

South Africa - Just Cats!

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 10 November 2011



African Lion



Wild Dog



Leopard



Serval

Report and images compiled by Leon Marais



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Day 1

Tuesday 1st November

Blyde River Canyon

Starting with partly cloudy weather in Johannesburg, we left the city early, heading eastwards through the coal mining and agricultural regions of western Mpumalanga Province. By the time we reached our lunch stop in the highland forestry town of Graskop it was misty, cold and raining, so after the meal we headed straight on to our accommodation for the night at the Blyde River Canyon. We had some time to rest and some of us then headed up to the resort's view point for a brief view of the canyon through the clouds. Later we had an introductory dinner and went to bed hoping for better weather and an exciting day to come (both wishes being fulfilled).

Day 2

Wednesday 2nd November

Skukuza Rest Camp, Kruger National Park

We met up at the respectable hour of 07h00 for a morning walk down to the Tufa Waterfall before breakfast and departure. Thankfully the clouds lifted enough for us to take in the Three Rondavels view site and the grandeur of the lower canyon on the way out. We then headed on to Orpen Gate, where we stopped for a snack and a drink before entering the Kruger National Park. And what a start we had...

The very first mammals we saw, even before a single Impala, were Wild Dogs, a pack of around 18 lying on both sides of the road. We spent 45 minutes watching them, with some superb photographic opportunities for the group. The adults were fairly sedentary but in typical fashion the seven pups were much more restless, getting up and moving around all the time. This was a dream fulfilled for many of the tour participants! Moving on we saw plenty of general game and birdlife, as well as a pair of young male Lions late in the afternoon to make for a fantastic first day of safari. We then checked in to camp and had time to relax before dinner.

Cat Count: 1 Lion sighting (2 individuals) and 1 Wild Dog sighting (18 individuals).

Day 3

Thursday 3rd November

Satara Rest Camp, KNP.

After an early cup of coffee, we started off our day with a drive into the arid Mavumbye plains region, though with the recent rain it was starting to green up at a rapid rate. We had a good drive, without any cats though, seeing a spectacular White Rhino bull up close, plenty of general game and a territorial dispute between three Tawny Eagles.

Back at camp we had breakfast and then headed out again, following up on the news of a pair of 'honeymoon' Lions to the north of the camp. We found them, and after a while of patient waiting, got to see them copulate, though with Lions this is a fairly regular occurrence during their days together as a mating pair. We then headed back to camp for a break.

In the afternoon we took another drive, following up on some reports of Cheetah in the Mavumbye plains region, but without any luck. Back at camp we had a cup of tea before the group embarked on a sunset drive with the park guide, which turned up, among other things, the four Cheetahs in the Mavumbye plains region we'd been searching for during the day, Lions and African Wild Cat. All in all a great day and we retired after dinner and hoping for Leopard the following day.

Cat Count: 2 Lion sightings (numerous individuals); 1 Cheetah sighting (4 individuals); 1 African Wild Cat sighting (1 individual).

Day 4

Friday 4th November

Satara Rest Camp, KNP

After a cup of coffee and a rusk, our early route took us west and north via the Timbavati Picnic Site and back south to camp along the main north-south tar road, producing some good general game, a close-up encounter with two large Elephant Bulls and a pride of four sleepy Lionesses being watched by a herd of giraffe.

After breakfast we left for Skukuza, a few hours' drive southwards. We had a great drive there, coming across a female Leopard while we were watching some Giraffe, and getting some great views to fulfill our goal of finding the final big predator. We also had an encounter with another two huge Elephant bulls, one in particular being very impressive, with a good set of ivory.

We arrived at camp and had time to rest before an afternoon drive, which produced a Spotted Hyena picking up scraps from a male Leopard in a dense, thorny tree above as the highlight. Back at camp we had time to freshen up before dinner in the Selati Restaurant.

Cat Count: 1 Lion sighting (4 individuals); 2 Leopard sightings (1 male, 1 female).

Day 5

Saturday 5th November

Satara Rest Camp, KNP

For the morning we headed for a Spotted Hyena den a way out from the camp. As we arrived we saw a Hyena walking up the road carrying a young cub in its mouth, but unfortunately she had disappeared into the den by the time we arrived and we had to suffice with a view of one of the adults resting at the entrance to their drain pipe den underneath the road. Other sightings for the morning included a poor view of a pair of male Lions and an excellent view of two bull Giraffes having a spectacular dominance fight.

Back at camp we had breakfast and then a rest period before heading out on an afternoon jaunt, which produced a fantastic encounter with a herd of Elephants.

Back at camp again we had a cup of tea before the group headed out on the park's Sunset Drive, which produced an unbelievable sunset as well as eight White Rhino and three male Lions in two separate sightings. After the drive we had dinner in the Selati Restaurant once again.

Cat Count: 3 Lion sightings (five individuals).

Day 6

Sunday 6th November

Nkorho, Sabi Sand Game Reserve

With a super-early start we left camp at 04h30 and made our way northwards to Tshokwane Picnic Site, which at the early hour was deserted save for a troop of Chacma Baboons. We had a cup of coffee and a leg stretch before continuing on to Satara for breakfast. The morning delivered some great wildlife in general, including a pride of Lions with a Buffalo kill and two young male Lions asleep right next to the road.

After breakfast we exited the park at Orpen Gate and drove through the village areas adjacent to the park and into the Sabi Sand Game Reserve via Gowrie Gate. After arriving at the lodge we had time to relax and have lunch before our first open vehicle safari with guide Ruan and tracker Thomas. We started off with a bang, coming across a Serval in the road and getting unbelievable views before it moved off into the bush. No other cats were forthcoming but we had some excellent sighting of the four big herbivores - Elephant, White Rhino, Buffalo and a pod of Hippos out of the water after dark. Back at the lodge we had dinner and retired in anticipation of a full and exciting day to come.

Cat Count: 2 Lion sightings (numerous individuals); 1 Serval sighting (1 individual).

Day 7

Monday 7th November

Nkorho, SSGR

After meeting up at 05h15 for a cup of freshly ground coffee our first morning drive from the lodge started off cool and cloudy. Our first sighting was an Elephant bull in musth, the male's breeding cycle, followed by a distant view of a young male Lion across the other side of a large clearing. The rest of the drive was rather quiet, until around 08h20, when our tracker saw some fresh Leopard tracks on the road. We followed up for a while and had in fact given up when another vehicle came across a female Leopard up in a large Marula tree overhanging a road we'd just driven down! We turned around immediately and went to have a look, getting great views of her (a female named Salayexe) up in the tree in classic Leopard style.

We then returned to the lodge for breakfast, after which we did our check list while a small herd of Buffalo and two Elephant bulls came down to drink at the water hole in front of the camp. During the post lunch period most of us congregated outside my room where an African Scops Owl was roosting in a tree while a pair of Chinspot Batis built their spider web and lichen nest on another branch.

The afternoon drive was fairly quiet in terms of cats, with a poor view of a female Leopard (Karula) but some great sightings of smaller things such as Dwarf Mongoose, a Black-backed Jackal and pup and other general wildlife.

Cat Count: 2 Leopard sightings (2 females), 1 Lion sighting (male).

Day 8

Tuesday 8th November

Nkorho Bush Camp, SSGR

Our morning drive turned out to be another highlight. First up was a large breeding herd of Elephants crossing the track all around us, followed by the thrill of a pack of nine Wild Dogs (six adults and three pups) finishing off a very unfortunate Impala ewe. Though the actual kill had occurred only ten minutes earlier the carcass was virtually clean stripped by the time we got there, with some of the pack cleaning up the last bits and others playing in celebration of their morning's success. All in all a great sighting of this endangered carnivore, number two for the tour and number six for the three 2011 Just Cats! Tours.

After the action we stopped for morning coffee on a flat rock outcrop, where several Giant Plated Lizards came out of the cracks to pick up the rusk crumbs at our feet. Afterwards two of the group took part in the morning walk while the rest headed back to camp for a break before breakfast. We then had lots of time to relax before our afternoon excursion, catching up on sleep and diary entries or photographing the weavers (large breeding colonies of three species in the camp) and Scops Owl in the camp. Lady Luck seemed to have deserted us for the afternoon however, as our only carnivore was a White-tailed Mongoose, as well as a Lesser Bushbaby, general game and some birds. Thus we recorded one of the two catless days thus far in three Just Cats! Tours in total (the other being the last day of the first tour), though of course we had the wonderful Wild Dog sighting in the morning to make up for that.

Cat Count: 1 Wild Dog sighting (9 individuals).

Day 9

Wednesday 9th November

Nkorho Bush Camp, SSGR.

Our penultimate morning drive turned out to be a great one. We started off by finding a young male Leopard, offspring of a female known as Thandie. We spotted him coming down from a resting spot on a large termite mound to disappear in some thick grass. Waiting for his mother to return from her hunting forays he was a little unsure of the vehicle but calmed down once he was in some cover and we managed to get fairly good views of him. While we were there another vehicle found a Cheetah not far away so we left to see if we could find it, but without any luck. We returned to the young Leopard for some more views before we responded to a sighting of one of the old male Leopards of the area, a veteran named Mfufunyane by the guides, who we'd seen on the Just Cats! Tours of previous years. Unfortunately as we arrived he'd moved into a densely vegetated thicket to drink water and rest in the shade. The views were poor and we were a bit disappointed, as he seemed to be settling down for the day. We then decided to try getting in from the other side of the drainage line, which allowed us to get up close to him, getting superb views of the old boy as he lay in the shade and then got up to drink water right in front of us, after which we headed off for a cup of coffee and then back to the lodge for breakfast.

The day was spent relaxing in camp and in the afternoon we headed out again, seeing the same two Leopards as seen during the morning, as well as Buffalo, Elephant and White Rhino, Small-spotted Genet, Lesser Bushbaby, Dark Chanting Goshawk eating a snake, Puff Adder and Burrowing Scorpion among other things. In the evening we had dinner around the fire in the boma before retiring for the last night of the tour.

Cat Count: 2 Leopard sightings (2 males).

Day 10

Thursday 10th November

Departure day

We set off on our last morning departure under a cloudless early morning sky just after sunrise. It proved to be a fairly quiet drive, but enjoyable nevertheless, with a sighting of the young male Leopard from previous days as the cat sighting of the day. We spent much of the morning tracking a male Lion which had been seen in the area earlier, but without any luck. We did however see some of the first Impala lambs of the season, earlier by at least two weeks compared to last year due to the early rains and evidence that the seasonal birthing period is linked to the rainfall regime.

After coffee, during which we filmed Red-billed Hornbills picking up crumbs at our feet and a pair of Zebra stallions fighting it out, we headed back to the lodge for breakfast, at which the lodge staff sang songs in honour of Pam, who was celebrating her birthday, and then made the long trek back to Johannesburg for the departure flight (though for two of the group the holiday was not yet over as they were heading down to Cape Town for some relaxation after a busy and exciting Just Cats! Safari)!

Cat Count: 1 Leopard sighting (male).

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Species Lists

Mammals (Total cat / Wild Dog stats: 22 sightings, 5 species of Cat.)

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

Birds

1	Common Ostrich	<i>Struthio camelus</i>
2	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
3	Black-headed Heron	<i>Ardea melanocephala</i>
4	Goliath Heron	<i>Ardea goliath</i>
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
6	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
7	Green-backed Heron	<i>Butorides striatus</i>
8	Hamerkop	<i>Scopus umbretta</i>
9	Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>
10	Saddle-billed Stork	<i>Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis</i>
11	Marabou Stork	<i>Leptoptilos crumeniferus</i>
12	African Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>
13	Southern Bald Ibis (E)	<i>Geronticus calvus</i>
14	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
15	Hadedda Ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>
16	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiacus</i>
17	African Black Duck	<i>Anas sparsa</i>
18	Spur-winged Goose	<i>Plectropterus gambensis</i>
19	Hooded Vulture	<i>Necrosyrtes monachus</i>
20	White-backed Vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>
21	Lappet-faced Vulture	<i>Torgos tracheliotus</i>
22	White-headed Vulture	<i>Trigonoceps occipitalis</i>
23	Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius</i>
24	Tawny Eagle	<i>Aquila rapax</i>
25	Lesser Spotted Eagle	<i>Aquila pomarina</i>
26	Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Aquila wahlbergi</i>
27	Martial Eagle	<i>Polemaetus bellicosus</i>
28	Brown Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus cinereus</i>
29	Black-chested Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>
30	Bateleur	<i>Terathopius ecaudatus</i>
31	African Fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus vocifer</i>
32	Steppe Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
33	Dark Chanting Goshawk	<i>Melierax metabates</i>
34	Crested Francolin	<i>Francolinus sephaena</i>
35	Natal Francolin (NE)	<i>Francolinus natalensis</i>
36	Swainson's Spurfowl (NE)	<i>Francolinus swainsonii</i>
37	Helmeted Guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>
38	Black Crake	<i>Amauornis flavirostris</i>
39	Kori Bustard	<i>Ardeotis kori</i>
40	Red-crested Korhaan (NE)	<i>Eupodotis ruficrista</i>
41	Black-bellied Korhaan	<i>Eupodotis melanogaster</i>
42	Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>
43	Crowned Lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>
44	Senegal Lapwing	<i>Vanellus lugubris</i>
45	Blacksmith Lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>
46	White-crowned Lapwing	<i>Vanellus albiceps</i>
47	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
48	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
49	Double-banded Sandgrouse (NE)	<i>Pterocles bicinctus</i>
50	Speckled Pigeon	<i>Columba guinea</i>
51	African Mourning Dove	<i>Streptopelia decipiens</i>
52	Cape Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>
53	Laughing (Palm) Dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
54	Namaqua Dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>

55	Grey Go-away Bird	<i>Corythaixoides concolor</i>
56	Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>
57	Levaillant's (Striped) Cuckoo	<i>Clamator levaillantii</i>
58	Diederik Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx caprius</i>
59	Burchell's Coucal (E)	<i>Centropus burchellii</i>
60	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>
61	Pearl-spotted Owlet	<i>Glaucidium perlatum</i>
62	Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>
63	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>
64	African Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>
65	Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
66	Giant Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle maxima</i>
67	Brown-hooded Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon albiventris</i>
68	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
69	Little Bee-eater	<i>Merops pusillus</i>
70	Lilac-breasted Roller	<i>Coracias caudata</i>
71	Purple Roller	<i>Coracias naevia</i>
72	African Hoopoe	<i>Upupa africana</i>
73	Green Woodhoopoe	<i>Phoeniculus purpureus</i>
74	Common Scimitarbill	<i>Rhinopomastus cyanomelas</i>
75	African Grey Hornbill	<i>Tockus nasutus</i>
76	Red-billed Hornbill	<i>Tockus erythrorhynchus</i>
77	Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill	<i>Tockus leucomelas</i>
78	Southern Ground Hornbill	<i>Bucorvus leadbeateri</i>
79	Black-collared Barbet	<i>Lybius torquatus</i>
80	Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird	<i>Pogoniulus chrysoconus</i>
81	Crested Barbet	<i>Trachyphonus vaillantii</i>
82	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
83	Red-breasted Swallow	<i>Hirundo semirufa</i>
84	Rock Martin	<i>Hirundo fuligula</i>
85	Fork-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>
86	Eastern Black-headed Oriole	<i>Oriolus larvatus</i>
87	Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>
88	Arrow-marked Babbler	<i>Turdoides jardineii</i>
89	Dark-capped Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus barbatus</i>
90	Groundscraper Thrush	<i>Turdus litsitsirupa</i>
91	Cape Rock Thrush (E)	<i>Monticola rupestris</i>
92	Mocking Cliff-Chat	<i>Thamnolaea cinnamomeiventris</i>
93	Bar-throated Apalis	<i>Apalis thoracica</i>
94	Rattling Cisticola	<i>Cisticola chiniana</i>
95	Chin-spot Batis	<i>Batis molitor</i>
96	African Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla aguimp</i>
97	Cape Wagtail	<i>Motacilla capensis</i>
98	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>
99	Magpie Shrike	<i>Corvinella melanoleuca</i>
100	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
101	Wattled Starling	<i>Creatophora cinerea</i>
102	Violet-backed Starling	<i>Cinnyricinclus leucogaster</i>
103	Burchell's Starling (NE)	<i>Lamprotornis australis</i>
104	Cape 'Glossy Starling	<i>Lamprotornis nitens</i>
105	Greater Blue-eared Starling	<i>Lamprotornis chalybaeus</i>
106	Red-winged Starling	<i>Onychognathus morio</i>
107	Red-billed Oxpecker	<i>Buphagus erythrorhynchus</i>
108	Marico Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia mariquensis</i>
109	Cape White-eye (E)	<i>Zosterops pallidus</i>

110	Red-billed Buffalo Weaver	Bubalornis niger
111	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus
112	Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	Passer diffusus
113	Village (Spotted-backed) Weaver	Ploceus cucullatus
114	Southern Masked Weaver	Ploceus velatus
115	Lesser Masked Weaver	Ploceus intermedius
116	Red-headed Weaver	Anaplectes rubriceps
117	Southern Red Bishop	Euplectes orix
118	Long-tailed Widow	Euplectes progne