

# South Africa – Kruger (Mammals)

Naturetrek Tour Report

21st – 28th October 2023

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African Bush Elephant



Cape Buffalo



African Wild Dog



Lion

Tour report kindly written by Naturetrek client John Moseley

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Tour participants: Gavin Sims (Leader) with six Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

## Sunday 22nd October

Our African adventure began with an overnight flight from London Heathrow to Johannesburg a day in advance of the rest of our group, as work commitments meant we had to leave the tour two days early. After the eleven-hour flight, we were met by our guide, Gavin Sims, at the airport and taken to the nearby Rietvlei Nature Reserve prior to an overnight stay at the fabulous African Sky Boutique Hotel. Rietvlei is somewhat incongruously set within an urban environment on the outskirts of Pretoria and covers around 3,800 hectares of highveld or open grassland habitat. It is home to a range of fantastic bird and mammal species, all of which are relatively easy to see given the compact size of the reserve. Our first bird sightings of the trip around the entrance to the reserve included Rock Martin, Fiscal Flycatcher and Cape White-eye, as well as a foraging Hadada Ibis.

Once on the reserve, a quick stop at a hide overlooking a large lake also yielded a resplendent Southern Red Bishop busy collecting nesting material, as well as Southern Masked Weaver, Greater Striped Swallow and White-throated Swallow. Cape Longclaws were an eye-catching sight moving through the roadside margins and it wasn't long before we spotted our first Water Thick-knee, one of our key target bird species for the trip. Long-tailed Widowbirds proved to be a regular sight as we moved around the reserve, as were Ostrich, which roamed freely among the grassy plains and were perhaps our first real confirmation that we were indeed in Africa on safari: a thrilling realisation.

Gavin suggested we try a particular area for Northern Black Korhaan, a species of bustard typical for the habitat and location and one was easily found in its likely location. Mammal sightings for the day included our first Cape Buffalo (Big Five Species No.1), Black Wildebeest, Plains Zebra and the impressively-sized Red Hartebeest, together with Common Eland and Waterbuck. We left the reserve and made our way to our overnight stay, where Gavin encouraged us to keep an eye out for Karoo Thrush, which does not occur in Kruger. We duly spotted a couple of individuals hopping about near the hotel entrance. So ended our first day in South Africa, with forty-one bird species added to the life list as well as six mammal species: a hugely encouraging start to the trip.

## Day 2

## Monday 23rd October

Following a gratifying breakfast, we waited in the hotel for Gavin and the rest of the group, who had arrived overnight from the UK. A stroll around the hotel grounds yielded a brief but spectacular glimpse of a male African Paradise Flycatcher in full breeding plumage: a truly stunning bird. Another fleeting visitor was a Crested Barbet, of which we were to get even more confiding views later in the trip.

Once we loaded up with Gavin and the rest of our group, we began making our way on the long drive to Dullstroom, which was to be our overnight stop before entering Kruger the following day. Gavin had pre-warned us that the drive was not particularly interesting as much of it was through farmland and therefore bird and mammal species would be thin on the ground. Nevertheless, we stopped at a small lake en route and picked up Cape Shoveler, Maccoa Duck and Southern Pochard. A second look prompted by the ever-eagle-eyed Dan yielded a Capped Wheatear perched up along a barbed-wire fence. Further into our journey, we stopped at what looked to all intents and purposes like a very normal motorway service station. However, this particular service stop has a feeding station out back, which attracts herds of completely wild but somewhat habituated Southern White Rhino

(Big Five Species No.2), Oryx, Sable Antelope and Blesbok. Another potent reminder, if one were needed, that we were in a country quite unlike any other.

We eventually reached our destination, The Old Transvaal Inn at Dullstroom and after dropping our bags, headed out with Gavin to scour the local area for wildlife. Driving slowly along a bumpy hillside road, we had great sightings of a perched Jackal Buzzard and a flying Denham's Bustard. Common and Mountain Reedbuck were also sighted. Tantalisingly, we also heard the unmistakable screech of Blue Crane apparently close by but they evaded our sight and in truth were likely to be moving quickly through the terrain where clear lines of sight were quickly obscured. A Hewitt's Red Rock Rabbit was spotted though, which Gavin tagged as the sighting of the day, underlining how uncommon it was.

## Day 3

## Tuesday 24th October

It seemed like an age since we had first arrived in South Africa and the excitement amongst our group was palpable as we neared the entrance to Kruger National Park, having picked up sightings of a Verreaux's Eagle circling languidly over the road as well as a Brown-hooded Kingfisher perched on a wire. We stopped on the final leg of our journey for breakfast at a spot where we saw our first Blue Rock Agama, a large and strikingly colourful lizard, as well as an equally impressive Common Mother-of-Pearl Butterfly. The drive to the Orpen Gate yielded some tantalising early views of the mammals of Kruger, including small groups of Impala hugging the fence-line and our first African Bush Elephant (Big Five Species No.3). We saw Elephant without fail every day once inside Kruger and these magnificent yet gentle creatures never failed to delight.

Once we'd sorted the requisite paperwork at the park entrance, we still had a long drive ahead of us to Satara Camp; our base for the next two nights. The drive was taken at a modest pace with frequent stops for key sightings and we were soon quickly racking up new bird and mammal species. In contrast to Rietvlei, the Wildebeest in Kruger are of the Blue race and these were sighted along with Steenbok, Burchell's Zebra, Chacma Baboon, Common Warthog, Greater Kudu and our first Spotted Hyena and Hippo. Some key bird species were also sighted, including Magpie Shrike, Spotted Thick-knee, Tawny Eagle, African Hoopoe, both Purple and Lilac-breasted Roller, Bearded Woodpecker and Three-banded Plover. A lone Marabou Stork stood atop a set of buildings just outside the boundary of the camp and a family party of Elephants were seen dousing themselves with water just further along. Our arrival at the camp reception area was greeted by a ridiculously confiding Crested Barbet, which proved highly photogenic, as well as roosting Peter's Epauletted Fruit Bats. Once checked-in, we dispersed to our rooms, known as Rondavels and took some time to settle in and orientate ourselves.

An optional two-hour night-drive added a thrilling facet to our trip and as darkness fell, some of us headed out along with other camp guests to see what we could find in the dark. Throughout the day, the wind had steadily increased, which made for a blustery and dust-blown drive. As a consequence, sightings of either mammal or other species were somewhat thin on the ground to begin with. However, as we entered a dry river-bed, to our amazement we realised we were practically nose-to-nose with a group of seven female Lions (Big Five Species No.4). Despite the torchlight and general excitement, the animals remained completely unperturbed by our presence, even lazily sniffing around the vehicle as part of their unconcerned inspection of us. Having soaked up the sighting, we moved on and within a few hundred yards had pulled off the road to witness two male Lions devouring a Buffalo carcass. Again, the animals were totally unmoved by our presence, which enabled us all to get

breathtaking views of an iconic carnivore. By the day's end, we could count ten new mammal and forty new bird species.

## Day 4

## Wednesday 25th October

The day started with coffee and biscuits at 5:15am before we ventured out pre-breakfast to see what we could find on the roads and tracks surrounding the camp. News had spread the previous night of a pride of Lions on a Giraffe kill and we duly made our way to the site to gain our first daytime views of Lion. Two female lions were immediately visible resting in the nearby grass and other members of the group slowly showed themselves. On the roadside opposite was the kill and a stark reminder, through its sheer size, of the impressive hunting skills of these apex predators.

The first marquee sighting of the day was a Saddle-billed Stork and this was followed later by a striking Leopard Tortoise by the roadside. A Marsh Terrapin was also encountered crossing the road and at a stop later in the day a Plated Lizard and Striped Skink were also found. As the heat of the day began to climb, we returned to camp and following lunch, headed out again in the afternoon. The species count began to slow somewhat as possible sightings retreated from the afternoon sun but we continued to diligently scan the brush whilst criss-crossing the trails around Satara. After a quiet period, we were rewarded with a view of not one but two Secretary Birds crossing our path and striding imperiously off into the nearby brush. As the day cooled, a few other bird species appeared, including Black-collared Barbet, Lappet-faced Vulture, Red-crested Korhaan and Wattled Starling.

That evening, we once again headed out for a night-drive. In contrast to the evening before, the weather was fine and clear. Volunteers were asked this time to hold the spotting torches. Dan was given the honour of scanning the scrub and trees, which turned out to be a wise decision given his uncanny ability to find species others would ordinarily miss. About half an hour into the drive, we picked up our first small cat; the Small-spotted Genet. This is distinguished from the Large-spotted Genet by its white-tipped tail, which is black-tipped in the larger species. Shortly afterwards, we were able to see this difference for ourselves as the latter species gave lingering views as it skulked around some nearby bushes. A Side-striped Jackal showed well shortly afterwards as it moved purposefully through the scrub. A shout went up from one of the other guests who had spotted an enormous male Southern White Rhino, well-known in the local area, in nearby bush (Big Five Species No.4). A Bushbuck was also seen and towards the end of the drive as well as African Wild Cat. One notable bird sighting was a magnificent perched Verreaux's Eagle Owl with a large lizard in its mouth. The final mammal sightings of the evening involved a Scrub Hare caught in the torchlight sitting in the middle of the road. A Spotted Hyena strolled nonchalantly past the Hare before turning and setting off in pursuit at a surprisingly impressive pace. As we returned to camp, we were left to wonder what the outcome was of that particular encounter...

## Day 5

## Thursday 26th October

Today was our day to re-locate from Satara to our second camp within Kruger at Lower Sabie, where we would spend the next two nights. Another dry and clear day greeted us as we made our way out of Satara and throughout the trip we were blessed with fine weather and only the briefest spots of rain. Our first sighting of the day was a small, familiar-looking raptor which turned out, perhaps unsurprisingly, to be a Little Sparrowhawk. A number of new bird sightings followed throughout the morning, including Collared Sunbird, Black-headed Oriole, Black-bellied Bustard, Red-faced Mousebird and Grey-headed Bush-Shrike. We were alerted to a possible mammal or

reptile sighting by the alarm calls of a number of birds atop a roadside bush and some patience was rewarded with a fleeting glimpse of a Slender Mongoose disappearing into the undergrowth. We were to get increasingly prolonged views of this species later in the trip.

Undoubtedly the most exhilarating sighting of the day came as we neared a bridge across a dry, sandy river bed. There were a number of vehicles in the vicinity and word quickly spread that a Greater Painted-Snipe had been seen. However, as we drew closer and peered over the bridge railings, we were astonished to see not one, but a pair of Leopard. Normally solitary animals, the male and female had come together for a brief interlude to mate. A Leopard sighting is a rarity and a privilege in itself but to see a mating pair out in the open in the middle of the day was nothing short of miraculous. We steadied our breath and focused on either absorbing the view or taking some memorable photos and video but we needn't have worried. The Leopards were unconcerned by our presence and once the nuptials were over, moved slowly away into nearby cover, turning and pausing to give us fantastic, lingering views. The quality of the sighting took a while to process and we were all left in stunned silence as we continued to make our way towards Lower Sabie. A Martial Eagle and a Jacobin Cuckoo were seen as we neared the camp, and on any other day, these would be fantastic bird sightings but they paled into comparison somewhat with the Leopard pair, which coincidentally meant that we had seen all Big Five species in less than forty-eight hours.

## Day 6

## Friday 27th October

Lower Sabie is a quintessential African safari camp, with a large decking area housing the restaurant, camp shop and reception area, giving expansive views of the Sabie river, part of the Komati river system. From here we were able to easily pick up numerous bird, mammal and reptile species including African Openbill, Hippo and Nile Crocodile as well as observing the frequent visits made by family parties of Elephant. We had long-since forgotten that we were in an enclosed reserve and hadn't even seen a fence other than those around the campsite. Given that Kruger covers some two million square hectares and is similar in size to Wales and Israel, this is perhaps unsurprising.

Our exploration of the roads and tracks around Lower Sabie yielded some excellent new bird species and even better mammal species. Birds seen included our first Dideric Cuckoo, White-fronted Bee-eater, Jameson's Firefinch, White-browed Scrub Robin and White-browed Robin Chat. Mammal species included a Duiker, a small antelope whose name derives from its habit of diving into the tangled undergrowth for cover. We also had clear views of a communal group of Banded Mongoose as well as Nyala, a spiral-horned, mid-sized antelope with striking white facial markings. The ever-inscrutable Gavin had been stopping at various points on our travels to gather and share news of various sightings with other guides, without giving anything away to our party, despite us trying surreptitiously to translate the Afrikaans words that seemed most significant! Nevertheless, Gavin did share with us that African Wild Dog had been seen in a nearby area and that we would make a concerted effort to find them. With this in mind, we set off down a series of unremarkable tracks until we stopped at a nondescript area of scrub by the roadside. There were no obvious signs of movement or presence, but Gavin knew a little patience would be rewarded. After a couple of minutes waiting with bated breath, a male African Wild Dog stood up out of nowhere and surveyed its surroundings. Minutes later a second and then a third animal also appeared. They were clearly at rest and, not for the first time on the trip, we were given unrivalled views of an elusive target species.

A stop for lunch and refreshments also included the sight of our first snake; an Eastern Green Mamba high up in the bough of a tree. Resuming our drive, we stopped next to a lone car and the occupants were good enough to help us to our second Leopard sighting of the trip. Later that afternoon, having traversed a similar spot, we saw another Leopard strolling across the road and down the bank towards the river. Thinking it was the same animal as before, Gavin pointed out that they were male and female individuals and therefore we had our third Leopard sighting in a single trip. Quite remarkable.

On our return to camp following our afternoon drive, Gavin pointed us in the direction of chalet number 63, around the back of which we could observe both Angolan Freetail and Little Freetail Bats. An interesting end to another great day in the field.

## Day 7

## Saturday 28th October

Today was sadly the day Dan and I had to depart early from the tour to return to the UK. We joined the rest of the party in the transfer to the final destination of the trip, Skukuza Rest Camp. The name Skukuza comes from the Tsonga name for James Stevenson-Hamilton, first warden of the Sabie Game Reserve, forerunner of the Kruger National Park. Literally translated, it means 'he who sweeps clean' in reference to Stevenson-Hamilton's efforts to control poaching in the early days of the reserve.

Although no new mammal sightings were made on the way to Skukuza, we did have a special sighting of a female lion crossing the road just ahead of us. Tracking her movements at a reasonable distance, we watched as she returned to a hidden den in the middle of the dry river bed and caught a thrilling glimpse of a couple of cubs, which confirmed it was indeed a den sight. That meant we had managed to see male, female and lion cubs within a relatively short space of time in Kruger.

Knob-billed Duck, Sulphur-breasted Bush-Shrike, Southern Boubou, African Pied Barbet, Red-faced Cisticola and a fabulous Trumpeter Hornbill were all added to the bird list. Keeping in touch with the rest of the group on our return, we were pleased to hear they finally managed to add the elusive Blue Crane to the sightings list, as well as Grey-crowned Crane and Red-throated Wryneck. All in all, it was an incredibly rewarding trip with fantastic sightings, incredible encounters, great companionship and a superb guide to boot. Our totals for the trip were forty mammal species and 142 new bird species. Thank you, Naturetrek!



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Hippopotamus and Spotted Hyena