

South Africa - Just Cats!

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 - 13 November 2009

Report compiled by Leon Marais



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Day 0

Monday 2nd November

Travel from the UK

Day 1

Tuesday 3rd November

The Blyde River Canyon

The group arrived in cool and cloudy conditions in Johannesburg, and soon we were on our way eastwards towards the Blyde River Canyon, a five to six hour journey through the coal, maize and stock farming regions of western Mpumalanga and the highlands of the escarpment. We had a lunch stop in the small town of Graskop and then continued on to the Blyde River Canyon. After a rest period we headed up to the resort's view site, where we at least had some views of the Three Rondavels and the lower end of the canyon, although the overcast conditions did not bring out the best in the scenery. We then headed back to our rooms and had time to freshen up before dinner in the resort's Kadisi Restaurant, where we had a great dinner before calling it a day.

Day 2

Wednesday 4th November

Skukuza Rest Camp, KNP.

After a morning birding walk at Blyde, under cool misty conditions, we had breakfast, packed and departed at 9 AM. We skipped most of the features of the Panorama Route, due to the mist, and headed down via Kown's Pass to Hazyview, entering the Kruger National Park at Phabeni Gate. We took our time getting to camp, spotting lots of general game on the way, but no cats unfortunately. We'd had reports of a pride of Lions with a Buffalo kill, but it was too far away for us to get too and still have time for the sunset drive with a National Park guide. We did however have a great view of a Martial Eagle eating a Savannah Monitor Lizard, and the sunset drive produced Porcupine, White-tailed Mongoose and Spotted Hyena, among others. Also seen on the way in were White Rhinoceros, Elephant and Cape Buffalo, among the usual host of antelope, warthogs and general game species. We also saw our first new-born Impala lambs, some of the first of the summer season. All in all it was a good start, though cats were at the front of our minds as we went to bed and we had high hopes and expectations for the coming day.

Day 3

Thursday 5th November

Pretoriuskop Rest Camp, KNP.

We began with coffee and tea just after five AM, and shortly thereafter headed out along the Sabie River in search of cats. Our game viewing started with a bang – not far down the river we came across a Lioness and three +- 4 month old cubs heading down the tar road, totally oblivious to the few vehicles around them. We followed them on and off for nearly an hour, having several walk-pasts with the cubs meowing and struggling to keep up with a determined mother, who definitely had someplace she wanted to be in mind. Eventually they turned off the road and headed down into the shade of a stand of trees in the riverbed, where she flopped down and let the hungry cubs have a chance to suckle for a while. What a great start to the tour, and we headed back to the Selati Restaurant for a joyous breakfast.

We then headed on to Pretoriuskop, passing the buffalo kill site we had heard about the previous day. There was nary a cat to be seen however, or even a vulture for that matter, and all that remained of the 800 kilogram animal was a picked-clean carcass. We arrived at camp in the early afternoon, and had a chance to rest before an afternoon game drive. The drive was fairly quiet until about 30 minutes before we had to be back in camp, when the rear vehicle came across a female Leopard in the road. We in the front vehicle rushed back to find that it had disappeared from view, but while sitting and waiting she climbed up into a tree and we all got good views of her for the next quarter of an hour before it was time to rush back to camp. So a great day, with lion and leopard on the score card, and eight tired but happy participants.

Cat Count: 1 lion sighting; 4 individuals.

1 Leopard sighting; 1 individual.

Day 4

Friday 6th November

Satara Rest Camp, KNP.

We met up early with all our luggage packed and left camp before 5: 30 AM, heading northwards on the 42 kilometre journey back to Skukuza, where we planned on having breakfast at the golf club. Not far from the club the lead vehicle came across a Leopard on the road, number two for the tour. Good views were had as it slunk across the road and crept stealthily into the bush, with a few backward glances at us before continuing. It appeared to be a young male, and was stalking something off into the bush. The second vehicle arrived in time to get reasonable views as the cat turned this way and that, trying to get into the best position for the hunt. We couldn't see what it was after, but the body language and behaviour was indicative of a hunt-in-progress. Eventually though it moved too far into the bush and with no visual contact we headed off to a hearty breakfast overlooking the 9th green.

We then headed down the river to Lower Sabie, spotting on the way a male Leopard lying in the shade along the opposite bank of the Sabie River. This third Leopard of the tour was the last cat seen for the day, despite the huge amount of territory covered by heading first to Lower Sabie and then to Satara, covering a distance of around 130 kilometres for the day. We arrived in the late afternoon and had a few hours to relax before dinner and bed, with Lions high on the priority list for the morning. And what a lion-day it was to be...Cat Count: 2 Leopard sightings; 2 individuals.

Day 5

Saturday 7th November

Satara Rest Camp, KNP.

We awoke to find that the heat of the previous day looked set to continue, with 35 degrees the high for the day. After our morning coffee we headed north out of the camp towards the Timbavati Picnic Site, a route that proved very worthwhile during the two previous Just Cat tours. At the waterhole on the camp's northern perimeter we came across a pair of Hyenas, with one seeming to be in a joyous and frisky mood indeed, running and literally jumping and splashing through the small waterhole repeatedly, while his mate (a female no doubt) looked on as if to say 'What the %\$#@^&* are you doing?!). Not far out of camp we came across four Lionesses encamped at a waterhole, with herds of thirsty Zebra and Wildebeest looking on, probably wishing the cats to move on so that they could have a drink before heading on to carry on feeding. The rest of the drive produced no further cat sightings, though we did pick up some reports of plenty of lions further to the north close to the Olifants River.

So after breakfast and a rest we headed speedily north, and first had views of a pride of lions – two males and two females – resting up in the shade, and then a little further north, and perhaps part of the same pride, three females resting in the shade near a female giraffe that they had brought down during the night. The intense heat though meant that they were fairly inactive, just lying in the shade and panting heavily while keeping one eye on the carcass to make sure that the vultures didn't come down to begin cleaning it up. On the way back to camp we came across two Hippo bulls that were having a clash, probably over ownership of the last pool in the creek. Both had bleeding wounds on the head and neck, and though we didn't actually see them fight they were standing facing each other with massive jaws agape, making the most frightening groaning sound. Soon however one turned around and continued to feed and we left the scene unsure as to whether he was giving up or merely taking a break from the fighting.

Back at camp we had time to get ready for the sunset drive with Edward, the park guide. This one proved to be a spectacular drive indeed, with two Leopard sightings, two lion sightings, an African Wildcat sighting, as well as views of a Porcupine female and young crossing the road. The group returned elated, and we enjoyed a great dinner and drinks before heading to bed in anticipation of moving on to the Sabi Sand Game Reserve the following day.

Cat Count: 5 Lion sightings; 17 individuals.

2 Leopard sightings; 2 individuals.

1 African Wild Cat sighting; 1 individual.

Day 6

Sunday 8th November

Galago Bush Camp, SSGR.

Our last morning game drive in the Kruger took us eastwards along the S 100 to the Nwanetsi Picnic Site and back along the tar road. We decided to have a quick look at the Sweni waterhole before returning to camp, and there found three young male lions resting close to the road (and the third tour in a row that we'd had male lions near this particular waterhole on the last morning in Kruger). We had some good views of them and then headed back to camp for breakfast and departure. Once again the heat wave persisted, and the day looked set to be another 35 degrees plus.

We left at around ten o'clock and headed straight for Orpen Gate and the adjacent Sabi Sand Game Reserve. We arrived there at around one o'clock and after some lunch had time to settle in and relax before an afternoon safari with guide and tracker Aubrey and William. We left at four o'clock PM, even though it was still very hot. Leaving a little early gave us more daylight to find cheetah, the one major cat missing from our list.

Not far out of camp Aubrey took us to see the two big male Lions that had caught a buffalo calf the previous evening. These two males are called the Gijima Males, and their territory lies to the north in the neighbouring Manyaleti Game Reserve, and thus they are not often seen this far south. They are two robust individuals who are not as used to the vehicles as some of the other cats in the reserve. Luckily however they were rather full and hot and so gave us nothing more than an evil stare while we watched them panting in the shade. We then left them and headed to the northern reaches of the reserve in search of cheetah, but without any luck.

After dark we encountered a young male Leopard, one of the offspring of a female known as Whitecloth. He was on his own, patiently waiting for his mother to come back from her hunting expedition. After a little while watching him we headed back to camp for a wonderful barbecue dinner before calling it a day.

Cat Count: 2 Lion sightings, 5 individuals (all males).

1 Leopard sighting; 1 individual (young male of around 1,5 to 2 years of age).

Day 7

Monday 9th November

Galago Bush Camp, SSGR.

We met for coffee early and were out before five thirty, once again heading north to search for cheetah. These cats cover large areas and are not always present in the reserve, moving over a vast area of the Kruger Park and neighbouring Sabi Sands and Manyaleti Game Reserves. The north of the Sabi Sands has many large clearings, as well as a healthy population of Impala, in part due to the many small dams and other water points created by the land owners. So the tactic in the search for cheetah is to cover as many of these clearings as possible in the hopes at least picking up some tracks. Unfortunately none were seen on this morning's drive, and after a good few hours of searching we drove southwards to take a look at two male Lions that had brought down a Buffalo. These were a different pair to the two of the previous day and are part of an original group of five male Lions known as the Mapogos, who basically rule the entire Sabie Sand Game Reserve. The five however seem to have split up permanently and these two now seem to be a totally separate unit, still commanding a large portion of the reserve. This morning however they were not up to much, merely resting near the carcass and waiting out the heat of the day. Leaving them we headed on, searching for more cats which were unfortunately not forthcoming. Even the famed Sabi Sand Game Reserve has its off days, with the continuing heat wave partly to blame.

We had a lovely breakfast back at camp, after which the day was free for reading, relaxation and a dip in the lodge's swimming pool. There was a bush walk on offer, but such exerting activities were not recommended considering the heat. The afternoon drive was also fairly quiet, with another sighting of the two male lions (still just resting near the carcass), and good views of Elephants, White Rhino and other general game species. With another big storm brewing in the evening we had a great dinner, and headed to bed with hopes for a break in the heat.

Cat Count: 2 Lion sightings; 2 individuals (adult males known as the Mapogos).

Day 8

Tuesday 10th November

Galago Bush Camp, SSGR.

Overnight rain heralded a break in the heat wave and under a cool, cloudy sky we headed out on our morning safari, once again with a search in the north for cheetah. Unfortunately we didn't find any sign of cheetah, but did come across Mvula, an adult male leopard that has been seen numerous times on previous Just Cats tours. Mvula is a handsome animal indeed and is very relaxed in the presence of vehicles. We first found him resting up in a Leadwood tree, with his Impala kill lodged in the branches of another tree close by and a Spotted Hyena patrolling below looking for any bits that might have fallen to the ground. Soon the Hyena pushed off to look for food elsewhere, and Mvula, who was looking rather uncomfortable up in the tree, came down to ground to rest at the base of the tree in relative comfort. We had great views of him from close up before heading on, stopping to see the two big male lions and their buffalo kill. Dozens of vultures had gathered at the scene, filling the dead trees all around as they waited patiently for their turn at the carcass. The lions were still resting, though at least they had their heads up, giving us better views than the previous two encounters.

Everyone was really happy with our wonderful morning and we headed back for breakfast, after which some of the participants took advantage of the relatively cool weather to head out on a bush walk with Aubrey, where they learned about tracking, the medicinal and practical uses of the local plant species, looked at insects and birds and got a general feeling of what it's like to be out in the bush on foot, without the safety of the vehicle.

By the time we headed out on our afternoon safari the sky had cleared, though the western sky had turned black and it looked as if we were in for the first big deluge of the summer rainy season. We headed north and went to check up on Mvula and his kill. We found him resting on the opposite bank of a gully, and spent the next 45 minutes or so watching him, getting great views as he climbed back up the tree to finish off the last remains of the kill. As the first few raindrops began to fall we left Mvula and headed off to have our sundowner drink (despite the black sky not much rain fell while we were out on the drive). After the drinks we headed on, enjoying a spectacular lightening show to the south and west. The storm abated while we ate our dinner, and it was only after we went to bed that some light rain fell, much needed but still not enough to quench the savannah's thirst.

Cat Count: 1 Lion sighting; 2 individuals.

2 Leopard sightings, 1 individual.

Day 9

Wednesday 11th November

Galago Bush Camp, SSGR.

The day started cool and cloudy once again, a nice change from the heat of the beginning of the tour. We headed out early, this time heading south to go and see the Styx Pride, three lionesses and three sub-adults that had brought down a wildebeest during the night. By the time we arrived they had finished most of it off and were showing hugely rounded abdomens. A male sub-adult seemed to be in a playful mood and sauntered over to play-fight with the head of the unfortunate wildebeest, a behaviour that is part play and part learning, as it enables him to practice the killing bites on the throat and muzzle of the prey animal.

After the lions we headed northwards along the boundary of the Kruger National Park, and then turned west along the boundary of the Manyaleti Game Reserve. Coming over a low rise we spotted some activity in the road ahead, comprising a Spotted Hyena, a few Black-backed Jackals, White-backed Vultures and a Tawny Eagle. There had obviously been a recent kill, and investigation of the remains and tracks in the area revealed that it was a cheetah that had originally made the kill, though it might have been chased off by the hyena. Unfortunately we couldn't find any tracks leading away from the kill, and thus couldn't tell if it had moved southwards into the Sabi Sands or northward into the Manyaleti Game Reserve. We searched for the rest of the drive, but weren't able to find any further sign of the cat.

The best we could do was to try once again in the afternoon, which we did, spending the daylight hours scouring the clearings of the north, without luck. Just before dark on our afternoon drive we stopped to see a lioness called Sandy-Patch and her 5–6 month old cub. Contrary to popular conception lions are not always members of a large pride, as shown by Sandy-Patch and her cub, who are loners of the reserve. They looked rather hungry, with hollow bellies, and drew much sympathy from the group. It's not uncommon for lionesses with cubs to shy away from other lions, as being alone means that they don't have to share food with others and their cubs don't have to compete with the adults for their share of the kill.

Moving on we had our customary sundowner stop, during which we were visited by a pair of curious Spotted Hyenas, and then carried on after dark, using a spotlight to locate animals. Not long after starting we spotted a big male Leopard on his nightly rounds. This individual is known as Mfufunyane, and we first spotted him close to a small dam, watching him as he came down to drink right in front of us. Two exited hyenas then arrived at the scene, at which point Mfufunyane decided it was time to move on, for hyenas are a constant menace for leopards, not necessarily posing too much of a physical threat to an adult male Leopard but always eager to rush in and steal any kill that the leopard might make. Bad company, in other words. We left the Leopard moving off into some impenetrable bush, and on the way home had a wonderful encounter with a Lesser Bushbaby, one of the cutest creatures in the bush. Back at camp we had a wonderful final dinner.

Cat Count: 2 Lion sightings; 8 individuals.

1 Leopard sighting; 1 individual.

Day 10

Thursday 12th November

Departure

Sadly our wonderful time on safari was quickly drawing to a close, with one last opportunity for cheetah left. It wasn't to be however, and after some time spent searching we decided to give up and rather get a last leopard fix for the tour. Karula, a female, and her two almost fully grown cubs had killed an Impala during the night and we arrived to find her lying up on the side of a termite mound and one of the youngsters feeding on the carcass, while the second youngster's position some way off in a thickly wooded gully was given away by a troop of alarmed Vervet Monkeys. We spent some time watching the youngster feed, and after he had had his fill he moved off into the bush somewhere behind the female. At this point we headed over to watch the female, who is usually quite relaxed with the vehicles in close proximity. There was a film vehicle at the sighting as well and something (perhaps the fully exposed cameraman on the film vehicle) wasn't quite to her liking.

She began hissing and snarling, and her tail jerked up and down, hitting the ground with an audible thud. These were all signs of her not being too comfortable, and before we could move out she charged and then made a sudden stop towards us which was alarming to say the least, but she calmed down quickly however, and she soon moved off, at which point we decided that it was better to let her be and left the sighting. We then headed back to camp for breakfast, after which David and Jan left us, bound for some days of relaxation in Cape Town, while the rest of us headed back to Johannesburg and the airport.

Cat Count: 1 Leopard sighting; 2 individuals (Karula and male cub of 1,5 years of age).

Day 11

Wednesday 13th November

Arrival back in the UK

Summary:

The third Just Cats tour for 2009 was just as successful as the last two of the year, as well as the two from 2008. We recorded a total of 24 cat sightings, comprising some 47 different individual cats, with a record of twenty individuals for one day in the Kruger National Park. Unfortunately we missed out on Cheetah, but they cover so much ground that there simply aren't any guarantees. Nevertheless we had some wonderful encounters with the other species, and I'm sure this exciting experience will live on in the minds of all participants. Thanks to all for joining us on this tour.

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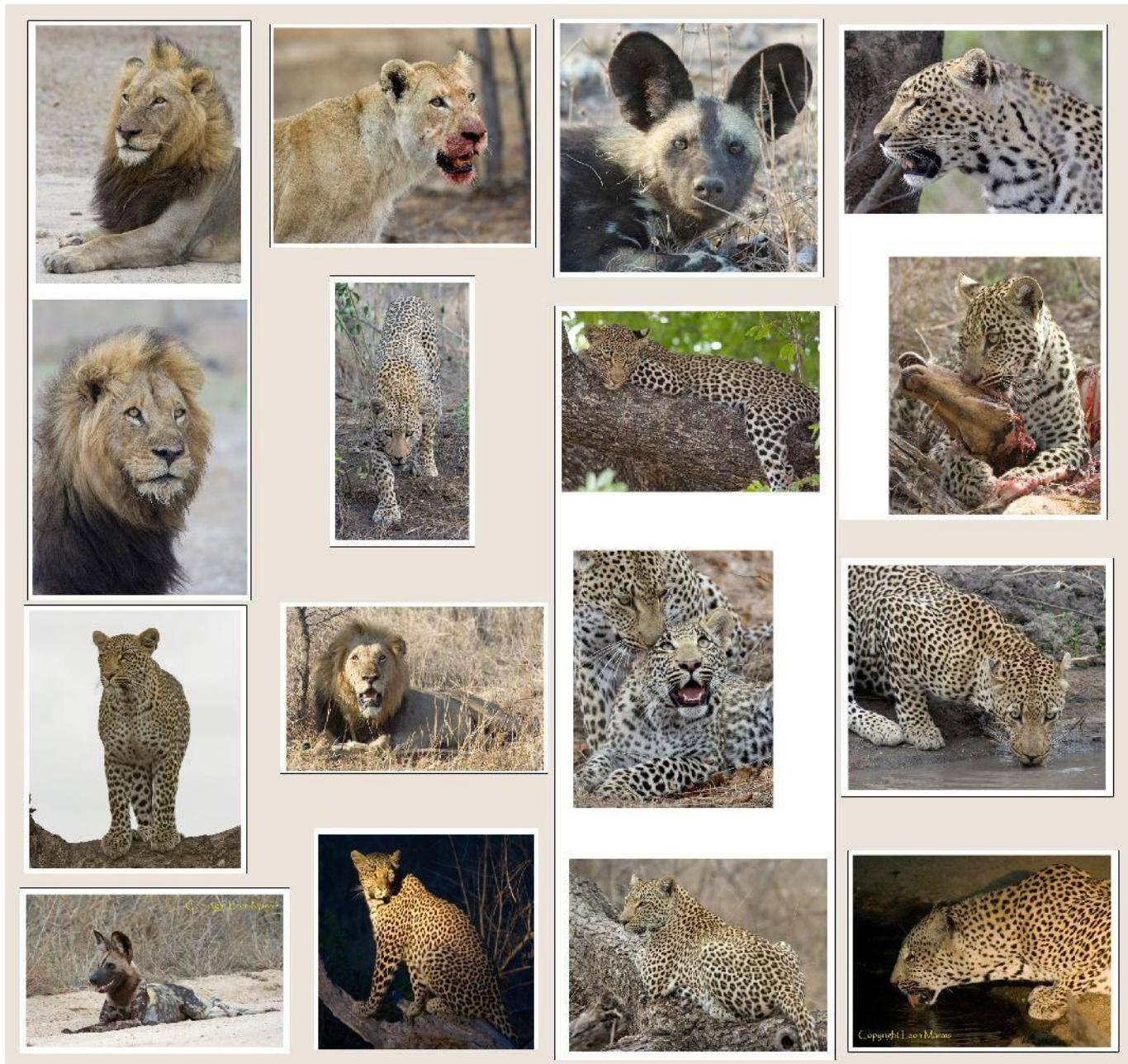
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Mammal List

	Common name	Scientific name	November									
			3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Baboon, Chacma	<i>Papio ursinus</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
2	Bat, Fruit (Peter's Epauletted)	<i>Epomophorus crypturus</i>							✓			
3	Buffalo	<i>Synacerus caffer</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Bushbaby, Lesser	<i>Galago moholi</i>										✓
5	Bushbaby, Thick-tailed	<i>Otolemur crassicaudatus</i>			✓							
6	Bushbuck	<i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
7	Cat, African Wild	<i>Felis lybica</i>						✓				
8	Duiker, Common	<i>Sylvicapra grimmia</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Elephant, African	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
10	Genet, Small-spotted	<i>Genetta genetta</i>						✓				
11	Giraffe, Southern	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Hare, Scrub	<i>Lepus saxatilis</i>						✓		✓	✓	
13	Hippopotamus	<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓					
14	Hyaena, Spotted	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
15	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Jackal, Black-backed	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Jackal, Side-striped	<i>Canis adustus</i>									✓	
18	Klipspringer	<i>Oreotragus oreotragus</i>	✓	✓								
19	Kudu, Greater	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
21	Lion	<i>Pathera leo</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
22	Mongoose, Dwarf	<i>Helogale parvula</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
23	Mongoose, Slender	<i>Galerella sanguinæ</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		
24	Mongoose, White-tailed	<i>Ichnuemia albicauda</i>	✓									
25	Monkey, Vervet	<i>Cercopithecus aethiops</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
26	Porcupine	<i>Hystrix africaeaustralis</i>	✓				✓					
27	Reedbuck, Common	<i>Redunca arundinum</i>					✓		✓			
28	Rhinoceros, White	<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
29	Sharpe's Grysbok	<i>Raphicerus sharpei</i>							✓			
30	Squirrel, Tree	<i>Paraxerus cepapi</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Steenbok	<i>Raphicerus campestris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
32	Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus aethiopicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Waterbuck, Common	<i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Wildebeest, Blue	<i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	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 Tour Groups in 2009.

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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-named male Leopard seen on the second tour; Mfufunyane

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.

Whitecloth: 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 Manyaleti 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 Manyaleti Game Reserve to the north. Let's hope they keep coming back!