

Here is a new report about a trip I managed to organize and finally do in Namibia after two cancellations and postponements due to the COVID situation. This was a family trip with a party of 5 persons that we did between Christmas and New Year's day 2021/2022. The trip was organized which a local French agency called Tourmaline Safaris. Based on an itinerary I gave them taking into account past reports about bird and mammal watching in Namibia, they took care of the car rental and all the park/lodge/camp reservations. It was the second time I used their service and as usual they were very helpful in proposing accommodation options and booking them for me. They also proved to be very useful and efficient to rebook and adjust the itinerary after each cancellation based on the camp/lodge availability and considering those that stayed closed or even went bankrupt because of the sanitary crisis. With the discovery of the omicron variant a few weeks before our departure we were not sure until the last day that we could actually leave due to all the new rules our French government kept on changing week after week for foreign travels. I won't comment about the overall European strategy against covid and variant spreads but talking with some locals, I think South Africa learned the lesson and won't declare new variants for the next decades. They will let other countries do this and I don't blame them...

Enough covid and let's talk now about Namibia. It was the second time we visited this beautiful country. The first time my wife and I came mostly to discover the gorgeous landscapes in the country and the various tribes who inhabit there. This time we mostly focused on wildlife watching with some key targets of bird and mammal species we wanted to see. Since we only had 14 days, we had to make some tough choices and our itinerary focused on the north of Windhoek combining locations good for mammals but also for birds. We also choosed to stay in comfortable lodges for our other family members who are not hardcore mammal watchers. Finding a good balance for everybody was a challenge ☺

We visited Okonjima (2 nights) – Etosha (6 nights: 1 in Namutoni, 3 in Halali and 2 in Okaukuejo) – Waterberg (1 night) – Erindi (2 nights) – Spitzkoppe (1 night) and Erongo (1 night). In Etosha and Waterberg, we stayed at the NWR camps. From what I could remember from our first trip 10 years ago, I found the camps were upgraded with decent chalets in terms of comfort and always very clean, and the food served at the restaurant was always ok. The Okonjima and Erindi private reserves were both on the luxury side with great rooms, restaurant and service. We stayed at the lovely Spitzkoppen lodge, a fantastic place with such a scenic surrounding. In the Erongo mountains, we stayed at the Ai-Aiba lodge since the Erongo Mountain lodge is now definitely closed. Ai-Aiba was also a great lodge but for bird lovers mostly. Since we had to take covid tests before leaving the country, we did an extra and unplanned stop in Swakopmund that was closer to our lodges compared to Windhoek. This was actually a very good choice since we could visit the city, enjoy the ocean view and taste local oysters. We then had less the feeling to loose a day because of the covid tests versus driving for hours for a return trip to Windhoek.

Regarding the weather, December/January is supposed to be the hot and rainy season and we knew it was not the best time in the year for mammal watching. We indeed had some rain but just on 2 days and a few hours per day. The rest of trip was dry with clear blue sky and stunning starry nights! On the other hand, it was very hot most of our trip, especially in Etosha. I was actually amazed how hot it could be: we reached around 40°C for several days! Temperatures went significantly cooler the second half of our trip when we visited Erindi and the Spitzkoppe/Erongo area.

As many of you know, Namibia is quite empty to say the least ☺ You can drive hours without seeing any other car, which is so relaxing while driving but also a bit scary when you think about it in case you have a car problem. These days due to covid, the parks and lodges were even more empty, which was great for us tourists since we could enjoy lodges and parks almost for our own (always very pleasant to see big cats without any other people around you!) but so sad for the local people and tourism business that is clearly suffering from having so few foreign visitors.

A few words about each place we visited

**Okonjima:** when preparing this trip to Namibia, I read mixed reports about this reserve so I did not really know what to expect when we arrived there. To make a long story short, I really loved the place: the lodge, the restaurant/food, the fauna, the landscape, the staff and guide, everything was great there! I was indeed quite impressed by how rich the fauna was in the reserve. Of course, we can always blame that leopards have collars (not all of them though) and that some species are introduced (like sable antelopes or waterbuck) but there are also plenty of native birds and mammals that are fully wild to enjoy. Everybody can make its own judgement and decide to visit or not. You cannot do any self-drive in Okonjima so you have to book their game drives. The guide who was assigned to us was good and was not counting his time, which I really appreciated. We could organize with him all of our drives (day and night) based on our expectations and he really strived to please us. We saw several cool stuff like brown hyena (only one though but in full daylight), leopards (all with collars to be honest), bushveld sengi, bat-eared fox, genet, mountain zebras, white rhinos and above all, our first ground pangolin during a night drive!! What a cool animal to watch.

**Etosha:** I don't think we need to present anymore in detail this world class national park. During our first trip done 10 years ago in August I was impressed by its size and rich wildlife, especially around the waterholes. After this trip in December, my final impression was mixed. I guess the weather played a big role. Indeed, due to the high temperatures combined with some rain that created many small pools throughout the park, most of the usual waterholes were quiet throughout the day and some areas of the park were just totally empty! During our visit only the Andoni, Goas and Gemsbokvlakte waterholes were interesting as well as those near the Halali and Okaukuejo camps at night. The number of animals was definitely low but they were there for sure and with a good diversity. We just had to work harder and longer to find them. I think we were actually spoiled because in addition to the usual ungulates (springboks, Burchell's zebra, gemsbok, steenbok, black-faced impalas etc..) we could observe very well 2 cheetahs, 1 leopard (on our own, yeah!), several lions including a mating couple, 1 honey badger, 1 Cape fox (a lifer for us!), different species of mongooses including the cute yellow mongoose and plenty of rhinos. Not bad ☺ One very positive point was the great number of black rhinos we could observe in the park, especially in the Halali area where we could see tenths of them in very good conditions and close to the tracks. We could even observe multiple cubs, which is so nice for such an endangered species. We saw more rhinos every night at the camp waterholes including a few white rhinos. We eventually saw more rhinos than elephants in Etosha during this trip, unbelievable!

**Waterberg plateau:** We went there primarily for bird watching as some key species for Namibia are easier to see there. The NWR camp is situated at the base of the plateau and cliffs. It is very well located and most of the chalets have been recently refurbished and are overlooking the Namibian savannah. Nice place. In the camp there are several warthogs, chacma baboons and greater kudus that are roaming freely. We booked a morning game drive at the plateau where a National Park has been created to translocate several endangered species like rhinos, sable and roan antelopes. There is also there a large population of disease free buffalos. The vegetation is very dense in the plateau so it is very difficult to see animals unless you are lucky. Therefore, the game drive basically brings you through tracks to 3 very well done hides near artificial waterholes. I assume doing a game drive in Waterberg is best during the dry season but in December we saw very little, except 3 buffalos and a few great kudus. The good thing when driving from the NWR camp to the entrance of the national park is we actually cross a private reserve in which we saw plenty of animals, more than during all the time we spent in the park itself. We observed Angola giraffes, common impala, steenbok, gemsbok and kudus. Except if you are a keen birder or like nice landscapes or have time, I would not recommend the detour to Waterberg for mammal watching.

**Erindi** is a private reserve like Okonjima. Apparently this is the largest private reserve in Erindi and indeed the place is huge! The entire reserve is divided in 3 areas: one zone has a "basic" camp and is open to private vehicles for self-driving; one zone has a more luxury lodge overlooking a very large artificial waterhole and is only accessible to the lodge guests with their game drive vehicles and the third zone cannot be visited. After being closed for more than a year due to covid and because of the lack of tourists, they did not reopen yet the camp and it was not allowed to do self-drives. When rebooking we had to move to the lodge and therefore use their vehicles and guides, which was not our initial plan but turned out to be positive since the local guides perfectly know the reserve, where to look for big game and can drive off roads. There is plenty of wildlife in this reserve. They have everything: decent populations of elephants, giraffes, ungulates and an impressive number of black and white rhinos that they are asking guests to not give too much details to avoid poaching. Since they have large waterholes, they also introduced hippos, crocodiles and waterbuck, which we can debate. Regarding predators, they have lions (without collars since they are easy to find), leopards (with and without collars and we actually saw one without a collar), cheetahs (with collars) and a pack of wild dogs (alpha couple with collar). We also saw many mongooses there, bat-ear foxes, spotted hyenas, black-backed jackals etc.... While we were there, other guests saw honey badgers, brown hyenas and wild cats but we didn't have that luck. I liked this reserve very much and I think is worth visiting (it is also not that far from Windhoek) but I was more impressed by Okonjima.

**Spitzkoppe:** what a beautiful place! The mountain and boulders are quite impressive and the colors at sunrise and sunset breathtaking. We saw there plenty of rock hyraxes, several bushveld sengi, a few zebras and 2 black mongooses in very good conditions. Thanks to the mammalwatching community for explaining where to see such mongoose species.

**Erongo mountain:** we visited the place primarily for birds. Because it was our last night and we wanted to spend New Year's eve in a nice place as a family, we booked Ai-Aiba lodge. It was a great place, surrounded by impressive and colorful boulders, and they served a memorable dinner for that night. The place was full of birds in the mornings and as far as mammals are concerned, we saw one giraffe, great kudus, springboks, one black mongoose (but a skittish one this time) and a dassie rat.

As a summary, this trip was not the best mammal watching we've ever done in Africa but Namibia stays a great country to visit and revisit. We were so happy we could finally go there after all these cancellations and beside the landscape,

there is plenty of wildlife to see in this country. In total, we saw 48 different species in 2 weeks including several cool lifers like the Cape fox, black mongoose, sengi and of course the very much sought after ground pangolin. Yeah ☺ !!

| Mammals with photos or well seen (lifers in green) |                                 |                          |  |     |
|--|---------------------------------|--------------------------|--|-----|
| Species  | Espèces                         | Latin Name               | Where seen   | Pic |
| Rock hyrax   | Daman des rochers               | Procavia c. welwitschii  | A few observed in Okonjima and many in Spitzkoppe and Erongo                       | X   |
| Bushveld sengi                                     | Musaraigne éléphant du bushveld | Elephantulus intufi      | One seen in Okonjima and several in Spitzkoppe                                     | X   |
| Bush Elephant                                      | Elephant de savane              | Loxodonta africana       | Observed in Erindi and surprisingly very few seen in Etosha                        | X   |
| Chacma baboon                                      | Babouin chacma                  | Papio ursinus            | Commonly observed everywhere including along roads                                 | X   |
| Scrub Hare   | Lièvre des buissons             | Lepus saxatilis          | Several seen in Okonjima, Etosha and Erindi  | X   |
| Cape Hare  | Lièvre du Cap                   | Lepus capensis           | A few seen in Etosha   | X   |
| Dassie rat   | Noki                            | Petromus typicus         | Only one observed in Erongo  | X   |
| Acacia rat   | Rat à queue noire               | Thallomys nigricauda     | One observed in Okaukuejo camp   | X   |
| South African ground squirrel                      | Ecureuil fouisseur du Cap       | Xerus inauris            | Only observed in Etosha and Erindi   | X   |
| Smith's bush squirrel                              | Ecureuil de brousse             | Paraxerus cepapi         | Common in Halali camp  | X   |
| African wild dog                                   | Lycaon                          | Canis pictus             | A small group observed in Erindi   | X   |
| Black-backed Jackal                                | Chacal à chabraque              | Canis mesomelas          | Several seen in every park   | X   |
| Bat-eared fox                                      | Otocyon                         | Otocyon megalotis        | 1 seen at night in Okonjima and 2 more in Erindi during the day                    | X   |
| Cape fox   | Renard du Cap                   | Vulpes chama             | 1 very nice observation in Etosha  | X   |
| Honey Badger                                       | Ratel                           | Mellivora capensis       | 1 very brief observation in Etosha while driving                                   |     |
| Cheetah  | Guépard                         | Acinonyx jubatus         | 2 seen resting in Etosha and 2 others seen in Erindi                               | X   |
| Leopard  | Léopard                         | Panthera pardus          | 3 seen in Okonjima (with collars), 1 nice encounter in Etosha and 1 seen in Erindi | X   |
| Lion   | Lion                            | Panthera Leo             | Several seen in Erindi and in Etosha, including two individuals mating             | X   |
| Small-spotted Genet                                | Genette commune                 | Genetta genetta          | One observed at night in Okonjima  |     |
| Brown Hyaena                                       | Hyène brune                     | Hyaena brunnea           | Only one but very cool observation in full daylight in Okonjima                    | X   |
| Spotted Hyaena                                     | Hyène tachetée                  | Crocuta crocuta          | Several seen in Etosha and in Erindi   | X   |
| Slender Mongoose                                   | Mangouste rouge                 | Herpestes sanguineus     | Seen well in Okonjima and a few others in Erindi                                   | X   |
| Black mongoose                                     | Mangouste noire                 | Herpestes nigrata        | 2 observed in Spitzkoppe and 1 in Erongo   | X   |
| Yellow mongoose                                    | Mangouste fauve                 | Cynictis penicillata     | Fairly common in Etosha  | X   |
| Banded Mongoose                                    | Mangouste rayée                 | Mungos mungo             | Observed in Okonjima and a group seen once in Etosha near Namutoni                 |     |
| Ground pangolin                                    | Pangolin de Temminck            | Smutsia temminckii       | 1 great observation made at night in Okonjima                                      | X   |
| Burchell's Zebra                                   | Zèbre de Burchell               | Equus q. burchelli       | Commonly observed in Okonjima, Etosha and Erindi                                   | X   |
| Mountain Zebra                                     | Zèbre de Hartmann               | Equus z. hartmanni       | A few observed in Okonjima   | X   |
| Black rhinoceros                                   | Rhinocéros noir                 | Diceros bicornis         | Happily seen in large numbers and very good conditions in both Etosha and Erindi   | X   |
| White rhinoceros                                   | Rhinocéros blanc                | Ceratotherium simum      | 2 observed in Okonjima, 2 at night in Halali's waterhole and a few in Erindi       | X   |
| Common Warthog                                     | Phacochère commun               | Phacochoerus africanus   | Seen everywhere but always in low numbers  | X   |
| Hippopotamus                                       | Hippopotame                     | Hippopotamus amphibius   | Seen locally in Erindi   | X   |
| Angola Giraffe                                     | Girafe de l'Angola              | Giraffa c. angolensis    | Quite common and seen everywhere   | X   |
| Cape Buffalo                                       | Buffle d'Afrique                | Syncerus c. caffer       | Only 3 individuals seen in Waterberg   | X   |
| Greater Kudu                                       | Grand koudou                    | Tragelaphus strepsiceros | Common and observed everywhere   | X   |

|                         |                      |                                    |  |   |
|-------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|--|---|
| Common Eland            | Eland du Cap         | Taurotragus oryx                   | Several seen in Okonjima and Erindi and only a very skittish one in Etosha | X |
| Common duiker           | Céphalophe couronné  | Sylvicapra grimmia                 | Only 2 briefly seen in Okonjima and probably 2 others in Etosha            |   |
| Steenbok                | Raphicère champêtre  | Raphicerus campestris              | Very common and seen everywhere  | X |
| Damara Dikdik           | Dik-dik de Damara    | Madoqua k. damarensis              | See in low numbers in Okonjima, Etosha and Erindi                          | X |
| Springbok               | Springbok            | Antidorcas marsupialis             | Most common species seen everywhere in Namibia                             | X |
| Common Waterbuck        | Cobe à croissant     | Kobus e. ellipsiprymnus            | Several observed in Okonjima and Erindi (introduced)                       | X |
| Impala                  | Impala               | Aepyceros melampus                 | Quite common in Okonjima, Erindi and Waterberg                             | X |
| Black-faced Impala      | Impala à face noire  | Aepyceros m. petersi               | Nicely observed in Etosha only   | X |
| Red hartebeest          | Bubale du Cap        | Alcelaphus b. caama                | Quite common in Okonjima, Etosha and Erindi                                | X |
| Common wildebeest       | Gnou bleu            | Connochaetes t. taurinus           | Commonly observed in all parks   | X |
| Black wildebeest        | Gnou à queue blanche | Connochaetes gnou                  | A few individuals seen in Erindi (introduced)                              | X |
| Sable antelope          | Hippotrague noir     | Hippotragus niger                  | 1 seen in Okonjima (introduced)  | X |
| Southern oryx / Gemsbok | Gemsbok              | Oryx gazella                       | Commonly observed in all parks   | X |
|                         |                      | <b>Total Species Recorded = 48</b> |  |   |

I'm adding to this report a few pictures of some of the iconic species we observed during that trip or that were new to me.



Lions



Leopard



Cheetah



Wild Dog





Brown hyena



Spotted hyena



Cap Fox



Bat-eared fox



Black rhino



White rhino





Dassie rat



Acacia rat



Slender mongoose



Black mongoose



Yellow mongoose



South African ground squirrel





Rock hyrax



Bushveld sengi



Damara dikdik



Steenbok



Gemsbok



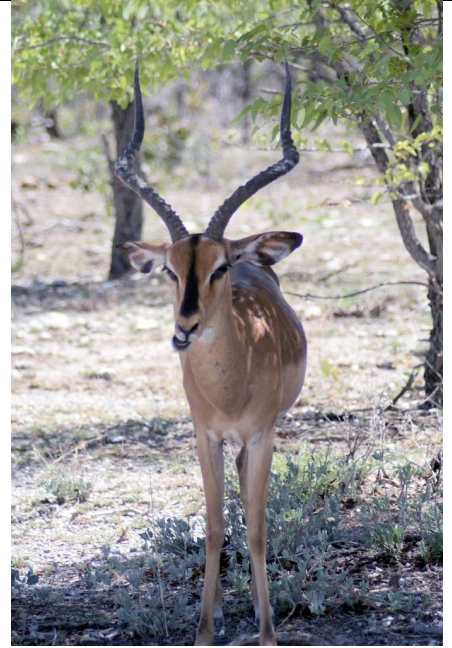
Red hartebeest



Angola giraffe



Smith's bush squirrel



Black-faced impala



Ground pangolin