

South Africa Trip Report, May 2025.



Between the competing demands of school, jobs, and boyfriends and girlfriends, coordinating family trips is always challenging. A window of opportunity arose this spring and I jumped on it, booking a trip to South Africa for my daughter, Josie, my son, Ben, Tracey and myself. Our kids had not been to sub-Saharan Africa before, so the trip was designed to show them some of the charismatic megafauna as well as looking for the more underappreciated species I hoped to find.

After a day's sightseeing in Frankfurt, we arrived in Johannesburg somewhat blurry-eyed at 8:30 the following morning. A chap from Britz was awaiting us and we drove to Kempton Park to pick up a Toyota Hillux with two rooftop tents. After a safety video and briefing, we headed out, 26 years from the last time we drove around South Africa. The trip northeast through Dullstroom revealed some wildlife in game farms and one truly wild Vervet Monkey. We arrived at Blyde River Canyon's Forever Resort about 6:00 pm and set up camp under some huge trees. A Common Genet in woody vegetation by the campsite was the only mammal of note before an early night for all of us.

I had forgotten how cold it can be during the South African winter. The vehicle came equipped with sleeping bags, but of such thinness that they didn't fully ward off the cold, which made for an early morning. Breakfast was enlivened by Vervet Monkeys scrambling on the swings and other equipment in the gym area. Afterwards, we hiked the "Leopard Trail" up to some fantastic viewpoints overlooking the canyon, seeing a troop of Chacma Baboons along the way. Lunch and a nap rounded out the afternoon, followed by a hike around the campground after dark. Epauletted Fruit Bats were in evidence, as well as

two Jameson's Red Rock Hares on the road in the campground and two Southern Lesser Galagos in the trees by the roadside.

We left early for Kruger Park, stopping in Grasskop for supplies and cold weather gear. Three Dwarf Mongooses crossed the road just before we entered the Kruger Gate. Driving towards Skukuza Camp, we saw Common Warthog and Impala. We checked into the campsite, had lunch and then headed out towards the southeast. The sightings came fast and furious – lots of Impala, two Leopards in a tree, a number of Common Nyala, Savanna Elephants, large herds of African Buffalo, Greater Kudu, Common Zebra, a pride of Lions, Southern Giraffe, Common Hippos, Chacma Baboons and a Spotted Hyena with young by the side of the road. We returned to camp just before the curfew, found a campsite and cooked up steaks while watching fruit bats flying around.



We departed as soon as the gates opened the next morning, quickly seeing Elephant, a Lioness in the middle of the road and a Spotted Hyena with young. New species for the trip that morning included Banded Mongoose, Common Duiker, Smith's Bush/Tree Squirrel, Slender Mongoose and, best of all, three African Wild Dogs at the turnoff to Jock's Camp. We checked in to Pretoriuskop Camp before noon, had lunch and a swim, and admired Tree Squirrels and Dwarf Mongoose around the campground. The afternoon drive started slowly and revealed only previously-seen species, but we did have a couple of great sightings. After more than 25 years of scanning trees, Tracey was rewarded with a beautiful sighting of a resting Leopard which we could enjoy without other vehicles around. A Spotted Hyena den right beside the road provided great views of mother and young. An after-dinner night walk around the campground revealed two species in bat boxes, Yellow-bellied House Bat and Egyptian Slit-faced Bat.









We left Pretoriuskop shortly after the gate opened, but still missed a Lion which had just wandered from the roadside deeper into the bush. We did have good views of hippos out of the water in daytime, apparently a common sight in Kruger during the winter. We stopped for a late breakfast at Skukuza, then checked with the office to be told that the campsites in the park were full. A staff member called around and told us that a campsite was available at Berg-en-Dal, which she reserved for us. We drove on to Lower Sabie, seeing lots of animals, including a couple of new species, Common Waterbuck and Bushbuck. Stopping at Lower Sabie for lunch, I consulted the map and realized that there was no realistic way we would be able to drive to Berg-en-Dal before the gate closed. A discussion with the reception staff at Lower Sabie revealed that they did have space for the night and that we could switch our reservation thankfully. While eating lunch, a group of Brindled Wildebeest appeared at the river along with elephants, zebras and other animals. Our after-lunch drive produced sightings of previously-seen mammals, as well as a pair of Ground Hornbills, an increasingly rare species in South Africa. We finally made it out on a night safari that night, which revealed many of the species we had already seen in Kruger as well as several Steenbok, Scrub Hares and, best of all, a White Rhino.





The next morning, we discovered a bat in the camp washroom, which turned out to be Sundevall's Leaf-nosed Bat, then drove to the Crocodile Bridge Rest Camp. Here we found a colony of Epauletted Fruit Bats under the decorative entrance way. We left the park and drove to Nelspruit, which I remembered as a small town from our last trip to South Africa 26 years ago, but was now a large city. We continued on, arriving in Johannesburg at the height of rush hour. Despite almost hitting another vehicle at a spot where the lane I was in mysteriously disappeared, we made it out of the city intact and got over to the N12. Distances in South Africa seem to have increased since we were last there. I had optimistically thought we could reach Kimberley that night. By 8:30 pm I was almost falling asleep at the wheel. Ben noticed a nature reserve with a campground on the road atlas, so we left the highway and arrived at the Bloemhof Dam Nature Reserve about 10 minutes later. The watchman at the gate said that camping was closed due to flooding, but I managed to convince him that me driving further would be a serious threat to other drivers on the road and he agreed to let us camp by the ablutions block.





I was awoken during the night by Tracey and Josie in the other tent discussing the possibility of there being elephants around the vehicle. I could hear something large moving around and emerged to see five Common Eland grazing close to our truck. Further antelope, in the form of Gemsbok and Springbok, appeared during breakfast a few hours later.

We arrived in Kimberley about 11:15 and toured the Big Hole. The exhibit here has been significantly expanded and the diamonds on display are impressive. Lunch at the restaurant there was enlivened by a Yellow Mongoose running around between the tables.

We arrived at Marrick about 3:30 to be greeted by a colony of South African Ground Squirrels near the entrance. Shortly after we drove around the property, seeing Bontebok, Sable, Roan, Warthog, Springbok, Gemsbok, Burchell's Zebra and Red Hartebeest. The highlight of the drive was a brief glimpse

of a Southern Aardwolf running across the track. We returned to our cottage for dinner, then went out on a night drive guided by Ben, a long-time guide at Marrick. As many reading this report will attest, a night drive at Marrick is a South African highlight. In addition to species seen during the day we found three South African Porcupines, several Steenbok, a large number of Southern Springhares and Cape Hares, a Mountain Reedbuck, a total of four Southern Aardwolves and a Black-footed Cat which remained crouched down in the grass, affording only poor views.



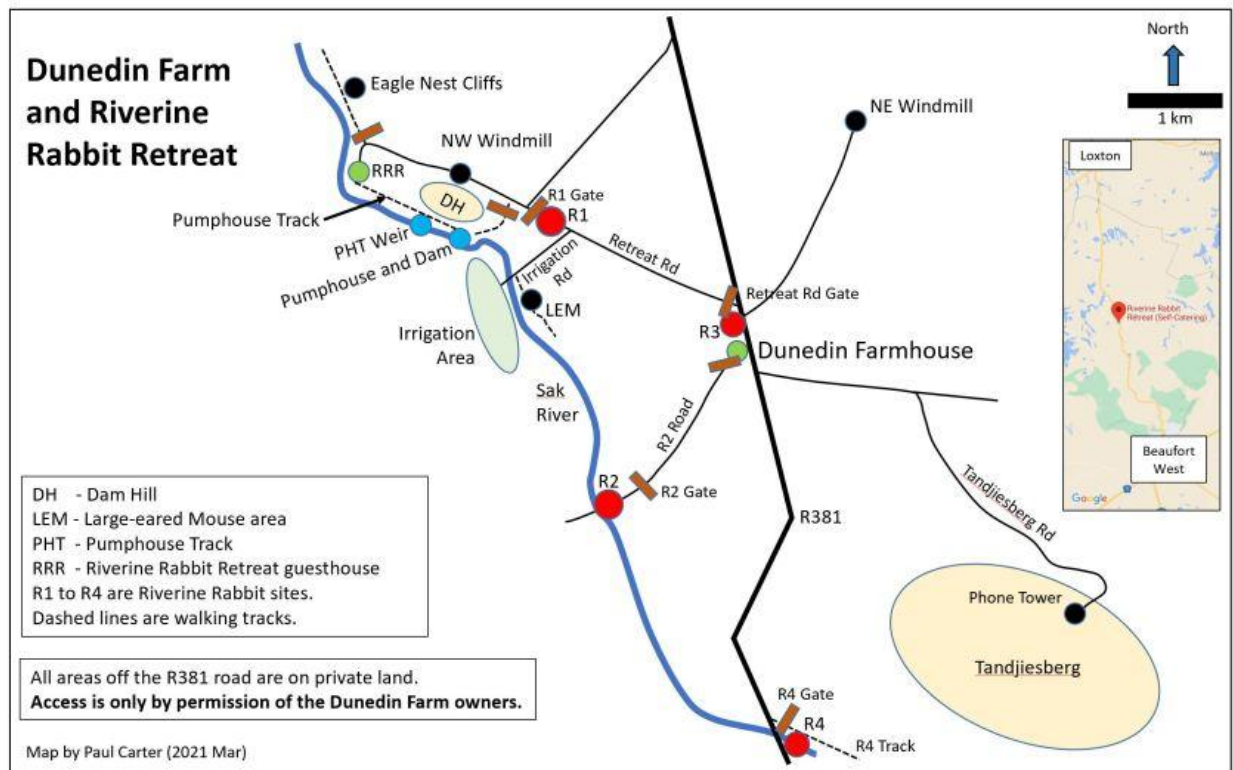
After a warm night's sleep, I took a walk around the grounds and then headed to the nearby kopje to look for sengis. I saw a Sable Antelope and likely the same Mountain Reedbuck as the previous night, but no sengis, unfortunately.

We continued along the N12 and had lunch in Britstown, a rough Karoo town with a surprisingly good restaurant on the main street. We continued on to Loxton on a paved road, then headed 55 km south on the R381, a good dirt road, passing only two vehicles on the whole drive. Arriving about 7:00 pm at Dunedin Farm, we met Marietha who accompanied us to the Riverine Rabbit Retreat Guesthouse located on their farm. The retreat was lovely and inviting after a long drive, especially given the cold and windy weather. I did a brief walk around, seeing a Karoo Bush Rat, before heading to bed.

The following morning, I noticed a light was on in Ben's room. He told me a rodent had been keeping him awake, allowing for some indoor mammal-watching. I hiked out to the nearest spot where Paul Carter had seen Riverine Rabbit (R1 on his map, which follows), but didn't see any. I walked back along the Pumphouse Trail, finding some Rock Hyraxes close to the guesthouse. We drove over to Dunedin farm

for a visit with Marietha, who kindly accompanied us to area R4 to further search for Riverine Rabbits but without success. Further along the track we did see two Greater Kudu and a Scrub Hare. Our drive back to the guesthouse was productive, revealing both Southern Aardwolf and an African Wildcat. I checked the shed by the guesthouse and found LeSueur's Wing-gland Bat and Cape Serotine, as others have reported previously. I then set several live traps within the house, one of which caught a Namaqua Rock Rat/Mouse within minutes. An after-dinner hike produced several Scrub and Cape Hares and a Feline Genet in the willow tree just behind the house. I did a lengthy walk on top of the Dam Hill but was unable to find any Hewitt's Red Rock Hares.

Paul Carter's map of Dunedin Farm and Riverine Rabbit Retreat, below:





The next morning started with a family expedition to the R2 area on Paul's Riverine Rabbit map. We spent about two hours combing the area but were unable to find any rabbits. We did manage to live trap another Namaqua Rock Rat/Mouse in the house during breakfast and release it outside. The afternoon's hike revealed a Cape Grey Mongoose climbing up between the rocks behind the Riverine Rabbit Retreat. I went over to try for better views and saw a flash of movement which turned out to be a Karoo Rock Sengi that posed nicely for photos in the evening light. Meanwhile, Marietha had kindly picked up some lamb chops in town at my request and dropped them off along with plenty of wood for a braai. I had suggested three lamb chops each, but Marietha was concerned that this might not be adequate and picked up a few extra just in case. South Africa is not a country for the faint of appetite.



After dinner, Josie and I walked the Pumphouse Track. The most surprising sighting of the night came in the form of a large male Aoudad on the crest of the escarpment on the other side of the river. We covered Dam Hill in detail from top to bottom but again were unable to find any Hewitt's Red Rock Hares. A walk around the Riverine Rabbit Retreat grounds was likewise unproductive.

We drove to Dunedin to settle the bill, seeing Rock Hyraxes and a Cape Grey Mongoose along the way. Marietha noticed our right rear tire was flat, so there was a bit of a delay while that was changed. The road south from Dunedin runs through Karoo National Park where we saw two Klipspringers on an escarpment beside the road, followed by Black Wildebeest and Common Eland on a flatter area. We arrived in Beaufort West about noon, and had the punctured tire repaired for the princely sum of 75 rand while drinking complementary coffees at the repair shop. After lunch at Steers and a brief grocery-

shopping expedition, we drove through the scenic defile of Meiringspoort in the Swartberg Range. We stopped to admire some impressive waterfalls but were feeling pressed for time and certainly didn't give the stunning area the attention it deserved. Mammal sightings were restricted to Vervet Monkeys and Chacma Baboons. We continued through George to Wilderness, the least accurately named town in South Africa. The first camping spot we tried turned out to be an upscale tented safari camp, while the second, Island Lake Campground, closed at 7:00 pm. Having arrived nine minutes later, we were denied entry, despite my protestations to the person on the intercom that we would set up camp quietly and fluff our own pillows. We ended up in the Ebb and Flow campground at Wilderness National Park which was a lovely open area dotted with Bushbuck. An after-dinner walk revealed no new species and we had a relatively early night, enjoying the warm temperatures after experiencing frosty nights in the Karoo.



Grass was moving beside the mole rat burrows near our campsite but we were unable to get views of the actual animals, despite them being clearly just below the surface. We hiked the Kingfisher Trail in to some beautiful waterfalls, seeing Vervet Monkeys and Knyssna Touracos along the way. After stopping for lunch in Knyssna we continued on to a campground near Jeffreys Bay, which turned out to be down a road so rutted and empty of vehicles after dark that we kept wondering if GPS was leading us astray. The campground was nice and spacious and we prepared a braai, which took about two hours to complete due to the dampness of the wood.

We were back on the N2 East the next morning and saw a Mountain Zebra in a reserve beside the road, amongst other animals. After lunch in Grahamstown, we arrived in Cintsa Bay about 4:30 pm and headed for Buccaneers. Tracey and I had stayed at Buccaneers back in 1999 and were delighted to find it was still owned by the same folks and had resisted the passage of time more effectively than most places. There were a few new buildings, but the stunning beach in front looked the same as on our last visit. Free welcome drinks and delicious pizzas were the icing on the cake.

We spent the next morning on the beach, then had a discussion about travel options. As the majority vote was for seeing more wildlife, we decided to drive to Pilanesberg National Park, as the parks in Natal were too far for the time we had remaining. We departed about 2:00 pm, stopped in Aliwal North for KFC and made it to Bloemfontein about 10:00 pm. The four bed room I had booked at Eeufees Guesthouse via Booking.com was apparently not available so we ended up crashing on two large beds, too tired to care.

I dropped Tracey and the kids at the mall while I went to Supa Tyre as another tire on the vehicle had become soft. The cause turned out to be another nail. After picking up the family and inspecting the impressive armaments in the mall gun store we headed north, arriving at Joezebel Guesthouse in Mogwase about 6:00 pm. Joezebel Guesthouse was lovely, and impressed me even more by dropping off packed breakfasts for the following morning just before we went to bed so that we could leave early.

The guesthouse turned out to be a nine-minute drive from Manyane Gate, so we arrived before the administrative office opened at 6:30 am. Admission was efficient and we were soon on our way. Although Pilanesberg was previously farmed, prior to a massive game-stocking campaign, it feels surprisingly wild and was much nicer than I was expecting. The only new species for the trip was Tsessebe, but we saw seven or eight White Rhinos as well as all of the usual suspects. The drive back through the park was slower than expected, but we managed to be at the gate about 10 minutes before it closed. We stayed at Joezebel Guesthouse for a second night, then headed back to Kempton Park the next morning. After successfully navigating far more remote places, I managed to get lost on the way back to the Britz rental location, but eventually found it with time to spare. We dropped off the vehicle and headed to the airport for uneventful flights home.

Despite the often-negative newspaper headlines about South Africa, we found it a more pleasant country than we did our last time there in 1998 and 1999. We were able to converse with people across the racial divide far more often and easily than on previous visits and enjoyed our trip immensely. The fact that Josie only once said that perhaps we were having too much quality family togetherness time says it all. I can't wait to return.

Given that South Africa is well-represented on trip reports on mammal-watching.com, I have kept this report fairly brief. If anyone has further questions or comments, please feel free to e-mail me at

ibtson@yahoo.com. Special thanks to Ben at Marrick Safaris, Marietha at Dunedin Farm and Paul for his detailed map and notes regarding Dunedin.

Ian Thompson

Victoria, B.C.



List of mammal species seen:

1. Rock Hyrax – *Procavia capensis*
2. African Savanna Elephant – *Loxodonta africana*
3. Karoo Rock Sengi – *Elephantulus pilicaudus*
4. Chacma Baboon – *Papio ursinus*
5. Vervet Monkey – *Chlorocebus pygerythrus*
6. Southern Lesser/Mohol Galago – *Galago moholi*
7. Southern African Springhare – *Pedetes capensis*
8. South African/Cape Porcupine – *Hystrix africaeaustralis*
9. South African Ground Squirrel – *Xerus inauris*
10. Tree/Smith's Bush Squirrel – *Paraxerus cepapi*
11. Karoo Bush Rat – *Otomys unisulcatus*
12. Namaqua Rock Rat/Mouse – *Micaelamys namaquensis*
13. Cape Hare – *Lepus capensis*
14. Scrub Hare – *Lepus saxatilis*
15. Jameson's Red Rock Hare – *Pronolagus randensis*
16. Peters's/Wahlberg's Epauletted Fruit Bat – *Epomophorus crypturus/wahlbergi*
17. Yellow-bellied House Bat – *Scotophilus dingani*
18. Egyptian Slit-faced Bat – *Nycteris thebaica*
19. Sundevall's Leaf-nosed Bat – *Hipposiderus caffer*
20. LeSueur's Wing-gland Bat – *Cistugo lesueuri*
21. Cape Serotine – *Laeophotis capensis*
22. Black-footed Cat – *Felis nigripes*
23. African Wildcat – *Felis lybica*
24. Lion – *Panthera leo*
25. Leopard – *Panthera pardus*
26. Common Genet – *Genetta genetta*
27. Feline Genet – *Genetta felina*
28. Yellow Mongoose – *Cynictis penicillata*
29. Cape Grey Mongoose – *Herpestes pulverulentus*
30. Slender Mongoose – *Herpestes sanguineus*
31. Dwarf Mongoose – *Helogale parvula*
32. Banded Mongoose – *Mungos mungo*
33. Spotted Hyena – *Crocuta crocuta*
34. Southern Aardwolf – *Proteles cristatus*
35. Black-backed Jackal – *Canis mesomelas*
36. African Wild Dog – *Canis pictus*
37. Plains/Common/Burchell's Zebra – *Equus quagga*
38. Mountain Zebra – *Equus zebra*
39. White Rhinoceros – *Ceratotherium simum*
40. Common Warthog – *Phacochoerus africanus*
41. Common Hippopotamus – *Hippopotamus amphibius*
42. Southern Giraffe – *Giraffa giraffa*
43. Common Impala – *Aepyceros melampus*

44. Red Hartebeest – *Alcelaphus caama*
45. Black/White-tailed Wildebeest – *Connochaetes gnou*
46. Blue/Common/Brindled Wildebeest – *Connochaetes taurinus*
47. Blesbok/Bontebok – *Damaliscus pygargus*
48. Springbok – *Antidorcas marsupialis*
49. Klipspringer – *Oreotragus oreotragus*
50. Steenbok – *Raphicerus campestris*
51. African Buffalo- *Syncerus caffer*
52. Common Eland – *Taurotragus oryx*
53. Common Nyala – *Tragelaphus angasi*
54. Bushbuck – *Tragelaphus scriptus*
55. Greater Kudu – *Tragelaphus strepsiceros*
56. Bush Duiker – *Sylvicapra grimmia*
57. Gemsbok – *Oryx gazella*
58. Common Waterbuck – *Kobus ellipsiprymnus*
59. Mountain Reedbuck – *Redunca fulvorufula*
60. Tsessebe – *Damaliscus lunatus*
61. Roan Antelope – *Hippotragus equinus*
62. Sable Antelope – *Hippotragus niger*
63. Aoudad (introduced) – *Ammotragus lervia*