

South Africa - Kruger

Naturetrek Tour Report

21 - 30 October 2016



Young male Lion



Burchell's Zebras



Spotted Hyena lying in a pool of water



Marabou Storks

Report and images by Toby Esplin



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Tour participants: Toby Esplin (leader) with a group of four Naturetrek clients

Summary

On the tour we covered a good variety of landscapes and varying habitats, and were really lucky to have been rewarded with excellent sightings of almost every species we aimed for, excluding Wild Dog. Although the temperatures were high, most species were seen in abundance. The species mentioned in the daily summaries are some of those seen at each locality. Please refer to detailed checklist at end of the report for a comprehensive list of species seen on the tour.

Day 1

Friday 21st October

In flight from London Heathrow Airport

The tour started with an overnight flight from Heathrow airport to South Africa

Day 2

Saturday 22nd October

Johannesburg airport to Dullstroom & Verloren Vallei Nature Reserve

After the quickest clearance of passport control at OR Tambo International Airport, Johannesburg Toby had experienced (25 minutes), we made our way out of the bustling city and headed to the scenic town of Dullstroom. Without delaying or missing an opportunity to view the wildlife along the way, we started to add a few bird species to our lists whilst driving past numerous farm dams and marshes, but the real excitement came when we pulled in to the Alzu Petropoort for a refreshment stop and were rewarded with our first mammal sightings. The Alzu Petropoort is located about halfway between Johannesburg and Nelspruit and has a variety of game species including White Rhinoceros, African Buffalo, Eland, Gemsbok and Ostrich, to name but a few.

Back on the road and a little while later, we stopped at Harries Pancakes restaurant for an early lunch. Given that we had arrived with time in hand, we made our way to the Dullstroom Bird of Prey Centre. After a guided walk, led by Toby, around the main enclosures, learning about the various native birds of prey, we sat down to watch the afternoon flight display of some of these majestic creatures of the skies, with Lanner Falcon, Barn Owl, Jackal Buzzard and Verreaux's Eagle all being displayed.

Having several hours of the afternoon left, we made a short drive to the Verloren Vallei Nature Reserve where we were lucky enough to find Grey Rhebok, Blesbok and Oribi, along with a few more bird species.

With the lack of sleep on the plane starting to take its toll, we headed back to the lodge for an early dinner and an early night in preparation for tomorrow's entrance into the Kruger National Park.

Mammals for the day: 3

Day 3

Sunday 23rd October

Dullstroom to Orpen Gate, then Satara, Kruger National Park

After a rather restless night for everybody, with an impressive thunder and rain storm around midnight keeping everybody awake, we had breakfast and then headed off toward the Kruger National Park for what was to be a very productive day. It started with a close sighting of a Long-crested Eagle shortly after leaving Dullstroom that caught a large Rat close to the side of the road. We then saw a number of mammal species along the way, such as the Vervet Monkeys and Chacma Baboons, and after our arrival into the Kruger, things didn't slow down. Along with several sightings of the endangered Southern Ground Hornbill, we saw numerous general plains game and a small group of three young male Lions, before checking in to Satara.

While checking in, we were told of a nearby Cheetah sighting, so after quickly dropping the bags, we headed out to the famed dirt road, the S100, to be rewarded not only with a fantastic Cheetah sighting, but we also saw several White-backed and Hooded Vultures; both endangered species. We returned for dinner and did our best to regain strength and stamina after the hot and dehydrating day. We then retired to bed, hoping that tomorrow would also present us with so much to see.

Mammals for the day: 18

Day 4

Monday 24th October

Satara Region

After early tea, coffee and rusks, we headed out for a birthday drive (Denise's birthday) and had some amazing sightings. A kilometre along the S100 we found two male Lions, one in the road, and then only a few hundred metres further, a pair of mating Leopards! After enjoying these incredible sightings we moved on, finding a day-old baby Elephant with her mother, two more male Lions, and on our return to camp for breakfast, a lone male Buffalo.

While at breakfast we heard about a Rhinoceros sighting, so headed there to fulfil our 'Big 5' sightings, before having a rest in the hottest part of the day, back at camp. After an appreciated cool down in our air-conditioned rooms, we headed out on a short drive to find that the Crocodile we had seen yesterday was still trying to submerge himself deeper into his drying mud pool to escape the heat. The heat didn't seem to affect all animals. While watching a small herd of Elephants after they had been drinking at the Girivana Dam, a curious Smith's Bush Squirrel climbed onto the side of the open safari vehicle, climbing rather energetically from side to side in the hope that somebody would give it some food.

Mammals for the day: 22

Day 5

Tuesday 25th October

Satara Region, then to Skukuza via Tshokwane, Skukuza Region

The current drought had had a very big impact on the central regions of Kruger National Park, and the grasslands typical to this region were mostly bare soil. With thunderstorms rolling in overnight and bringing

some much needed rain, the morning drive was expectedly abundant with plenty of plains game. Even the smallest amount of rain helps to produce green foliage. Leading up to this rain, it has been interesting to observe that several grazing species, such as the African Buffalo, had turned primarily to browsing the Mopani trees, to maintain their regular food and nutrition intake.

Returning to camp and loading the vehicle before breakfast, we then headed to Skukuza, finding a lone and rather thin (perhaps due to TB) Lioness who was investigating a very old Buffalo carcass. After stopping at the Tshokwane picnic area for a quick bite to eat and a leg stretch, we came across what at first was a rather unusual sighting: a Spotted Hyena, head in perfect condition, sitting in what appeared to be a very shallow mud pool. We were all silent while trying to figure it out, until we saw movement. The Hyena stood up and repositioned itself, before lying back down again. Clearly the mud pool was a lot deeper than what we first perceived.

After checking in at Skukuza, we took an afternoon drive along the Sabie River. Everyone was so excited as we watched a newly born Elephant crossing the river with the rest of its herd, that we almost missed seeing a Lioness standing only metres away from the front of the vehicle! We turned our attention to the Lioness and after following her for a kilometre or so, we returned for dinner and an early night after another hot day.

Mammals for the day: 21

Day 6

Wednesday 26th October

Skukuza Region

Heading back along the Sabie River for our morning drive, we found a lone male Lion in the riverbed, sharing a Buffalo kill with a Nile Crocodile! While watching this, three Cape Clawless Otters walked past in the background, and we spotted a number of bird species. A truly privileged sighting! Moving further along the river, we found another Lioness, but after viewing her for a short while, she moved out of sight. Then, just before reaching the high level bridge where we would cross over to the other side of the river, we were rewarded with a Cheetah lying on a sand bank. As the traffic at this sighting started to build up, we decided to move on, and while admiring the scenery from the high level bridge, noticed that we also had an open view of the Cheetah, but with no other cars around. We admired the Cheetah a little more before heading back to Skukuza for breakfast.

For our next drive, we avoided the heat of the day by visiting the Lake Panic Bird Hide, where we were rewarded with far more sightings than expected for a relatively short stay: Hippopotamus, Nile Crocodile, African Fish Eagle, Pied and Malachite Kingfishers, Southern Giraffe, Bushbuck and Nyala to name but a few of the species seen there. On leaving Lake Panic, we headed down to the nearby Kruger Gate in search of a Leopard that had recently been seen there, however, we weren't lucky. The remainder of the afternoon provided us with some of the best sightings of White Rhinoceros, several large herds of Elephants and a very large herd of African Buffalo.

Mammals for the day: 23

Day 7

Thursday 27th October

Skukuza Region, then to Pretoriuskop via Lower Sabie and Mpondo Dam

This morning we received some very sad news when, over the radio, Toby heard that one of the White Rhino's that we had been viewing yesterday afternoon had been killed by poachers overnight. The reality of the effects of poaching really hits home when an animal you were viewing only hours before, has been killed to feed such a controversial remedy. The effects of poaching are having a detrimental effect on the populations in large conservation areas and what used to be a relatively easy species to find, has now become one of the harder species.

Scanning the banks of the Sabie River on our morning drive, we found the lone male Lion with his Buffalo kill, though this time he had it all to himself, occasionally chasing a brave White-backed Vulture that would step a little closer hoping to get some tasty morsels from the carcass. Heading up to Lower Sabie for a late breakfast, there was lots of Elephant activity along the river as the temperature starting to climb early in the day. Everything else seemed to be retreating to the shade for much of our journey to Pretoriuskop, where we also opted to retire for an afternoon in camp, and a visit to the cool waters of the camp's swimming pool.

Mammals for the day: 21

Day 8

Friday 28th October

Pretoriuskop Region

Taking a short drive to Transport Dam and back this morning, we found a nice-sized herd of Sable Antelope; a species not regularly seen in Kruger, which only holds a few isolated populations throughout the park. Sightings of some more general game species such as Kudu and Waterbuck were really good this morning, and in contrast to what we had prepared ourselves for with the news of the Rhinoceros poaching yesterday, we had fantastic sightings of White Rhinoceros and on the return to camp for breakfast, we found a large herd of Buffalo in the distance. The late afternoon drive, however, was fairly unproductive with the temperatures again reaching the 40's.

Mammals for the day: 18

Day 9

Saturday 29th October

Pretoriuskop Region, then to O.R. Tambo Airport, Johannesburg

Taking a relaxed morning drive around the camp area this morning, it was nice to find water on the Fayi Loop, with the herd of Sable Antelope we had seen yesterday and a small herd of Buffalo drinking among the reeds. We took extra time to appreciate the smaller things like the dragonflies, and Linda's sharp eyes came in very handy, finding a pair of Little Bee-eaters catching insects around the shallows of the pools.

Returning to camp and after packing our bags for the last time, we had breakfast and one last short drive to find Hippopotamus, Elephant and Giraffe, before changing back into the closed vehicle at Numbi Gate and making our way back to Johannesburg.

At Johannesburg airport we said our thanks and goodbyes to Toby before catching our overnight flight back to the UK.

Mammals for the day: 16

Day 10

Sunday 30th October

Return flight to the UK

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

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Lion and Nile Crocodile

Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	October								
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	
1	Sable Antelope	<i>Hippotragus niger</i>							✓	✓	✓
2	Chacma Baboon	<i>Papio ursinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Honey Badger	<i>Mellivora capensis</i>		✓							
4	Blesbok	<i>Damaliscus dorcas phillipsi</i>	✓								
5	Cape Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Thick-tailed Bushbaby	<i>Otolemur crassicaudatus</i>			✓	✓					
7	Bushbuck	<i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i>				✓	✓	✓			
8	Cheetah	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>		✓				✓			
9	Common Duiker	<i>Sylvicapra grimmia</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	African Elephant	<i>Loxodonta Africana</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Southern Giraffe	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Hippopotamus	<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Spotted Hyena	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>				✓	✓	✓			
14	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Black-backed Jackal	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>			✓						
16	Klipspringer	<i>Oreotragus oreotragus</i>				✓	✓			✓	
17	Greater Kudu	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>			✓						
19	Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
20	Banded Mongoose	<i>Mungos mungo</i>			✓						
21	Dwarf Mongoose	<i>Helogale parvula</i>									✓
22	Slender Mongoose	<i>Galerella sanguine</i>		✓							
23	Vervet Monkey	<i>Cercopithecus aethiops</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	Nyala	<i>Tragelaphus angasii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
25	Oribi	<i>Ourebia ourebi</i>	✓								
26	Cape Clawless Otter	<i>Aonyx capensis</i>					✓				
27	Grey Rhebok	<i>Palea capreolus</i>	✓								
28	White Rhinoceros	<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Tree Squirrel	<i>Paraxerus cepapi</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Steenbok	<i>Raphicerus campestris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus aethiopicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Common Waterbuck	<i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Blue Wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Burchell's Zebra	<i>Equus burchelli</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Birds (E – endemic; NE – near endemic)

Common name	Scientific name
Common Ostrich	<i>Struthio camelus</i>
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
White-breasted Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Reed Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax africanus</i>
African Darter	<i>Anhinga rufa</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Black-headed Heron	<i>Ardea melanocephala</i>
Goliath Heron	<i>Ardea goliath</i>
Great Egret	<i>Casmerodiusa albus</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>
Hamerkop	<i>Scopus umbretta</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>
Saddle-billed Stork	<i>Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis</i>
Marabou Stork	<i>Leptoptilos crumeniferus</i>
Yellow-billed Stork	<i>Mycteria ibis</i>
African Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Hadeda Ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>
African Spoonbill	<i>Platalea alba</i>
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>
White-faced Duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>
Yellow-billed Duck	<i>Anas undulate</i>
African Black Duck	<i>Anas sparsa</i>
Hooded Vulture	<i>Necrosyrtes monachus</i>
White-backed Vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>
Lappet-faced Vulture	<i>Torgos tracheliotus</i>
Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius</i>
Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>
African Cuckoo Hawk	<i>Aviceda cuculoides</i>
Tawny Eagle	<i>Aquila rapax</i>
Lesser Spotted Eagle	<i>Aquila pomarina</i>
Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Aquila wahlbergi</i>
African Hawk-Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus fasciatus</i>
Long-crested Eagle	<i>Lophaetus occipitalis</i>
Martial Eagle	<i>Polemaetus bellicosus</i>
Brown Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus cinereus</i>
Black-chested Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>
Bataleur	<i>Terathopius ecaudatus</i>
African Fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus vocifer</i>
Steppe Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Jackal Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufofuscus</i>
African Goshawk	<i>Accipiter tachiro</i>
Dark Chanting Goshawk	<i>Melierax metabates</i>
Rock Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Crested Francolin	<i>Francolinus sephaena</i>
Natal Francolin (NE)	<i>Francolinus natalensis</i>
Swainson's Spurfowl (NE)	<i>Francolinus swainsonii</i>
Helmeted Guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>
Black Crane	<i>Amaurornis flavirostris</i>
Red-knobbed Coot	<i>Fulica cristata</i>
Kori Bustard	<i>Ardeotis kori</i>
Denham's Bustard	<i>Neotis denhami</i>
Red-crested Korhaan (NE)	<i>Eupodotis ruficrista</i>
Black-bellied Bustard	<i>Eupodotis melanogaster</i>
African Jacana	<i>Actophilornis africanus</i>
Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>
Crowned Lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>
Blacksmith Lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>
White-crowned Lapwing	<i>Vanellus albiceps</i>
African Wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus senegallus</i>
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Spotted Thick-Knee	<i>Burhinus capensis</i>
Water Thick-knee	<i>Burhinus vermiculatus</i>
Grey-headed Gull	<i>Larus cirrocephalus</i>
White-winged Tern	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>
Speckled Pigeon	<i>Columba guinea</i>
African Mourning Dove	<i>Streptopelia decipiens</i>
Cape Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>
Laughing Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
Emerald-spotted Wood-Dove	<i>Turtur chalcospilos</i>
Brown-headed Parrot	<i>Poicephalus cryptoxanthus</i>
Purple-crested Turaco	<i>Tauraco porphyreolophus</i>
Grey Go-away Bird	<i>Corythaixoides concolor</i>
Diederik Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx caprius</i>
Burchell's Coucal (E)	<i>Centropus burchellii</i>
African Black Swift	<i>Apus barbatus</i>
White-rumped Swift	<i>Apus caffer</i>
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>
Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
Brown-hooded Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon albiventris</i>
Striped Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon chelicuti</i>
European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
White-fronted Bee-eater	<i>Merops bullockoides</i>
Little Bee-eater	<i>Merops pusillus</i>
Lilac-breasted Roller	<i>Coracias caudate</i>
Purple Roller	<i>Coracias naevia</i>
African Hoopoe	<i>Upupa Africana</i>
Green Woodhoopoe	<i>Phoeniculus purpureus</i>
Common Scimitarbill	<i>Rhinopomastus cyanomelas</i>
African Grey Hornbill	<i>Tockus nasutus</i>
Red-billed Hornbill	<i>Tockus erythrorhynchus</i>
Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill	<i>Tockus leucomelas</i>
Southern Ground Hornbill	<i>Bucorvus leadbeateri</i>
Black-collared Barbet	<i>Lybius torquatus</i>
Acacia Pied Barbet (NE)	<i>Tricholaema leucomelas</i>
Crested Barbet	<i>Trachyphonus vaillantii</i>
Bennett's Woodpecker	<i>Campethera bennettii</i>
Cardinal Woodpecker	<i>Dendropicops fuscescens</i>
Sabota Lark (NE)	<i>Mirafra sabota</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
White-throated Swallow	<i>Hirundo albigularis</i>
Red-breasted Swallow	<i>Hirundo semirufa</i>
Greater Striped Swallow	<i>Hirundo cucullata</i>
Fork-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>
Eastern Black-headed Oriole	<i>Oriolus larvatus</i>
Cape Crow	<i>Corvus capensis</i>
Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>
Southern Black Tit	<i>Parus niger</i>
Arrow-marked Babbler	<i>Turdoides jardineii</i>
Dark-capped Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>
Kurrichane Thrush	<i>Turdus libonyana</i>
Groundscraper Thrush	<i>Turdus litsitsirupa</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Mountain Wheatear (NE)	<i>Oenanthe monticola</i>
Ant-eating Chat (E)	<i>Myrmecocichla formicivora</i>
African Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>
White-browed Scrub-Robin	<i>Erthropygia leucophrys</i>
Long-billed Crombec	<i>Sylvietta rufescens</i>
Rattling Cisticola	<i>Cisticola chiniana</i>
Levaillant's Cisticola	<i>Cisticola tinniens</i>
Neddicky	<i>Cisticola fulvicapillus</i>
Tawny-flanked Prinia	<i>Prinia subflava</i>
Southern Black Flycatcher	<i>Melaenornis pammelaina</i>
Chin-spot Batis	<i>Batis molitor</i>
African Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla aguimp</i>
African Pipit	<i>Anthus cinnamomeus</i>
Cape Longclaw (E)	<i>Macronyx capensis</i>
Lesser Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius minor</i>
Common Fiscal	<i>Lanius collaris</i>
Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>
Magpie Shrike	<i>Corvinella melanoleuca</i>
Southern Boubou (E)	<i>Laniarius ferrugineus</i>
Black-backed Puffback	<i>Dryoscopus cubla</i>
Brown-crowned Tchagra	<i>Tchagra australis</i>
Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike	<i>Telophorus sulfureopectus</i>
Grey-headed Bush-Shrike	<i>Malaconotus blanchoti</i>
White-crested Helmet-Shrike	<i>Prionops plumatus</i>
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
Pied Starling (E)	<i>Spreo bicolor</i>
Wattled Starling	<i>Creatophora cinerea</i>
Violet-backed Starling	<i>Cinnyricinclus leucogaster</i>
Burchell's Starling (NE)	<i>Lamprotornis australis</i>
Cape Glossy Starling	<i>Lamprotornis nitens</i>
Greater Blue-eared Starling	<i>Lamprotornis chalybaeus</i>
Red-winged Starling	<i>Onychognathus morio</i>
Red-billed Oxpecker	<i>Buphagus erythrorhynchus</i>
Greater Double-collared Sunbird (E)	<i>Nectarinia afra</i>
White-bellied Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia talatala</i>
Scarlet-chested Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia senegalensis</i>
Red-billed Buffalo Weaver	<i>Bubalornis niger</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>
Village (Spotted-backed) Weaver	<i>Ploceus cucullatus</i>
Cape Weaver (E)	<i>Ploceus capensis</i>
Red-headed Weaver	<i>Anaplectes rubriceps</i>
Red-billed Quelea	<i>Quelea quelea</i>
Long-tailed Widowbird	<i>Euplectes pronge</i>
Green-winged Pytilia	<i>Pytilia melba</i>
Blue Waxbill	<i>Uraeginthus angolensis</i>
Cut-throat Finch	<i>Amadina fasciata</i>
Black-throated Canary	<i>Serinus atrogularis</i>
Cape Canary	<i>Serinus canicollis</i>
Golden-breasted Bunting	<i>Emberiza flaviventris</i>
Shaft-tailed Whydah	<i>Vidua regia</i>
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
South African Shelduck	<i>Tadorna cana</i>