

South Africa - Just Cats!

Naturetrek Tour Report

5 - 16 October 2009



Cheetah



Lion



Wild Dog



Leopard



Zebra Herd



White Rhino

Report compiled by Leon Marais

Images by kind courtesy of Mervyn Seltzer



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Day 0

Monday 5th October

Travel from the UK

Day 1

Tuesday 6th October

Blyde River Canyon

The best part of an overseas flight is arriving at your destination early rather than late, and the British Airways flight landed ahead of schedule despite a delayed take-off from Heathrow. Soon the group had cleared customs at O. R. Tambo International in Johannesburg and we were on our way eastwards through the maize, stock and coal mining regions of western Mpumalanga.

At the town of Belfast we turned off the main highway and climbed up into the highlands of the province, where we had lunch in the small town of Dullstroom. From there we ascended Long Tom Pass, named after the large cannon that in Boer hands shelled the British troops in the Lydenburg area during the Anglo-Boer War, travelled through the forestry town of Sabie, the tourist town of Graskop and then arrived at our destination on the edge of the Blyde River Canyon.

After some time to settle in we took a walk up to the Three Rondavels View Point, with spectacular views of the canyon and Blydepoort Dam, with the extensive savannah stretching to the hazy horizon beyond. Later in the evening we met for dinner, where we got to know each other a little better and discussed the exciting days still to come.

Day 2

Wednesday 7th October

Skukuza Rest Camp, KNP.

Some of the group decided to join in on an early morning walk in the resort grounds, though the majority had decided to take this first morning of the tour as a chance to catch up on some sleep, as the rest of the tour involves very early starts indeed. We then had a leisurely breakfast and headed on to some of the main attractions of the Panorama Route, as the region is known. These included the Three Rondavels View Site, Lisbon Falls and Wonder View. We descended via Kown's Pass and had a lunch stop in the small town of Hazyview before entering the Kruger National Park via Phabeni Gate.

It was an incredibly hot day (welcome to the Kruger in October!), and the heat and dryness resulted in some good game viewing, as most animals were drawn to the few remaining water holes. At a spot known simply as Watergat ('water hole') we encountered the first of many cats for the tour – a small pride of Lions, perhaps three to four individuals, lying up in the shade close to the water hole. Needless to say they were fairly inactive, but the views were not bad at all. Other species such as Impala, Warthogs, Vervet Monkeys and an impressive White Rhino bull came down to drink while we were there, making for a really good start to the tour.

Heading on, we by-passed the camp and took a drive along the Sabie River, where several Lion cubs were spotted resting up on a large rock far down the riverbed. With the day drawing to an end we headed on to Skukuza, where we checked in and had some time to cool down in our chalets before a wonderful outdoor braai (barbecue) prepared by the catering team of Don and Mavourneen.

Cat Count: 2 lion sightings; unknown number of individuals

Day 3

Thursday 8th October

Skukuza Rest Camp, KNP.

With a 5:30 AM departure, after a cup of coffee of course, we headed out into the park to try our luck along the Sabie River. The Lion cubs were still on the same rock in the riverbed, though an adult female, who had probably been out hunting during the night and previous day, had joined them. General game species, and Impala especially, were prolific, but the morning didn't bring any more cat sightings, unfortunately. Such is the nature of the game though, and lady luck plays a big role in Kruger National Park game viewing. The great South African golfer, Gary Player, was quoted as stating that the more he practices the luckier he gets, and so is it with game viewing – you just have to get out there and put in as much effort as you can.

After breakfast we took some time off and then headed back to Watergat, as the sightings board showed that some Wild Dogs had been seen there during the morning. No dogs were found this time, but we did have some wonderful viewing, which included a Klipspringer (to the delight of the group), as well as a gathering of general game species at a waterhole known as Renosterkoppies (Rhino Koppies), which included a trio of big Elephant bulls, one of which was clearly not too keen to share the water with the hordes of thirsty Impala and Zebra.

We headed back to camp early, for the group had a sunset drive with a park guide in the evening. This allows one to be out in the park after dark, and the group returned for dinner absolutely elated with Aardvark, Wild Dogs and Lions gracing the evening's sightings list.

Cat Count: 2 lion sightings; unknown number of individuals.

Day 4

Friday 9th October

Satara Rest Camp, KNP.

After the hot weather of the two previous days we awoke to cool cloudy conditions and a welcome respite from the heat. Our morning drive took us out past Watergat once again, and we stopped in at Transport Dam where a Lioness and 4 – 5 month old cub were spotted at the inflow to the dam.

The general game, which included Kudu, Impala and Waterbuck were oblivious to the Lions and were crowding the lower end of the dam, with swarms of Wattled Starlings feeding in between their feet. There were no further cats for the morning and we headed back to camp for a final breakfast at Skukuza, after which we began the 92 kilometre journey northwards to Satara Rest Camp.

En-route we encountered two male Lions at a waterhole, though they were 'flat cat' as we say, and the views were not too good. At Leeupan (Lion Pan), a small waterhole further on we had some good views of a group of big Buffalo bulls, as well as a bull Giraffe who can down to drink, and some good bird watching. Further on we encountered a herd of several hundred Buffalo and several smaller Elephant herds, providing some good close-up views.

Moving on we arrived at Satara and had time to relax before an afternoon drive along the Nwanetsi Creek. We had some reports of a group of lions further up the road, but didn't have enough time to get there and get back to camp before the gates closed. Back at camp we had another wonderful al fresco meal before calling it a night.

Cat Count: 2 lion sightings; 4 individuals.

Day 5

Saturday 10th October

Satara Rest Camp, KNP.

With Leopard foremost on the brain we headed out into the open Knobthorn / Marula savannah of the Satara region, heading north to the Timbavati Picnic Site. Not far from camp we encountered the tail end of a pride of lions on the move through the long grass, with several Spotted Hyenas following in their wake, hoping to be on the scene as soon as the pride started hunting. Things were a bit quiet cat-wise until just after our break at the Picnic Site, when we came across a troop of Vervet Monkeys calling in alarm from the tree tops, usually a good sign that a cat is on the prowl in the vicinity. After some time searching though we couldn't find any trace of a predator, and with the monkeys having fallen silent chalked it up to a false alarm...

Twenty minutes or so later however we came to a screeching halt as a somewhat old Impala carcass was spotted draped over a bough in a large Leadwood tree. A big male Leopard was then spotted resting high up in the branches of the tree, though the views were not too good. After some patience however we were rewarded as he got up and moved over to continue feeding, giving us superb views. At one point a herd of Elephants passed close by, and the matriarch seemed to sense the decaying animal carcass and/or the predator itself, calling the herd to a halt several times before moving on and away past the tree. We stayed for over half an hour, with not another vehicle in sight, and with the pressure somewhat lifted continued on back to camp, passing three White Rhinos, Common Reedbuck and host of other game species on the way.

After breakfast and a rest we took a drive out along the Nwanetsi Creek, and came across a huge male Lion lying in the grass, with a Lioness or two moving around further down along the river course. The Lion eventually roused himself to follow the females, giving us some good views. The success was to continue from this point onwards, and on the sunset drive the group was lucky enough to encounter both Serval and African Wild Cat (as well as four more Lions), taking our number of cat species up to four out of six, with half of the tour still to come.

Cat Count: 3 lion sightings; 7 individuals
1 leopard sighting; 1 individual.
1 African wild cat sighting; 1 individual
1 serval sighting; 1 individual
1 wild dog sighting; 4 individuals

Day 6

Sunday 11th October

Galago Bush Camp, SSGR.

Our last morning in the Kruger started off cool and cloudy and we headed eastwards to the Nwanetsi Picnic Site, where we had a break before returning to camp via the Sweni Water Hole. A large herd of Elephants were drinking at the water hole, and on the other side of the road a large male Lion was lying right out in the open, giving us our best big cat photographic opportunities up to this point. We then headed back to camp and had breakfast and departed for Orpen Gate, encountering a male Lion with a Buffalo kill some distance off the road not far from camp (with several Spotted Hyenas and Black-backed Jackals in attendance).

Further on, we received reports of a pride of Lions at the Girivana Water Hole, and took a short detour there where we had great views of 9 Lions (1 male, three females and five cubs) busy finishing off an Impala kill. We then pushed on to Orpen Gate, where we exited the park, and drove into the adjacent Sabi Sand Game Reserve via Gowrie Gate in the north of the reserve.

We arrived at Galago Rest Camp in time for lunch, and had the afternoon to relax before our first open vehicle safari. It went rather well, with excellent sightings of both Wild Dogs (a pack of 8) and a female Cheetah resting on top of a large termite mound (making for 5 out of 6 possible cat species!). The drive back to camp produced Large-spotted Genet, Lesser Bushbaby and African Civet, while after dinner a Honey Badger was spotted on the clearing in front of the camp, illuminated by spotlight.

I mean, can it just get any better than this? Well, 'YES' is the answer, as the next few days were to prove.

Cat Count: 3 lion sightings; 11 individuals
1 cheetah sighting; 1 individual
1 wild dog sighting; 8 individuals.

Day 7

Monday 12th October

Galago Bush Camp, SSGR.

If there was anything still missing at this point it was a close-up view of a Leopard and with this in mind we set out on our morning safari. Not too far into it the call came over the radio that a young male Leopard had been found, and soon we arrived at the scene. The two-year-old male was found near one of the camps, and we had some reasonable views as he climbed up onto a large termite mound. By the time we were settled however he had crawled in under a thick Raisin Bush, so though he was only a few metres away the views were obscured by sticks and leaves. Still, the cameras clicked away....

Moving on, we enjoyed some birding and general game viewing before encountering another Leopard, this individual, known as Karula ('Peaceful'), was the mother of the Leopard we had seen earlier, and although she was also resting up on a termite mound we got some good close-up views of her, as well as the posse of somewhat alarmed Dwarf Mongooses who happened to be occupying the base of the same termite mound. I think by this stage all wishes must have been answered, and we headed back to camp for breakfast. After the meal most of the group joined the Galago guide and tracker on a bush walk, which though rather hot was enjoyed by all.

After lunch and a relaxing afternoon we embarked on our evening safari, which, among other things, brought a female Cheetah hunting Impala on a clearing, with a successful conclusion to the hunt for the cat.

Cat Count: 2 leopard sightings; 2 individuals.

1 cheetah sighting; 1 individual.

Day 8

Tuesday 13th October

Nkorho Bush Camp, SSGR.

After a cup of coffee we headed out with our guide Aubrey and tracker William on another morning safari. First up was Karula, the leopardess we had seen the day before, together with the somewhat boisterous two-year-old male in tow. Evidently she had made a kill and, having stashed in a patch of thick brush, had gone off to find the male cub. This two-year-old would be at the point where the mother is spending less and less time with him, but will still lead him to her kills now and then so that he can feed, though he will also be making small kills on his own (the evening before he had killed an eaten a terrapin).

We lost sight of the pair of cats as they entered some thick bush along a ravine, but bumped into them a little while later. Things were not in their favour however, as a big male known as the Jordaan male, father of the cub, had appropriated the Duiker kill, and was clearly not in a mood to share! The poor cub and female were left with a leg or two and some of the stomach contents while the male dragged the kill into some thick bush for leisurely consumption, with the male cub following expectantly close behind.

This sighting took up the bulk of the morning and we headed back to breakfast at Galago before departing for our next and final lodge, Nkorho Bush Camp. Once again it was a very hot day and upon arrival at Nkorho found the plain and waterhole in front of the camp crowded with animals, including Cape Buffalo, Giraffe, Blue Wildebeest, Plains Zebra, Impala, Warthogs, Steenbok and Black-backed Jackal.

That afternoon, with a big storm brewing to the south, we headed out on our first drive with guide Peter and tracker Frankie. Not long into the drive the other Nkorho team of Greg and Elvis found a freshly-killed Impala, and after some searching located the perpetrator – Mvula, a big male Leopard. He was lying some way off from the kill, and we had great views as he bounded up onto a large termite mound, where he lay down to rest with the sky above churning and volatile with the approaching storm. No rain fell however, and the stars were out by the time we arrived at our next sighting after dark. This included a Lioness and two big male Lions, part of the dominant coalition in the area known as the Mapogos, who were feeding on the carcass of a baby Hippopotamus they had found floating at the edge of a dam.

Back at the lodge we completed our check-lists in the bar before dinner, after which our beds were most welcome.

Cat Count: 2 leopard sightings; 3 individuals.

1 lion sighting; 3 individuals.

Day 9

Wednesday 14th October

Nkorho Bush Camp, SSGR.

Our last full day of the tour, and what an exciting one at that! Once again we set out at 5:30 AM and went straight on to check on Mvula, the male Leopard. The previous evening his kill had been stolen by a pair of Spotted Hyena, but somehow he had managed to take it back and had wisely hauled it up into a Marula tree, where it was out of reach of thieves. We found him resting on the ground below the kill, unconcerned with much except sleeping and feeding on and off during the next couple of days.

Moving on we stopped in at Chitwa Dam, where the two male lions were feeding on the carcass of the hippo that they had dragged out of the water (to get it away from the crocodiles). We had some great views of the two lions, and then headed off to have a coffee break out in the bush. On the way back to the lodge we stopped to watch Mvula, the male leopard, slaking his thirst at a water hole not far from where his kill was stashed. Then it was back to camp for breakfast and a bush walk, after which there was time for a good afternoon rest before our penultimate safari.

The evening started off once again with great views of Mvula, this time up in the tree with his kill. Not long afterwards we came across Whitecloth, a female leopard who also frequents this portion of the reserve. She was sleeping in the grass as we arrived, and soon got up and began her nightly errand, scent marking as she went and at one point passing close by a crouching Warthog without even realising it. The two male lions were still sleeping near their hippo carcass, and we didn't stay with them long.

Later in the evening, after dark, we came across the Styx Pride of eight lions moving north from the neighbouring property of Mala Mala onto our traversing area. They began hunting on the clearing, with a Blue Wildebeest in their sights. Luckily for the wildebeest though they were detected before they got close enough, and he made his escape with one young male lion chasing on in vain.

We then returned to the lodge, where we had our final dinner around the fire in the Boma (circular outdoor eating area).

Cat Count: 4 leopard sightings; 2 individuals.

3 lion sightings; 10 individuals.

Day 10

Thursday 15th October

Departure

We took our last safari at quite a leisurely pace, as we had seen so much already on this tour. The only cat sighting was once again Mvula, this time up in the tree feeding on the last remains of his Impala kill.

With a clear morning sky the light was excellent, providing superb photographic opportunities. After a pleasant cup of coffee out in the bush we meandered back to camp, where we had breakfast and then got underway for Johannesburg, arriving at 5:00 PM on the dot and well in time for check-in.

Cat Count: 1 leopard sighting; 1 individual.

Day 11

Friday 16th October

Return to the UK

Summary:

Once again the Just Cats tour proved to be a roaring success, with the highlights including 30 cat sightings (a sighting is basically an encounter, and can include any number of individuals) comprising more than 38 individual cats, as well as two Wild Dog sightings and a sighting of the extremely elusive Aardvark.

The participants experienced all sides of nature, from the cute and cuddly to the raw and gory and indeed this is not only an incredible tour, but an awesome and humbling life experience, one that I consider myself to be very privileged to lead.

So thanks to all the participants for joining us on this tour, and thanks to Mervyn for the photographs, which I'm sure will speak for themselves.

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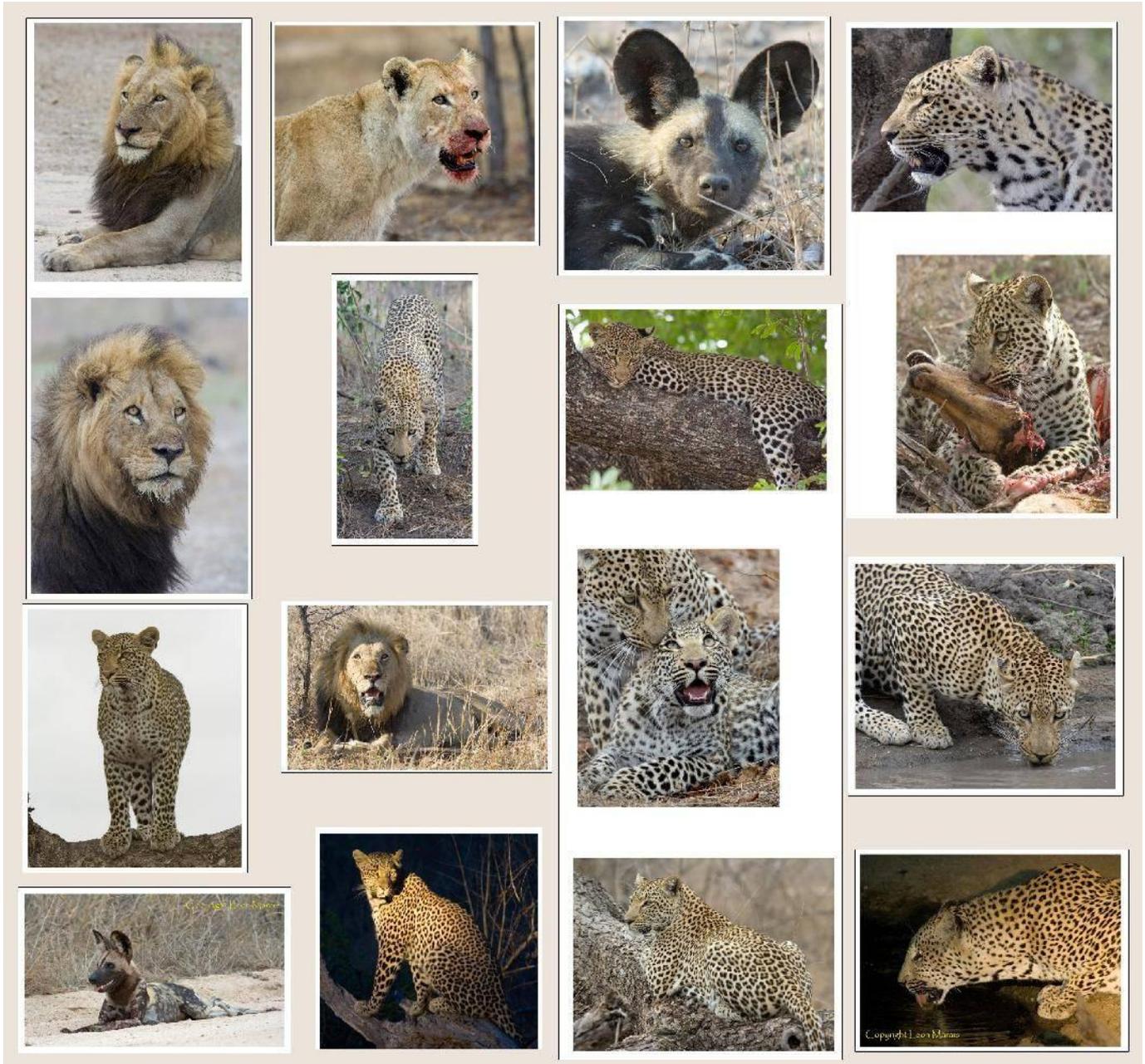
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Mammal List

	Common name	Scientific name	October											
			6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15		
1	Aardvark (Antbear)	<i>Orycteropus afer</i>			✓									
2	Baboon, Chacma	<i>Papio ursinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
3	Badger, Honey	<i>Mellivora capensis</i>								✓				
4	Bat, Fruit (Peter's Epauletted)	<i>Epomophorus crypturus</i>						✓						
5	Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
6	Bushbaby, Lesser	<i>Galago moholi</i>							✓				✓	
7	Bushbaby, Thick-tailed	<i>Otolemur crassicaudatus</i>			✓				✓					
8	Bushbuck	<i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
9	Cat, African Wild	<i>Felis lybica</i>						✓						
10	Cheetah	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>							✓	✓				
11	Civet, African	<i>Civettictis civetta</i>			✓		✓	✓						
12	Duiker, Common	<i>Sylvicapra grimmia</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Elephant, African	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Genet, Large-spotted	<i>Genetta tigrina</i>							✓					
15	Giraffe, Southern	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Hare, Scrub	<i>Lepus saxatilis</i>						✓	✓	✓			✓	
17	Hippopotamus	<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
18	Hyaena, Spotted	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
19	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Jackal, Black-backed	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>		✓		✓			✓				✓	✓
21	Jackal, Side-striped	<i>Canis adustus</i>							✓			✓	✓	
22	Klipspringer	<i>Oreotragus oreotragus</i>			✓									
23	Kudu, Greater	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>						✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
26	Mongoose, Banded	<i>Mungos mungo</i>		✓	✓									
27	Mongoose, Dwarf	<i>Helogale parvula</i>			✓				✓	✓	✓			✓
28	Mongoose, Slender	<i>Galerella sanguinea</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
29	Monkey, Vervet	<i>Cercopithecus aethiops</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓			✓
30	Nyala	<i>Tragelaphus angasii</i>			✓						✓			✓
31	Reedbuck, Common	<i>Redunca arundinum</i>						✓						
32	Rhinoceros, White	<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
33	Serval	<i>Felis serval</i>						✓						
34	Squirrel, Tree	<i>Paraxerus cepapi</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Steenbok	<i>Raphicerus campestris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus aethiopicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Waterbuck, Common	<i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
38	Wild Dog	<i>Lycaon pictus</i>			✓				✓					
39	Wildebeest, Blue	<i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Zebra, Burchell's	<i>Equus burchelli</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Cat Profiles: Some of the more well-known cats and dogs seen in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve by Naturetrek Groups in 2009.

Images by Leon Marais, and not to be used without permission.



Left hand column (top to bottom): The Mapogos; Imbilo; one of the pack of 24 wild dogs.

Centre left column: Adult lioness of the Styx Pride; Mvula; one of the Gijima males; Shadow by spotlight.

Centre right column: one of the pack of 8 Wild Dogs; Salayexe’s female cub; Salayexe’s male cub being groomed; Salayexe.

Right hand column: Karula; one of Karula’s male cubs; un-name d male Leopard seen on the second tour; Mfufunya

Karula and cubs: Karula, meaning 'Peace', is an adult female Leopard occupying the Djuma / Vuyatela property in the main. She currently has two almost independent male offspring, who should be fully independent within the next few months. Karula and one of the male cubs were seen on the first and third *Just Cats* tours of 2009.

Salayexe and cubs: Salayexe is one of the stars of the western portion of the northern Sabi Sand Game Reserve. She currently has two young cubs of about 4 to 5 months of age, one female and one male. The trio was seen twice on the second *Just Cats* tour of 2009.

Imbilo: Imbilo, a young female Leopard, was first seen as a smallish cub on the second *Just Cats* tour of 2008, and again encountered on the second *Just Cats* tour of 2009 as an independent youngster. She gave us quite a show, climbing termite mounds and trees right next to the vehicle.

Shadow: Shadow, an adult female Leopard, is so named as she is not quite as relaxed in the presence of the safari vehicles as some of the other leopards and although she doesn't actually run away or hide, it's a tough job to keep up with her and fleeting views are the norm with this individual. Shadow was seen on the second *Just Cats* tour of 2009

Whitethroat: This is another female Leopard, very calm with the vehicles, who has a male cub nearing the independence stage. She was seen on the first tour of 2009, while the cub was seen on the third tour (no photographs).

Mvula: An adult male Leopard, Mvula – the name meaning 'Rain' – is one of the more regularly seen males. He was seen on all three *Just Cats* tours of 2009.

Mfufunyane: Mfufunyane is a mature adult male, as can be seen from the dewlap and slightly saggy facial skin, all markers of a leopard in his prime. The name means 'Bad Tempered', though in actual fact he is quite calm in the presence of the safari vehicles.

Unnamed male: This un-named male Leopard is clearly a dominant male, 'large-and-in-charge' as they say. He seems to be venturing northwards from the properties to the south, and if he spends more time in the area the guides will soon give him a name.

Styx Pride: This pride comprises eight individuals: five adult females and three youngsters, though as is the case with lions they do separate into smaller groups from time to time. All eight were seen on the first *Just Cats* tour, while six were seen on the second and third tours.

The Mapogos: The Mapogos are named after a notorious local security company, one that had a reputation for being a little rough. There used to be five adult male Lions in the group, and as such they ruled virtually the entire Sabi Sand Game Reserve. Of late though they seem to have split permanently into two groups, with two of them spending quite a lot of time in the northern Sabi Sands. They were seen on the first and third *Just Cats* tours of 2009.

Sandy Patch: This is the sole survivor of a group of females that were decimated by the Mapogos. She is a lone operator and at the moment has a 7–8 month old male cub. She was seen on the second and third tours of 2009 (no photographs).

The Gijima Bro's: These are two big male Lions who spend most of their time in the Manyeleti Game Reserve to the north of the Sabi Sands. Here they don't come across vehicles too often and are thus not too relaxed with vehicles and have a tendency to either run away or charge on occasion, hence the name Gijima: 'to run'. They were seen on the third *Just Cats* tour of 2009.

The pack of 8 Wild Dogs: This pack frequents the area to the south, normally spending most of their time on the Mala Mala property or else in the neighbouring Kruger National Park. They were seen on the first tour, and tracked extensively but never found on the second tour.

The pack of 24 Wild Dogs: This is an awesome pack of 12 adults and 12 pups and truly something to see. To my knowledge this is the first time that they had ventured into the northern Sabi Sand Game Reserve, normally occupying the Manyeleti Game Reserve to the north. Let's hope they keep coming back!