

Daily Blog of African Trip, August, 2010

August 5, 2010: Namibia

Today, we officially started our African tour, not counting the two days it took to get us to this point. Our flight from Austin to Jo'burg via Dulles airport and Dakar took about 24 hours or so. As a result, we arrived at our hotel in J ready for nothing but sleeping. We had a quick drink with the Cloudmans, who arrived earlier on the 4th, trying some excellent South African wine the hotel was promoting. Then, we slept until about 3:00 in the morning, when the jet lag asserted itself.



After a hearty breakfast and some quick birding around the grounds of the hotel with the C's, we headed for the airport and the short flight to Walvis Bay, Namibia. There, we managed to satisfy the authorities of our benign intentions in about an hour and set off to bird our way to Swakopmund. We spent several hours on the golf course of the local country club, adding Springbok to our list of antelope species and seven new lifers to our bird list. My favorite sighting of the day was the four-striped mouse that I spotted while Geoff, our guide, was trying to get us onto the Black-chested Prinia, making it a two-mammal day.

Our hotel in Swakopmund (the name means the mouth of the Swakop river), the Hansa, was quite posh. The dinner menu offered several game choices. Based on a recommendation from Dodge Engleman, I tried Zebra steak, which was OK, but nothing special. Tomorrow, we start birding for real.

August 6, 2010: Walvis Bay

I think of this as Day 2 of our trip, though the camera, which I programmed myself with the trip information, thought it was day 369 until I fixed it.

Today, we traveled around the town of Walvis Bay, or "whale bay," which is usually shortened to way bay. Walvis, we learned today, means whale in either German or some related language.

We first spent quite a bit of time chasing around the dunes looking for the Dune Lark, a bird with a very restricted range, while waiting for the daily dose of coastal fog to clear. We did see several of the Dune Larks, as well as two Pale Chanting Goshawks before heading for the coast. It was about 10:00 before we started for the coast. We had shed all the extra layers of clothing we had donned to escape the cold fog. Once we got to the coast, we immediately put it all back on.



We saw THOUSANDS of flamingos! Everywhere we looked there were more of them. Most were Greater Flamingos, aka American Flamingos, with some Lesser Flamingos mixed in. We also saw tons of small plovers and other shorebirds. The small plovers were beautiful, especially the Chestnut-banded and White-fronted Plovers in breeding plumage, both lifers.

After a picnic lunch, we drove around the salt works near Walvis Bay, tallying lots of shorebirds, most of which were old friends.

August 7, 2010: Swakopmund: The Great Lizard Hunt

Today, we spent the morning around the town of Swakopmund, where we have been staying. We walked down to the beach where we had a view of an amazing flotilla of Cape Cormorants. We estimated about 5000 of them swimming and flying around in a large circle around what must have been a treasure trove of Pilchards. Video is on the web site, hargrove.org/2010.

Then, after breakfast, we drove around the Swakopmund Salt Works. Turns out that salt production (sea salt) is a major industry of the area. The ponds set up to evaporate the water is ideal for birds until the saline level gets too

high. I learned that the pink color, highly prized by some gourmets, is not due to the salt itself, but to an alga that lives in the incredibly salty environment. While we were there, we located the last special bird of the area, the Gray's Lark. (Not to be confused with the Gray Lark.) Linda was the one to spot the flock flying around the beach area. That left us free to pursue other goals.

High on the list were two oddities of the region: Welwitschia Maria Balor, a strange plant that is reputed to live for thousands of years. Darwin called it, "The platypus of the plant world." We managed to find several of these in the spot where we stopped for a picnic lunch. We have photos of both a male and a female plant, though ours were estimated to be only a couple of hundred years old.



Then after lunch, we set off to find the Namaqua Chameleon, which all of wanted to see. We had actually spent some time already looking for them. They hang out in "dollar plant," a kind of succulent common in the area. Alas, there are far more dollar plants than there are chameleons.



Jenny Cloudman finally spotted one late in the afternoon after lots of searching. I took some great photos that seem to be in a format incompatible with all the software on this computer. (I brought my older, small laptop to save weight, as we are limited to 25 pounds apiece.)

We also took some shots of the incredible sand dunes around here. They are quite lovely, unlike anything we have seen before. Sand swirling around on the surface created beautiful patterns that we tried to capture on video. I doubt that the video captured the ephemeral nature of the phenomenon, and I probably won't know for sure until I get back to Austin and a real computer.



Tomorrow, we leave the relatively civilized environs of Swakopmund and a 4-star hotel for a lodge near Huab. We probably won't have net access for a while, so be patient.

Thus far, we have seen 85 species, with 12 lifers. We should have a lot more lifers on the next phase of the trip.

August 8, 2010: On to Huab

Got up this morning, and seeing it was Sunday and therefore no danger that Linda would do some inappropriate shopping, we took a long walk after breakfast. To our surprise, where yesterday we had seen about 5000 Cape Cormorants feeding in a massive gyre, today there were almost none. Apparently, the fish had moved on. After that, we transferred to the Swakopmund Airport and boarded a charter flight to Huab Lodge in the northern part of Namibia.

The view of the Namib was amazing. Stretches of desert without so much as a bush alternated with dry riverbeds (called "rivers" in these parts) lined with trees. From the air, the trees sketched out pretty patterns following the dry washes. What was even more amazing was spotting small clusters of buildings, called "farms", in the absolute middle of nowhere. This is probably the definition of back of beyond.

As we drew near to Huab (pronounced Hoo-Ob) the vegetation grew thicker, almost green in places. We landed at a small dirt airstrip after about an hour of flying. Then we boarded a large open-air vehicle for the short ride to the lodge. The lodge is quite comfortable, and the food far better than we expected. In fact, the food has exceeded our expectations everywhere so far. To my astonishment, the lodge even has Wi-Fi access in the room, so here I am writing another note.

After lunch, we rested until 4:00, which means we observed birds (mostly lifers) from the shade of the dining area. Linda retreated to our room for a lie down and read, so she has two lifers to catch up on now. After siesta, we boarded the open-air conveyance again as set off down the Huab river. This actually had water in it, about ankle deep, flowing gently. The track took us right down the river. Unfortunately, when we stopped to look for the Damara Rockrunner, the engine wouldn't start. I was glad that the radio worked. We birded around the area for quite a while

until a relief truck arrived and took us back to the lodge in two batches. Although it was theoretically possible to walk back, it wouldn't have been fun.



Now, we need to head to the dining area for the evening meal and a tally of the many lifers we need to add to the list.

So, a brief note from the middle of nowhere. We are fine and having a great time.

One great extra for the Lodge: A gorgeous Namid Rock Agama that lives right outside the dining area.

August 9-10, 2010: Huab

Well, this is serious wildlife watching.

For the past two days, we've arisen before dawn in time to dress and get to the main lodge by 6:00 for a quick cup of coffee before heading out. (It's been dictionary days, where "birding" comes before "breakfast.") These quick outings last about 2 hours, after which we return for breakfast about 8:00. We head out again for a game drive about 10:00, returning at 1:00 for lunch. Then we have a siesta. I'm writing this during the siesta, when I should be taking a nap.

We head out again at 4:00 for a drive until sunset, about 6:00, returning in time for dinner at 7:00. After that, we stagger into bed.

That's why you didn't hear from me yesterday.



Yesterday, we saw the Rockrunner during our first walk. Both our guide, Geoff, and our host, Jon(Yon), proclaimed it the best view ever of the bird, one of the specialties of the area. That was the first 5 (on a scale of 1-5) of the trip.

The afternoon game drive produced outstanding looks at the many Oryx in the reserve. There are probably several hundred of these handsome antelope running around. I spent the afternoon logging our sightings into the database and discovered that Linda and I were close to seeing our 600th bird in Africa. This morning, we both managed to achieve this mini-milestone.

Linda, having seen the Black-crowned Tchraga in Uganda while I missed it twice, was one ahead. The first lifer of the morning was her 600th, a pair of Pygmy Falcons we saw performing a nuptial display, bobbing their heads and bowing to each other while perched at the top of a tree, before rewarding us with an automatic 5 by copulating three times.



I had to wait several minutes before we had incredible looks at Hartlaub's Francolin, a chicken-like bird that lives in the rocky "Kopje's" on the reserve. We saw 3 males and a single female on the top of a fairly distant hill, but another male showed up about 30 feet



away on a different rocky outcrop. We awarded that another 5, the third of the trip. On the drive back to the lodge, we saw a magnificent Greater Kudu bull happily browsing a "kudu bush" about 100 meters away. I took several photos with the little Lumix camera. This is quite a mature bull, perhaps something like 10 years old. Tomorrow, we leave Huab for Etosha National Park, where we will be spending several days at three different sites. I don't know whether we will have access to the web there, so be patient.



Oh. One more thing! Today is my **24th K-day**.

August 11, 2010: Huab Lodge to Okaukuejo

Today, we left Huab Lodge and the security blanket of the internet for a trip on the wild side in Etosha National Park. Our first stop was the modern, and luxurious lodge at Okaukuejo. The latter is one of the main entry points for Etosha and is pronounced Oak-uh-KOO-yo, just like it's spelled. The drive following the main road, C38, takes a couple of hours. Naturally, we avoided the main road as long as possible, following a succession of D roads instead, taking most of the day to get there.

We started the day with a brief walk around Huab. We hiked down the river for a while, then climbed a hill to an old cannon emplacement dating to a time when the German ~~occupiers~~ colonists had troubles with the locals. We watched the sunrise from the top of the hill, before walking to the solar energy plant that runs the lodge. The collection of panels and 32 lead-acid batteries has been working for 17 years with minimal replacements. The panels themselves are 20 years old, and Jon (Yon) our host said that he probably would have to replace them soon. Imagine using solar energy 20 years ago! It is a very good choice for this area, as building power lines would be expensive and unreliable. The power went out briefly several times at our 4-star hotel in Swakopmund, as well as in Jo'burg.

After breakfast, we set off for Etosha in a comfortable VW van. Our main vehicle for Etosha, a huge open-air truck intended for game drives went ahead on the main road with baggage. Following the back roads provided numerous opportunities for wildlife viewing, both avian and mammalian. We had superb looks at a Steinbok (or Steenbok), a cute diminutive antelope with huge eyes and long eyelashes. It sat in the shade thinking itself invisible. The birding was good, but of interest only to serious birders, involving waxbills and similar small brown birds. Actually, they weren't brown, but you get the idea.



Shortly after entering the main gate at Etosha, before getting to the lodge itself, we spotted Kori Bustards, the heaviest flying bird in Africa, in a field near the road. While looking at them, our guide, Geoff, spotted a group of Bat-eared Foxes in the background. We watched them for several minutes as they came closer to our vehicle, now the huge game drive truck after a quick exchange at the entrance. The Bat-eared foxes walked past a resting Cape Fox, a tiny animal that resembles a Kit fox. We got good photos of all of these, especially Terry Cloudman, who is serving as our official photographer for the trip.

Terry is using a Nikon D3 with a 150-500mm lens. He also brackets every shot with three different exposure settings. The rapid rip-rip-rip sound is comforting. We should be able to borrow numerous great shots. The little Lumix that we bought for the trip works quite well, but is no match for the real thing. Francis, another birder from Australia in our group has an earlier model of the same camera. She consistently gets better photos than I do. Linda wouldn't accept my offered explanation of operator error and assumed that I must have the camera set up wrong. This led to a lengthy trial with different settings. We still haven't settled the issue.



Near the gate to Okaukuejo Lodge we had the opportunity to observe a Black or Browsing Rhino from a distance of 5-10 meters. We have some great photos of this encounter. After watching for about 15 minutes, we finally headed into the Lodge itself just before sunset, when the gates are closed for the night.

Etosha means "Great White Place," referring to the vast "pan" that forms the heart of the park. This is a lake that fills up each summer with brackish water and dries up after the rains cease. At present, it is completely dry and filled with a combination of salt and fine dust. The dry lake presents a very convincing mirage, which I hope to have captured in some photos. Another name is "the land of dry water."

Due to the lack of water, all the wildlife eventually comes to one of the many water holes in the area. Our cabin at the Okaukuejo Lodge was located near a large, artificially enhanced water hole that is lit up at night. We arrived in time to catch a herd of elephants drinking. We also saw another Black Rhino and several other birds and mammals. I left to work on the bird records. Linda arrived while I was working on data entry to inform me that there was a White Rhino mother and baby at the water hole. This was completely unexpected. I rushed out to find that they had left. We will have another chance to see one much later in our tour.

After dinner, we fell into bed in our luxurious accommodations with the alarm set for 5:30 a.m.

August 12, 2001: Etosha: Okandeka and on to Hilali

Early the next morning, we checked the water hole at the lodge and found little new, except for an Acacia Rat in a tree nearby, so we went on a two hour game drive before breakfast. This was to be our routine for the rest of the time in Etosha. We quickly added several small mammals and some interesting new birds, but no lions or leopards. We did find a huge herd of zebra, probably at least 1000 altogether, and quite a few giraffes. We also saw several different kinds of antelope, including the Springbok that we had seen many times already, Oryx, and our first Impala of the trip. The latter are a Black-faced race that was hunted to extinction in the area before a successful re-introduction in the 1960s.

They are in no danger now.



After breakfast, we set off for Okandeka, a water hole at the end of the road on the west side of the Pan. This dry country provided four species of Larks to add to our list. Most of the other cars we saw were not interested in anything so nondescript. We saw many more antelope and giraffes, but still no lions or other large cats.



We had a second 5-star view of a pair of Pygmy Falcons that had just finished dining on some small creature.

After a picnic lunch, we returned to the main west to east road and headed for Hilali, exactly halfway along the road. Birding our way there consumed the entire afternoon, and so we arrived at the camp at sunset, as usual.

Before dinner, we found three owls in the campground. One was a familiar Barn Owl, the same one we have in Texas. In fact, Barn Owls are found on every continent except Antarctica. We also found a Southern White-faced Owl and an African Scops-Owl. We had seen a small Pearl-spotted Owlet, which is common, earlier in the day, so we had a rare four-owl day. We went to bed satisfied, unaware that the following day was to be the best of the trip and one of the most fabulous days of wildlife viewing in our lives.

August 13, 2010: Etosha: Halali to Namutoni

We checked the waterhole early, but found it almost deserted. There was a single giraffe drinking, and a Familiar Chat hopped up onto a rock near me begging me to take his picture. I complied. We heard a Pearl-spotted Owlet calling. We have all become well acquainted with the call as Geoff uses it to stir up the small birds, just as we use a Screech Owl call in Texas.

Since we knew about where the owls we saw last night were roosting, we looked for them again and saw all three in daylight. The best was the small African Scops-owl, which was probably nesting in a hole in the same tree we saw it in last night. We got some excellent photos of the owls and tallied another four-owl day before breakfast.



Then we set off for the water holes on the way to Namutoni, our last stop in Etosha. The first one, Goas, proved very rewarding. First, we saw a Spotted Hyena crunching bones of a recent kill. She seemed a bit nervous, so we looked around and soon found the reason: a pride of ten lionesses lazing around the water. Our first lions seen in the wild! (We missed seeing them in Uganda.) They were in no hurry to move and seemed to be very well fed. We guessed that they had killed the Impala the Hyena was scavenging. We moved the big game drive vehicle to the other side of the water for better light. From our new vantage point, we saw a herd of elephants coming in to



drink.



The lionesses saw the elephants also and decided that discretion was the better part of valor. Slowly — they didn't want the elephants to think they were afraid of them — they got up and moved into the brush, leaving the elephants a clear trail to the water. I took some video of the elephants to send to Kai as soon as I get a chance. The herd moved close to our vehicle on the way to the water. Elephants move with confidence, knowing that they have no predators to worry about. The herd had several young ones mixed in with several matriarchs and a few young bulls.

It was a great start to the day, but the fun was not over. A large herd of Springbok was also there. We had grown blasé about Springboks as we have seen them almost every day of the trip. This time, though, we saw two of them practicing the strange stiff legged jumping that gives them their name. As they didn't display the white patch of fur on their backs at the same time, technically this wasn't "pronging," but we didn't care.

At the next water hole, we saw Elands for the first time, adding to a growing list of antelope species. Six bulls came to the hole and drank before walking off. Apparently, Elands have been scarce in the park in recent years, but we were going to see quite a few of them during the next few days.

Of course, we also saw some great birds. Linda's adopted a New Favorite Bird™, Pale Chanting Goshawk, one of the loveliest raptor around, a gray bird when perched, it shows a pristine white belly, black and white wings, and a long barred tail in flight. To our delight, they are common in the park and we had many chances to admire them. We took to calling them "PCG" for short.



We made our way slowly toward Namutoni, stopping at virtually every water hole en route. Jon drove the entire way and knew which places were good stops. He has lived in the area since the 1960s, and spent many years in Etosha before setting up the Huab Lodge. He and Suzi were actually married at one of the water holes 27 years ago.

Our list of mammals had reached 18 for the day as we neared Namutoni. We started with a new squirrel, Tree Squirrel early in the morning, as well numerous Black-backed Jackals. Various species of antelope showed up during the day, and of course the hyena and lions. But more was to come.



Before entering the camp, we drove along Dik-dik Drive, one of the few accurately named roads in the Park. We hadn't driven more than five minutes when we spotted three of the cute, tiny antelope. These are the smallest antelopes in Africa, and maybe the world. No larger than Chipper, with huge eyes and a strange prehensile nose, they cavorted around playfully as we snapped frame after frame. We hadn't dared to put these on our wish list for fear of jinxing everything.

As we drove along the road, we stopped for some birds. While we were watching them, Geoff called out, "African Wild Cat." Those of us in the front seats, which thankfully included Linda and me, had a brief look at the source of our domestic cat. Larger than a domestic cat, with longer legs, it nevertheless looked so much like Minnie that we had no doubt that the theory is correct. A soft gray color with tinges of the same mackerel that Minnie has, the cat lacked only the tabby stripes on the body and face for a complete match. It did show some of the striped markings on its hind legs. We never expected to see this animal in the wild, and indeed, it vanished into the brush so quickly that people at the back of the bus didn't manage to see it. Thus, Linda and I had to restrain our enthusiasm, but we both agreed it was one of the highlights of the trip.

With 20 mammal species to go with the 83 birds, it was a stupendous day. We fell into bed tired but happy after dinner wondering what could possibly match it.

August 14, 2010: Etosha: Namutoni to Andoni and back.

We spent today in a fruitless search for Blue Crane, driving along the eastern edge of the Etosha Pan to one of the gates at a place called Andoni. We added many new bird species, including two more lark species, and pushing our total for Namibia past 200, but the cranes were nowhere to be found. However, the day was not a total loss.

Early on, we chanced on a large herd of Elands coming drinking at a water hole. Something spooked them, or maybe they were simply ready to go. At any rate, they stampeded away from the water, leaping high into the air as they ran. The sight of these huge antelope, the largest in Africa, jumping was truly amazing.

At the end of the day, we stopped at one of the water holes near the camp before finishing for the day. We watched a large group of Impala standing around. Some were drinking, but most were doing nothing. We also saw a Black Rhino near the tree line, and as we watched that, spotted two young male lions approaching the water. One of them seemed nonchalant, but the other had thoughts of taking an Impala before drinking. The lions were upwind, and the Impalas didn't notice them. We watched, holding our breath, wondering if we would have a chance to witness a kill. Suddenly, one of the Impalas saw them and bolted. In seconds, nothing was left of the entire herd except a dust cloud.

The lion who had been stalking, whether from frustration or some other cause, let out a roar, which his companion soon echoed. Of course, I wasn't taking video. When the roaring was over and the lions calmly took a drink, Linda asked, "Were you able to get the roar on video?" I confessed that I had taken some still photos, including one of the lion in full roar, but no video. She was incredulous. "I would have said something, but I didn't want to make any noise. I assumed you would take video." So it goes.

Suzi, however, did manage to get video of both lions roaring, and gave a copy to Terry, so we should be able to get a copy eventually. Video is online, on the web site, hargrove.org/2010.

It was a great way to end our visit to Etosha, cranes or not. Now, on to Botswana.

August 15, 2010: Namutoni to Shakawe Lodge via Mahongo Game Reserve

We got up early and took one last drive around Namutoni before eating breakfast at 7:00. We were due at the air strip at Mokuti Lodge, a mere 15 kilometers away in time for wheels up at 9:00. As we packed up the game drive vehicle for the last time, Geoff spotted a pair of Burnt-necked Eremophobas in a nearby tree. Time for one last lifer before leaving. Then we headed out on one of the few paved roads (known as "tarred" by the Namibians) for the drive out of the park. About halfway there, we stopped for a flock of White Helmetshrikes, another lifer. As a result, we pulled into the area near the air strip to see the pilot adjusting the plane for a takeoff.

Our first stop, after a 20 minute flight, was a mining town called Tsuneb, where we refueled. As it was Sunday, opportunities to get fuel were limited and the plan required more than the tank would hold for the round trip. At Tsuneb, we secured a couple more new birds for the list in the 15 minutes it took to get fuel and take off again. With an hour and twenty minutes of time on my hands, I got the bird list up to date and wrote up some reports on Etosha. I announced that our Namibia list stood at a very respectable 218 species of birds. Geoff said, "Don't close the books on Namibia yet, we're going to be in the country for quite a while yet."

As it turned out, we landed in Namibia at a dirt strip in the middle of nowhere, a place called Mahonga. Geoff was delighted to spot Bradfield's Hornbill in a tree near the strip. "Last year," he explained, "we had to make a special trip back here just to get that bird." I mentally added another bird to the Namibia list.

Our drive to Botswana took us through the Mahonga Game Reserve, and I understood why Geoff insisted I keep the books open. We spent the next four hours driving slowly along the floodplain of the Okavango River where it flows through the "panhandle" of Namibia. This geographical curiosity owes its existence to some dealing between the Germans and British in the 19th century, the exact nature of which is hazy, but was somehow related to "equity."

The result was another 38 species or so for the Namibia list, many of them lifers. We also added several new antelope species to the tally, including several we had seen in Uganda, and a new one, Red Lechwe. The best sight, though was two elephants using mud and dirt as part of their personal hygiene. We first saw one that had come up from the river. Instead of gray, it was dark, almost black in color. We thought it was because he was wet. I got video and photos of him hurling red sand onto his back. Presumably, this is designed to rid him of some pest, but we don't know for sure, only that he was very deliberate about choosing the right sand. [***Video here***]

Later, we saw a different elephant standing in the river flinging mud dug up from the bank onto his back. The mud was very dark, and was the reason the first elephant had appeared black. Clearly, the cleansing was a two-step process. I got video of the second elephant as well. I hope that Kai still likes elephants.

We saw several Warthogs running around. When they run, they stick their tails straight up in the air, giving them an even more comical appearance than usual. When we saw this the first time, back at the beginning of the trip, Geoff explained the reason for this behavior, “When they run through the grass, they have to keep their eyes closed. Otherwise, the spines will scratch their corneas. Their skin is so tight that when they shut their eyes, it pulls the skin taut, causing the tails to stick straight up. The only problem is a tendency to run into things, which is why they have flattened faces. If they blunder into something at speed, it stuns them.”

He delivered this in complete deadpan.

Of course, no one believed this nonsense, but it became a running joke over the next several weeks, growing more elaborate over time. As we had been searching in vain for a Leopard, Geoff told us that a good way to find one was to watch the Warthogs. “The leopard knows about the warthog habit of running into things, so it simply frightens one and waits for it to run into something. Then he comes in while it is stunned and finishes it off.”

We didn’t manage to see a leopard.

Our drive through the reserve ended at the border, where we first had to satisfy the Namibian authorities that we were leaving peacefully, then drive 200 meters and repeat the process in Botswana to a smiling clerk and a scowling boss anxious to close the post. We got out at 5:30 after losing an hour to the time difference between the two countries. As a result, we pulled into Shakawe Lodge at our accustomed time of sunset.

The plan for the next hour was to quickly drop our bags, then take a boat ride looking for Pel’s Fishing Owl. This spectacular bird is one of the reasons for staying two days and three nights at the lodge, to maximize the chance of seeing one. Geoff hoped to find one the first night, “So I can sleep soundly.”

The gods of birding smiled on us and we located the owl, a huge, UT-colored bird, sitting on a branch of a tree by the river. Its nickname is the “flying pumpkin.” We were all elated, as we were as anxious to see the bird as Geoff was to show it to us. We returned to the lodge for a quick dinner and off to bed. Tomorrow, the program called for us to watch the sun rise over the river, starting at 6:00, which was only 5:00 Namibian time.

August 16 and 17: Shakawe Lodge, Okavango River, Botswana

Both days at Shakawe were similar: we got up to watch the sun rise, then spent the rest of the day looking for area specialties. The Okavango flows mostly southeast in Botswana until it peters out into a vast delta, never reaching the sea. Where the lodge is located, the river is full and flowing strongly. Our next stop, Xakanaka, is in the delta and should be quite different.

The river meanders a lot, of course, and in front of the lodge, it flows due west for a while. So the sun rises over some trees marking a bend in the river, which produces a spectacular sunrise. We snapped many photos both mornings. On the 17th, an early jet — supposedly the daily jet to Jo’burg — left a striking contrail in the pre-dawn sky. It looked like a small comet, or a long-lived meteor.

With the sun’s warmth, the birds became very active. A flowering coral tree near the lodge was a particular favorite of Sunbirds, both Collared and Mariqua species, and we had many opportunities to study these African nectar feeders as they zipped from bloom to bloom. Many other birds shared the tree with the sunbirds, so we spent the first hour of the day just standing around, drinking coffee and watching the bird life until it was time for breakfast.

On the 17th, Francis, our Australian companion (actually, she only lives there as she carefully explained, and still considers herself to be English) spied a Spotted-neck Otter swimming past the lodge, adding another mammal to our growing list. We also photographed a Common Slit-faced Bat roosting on the ceiling of the bar for a second addition. We have now seen 44 different mammals on the trip. Linda has seen another one, the White Rhino. We expect several more before we are done.



After breakfast, we took a long ride in the boat, checking the reeds and trees along the shore for some of the special birds of the river. Many of these are “birder’s birds,” little brown skulkers that have to be coaxed out of the reeds. We have seen some fun ones, though, such as the African Skimmers on the 17th. These look very similar to our Skimmers back home, but have heavier orange-colored bills. A contrast was a beautiful Malachite Kingfisher sitting out on a branch with a damselfly in its beak.

The morning ride ended in time for lunch around 1:00.

The first day, we were able to enjoy a real siesta, but on the second afternoon, Geoff interrupted us to say that he had located an African Wood-owl roosting nearby. We piled out of the cabin to find that he had set up the telescope about 20 feet from the back of our cabin. We had great looks at our sixth owl of the trip. Later that afternoon, we found the mate in another tree nearby and had an even better view.

During one of our boat rides, a fruitless search for the White-backed Night-heron, Linda amazed everyone by spotting a female Little Bittern sitting on a branch near the water. This is a very difficult bird to find, one that typically hides in the reeds and doesn't respond to coaxing. We had been warned that our only chance to see one was if we happened to spot it flying from one place to another. Linda's find provided a rare opportunity to photograph one.



As we were still missing the White-backed Night-heron, we set out before dinner on our last night for one final attempt. We left at 7:00 just as it was getting dark and patrolled the river slowly, with our driver shining a spotlight on all likely roosts for the bird. As there was no bird life to watch, we spent most of the time admiring Venus shining brightly. The stars here have been spectacular. We forget what they are like living in the city. We have seen the Southern Cross and had a lesson in figuring out which direction is South, a much harder task than locating Polaris in the northern sky. Orion, one of the easiest constellations to recognize, is visible at night but upside down from what we are used to.

Just as we were about to give up on the Night-heron and head back to the lodge for dinner, it appeared. The spotlight showed it standing on a small sand bar on the edge of the reeds. Its eye is surrounded by a huge white ring, giving it a distinctive appearance and making identification easy. So, our luck is still holding, and we returned to the lodge for a cheerful final dinner before leaving for the Delta in the morning. [***Terry Photo***]

August 18, 2010: Shakawe to Xakanaka

As a reward for locating the Night-heron the previous night, we were able to sleep in, assembling for coffee at 6:30 instead of the usual 6:00. Then, after breakfast at 7:30, we decided to try for better photographs of the Wood-owl before packing for our flight to the Delta. We found the bird easily, in the same tree as the previous afternoon, and spent about 20 minutes trying to get a good angle for the photo. We'll see how it turns out.

We took off at 10:45 in our chartered plane for Xakanaka, flying low most of the trip. Our route began by flying along the river, providing a bird's eye view of its many meanders. Then we flew over arid scrubland and thorn forest until we saw the delta beneath us, a vast collection of small shallow lagoons and narrow channels with an occasional tree island. We spotted several elephants from the plane before landing at the Xakanaka air strip.

Xakanaka, the "X" represents a click made with the tip of the tongue pressed against the front teeth, but non-native speakers usually substitute a slurred "T" sound. It still represents a challenge for English speakers. I practiced the click on the plane ride, but no one has asked me to pronounce it yet. The camp is located in the middle of the Moremi Game Reserve, about 6km from the air strip.

About halfway there, our driver, one of the Game Rangers, stopped the Land Rover and looked at the ground. "These are probably leopard tracks. We have had a mated pair in the area for the past few days. The tracks look like they're heading for those trees." He drove a bit farther, then stopped the vehicle and pointed.

Two leopards, apparently well-fed on a diet of stunned warthogs, were lounging in a tree about 75 meters from the road. While we watched, they mated twice (for an automatic 5 of course) before jumping down to the ground where those still able to see them reported they did it again. The sighting was cause for considerable jubilation, especially for Francis who *really* wanted to see a leopard. Unfortunately, our driver informed us that he was on a tight schedule, so we didn't have time to search for them again.

After a light lunch, we had time for a brief siesta before setting out on an afternoon game drive. Geoff had consistently referred to our accommodations as "tents," so we were pleasantly surprised to find luxurious rooms, which resembled tents only by having fabric walls. We have a deck in front and attached bath in back, with a large bed and even a desk on which I am typing this note. I had been expecting something similar to what we had at Lake Mburo in Uganda, but these are quite a bit nicer. This may be the only 5-star tent camp in Botswana. (Geoff informed us over dinner that this is the low end of the *upscale* tent camps. It has to do with the way the Botswana government gets money from the operation.)

Our game drive in the afternoon produced two outstanding sightings:

1. African Barred Owlet: Geoff played the call of this owl and got an immediate answer. Shortly, two of the birds flew into a tree nearby, providing us with a fantastic look at this small, beautiful owl. After they flew to another tree, I re-located the male, which is smaller than the female. I watched it move into a hole in the tree. According to Geoff, the nesting behavior of these birds is not well known.
2. Late in the afternoon, we stopped for a *sundowner*, a great African tradition of a drink at sunset after a game drive. It wasn't exactly sunset as driving after dark is prohibited, but it was late in the day. We picked a spot near a small pond where we could see some Red Lechwe antelope on the other side. While we scoped them, our driver, Ollie, said, "There's a Serval." We all got a look as it walked slowly past a fallen tree, then it sat in tall grass and proceeded to groom until it we had to leave. We could see its head, especially his ears, every so often. Geoff says this is much harder to see than a leopard. He's seen only five in his life and none on this tour before.

August 19, 2010: Xakanaka

Another day, another fabulous series of game drives. Having more or less cleaned out all the water birds at Shakawe, we devoted our time at Xakanaka to searching for bigger prizes. The leopards had whetted our appetites as we set out after a quick, continental breakfast.

The vehicles used for these treks is a venerable Land Rover equipped with a "snorkel" to keep air going to the engine when we drive through water on the road. We soon found out that this equipment was essential as we heard the driver's warning, "Raise your feet." Then he pressed on into the water, which soon covered the hood (bonnet, if you prefer) of the truck. The people in front discovered that the warning was real as water poured over the side and onto the floor. However, we soon found ourselves back on dry land again and plunged ahead.

Shortly, we chanced on a new bird, a small family group of Southern Ground Hornbills. These turkey-sized hornbills have large red throat pouches, which they inflate and use to make a low frequency "boom" sound as they walk. Geoff explained that this was a territorial signal to any other family groups in the area. We shot tons of photos, including at least one of a bird with the sac fully blown up.

We had a couple of other life birds, but the list of candidates is thinning out. The trip list passed 300 species yesterday, and a Dwarf Mongoose that we chanced on during the drive added the 49th mammal to the list. Actually, the list of mammals stands at 50, but I missed seeing the White Rhino that everyone else saw. There is a chance to add that in

Livingstone, or if not there on the South African part of our trip. I find the mammal list more impressive than the bird list, including at least four outstanding views, the two foxes on the first day in Etosha, and the leopard and serval here.

We returned to the lodge for brunch at 11:15. We were the last group to get there, something that is apparently expected of birders. Linda read a book this week written by a Botswana guide, with stories of his experiences leading tours. One chapter, *Bird Nerds*, satirizes the extreme examples of our type, those interested in birds above all else. The funniest passage tells how the guide pointed out the Wattled Starling:

"See that tree with the yellowish bark. It's called a Sycamore Fig, but I guess you're not interested in that. If you follow the main trunk until it forks, then follow the left branch, you'll come to a place where it forks again into an upper and lower branch. If you look on the lower branch, you'll see a leopard, and if you look right over the back of the leopard, you'll find the Wattled Starling."

We're not like that.

After brunch, we settled in for a siesta, only to be interrupted as usual when Geoff located another new bird, in this case Brown Firefinches, a cute little brown bird with a pink wash on the breast covered with white spots. He also turned up the African Scops-owl again in the tree over our tent.

Another game drive in the afternoon failed to turn up anything exciting. We had reports of African Wild Dogs, but were unable to find them. We spent the rest of the afternoon searching for Verreaux's Eagle-owl, which would be the eighth owl for our list. We didn't find them, or the leopard that another group saw, but we had a great time nonetheless.



August 20, 2010: Xakanaka, and on to Livingstone in Zambia

Geoff berated us for our tardiness yesterday. We didn't realize that we should have been the first people at the continental breakfast and wasted time dealing with some laundry. This morning, we rose at 5:15 and packed our bags before the guard arrived to let us know it was safe to move around the camp. Xakanaka is not fenced, and wild animals wander the grounds at night. We have heard hippos every night, and a leopard was snorting, a sound resembling a loud snore, the first night.

Fortified with a quick meal, we set out for our final game drive. We searched again in vain for the Wild Dogs, contenting ourselves with their footprints in the dust on the road. We had a radio report of leopards, so we headed for them, taking a roundabout route that gave us another chance for Verreaux's Eagle-owl. This time our luck was in. We checked a possible nest site that we had looked at yesterday and found the owl standing on a nearby branch. After everyone had a good look, we headed to the leopards. Three other vehicles were already parked by the time we got there, but we still had an excellent view of a large male lying on a branch. We snapped more photos. In fact, we found out later that we had run the battery down on the Lumix.



All the other groups left and we were able to re-position with an even better view. Then the female arrived and climbed up the tree near the male. We were hoping for a repeat performance of our first sighting, but alas, the honeymoon is over. The male showed no interest when the much

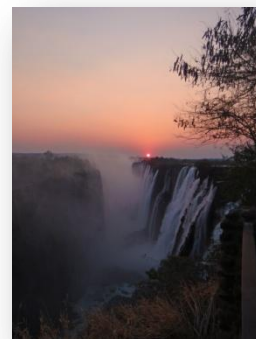
smaller female moved in front of him and waved her tail alluringly. After a few minutes, she gave up and left.

A great way to end this part of the trip.

However, after a real breakfast, we encountered a Giraffe on the way to the airport. He was chewing on a "sausage," really the seed pod of a sausage tree. These pods are about a foot long and weigh several pounds. We have heard stories about people being hit in the head when one falls from the tree. The Giraffe may have bitten off more than he could chew, though he was chewing for all he was worth. Linda got some pictures of this funny sight with her camera, then we proceeded to the airport and boarded the plane. We had to fly to Kasane first and satisfy Botswana immigration and customs that we were legit. Then we had a short 20 minute hop to Livingstone in Zambia, where we had to do it all over again.

Dealing with bureaucrats turned out to be easier than expected. For one thing, they removed a sample of the bags on the plane to screen, and weren't nearly as persnickety as the TSA folks back home about the rest. We had to buy visas for Zambia at \$50 apiece, but it looks as though they could use the money.

The Royal Livingstone Hotel, however, is another story altogether. A throwback to an earlier era, it has liveried servants, including our "personal valet," who we are informed will be happy to unpack for us and see that our clothes are pressed. Dressing for dinner is *de rigueur*, naturally, so we don't plan to dine in the hotel. Coats and ties didn't make it with the 25-pound weight limit. Fortunately, the sister hotel Zambezi Sun, a short walk away, caters to a more informal crowd. We ate too much lunch there at about 3:00. Two members of the group are slightly sick and didn't want anything to eat, and the rest of us decided this was a good time to skip dinner, which would have been our fourth meal of the day.



Geoff, Linda, Jenny and I walked to view the falls. The tour used to visit the falls from the Zimbabwe side, but "uncle Bob" has made things difficult, so Zambia is now getting virtually all the traffic. We found the falls spectacular, Granny's warning to the contrary notwithstanding. We stayed long enough to photograph the sun setting, then came back to the room and crashed. Tomorrow, we get up at 5:30 for a boat trip on the Zambezi.

August 21, 2010: Livingstone, Zambia

We started the day as usual, by rising before dawn. We met at 6:15 on a deck overlooking the Zambezi River as it flowed past the hotel. The sound of African Fish Eagles, which resembles our Bald Eagle, heralded the start of another day of birding, our next to last on the trip.

After a breakfast, based on a completely over-the-top buffet that included everything from herring to sushi, as well as pedestrian offerings such as eggs and bacon, we drove a short distance to African Queen Tours. Yes, that is really the name. However, the boats were somewhat more modern than the craft used by Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn. We set out to sample the delights of the river islands.

Almost immediately, we spotted one of the target birds, African Finfoot. This strange bird is one of three members of its family and usually quite difficult to see. We were fortunate enough to see two females and two males during the course of our day. We had seen females in Uganda — indeed, we have a great photo of one — but never a male. It was a good start.

Two Wire-tailed Swallows followed us for the entire voyage. Geoff explained that the birds often build a nest under the hull of the boat. Somehow, they recognize *their* boat and return to it even while it is underway. The birds frequently lit on the bow of our boat, begging to be photographed. This turned out to be harder than you'd expect. As I aimed the camera, the birds took off. I finally managed to get some shots. These are small, interesting swallows with long tail streamers, at least in the males, during breeding plumage. These thin spines often break off during courtship, and our birds lacked them.



Later in the morning, we spotted a Half-collared Kingfisher, the other rare bird we were seeking. A small kingfisher with a brilliant azure back and bright red bill, the bird likes to sit on branches just above the water, in the shade, where they are hard to see. For us, though, one posed in bright sunlight, which lit up the plumage like a Christmas tree ornament.

The boat brought us ashore at the hotel, saving us the drive back, and leaving time to explore the grounds some more before the usual fancy meal. Several of us were feeling the effects of travel and not in the mood for much lunch. I made do with a bowl of leek and potato soup, with a piece of salmon included, an interesting addition, but not one I plan to emulate.

On the subject of potatoes, I realize that I have not yet mentioned the “potato plant” that we have encountered several times on the trip. The plant gives off an odor, especially late in the afternoon, with an uncanny similarity to cooked potatoes. Jenny noted it first during one of our boat rides in Botswana. “Someone’s cooking potatoes,” she remarked. Geoff corrected and gave a short explanation. We never did get a look at the plant itself, so it will have to go on our smelled-only list.

On our last afternoon in Zambia, we took a game drive in Mosi-o-Tunya Park. The name is what the natives call the Falls. It means, “The smoke that thunders.” We were promised White Rhino in the park, which I needed to catch up with Linda and Jenny. They had been lucky to see one at Okaukuejo the first night we were there. I was in our cabin at the time and the rhinos, a mother and baby, had left the water hole by the time I arrived.

At Mosi-o-Tunya, a Rhino had given birth only three days earlier, and we hoped to see the two of them. The rhinos in the park are provided 24/7 protection by guards armed with venerable AK-47s to stop poachers. The horn is alleged to have anti-pyretic and aphrodisiac properties, as well as serving as the handle for ceremonial daggers. As a result, it is in high demand. Since the park contained only five rhinos, protection seems appropriate, especially considering the pharmaceutical substitutes.

We waited, drinking beer and soft drinks, while our driver consulted with the park staff. Finally, we were told where to find the animals. Along the way, we passed a large herd of Cape Buffalo, the other large mammal to elude us on the trip. We parked and followed the guards single file to a spot where we could take pictures. We were somewhat disappointed to discover that we were viewing the other rhinos, not the mother and baby. The pair was considered too valuable and fragile for general viewing.

That night, during our final dinner of the trip, we all lauded the results. I tried to credit my lucky rock, which I threatened to put up for sale on eBay. Linda asked me to dance, despite the fact that the floor was empty. Mellowed by two glasses of wine and the overall state of satisfaction, I accompanied her for our usual fake dancing, consisting of the steps we used back in college, for two pieces. When we applauded the band at the end of each piece, the keyboard operator gave us a hand, as did a pretty Japanese tourist at the bar. So, I guess it was worth it.

August 22, 2010: Victoria Falls

Our last morning. We set out at 6:30 to walk to the Falls before the crowds got there. Along the way, we stumbled onto several Schalow's Turacos, fantastic birds that quickly went onto the short list of Birds-of-the-Trip. Emerald green bodies contrast with red wings and blue tails, the latter visible only when the birds fly. Bright red eye rings and an overlong crest complete the picture. We watched the birds hopping from limb to limb along the trail to the bridge across part of the gorge. When we got onto the bridge, we were lucky enough to see the birds flying across the gap, a rare and very satisfying view from above.

We spent quite a bit of time at the Falls trying to get a good photograph of a 180° rainbow formed in the mist from the Falls. The camera must have seen something different from my eye, as the pictures never captured the brilliance of the sight. We could barely see a dim second rainbow, an inverted image as I had tried to explain to my dinner companions last night. Strangely, none was particularly interested in the optics of rainbows I had gleaned from a Scientific American article years ago.

After packing, we waited by the river, catching sight of a Black Stork soaring over the gorge, our last trip bird of this phase of our journey. Linda's list of Bird of the Trip contained 15 entries, until we pointed out that she hadn't included Kori Bustard, at which point it increased to 16. The rest of us were content with fewer choices, and to Geoff's disappointment, no one thought the Yellow-bellied Eremonela deserved a place on the list.

August 23, 2010: Cape Town: Kirstenbosch Gardens, Sterntfontein Ponds

Our first day of birding in Cape Town. We met Gavin Lautenbach, our guide for this portion of the trip at the airport last night, where he recognized us easily without the need for a sign or anything like that. We drove through the modern city of Cape Town, which has grown quite a bit since we visited in 1998. We have a nice room in Afton Grove, a Bed and Breakfast type of establishment. Actually, it serves evening meals on demand as well.

Cape Town is colder than most places we have stayed on the trip, with daytime temperatures reaching only the high 50s (F). We were delighted to find that we could heat the beds, though surprisingly, it is more like an electric mattress cover than an electric blanket. Best of all, Afton Grove gave me access to the internet again for the first time in weeks.



After a nice sleep and a late breakfast (7:00) we set off to see the birds of the Cape area, starting at Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. Linda and I had begun birding there in 1998 when we had half a day on our own. The gardens are beautiful now, with early spring flowers everywhere. Most of the birds were new for our current trip, but not lifers as we'd seen them in 1998. We enjoyed a lovely, relaxed morning walk, just what we needed at this point.

After a quick lunch in the Gardens, we headed for the "ponds" at Sterntfontein. These, you will not be surprised to learn, are actually sewage treatment ponds, something birders relish. We spent the afternoon happily driving from one pond to another checking out various water birds.

At night, we went out to dinner with some friends we had met on our Antarctica cruise last January. Trevor Hardaker and Alvin Cope turn out to be local legends in the birding community here, so it was easy to arrange things. Everyone knew them. We met at the Harbour House Restaurant in the suburb of Fish Hoek. Hoek is an Afrikaans word meaning "corner." However, the Afrikaans for fish would be Vis, or something like that. So I think the name is a clever joke the English pulled years ago.

Dinner was excellent. We all opted for fish, of course, as we are in a place with not one but two oceans to choose from. I sat next to Felicity Cope, a charming lady a few years older than we are. She grew up in Zimbabwe and told us what it was like in the Colonial days. Her grandmother's black butler served the meal in a white coat and gloves. She rang a little bell to signal the end of each course, when the butler returned to clear the plates and bring the next course. I thought, "Those days are long gone. What a life."

It was about midnight when I recalled dinner at my grandmother's house. James Pickens brought each course in response to Mamaw's ringing a little bell. Strangely, the comparison of pre-Civil Rights Louisiana and Colonial Zimbabwe had not occurred to me before then.

August 24, 2010: Cape Town: Rooiels, Stony Point, Cape Point

Today we started early, with breakfast at 6:00 instead of 7:00. After that, we set off to search for the Cape Rockjumper, one of the signature birds of the Cape area. We drove through early morning traffic across the width of Cape Town to the beach community of Rooiels, where everyone seems to go to look for the bird. After about an hour of birding, Gavin spotted one sitting on a rock and got it in the telescope for all of us to enjoy. It is a beautiful, and usually difficult, bird much sought after by visiting birders. [***Terry Photo***] We were fortunate to find it quickly. That was my 701st African bird. We worked our way from 600 to 700 very quickly. I think the going is likely to be a bit tougher from now on.

A group visiting from Midwest USA was even more fortunate than we were. They arrived in time to get the bird handed to them by looking through our scope. We were happy to share our good luck.

At about 10:30, we left Rooiels and drove a short distance to Stony Point, where we saw a colony of African Penguins. These used to be called Jackass Penguins, but that name is no longer politically correct. The colony is also home to quite a few families of Rock Hyraxes, and we had close views, a marked contrast to the looks we had at Huab Lodge. We took some nice photos, but didn't spend much time there.



After a quick lunch of fish and chips, we drove across Cape Town again to Cape Point, or Table Mountain National Park, its official name. The drive took forever as we had to go all the way around False Bay. However, we had great looks at Southern Right Whales, including a mother and calf, very close to shore. Even more remarkable was the sight of one of the submarines in the South African Navy. We tried to imagine what use the navy had for these vessels, but were unable to come up with an explanation.

The actual Cape of Good Hope is located in the Table Mountain National Park. Linda and I had visited the Park in 1998, and I remember driving on gravel roads. Our guide then stopped at the gate, exchanged a few words in Afrikaans with the guards and drove on into the park. This time, the roads are paved, and there is a 75Rand entrance fee. There were also far fewer birds and no Mountain Zebra this time.

The visit did turn up a sensational sighting, though. We saw a male Ostrich doing some strange movements with his wings. "He's displaying," Gavin informed us. We drove forward for a better view and spotted the target of his affections. Both birds displayed elaborately, something that I managed to capture on video, at least for a minute. Gavin told us, "This can go on for days." I replied, "I only have 7 minutes of video left." Both birds disappeared from view before completing the performance, so my video is Ostrich erotica instead of something more serious. We still awarded the sighting a coveted 5-star rating. [***Video***]

Tomorrow, we have yet another early start and a drive across Cape Town to the West Coast National Park.

August 25, 2010: Cape Town to Ceres via West Coast NP

We ate breakfast at 6:00 and hit the road just in time for rush hour traffic in Cape Town. We had to drive through Cape Town to get to the West Coast National Park. Finally, after about an hour of stop and go, we hit the freeway and had clear sailing. The rush hour was just like any large city: Lots of cars with a single driver. Alas, there was no carpool lane. At least we are in a country with First World infrastructure for the most part. Gavin told us earlier that SA was a country with First World infrastructure and a Third World economy. From what we read in the newspapers, it definitely seems to be heading in the direction of Third World government.

When we finally reached the West Coast National Park, we found the flowers for which it is famous starting to bloom. We are probably a couple of weeks too early for the full show. You aren't allowed to step out of the vehicle while on the main roads in the park. There are baboons around that are aggressive for one thing. Therefore, we couldn't get all the flower pictures Linda wanted, but we did manage a few.

We drove to a bird blind that opened onto an expansive mud flat as the tide was out. We spent about 30 minutes checking out the shorebirds, many of them old friends, before heading to lunch. Lunch was at Geelbok House, a restaurant in a structure dating back to 1759, when Dutch settlers moved into the area with several slaves from Malaysia. The menu features some Malay dishes that were excellent. Linda had the most interesting selection, Mussels under the African Sun, a



concoction of mussels with a cheese topping arranged in a pattern resembling the sun.

After lunch, we check the blinds again with the tide moving in, pushing the birds closer, before heading for Ceres late in the afternoon.

The drive to Ceres followed some gravel roads through agricultural areas much of the way, giving us a chance for some new Larks. (There are many different Larks in SA.) We saw a display flight of the Cape Clapper Lark, a bouncing flight where the Lark claps its wings together each time it bounces higher, then descends in what is described as a “parachute” landing. Very dramatic. Unfortunately, the wind was blowing too much to hear the clap, but we decided it was good enough as it was.

We pulled into Ceres after dark and checked into the Village Guesthouse and Restaurant, a comfortable and homey place with excellent food. Ceres is the center of fruit growing in SA. We have been drinking from their juice boxes for weeks, so it was nice to see the place finally. At least it would have been nice if we saw it in daylight. Our plan called for leaving before dawn on the next day, so the view would have to wait.

August 26, 2010: Into the Karoo

We left Ceres at 6:00 and drove in the dark to the edge of the Tanqua Karoo, a vast stony desert that by some estimates stretches all the way to Namibia. Naturally, we were there to see various small brown birds whose names begin with Karoo. Our first stop produced the Karoo Eremomela, which fits the specs precisely.

During the night, a cold front moved into the area, bringing rain, wind, and much colder weather. We drove out of the rain before opening our box breakfasts, but the cold wind hampered birding all day. Many of the birds seemed to have hunkered down in whatever shelter they could find. We drove around dirt roads all day, stopping whenever we spotted something. At the end of the day, we had a respectable list of Karoo specialties, missing only the Karoo Long-billed Lark.

We left the Karoo late in the afternoon and drove up a small canyon to search for a specialty, Cinnamon-breasted Warbler, described as “very localized, shy and often overlooked.” Before seeing it, we saw a Booted Eagle, a lovely small eagle that we had seen only once before, in Bhutan. The bird sailed overhead, showing us all the field marks, including the “headlights” on the shoulders to clinch the ID.

About an hour later, we did see the Warbler as it sat out on a rock. Linda had lagged behind on an errand of her own, and for a moment, we feared another dreaded “half bird.” (Linda is ahead of me on the Africa list by virtue of three half birds: Black-crowned Tchagra, which I hope to see on this trip; Brown Skua, which we saw in Antarctica and which she saw in West Coast NP; and a mystery bird which I am determined to track down at some point.) Luckily, Linda hurried up in time to see the Cinnamon-breasted Warbler when it sat out a second time.

As we were driving home, we saw six Karoo Korhaans by a small pond, saving us the ignominy of missing the signature bird of the region. The bird gods smiled on us later as we neared the outskirts of Ceres. Driving past another small pond, Gavin and I both called out, “Great Crested Grebe.” Linda and I had last seen this bird with Charles in Yorkshire in 2000. It was a lifer for Jenny. We managed a close look in fading light, then drove back to the Village.

August 27, 2010: Ceres to De Hoop Preserve

We slept in this morning, getting up for breakfast at 7:15. After the day yesterday, we needed a break. After breakfast, we drove north to search for the Protea Canary, which eluded us. However, we did finally get a look at the lovely Ceres Valley, a picturesque collection of orchards just starting to bloom, and several small hamlets. Ceres itself barely deserves the designation as a city. Small town is more accurate. We drove up into the protea area on hills near



the town and spent about an hour in cold wind searching for the Canary. We did see a couple of new birds, and thought we had the Canary, only to discover that it was another lifer, Streak-headed Seedeater. Gavin kept trying long after the rest of us were ready to concede defeat. Finally, he threw in the towel as well and we headed south.

The road we wanted to take through the mountains was closed, apparently for repairs, necessitating a detour. The normally reliable GPS system Gavin has been using refused to acknowledge the

need to detour and kept trying to send us back to go through the pass. Finally, we got far enough along the other route to convince her of our intentions. We stopped for a break at a very modern looking gas station with other facilities on the N1, a real freeway. We bought some US style junk food, Doritos and Potato chips, to help us on the long, uninteresting drive southeast.

We stopped for lunch at a place called Droz in Breede Valley, which we all agreed was eminently skippable. After that, we set off again and quickly abandoned the main road. Birding got better immediately. Soon, we saw our first Blue Cranes of the trip (and our life). These stunning birds are the National Bird of South Africa. A beautiful bluish gray body contrasts with a white top of the head and black wing and tail feathers that trail the body as in most cranes. Shortly after



that, we started the activity that was to consume most of our time for the next day and half: searching for Larks. South Africa possesses a plethora of larks, all of which look similar. They are small brown birds that blend into the background and are easy to see only when they walk or fly. Most turned out to be Red-capped Larks. Ultimately we found the Argulhas Long-billed Lark we were looking for. Or did we? Checking the book, we questioned our ID. The bills didn't appear to be long enough. After checking several sources, we determined that the females have shorter bills than the males and ticked the bird off our list of must haves.

We also were lucky to find a new mongoose for the trip. *Herpestes ichneumon* has several common names: Egyptian Mongoose and Large Gray Mongoose being the most common. Its long gray fur covered its legs and feet as it ran away, but its long tail with a marked black tip was enough to prove it was that species. No other has such a tail. We had already seen a Yellow Mongoose during the afternoon, and reveled in the rare two mongoose day. It's strange to drive through farm lands with sheep and cattle then suddenly stumble on a mongoose. You remember that you're not in the US or England after all.

We were merrily birding along the road when a passing car stopped to see if we were lost. This is a not infrequent occurrence. When we explained, they mentioned that the ferry we had to use to get across the river stopped running at 6:00. We had exactly 14 minutes to get there. Birding forgotten, we dashed to the ferry crossing, only to wait about 15 minutes for the ferrymen to decide that three cars were enough to merit another run. Amazingly, the two men *pulled* the ferry across the river using a chain that stretched from one side to the other. Terry got pictures of the process. [***Terry Photo***]

We arrived at the turnoff to Buchu Bushcamp shortly after dark. As we drove toward the camp, an owl flew across the road and perched atop a utility pole at the side of the road. We quickly jumped to the nearest window for a look. Jenny said, "It looks like a Great Horned Owl." And so it did. A robust, rufous-colored owl with prominent ear tufts, was quickly identified as the Cape Eagle-owl. Gavin, our guide noted the yellow eyes to clinch the ID, then confided to us, "That's a lifer for me. I've been looking for it for years." We had all heard a lecture the day before about how difficult the owl was to find. Though not exactly rare, it seldom shows up in the same place for long, and thus is hard to find. We were very lucky.

Thus elated, we proceeded to the camp, moved into our cabin and went to dinner. Tomorrow, we planned to spend the entire day exploring the De Hoop Nature Preserve, which opened at 7:00. We get to sleep late again!

August 28, 2010: De Hoop Nature Preserve, the Great Lark Hunt

After breakfast, we drove to the preserve, a short distance from the Bushcamp. We had a short list of targets for the day, including the Knysna (pronounced nizna) Woodpecker, the Southern Tchagra, and the elusive Cape Clapper Lark. We also hoped to spot a Secretary Bird, which all of us wanted to see. These birds have declined dramatically and are hard to find now, but we were in perfect habitat.

We connected with one of the employees at the park, who agreed to show us two Barn Owls roosting in an old barn, as well as a nest of Cape Robin-chats. After showing us both, he told us a good place to look for the Woodpecker and Tchagra. Based on his suggestions, we were able to find both birds after about an hour of searching. The Woodpecker was especially interesting. When we saw the male, he was busily demolishing the nest of some Cocktail Ants, probably in search of larvae. The ants are able to spray a substance from their abdomens that causes itching.

Apparently, the Woodpecker doesn't care. He kept eating while the ants attacked. Finally, he left and moved to a nearby tree where the female joined him. We had "crippling" looks at both.

After a quick cappuccino at the Park Restaurant, a building dating back to 1820, we set out on the Great Lark Hunt. Well, to be honest, I was really looking for a Secretary Bird, but don't tell. In the end, we saw neither despite hours of driving the roads at 30 kph. We did stop for a few minutes at a spot overlooking the Indian Ocean to see several Southern Right Whales in the waters near the beach. They looked to be close enough that you could swim out to them, if the weather were more amenable and the restrictions on whale harassment lifted.

Back at the camp, we consoled ourselves on our loss by doubling the nightly ration of red wine. This was the last day of the trip for Jenny and Terry, who fly to Jo'burg tomorrow, then on to home. Linda and I, however, look forward to two more weeks of some *serious* birding. So far, we have seen slightly more than 400 species of birds (145 lifers) and almost 60 different mammals. Now, we head to eastern South Africa, where most of the birds and some of the mammals will be new. Our list of African birds is now more than 700. Although unlikely, there is an outside chance of adding another 300 species to the list before we are done. It should be exciting.

August 29, 2010: Back to Cape Town, Fly to Durban, Drive to Underberg

Today was mostly a travel day. After breakfast, we hit the road for Cape Town, planning to stop only for some new birds. As it turned out, the only new bird for the day was the Lesser Striped Swallow, which we had seen in abundance in Botswana, and we saw that when we stopped for fuel. We arrived at the Cape Town International Airport far enough in advance of our flight that even I was relaxed.



After a brief snack for lunch, we leisurely read the newspaper, which was full of pessimistic news about South Africa, and incomprehensible articles about the local sporting scene. Shortly before 1:00 pm, we bade goodbye to the Cloudmans and boarded our flight to Durban. We arrived slightly ahead of schedule and picked up our rent car for the two-hour drive to Underberg. This is a small town in the Midlands, a horsey area with a strong English background. Gone are the Afrikaner names, though Underberg is an exception.

As it was Sunday, the town closed down early including the place we had planned to eat. Our second choice was also closed. Ultimately, we settled on The Grind Café, where we were pleasantly surprised to find an excellent pizza and good cold beer. It was so good we didn't consider any other option for the future. It even had WiFi access, but I didn't learn that until too late.

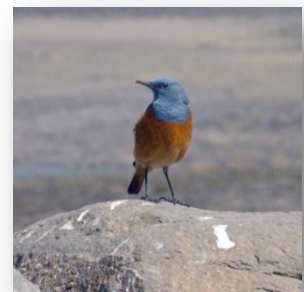
After dinner, we drove 6 km to Valmount Country Lodge, our home for the next two nights. Tomorrow, we planned to leave at 6:30 with breakfast and lunch on the road.

August 30, 2010: The Sani Pass Road

We left as planned with our guide for the day, Stuart, driving us in his 4x4. We soon found out why we had traded vehicles when we turned onto the Sani Pass Road for a day trip into the Kingdom of Lesotho. If not the worst road we have driven over, it is surely on the short list. More a stony track than a real road, it took most of the morning to drive the 25km to the entry point into Lesotho, a place called Sani Top. Along the way, we picked up several new lifer birds, including many excellent views of the Drakensberg Rockjumper, the bird on the logo of Rockjumper Tours.

Another lovely lifer that we saw repeatedly was the Sentinel Rock Thrush. Curiously, when we saw the Cape Rockjumper earlier in the trip, we also saw the Cape Rock Thrush at about the same time. All the birds share the same kind of habitat: large boulders and scrub. The day was filled with great new birds and some new reptiles. By the end, we had 13 new lifers out of 75 bird species.

When we stopped at the port of entry, the immigration guard asked me, "Are you in a



norry?" Not sure exactly what a *norry* was, I hoped the question was directed at someone else. Then he repeated very distinctly, making sure I understood. I finally figured it out and replied, "No, I'm not in a hurry." "Good," he said, "I was enjoying looking at your passport."

The most interesting bird event was not even a lifer. At lunchtime, we stopped along the road where we had a scope view of a Lammergeyer nest. Stuart told us the nest had lasted "for generations." I'm not sure whether that was bird or human generations. Our view was not great. "See that white spot in the back of the crevice? That's the adult's head. The chick is in there somewhere."

While we were looking through the scope, some Lesothoans (or more correctly *Basotho*) showed up to chat. The chat was a bit one-sided, or maybe no-sided. "Why are you going?" "We aren't going anywhere." "Why are you going?" Finally, I pointed to the ground and said, "Here." That

seemed to satisfy them, especially after we gave them all our apples. Linda took their picture, first as a group, then individually. This was accompanied by a great deal of laughter.

When the Lammergeyer still failed to cooperate, Stuart suggested we move down the road a bit to change our luck. We did and after nailing yet another lifer, Mountain Wheatear, we returned just in time to see a different Lammergeyer go into the nest. This time, the adult was more accommodating, and we watched it feed the chick.

After some tea and coffee at the Sani Top Pub, advertised as the highest pub in Africa, we set off back down the hill, jolting our way to the bottom and returning to our abode just as it grew dark.

We ate at The Grind again. I noticed someone using a computer and tried connecting with my iPhone. Voila! I had net access. However, this report was stuck on the computer back at the B&B. Rats! Tomorrow is another early day.



August 31, 2010: Benvi Gardens, Karkloof, Midmar Dam

We left Underberg before dawn began cracking and drove like mad to get to Benvi Gardens early enough to have a chance to see the Cape Parrot, of which there are about 500 left. None appeared, so we walked around the place getting other birds. Linda managed to get a glimpse of the Orange Ground-Thrush, a skulker that disappeared before I managed to catch sight of it. No worry. They are around. Sadly, that proved to be incorrect, and this critically endangered species that is found virtually nowhere else is now a permanent "half bird." Gavin and I spent much of the morning walking around peering under shrubbery, to no avail.

That's not to say the morning was a bust. Far from it. One Cape Parrot finally showed up and posed at the top of a tall Eucalyptus, so we at least got to see it. We had many new and beautiful birds during our search for the Ground-Thrush. We haven't tallied them all as I write this, and probably won't until sometime tomorrow. I'll probably work on the list in the car as we spend two hours starting at dark o'clock, getting to some place called Dinza.

After reluctantly leaving Benvi, we stopped at Karkloof, where we added African Snipe to our list. Snipes are not my favorite kind of bird — they all look alike for one thing — and I was glad to have this out of the way. It gave us time in the afternoon to look for more interesting stuff.

We stopped for lunch in Howick, a nearby town, at the Victorian Café. Here, tourists and local residents, all white, were served baguette sandwiches by cute young black women, the standard waitperson in most restaurants. Although the only overt discrimination in the country is a requirement to hire 75% blacks in any business, whites clearly have it better than blacks. This is fodder for a firebrand politician, President of the African National Congress Youth League. The ANC controls 79% of parliament, making this effectively a one-party system. An article in the paper I read in the Cape Town airport suggested that it was time to stop negotiating with white landowners, amending the Constitution in the process, and take the land. This is, of course, what led to the downfall of Zimbabwe.

Enough politics!

After lunch, we moved on to the area around Midmar Dam. The dam created a large shallow lake that supplies water to Pietermaritzburg, the



main city in the area. We spent the entire afternoon driving around on dirt roads checking out various antelope species and waiting for it to get dark so we could see a Marsh Owl. Near the end of the afternoon, after we hadn't seen anything for some time, Gavin said, "Secretary bird." He knew the Secretary was one of the birds we most wanted to see on this trip and had warned us that they were becoming scarce. Fortunately, this bird was settling down for the night, and we watched for a long time. It was perched in a tree beside the road, offering a much better view than if it had been walking in tall grass.

After the sun was fully down, we were driving toward the exit when Gavin spotted the Marsh Owl. We quickly jumped out of the car and watched as it flew past about 30 meters from us, then made a kill and disappeared into tall grass. It was the tenth owl species of our trip, an amazing record. There are two more owl possibilities that we plan to work on. In fact, several people have told us that we have seen the hard-to-find owls and have the easy ones left.

We ate supper at a Polish restaurant in Hilton, near our motel. Gavin and I both ordered Goulash, only to find out there was none available. We settled instead on Wiener Schnitzel, and received a huge piece of *pork* (not *veal*) breaded and fried. It was excellent. Gavin's previous clients had all been from New York City and loved the place.

September 1, 2010: Hilton to St. Lucia via Dlinza Forest

This turned out to be the best day of the trip for lifers. We had 17 new birds by the end of the day. We started very early, leaving Hilton at 5:00 in the morning. We'd shopped for breakfast items the night before, selecting some rolls, yogurt, and "shaved meats," which we know as sandwich fixings, along with some orange juice. Our goal was to get to the Dlinza forest by 7:30 to search for some special birds that would be active only in the morning.

The drive was illuminating, highlighting some of the amazing contrasts in South Africa. For most of the time, we traveled on a very modern toll road with 3-4 lanes, trucks banned from the fast lanes. We made a steady 120 kph, which is about 75 mph. Along the way, we passed some very nice neighborhoods, a large shopping mall, new communities with tract homes that could have been found in many middle class areas in the US, and typical African villages, round mud houses with thatched roofs. Gavin again offered his assessment: First World infrastructure, Third World Economy.

Buying fuel illustrates another difference from the US. As you drive into the station, which contains multiple bays of modern gas pumps, uniformed attendants direct you to an open bay, where another attendant awaits. If you are white and ask for a fill-up, the attendant starts the pump then proceeds to wash the windshield with soap and water using the same brush and squeegee combination found in the US. The results is usually better than self-service, but typically involves using the windshield washer as soon as you leave the station. For the most part, you cannot pay for fuel with a credit card. (We noted one exception. Many stations had signs blaming government for the policy.) You give the attendant cash, which he/she takes to the window and returns with change. You give the change to the attendant.

If you are black, or give the attendant cash up front instead of asking for a fill up, they just pump the gas.

Meanwhile, the land we passed seemed to be used mainly for commercial forests. We saw huge areas devoted to Eucalyptus and Pine trees planted too close together for optimum tree growth. The result was a large number of tall, skinny trees, ideal for cutting down to make poles. We saw plenty of those on the road in lumberyards and on trucks.

There is a strike at present by some public employees, particularly health care workers, against the government. Ostensibly, the unions are demanding an 8% increase in place of the 7.3% offered by the government. The courts have ordered the unions back to work and the unions have ignored the order. Some reports say the petrol workers may join the strike, which could complicate our lives enormously. Frankly, I think the Reagan solution may be the best alternative, especially as unemployment stands at 25%, but no one in government seems to consider firing everyone an option. The unions may really be trying to bring down the government. It all seems very Third-worldly.

We didn't let this interfere with our birding. We arrived at the Dlinza Forest at our appointed hour and ate breakfast at picnic tables by the entrance. Then we set off down the trails, quickly logging lifers and spectacular non-lifers, such as the Narina Trogon. We'd seen that bird in Uganda after a great deal of work, but we had a much better view this morning.

Gradually, we worked our way to the aerial boardwalk that took us up to the top of the canopy. As the tower was on the side of the hill, we looked down on many trees below. We watched Trumpeter Hornbills as the sailed from one tree to another across the canyon. White-eared Barbets and Red-fronted Tinkerbirds were common in the tree next to the tower, a fruiting fig. Wooly-necked Storks soared in the distance.

All too soon, Gavin announced that it was time to leave.

We drove to the beach town of St. Lucia on the Indian Ocean, arriving about 2:30 in the afternoon. We dropped our bags at Mabutoland B&B and adjourned for lunch. We ate at Ocean Basket, a chain of fish restaurants that serve excellent seafood in clean, modern surroundings. Then we moved on to the nearby forest. This was refreshingly different from the sterile commercial forests we passed, consisting of indigenous trees with many special birds. We added several of these to our list before finally calling it a day as darkness fell. Linda decided to skip dinner, so Gavin and I went to Brazza, an upscale restaurant owned by the same company as Ocean Basket. The restaurant specialized in food from former Portuguese colonies, including Brazil, Angola, and Mozambique. I had a kebob dish that wasn't nearly as good as the fish and chips available next door.



September 2, 2010: St. Lucia

We started birding this morning before dawn in another forest in the area, a "sand forest," consisting of vegetation growing on top of ancient sand dunes. The dunes in question were begun 180 million years ago! The vegetation and therefore the avifauna are unique, though we found many of the same birds from yesterday's outing. However, we were there for a special bird: African Broadbill. This is a small nondescript bird with a very unusual display. The male sits atop a stick, then jumps into the air, claps his wings together making a loud sound that reminded me of an Elephant trumpeting, before returning to the stick.



Unless the male is performing, you have no chance of seeing the bird, and frankly little reason for trying to. We walked along trails where the bird was known to be present while playing a recording of the "call." No luck. Shrugging resignedly, we turned off the recording to do some other birding. Almost immediately, the bird called.

Following the sound of the call, we located, that is, Gavin located, the bird's perch. Small, streaked, and brown, the bird blended into the background so well that we couldn't find it. "Wait for it to call," Gavin suggested. The bird called, and we spotted it easily. It shows a broad white back when it performs, so no one could miss it. We watched it do its thing several times before I decided to put down

the binocs and try to get some video of the act. That was the signal for the curtain to fall. The bird flew off. Show over.

We returned to our B&B for breakfast at 9:00, then set out again to explore this interesting area. We drove through a national conservation area, stopping at several places along the way before winding up at Cape Vidal, the end of the road. Along the way, we encountered several fairly small (for a bird) flying creatures that kept up with our car. Gavin informed us they were dung beetles. We had seen and photographed dung beetles on the ground. They are about the size of my big toe. Flying, they looked *huge*!

There we encountered the rare and endangered Somango Monkey, more or less restricted to this area. We watched a young monkey grooming an older male before moving on to another view point where we could see the Indian Ocean. As we left the car, Linda suggested putting the windows up. "We're only going to be gone for a minute," Gavin assured her.



That was all the time required for one of the monkeys to enter the car and steal three bananas. Alas, we had failed to “secure our food,” as several signs in the area requested. Fortunately, we didn’t need the bananas for sustenance; in fact, we could probably live off accumulated fat for days.

We had a chance to test this theory. Gavin suggested we skip lunch, bird some more, and eat an early dinner. We agreed, especially after being told that a stop for ice cream was part of the plan. Fortified with sweets, we moved on to the Estuary, where a river flows into the ocean. Actually, a large sand bar blocks the outlet at present, so the water simply backs up. We scoped the islands and sand bars in the river for several new trip birds, but no lifers. At our final stop, we did find two new species of weavers, bringing our total near 3800, with the list of African birds approaching a respectable 800 species. We should have a chance to pass both milestones tomorrow. The plan is similar to today’s: up early, returning for breakfast, then leaving for our next destination.

We made no mistake over dinner, returning to Ocean Basket for a sumptuous seafood dinner before retiring early.

September 3, 2010: St. Lucia to Hluhluwe via Phinda Game Reserve

After a final morning of birding around St. Lucia, which failed to turn up anything startling, we set off for Hluhluwe, which is pronounced something like Shlooshlooie. To be precise, the hlu part is pronounced by pressing the tip of the tongue on the roof palette and trying to say an HL sound. It takes practice. The drive was an easy one, only two hours, but there was no good place to stop for lunch. So, we popped into the local supermarket and stocked up on essentials: PB&J for me, PB with bananas for Linda. We still had a few bananas the monkeys left us.

Gavin had previously worked in the Phinda game reserve, so he took us through it on the way. The drive turned up frustratingly poor sightings of Pink-faced Twinspot, a cute little finch that is probably found in many pet shops. We managed to see them very well the next day.



We stopped for a picnic lunch by a “pan,” the local name for a shallow lake. While we ate, we scoped the many waterfowl on the pond, adding several birds to our list for the trip, but no new lifers. We’re finding lifers increasingly hard to get now. There are fewer available, and many of those require special effort, such as the Twinspots. These don’t stay put for long, making it hard to see them well.

Next, we drove into a rural area looking for some special birds, the Rosy-throated Longclaw and Lemon-breasted Canary. We found both quickly, which once again earned us the “lucky” label. The Longclaw is an especially pretty bird. We had previously seen two species of Longclaws, Orange-throated and Yellow-throated. The latter is a near twin of our Meadowlarks, but it completely unrelated, a great example of convergent evolution. However, the Rosy-throated puts both other Longclaws to shame, with a hard-to-describe, but lovely shade of red-orange throat. Rosy is a poor match, but that’s what the bird is called. Gavin said that we were in one of the few places where we could see it.

The Lemon-breasted Canary was another in a long list of Canaries, all of which have some yellow on them somewhere. The Lemon-breasted is one of the least yellow, making it uninteresting save for its localized range.

Having thus disposed of our targets for the day easily, Gavin set off to find another pan by asking everyone we passed if they knew where it was. This involved conversations in Zulu, in which Gavin is fluent, that were meaningless to Linda and me. We could only guess what was being said by the gestures. Our search led us on an increasingly meandering path through areas where white people were a novelty. Gavin casually said, “If we get lost, you have to help me find our way out.” I wasn’t sure he was kidding, so I tried keeping track of our many turns, but eventually gave up. We tried following the directions, but ultimately relied on Yogi Berra’s advice, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

When one inquiry for directions resulted in prolonged laughter from a local, I guessed that we weren’t going to find the pan. Our road became a track that eventually turned into nothing at all. As we crashed through scrub, we attracted the attention of a Zulu man tending his cattle. Gavin switched tactics and asked for directions to “main road,”

for which there is apparently no Zulu equivalent. This produced a confused series of gestures that began with directing us through the scrub. Gavin asked about turning around, and the man agreed that was an alternative. He then asked for money, the only person to do so. We gave him a few coins and turned around.

As it happens, finding the main road is straightforward. You simply follow any road bigger or better than the one you are traveling on. In minutes, we were back on the “tarred road” and heading for Umkhumbi Lodge. Umkhumbi means “Red Duiker” in Zulu, and the delightful small antelope were plentiful there. However, an even better mammal was available.

After dinner, we set off on a night walk through the forest around the lodge. Gavin spotted several photographic targets, a magnificent orb-weaver spider he called a “bark spider;” two toads; a nest of tiny communal spiders that, when disturbed, began to drop out of the web on drag lines like mountaineers descending a cliff; and finally, the mammal we wanted, an Elephant Shrew (specifically, Four-toed Elephant Shrew). We stared through binoculars at his strange, trunk-like snout that gives him the name, completely neglecting to take pictures. Satisfied, we went to bed, prepared for another early start tomorrow.

September 4, 2010: Hluhluwe area, False Bay Park, around rural area

A cold front arrived during the night, bringing winds, but no rain. The wind proved to be a hindrance to birding all day, and by the end, we had little new to show for our efforts. It wasn’t for want of trying. We started early by driving a short distance to False Bay Park, another part of the vast iSimangaliso wetlands preserve. These are some of the same fossil sand dunes we encountered in St. Lucia. They represent a very different kind of forest from what we have seen elsewhere. We spotted Neergaard’s Sunbird, one of our targets, and had good looks at the Pink Twinspot. That left us two more localized species that we wanted to get before moving on to a different habitat, and we managed to miss both of them.

After a couple of hours, with no new species to show for the time, we returned for a “full English breakfast” at the lodge. This consists of starters of fruit, cereal, toast, and yogurt, followed by a “hot breakfast.” That means, eggs, bacon (the peculiar English kind, fatty and undercooked), sausage, potatoes, mushrooms, grilled tomato, with a garnish of parsley. The baked beans, a staple of English breakfasts, was missing. Needless to say, the idea was to skip lunch, which we did.

We visited our host, who showed us the White-faced Owl he was rehabilitating. We watched the owl being fed the kind of food it needed to learn to catch in the wild, small insects and other invertebrates. We had a much better view of the bird than our earlier one in Halali, but this one was not *countable*.

We tried another part of False Bay Park, which Gavin explained used to be filled with water. Now, it is a large expanse of dry sand. The explanation of what has happened is not clear, but it apparently involves human activity taking water from the rivers. The beach is supposed to be a good place to find fossils dating back 180 million years, but all the good stuff had been stolen years ago.



We continued our search for the two specialties, Four-colored Bushshrike and Eastern Nicator, in a rural area, as we had yesterday. At least this one was harder to get lost in. However, it was no more productive than yesterday, and finally we gave up and returned to the lodge. We walked around the trail to try to stir up something, but again found the wind discouraged the birds from coming out. We called it a day early and returned to our cabin at 5:30.

Dinner was planned for 7:00. We showed up at the bar at 6:00 to find that Gavin had run to town. Johnny, a new face, asked about our day. He suggested that we should be able to see the Elephant Shrew easily by walking along the road at dusk, that is, the present moment. Linda and I set off by the light from my headlamp. This reflected the green eyes of several wolf spiders, and we photographed three different kinds. We didn’t find an Elephant Shrew, though, and returned to the bar about 6:45.

Gavin had returned, and we talked with him and Johnny, who mentioned that we had seen several of the “little five.” This is a joke

based on the “big five,” Lion, Elephant, Buffalo, Leopard, Rhinoceros, that most tourists to Africa are interested in seeing. In fact, some people care about nothing else. Gavin told us about taking a group of tourists on a game drive. He stopped to show them a Giraffe in the process of giving birth. “Not big five,” was their assessment.

The Little Five are small species that share the names of the Big Five: Ant Lion, Elephant Shrew, Buffalo Weaver, Rhinoceros Beetle, Leopard Tortoise. It turns out that we are missing only the Rhino Beetle, though to be honest we haven’t really seen Ant Lion on this trip, but we have seen plenty of the conical traps they dig. We decided to make a special effort to find Rhino Beetle in Kruger Park later in the trip.

The plan is for another early morning walk around the lodge tomorrow, then a long drive to Wakkerstroom.

September 5, 2010: Hluhluwe to Wakkerstrom

At 6:00, we set off to try again for our two specialties. We heard what Gavin said was a Nicator, but were unable to bring it close enough for a look. The problem is that the recording Gavin has is the territorial song of a Nicator, and they aren’t defending territories yet. We did get stunning good looks at Narina Trogon, a bird we had seen before, but one worth a second look. Finally, Linda spotted the Four-colored Bushshrike whose song we had been following for quite a while. We had decent looks and crossed another bird off the target list.

We also saw and photographed an Eastern Coastal Skink, to prove that we are willing to stop for amphibians as well as birds.

After another full English breakfast, we began the long drive to Wakkerstroom. On the way out, Linda spotted a

small flock of Mannikins, the



African version sometimes called Munias, not the colorful South American type. These were a new species for us, Red-backed Mannikins, but Clements, the authority for World Life Lists, considers them the same species as the Pied Mannikins we saw in Uganda, although they look completely different. Clements has cost us several species on the trip, but as of today, I finally hit 3800. Linda is still 21 behind on the world list, but 5 ahead of me on the Africa list at 788. We move to a different kind of area today, with many new species available.



Before we actually got to the highway, we saw a Suni Antelope, the final small species available to us. They are very shy and seldom seen, so we got to hear Gavin tell us again, “You are very lucky.”

We arrived in Wakkerstroom about 2:00 and grabbed a light lunch at a place called The Garret. A plaque on the wall states, “Since 2010.” Guess everyone has to start sometime. When we came out from lunch, we found one tire on the vehicle flat. Blech! It was Sunday afternoon, and although Gavin proved adept at changing the tire with the spare, we were unable to find a place to get it fixed until the next day. So, we had to alter the itinerary to stay close to town. We opted to bird the wetlands on the edge of town from a bridge, and spent the rest of the afternoon there.

Most of the species that we saw were not new, with one notable exception. We finally got great looks at an African Rail and were able to erase it from our “heard only” list.

We wiled away our time misidentifying weavers, then getting Gavin's explanation of the field marks we had failed to note properly. There are many different weavers, and they look similar. We were waiting for dusk.

Just after sunset, the reason for waiting appeared. We saw four African Clawless Otters swimming in the



wetland. Thus fortified with our second new mammal of day, we settled down for a long wait, hoping to see a Grass Owl. Unlike the more cooperative Marsh Owl we saw a few days ago, Grass Owls wait until you can barely see anything before setting out for their nightly hunt. We scanned the grassland adjacent to the wetlands repeatedly, looking for the proper silhouette, distracted repeatedly by ducks and night-herons flying past.

Bats came out, small ones similar to the ones have in Austin. "Where are you Owl?" we asked. If bats came out surely it was dark enough for the owl. And there it was. Gavin spotted it flying toward us and yelled, "Over the road!" We looked where he indicated

and saw an owl flying close by. As we watched, it snatched one of the bats from the air, then flew off to eat dinner in the tall grass it lives in. This was the eleventh owl of the trip, a truly exceptional record, leaving us only the Spotted Eagle-owl as a target. Everyone tells us that it is one of the easiest owls to see, so it is ironic that it is the only one missing. We still have a chance, probably in Kruger Park.

September 6, 2010: Wakkerstroom Area: The Great Lark Hunt II

At 6:30, we met our local guide for the day, Lucky, a short, stocky black man. During the day, he lived up to his name, as we found no fewer than seven species of Larks, our focus for the day. However, before we got started on birds, we added a new mammal to our list, a group of Meercats, or Suricates as they are properly known. We had a false alarm early, when a Yellow Mongoose stood up and imitated a Meercat. Then, we saw the real thing, standing up with his light face and dark eyes checking us out. When we looked with binocs, we saw a large group. They ran off, of course, in a curious fashion. They seemed to rotate the task of looking back at us. First one would stand a check us out while most ran off, then he would run while another stood watch. They gave the appearance of being very well organized.



The only decent photograph for the day was this picture of a Spotted Dikkop (the South African name) aka Spotted Thick-knee.

Shortly after sighting the Meercats, we had our first new bird for the day, Bald Ibis, followed shortly by three more, two new Bustards, or Korhaans as the South Africans prefer to call them, and a new lark, enough to put Linda up to 800 African birds. I am still five behind her. Actually, we later found out that I had made a mistake in the count and that she needed the rest of the day to reach that target, achieving it on a classic little brown bird, Lazy Cisticola. I'm jealous. I usually manage little brown birds for my milestones, while Linda specializes in large colorful birds.

We returned to the B&B, Toad Hall, for a quick breakfast before resuming our search for specialties of the grasslands. Thanks to Lucky, we found Botha's Lark, an endangered species, and had excellent views of a couple. When they flew off, we were surprised to see that there were 18-20 birds in the flock. Most had been hiding in the grass.

Linda spotted a Yellow-breasted Pipit, another of our target birds, and we tallied them. Then on to Rudd's Lark, an even more endangered species than Botha's. I won't bother with the complete list of larks that we saw. They were definitely "birder's birds," of interest mainly due to their rarity and difficulty, not their inherent beauty.

We ended the day before dark for a change, delivering Lucky to his neighborhood before heading back to the B&B for dinner. As usual, there was quite a contrast between the two areas.

Tomorrow, we head for Kruger Park.

September 7, 2010: Wakkerstroom to Kruger National Park (Skukusa Camp)

Slept in this morning and had breakfast at 7:00, then departed for Kruger. The drive took us through the scenic “highlands” according to several signs advertising the “highlands meander.” The valleys were alive with citrus crops, many of the trees in full flower. Along the road were the Eucalyptus forests we have come to expect. They are everywhere, in all stages of growth.

Afrikaners dominate the area, with names such as Amersfoort, Utrecht, and Amsterdam, though with the occasional English name, such as Carolina and Elmore, where we took a comfort stop. There, I spotted a pharmacy nearby and was finally able to purchase some sunscreen to replace the tube that is almost empty. Apparently, sunscreen is not a popular item in South Africa, understandably, as most of the population doesn’t need it.

We stopped for lunch at Nelspruit, which Gavin told us is the fastest growing city in SA. It is the gateway not only to Kruger, but also to Mozambique, a popular vacation destination for South Africans. A very modern city, at least after we passed the slums at the edge of town, it possesses a shopping mall that would be at home in Austin. We ate lunch at Mugg and Bean, a chain of restaurants that pretends to be from San Francisco. Gavin told us that was just a marketing gimmick. I was impressed in the mall and restaurant to see many middle class blacks for the first time. Our waiter wore a nametag with “Mxolisi” on it. He was happy to pronounce it for us when we asked. The “x” stands for a sound similar to what we represent in English as “tsk,” and the final “i” is dropped.

After a nice sandwich, which didn’t look like the picture on the menu, but which was tasty nonetheless, we set off again. We crossed into Kruger Park at the Numbi Gate, near the town of Hazyview. Then we spent the next three hours covering the 48 km to the Skukusa Camp, our home for the next two nights. Though far from the luxury of Etosha, the camp is certainly adequate, especially as we plan to leave at dawn and return in time to get aboard a government-run night drive.

As we drove through the park, we stopped at a water hole to watch two young bull elephants playing around. The games involved some dominance activities, but mostly, they just seemed to be having a good time. We took some video for our planned show for Kai. [***Video***]

September 8, 2010: Kruger National Park: Skukuza, Night Drive



We spent the morning driving around Kruger near Skukuza, turning up some interesting stuff, especially a very full Spotted Hyena who walked within 10 meters of our car, but nothing earth shaking, when we got caught in a traffic jam on a bridge near the camp. So many cars were stopped that it was impossible to get across. Eventually, I spotted a leopard lying down on a rock by the river, resting after a good meal. (Presumably.) There was a moderately sized herd of elephant feeding nearby.

Then, we noticed that several people were looking on the other side of the bridge. Ah! A pride of lions was approaching. When we looked back, the leopard had disappeared. Even the elephants moved off, though very slowly as befits the largest animal around.

We watched fascinated as the pride moved closer, slipping into the reeds, reappearing near where the leopard had been. Two young males detached themselves and started searching for where the leopard had stashed his kill. Three young lions followed the powerful female, but stopped short, remaining on a rock in the river with a baby-sitting lioness. An old lioness showed up, looking for a free meal.



The dominant male made an appearance at the last minute, looking regal, but contributing nothing to the hunt.

We watched for almost an hour. I don't think the pride ever found the remains of the leopard's meal. The traffic jam finally cleared enough for us to get across the bridge, with barely enough time to prepare for a "sunset drive." We grabbed a quick bite to eat, watched some epauletted fruit bats roosting in the dining area, and made it to the meetup just in time to wait around for the drivers to get organized.

The drive turned up two young male lions lying by the side of the road. "Brothers," we were informed. One moved away slightly and marked a tree as his property. Then, just to make sure we understood, he crapped right on the spot, which gave us a good reason to move a bit farther down the road. The second lion had something wrong with his left rear leg, but managed to limp off to join his brother in a nightly hunt.

We saw a white-tailed mongoose to our growing list of mammals, but missed a genet, who appeared at the same time. Then, a woman on the other side of the bus spotted a leopard. We watched as he growled to establish his territory, then set off looking for a meal. It was a fabulous sighting, but after the excitement of the afternoon, a bit anticlimax.

September 9, 2010: Kruger National Park: Skukuza to Satara Camp

Today, we left Skukuza to drive a bit further north into the Park, though still well within the southern portion. We spent all morning and most of the afternoon covering the 100km between the two camps. As the speed limit on the roads in the park is 50kph, you can figure out that we spent much of the time stopped and taking detours. One amusing sight was a hyena enjoying a dip in a concrete water hole. He seemed to be keeping cool. Gavin says that hyenas sometimes leave bones under the water to hide them. Altogether, we had four excellent sightings of hyenas in the park.

Linda spotted a Klipspringer standing on a rock beside the road. This was our third sighting for the trip of these strange and cute antelope, who spring with surefooted grace from rock to rock on tiptoe.

We arrived at Satara too early to check into our rooms, but we were able to arrange for another sunset drive for Linda and me. Gavin decided to pass up the drive. He said that on his previous visit to Satara a couple of weeks ago, the drive's big find was a chameleon, with nothing else to show for it. It took quite a while to secure the tickets as the agent refused to fork them over without explaining the entire process.



Gavin and I ate lunch while Linda hit the curio shop. I finally had to go in and take over the process of paying for innumerable Christmas presents so Linda could finish her lunch. Then we went birding for a couple of hours, returning in time for the sunset drive. The drive started with a sighting of a new bird for our South African list, Kori Bustard. This is the heaviest flying bird in Africa (maybe in the world), and one of Linda's Favorite Birds™. The male had his neck puffed out to three times normal size and his crest raised, hoping to attract a nearby female.

Shortly, just as it was beginning to grow dark, our driver spotted a cheetah, and proceeded to break all the park rules by setting off cross country to get a closer view.

The cheetah he had spotted was a mother with two young cubs. She was gorging on a Common Duiker she had killed and refused to move even when we parked the vehicle about 10-15 meters away. We took lots of photos, but it was getting dark, and none really worked out. Cheetahs have to eat fast, as scavengers smell the kill and show up quickly. Cheetahs are too small to defend the kill against lions or hyenas. The mother cheetah's stomach was already quite full from the amount she had eaten.

The two cubs were a bit more wary of humans in a big truck and moved off. The mother finally dragged the carcass over to where the two cubs were standing. Our driver at this point made sure that we realized he had broken the rules and we had to leave quickly and keep quiet about what we had seen. This sighting was definitely the best in our entire South African trip, rivaled only by the leopards mating in Moremi Game Park in Botswana!

We also spotted a mother white rhino with a calf, a spotted genet, a scrub hare, and the advertised chameleon before returning to the lodge.

We told Gavin what he had missed, starting with the chameleon, and ending with the cheetahs. He took credit for our success, saying that if he had been aboard, we wouldn't have seen anything.

September 10, 2010: Satara to Rust de Winter via Van Stryden Tunnel

Today was advertised as a big driving day without much birding along the way. We got to see the best and worst of South African roads. We arose early, as usual, planning to eat breakfast on the road. Linda and I had time for some birding before we left at 6:00, and spent much of it on Linda's New Favorite Bird™, Crested Barbet. This bird sings by passing air over its syrinx (bird equivalent to a larynx) twice, once breathing in, another breathing out. As a result, he sings a relatively monotonous trill for a long time. Linda timed one lasting 25 seconds. Then she took a picture of her newest favorite bird, African Hoopoe, probing for prey nearby.

We made our way at a modest pace toward the Orpen exit from the park, stopping for breakfast at a picnic site unique for having no fence separating it from the bush. We heard a bushbuck snorting its predator warning, followed shortly by a lion roaring in the distance. Gavin casually remarked, "If I tell you to get in the car, just go, don't stop to pick up anything." As it turned out, the lion had other plans for the morning, and we finished breakfast in peace.

We added several new birds to the trip list on our way out, particularly the Purple Roller, a lovely relative of the spectacular Lilac-breasted Roller. We had seen them earlier, in Namibia. We also saw a giraffe crossing the road with sunrise in the background. Gavin said that some lions in the park had learned to chase giraffes onto the tarred road, where they sometimes slip and fall, making them an easy target.

At lunch, Linda and I had good views of the Acacia Pied Barbet, not a lifer, but a bird we wanted to see better, while waiting for a delicious lunch. The one disappointing aspect of Kruger was the food available in the park. It was nice to stop at a decent restaurant for a change.

Our next stop was near the Van Stryden Tunnel, in the Drakensberg Mountains. The road cuts through cliffs of red rock, covered by chartreuse lichens on the sunny side. Our target bird was the Taita Falcon, the rarest breeding bird in South Africa. Only six breeding pairs are known to exist, all nesting on the cliffs in the area. A local guide, Michael, knew where to look for the birds. However, there were none around. We agreed to spend two hours waiting for one to return from hunting to feed the mate, who was hiding on a nest somewhere in the cliff face. Meanwhile, I managed to catch sight of a Sweet Waxbill, a tiny, active finch that Linda had seen earlier when I wasn't around. I came on the trip hoping to eliminate a "half bird," Black-crowned Tchagra, which I managed to do. Unfortunately, Linda picked up several new birds that I missed, so that I am now three birds in arrears for Africa. (Sigh! We both passed the 800 mark, though.)

With six minutes left in our allotted time, one of the tiny Falcons finally flew far overhead. It was probably the rarest bird we have ever seen, even though we rated the view at 2 on our 5-star scale.

On our way to Rust de Winter, we spent almost 40 minutes sitting waiting for our turn to drive over the only open lane where workers were repairing the road. Many other drivers weren't content to sit and wait, driving on the shoulder and risking the opposite lane in an attempt to shave a few minutes off the delay. This, of course, resulted in a huge mess, causing further delays. The GPS device calmly adjusted our predicted arrival time from 6:30 to 7:30 pm. Finally, we passed the last stretch of road work and reached the superb N1 toll road. This road runs from Jo'burg and Pretoria to the city of Polokwane, which my map shows as Pieterburg. People from the rural area in the north work weeks, or sometimes a full month, in Jo'burg, then return home for a visit. We saw a long line of traffic heading in the opposite direction. The road is two or three lanes on each side, with the heavy vehicles restricted to the far left lane.

The trucks here are monstrous. Instead of 18-wheelers, they are typically 26-wheelers, and sometimes 30, with two trailers or more hooked together behind the cab.

We reached our lodge for the night after dark, but had a great look at the Southern White-faced Scops-owl sitting on a wire at the entrance. This was not a lifer, but was a wonderful view. This is now Linda's New Favorite Owl™.

September 11, 2010: Rust de Winter to Jo'burg

Today, the last day of our tour, we again delayed breakfast to leave more time for birding. We drove along a road with a name something like Spakuldrift Road, a dirt road through farming areas. We saw several new additions to our South Africa list, including some we thought would be lifers. However, after checking the database, we found all of them were birds we had seen before. A bit of birding fatigue after almost six weeks of non-stop birding.

After that, we made our way back to the incomparable N1, which got even better the closer we got to Jo'burg. Of course, that was too good to last. We had one final bout of roadwork, very close to OR Tambo International Airport. We arrived at our hotel, a "resort and conference center" not far from the airport. We bid goodbye to Gavin and gave him Jim's lucky rock to pass along to Lucky, our guide in Wakkerstroom, who had cast covetous eyes on it. It had worked very well, even producing the Taita Falcon at the last minute, which required some additional rubbing.

Internet access from the hotel was spotty, but good enough to allow me to send this out to you. The write up has gotten longer with each passing day, more so after Linda started looking over my shoulder and suggesting items I had left out.

Some statistics for the trip:

Total bird species: 544 using SA taxonomy, 537 using Clements, the authority for world lists. This is about 9 new bird species each day of birding, not counting travel days.

Total bird species in NBZ: 342 or 344, depending on taxonomy used.

Total bird species in SA: 434 or 437.

Total mammal species: 75, an amazing count. This depends on our seeing two closely related species of Epauletted Bats, which is suspect but defensible.

Best bird sighting (Jim's list): Pygmy Falcon in NBZ, African Broadbill in SA.

Close seconds: Schalow's Turraco for NBZ, Ostriches displaying in West Coast NP in SA. Most pleasing: Black-crowned Tchagra in Kruger for 801st African bird.

Best mammal sightings: Leopards in Moremi, Cheetahs in Kruger, Elephant Shrew in Hluhluwe.

Best Reptile: Namid Rock Agama in Huab, with the chameleons a close second.

Best birds (Linda's List): NBZ: Pygmy Falcon, Kori Bustard, Wattled Crane, African Barred Owlets (front and back), Schalow's Turraco, Southern Ground Hornbill, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Double-banded Courser, Rockrunner, Pale Chanting Goshawk, Green Woodhoopoe, Wire-tailed Swallow, Half-collared Kingfisher, Black-back Puffbird with back puffed out, Chestnut-banded Plover, Little Bittern.

SA: Blue Crane, Shy Albatross, Displaying Ostriches, Southern White-faced Scops-owl, Orange-winged Pytillia, Kori Bustard, Purple Roller, African Rail, Jackal Buzzard killing Vlei Rat, Yellow-breasted Pipit, Secretary Bird, Booted Eagle (with headlights), Red-breasted Swallow, Livingstone's Turraco, Knysna Woodpecker, Blue-mantled Crested-flycatcher, Lazy Cisticola (Linda's 800th African bird), Orange-breasted Sunbird, White-bellied Sunbird, Pink-throated Twinspot, Ovambo Sparrowhawk and Double-banded Sandgrouse, and finally the displaying African Broadbill. [Whew!]

Best mammal: (NBZ) Leopard, Serval, African Wild Cat, Cape Fox, Dik-dik, and Peter's Epauletted Fruit Bat. (SA) Cheetah, Elephant Shrew.

Best Reptile: (Same as Jim!)