

## **Namibia Mammal Safari Trip Report**

### **Windhoek – Okonjima**

After meeting all the guests at the lodge, we left Windhoek and headed north toward Okonjima, home of the AfriCat Foundation. A quick lunch and coffee stop in the small town of Okahandja turned into a bit of a strategy session—the four days ahead of us were packed with leopard tracking, pangolin tracking, night drives, and game drives. The thunderclouds were building, though, and it seemed that the weather might become a deciding factor in the days ahead.

We rolled into the lodge mid-afternoon, dropped our bags, and made a beeline for the waterhole in front of the restaurant. It didn't take long before the regulars showed up—Springbok, Common Duiker, Steenbok, Warthog, Plains Zebra, and Impala, ticking things off nicely before sunset.

As the light softened and the thunderclouds unloaded their payload, we sat down for dinner. We then layered up and climbed onto the vehicle for our first proper outing: a night drive. Porcupine, Brown Hyena, Black-backed Jackal, and Scrub Hare were all added to the list. We got back to the lodge dry, and climbing into bed while listening to the jackals is always a great way to end the day.

Up and at it the following morning, we all gathered at the lodge for a quick coffee and a muffin for those who were hungry. Soon it was time to jump back into the vehicle and head out—leopard tracking would fill our morning.

This activity always has an air of excitement surrounding it, but before that even kicks in, I need a coffee.

Okonjima has a number of collared leopards used for research, which gives you a genuine shot at finding them—but let's not kid ourselves, this is still Africa. Not a zoo, not even close. We picked up a signal from a male, followed it for what seemed like ages, and got absolutely outplayed. He stayed one step ahead the entire time. Frustrating? Sure. Impressive? Even more so.

We didn't go home empty-handed though—Black-backed Jackal, Oryx, Hartmann's Mountain Zebra, Greater Kudu, Blue Wildebeest, Springbok, Common Impala, and Common Duiker made for a solid supporting cast.



It was back to the lodge for breakfast and some free time.

We met up again in the late afternoon to spend some time with the locals that called the waterhole in front of the lodge restaurant home. Sundowner drinks were enjoyed while watching Giraffe, Springbok, Warthog, Black-backed Jackal, and Common Duiker quench their thirst.



After a delicious dinner, we headed out into the night in search of Africa's most illegally trafficked mammal: the Pangolin.

With the sky filled with lightning, we began our sojourn through the reserve. We soon met up with the APU (Anti-Poaching Unit), which is responsible for the tracking and research of these remarkable creatures. The weather was behaving itself—or at least we

were relatively dry. We hopped off the vehicle, were handed head torches, and after a short walk through the bush in the dark, there he was: a Pangolin.

I am privileged enough to have seen a number of these strange, magical creatures in my life, but they still stop me in my tracks every time.

Again, the weather gods smiled on us and we managed to dodge the rain on the way back to the lodge. With Pangolin now ticked off the list, the day was truly done and dusted. Time for a well-deserved sleep.

Déjà vu all over again—and another shot at leopard tracking.

Up before sunrise, coffee in hand and muffin in the other, we were still talking about the night before as we headed back out onto the reserve.

This time we were rewarded with an incredible Leopard sighting. A young male was patrolling the boundary of his newly acquired territory. We watched in awe as he scent-marked, climbed trees, fell out of one of the trees, attempted to catch sandgrouse, and then finished with a majestic stretch and yawn less than 30 metres from us. A photographer's delight.



The heat over lunch and the afternoon did what it always does—slowed everything down, including us. A bit of downtime was non-negotiable before dinner and then another night drive.

Later, we regrouped on the lodge deck overlooking the waterhole. Springbok with calves, Warthog families, Giraffe, and Banded Mongoose all came down for a drink.

The night drive itself was challenging. Wind and a full moon are not exactly ideal conditions, but we still managed Brown Hyena, Bat-eared Fox, Springhare, and Black-backed Jackal. Not record-breaking, but considering the conditions, we'll call that a win.

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### **Waterberg Plateau National Park**

Our next stop was a relatively short drive from Okonjima as we headed slightly north into Waterberg Plateau National Park.

Here we would be ditching the vehicle for the next 24 hours and exploring the area on foot.

An afternoon walk to the top of the plateau was thoroughly enjoyed by everyone, although the local Black Mongoose clan managed to evade us.

After dinner, we headed out on a night walk around the property. Scrub Hare, Small-spotted Genet, Lesser Galago, and Acacia Tree Rat were added to our already impressive list of nocturnal creatures.

A personal highlight for me was finding a very specific species of butterfly here: Brain's Charaxes. What can I say? I like butterflies.

From here it was time to head even further north.

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### **Roy's Rest Camp**

Time to move on. Next stop: Roy's Rest Camp, a rustic little place with plenty of character—and, more importantly, Southern Lesser Galagos on the target list.

We arrived late in the afternoon and were greeted by a Damara Dik-dik, the smallest antelope in Namibia. Not exactly subtle, but a very welcome introduction.

The galagos kept us waiting (Africa time, obviously), but eventually showed up and gave us a proper show.

After dinner, we spent time at the waterhole hide. Kudu, Oryx, Impala, and Red Hartebeest topped off with a brief visit from an African Wildcat made the evening worthwhile.

We headed off to bed as tomorrow would be a long drive north into the Zambezi Region of Namibia.

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## **Mahangu / Bwabwata Area**

Up early and prepared for a travel day, we pushed north into the Zambezi Region—our first proper Big Five territory of the trip.

We would spend the next few days exploring the parks of the area.

Bwabwata Buffalo Core Area was the first region we explored. Before sunrise, we were already in the vehicle and on our way.

There had been a lot of rainfall in the area over the preceding weeks, and the bush was incredibly thick. This did not prove to be a problem, however, as we were lucky enough to come across a pride of Lions with cubs that were only around 12 weeks old.

Lion cubs first thing in the morning are incredibly active, and we were treated to all their antics while mum supervised. An elephant roadblock on the way out of the park was an added bonus.

After nearly a full day in the Bwabwata Buffalo Core Area, we had ticked off Lion, Elephant, Sable Antelope, Red Lechwe, Greater Kudu, and Bushbuck.



Mahangu didn't disappoint either. Morning drives produced Elephant, Buffalo, Red Lechwe, Sable, Kudu, and more Buffalo. The list kept building. It is no wonder this remains one of my favourite places to visit in Namibia.

The afternoon boat trips along the Kavango River gave us a different perspective. Large pods of Hippopotamus, Nile Crocodile, and Water Monitor Lizard provided excellent viewing.



Night walks around the lodge grounds added Small-spotted Genet and Lesser Galago once again—familiar faces, but no complaints.

On our final breakfast boat cruise, the highlight wasn't one of the usual suspects—it was a Cape Clawless Otter. Signs of these secretive creatures are often seen, but actually seeing one is a completely different story. High fives all round!

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### **Etosha National Park – East to West**

Back south we went, returning to Etosha National Park via Von Lindequist Gate.

We were first in the queue to enter the park and within minutes had our first sighting of Black-faced Impala—an endangered, near-endemic species that many visitors drive straight past but is well worth stopping for.



The morning picked up quickly when we encountered two male Lions feeding on a Zebra kill just 20 metres from the road. I'm talking close enough to hear the crunching of cartilage as they fed.



As we moved west toward Halali, we enjoyed sightings of Giraffe, Blue Wildebeest, Springbok, Black-faced Impala, Warthog, Spotted Hyena, Banded Mongoose, Ground Squirrel, and Cheetah.



Halali's waterhole provided a steady afternoon of wildlife viewing, followed by a productive night drive. Black Rhino, African Wildcat, Porcupine, and more Lesser Galagos all made appearances.

The following morning it was time to continue west towards Okaukuejo, our final destination within Namibia's flagship national park.



Between the game drives and the famous waterhole, we added further sightings of Lion and Cheetah, along with Elephant, Black-backed Jackal, Black Rhino, Yellow Mongoose, Ground Squirrel, Giraffe, Oryx, Red Hartebeest, Blue Wildebeest, Plains Zebra, Springbok, and Black-faced Impala.

Etosha had, as always, delivered the goods.



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## Brandberg – Erongo

From Etosha we pushed into the harsher terrain around Brandberg. Progress was slower, but the rewards were worth it.

The Meerkats eventually showed themselves after some patience, while the elusive Damaraland Ground Squirrel took even longer. Not quickly and not easily, but we managed to tick off both of these sought-after mammal species.



A night drive from the lodge produced Black-backed Jackal, Yellow Mongoose, Scrub Hare, Springhare, Brush-tailed Gerbil, and Jameson's Rock Rabbit.

Our final destination was the Erongo Mountains. This wrapped things up inland with sightings of Bushveld Sengi, Dassie Rat, Rock Hyrax, and finally Black Mongoose.



The local troop of Chacma Baboons made their presence known with the warning barks of the dominant male and the shrieks and screeches of the younger members of the troop.

A more relaxed pace, but still full of memorable moments.



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## Wrap-Up

Over the course of the trip, we recorded just over **55 mammal species**, with a significant number being lifers for the guests.

Highlights included:

- Pangolin tracking at Okonjima
- An exceptional Leopard sighting
- Lion cubs in Bwabwata
- Cape Clawless Otter on the Kavango River
- Black Rhino in Etosha
- Black Mongoose in the Erongo Mountains

Not everything went to plan—but that's exactly why it worked.

After all, this is Africa.

We are already looking ahead to the next Namibia Mammal Safari, and if this trip was anything to go by, it promises to be another unforgettable adventure.

