://www.pangolinrcf.org/contact/) (<https://www.pangolinrcf.org/contact/>) instead, however at the time of planning they weren't quite ready for tourists to track radio collared animals. Last we heard, they have a couple of sites about to be ready (one east of Etosha, and another between Etosha and Windhoek), so perhaps worth checking.

Even without a purely mammal focus, owing to Namibia's exceptional mammal watching sites, we did see quite a few species, and some real crackers too. It certainly helped that we got somewhat lucky with the rains. Specifically, the dry seasons ends sometime in early November, and once the rains properly hit, the animals disperse. However, the rains seemed a little late, and were only just starting during our time there (including a couple of proper down pours) so everywhere was still largely dry and animals concentrated around waterholes still.

### Overall plan

Dates	Place	Accommodation
18 <sup>th</sup> – 20 <sup>th</sup> Nov	Sossusvlei	Sesriem Campsite (camping)
20 <sup>th</sup> – 22 <sup>nd</sup> Nov	Swakopmund	Bismark II (apartment, Booking.com)
22 <sup>nd</sup> – 23 <sup>rd</sup> Nov	Uis	White Lady Lodge (cottage, tree-top tent)
23 <sup>rd</sup> – 25 <sup>th</sup> Nov	Etosha National Park	Halali Campsite (camping)
25 <sup>th</sup> – 27 <sup>th</sup> Nov	Etosha National Park	Namutoni Campsite (rooms)
27 <sup>th</sup> – 29 <sup>th</sup> Nov	Okonjima Reserve	Okonjima Reserve (Plains View Room)
29 <sup>th</sup> Nov – 2 <sup>nd</sup> Dec	Cape Town	The Annex in Kalk Bay (AirBnB)
2 <sup>nd</sup> – 3 <sup>rd</sup> Dec	Hermanus	Walker Bay Manor Guest House
3 <sup>rd</sup> – 5 <sup>th</sup> Dec	De Hoop	Mudlark Riverfront Lodge

### Flights

For those travelling from Europe to Namibia, Eurowings/Discover operate flights direct from Frankfurt to Windhoek (sold through Lufthansa), up to twice daily. However, do check recent flight histories before booking: when we travelled in the shoulder season, about 1 in 10 flights incurred a ~10h delay.

### Car hire

For our time in Namibia, we rented through [Asco](#) car hire, who were very straightforward, easy to deal with, and very reasonably priced (about \$120/day for the car including all insurances). We had a Toyota Hilux with roof tents, but in hindsight would have been better off simply getting the car without the tents - indeed we only camped 4 nights in the 11 we were there. While camping was comfortable enough, putting the tents down before a morning drive was just a bit of a challenge, and the accommodation we did book tended to be relatively cheap and very comfortable.



*Our trusty Toyota Hilux*

### Day-by-day

#### **Sossusvlei, 18-20/11**

After landing, picking up the car, and sorting some basic groceries, we set off towards Sossusvlei, about 4h30 from Windhoek. **Chacma baboon** were common between the airport and Windhoek itself, and then en route to Sossusvlei we saw **steenbok**, **springbok**, **gemsbok** and one **kudu**, and several **Ruppel's Koorhan** (birds) as we got nearer to our destination. We had a brief stop in Solitaire - McGregor's Bakery does excellent sweet treats – and spotted a pair of **yellow mongoose** in the car park.

We stayed in Sesriem campsite, which was comfortable, with decent facilities and a very nice swimming pool. The restaurant did passable food, including a vegetarian option. We were mainly in Sossusvlei for the absolutely stunning scenery, and it did not disappoint. We went to Dune 45 for sunrise, which was stunning, although the main advantage of being there that early was that it was still cool. We then went to explore Deadvlei, and Ben and Jonah climbed Big Daddy. The road to this end is along an old river bed, so you should deflate your tyres slightly – to 1.6psi – before driving this, but it was very easy to drive just so long as you follow other people's tyre tracks and don't stop, and



*An inquisitive gemsbok at Sesriem campsite*



*The view from Dune 45 at sunrise*



*Deadvlei*

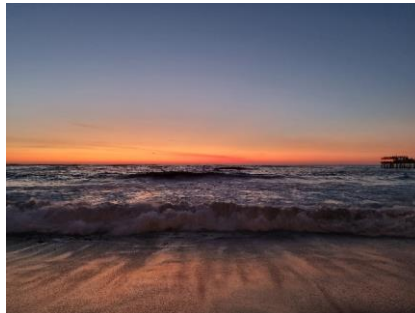
try to avoid changing gear. For those that would rather not drive it themselves, there is also a shuttle bus option which is about \$10pp.

While in the national park, we saw plenty of **gemsbok** (including one in camp who wanted a close inspection of our slice of watermelon, even as we were sat by it) and **springbok**, and then a few **black backed jackal** between Sossusvlei and Solitaire. There were also reports of **hyena** (presumably **brown**) coming into camp on the second night, although we didn't see them.

### **Swakopmund, 20-22/11**

We left Sesriem campsite early in the morning to drive 4h20 to Swakopmund. We got there around lunchtime, unpacked and did a small food shop from the Pick 'n' Pay in town. We stayed in a very nice apartment called Bismark II (reserved through Booking.com), which is ideally located just off the main high street, opposite a cute restaurant/bar called Ankerplatz and only a 5 minute walk from the beach. It's very clean and comfortable and it has a gated car park, two bathrooms and a fully kitted kitchen. Having a washing machine and tumble dryer was also very useful to refresh some of our stuff after camping, although washing liquid is not provided.

In the afternoon, Frankie and Jonah were off to the nearby airfield for Frankie's skydiving experience (Ground Rush Adventures), while Ben and Marina visited the town. The town has a very European feel to it and it's ideal for some down time and souvenir/gift shopping. Make sure you pack some warm clothes however, as temperatures in town are around 20°C during the day and cooler at night. This made for a very nice break from the heat of Sossusvlei. Plus we enjoyed great, and extremely reasonably priced, cocktails at Ankerplatz for sundowners.



*Sunset on Swakopmund beach*

The following morning, we got picked up around 9am from outside the apartment and headed back out into the desert for a dune surfing experience with Alter Action, which we would highly recommend. We all opted for the stand-up dune boarding (similar to snowboarding, just on a dune) which also includes lie-down dune boarding (similar to body-boarding). We all had a brilliant time, all trying the jump on the boards, and a little competition for the fastest lie-down time (Ben clocked in at 68 km/h). Be aware, that a relatively good level of fitness is required as you need to walk all the way up the dune every time you surf down, which can get quite tiring, but either it will be good prep for Sossusvlei, or Sossusvlei will have got you ready for this. After the surfing is done, we had very nice sandwiches and a cold drink in the shade of the car before heading back into town.

After a (very thorough) shower, we headed back out, this time driving north to Cape Cross Seal Reserve, the world's largest colony of **cape fur seal**. We were warned when paying that there would be quite a few dead seal pups on the beach due to it being a couple of weeks into pupping season, however the view was pretty stark, with around half of the seal pups dead. We only stayed briefly, and saw **black backed jackal** on the drive out. If you're there during pupping season,



*Cape Cross Seal Reserve*

we would recommend caution if you're thinking of visiting with little ones or sensitive people, in which case kayaking with the fur seals at Pelican Point would definitely be a better option.

In the evening, we had dinner at The Fish Deli on Sam Nujoma Avenue. Interesting fish, really nicely cooked, as well as plenty of non-fish options. Very nice service, and we were sung to by an all-male acapella group halfway through the meal, who were exceptional!

The next morning, we checked out and drove south to Walvis Bay to go kayaking with seals (booked through Pelican Point Kayaking, they were fine). We parked just near the entrance to Pelican Point and then took their vehicle along the strip of land. The guide was very friendly and pointed out wildlife (mainly **flamingos**, both greater and lesser, and **black-baked jackal**) as well as other interesting bits to us on the way. We went kayaking next to another cape fur seal colony, albeit smaller than the Cape Cross one. The seals are clearly used to kayakers and would play around in the waves, or sleep. The really small pups



*Kayaking at Pelican Point*

were still on the shore, so the youngest seals in the water were around 1 year old, but it was great to be so close without disturbing them. The kayaking itself was just an excuse to be in the water and we didn't really do much kayaking, just stayed pretty much in the same area, watching the seals. There are often **bottlenose dolphins** seen on the trip, but not the day that we went. Once out of the water we had a nice lunch provided by the kayaking company of bagels, muffins, and hot and cold drinks.

#### ***White lady lodge, 22-23/11***

After lunch we made our way north towards Uis. Ben and Marina got dropped off at the White Lady Rock Art Visitor Centre, while Jonah and Frankie checked in at White Lady Lodge.

The White Lady Visitor Centre has shaded car parks, toilets and a place to buy cold drinks and snacks. Once you've paid entrance fees, you're allocated a guide who will take you to the rock art place – our guide Enrico was extremely knowledgeable and very interested and interesting. He used to be a guide at Etosha National Park so he even gave us some advice for our next stop.

It used to be the case that you could just drive closer to the rock art and visit it yourself, but since they've had multiple incidents of visitors damaging the site, the rock art is now only accessible with a guide. It's about a 2.5km walk there and back from the visitor centre, so a total of 5km of easy and relatively flat terrain. Due to the temperature and exposure, however, it's extremely important to wear sunscreen and hats and take water. It is cooler in the morning before the sun gets properly up, which would definitely have made the walk easier. We were there around 4pm, when the temperature was about 38°C, so it felt quite tough and we had to take multiple breaks on the way there and back.

That said, it's definitely worth it: the rock art itself is one of the most beautiful and best preserved in Namibia. Enrico explained the history of how this rock art site was discovered, how it got its name (turns out it's not a white lady!) and walked us through the different layers of art present (the site combines paintings from 7000 years ago and 5000 years ago) and what it tells us about how people used to live.

We then had a walk in the valley around the site as this used to be a riverbed and you can still see the signs of water erosion, and Enrico showed us a view of the highest peak in Namibia, Königstein.

We then made our way back to White Lady Lodge, which is a very comfortable and beautiful lodge and campsite. Jonah and Frankie stayed in one of the cottages, while Ben and Marina stayed in a tree-top "tent" (really a tree house which just happens to be made out of canvas) which was really good fun. The tent itself is very spacious and comfortable, cool at night, and gives you wonderful views of Brandberg Mountains at sunset and sunrise. Ben also appreciated the **Congo rope squirrel** around the tent and being woken up the next day by two rather feisty **yellow billed hornbill** (flying bananas) banging on our glass door! Marina got excited about ticking off Zazu from her Lion King cast list. The main building of the lodge has a nice pool area where a couple of very habituated **meerkats** roam, and a nice restaurant (although we ended up having all of our meals at the braai next to our accommodation).



*Sunset at White Lady Lodge*

#### **Etosha, 23-27/11**

We left Brandberg fairly early the next morning to head to Etosha. In hindsight, it would have been great to stop at Palmwag and look for **damara ground squirrel** but at that stage we'd totally forgotten about the Stuarts' report on MammalWatching. We spent our time in Etosha split between Halali for two nights (23 and 24), where we camped, and Namutoni (25 and 26), where we stayed in the double rooms. Both were comfortable enough, the Namutoni rooms actually very nice, with standard national park restaurants (the toasted sarnies and chips became a reliable staple in our diets!). **Gemsbok, black faced impala, springbok, plains zebra, blue wildebeest, giraffe, steenbok, red hartebeest, kudu, steenbok, elephant, spotted hyena, and black backed jackal** were common throughout the areas that we visited. We also saw **yellow mongoose, south African ground squirrel,** and **banded mongoose** sporadically throughout the park, as well as **white rhino** in a couple of locations.



In the Halali area, we spent mornings and afternoons out and about, as well as the first evening, before realising that the best place to be from about 1730/1800 onwards is the camp waterhole. While at Halali, we saw a large pride of **lion** near Salvadora twice, and one **leopard** the first evening at Goas waterhole. **Smith's bush squirrel** are very common in the camp area, and we saw a couple of **scrub hare** when we wandered around at night. At the camp waterhole, we saw a variety of ungulates, and the first evening **cape fox, African wildcat, black rhino, and black backed jackal**, as well as a **Namaqua rock rat** running over the rocks and around the benches that form the viewing



area. By the second evening, we'd found out that being at the waterhole earlier was a good idea, particularly for **honey badger** which seemed not to raid the bins as frequently as it once had, but was coming in for water at least once a night. Indeed, while we were out on a drive, Marina saw one come in at 10am. That evening, it came in again at 1930, chased off a **black rhino** and then later a **spotted hyena** before properly heading off at around 2000. We'd heard that it was around the same time the night before, and would be slightly later the following night (when dad saw it at about 2100). The **spotted hyena** and **black rhino** returned to the waterhole later at about 2030 to actually have a drink. The **wildcat** were again around, hiding behind rocks between the two pools of water which form a somewhat lopsided figure of eight.



In the Namutoni area, we additionally saw **eland** around Batia, **damara dik dik** along Dik Dik Drive, just past Klein Namutoni, **bat eared fox** in several places, **warthog** in the direction of Tsumcor, and a **cheetah** at the Klein Okevi-Aroe cross road junction with the main road. We also took night drives both nights we were here, as the waterhole is nowhere near as good as the one at halali. We saw **cape porcupine** on both trips, between Klein Namutoni and the main road and **scrub hare** were common. We also had one **wildcat**, a family of **bat eared foxes**, one **spring hare**, and one **small spotted genet**. If we had had more time, we would probably have added a night or two in either Dolomite or Olifantsrus camps, as the western end is supposed to be very different (e.g. with **brown hyena** and **mountain zebra**).



### ***Okonjima, 27-29/11***

Having met up with mum and dad, we left Namutoni after a morning drive to travel to Okonjima Nature Reserve. Unfortunately, we encountered a corrupt police officer on the way there. Specifically, there is a pass a bit south of Tsumeb, and just as you come out of it, there is a small stretch in which overtaking is allowed, before being banned again with no warning, that stretch is at 9°20'55.2"S 17°38'52.8"E, here: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/7iC1yXCwKUTGKAsu9>. We passed a lorry, pulling out where it is legal, but coming in after it is closed, and got pulled over by said officer stationed in the layby. Some tell-tale signs of corruption included a police ticket book where each offence was pre-ticked on each sequential page; only pulling over our first car with roof tents on the

top, and not the second 2-wheel drive which looked like it might be local; taking none of our details; pocketing the NAD\$1000 (~£50) fine; and not providing a receipt. Despite this unsavoury delay, we made it to Okonjima in plenty of time for that afternoon's game drive, and to find that we had been upgraded to view rooms – they're absolutely stunning!

Okonjima is more expensive than we would normally go for, but it is real luxury... and more importantly has radio tagged pangolins. For priority on choice of activities you need to stay in the rooms rather than camp. Staying in rooms is also mandatory for the pangolin track, which has a 2 night minimum stay too. Half-board accommodation was about £200/person/night plus about £40-60/person for each activity, and £100/person for pangolin tracking.

While Andrew and Ben had found Okonjima owing to its tagged **ground pangolins** (but do see our note in the introduction about PCRF, who might offer similar experiences at less premium prices), they had persuaded the others it was a nice place to go owing to the **leopard** tracking and luxury feel, which was exceptional: we had welcome drinks/snacks on arrival, hot and cold drinks and fresh fruit was available all day, and everyone at reception was always happy to help, nothing seemed to much of a bother.

That first afternoon, we all chose to do the **leopard** tracking, which is when we met our guide for the rest of the stay, Kavamba, who was fantastic: really personable, interested in both mammals and birds, and super skilled in tracking and ID'ing animals (including sex/age). For the leopard tracking, Kavamba initially said they have a ~50% success rate, but we suspect it must be exceptionally rare not to see one. We tracked two individuals, spending about an hour with the first, which seemed largely unbothered (although the **kudu** it thought about hunting were presumably well aware exactly where the **leopard** was, what with a massive land cruiser crawling alongside). The second **leopard** was far less relaxed, and ran off as soon as we spotted it. On the rest of the drive, as with others in Okonjima, we saw **impala, gemsbok, kudu, springbok, warthog, baboon, steenbok, giraffe, blue wildebeest, red hartebeest, common zebra, and mountain zebra**. We were also rather excited with a **bushveld sengi** which shot out in front of the car near the border fence. Later we would find that **sengis** are really rather common along the road between View Rooms 1-3, particularly in the early morning and late afternoon. There were also **black-backed jackal** commonly around the lodge area, including a pair with young pups by View Rooms 3 and 4.



That evening, despite a little confusion (do check on arrival if you are booked in for the evening's **pangolin** trek, and double check with your assigned guide) Andrew and Ben went out on the **pangolin** tracking. En route, we had brief views of **bush duiker**. We then had about a 15minute walk to look for the **ground pangolin**. We actually caught up with the **pangolin** a couple of times judging by the tracking equipment, but couldn't get a visual on it. At that point, we got out the thermal, and the next time we got close we could easily see the animal – which looked particularly stunning through the thermal imager. We stayed with it for about 10 minutes as it foraged around us and the guides, seemingly unfussed by our presence. The third or fourth time it moved on to another area,

we decided to leave it be and head home, given our excellent views and a desire to not stress out the animal.

The next day, we had a great view of a **sable** stroll pass the front of the restaurant over breakfast, and then enjoyed morning and afternoon game drives. In addition to the more common species, we saw **slender, yellow, and banded mongooses, South African ground squirrel, Damara dik-dik, common waterbuck, white rhino, and common eland**. On the morning drive, we finished up on a known **leopard** kill from the night before, where there was a female and cub. (NB: We are not sure we would have been allowed to go had we not already done a leopard tracking and/or had there been other leopard tracking vehicles parked with it). On the afternoon drive, we had prolonged views of **bat eared fox** and **brown hyena**. We saw the **hyena** from one of the lookouts used for sundowners. We were there specifically to look for **dassie rat** which are commonly seen there during the wet season, but we didn't get lucky in the dry.

### **Cape Town, 29/11-2/12**

*[Please note from now on the three couples split to do slightly different things, and this report follows Ben and Marina's itinerary]*

On the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup> we travelled back to Windhoek and caught a flight to Cape Town. All fairly straightforward, although do watch that you leave enough time to drop off the car with Asco – we suggest arriving to their depot about 4h before your flight departs as they check over the car with you there, and then it's about a 40m drive to the airport. In Cape Town, Marina and Ben hired a car through Green Motion who we would strongly recommend you do NOT use. They gave very confusing instructions and were late to both pick up and collection, to the point where Marina had to ask the info point at Cape Town airport to phone them for us, as their normal line didn't seem to work. On collection, they noticed a very minor paint scuff and assured us they would charge a maximum of £50 and then proceeded to bill us over £200 without notice. Luckily, we had separate excess cover through the excellent insurance4carhire, but it was a very annoying hassle nonetheless.

In Cape Town, all six of us stayed in a beautiful Air BnB, The Annex, in Kalk Bay. We spent most of our time in Cape Town enjoying time with family, visiting friends, shopping and doing more cultural activities. We recommend eating at: Ohana Café (try the scones), Olympia Café, SALT (excellent cocktails and seasonal food) and, if you're looking to celebrate, **Fyn** is well worth it, however you will need to reserve in advance, and the tasting menus are £60-80pp depending on which you go for.

Mammal-wise, our trip to Cape Town was relatively quiet. The first day there we climbed Table Mountain through the Platteklip Gorge. If you decide to walk up, keep an eye on the news for muggings, do it in the daylight, better in at least a pair. Platteklip is one of the safer – if duller – routes. One the way up we saw **cape four striped grass mouse** about half-way up and at the summit there were **rock hyrax** by the café. We then took the cable car back down and spent the rest of the afternoon visiting the VA area and on the Robben Island tour. While the tour is still extremely sobering, we were told it has a lighter tone than it used to do. We felt lucky to be able to do it then, as one of our guides was a former prisoner, but with former prisoners now becoming of retiring age it will soon no longer be possible to go on the tour with them.





The next two days, Ben and Andrew tried to look for **Cape Golden Mole** and **Cape Mole-rat** with groundskeepers that Alex Meyer had been out with at Kirstenbosch gardens. Unfortunately, over a few mornings we did not get lucky. They explained that the winter is a much better time to look for them. It's still worth reaching out to Sisa, one of the groundkeepers, if you're in the area, (Whatsapp: +27 78 468 7412). We did see **grey squirrel** cross the road in the Kirstenbosch area. We also had views of **bottlenose dolphin** in the bay from the Airbnb, and then **cape fur seal** at the main harbour. The afternoon of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ben and Marina also went on a (very tame) horse ride near Nordhoek.

### Hermanaus 2-3/12

At this point, Ben and Marina split from everyone else, and went to Hermanaus as a stop en-route to De Hoop and in the hope that we could do a whale watching trip. Unfortunately, the in-shore whales had all gone, and the wind picked up, so no boat trips were running. Ironically, it was also Gansbaai that Ben had been thinking of as the nice seaside town. Both of us ended up having norovirus at this point (Marina quite badly), so that meant we didn't enjoy Hermanaus or the place we were staying (Walker Bay Manor Guest House) as much as we would've wanted. We did however see **cape grey mongoose** while we ate dinner at Dutchies (very tasty food, too), and also saw **rock hyrax** at Gearing's point.

### De Hoop 3-5/12

We finished our trip in De Hoop. While the accommodation in the national park is very nice, it has unfortunately also become very expensive. We therefore stayed outside the national park at Mudlark River Lodge which was an absolutely stunning setting and much more reasonably priced with great food (about £90 for a double room half-board). Between Napier and Bredasdorp, an area that is often good for **caracal** in the wheat fields, we had a small group of **grey rhebok** and then also a single **cape grysbok**, with more of both species between Bredasdorp and Infanta, as well as a troop of **baboon**. Along the way, there was also what looked like a shooting ranch, with a herd of **sable** close to the road.



*1The view from Mudlark River Lodge*

From Mudlark itself, we saw **Cape four striped grass mouse** and **scrub hare** when walking back along the drive to the main road, and **Cape grysbok** in the fields on the opposite bank of the river. On the first night a **porcupine** also raided the compost heap at about 1930, which was pretty cool to see less than 10m away – apparently it's a frequent visitor.

Feeling much better, the day of the 4<sup>th</sup> we spent in De Hoop itself, and saw **cape mountain zebra**, **bontebok**, **eland**, **cape grysbok** and **baboon** dotted around, but particularly common by the central accommodation area. At the dunes, we saw a small pod of **Indian Ocean humpback dolphin**, but unfortunately no whales – which we must have been about 1-2 weeks late for.

We spent the day snorkelling (briefly), sunbathing and reading on the beach, which was a nice end to a fantastic holiday.

Commented [MA1]: We didn't see caracal tho?

Mammals seen

1. Rock hyrax
2. Elephant
3. Bushveld sengi
4. Chacma baboon
5. Porcupine
6. Congo Rope squirrel
7. Smith's bush squirrel
8. South African ground squirrel
9. Grey squirrel
10. Spring hare
11. Namaqua rock rat
12. Cape four striped grass mouse
13. Scrub hare
14. Black-backed jackal
15. Bat-eared fox
16. Cape fox
17. Honey badger
18. Cape fur seal
19. Lion
20. Leopard
21. Cheetah
22. African wildcat
23. Small-spotted genet
24. Brown hyena
25. Spotted Hyena
26. Slender mongoose
27. Cape Gray mongoose
28. Yellow mongoose
29. Banded mongoose
30. Ground pangolin
31. Common Zebra
32. Mountain Zebra
33. Black rhino
34. White rhino
35. Warthog
36. Giraffe
37. Kudu
38. Common eland
39. Bush Duiker
40. Cape grysbok
41. Steenbok
42. Damara Dik-Dik
43. Springbok
44. Grey rhebok
45. Common Waterbuck
46. Impala
47. Bontebok
48. Red Hartebeest
49. Blue Wildebeest
50. Sable
51. Gemsbok
52. Bottlenose dolphin
53. Indian Ocean humpback dolphin