

**Serval central – Sasol Synfuels
Seconda, South Africa
27-28th and 31st March, 2019**



It seems likely an unlikely backdrop for a holiday. No mountains or endless plains, rather the smoking stacks of Sasol's Synfuel plant in Seconda.

A couple of years ago I saw a documentary on wild cats which featured the serval cats living in the grasslands around the Sasol plant with the highest density of the species in Africa. A recently published paper showed serval density at over 100 animals per 100 sq km, two or three times higher than the second highest density in Tanzania's Ngorogoro crater. The serval was turning out to be my nemesis cat, having tried and failed to see it 3 times last year in Tanzania, Ethiopia and South Africa, so when the chance came up to revisit South Africa I got in contact with Sasol Synfuels. It was a long shot, and to be honest, I didn't expect to get a reply to my email, and certainly didn't expect the helpful and accommodating reply a few weeks later.

Serval conservation in Sasol is led by Daan Look who heads up the Biodiversity team. Daan went out of his way to show me around and has a deep passion and knowledge for servals. The 8000 hectare site is a grassland area that surrounds the plant and is entirely fenced and not open to the public. The fencing keeps out any large or medium sized carnivores, but smaller animals, including servals found their way in and have flourished in the absence of competitors and an abundance of Vlei rats their main prey.

Daan was keen to show me around. He had already seen a serval on the day I arrived but over the next few hours they eluded us. Even the security guards had seen one nonchalantly walking along a track, but alas, by the time we got there, he was gone. The next morning I went out but this time with his colleague Mabutho, who also has a sharp eye and passion for servals. The clock was ticking, and literally 2 minutes before turnaround time, a serval appeared on the track in front of us. I managed to capture the all-to-brief moment before it jumped into the grassland and vanished.



Daan invited me to return after my trip to Pilanesberg National park (home to both serval and caracal but I blanked on both cats after a three night luxury lodge extravaganza). So on March 30th I drove back to Seconda and spent a couple of hours at dusk and had two more sightings at close range. The link below is of the serval seen whilst spotlighting:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yyuCO4teDc&feature=youtu.be>

So if you are cat crazy and want a very good chance of seeing this stunning feline then this is the place to see it. You would however need to combine this with other wildlife sites in order to see the diversity of mammals on offer in South Africa.

I asked Daan if he was happy to be contacted by mammal watchers and he was very positive. I should say at this point that access to the site is restricted and you can only visit the area if accompanied by Daan or a member of his team. Daan also doesn't charge for his time, so you need to make your case. Daan's contact email is below:

- Daan.loock@sasol.com

Itinerary

The drive from Johannesburg to Secunda takes 1.5 hours. I hired a car with Thrifty car hire (Toyota Fortuner 4x4 70\$ per day unlimited km) and stayed at Dormio manor guest house in Secunda (not really a manormore like a B&B but clean and very close to the plant).

27 March Drove around the site with Daan from 5pm until 11.00 pm. After dark we spotlighted and picked up bright eye-shine on several occasions but couldn't get close enough to identify.

28 March 6am to 8.30 am, a quick early morning drive with Mabutho who struck gold just before I had to leave.

31 March Returned for one night and went out with Daan from 5pm to 7pm , two servals seen, one in daylight the other whilst spotlighting.

MAMMALS SEEN

1	Serval <i>Leptailurus serval</i>	Three animals seen during the morning, evening and at night.
2	Blesbok <i>Damaliscus pygargus phillipsi</i>	Common within the reserve.
3	Common duiker <i>Sylvicapra grimmia</i>	Common at night
4	Bushpig <i>Potamocheorus larvatus</i>	Two groups seen during the night drive
5	Plains zebra <i>Equus quagga</i>	Common at Sasol.

6	White rhino <i>Ceratotherium simum</i>	Two animals have been introduced into the reserve
7	Black-backed jackal <i>Canis mesomelas</i>	Several seen during the night drive
8	Cape porcupine <i>Hystrix africaaustralis</i>	Two animals seen at night
9	Scrub hare <i>Lepus saxatilis</i>	Abundant at night
