

# THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



## NAMIBIA

### Skeleton Coast & Etosha

19 – 31 October 2017

#### TOUR REPORT

**Leader: Geoff Crane**

##### **Day 1: Thursday 19 October 2017**

##### **Arrival at Windhoek Airport**

The group arrived at Windhoek Airport on time. Namaqua dove was the first bird to be seen at the airport and a lone Chacma baboon was seen hot footing it across the road to Windhoek. A shy vervet monkey was seen by one of the group as we drove past. We freshened up at our guest house in Windhoek and then had lunch at the local lodge café. Speckled pigeon, laughing dove, grey turaco, white-backed mousebird, red-eyed bulbul, white-browed sparrow-weaver, house sparrow and southern masked weaver were seen before lunch. After lunch we went for a walk around the Avis Dam Nature Reserve, which was very dry, but a small amount of water was still left from the rain at the start of the year.

We saw a good selection of birds and one mammal - yellow mongoose. Some of the birds that we saw well were: Bradfield's swift, little swift, greater-striped swallow, rock martin, Cape wagtail, African hoopoe, ground-scraper thrush, African pipit, reed cormorant, Egyptian goose, grey and black-headed heron, little grebe, yellow-billed egret, African sacred ibis, lots of blacksmiths lapwing and red-billed teal, chestnut-vented titbabbler, white-browed sparrow-weaver busy nest building. Rattling cisticola, fork-tailed drongo, black-throated canary and yellow canary, mountain wheatear, familiar chat, plain-backed pipit, pale-winged starling and a mixed flock of waders were on the muddy banks next to the water. Also, ruff, three-banded plover, wood sandpiper, common sandpiper, little stint and black-winged stilt. We had a fly past from a rock kestrel just before we left. We had a quick turnaround back at the lodge before going out to the lively and unusual Joe's Brewhouse for our dinner.

##### **Day 2: Friday 20 October 2017**

##### **Waterberg National Park**

After a leisurely breakfast we left our lodge and then spent an hour at the Windhoek National Botanical Gardens. The gardens were very dry but we still saw some good birds. Our walk through the gardens started with a look at some of the desert plants that we were likely to see on our travels. We then went for a circular walk through the gardens looking out for birds. The endemic white-tailed shrike was seen well, as well as rockrunner, common swift, Cape glossy starling, ground-scraper thrush, pale-winged starling and swallow-tailed bee-eater, plus plenty of nesting little swifts in the eaves of the Botanical Society building. Helmeted guineafowl, rufus-vented titbabbler, rattling cisticola, Marico flycatcher, scarlet-chested

sunbirds, house sparrow, southern masked weaver, blue waxbill and red-headed finch were seen. We also saw the yellow headed Namibian rock agama at the gardens as well as a few butterflies. *Acraea serena* was photographed and we also identified brown-veined meadow white and an orange tip.

We left Windhoek and the city rock doves (feral pigeons) and headed north towards the bushveld area of the Waterberg Plateau. As soon as we arrived at the park we were seeing new birds: Burchell's starling, Marico flycatcher, fork-tailed drongo, laughing dove, helmeted guineafowl, red-billed francolin and grey turaco.

We enjoyed lunch on the terrace overlooking the miles of bushveld below us. We had great views of scarlet-breasted sunbird and we watched a family of water mongoose as they went about their lunchtime business. We checked into our cottages and then had some time to relax through the heat of the early afternoon. Some of the group went for a swim and they saw Damara dik-dik on the lawns around the pool. At 4 o'clock we went for a walk through the forest - it was still very hot, but the birds and wildlife were up and about! At the start of the walk we had great views of a pair of Verreaux's eagle circling overhead and African hoopoe was on the lawn by the cottages. We also saw violet-eared waxbills and a large troop of Chacma baboons. Damara dik-dik were quite common in the dense bush - once you got your eye in!

On our walk through the forest we saw red-billed francolin, African grey hornbill and yellow-billed hornbill, cardinal woodpecker & bearded woodpecker, pririt batis, African red-eyed bulbul, white-browed scrub-robin, Southern masked weaver, lesser-masked weaver, dusky sunbird, Cape glossy and pale-winged starling, crimson-breasted shrike, green-winged pytilia, ground-scraper thrush, white-browed sparrow-weaver, long-billed crombec, chestnut-vented titbabbler, blue waxbill, red-headed finch, pin-tailed whydah, violet-eared waxbill, black-faced waxbill, grey-backed camaroptera, Cape wagtail, black-chested prinia, rosy-faced lovebird, grey turaco, Bradfield's swift, little swift, rock martin, white-backed mousebird and common scimitarbill.

One of our group walked up to the top of the escarpment for the view, while others in the group concentrated on some butterfly 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, foam grasshopper, spider hunting wasp, a red-veined damselfly and many butterfly species were also recorded: Darker commodore, *Precis antelope*. Green-veined emperor, *Charaxes candiope*. African ringlet, *Ypthima asterope*. Grass yellow, *eurema hecabe*. black pie, *Tuxentius melaena*. Citrus swallowtail, *Papilio demodocus demodocus*. Brown-veined white, *Belenois aurota aurota*. African monarch, *Danaus chrysippus aegyptius*. Pearl-spotted emperor, *Charaxes jahlusa*. Many small blue ones sp? Also, Julia skimmer, *Orthetrum Julia* and cattle louse fly, *Hippobosca rufipes*.

On the way down to dinner we had a family of warthogs and a number of Damara dik-diks on the lawns in front of the cottages. I think the lush green grass was tempting them in! On the way back to the cottages after dinner we saw a lesser bushbaby and a pearl-spotted owlet.

**Accommodation: Waterberg National Park Camp.**

### **Day 3: Saturday 21 October 2017**

#### **Waterberg National Park to Etosha National Park**

The pair of Verreaux's eagles were catching thermals high up on the cliff ledge above our cottages this morning. We had some birdwatching on the way to breakfast, with Rüppell's parrot and Alpine swift being spotted by some of the group and slender mongoose, banded mongoose and a tree squirrel were also seen. Then we were off to the Etosha National Park.

We stopped for a café lunch in an air conditioned coffee shop as the temperature was touching 40°C. We arrived at the Von Lindquist Gate, which is the eastern end of Etosha and we started birding and game watching straight away. Having checked in to our lodge we drove up to the Klein Okavi and Groot Okevi waterholes, which were very active with lots of mixed flocks of small birds. Mostly Cape sparrows but with

yellow canaries, red-headed finch, and non-breeding whydahs and widows, thrown in for good measure. The kudu were being very cautious; giraffe came down to the water to drink and there was a big warthog with menacing tusks enjoying the cool muddy water. Black-faced impala and kori bustard were also seen at this waterhole.

New birds for our ever growing bird list were: African ostrich, cattle egret, pale chanting goshawk, red-necked falcon, red-crested korhaan, double-banded sandgrouse, Cape turtle dove, purple roller, red-billed hornbill, red-capped lark, barn swallow, ashy tit, Kalahari scrub robin, brubru, Marico sunbird, great sparrow, southern grey-headed sparrow and scaly-feathered finch.

We saw our first elephants and Burchell's zebra, also gemsbok with their long straight horns. Black-backed jackal and steenbok were also seen.

We arrived back in camp just before the main gates were closed.... After dinner we spent some time at the flood-lit waterhole.

**Accommodation: Namutoni Camp, Etosha National Park.**

#### **Day 4: Sunday 22 October 2017**

##### **Etosha National Park**

We had a beautiful clear sky morning and sunrise. We went for a pre breakfast game drive to the Koinachas waterhole and then on to the Chudop waterhole. Black-shouldered kite, martial eagle, bateleur, northern black korhaan, double-banded courser were seen and there were plenty of Burchell's zebra, blue wildebeest, springbok and other plains game but alas, no cats – cheetah or lions. A black rhino was spotted off in the distance and as we sat and watched, it got closer and closer until it crossed the road right in front of us. A great sighting with plenty of photo 'memories'.

The white dust on the trees and bushes on the approach road to the Klein Namutoni waterhole gave the area a snow look. We photographed some black-faced impala in this 'snow' setting. There were plenty of new birds and old regulars at the Klein Namutoni waterhole: greenshank, Cape turtle dove, marabou stork, common sandpiper, Cape shoveller, ruff, wood and marsh sandpiper, three-banded plover, Kittlitz's plover, tawny eagle, crested francolin, crowned lapwing, emerald-spotted wood-dove, common moorhen, barn swallow and loads of helmeted guineafowl were also seen.

After a late breakfast we drove around Fischer's Pan loop and the local area spotting new birds and photographing mammals. At the Twin Palms waterhole we saw a large male warthog and a large herd of blue wildebeest. We watched two bull elephants at the Groot Okevi waterhole, as well as kudu, black-faced impala, gemsbok and giraffe.



We spotted three cheetahs resting up in the shade of a tree. Unfortunately the heat haze was getting up so no clear photos were taken. We had lunch and some R&R during the heat of the day and then went out again in the afternoon. Golden-breasted bunting, red-billed quelea (by the thousands) red-billed buffalo-weaver, ant-eating chat, red-breasted swallow, pied crow and emerald-spotted wood-dove were some of the new birds for the trip.

Our afternoon drive took us three or four kilometres in all directions trying to find the cheetahs – but to no avail. We drove around the Dik-dik Loop and then spent some time at the Klein Namutoni waterhole. A spotted eagle owl was seen at the waterhole after dinner and we could hear the yelping of spotted hyaena and the roar of lion not too far away!

**Accommodation: Namutoni Camp, Etosha National Park.**

#### **Day 5: Monday 23 October 2017**

##### **Etosha National Park**

We were the first vehicle out as the main gates opened at 06:30. Our target was to find the cheetahs that we had seen yesterday - but this was not to be. We did, however, see a large herd of very relaxed springbok (so there were obviously no cheetahs about!) There was a huge herd of Burchell's zebra, around 1,000 individuals heading towards the Namutoni waterhole (a 'dazzle' of zebra!) We watched a couple of displaying kori bustards and then we headed back to camp via the Klein Namutoni waterhole. Burchell's zebra, blue wildebeest, black-faced impala, giraffe and kudu were seen at the waterhole as well as all the usual birds. Back to camp for a well deserved breakfast and then we packed the vehicle and set off for our lunch stop at Halali Camp.

The veld was very dry and the game and birdlife was very much centered around any available water, so with this in mind, we decided to take a route that took us past a number of waterholes. The first waterhole was the Koinachas waterhole, where we saw a lion disappearing into the trees. Not great views – but a lion! 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 seen a large herd of elephants moving with purpose through the mopani bushveld further down the road. So we sat patiently at the waterhole, waiting for the elephants to arrive - We were rewarded with fantastic views of this large family herd coming in to drink. At one stage they were all lined up on the opposite bank facing us while quenching their thirst. The order of events were: first - quench thirst, second - cool off in water, third - dust bath, fourth - back to the mopani to continue feeding....

After a quick tyre change due to a puncture, we were at Halali camp for lunch. A white-crowned shrike was being very photogenic and the 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... We stopped 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 secretarybird and also a few close views of kori bustards. Black-necked grebe, African hawk eagle, greater kestrel, African jacana, Namaqua sandgrouse, African cuckoo, Eurasian bee-eater, rufous-naped lark, Sabota lark, black crow, yellow-bellied eremomela, white-crowned shrike, wattled starling, greater blue-eared starling, sociable weaver and secretarybird were new birds for the trip list. Lion and red hartebeest were the new mammals for the trip.

We spent what was left of the afternoon in camp, enjoying the camp waterhole, which had a black rhino drinking water on our arrival. Red-billed quelea were flocking together and making a great 'murmuration' sunset show, while using a large tree by the waterhole as a gathering spot. After dinner the floodlights at the waterhole were on and we saw black rhino, giraffe and black-backed jackal. Much later on into the night a lion with cubs arrived at the waterhole.

**Accommodation: Okaukuejo Camp, Etosha National Park**

#### **Day 6: Tuesday 24 October 2017**

##### **Etosha National Park**

This morning we started the day with the birds and mammals at sunrise, for a two hour local drive to the Okondeka waterhole. We first noticed that there was very little game at the water, with only a few mammals way out on the salt pan. Then we saw why – a pride of lions. Understandably the game was

scarce around this waterhole. We stayed with this pride for a while enjoying the interaction between its members. Burchell's courser, lappet-faced vulture, brown snake eagle and grey-backed finchlark were new birds for us. We also saw double-banded courser, & white-backed vulture, red-necked falcon and plenty of larks were seen on the way back to camp.

After breakfast we met up at the waterhole with the intention of going out on a game drive for the morning. There was so much happening at the waterhole with hundreds of mammals coming and going, we ended up staying there all morning. Kudu, hundreds of springbok, gemsbok, black-faced impala, black-backed jackal, giraffe, Burchell's zebra, blue wildebeest all coming and going in their droves. The first small herd of elephants came in from the far bushes midmorning, followed by half a dozen more groups. At one stage we had more than fifty elephants at the waterhole.



After lunch we had some down time - swimming, reading, sitting by the waterhole or snoozing – before heading out again in the late afternoon, first to the Nebrowni waterhole and then on to the Gemsbokvlakta waterhole and as far as the Olifantsbad waterhole. We watched hundreds of red-capped larks at the Nebrowni waterhole and two secretarybirds at the Gemsbokvlakta waterhole; at Olifantsbad we saw two new birds, lark-like buntings and a short-toed rock thrush.

The springbok lambs were 'finding their feet' on their new born legs and we saw a scrub hare, which stayed still long enough for us all to see well. When we returned to the camp there was a large black rhino at the camp waterhole and perhaps six or seven thousand red-billed quelea flying into roost.

**Accommodation: Okaukuejo Camp, Etosha National Park**

**Day 7: Wednesday 25 October 2017**

**Etosha National Park to Damaraland**

We met up by the waterhole for the sunrise and for the start of a pre breakfast birdwatching walk. Acacia pied barbet and white-throated swallow were new to our list. Other birds seen were red-billed francolin, African hoopoe, ashy tit, red-eyed bulbul, ground-scraper thrush, chestnut-vented titbabbler, Marico

flycatcher, crimson-breasted shrike, brubru, golden-breasted bunting, yellow canary, green-winged pytilia, scaly-feathered finch, red-billed quelea, Southern masked weaver, Southern grey-headed sparrow, sociable weaver, white-browed sparrow-weaver, scarlet-chested sunbird, dusky sunbird, glossy starling and white-crowned shrike.

After breakfast we set off for the exit gate via the Ombika waterhole, with giraffe, springbok, impala and some male kudu with very impressive horns. We left Etosha National Park and headed for the dry region of Damaraland. We stopped for a 'WiFi' coffee stop and a tyre change / refueling stop at the town of Outjo and then we were off towards Khorixas. We stopped at the 'petrified forest' and the group went for a half hour walk looking at the petrified trees, accompanied by a local guide. These trees were washed down from further north in a great flood many moons ago. We arrived at our lodge later in the day, in time for a swim and rest.

**Accommodation: Twyfelfontein Lodge.**

#### **Day 8: Thursday 26 October 2017**

##### **Damaraland / Twyfelfontein rock engravings and paintings**

We had breakfast at a sensible time and then we were off to the rock engravings at Twyfelfontein - which means 'doubtful spring'. We had a local guide to explain the rock engravings to us. After the tour, some of the group sat by the 'doubtful' spring for a while watching the birds and a dassie rat coming in to drink. Cape bunting, white-throated canary, red-eyed bulbul, glossy starling, pale-winged starling and Cape sparrows were seen. There were signs of elephants and black rhino having been there before us and perhaps zebra and a few different buck species.

We set off towards the cold waters of the Atlantic Ocean stopping at Uis for a light lunch. We started to see the sea mist when we were still 50 kilometre from the coast and as soon as we arrived at the coast we started to see turnstones, grey plover, white-fronted plover, cormorants, gannets, gulls and terns. We stopped to watch a family of suricates going about their business. Here we also saw the endemic gray's lark and trac trac chat. Both these birds were seen well.

Our rooms had views of the sea so we could enjoy a cup of tea while sitting on the balcony. (And the temperature was 25°C cooler than Etosha!)

**Accommodation: Cape Cross Lodge.**

#### **Day 9: Friday 27 October 2017**

##### **Damaraland Skeleton Coast / Cape Cross Seal colony / Swakopmund**

Some of the group went for an early morning walk along the beach, seeing bottlenose dolphins and Cape fur seals in the surf, birds on the beach and black-backed jackals in the dunes. After breakfast we packed the vehicle and set off to the seal colony.

We arrived at the Cape fur seal colony a little bit too early - the gate was still closed. So we spent some time looking at the lichen fields, which survive from the fog & mist precipitation. The Cape fur seal colony was as stinky as ever, but with an abundance of seals & pups and plenty of great photographic opportunities. 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 were seen. Black-backed jackals were also hanging around on the peripheries of the colony.

We stopped at a shipwreck on the way to Swakopmund. This fishing vessel had run aground many years ago and was now covered in white-breasted cormorants nesting all over the wreck. Gray's lark and trac trac chat were seen again on the way to Swakopmund.

We arrived in Swakopmund in time for a nice lunch at Anton's café and as the tide and the weather was in our favor we decided to swap around our days a bit. So we spent the afternoon birdwatching around the

Walvis Bay lagoon and salt pans. We had greater flamingos and great white pelicans at one end of the size scale and the little chestnut-banded plovers, little stints 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	Cape wagtail	Whimbrel
Pied avocet	Black-winged stilt	Black-necked grebe
Kelp gull	Hartlaub's gull	African black oystercatcher
Caspian tern	Swift tern	Sandwich tern
Common tern	Damara tern	White-breasted cormorant
Cape cormorant	Grey heron	Cape teal
Greater flamingo	Common sandpiper	

We went out to a local restaurant called 'The Raft' as it is situated at the end of a pier.

**Accommodation: Lagoon Lodge, Walvis Bay**

#### **Day 10: Saturday 28 October 2017**

##### **Walvis Bay / Swakop River valley and the Moon Landscape**

After breakfast we ventured 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. The dirt road was very corrugated but we persevered and made it to the very old Welwitschias, *Welwitschia mirabilis*. We also saw plenty of the dollar bushes, *Zygophyllum stapffii*, pencil bushes, *Arthroerua leubnitziae*, Bushman's candle, *Sarcocaulon sp.*, aloes and mist-gathering lichens. Tractrac chats were seen at one of the view stops. We had lunch back in Swakopmund and then group had some free time to look around Swakopmund.

We spent the rest of the afternoon walking along the promenade in front of our lodge looking at all the waders and photographing the flamingos, and had dinner at the Raft restaurant again.

**Accommodation: Lagoon Lodge, Walvis Bay.**

#### **Day 11: Sunday 29 October 2017**

##### **Namib-Naukluft National Park**

We fueled 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 of driving in the cool.

We stopped here and there to see what was flying and to do a bit of fossicking. Gemsbok, springbok and Hartmann's mountain zebra were seen across the gravel plains. We made it through to Solitaire for our picnic lunch, where we had Cape sparrow and house sparrow join us at the table! We then continued to our lodge seeing a small herd of blue wildebeest just before arriving.

Sundowners before dinner was the order of the day as we watched the sun sink over the sand dunes of the desert. Springbok, gemsbok and black-backed jackal came up to the flood lit waterhole during our al fresco dinner.

**Accommodation: Sossus Dune Lodge.**

#### **Day 12: Monday 30 October 2017**

##### **Sossusvlei**

04:45 departure.... We met up for coffee in the lounge and then we 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 part the way up the highest dune for the panoramic views. We just about 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. We found a spotted eagle owl roosting in a camel thorn tree and there were a few gemsbok and springbok walking through the area. On the way back we saw Rüppell's korhaan, black & pied crow and fiscal shrike.

We had lunch back at the lodge followed by some down time to relax or swim. We had spike-heeled larks around our lodge and mountain wheatear as well. Later on in the afternoon some of the group walked down the Sesriem Canyon. This water eroded canyon must be about 60 metres deep offering a cool shelter to birds and mammals during the heat of the day. We found an interesting beetle at the top of the canyon: a long-legged darkling beetle, *Stenocara dentate*.

Our luxury 'tents' had fantastic views across the plains to the red sand dunes in the far distance. A few cold beers whilst watching the sun go down followed by a good dinner was a good way to end the day!

**Accommodation: Sossus Dune Lodge.**

### **Day 13: Tuesday 31 October 2017**

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. Not much happened en route. We stopped a few times for iconic trees, the first being a bottle tree, *Pachypodium lealii* (we gave it a good tree hug). The second tree was a big old quiver tree, *Aloe dichotoma*. We had lunch in the airport café and then checked in to the transfer flight to Cape Town. All goodbyes and farewells said, the group departed on their trip home with many memories (and photos). All in all, we saw 31 mammal species and plenty of good bird sightings.