

FIONA REID'S WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS SOUTH AFRICA TRIP REPORT

8 – 21 March, 2015

8 March, Joannesburg

We all arrived early and stayed at the very nice Outlook Lodge, quite close to the airport but in a quiet residential area. It is close to a small wetland reserve where I listed 40 bird species in two walks! It was a great start to our trip.

9 March, Kruger National Park, Pretoriuskop Rest Camp

Heading back to the J'burg airport after a sumptuous breakfast, we got a connecting flight to Kruger's Skukusa airport. This is the prettiest and cleanest airport I have ever seen! Here our Lawson's guide, **John Davies** was waiting for us. We set off and soon got to see the ubiquitous Rollers (Lilac-breasted and European). One of our first mammals was the lovely **Steenbok**, soon followed by **Impala**. Within a less than an hour we came across our first pride of **Lions** eating an Impala, accompanied by numerous vultures, hanging about on a riverbed along with Nile Crocodiles. Before lunch we'd also seen **Nyala**, **Bushbuck** and **Greater Kudu** as well as a good assortment of birds. We went back to the Skukusa area for lunch then headed toward Pretoriuskop Rest Camp in the south-western corner of Kruger Park. On our afternoon drive we saw our first and only Purple-crested Turaco, an amazing bird. We saw **Southern Giraffe** and **Elephant**, **Plains Zebra** and a **Common Duiker**. We also saw **Chacma Baboon** and **Vervets** near the road. Later on that afternoon I spotted two **White Rhino** in a grassy area, but they were not easy to see well.



Shortly before dusk John took us to a waterhole where we saw a good variety of waterbirds and we were enjoying watching some **Hippos** when John spotted two more **White Rhinos**. While watching the rhinos we noticed a group of **Lions** sneaking along behind rocks toward the Rhinos. We were all amazed to see the five lions surround and threaten the rhinos! We watched the drama unfold for as long as we could (about 10 minutes), but we had to leave in order not to be locked out of our accommodation. On our arrival at the camp we saw our first **Common Dwarf Mongoose** at the edge of the parking lot. After dinner I noticed bats visiting a fruiting fig tree near the cabins and we saw two species, **Wahlberg's Epauletted Fruit Bats** and **Egyptian Rousettes**.

10 March, Kruger National Park, Lower Sabie Rest Camp

We went out on an early morning game drive where we saw some new birds but didn't add to our mammal count. After breakfast we headed to the Numbi exit gate near our camp to take a close look at epauletted fruit bats at a tree roost that John knew about. Then we drove eastwards toward Lower Sabie Rest Camp, situated on the southern bank of the Sabie River. About halfway to Sabie John spotted a group of **Wild Dogs** sleeping right beside the road!



It was amazing how well concealed they were! About 12 individuals were sleeping. One got up and stretched, allowing us to see its markings and very slim body. This was a really unexpected bonus. Farther along we passed a rocky outcrop and I noticed two **Klipspringers**, one sitting and one standing. They were fairly distant but still a good sighting of a fairly uncommon species in this area. We enjoyed bird and mammal viewing along the river bank at the rest camp, including some **African Buffalo** and at nearby Sunset Dam with its pods of Hippopotamus as well as large Nile Crocodiles and water birds such as Yellow-billed Storks, Egyptian Geese, African Spoonbill, Water Thick-knees and many others. **Smith's Bush Squirrel** was seen here and at most other camps in Kruger. We visited Sunset Dam later and saw large numbers of Elephant, Giraffe and Impala. **Angolan Free-tailed Bats** were seen near the camp restaurant, flying from buildings toward the river. After dinner we went on our first night drive using the park service vehicles. These are a bit hit or miss as the driver decides what to stop for and then wastes precious night-time minutes talking about hippos or elephants. At least we were allowed to operate the spotlights, which was a big plus. We found numerous **Scrub Hares** (and again

most nights through Kruger), two **Small-spotted Genets**, one **African Civet**, and to our delight (and much to the surprise of the driver), I spotted a **Honey Badger** who stopped briefly to sit down and look at us. We also located a **White-faced Owl**.

11 March, Lower Sabie

We had a pre-breakfast drive which turned out to be extremely misty – Ground Hornbills in the mist and Lions in the mist (no gorillas though!). After breakfast John ran into his friend Rowen who was studying **Martial Eagles**. He had his eye on a subadult eagle atop a tree near the road and hoped to catch it using a chicken as bait. John was a bit sceptical given there was lots of traffic, but amazingly enough the eagle did swoop down and get caught! We were thrilled to be allowed to watch the examination and banding of this magnificent bird (its eyes were covered to calm it down). In the later afternoon we went out again and saw a Leopard Tortoise and many of the big five and many new birds. At dinner we were happy to see our first **Leopard** lounging on the far bank of the Sabie River. We could see it well but at quite some distance. After dinner we had a second night drive which was not quite as good as the previous night, but did give us fine views of a **Large-spotted Genet** and a Flap-necked Chameleon. Other herps that day included Southern Tree Agama and Foam-nest Frog on my air conditioner.



12 March, Kruger National Park, Lower Sabie to Satara Rest Camp

We had another early drive. Being up at this unearthly hour did at least allow us to see bats returning to their roosts and some of us had very good looks at **Yellow-bellied House Bats** and **Angolan Free-tails** as they paused before scrambling into the roofs of our cabins. John found a dead Little Free-tail as well, but we didn't see this species coming to roost. Leaving Lower Sabie after breakfast we made our way northwards to Satara Rest Camp. We stopped for lunch on the way and John showed us a small colony of



Mauritian Tomb Bats near the washrooms. The Satara region includes more open grassland and attracts herds of grazers such as Burchell's Zebra, Blue Wildebeest and African Buffalo. These in turn attract predators which of course we were keen to see. We went out on the park service Sunset Drive, in a very large vehicle filled with tourists. At first it seemed we would be doomed to spending all our time with zebra, giraffe and elephant, which we had already seen and enjoyed, but news spread of a **Cheetah** with kill and we were able to get fairly close. This being the first Cheetah for many of us, it made up for a lot! We got our first **Waterbuck** here as well. Later we had great views of both species of genet and a **Spotted Hyena** who strolled around the bus. We also saw a very distant mammal that I believe was a **Serval**, but it was too far away to be 100% confirmed. We saw a **Leopard** on the road ahead but our driver raced at it and it backed off. I squeaked it out of tall grass but the general noise of the bus was too much for it and I was the only one who saw it well. We saw several genets but our driver was on the clock and raced back without giving the smaller mammals (let alone

birds) their due. I went back to my moth light only to find tiny bats coming and picking off all the moths. Based on shape, size (tiny) and color these were identified as **Schlieffen's Twilight Bats**. I also walked round the whole camp in search of more mammals reputed to live there, but without luck.

13 March, Satara Rest Camp

John cajoled us into another very early start which brought us good views of **Banded Mongoose** on our way out of camp, and some birds of interest at the marsh such as Black Crane. We watched a family of **Chacma Baboons**, youngsters leaping around, adults sitting quietly. We later had a close encounter with a large bull **Elephant** who strolled over to our open vehicle and sniffed the tire! John was sure it was not acting aggressively and since the vehicle remained upright, he seemed to be correct. In the afternoon our game drive brought us into the midst of a huge herd of **Cape Buffalo**, along with zebra and some nice looks at a **White Rhino**. We had a night drive booked with the park guides – was this going to be another bus-stampede, replete with red-faced babbler tourists, we wondered? Fortunately, John managed to wangle a private vehicle for us with a great driver, Edward. We had a fabulous outing with really good looks at both **Large-Spotted Genet** (below left), and **Small-spotted Genet** (below right)



and **African Civet**, finally got to see **Black-backed Jackals**, had close views of **Giant Eagle Owl** and a **Common Barn Owl**



(which flew straight for me when I gave my squeaky-mouse call!), and even got a pretty good look at our first **African Porcupine**. While waiting for an elephant to vacate the track we had great looks at a **Flap-necked Chameleon**.

Returning at about 11 p.m., I decided to try again to locate **African Wild Cat** reputed to live in the rest camp, and in just a short time I found one in the parking lot. The cat was quite tame and it was a pity everyone else had retired for the night.



14 March, Balule Nature Reserve, Mhlabetsi Safari Lodge

I set out well before dawn in hopes of finding a Honey Badger, but instead located a lovely **Woodland Thicket Mouse** and a small **Rock Python**. Sadly neither species cooperated and remained in position when I returned with the group, but we all enjoyed some fine birding and then out of nowhere an **African Wild Cat** nonchalantly appeared, wandered past us, and in a lightning quick move snatched a **Little Swift** that was exiting the thatched cabin roof!

We of course all missed filming the capture but got great looks at this wonderful cat eating its breakfast. After our own breakfast and good views of **Banded** and **Common Dwarf Mongoose**, we headed westward to Orpen Gate, where we exited the park. We then drove north to the Balule Nature Reserve, a private conservancy that is joined to the Kruger and forms part of the Greater Kruger National Park. At Mhlabetsi we enjoyed a private safari, with more freedom allowed such as driving off-road and getting out of the vehicle.

The lodge was really nice and had some bonus features such as **Epauletted Fruit Bats** and **Mauritian Tomb Bats** roosting under eaves of the main building. The habitat was quite dense brush and very dry, with few waterholes. We saw a fair number of game species we had already seen and a few new birds. At dusk we watched some lions. Returning for dinner some of us saw **Lesser Galagos** that had emerged from the thatched roof, and an **African Barred Owlet**. Our short night drive was not very productive, just the usual Scrub Hares and various bovids.

15 March, Mhlabetsi Safari Lodge

We spent time on the exit road trying to locate Cheetah, but had no luck. Later, part of the group took a stroll on foot allowing a bit of birding. Those who stayed on the jeep had great views of two **Black-backed Jackals**. Our new mammals seen on this day were **Slender Mongoose** and a lone **Sharpe's Grysbok**. A good part of the heat of the day was spent recovering from the rather limited sleep we had had! The **Lesser Galagos** were a bit more cooperative this evening and one even visited my moth light for a snack, in the company of a tiny Marbled Tree Snake.



16 March, Balule to Blyde River Canyon

We tried yet again on our early drive to locate the Cheetah that likes to patrol the fence line, but although we failed on Cheetah, we did manage to see a young **Leopard**, albeit briefly. After breakfast we made our way out of the reserve, and back on the exit road John spotted a **Cheetah** lying under a small bush quite close by! We then headed up into the nearby Drakensberg Escarpment where we stayed at a nice resort on the edge of the Blyde River Canyon. We tried staking out a spot



where rock elephant shrew had been seen, but had no luck, although the rather impressive Warren's Girdled Lizard was found. We walked up to the upper view point in the late afternoon, which had a spectacular view and great lighting. It was however incredibly windy and the rain soon followed. After dark we took a short walk down to the restaurant and were lucky to see a **Puff Adder**, **Guttural Toad** and **Large Verdant Sphinx Moth**. The rain picked up again and stymied plans for more night walking.

17 March, Blyde to Dullstroom



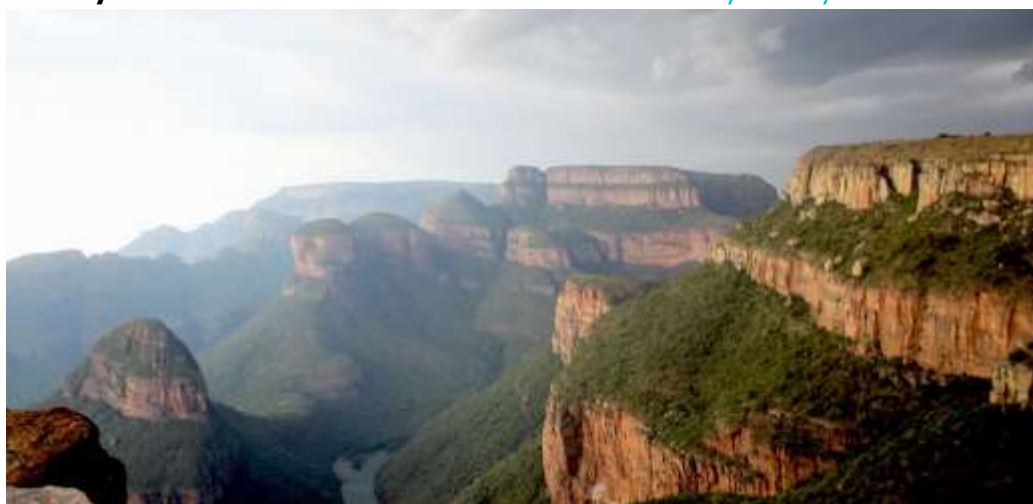
In the morning we had a pre-breakfast walk down to the Lower View Site. On the way, John spotted **Rock Hyrax**, a very nice addition to our list, along with a number of new bird species. We went onto the Tufa Trail, which skirts the Kadisi Stream, a tributary of the Blyde River. Here John found us a **Legless Skink**, one of the best herps of the trip. After breakfast we departed for Dullstroom, stopping en-route for Three Rondavels View Site and a waterfall. We stopped for

lunch and some shopping at Hoedspruit before continuing toward Dullstroom. As we climbed in altitude we drove into a very hard hailstorm, and went straight to our lovely accommodations at Linger Longer. Some of the group headed into Dullstroom later to eat, and on their way back were lucky to encounter a **Serval**, which came up close, although nobody had a camera on hand.

18 March, Dullstroom to Kimberley

We had an early drive to the Veloren Valei Nature Reserve on the high plateau. The conditions were not good as there was a dense fog, but we did make out some **Blesbok**. On our way back I spotted two distant **Oribi**, which raced off making quite impressive leaps. We enjoyed several new highland birds and saw Denham Bustard before heading to Dullstroom for breakfast and then on to Johannesburg where we got

Blyde Canyon





a connecting flight to Kimberley. On arrival there we picked up two vans and met Gavin, our second driver. We saw a colony of **South African Ground Squirrels** near the airport. We went to the Five Acres Guest House on the edge of town. After dinner we headed to Marrick for a night safari. Reputed to be one of the driest parts of the country, it was a bit of a shock when a storm picked up. The wind was howling and when thunder and lightning seemed too close for comfort we had to take a break. We did, however, have wonderful views of **Bat-eared Fox** hunting insects, **Highveld Gerbil**, **Springhare**, **Cape Porcupine**, **Cape** and **Scrub Hare**, **Yellow Mongoose**, three rare **Black-footed Cats**, **Black-backed Jackal**, **Springbok**, and a

Spotted Eagle-Owl before we had to call it a night and get out of the storm.

19 March, Mokala and Marrick, Kimberley area

We went to Mokala National Park after breakfast, visiting the southern section of the park where we added a number of new bovids to our list of mammals: **Eland**, **Gemsbok** (Oryx), **Red Hartebeest**, **Black Wildebeest**, **Springbok**, and **Tsessebe**. The only Sable we saw were in a game park so didn't make it to our list. We saw our first **Small Grey Mongoose** and also **Yellow Mongoose**. Occupants of one van saw **Meerkat** fleetingly. The birding was good too, and at our lunch stop in the park we added Karoo Girdled Lizard and Rock Agama to our herp list. At dusk before we set off for our night drive I used my bat detector and we could see and listen to **Cape Serotines** and **Yellow-bellied House Bats**, as well as **Egyptian Free-tails**, which youngsters like John could actually hear. At Marrick we had the *best night drive ever!* We saw 18 species of mammals and a very good array of birds too, notably two young **Blue Cranes**. John got his first **Hedgehog** (then two more!)! They were new to all of us too. The **Aardvark** and **Aardwolf** were incredible. And we had bonus mammals like a tiny **Pygmy Mouse** running in the bare track-line in front of us and **Large-eared Mouse** hunkering down to allow a definite ID. We kept track of some of the numbers seen (species new to us in bold):

3 Black-footed Cat

2 **Aardvark**

3 **Southern African Hedgehog**

1 Southern African Wildcat

ca. 100 Springhare

2 **Aardwolf**

21 Bat-eared Fox

3 Highveld Gerbil

2 **Short-tailed Gerbil**

1 **Pygmy Mouse**

2 **Large-eared Mouse**

7 Cape Porcupine

4 Cape Hare

1 Black-backed Jackal

2 Steenbok

3 Common Duiker

Springbok (many)

Black Wildebeest (many)



20 March, Mokala and Marrick, Kimberley area

This time we went to the northern end of Mokala where we had some great sightings of many of the antelope and other large game we had already seen, and added **Roan** and a single **Southern Reedbuck** to our list. At a waterhole we watched Black Wildebeest stampeding after one another, to the apparent consternation of the more tranquil Red Hartebeest. All of us got to see **Meerkat**, which was on guard by a fence, and remained on guard the entire day! The birding was pretty good as well. On our last night drive at

Marrick we hoped to get closer views of Aardvark and Aardwolf. We did see both species again (2 **Aardvark** and 3 **Aardwolf**) and had very close but brief views of the latter. It was a bit colder and there was less activity, but we were able to focus on observing some rodents and bats as well. We had good views of **Egyptian Freetails** feeding on insects swarming in the spotlight, and we also recorded **Horseshoe Bats**, most probably **Darling's**, and saw them feed as well. A sleeping line-up of Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters rounded off the evening.

21 March, Kimberley to Johannesburg

Some of us staggered out early to pay a last visit to Marrick. We stationed ourselves on a rocky slope and waited, and waited. John wandered off and then came racing back to get us. He had found my much-wanted **Eastern Rock Elephant Shrew**, and by some great stroke of luck it stayed put and we were all able to clamber down from the rocks and walk over to the site and see this lovely mammal very well. I was floating on air, having missed elephant shrews on previous trips to Africa. Another highlight as we made our way back to the van was a pair of very confiding **Meerkats** that approached us all very closely (but were almost impossible to photograph). It was a fantastic end to a wonderful trip.

Mammal list

Eastern Rock Elephant Shrew

Aardvark
 Rock Hyrax
 African Elephant
 Southern Lesser Galago
 Vervet Monkey
 Chacma Baboon
 South African Ground Squirrel
 Smith's Bush Squirrel
 Highveld Gerbil
 Short-tailed Gerbil
 Pygmy Mouse
 Large-eared Mouse
 Woodland Thicket Rat
 Springhare
 Cape Porcupine
 Cape Hare
 Scrub Hare
 Southern African Hedgehog
 Wahlberg's Epauletted Fruit Bat
 Egyptian Rousette
 Darling's Horseshoe Bat
 Mauritian Tomb Bat
 Angolan Free-tailed Bat
 Egyptian Free-tailed Bat
 Yellow-bellied House Bat
 Cape Serotine
 Schlieffen's Twilight Bat
 Cheetah
 Black-footed cat
 Southern African Wildcat
 Serval
 Lion
 Leopard
 African Civet
 Small-spotted Genet
 Large-spotted Genet
 Yellow Mongoose
 Common Dwarf Mongoose
 Small Grey Mongoose
 Slender Mongoose
 Banded Mongoose
 Meerkat



- Spotted Hyena
- Aardwolf
- Black-backed Jackal
- African Wild Dog
- Bat-eared Fox
- Honey Badger
- Burchell's Zebra
- White Rhinoceros
- Common Warthog
- Hippopotamus
- Southern Giraffe
- Impala
- Eland,
- Gemsbok
- Red Hartebeest
- Black Wildebeest
- Blue Wildebeest
- Springbok
- Tsessebe
- Blesbok
- Klipspringer
- Oribi
- Steenbok
- Sharpe's Grysbok
- African Buffalo
- Nyala
- Bushbuck
- Greater Kudu
- Common Duiker
- Roan Antelope
- Common Waterbuck
- Southern Reedbuck

Total 75 species



John gets some assistance from a Meerkat



Our group, from left: Sharon and Don Hallberg, Adriana Greisman, Sandy Webb, Julia and Vernon Shibla, Fiona Reid and John Davies

