



My Big Cat Year – Visit to South Africa for **7 Wild Cat Species** – 08/01/26 to 28/01/26

As part of The Big Cat Year we made a visit to South Africa, organized together with Nature Travel Africa. It was a three week trip during which we covered several different habitats. The trip reports in Mammalwatching.com were extremely useful in defining the right area's.

We started at **Cape Town** where we visited Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden, West Coast National Park, Cape Good Hope NP, Strandfontein Sewage Works, Boulders Beach, Stony Point, Hangklip Trail, Lowry's Pass and Harold Porter Botanical Garden. From Cape Town, we flew to **Kimberly** where we spent a few days at **Marrick Safari**. After Kimberley, we flew to Johannesburg, picked up a car and drove to **Madikwe Game Reserve**, in the north close to Botswana, and had a great few days. We then drove via **Dullstroom** to **Kruger NP** and due to the recent flooding at Kruger, we had to stay at **Skukuza** (3 nights) and **Berg en Dal Camp** (2 nights). From there we drove to **Wakkerstroom** where we had an exciting time in a total different habitat. After two days we drove to back to Johannesburg and finalized the trip.



Highlights were obviously the sightings of the **Caracal**, **Lion**, **African Wild Cat**, **Leopard** and **Serval** which is described hereafter.



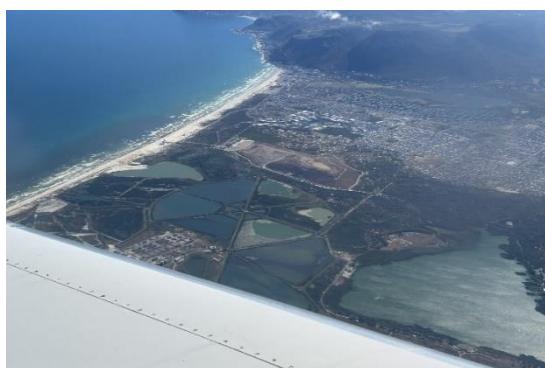


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A Caracal at Strandfontein Sewage Works in Cape Town!

Together with Nature Travel Africa, <https://naturetravelafrica.com/>, we arranged a 3 week trip, covering several good area's for the 7 wild cat species which occur in South Africa. We started on the West Kaap, in Cape Town, as it has the best habitat for a chance to see the Caracal. Especially West Coast National Park is famous for its Caracals but also Cape Good Hope National Park offers good habitat.

Together with wildlife guide Alfie Curling we spend a full day in both area's from early day light (there are no night drives allowed in those 2 National Parks) and did a lot of driving, scanning and hiking in search of this great looking cat species. The first day at West Coast National Park and the second day we spend half a day at Cape Good Hope NP. Despite all our efforts no sign of the Caracal. Not strange because this species can be extremely difficult to find. At the end of the afternoon we decided to go to Strandfontein Sewage Works, an area at the edge of Cape Town, surrounded by the sea and on all other sides by thousands and thousands of people living, as you can see on the picture taken from the plane. It offers some great birding so we had a good time. We knew the Caracal had been seen in this area so we kept our eyes and ears open. Around 18:46 we were a few hundred meters away from the exit as it closes at 19:00. We suddenly heard a group of **Helmeted Guineafowl** and their alarm calls. Alfie stopped the car and we looked through our binoculars at the Guineafowl some 150 meters away. I saw the birds were looking to the left, so I slowly scanned the environment to the left and a hundred meter further, there it was, a Caracal! I said with a subdued voice, '**A Caracal!!!**'. But Alfie was already on it and saw it as well. I tried to make a picture but I noticed that only 2 minutes before, I had clipped my seatbelt as we were moving out of the park, and my camera strap was underneath it Stressful I unclipped it as quickly as I could and managed to make a few images. Unfortunately no time to make a video as shortly afterwards it disappeared into the bush. We were both extremely happy, what a relief and what a privilege to have an encounter like this with the **Caracal!!**





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The location and timing of seeing this incredible cat shows you need to be always prepared for seeing the unexpected. It also shows the adaptive qualities of the Caracal to adapt to urban environments as the location was in the city. There is even a Urban Caracal Project, <http://www.urbancaracal.org/>, aiming to create awareness and to protect the Caracal.

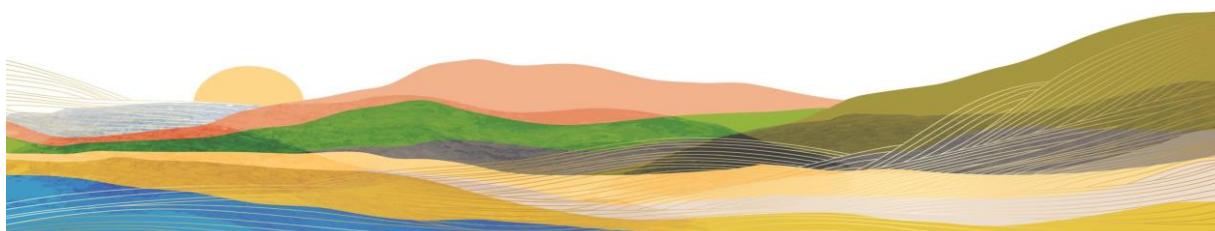
I had seen the Caracal once before, in 1997 in Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe, together with my partner Bea. It was an awesome encounter and the picture is shown in the cat gallery. All in all in the past decades, I have travelled for over 20 weeks in Africa and managed to only see it once. Now, with a lot effort, focus, dedication ... and also some luck, we managed to see it in only 2 days. Happy us!

Aardwolf and Aardvark at Marrick

After Cape Town we flew to Kimberley, in the Northern Cape, for a visit to Marrick Safaris <https://www.marricksafari.com/>, where we stayed for a few days especially searching for some very specific mammals. Marrick Safaris is a private game reserve but also breeds some wildlife species for hunting purposes as well as for replenishing stock at other game reserves and national parks. As such it breeds **African Buffalo**, **Sable Antelope** and **Springbok** (both the white and black form). It is a small farm and has accommodation for few people. We were the only ones staying there at the time. Staff is friendly and they make some great food. As I am not eating any meat during My Big Cat Year (in addition to compensating flights), they were able to create some great vegetarian food. The habitat in Marrick is like Kalahari Scrubveld, very dry but still with some vegetation.



Marrick is famous in the world of the Mammal Watchers for some very specific and mainly nocturnal animals like **Aardwolf**, **Bat-eared Fox**, **Cape Porcupine**, **Black-footed Cat**, **Striped Polecat**, **Aardvark**, **African Wild Cat**, **Cape Hare**, **Springhare**, **Brown Hyena**, etc. We had three nightdrives there from 20:00 to 23:00. Also, we had a morning drive from 05:30 to 10:00 and





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an afternoon drive from 15:00 to 19:00 hours. One full day we spend at Mokala NP from 07:00 to 15:00 hours.

I loved the area, its habitat and its wildlife and we had some great sightings. Especially, seeing an **Aardvark**, one of the most sought after species the whole of Africa, was an absolute highlight. But also seeing a total of 16 **Aardwolf** was incredible, it must be one of the best places in Africa for this nocturnal, insect eating animal. In addition we saw over **30 Bat-eared Fox**, three times we saw the **Cape Porcupine** and lots of **Black-backed Jackals**, **Cape Hare**, **Scrub Hare** and **Springhare**. During the day we observed species like the **Yellow Mongoose**, **Slender Mongoose**, **Roan Antelope**, **Sable Antelope**, **Gemsbok**, etc.. Birdlife was good with **Double-banded Courser**, **Burchell's Sandgrouse**, **Blue Cranes** and **Secretary birds**.

However ... and unfortunately ... we missed the endemic and smallest cat of the world, the **Black-footed Cat**, <https://www.catsg.org/living-species-blackfootedcat> . Marrick was the only spot for me during my Big Cat Year to observe this species. Despite the hard work by Alfie, the other guides and myself, we missed it. What a bummer, however it is nature and it can not be predicted. Also, we missed out on the **African Wild Cat**, however I was in good spirit that we would be able to see this species at some other spots. Together with Alfie and Nature Travel Africa, <https://naturetraveafrica.com/> , we worked hard in finding the species. Next is Madikwe and then to Kruger NP for lots of interesting wildlife and hopefully we will be able to observe the Lion, Cheetah, Leopard, African Wild Cat and the Serval. Quite a list and not easy as Kruger experienced its worst flooding in 50 years.

Lions and African Wild Dogs at Madikwe Game Reserve

We left Marrick where we had a great time and flew from Kimberley to Johannesburg. There a car was picked up and we drove directly to Marrick to the Mosethla camp. A nice and small eco-friendly camp with about 15 huts. No electricity, Wifi and only bush showers and bush toilets. I loved the place and the tranquility. It was run by Caroline and Monika, great people and we had some good in-depth conversations how the camp is run and how it all worked. Food was great. As well as compensating all flights, I have also set myself the challenge of eating no meat this year. No problem they, had some excellent vegetarian meals.

Madikwe is a big game reserve with a great diversity of wildlife, including all South African's Wild Cat species, except the Black-footed Cat which lives in arid and dry habitat. In 2 days, we had 4 drives in this 750 square km Game reserve with beautiful landscapes and some good wildlife.





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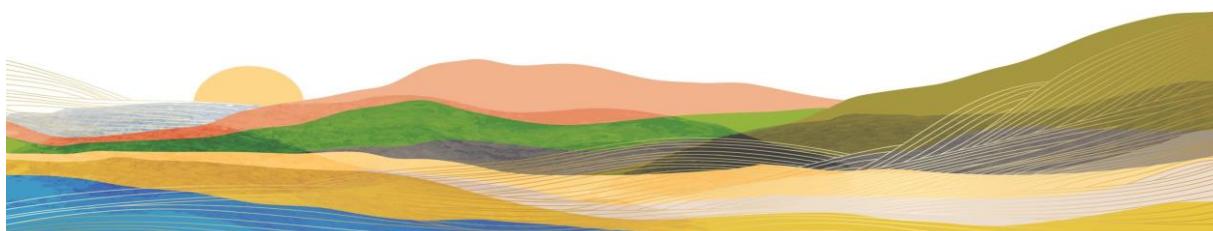
A highlight was seeing a pack of 15 **Wild Dogs** traversing a river. The elder dogs had no problem but the younger dogs did not dare to traverse. We watched the behavior for 30 minutes how they finally made it to the other side. What an encounter. The **African Wild Dog** is one of my most favorite African Mammals and I have been lucky to observe them before at Hwange NP in Zimbabwe and in Kruger NP in South Africa. As these dogs are endangered and rare, it is always a privilege to be able to see them in the wild and this particular encounter is certainly one of the highlights of the trip.

The other highlight took place during one of the morning Game drives through flat and good savanna habitat searching for **Cheetah**. As we were cruising through the savanna, we flushed around 100 Common **Buttonquails and Harlequin button quail**, small birds which I did not expect to see during the trip and which showed themselves incredibly well. We also managed to find a small tribe of **lions**, 1 male and 3 females. In excellent light, we watched this group for over half an hour. An advantage of Marrick is that there are not many Safari vehicles, ie. we were the only ones watching those **lions**.



Lions do seem to thrive well in the National- and other Provincial Parks. However, outside these parks, the lions are almost nox-existent. Even more worrying is that in some parts of Africa, the Lion is Critically Endangered. I believe in the whole of Western Africa, there are only around 200 Lions left. Luke Hunter, one of the worlds most renowned carnivore expert talked about this on his inspiring podcast at [Mammalwatching. com](https://www.mammalwatching.com/podcast/s2-e16-luke-hunter/), see <https://www.mammalwatching.com/podcast/s2-e16-luke-hunter/>

Big target for Madikwe was the **Cheetah**. Although the next destination is Kruger NP which also has a good population of **Cheetah**, it is not always easy to find it there. During two days in Madikwe, there is a good chance to spot the **Cheetah** ... however we missed it! Yes, we had three encounters with Lions but missing the **Cheetah** worried us. We jointly discussed what we should change in our approach to optimize the chances in Kruger NP and in good spirit we left Madikwe and went on our way to Kruger NP.





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Challenges and complexities at Kruger National Park and a great finish in Wakkerstroom!

Arriving at Kruger brought with it some challenges and complexities. Challenges in terms of the Wild Cats, i.e. we had only seen 2 species so far, the [Caracal](#) at Cape Town and the [Lion](#) at Madikwe. Although the Caracal was an absolute highlight, seeing only 2 species so far was below my expectations. I was enjoying very much the whole trip and the diverse habitat and wildlife but I noticed that the pressure of a Big Cat Year was really on and only having a good time and seeing lots of other nice stuff was clearly not enough. Alfie also felt the pressure and it was good to notice that we both shared the same feeling and to see that he was also so dedicated and involved with The Big Cat Year.

The complexities were there as the northeast of the country, and thus Kruger NP, were experiencing extremely heavy rains for over a week. It led to the heaviest flooding in Kruger NP for over 5 decades. Tourists were being evacuated and the park was closed. We arrived there at the last day of the rain and it meant that only a few tar roads were open, as were a few camps. We therefore had to reorganize the whole Kruger bit of the trip as some areas and Camps we wanted to go to, were simply not possible as they were closed off.

Additionally and unfortunately, all gravel roads were closed during our whole stay at Kruger, limiting ourselves badly. It meant that we stayed at Skukuza for 3 nights, followed by Berg en Dal for 2 nights. Only travelling the tar roads and not being able to visit some gravel routes which were very good for Cheetah. Also Satara Camp was closed and we originally planned to stay there for a few nights as it is very good for especially African Wild Cat and Cheetah. Two species very high on our list. The other one being the Leopard. We were quite confident that even with the limited maneuvering on tar roads, we should be able to get the Leopard. Although Serval can be seen at Kruger, it is very difficult and we expected that our chances would be much higher at Wakkerstroom, the latest part of the trip. There was however one advantage of all the flooding and the closure of the Park, there were very few cars on the tar roads which made the whole experience much and much better. Also, we decided to do many more night drives as originally planned to maximize our chances, that turned out to be an excellent call!

Upon arrival on Kruger through Hazyview Gate, we made our way towards Skukuza. We had some nice sightings already and arrived around 18:00 hours at Skukuza, where we checked in and had some food. In time for the first nightdrive, which started at 20:00 and typically finishes around 22:00 hours. After 15 minutes we ran into a group of [lions](#) which were resting on the middle of the tar road. Typical behavior and seen more often, as those roads tend to





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keep their warmth. It was a nice sighting but obviously not what we hoped for. We continued our drive. Alfie was spotlighting on the left side of the truck and I did the same on the right side. Some 20 minutes later, I spotted an animal on the right side of the road, in the dark, making its way into the bush. It went so quick but it made the impression to me as being one of the small cats. As the Skukuza driver/Safari Guide missed it, I firmly said 'Stop', move backwards, there is something out there'. From my voice and behavior, Alfie immediately



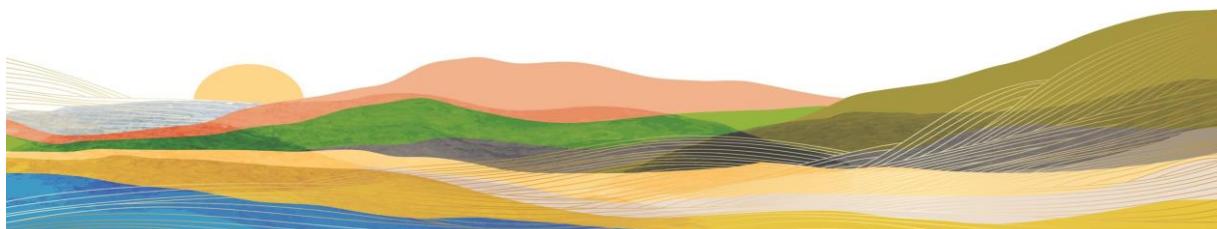
knew this was something serious and could be a cat species. I shined my spotlight into the bush, a few meters from the road, and there it was, an [African Wild Cat](#)!! The Skukuza Safari Guide asked what is that upon which I replied 'An [African Wild Cat](#)'. He was thrilled to see it and noted that they rarely see it at Skukuza. The cat seemed relaxed and did not seem to bother the light and the attention. All people in the truck were excited

and happy to see this feline. I was very delighted and so was Alfie, we high fived, something we started doing since our first cat, the Caracal, of the trip. What a relief to see this beautiful cat at a place where it is rarely seen.

My spotting skills seem to improve day by day. Learned a lot last year in West-Papua and Bolivia and taking a lot of night walks and drives really paid off. During the following morning drives (first 45 minutes, from 04:30 to 05:15) in the dark and the additional four nightdrives, we found some amazing wildlife; [African Wild Dogs](#) and [Spotted Hyena's](#) each resting next to each other on two sides of the road, [White-tailed Mongoose](#), [Cape Porcupine](#), [Large Spotted Genet](#), [Small Spotted Genet](#), [Common Duiker](#), etc..



The [African Wild Cat](#) was our 3rd species of Wild Cat in South Africa and the next morning we got our 4th species, the [Leopard](#). A typical Kruger Sighting as we already heard from one of the guides that a Leopard was resting in one of the trees. While driving the tar road we came upon a group of cars and yes, there it was, a [Leopard](#) far away in a tree. Not a great sighting but we





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got it and high fives followed. As few days later, we luckily had our second **Leopard**, close to Berg en Dal Camp. Also resting in a tree, but with almost no cars and we had some great views of its behavior. Happy with that one!

That left us with the **Cheetah**, our main target. A sometimes tricky species to get in Kruger, as there are not that many. Officially the tally is around 350, but I overheard one of the guides saying there may only be 100. That's not much, especially in a National Park, the size half of the Netherlands. I noticed that going in into Kruger, Alfie was already a bit concerned about this one. And he was right, despite all the hard work and energy we spend into searching it. We made long days, from 04:30 out there until 11:00, a late breakfast and some rest and work, and then out there again from 15:30 until 18:30. Diner and some rest and emails and on again on the nightdrive from 20:00 to 22:00 hours. We still missed it and could not find it. Although we had some great sightings of other wildlife, it was a big miss. Especially, as later on in the year I did not make any plan to return to Africa with regard to a relatively easy species as the **Cheetah**.

However, missing the Cheetah proves again that nature is unpredictable with all its surprises. Also, an easy species in one country can be not easy at all in another country, as is the case with the **Cheetah**. And that's totally oke with me, it excites me enormously searching for all this great wildlife, knowing it is out there, but not knowing on beforehand if we will manage to see it. Wildlife and Nature lovers in general and Mammal and Birdwatchers specifically, undoubtedly recognize this feeling and thrill, For others, it may be difficult to comprehend and understand that passion for wildlife. And that's fine with me, we are all humans but our thrills and excitement may be totally different. Let's stop this little bit of the mental side of what I am doing and back to the quest.

Overall and taking into account the difficult circumstances in Kruger NP, I was very pleased with this impressive National Park, its wildlife in general and the cat sightings in specific.

Out of Kruger we made our way to Wakkerstroom, in Mpumalanga Province. Mountain and highland Grasslands in a hilly landscape. An area, high on the list of birdwatchers as it has some specific birds like several Bustard species and the endangered **Southern Bald Ibis**. However, we were there for the **Serval**, as the habitat is very good for this beautiful feline. We stayed at Forrelenhof, <https://www.forelenhof.co.za/>, a bed and breakfast at a farm where regularly a resident female Serval has been seen. It was a great place with some excellent (also vegetarian) food and a very nice owner Ronel who took great care of us. The





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landscape in front of our accommodation was just mind-blowing and the whole setting was extremely peaceful.

However, I noticed that I just felt restless as 4 wild cat species was not enough and we should really try to this this **Serval**. Alfie noticed this and brought some peace in my mind by offering to go out every night and early morning spotlighting for this elusive cat. What a great guide he is. We arrived just before dinner and had a great chat with a birdwatching group, mainly Americans, of 8 people. During dinner we exchanged our sightings but already quickly the talk was about the Big Cat Year, its reasons behind it, etc.. Nice to notice that they were heavily interested in what I was doing. At times I am in doubt about the whole thing and going for this challenge, I'm 58 years, have a great and loving partner at home, three kids I deeply love and of which I am very proud off, and many friends and relatives which I truly value. So why doing this challenge and spend all this time and energy into the quest. Feeling the enthusiasm and aspiration of those birdwatching group confirmed for me again that I am doing the right thing and I should pursue. I have experienced it already a few times this year and it really helps with the uncertainties and doubts I do have sometimes. So, thanks birdwatchers for your support!! Also helpful in pursuing the quest is seeing one of those incredible wild cat species in the wild. So after dinner, Alfie and I went again on our nightly spotlighting. Leaving the bird group behind in amazement.

On our way out from the farm, we spotted two spectacled owls and a very nicely showing barn owl. 10 minutes out, we spotted a cat. Our adrenaline was flowing!! Until we realized is was a housecat ... what a bummer. It happened again and again, so we saw 3 house cats all bringing that bit of excitement, followed but a big drop and disappointment. We continued. Alfie drove and spotlighted the right side of the car. I did the same with the left side and also sometimes I used the Thermal. We continued for another 15 minutes. But then Alfie said, 'I



am on to something. I saw two eyes, could be a cat'. I noticed the way he spoke about it, this was serious. He drove a meter back, spotlighted again and used his binoculars and then he said it, 'That's it, a **Serval**' !!!! Stupid enough, the only part of the trip when I forgot to take my binoculars as I was so busy with the torch and the thermal was on this

nightdrive. So Alfie gave me his binoculars and there is was indeed, a **Serval**!! What a sighting. I could





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make some video footage and although the footage is not very good and the Serval was about 40 to 50 meters away in long grass, it is clearly shown in the video. We were both so happy and high fives followed!! What a great find on our first night in Wakkerstroom and a great ending of the trip!

During the trip we saw 5 cat species; **Caracal**, **Lion (15 sightings)**, **Leopard (2 sightings)**, **African Wild Cat (4 sightings but very likely the same cat)**, and **Serval**. In total we observed over **65 mammals** and close to **420 birds species**. Also we have seen more than 15 interesting reptiles as the Cape Cobra, Mozambique Spitting Cobra, Boomslang, several types of tortoises and lizards and skinks. We have covered almost all provinces (except two) and experienced many different habitats and met some great people.

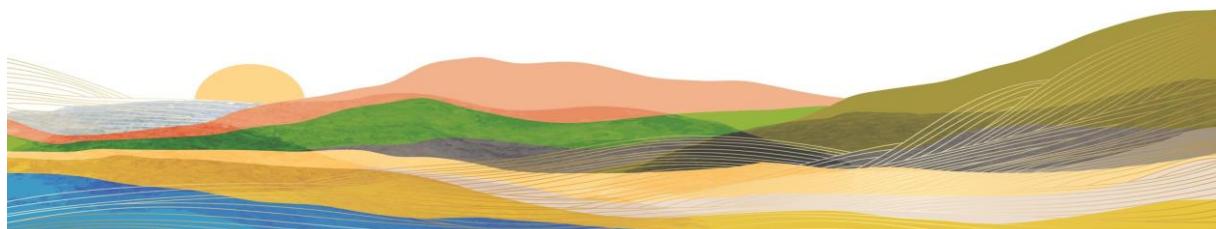
Many, many thanks to Alfie Curling who did a great job and is a super nice guy to travel with. Also thanks to Nature Travel Africa, <https://naturetravelafrica.com/>, for the organization and the good care.

As you probably know, the Big Cat Year is not only about sightings of Wild Cats. It is also about caring for Nature and its Wildlife. We aim to support one project/organization in each country visited. As such, we have made a Big Cat Year donation, <https://mybigcatyear.com/projects>, towards Panthera South Africa for the protection of the wild cat species and its habitat. Panthera is an organization dedicated to the conservation of the Wild Cat species in the world. Read more about Panthera South Africa: <https://panthera.org/panthera-south-africa>

Would you like to contribute to supporting these important projects and/or organizations in the world with regard to conservation and protection of nature and wildlife, please have a look at the funding page, <https://mybigcatyear.com/funding>. All help is appreciated! Big and small, it all counts. You can already help by buying the projects a coffee, <https://buymeacoffee.com/mybigcatyear>

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All images can be seen on the Gallery page of [Wild Cat Big Year](#)





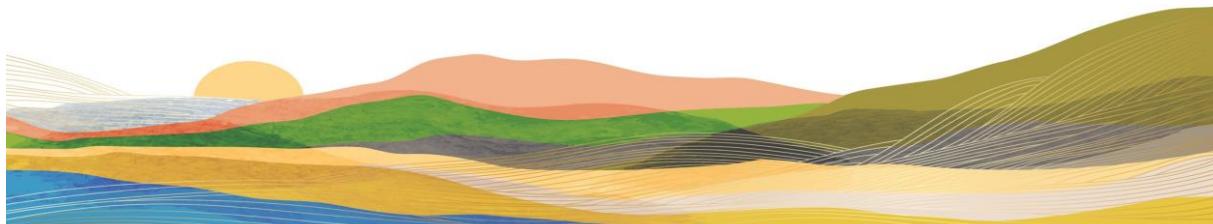
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Most memorable experiences of the whole trip;

- **Caracal** Sighting in Sewage Works Strandfontein in Cape Town with the alarm calls of the Helmeted Guineafowl
- During one of the last evenings of the trip, we had a **Serval** at Wakkerstroom
- Unfortunately, we missed the Black-footed cat at Marrick, but we had two great observations of **Aardvark** and 16 **Aardwolf** in Marrick Safari, Kimberley
- A 45 min game drive at the 20th from 04:30 tot 05:15 delivered, **Hippo, African Wild Dog** resting next to **Spotted Hyeana's, White Tailed Mongoose, Natal Red Duiker, Common Bushbuck, Hippo, Waterbuck, Cape Porcupine**, later in the morning at the same Game Drive we had a **Leopard**
- The morning Game Drive in Madikwe towards the north of the park, bordering Botswana, we had the savanna full with **Common Buttonquails** and **Harlequin Quail**. In addition, we had a great sighting and observation in great light of 3 **rhino** (male, female and young) and a small pride of 4 **lions** (male and three females)
- One of the morning Game Drives in Madikwe we had a pack of 15 **African Wild Dogs** traversing a river and we watched the behavior of the young which initially did not dare to cross the river
- First Night drive in Skukuza, Kruger NP, I spotted an **African Wild Cat!** Rare in Skukuza.
- Early morning at dark, two **White Rhino's** on the road in Kruger NP, rare nowadays
- Group of 40 **Common Eland** in Cape Horn NP going and crossing the beaches
- **Cape Porcupine** at Cape Good Hope NP, running the road was a fun sight!
- We had a group of 4 **Side-striped Hyeana's**, a lifer for me.
- Watching mating **Lions** at Berg en Dal, Kruger NP, was a special.
- A nice **Leopard** in a tree, watching its behavior for over 30 minutes.

Top Birds

- **Blue Cranes** at Marrick
- **Black Harrier** at West Coast NP
- **Common Button Quail** and **Harlequin Quail** at Madikwe
- **Broad-billed Roller** at Skukuza, Kruger NP
- **Cape Rockjumper** at Lowry's Pass, Cape Town
- **Southern Bald Ibis** at Wakkerstroom





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Name	West Coast NP	Cape Good Hope NP	Strandfontein Sewage Works	Mokala NP	Marrick Safari	Madikwe Game Reserve	Kruger NP - Skukuza	Kruger NP - Bergen Dal	Wakkerstroom
Common Rock Hyrax	v								
African Elephant				v		v	v	v	
Aardvark					v				
Caracal			v						
African Wildcat						v			
Serval								v	
Lion					v	v	v		
Leopard						v	v		
South African Small-spotted Genet							v		
South African Large-spotted Genet							v		
Spotted Hyena						v	v	v	
Aardwolf				v					
Yellow Mongoose				v				v	
Common Dwarf Mongoose						v	v		
Cape Grey Mongoose	v	v							
Slender Mongoose				v					
White-tailed Mongoose						v	v		
Banded Mongoose					v				
Meerkat					v			v	
Side-striped Jackal							v		
Black-backed Jackal			v	v			v		
African Wild Dog						v	v	v	
Bat-eared Fox				v					
South African Fur Seal	v								
Plains Zebra			v	v	v	v	v		
Mountain Zebra	v								
White Rhinoceros			v		v		v		
Common Warthog			v	v	v		v	v	
Southern Giraffe	v		v		v	v	v		
Impala			v		v	v	v	v	
Hartebeest			v	v	v		v		
Springbok			v						
Natal Red Duiker						v			
Black Wildebeest				v					
Common Wildebeest			v		v	v	v		
Topi		v							
Blesbok							v		
Roan Antelope			v	v					
Sable Antelope			v	v					
Waterbuck						v	v		
Klipspringer						v			
Gemsbok			v	v					
Steenbok	v		v	v	v	v		v	
Mountain Reedbuck								v	
Common Duiker			v	v			v		
African Buffalo			v		v	v	v	v	
Nyala				v					
Common Eland	v	v	v						
Bushbuck						v	v		
Greater Kudu				v	v	v	v	v	
Hippopotamus						v	v	v	
Wahlberg's Epauletted Fruit Bat						v			
Southern Lesser Galago							v		
Vervet Monkey			v			v	v	v	
Chacma Baboon	v		v		v	v	v		
Cape Hare				v					
Cape Scrub Hare				v			v		
Cape Porcupine	v			v			v	v	
Red Bush Squirrel					v	v	v		
South African Ground Squirrel			v	v					
South African Spring-hare			v						
Vlei Rat								v	
Bush Vlei Rat	v								
Four-striped Grass Mouse	v								
Bonte Bok	v	v	v	v					
Red Lechwe								v	

