# **South Africa - Just Cats!**

## Naturetrek Tour Report

23 October - 3 November 2017





Lions near Satara





Leopard (Tamba



Spotted Hyena pups

Report and images by Leon Marais



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Tour Report South Africa - Just Cats!

Tour participants: Leon Marais and Jason Stewart (leaders) together with nine Naturetrek clients

#### **Summary**

Yet another great Just Cats! tour in South Africa! Once again the itinerary proved to be a winner, building in terms of excitement, each day just getting better and better – until the last day, of course! A big thanks to all the participants for joining the tour, and to all the people who helped make it a success, from the office staff to the various guides and leaders, catering staff etc.

#### Day 1

## **Monday 23rd October**

The tour started with an overnight flight from London Heathrow Airport to Johannesburg.

#### Day 2

## **Tuesday 24th October**

#### Blyde River Canyon

Our British Airways flight arrived on time, despite having left Heathrow a bit behind schedule, and by 8.30am we were loaded up and on our way out of Johannesburg. We stopped at a roadside service station for some lunch items and then continued to the Blyde River Canyon via Lydenburg and Ohrigstad. Before checking in we took in the Three Rondawels View Site, offering spectacular views of the canyon, and then had a bit of a rest before a trip up to the resort's private view site. We then had time to freshen up before dinner and a good night's sleep..

#### Day 3

## Wednesday 25th October

#### Lower Sabie, Kruger Park

We started the day with tea and coffee at 6.30am, before a birding walk in the resort grounds. We then had breakfast before leaving the canyon. We took in Lisbon Falls and then descended into Hazyview to pick up our lunch supplies. The day was turning into an absolute scorcher, the vehicle's thermometer reading 38 degrees Celsius by the time we reached Phabeni Gate around midday. There we swapped over into our safari vehicles and began the long trek to Lower Sabie Rest Camp in the south-eastern corner of the park. We got off to a good start with a beautiful female Leopard as the third mammal species we saw in the Kruger. She was on the move as we arrived, but then lay up in the shade on some exposed rocks close to the road, giving us pretty good views. Moving on, we saw White Rhinoceros, Elephant and Buffalo as major species, but by 3pm the heat was so intense we pushed through to the camp, arriving finally at 4.30pm. After checking in we had time to relax before a wonderful traditional South African bobotic dinner; a fine end to our first say on safari.

## Day 4

## **Thursday 26th October**

#### Lower Sabie, Kruger Park

Expecting another very hot day, we started with tea and coffee at 5.15am before a full morning safari in the Lower Sabie area. We began by going up the tar road to Skukuza, the section between Lowe Sabie and the Lubyelubye Bridge being particularly good for Lion. At the bridge we spotted some Lions in the riverbed some distance away but weren't able to locate them again for closer views. However we got it right on the way back

towards camp, with a total of 19 Lions resting in the sand of the riverbed. From there we headed south into the Duke's Waterhole area in the hope of finding Cheetah, but without luck, though we still saw plenty of general game and birds to keep us busy.

Back at camp we had breakfast and then another two-hour drive, spending time at Sunset Dam and the low level bridge over the Sabie River, which was most enjoyable, plus poor views of two Lions sleeping under a bush north of the camp. We then had a rest before the 4.30pm sunset drive with a park guide and vehicle, which was a roaring success, producing the same pride of Lions along the Sabie River, a female Cheetah with three young cubs, and four more Lions, which were the group we'd seen two of north of the camp. All in all, a superb day on safari!

### Day 5

#### Friday 27th October

#### Satara, Kruger Park

Today the expected weather change arrived. At first it didn't seem too bad, but soon started to deteriorate. We had breakfast at 6.30am and then departed for Satara, 92 kilometres away to the north. In terms of cats it was pretty quiet, with only one old male Lion eating grass along the Sweni Road; not a very impressive specimen of the species at all. We arrived in camp at 2pm and had two hours rest before an afternoon drive. Strong winds and very light rain were the conditions for the afternoon, but we soon forgot about the weather as we encountered two male Lions not too far to the north of the camp. They were some distance away from the road, but on the move in fairly open country. One was dark and the other very pale, and with their manes blown back in the wind they were a very impressive sight indeed, the weather conditions only adding to the mood. Eventually they made it as far as the S90 dirt road, and we ended up with close views before heading back to camp, seeing a clan of Hyenas next to the road on the way. An Impala potiie (pot stew) rounded off the evening very well, despite the inclement weather.

## Day 6

## Saturday 28th October

#### Satara, Kruger Park

With the wind and overcast conditions set to continue for at least one more day, we opted for breakfast at 7am before a long game drive. We got lucky early on with a pack of six Wild Dogs next to the road. At first they were asleep in the grass, but soon after we arrived they got up and began to run around and play with each other. There was also some interaction with two trailing Spotted Hyenas, one dog ending up with a mouth full of Hyena fur after a brief squabble. Eventually they moved off to the north and we carried on, seeing plenty of general game and Elephants before arriving back in camp at lunch time. We then had a sunset drive with a park guide, which was rather quiet; not surprising considering the weather conditions. It produced three White Rhinoceros, a few Scrub Hares and general game. Back in camp we enjoyed a superb rump steak dinner to end off our last night in the Kruger.

#### Day 7

## **Sunday 29th October**

Elephant Plains; Sabi Sands

We started off under slightly improved weather conditions – still cloudy and cool but at least the wind had dropped. We left camp at 5.30am on a morning drive, which was fairly quiet, producing no cats but one Hyena at least, which was gnawing on a bit of sinew from an old Elephant carcass. Back in camp we had breakfast and then departed, arriving at Elephant Plains in time to settle in before lunch, where we also said goodbye to Jason. We then departed on our 4pm safari. The drive produced brief views of a somewhat skittish male Leopard, not the usual quality for the Sabi Sands, but a Leopard sighting nevertheless. Later we caught up with a pack of five Wild Dogs on the hunt, with at least two Spotted Hyenas following close behind in case there were any scraps if the hunt proved to be successful, and it was wonderful to see the behaviour here. It was getting a bit dark so we left them still moving rapidly and headed off to look for a female Leopard that had been seen close to the lodge, but without any luck. We then had dinner before retiring, in anticipation of the day to come.

#### Day 8

#### **Monday 30th October**

Elephant Plains; Sabi Sands

We awoke to clear and fresh conditions, the wind and overcast skies now a thing of the past. We left camp at 5.30am on our morning drive, the highlight of which was time spent at a Spotted Hyena den, where we got great views of the pups (various age groups) playing while the adults soaked up the morning sun. Other highlights included a 'crash' of four White Rhinoceros and a few small herds of Buffalo, but unfortunately the Leopard we were tracking failed to show itself, despite the fact that we could even smell her scent-marking on a bush, so close behind her we were. But even in the famed Sabi Sand Game Reserve the big cats are not on tap, so we went back to the lodge for breakfast, a bush walk for some and another attempt in the afternoon.

The afternoon was a lot better and we got back on track as far as cat sightings went. We started off with a young male Leopard known as Tamba, who was resting up on an embankment. We enjoyed great views before he drank some water, briefly stalked a Three-banded Plover, and moved into some shade. From there we headed back west to an area we'd been in earlier, and the small Tshalala pride of three Lionesses and one six-month-old cub appeared out of the bushes. After viewing them we continued with the night drive, seeing a clan of Hyenas, a couple of White-tailed Mongooses and a Bushveld Gerbil before arriving back at the lodge for time to freshen up before dinner.

#### Day 9

## **Tuesday 31st October**

#### Nkorho; Sabi Sands

The day started at 5.30am under almost perfect conditions – clear skies and a fresh edge to the air. Good conditions facilitate good game viewing and this morning the magic element manifested itself. We started off with the small Tshalala pride in the same place we'd left them the previous evening. They weren't up to much but did show interest in some passing Giraffes and certainly looked better in the morning sun than they did in yesterday's evening half-light. While we were there, word came in over the radio that another bigger pride had been found close by, so we left to see the Nkahuma pride of 12 Lions including one of the four Birmingham males, the dominant Lions in the area. After watching them for a while we moved on to see the Leopard, Tiyani,

a young female who we'd searched for unsuccessfully the afternoon we arrived. She was on the hunt, and as we arrived was investigating something in a thicket of grass under a fallen Knob-thorn tree; a place many species of small mammals may hide during the day. Suddenly she pounced and out ran what we thought was a Meller's Mongoose, a seldom seem species. It took off like a bullet with Tiyani in hot pursuit, and after quite a long chase the Mongoose eventually managed to get away, Leopards seldom chasing prey for more than a few seconds normally. After that she spent some time resting up on a termite mound and then began further hunting and scent-marking, giving us wonderful views. After quite a bit of time spent with her, we went for a coffee stop before some more game viewing on our way back to camp.

We checked out at 11am and took a slow drive to Nkorho, arriving at noon with time to settle in before lunch and our afternoon drive. We had the camp to ourselves and were thus able to spread out over two vehicles, giving us plenty of space but creating the potential for very different experiences and sightings, despite the best efforts of the guides to try and see the same things. This afternoon the young male Leopard known as Tamba was the main highlight, seen resting up on a termite mound and briefly stalking some Impala. A fiery sunset and sundowner drinks were also something to be remembered, though the half hour after dark that was dedicated to searching for some of the smaller nocturnal mammals didn't deliver any rewards. Back at camp we enjoyed a lovely fire-side dinner before getting an early night ahead of our full day at Nkorho.

#### **Day 10**

#### Wednesday 1st November

Nkorho; Sabi Sands

We started at 5.30am under clear skies with the aim of going east to see the Nkahuma pride, which had been found the previous evening. Although group members in both vehicles got too see them, circumstances and timing lead to two very different experiences. Those with guide Pieter saw the four females of the pride and the one Birmingham male Lion at rest, as well as the fifth female and her two young cubs, who were some distance away from the others but moving quickly in their general direction. Those with guide Ari were on their way to the pride when they came across the six youngsters of the Nkahuma pride, who were resting up in the Manyaleti riverbed. Then, when they arrived at the adults, a herd of Buffalo bulls strayed close by, creating a lot of interest among the Lions. The Buffalo, however, spotted the cats and a standoff ensued, broken only when the bulls stampeded off through the bush away from the Lions, sounding like a runaway freight train crashing through the undergrowth. Then, on the way out of the area, they managed to track down Tiyani, the young female Leopard on the hunt, but she was soon outed by a troop of Vervet Monkeys. Elephants, Rhinoceros and lots of birds and general game filled in the rest of the morning for both groups, and after a hearty breakfast there was a chance to rest before lunch and the afternoon drive.

The afternoon drive was quieter with both teams going west to see the Nkahuma pride, but they were very much asleep for most of the time we were there, the male lifting his head up once or twice before moving a few metres only to flop down again – a typical Lion sighting in other words. On the way back, one team were fortunate enough to come across a Pangolin, a very seldom seen species indeed.

Back at the lodge we had time to collect our torches before setting off for a magical bush dinner, the evening being just about as perfect as it gets weather-wise. After the wonderful meal we had a short night drive back to the lodge which was surprisingly good, producing our fifth individual Leopard, Nkanyeni, a tiny adult female, who was asleep next to the road close to the lodge. And just outside the lodge we had a rather fun sighting of a

Spotted Hyena digging up and chewing an outlet pipe from the kitchen, probably stimulated by the fat elements in the water. Soon we were off to bed, hoping for a good morning drive the next day to end off the tour.

#### **Day 11**

#### **Thursday 2nd November**

#### Departure

Our final day started cool and overcast, clearing later to become fine and hot. Not too long into the drive, reports came over the radio of a male Leopard on the road close to another lodge, called in by the camp's caretaker. He didn't stay with it however (much to our guide Pieter's frustration!) and by the time we arrived it was nowhere to be seen. A vehicle from another lodge joined us in the area and the hunt began. The trackers got off and went in on foot, while the guides circled the area, responding to the news from the trackers and hoping for a glimpse of the cat. The minutes went by and half-an-hour later we were still empty handed, and getting desperate. Eventually our tracker David heard the alarm calls of a herd of Kudu and, to our relief, the call came in that the other guide had eyes on the Leopard. We entered the bush and beheld Quarantine, an adult male Leopard, with a freshly killed Warthog yearling. We watched him munching his way through his prize for a while and then made our way to another Leopard sighting. While we had been looking for our Leopard, Victor, one of the trackers from Nkorho, had been out tracking on foot and had located a young male Leopard known as Hosana. Victor had spent a good 45 minutes keeping eyes on the Leopard, and later related that the cat had stalked him in a playful manner several times, illustrating this unreal relationship between Leopards and the guides and trackers in the Sabi Sands. We arrived in the area and were directed in by Victor, getting great views of Hosana as he went about his business. At one point he scaled a Tamboti tree to investigate the skull of an Impala ram lodged high up in the branches; the leftovers from an old Leopard kill. He dislodged the skull, which fell a few metres before the horns hooked in another branch. The Leopard then descended a bit and went right out on the limb to try and hook the skull, but was unable to retrieve it and so he came down and went on his way. We left him and went for a final coffee stop before continuing.

After the break one team went back to the lodge while the other team went for one more look at Quarantine. We saw him just before he crossed north into the neighbouring property, posing beautifully on a large termite mound: a wonderful way to end off the tour! Back at the lodge we had time to pack for the homeward journey.

## Day 12

## **Friday 3rd November**

Our overnight flight landed in the morning at London Heathrow Airport, where another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

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Pangolin Leopard with a kill

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## **Species Lists**

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted)

		Scientific name	October/November										
Common	name		24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	
1 Chacma E	Baboon	Papio ursinus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
2 Vervet Mo	nkey	Cercopithecus aethiops		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
3 Thick-taile	d Bushbaby	Otolemur crassicaudatus			✓								
4 Lesser Bu	shbaby	Galago moholi								✓			
5 Pangolin		Manis temminckii									✓		
6 Scrub Har	е	Lepus saxatilis						✓	✓	✓	✓		
7 Tree Squii	rrel	Paraxerus cepapi	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
8 Bushveld	Gerbil	Tatera leucogaster							✓				
9 Side-stripe	ed Jackal	Canis adustus									✓	✓	
10 Wild Dog		Lycaon pictus					✓	✓					
11 Banded M	longoose	Mungos mungo					✓						
13 Slender M	longoose	Galerella sanguinea			✓	✓						✓	
14 Spotted H	yaena	Crocuta crocuta				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
15 Cheetah		Acinonyx jubatus			✓								
16 Lion		Pathera leo			✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		
17 Leopard		Panthera pardus		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
18 African Ele	ephant	Loxodonta africana		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
19 Rock Hyra	ax (Dassie)	Procavia capensis	✓										
20 Burchell's	Zebra	Equus burchelli		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
21 White Rhi	noceros	Ceratotherium simum		✓				✓	✓				
22 Warthog		Phacochoerus aethiopicus			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
23 Hippopota	ımus	Hippopotamus amphibius		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24 Southern	Giraffe	Giraffa camelopardalis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
25 Buffalo		Syncerus caffer		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
26 Greater K	udu	Tragelaphus strepsiceros		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
27 Bushbuck		Tragelaphus scriptus				✓		<b>✓</b>	✓	✓			
28 Nyala		Tragelaphus angasi						<b>✓</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
29 Common	Waterbuck	Kobus ellipsiprymnus			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
30 Blue Wilde	ebeest	Connochaetes taurinus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

			October/November									
	Common name	Scientific name	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2
31	Impala	Aepyceros melampus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Steenbok	Raphicerus campestris			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Common Duiker	Sylvicapra grimmia					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

#### Birds Recorded

Common Ostrich, Struthio camelus Black-headed Heron, Ardea melanocephala Western Cattle Egret, Bubulcus ibis Hamerkop, Scopus umbretta Saddle-billed Stork, Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis Southern Bald Ibis (E), Geronticus calvus African Spoonbill. Platalea alba Red-billed Teal, Anas erythrorhyncha Hooded Vulture, Necrosyrtes monachus White-headed Vulture, Trigonoceps occipitalis Tawny Eagle, Aquila rapax Martial Eagle, Polemaetus bellicosus African Fish Eagle, Haliaeetus vocifer Crested Francolin, Francolinus sephaena Swainson's Spurfowl (NE), Francolinus swainsonii Black Crake, Amaurornis flavirostris African Jacana, Actophilornis africanus Three-banded Plover, Charadrius tricollaris Blacksmith Lapwing, Vanellus armatus Wood Sandpiper, Tringa glareola Ruff, Philomachus pugnax Double-banded Sandgrouse (NE), Pterocles bicinctus Cape Turtle Dove, Streptopelia capicola Brown-headed Parrot, Poicephalus cryptoxanthus

Reed Cormorant, Phalacrocorax africanus Great Egret, Casmerodiusa albus Squacco Heron, Ardeola ralloides Woolly-necked Stork, Ciconia episcopus Marabou Stork, Leptoptilos crumeniferus Glossy Ibis, Plegadis falcinellus Greater Flamingo, Phoenicopterus ruber Comb Duck. Sarkidiornis melanotos White-backed Vulture, Gyps africanus Yellow-billed Kite, Milvus aegyptius Wahlberg's Eagle, Aquila wahlbergi Brown Snake Eagle, Circaetus cinereus Jackal Buzzard (E), Buteo rufofuscus Shelley's Francolin, Francolinus shelleyi Helmeted Guineafowl, Numida meleagris Red-crested Korhaan (NE), Eupodotis ruficrista Greater Painted Snipe, Rostratula benghalensis Crowned Lapwing, Vanellus coronatus White-crowned Lapwing, Vanellus albiceps Common Greenshank, Tringa nebularia Black-winged Stilt, Himantopus himantopus Red-eved Dove, Streptopelia semitorquata Laughing Dove, Streptopelia senegalensis Grey Go-away Bird, Corythaixoides concolor

Grey Heron, Ardea cinerea Little Egret, Egretta garzetta Green-backed Heron. Butorides striatus African Openbill, Anastomus lamelligerus Yellow-billed Stork, Mycteria ibis Hadeda Ibis, Bostrychia hagedash Egyptian Goose, Alopochen aegyptiacus Secretarybird, Sagittarius serpentarius Lappet-faced Vulture, Torgos tracheliotus Black-shouldered Kite, Elanus caeruleus African Hawk Eagle, Hieraaetus fasciatus Bateleur, Terathopius ecaudatus African Harrier-Hawk, Polyboroides typus Natal Francolin (NE), Francolinus natalensis Kurrichane Buttonquail, Turnix sylvatica Black-bellied Korhaan, Eupodotis melanogaster Kittlitz's Plover, Charadrius pecuarius Senegal Lapwing, Vanellus lugubris Common Sandpiper, Actitis hypoleucos Little Stint, Calidris minuta Water Thick-knee, Burhinus vermiculatus African Mourning Dove, Streptopelia decipiens African Green Pigeon, Treron calva Red-chested Cuckoo, Cuculus solitarius

Jacobin Cuckoo, *Clamator jacobinus*Marsh Owl, *Asio capensis*Pearl-spotted Owlet, *Glaucidium perlatum*Fiery-necked Nightjar, *Caprimulgus pectoralis*Malachite Kingfisher, *Alcedo cristata* 

Little Bee-eater, *Merops pusillus*African Hoopoe, *Upupa africana*Trumpeter Hornbill, *Bycanistes bucinator* 

Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill. Tockus leucomelas

Crested Barbet, *Trachyphonus vaillantii* Lesser Striped Swallow, *Hirundo abyssinica* 

Fork-tailed Drongo, *Dicrurus adsimilis* 

Arrow-marked Babbler, *Turdoides jardineii* Groundscraper Thrush, *Turdus litsitsirupa* 

Mocking Cliff-Chat, Thamnolaea cinnamomeiventris

Bar-throated Apalis, Apalis thoracica

Green-backed Camaroptera, Camaroptera brachyura

African Paradise Flycatcher, Terpsiphone viridis

Cape Wagtail, Motacilla capensis

Orange-breasted Bush Shrike, Telophorus sulfureopectus

Burchell's Starling (NE), Lamprotornis australis Yellow-billed Oxpecker, Buphagus africanus

Cape White-eye (E), Zosterops pallidus Cape Sparrow (NE), Passer melanurus

Lesser Masked Weaver, *Ploceus intermedius* 

White-winged Widow, Euplectes albonotatus

Yellow-fronted Canary, Serinus mozambicus

Burchell's Coucal (E), Centropus burchellii

African Scops Owl, Otus senegalensis

African Barred Owlet, Glaucidium capense

Pied Kingfisher, Ceryle rudis

Brown-hooded Kingfisher, Halcyon albiventris

Lilac-breasted Roller, Coracias caudata

Green Woodhoopoe, Phoeniculus purpureus

African Grey Hornbill, Tockus nasutus

Southern Ground Hornbill, Bucorvus leadbeateri

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica* Rock Martin, *Hirundo fuligula* 

Eastern Black-headed Oriole, *Oriolus larvatus*Dark-capped Bulbul, *Pycnonotus barbatus*Cape Rock Thrush (E), *Monticola rupestris*Red-capped Robin-Chat, *Cossypha natalensis* 

Yellow-breasted Apalis, *Apalis flavida*Spotted Flycatcher, *Muscicapa striata*African Pied Wagtail, *Motacilla aguimp*Magpie Shrike, *Corvinella melanoleuca* 

Southern White-crowned Shrike (NE), Eurocephalus anguitimens

Cape 'Glossy Starling', Lamprotornis nitens Red-billed Oxpecker, Buphagus erythrorhynchus

Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, Bubalornis niger

Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, Passer diffusus

Red-headed Weaver, Anaplectes rubriceps

Blue Waxbill, *Uraeginthus angolensis* 

Barn Owl, Tyto alba

Southern White-faced Scops Owl, Otus leucotis

Spotted Eagle Owl, Bubo africanus

Giant Kingfisher, Ceryle maxima

European Bee-eater, Merops apiaster

Purple Roller, Coracias naevia

Common Scimitarbill, Rhinopomastus cyanomelas

Red-billed Hornbill, Tockus erythrorhynchus

Black-collared Barbet, Lybius torquatus

Red-breasted Swallow, Hirundo semirufa

Common House Martin, *Delichon urbica* White-necked Raven, *Corvus albicollis* 

Kurrichane Thrush. Turdus libonvana

Familiar Chat, Cercomela familiaris

Willow Warbler, Phylloscopus trochilus

Long-billed Crombec, Sylvietta rufescens

African Dusky Flycatcher, Muscicapa adusta

Mountain Wagtail, Motacilla clara

Black-backed Puffback, Dryoscopus cubla

Wattled Starling, Creatophora cinerea

Greater Blue-eared Starling, Lamprotornis chalybaeus

Greater Double-collared Sunbird (E), Nectarinia afra

House Sparrow, Passer domesticus

Yellow-throated Petronia, Petronia superciliaris

Red-billed Quelea, Quelea quelea Common Waxbill, Estrilda astrild