

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



NAMIBIA

Skeleton Coast & Etosha

24 October – 5 November 2016

TOUR REPORT

Leader: Geoff Crane

Monday 24 October 2016

Arrival at Windhoek Airport

The group arrived at Windhoek Airport on time. Bradfield's swift was seen at the airport and a few chacma Baboons were seen en route to Windhoek from the airport. We freshened up at our guesthouse in Windhoek and then had lunch at the local café. After lunch we went for a walk in the Botanical Gardens, which were very dry - 'crispy' dry! The rains at the beginning of the year never really happened, so as we were to find out through the course of the trip, Namibia was very dry!

We saw a good selection of birds and one reptile – A female Namibian rock agama, with a beautiful yellow head. We saw the male agama later on in the trip with a showy red/orange head. The endemic rockrunner was seen well, along with laughing dove, rock dove, white-backed mousebird and red-faced mousebird, Eurasian & swallow-tailed bee-eater, rock martin, red-eyed bulbul, chestnut-vented titbabbler, helmeted guineafowl, blue waxbill, white-browed sparrow-weaver, house sparrow (at lunch), southern masked weaver, long-billed crombec, scarlet-chested sunbird, pale-winged starling and a small flock of totally lost red-billed firefinch at the gardens. We had a fly past from a hammerkop just before going out to the lively and unusual Joe's Brewhouse for our dinner. A great dinner was had by all and then an early night.

Accommodation: Windhoek

Tuesday 25 October 2016

Waterberg National Park

After a leisurely breakfast we left Windhoek and headed north towards the bushveld area of the Waterberg Plateau. Just leaving Windhoek we saw Cape wagtail, rock dove and speckled pigeon. Marico flycatcher, fork-tailed drongo, laughing dove, chat flycatcher, emerald-spotted wood dove, helmeted guineafowl, purple roller, Kalahari scrub-robin, African ostrich, crested and red-billed francolin and grey turaco were seen on the drive to the park - our welcoming committee was a family of banded mongooses taking in the midday shade by the restaurant.

We enjoyed a picnic lunch by the swimming pool to the sounds of a troop of baboons raiding the restaurant kitchen! By the time they appeared by us we had finished, so we hastily packed up. After our lunch we relaxed through the heat of the early afternoon by reading, swimming, drinking tea, or snoozing.

We went for a birding walk at 3 o'clock - it was still very hot, but at the start of the walk we had great views of a pair of Verreaux's eagle on a cliff ledge above our cottages. We also saw African grey hornbill, rock kestrel, pririt batis, African red-eyed bulbul, European bee-eater, puff-back, southern masked weaver, white-bellied sunbird, Cape glossy and pale-winged starling, greater-striped swallow, rock martin, fiscal shrike, crimson-breasted shrike, red-billed green wood hoopoe, ground-scraper thrush, long-billed crombec and some of the group saw rosy-faced lovebird and African hoopoe back in the camp. An advance party went to the top of the escarpment for the view and some photography. There were plenty of rock hyrax up on the escarpment and a large family of water mongooses was seen on the way back to the camp. Namibian rock agama, striped skink, foam grasshopper, spider hunting wasp, a red-veined damselfly and many butterfly species were also recorded.

We had a family of warthogs, a troop of chacma baboons and a number of Damara dik-diks on the lawns in front of the cottages – it was probably the lush green grass tempting them in. The water on the lawn was also attracting plenty of butterflies: small blue, citrus swallowtail, grey-veined white, pansy, yellow sulphur, orange tip and mocha wallowtail.

Accommodation: Waterberg National Park Camp

Wednesday 26 October 2016

Waterberg National Park to Etosha National Park

The pair of Verreaux's eagles were high up on the cliff ledge above our cottages this morning. We had some birdwatching on the way to breakfast and then we were off to the Etosha National Park. At the exit gate we were delayed by scaly-feathered finch, Burchell's starling, rattling cisticola, white-browed scrub-robin, Kalahari scrub-robin and Emerald-spotted wood-dove. We stopped in Otjiwarongo for fuel and some supplies and then arrived at the Von Lindquist gate in time for a picnic lunch. A tree squirrel was the first mammal to be seen in the park and in the tree above our picnic table we saw an icterine warbler.

We took a quick turn past the Klein Namutoni waterhole en route to the camp, here we saw giraffe and black-faced impala, as well as loads of new birds for our ever growing bird list: lappet-faced vulture and white-backed vulture, marabou stork and plenty of waders - to be identified in the afternoon!

We dropped our gear in our rooms and then set off for an afternoon drive. First we went to the Koinachas waterhole where we found a melanistic gabar goshawk, a beautiful kori bustard. black-smith lapwing, wood sandpiper, common sandpiper, little grebe, yellow-bellied eremomela and marsh terrapin were also seen. We then drove slowly to the Chudop waterhole, seeing red-capped lark and double-banded courser en route. There were two elephants and several giraffe drinking at the waterhole, with Burchell's zebra and black-faced impala patiently waiting their turn. We drove around the Doringdraai loop which gave us a view over the pan. Here we saw gemsbok and springbok in the distance, shimmering in the heat haze!

Back to the Klein Namutoni waterhole and the waders: greenshank, ruff, wood sandpiper, common sandpiper, three-banded plover and Kittlitz's plover were the waders. Cape teal, tawny eagle, Cape turtle dove, barn swallow (first of the season) and loads of helmeted guineafowl were also seen. We saw plenty of Damara dik-diks on the dik-dik loop, as well as short-toed rockthrush and green-winged pytilia. We agreed "no stopping until we get to the Klein Namutoni waterhole for sunset - unless we see a rhino", and around the corner a black rhino was crossing our path! At the waterhole we watched a family of elephants and five spotted hyena at the waterhole as the sun set.... the spotted hyena were enjoying the cool water – up to their necks.

We had dinner at the camp restaurant and then some of the group spent some time at the floodlit waterhole. During the afternoon we noticed that the perimeter fence was pushed over in some places and there were piles of elephant dung in the camp, so we were all extra vigilant at night! (We only saw a black-backed jackal in the camp.)

Accommodation: Namutoni Camp, Etosha National Park

Thursday 27 October 2016

Etosha National Park

We had a beautiful clear sky morning and sunrise. We went for a pre breakfast game drive to the Twee Palms waterhole in search of cheetah. There were plenty of Burchell's zebra, blue wildebeest, springbok and other plains game but alas, no cheetah. We continued around Fisher's Pan stopping here and there for birds or photo opportunities.

We stopped for a bird – like one does - and out pops a honey badger. We had great views of the badger going about its business and then a little further on we saw the twitch of a lion's ear waiting in ambush.... The ear turned out to be a couple of bat-eared fox's! The lesson here was 'patience is key'! We drove back and forth trying to get better views of our 'lion' before seeing the complete picture. The Groot Okevi waterhole was very active, with kudu, giraffe, Burchell's zebra, black-faced impala and kori bustards. There were also lots of small birds in a mixed flock coming in to drink for a few seconds before being spooked back into the cover of a tree. Yellow canary, red-headed finch, Cape sparrow, sociable weaver and emerald-spotted wood dove were seen. The Klein Okevi waterhole was void of mammals but had flock after flock of Burchell's sandgrouse coming in to drink, with one or two Namaqua sandgrouse as well. We enjoyed our breakfast outside back in the camp.

After breakfast we drove around the local area spotting new birds and photographing mammals. The white dust on the trees and bushes on the approach road to the Klein Namutoni waterhole gave the area a snowy look. We photographed some black-faced impala in this 'snow' setting. We had some R&R during the heat of the day and then went out again in the afternoon. We did the reverse of the route we took this morning before breakfast. We had four separate sightings of black rhino, one of which was out in the open as the rhino walked across Fisher's Pan. A honey badger was seen again (we presumed it to be the same one as this morning, as he was an old male and they don't get on with other males in their territories). The blue wildebeest were also heading out into the pan.

Accommodation: Namutoni Camp, Etosha National Park

Friday 28 October 2016

Etosha National Park

This morning we met up at the camp waterhole for some pre breakfast birdwatching, after we had breakfast and set off for Halali camp, which was to be our lunch stop. As the veld was so very dry, with game and birdlife very much centered around any available water, we decided to take a route that took us past a number of waterholes. The Goas waterhole was the most productive, with Burchell's zebra, kudu, black-faced impala, giraffe, springbok and warthogs all coming and going to drink. We had good views of a tawny eagle and an African hawk eagle, as well as many waders and small passerines.

At Halali camp we first visited the camp waterhole, where there was a dead and stinking giraffe - I was surprised it did not have vultures and carnivores around it. A black rhino was sleeping off the mid-day heat under a bush and a few kudu were also standing about in the shade near the waterhole. Some of the group took the opportunity to have a quick swim before lunch and there were great photo opportunities for the others. A purple roller was being very photogenic and violet wood-hoopoe, Burchell's starling and tree squirrels were also being photographed.

After lunch we set off on the second part of our drive to Okaukuejo camp. The temperature was high 30's so we more or less just drove, stopping briefly at Rietfontein Salvadora, Sueda, Charitsaub, Homob, Ondongab, Kapupuhedi and Nebrowni waterholes, seeing a few new mammals and birds. We had very good views of a slender mongoose and also a few close views of kori bustards.

We spent what was left of the afternoon in camp, enjoying the camp waterhole, which had elephants by it on our arrival. We had a very atmospheric sunset with some big storm clouds brewing on the horizon – a few drops of rain later but not enough to make any difference, however there was a power cut during dinner. After dinner the power came back on and consequently the flood lights at the waterhole. Black rhino, lions and elephants were keeping a respectable distance from one another. At one stage a matriarch and her calf gave a lion a run for his money as he was getting too close for comfort!

Accommodation: Okaukuejo Camp, Etosha National Park

Saturday 29 October 2016

Etosha National Park

This morning we started the day with the birds and mammals at sunrise, for a two hour drive to the Okondeka waterhole. Just before the waterhole we came across two male lions and a lioness, as well as a very finished off and well eaten giraffe, which was undoubtedly their work! There were nine more lions at the waterhole, lion cubs from this year, last year and two years ago, as well as a few lioness. Understandably the game was scarce around this waterhole. We stayed with this pride for a while enjoying the interaction between the cubs and their mother.

After breakfast we drove to the Nebrowni waterhole and then on to the Gemsbokvlakta waterhole and as far as the Olifantsbad waterhole. Lions were already tucked in the shade at the Olifantsbad waterhole. We watched hundreds of red-capped larks at the Nebrowni waterhole and two secretary birds at the Gemsbokvlakta waterhole.

We took lunch back at camp and then some enjoyed some R&R - swimming, reading, sitting by the waterhole or snoozing... We went out again in the late afternoon, first to the edge of the pan at Pan's Edge, then to the Ondongab waterhole, back up to the Gemsbokvlakta waterhole, and then back to camp. We watched a yellow mongoose who had taken up residence under a road marker and also an early evening scrub hare. There was no power cut this evening and no rain, but still the odd strong gust of wind.

Accommodation: Okaukuejo Camp, Etosha National Park

Sunday 30 October 2016

Etosha National Park to Damaraland

We met up by the waterhole for the sunrise: giraffe, springbok, a black rhino and the ever present black-backed jackal were there. We had breakfast in the camp and then set off for the exit gate via the Ombika waterhole. Three lions already resting in the shade, and an assortment of game was seen. We left Etosha National Park and headed for the dry region of Damaraland. We stopped for a 'WiFi' coffee stop and a refueling stop at the town of Outjo (which had no WiFi!) and then again at Khorixas. We had a picnic lunch at the petrified forest place – again the temperatures in the shade were in the high 30's. We took a half hour walk afterwards to look at the petrified trees, that were washed down from further north in a great flood many moons ago. We arrived at our lodge in time for a swim and rest.

Accommodation: Twyfelfontein Lodge

Monday 31 October 2016

Damaraland / Twyfelfontein rock engravings and paintings

We had breakfast at a sensible time and I made a quick punctured tyre change and then we were off to the rock engravings and paintings at Twyfelfontein. We took the longer tour with Elizabeth our guide, who gave

us a great explanation and was happy to hear our thoughts on the subject. After the tour we sat by the spring for a while watching the birds and a dassie rat coming in to drink. Birds included Cape bunting, white-throated canary, red-eyed bulbul, glossy starling, pale-winged starling and Cape sparrow. There were signs of elephants and black rhino having been there before us, as I am sure were many other mammal species. We walked up the slopes a little to some rock paintings which were in a very different style to the engravings. On our return to the lodge we found a martial eagle cooling off in a pool of water. After a late lunch back at the lodge we had the rest of the afternoon to relax, swim and birdwatch about the camp.

Accommodation: Twyfelfontein Lodge

Tuesday 1 November 2016

Damaraland Skeleton Coast / Cape Cross Seal colony / Swakopmund

We had a good but slow (big corrugations on the road) long drive to Swakopmund today. We left after breakfast and then drove through Damaraland, stopping here and there to look at a bird or to take a photograph. Once we reached the coast at Henties Bay we took a detour to the Cape Cross seal colony. Lots of photos were taken of the seals and we were now seeing the shore birds: kelp gull, Hartlaub's gull, swift tern, ruddy turnstone, Cape gannet, white-breasted cormorant and Cape cormorant. Cormorants were nesting all over a shipwreck.

Accommodation: Walvis Bay

Wednesday 2 November 2016

Walvis Bay

The moon and the tides were in perfect harmony to expose the first mud flats as we started birdwatching after breakfast. We spent our morning looking out over hundreds of waders in all shapes and sizes. We had greater & lesser flamingos and great white pelicans at one end of the size scale and the little chestnut-banded plovers and sanderlings at the other – with everything in between, including Cape fur seal and black-backed jackal.

Ringed plover	White-fronted plover	Little egret
Chestnut-banded plover	Grey plover	Ruddy turnstone
Marsh sandpiper	Greenshank	Great white pelican
Curlew sandpiper	Little stint	Sanderling
Bar-tailed godwit	Ruff	Whimbrel
Grey phalarope	Pied avocet	Black-winged stilt
Kelp gull	Hartlaub's gull	Grey-headed gull
Caspian tern	Swift tern	Sandwich tern
Common tern	Damara tern	White-breasted cormorant
Cape cormorant	Grey heron	Cape teal
Greater flamingo	Lesser flamingo	

We had some free time to look around Swakopmund while I fixed a puncture, and we met up for lunch at a café in Swakopmund. After lunch we ventured deeper into the desert and the massive Namib-Naukluft National Park via the Swakop River Valley and the Moon Landscape, formed over 460 million years ago. As we crossed the Swakop River, the muddy pools of water played host to a number of waders; we had great views of three-banded plover, chestnut-banded plover and Cape teal (and the ever present lesser and greater flamingos). Very old welwitschias, dollar bushes, pencil bushes and mist-gathering lichens were seen; tractrac chat and familiar chat were seen at one of the view stops. We had dinner at the Raft restaurant.

Accommodation: Walvis Bay

Thursday 3 November 2016**Namib-Naukluft National Park**

We fuelled up at breakfast and then headed off into the unique ecosystem of gravel plains, sweeping dunes and dry river valleys of the Namib-Naukluft Desert. The sea fog and mist only subsided after about 60 kilometres, which gave us the first half hour in the cool.

We ventured deeper into the desert and the massive Namib-Naukluft National Park via the geologically amazing area. We stopped here and there to see what was flying and to do a bit of fossicking. We made it through to Sesriem for our picnic lunch (with apple pie) and then continued to our lodge. Before checking in to our lodge we walked down into the Sesriem Canyon. Sundowners were the order of the day as we watched the sun sink over the sand dunes of the desert.

Accommodation: Sesriem

Friday 4 November 2016**Sossusvlei**

04:45 departure.... We met up for coffee in the lounge and then set off in the dark for the dunes of Sossusvlei. It took us an hour to get to the end of the road where we had a ten minute wait for one of the 4x4 taxis. We went straight through to the main area of Sossusvlei and proceeded to climb the highest dune for the panoramic views from the top. We still had the place to ourselves by the time we got back down to our picnic breakfast, which was under a large old camel thorn tree in the company of Cape sparrows and familiar chats.

After breakfast we walked across to Dead Vlei, where large camel thorn trees, dead for want of water, still stand 900 years later. After a late lunch back at the lodge, we had the rest of the afternoon to relax, swim and birdwatch about the camp – at 37°C in the shade! In the late afternoon we drove back to Dune 45 for some more photography and the sunset.

Accommodation: Sesriem

Saturday 5 November 2016

We had a great sunrise over the desert and a 07:00hrs breakfast. We then packed our bags and vehicle and headed off for Windhoek and the airport. We had lunch in the airport café and then checked in to the transfer flight to Johannesburg. All goodbyes and farewells said, the group departed on their trip home with many memories (and photos). We saw 30 mammal species and plenty of good bird sightings; unfortunately not so many flowers – due to the lack of rain.