

South Africa. Part Two, Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

Contributed by Jos

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Remote, wild and stunning, the Kgalagadi is truly an amazing place. Situated in a vast slab of land protruding up between Namibia and Botswana, it is in the Kgalagadi that the rolling dunes of the Kalahari are punctuated by the Auob and Nossob Valleys, shallow depressions vegetated by grassland and stunted acacias, populated by an impressive array of birds, an abundance of antelopes and gazelles and, most importantly, a density of feline predators to rival almost anywhere in Africa, plus good numbers of Brown Hyena and plenty more on top.

The centrepiece of my trip to South Africa, I was to spend five days in this national park, beginning in the Auob and concluding in the Nossob, the two valleys both choc'a'bloc with birds and animals from start to finish. Additionally, I also spent a day in northern Bushmanland, visting the Pofadder area and Augrabies Falls. 16 July. Pofadder & Augrabies Falls. The journey up from Cape Town was relatively uneventful, 380 km on the N7 only punctuated by the blue flashing lights of the local police - unknown to us, a petrol station some distance back had botched our credit card payment and then called the police to say we had driven off without paying! With the police officer most friendly, all was soon resolved and we were on our way. At Bitterfontein, we turned off the N7 and took gravel roads for another 240 km, four Spotted Eagle Owls en route, along with four Cape Hares, two Cape Foxes, two Bat-eared Foxes and eight Steenbok. Eventually, after what had been a very long day at sea and a very long night on the road, I pulled over for a couple of hours kip. A few kilometres ahead lay the Koa Dunes, destination for first light. Of all the South African larks, the only one that still eluded me was Red Lark - many hours I had spent in past years at Brandvlei in fruitless searches for this species, so it was with much hope that I arrived at the Koa Dunes early on the 16th. Not only are Red Larks apparently common here, but even better the Koa birds are of the red form, as opposed to the far duller birds at Brandvlei and elsewhere. Early morning mist and a temperature of just 2 C got me shivering a little as I stomped out onto the vivid red sand, a tad bleary eyed to boot. Spike-heeled Larks already running across the dunes, also both Karoo and Tractrac Chats in the area and a small flock of Namaqua Sandgrouse in the air above. Very quickly located several Sabota Larks (the race known as Bradfield's Lark) and also Rufous-eared Warblers, but it was all eyes for the stars of the show - at least six found in almost no time at all, my second new passerine of the trip, Red Lark. Corking birds they are, bright and boldly marked, sitting atop vegetation and scurrying around on the sand, nice.

From Koa, we then continued in a north-easterly direction towards the evocatively named town of Poffadder, the gravel roads on route adding, amongst others, Verreaux's Eagle, Pale-chanting Goshawk, Mountain Wheatear, Ant-eating Chat and Fawn-coloured Lark. A couple of circuits of Puffadder to try and find a pie shop (unsuccessfully), then onward towards Augrabies. A stop to brew coffee a few kilometres along was fun, a sudden swoosh being all I heard before being mugged by a huge flock of Sociable Weavers, one of the real characters of the arid north. Basically a sparrow-sized bird, the nests are truly amazing - the result of communal co-operation, the huge nests measure up to two or three metres across and hang prominently from solitary acacias and roadside utility poles throughout the plains. Sociable in name, breeding activity and life, it was a pleasure to share breakfast with them, the birds literally clambering on top of each other to get the best perches aside us. Some kilometres further, with still half a day to play with, a short detour took us to the delightful Augrabies Falls, a scenic locality where the mighty Orange River cuts a deep gorge, tumbling over cascades and providing home to hundreds and hundreds of Rock Dassies. Surely the world's capital for these engaging little animals, they were absolutely everywhere, hordes of them sunbathing on exposed rocks, pretty much similar numbers scampering around the visitor centre and throughout the campsite. No shortage of birds too - flocks of Orange River White-eyes roving through the area, Karoo Scrub-Robins darting from bush to bush, a pair of Black Storks soaring over the gorge, plus assorted doves and flocks of Black-throated Canaries, White-browed Sparrow Weavers and Scaly-feathered Finches, the latter two thereafter common throughout the Kalahari. The campsite in particular proved most productive - over lunch, with a wary eye kept on the thieving Vervet Monkeys, there were plenty of birds to keep me occupied - Orange River White-eyes pecking at melted fat on the braai sites, both Acacia Pied and Crested Barbets dropping down from trees, Karoo Thrushes on withered grass and a whole bunch of others, including African Hoopoe and Red-billed Firefinch. A short excursion some kilometres to the west, through a landscape of rocky outcrops and viewpoints over the river, added troops of Baboons, yet more Rock Dassies, a couple of Small Grey Mongoose and a positive treat of good birds, the best being exceptionally obliging Mountain Wheatears, the first Swallow-tailed Bee-eater of the trip and a superb Pygmy Falcon, the quaint little raptor just sitting atop a snag and peering down. Also saw Black-shouldered Kite, flocks of Pale-winged Starlings and Dusky Sunbird amongst others, but with darkness only an hour away and the fabled gates to the Kgalagadi still 250 km distant, it was time to move on. A short stop in Upington for fish'n'chips and then, as the sun sank to the horizon, we set out on the long lonely road heading north into the Kalahari. A couple of hours later, with several Bat-eared Foxes under the belt, we arrived just short of the Kgalagadi gates. We camped in what I presumed was a dead end track - we soon found out that it was actually the access to someone's farmstead! Having seen our car lights, the owner promptly arrived to see who we were, then establishing we were tourists, directed us inside the gate and then reappeared some minutes later with think blankets to supplement our sleeping bags. What a kind fellow - Kalahari nights are far from warm in the winter! 17 July. Kgalagadi, the Auob Valley. Jeepers, minus 3 C at dawn, ice on the windscreen!!! Considerable shivers as we drove the last kilometre up the entrance of Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, a coffee brewed alongside the gate bringing a hint of life back to our shocked bodies! I remembered back to my previous visit to this region, a mid-summer affair where the temperatures rose to a sizzling 45 C, ah how

nice! But now we were in, the delights of the Kalahara stretching out before us, five full days to wander at will, hopefully plenty of feline action ahead. A good dozen years since I last saw a Cheetah, this fantastic cat was high on my list of targets, so I decided the first explorations would be of the Auob, a broad open valley of parched grassland and acacia extending about 130 km to the Namibian border. Blessed with abundant herbivores and scant cover to conceal the cats, it is widely considered to be one of the better areas in Africa to find Cheetah, albeit still by no means guaranteed. To reach this valley however, the route first takes you over an expanse of low rolling dunes, largely devoid of large mammals, bar a few Gemsbok, and not exactly overrun with birds either! We did encounter several colonies of Brant's Whistling Rats though, plus two Meerkats, the only ones we would see on this day. As the Auob opened out before us however, a warm surge of excitement displaced the chill of the early morning - as the sun climbed above the dunes beyond, the vista was just simply one of animals. On parched remains of grass, grazing herds of Blue Wildebeest, Springboks in fantastic numbers, stately Gemsboks treading dusty paths - magic, this was what I had come for. And this would be the backdrop for the entire day, a spread of animals along the whole valley, occasional Giraffe and Red Hartebeests adding to the variety, Black-backed Jackals and Bat-eared Foxes also active. For all the mammals, the Kgalagadi is perhaps even more remarkable for birds - Kori Bustards by the bucketload, often plodding the valley in small flocks, raptors coming out of your ears and a variety and abundance of other birds to get you happy near enough non-stop. Amongst the raptors alone, on this first day, we notched up White-backed Vulture, Bateleur, both Brown and Black-chested Snake Eagle, both Tawny and Martial Eagle, Yellow-billed Kite, Pale-chanting Goshawk, Gabar Goshawk, Pygmy Falcon, Red-necked Falcon, Greater Kestrel and Secretary Bird. Kori Bustards numbered about 35, and some of the other impressive feathered beasts included a flock of Burchell's Sandgrouse landing with Namaqua Sandgrouse, plentiful Yellow-billed Hornbills, trillions of Scaly-feathered Finches and good numbers of Marico Flycatchers, Cape Glossy Starlings, Kalahari Scrub-Robins and, in smaller numbers, Lilac-breasted Roller, Chat Flycatcher and Red-headed Finch. Back to mammals however, we had now been in the Kgalagadi for little more than a couple of hours, carefully scanning under the stunted acacias, sweeping our eyes across the open grassy plains, not a feline as yet. Hardly surprising, it really would have been greedy to expect them served on platters, but just then a shout of stop from my companion, 'What's that on the ridge?'. One quick glance, distant though it was, and the identity was clear - silhouetted against the sky, strolling along the scrub-covered ridge, a Leopard in majestic outline, what a fabulous start to the feline action! We followed and watched for about 20 minutes, the Leopard rarely straying from the crest of the ridge, most probably a male. Leopards are rarely easy animals to find, I certainly had not expected to see one so quickly in Kgalagadi, or even at all to be honest. Most content, on we continued, filling the car with dust as we bumped along the sandy tracks, Kori Bustards alongside, Ostrich striding by. An hour further on, things got even better - on a soft sandy patch, just as we had risen over a low brow, suddenly there were animals on the track directly in front, four animals to be exact, all walking directly towards us! Stone me, Cheetahs!!! The most graceful of animals, I presume a female and three well-grown youngsters, they were striding purposefully down the valley, their route taking them off the track about 100 metres before our car and onto the open grassland. And there they continued, passing to our right and sauntering on towards a few acacias for a brief pause in the shade before once again resuming the walk down the valley. Springbok gave them a studied look, Gemsbok trotted out of their path, but these four seemed most unconcerned, on they went, a steady walk off into the distance, superb. Ah, with five cats now on the list, the sun shining and the temperature now a respectable 21 or 22 C, we decided a coffee stop would be nice, so we motored on to the small picnic area at Kamqua picnic site. A funny place for a stop - herds of Springbok charging by, no doubt Lions too on occasion. Yellow-billed Hornbills dropped down to scavenge, Cape Glossy Starlings and Sociable Weavers too, but the highlight of the stop was when I wandered off to investigate the reasons for the peculiar actions of a Pale Chanting Goshawk - jumping up and down, occasionally fluttering into the air, but most intent on something in the rocks. I assumed I would find a snake, but as I approached, a right little din was coming from the rocks - two Slender Mongooses having a scrap in a small hollow, fur flying and teeth bared! So engaged in their activity, they did not even notice my approach, so I sat on a rock and watched them battle it out, little balls of fury it seemed. And then, one of them with a slightly bloodied face, they decided to call it a day, stopped the fight and trotted off together, best of buddies all of a sudden! A quick check for any approaching Lions, then back to the main picnic area, my kettle now happily boiling away. Coffee with hornbill, peanut butter sandwich with weavers and sparrows, not bad at all. On we meandered, destination for the day being the Mata Mata camp on the Namibian border. With so many things to see, progress was slow, a little group of Giraffe grazed on acacia, a Kalahari Tent Tortoise plodded across the sands, birds included everything from abundant raptors to the first gaudy Crimson-breasted Shrikes of the day, the latter real stunners. About mid-way to the camp, we encountered a car parked aside an acacia, the occupants clearly watching something. Stopping a little short of them, it did not take much effort to see what they were looking at, a Black-backed Jackal standing in the sun about 30 metres out. Nice, but not particularly unusual, we had already seen a half dozen during the morning. And then, a sudden 'oo er', I had not noticed another animal lying in the shade of the acacia! Sandwiched pretty much midway between the car and the jackal was cat number six of the day, another Cheetah, this one feasting on a freshly-killed Springbok. The other car left and we had the cat to ourselves, slurps and crunching of bone, a blood-soaked face of the Cheetah glancing out of the bowels of the ex-Springbok every now and again, all most delightful! Two Black-backed Jackals now trotted in, but nothing disturbed this cat, lunch was a long affair! Eventually, with the Cheetah stubbornly refusing to shift from the darkest patch of shadow beneath the acacia, we decided to depart and head for Mata Mata, the 160 km drive now having taken us most of the day. At camp, we pitched tent in the most secluded corner I could find, my secret hope being that a few visitors might wander in come darkness. Plenty to occupy us in the meantime - dozens of South African Ground Squirrels, a pair of Common Scimitar-bills and, as dusk approached, a fairly quaint Black-tailed Tree Rat scurrying along a branch just above us. A dusk drive had not produced much extra, but still we had a little treat ahead - going on an organised night safari, we ventured out into the starlit night, spotlights angled to both sides. No cats, bar one brief thing jumping out of a tree which was probably an African Wild Cat,

but did manage a few more Bat-eared Foxes, one Cape Fox, three Cape Hares and, the most engaging animals of the night, at least 25 Spring Hares, little kangaroo-like things that go bounding off in all directions. Also three Spotted Eagle Owls. Very cold by the end of the safari, the open top of the truck not the warmest of places as the temperature dipped back towards freezing. Chucked on all the clothes I had at my disposal and slunk into the tent, my sleeping bag most snug. Day over. 18 July. Kgalagadi, the Auob Valley. Minus three again at the pre-dawn waking hour, a coffee on the stove to start things off, then a quick skirt round the administration buildings to try and find owls returning to roost, one smart pair of White-faced Scops Owls the reward. And then it was time to hit the dusty trails, a whole day again in the Auob Valley, largely retracing the route of the previous day, but with a few side detours to add variety. Plenty of big mammals parading almost as soon as it was light enough to see anything, Springbok, Gemsbok and Wildebeest again the species of most abundance, but also some rather quaint mammals at the other end of the size scales - Four-striped Grass Mice, several darting across the track, others feeding quietly in tussocks adjacent. Also plenty of South African Ground Squirrels, another Slender Mongoose and, back to the large critters, both Eland and stately Kudu. Birding was, needless to say, excellent. Even in the early morning chill, raptors were beginning to rise, a Tawny Eagle taking to the air, another roosting on the remains of a fallen tree, Pale Chanting Goshawks fairly common, plus a couple of Secretary Birds and, most engaging, a Greater Kestrel catching a mouse, only to be divebombed by a Lanner Falcon, the Greater Kestrel then dropping the mouse, which was promptly snapped up by the Lanner. And at that very moment, a Red-necked Falcon joined the fray, swooping in and circling, before sweeping off across the valley. Also added the first Grey Hornbills of the trip, along with Brown-hooded Kingfisher, Golden-tailed Woodpecker and a pair of Ashy Tits. About 30 km along our route, a most photogenic Bat-eared Fox caught our attention, sunbathing at the entrance to his burrow, most conveniently located a few metres from the side of the track. We would have probably stayed longer at this very nice animal had it not been for the arrival of another car, the occupants of which said there was an African Wild Cat under a bush just a couple of hundred metres back (which we had already passed). Hmm, with such news you really can't do much but reverse back! So there we were, parked at the said point peering at a lot of sand and rather many small shrubs and bushes. And then up it sat, the African Wild Cat stretched and plodded out into the sun, sitting in full view at about 20 metres distant. Looking every bit as though it had just wandered out of a domestic family setting, these cats are nevertheless real corkers, the gingery ears almost like little beacons as they walk along. Kgalagadi is excellent for this species, I had in the past seen as many as five in a single day, but this one was giving absolutely fantastic views, first sitting in the sun, then going for a little hunt, pouncing on what I presume were mice, before trotting off, tail held high. Pretty amazing, we had now seen Leopard, Cheetah and African Wild Cat in little over 24 hours, perhaps even more amazingly seeing these before the more numerous Lions that inhabit the area. Another little look at the sunbathing Bat-eared Fox, then back to the Kamqua picnic site for breakfast. Yellow-billed Hornbills present again, swooping in for hand-outs, plus Cape Crow and Red-eyed Bulbuls equally keen. Adjacent acacia scrub held an obliging Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, a Long-billed Crombec and a couple of Yellow-bellied Eremomela. The rest of the day was a relatively easy-going type of thing, a slow drive back to Mata Mata adding Black-faced Waxbills and more Red-headed Finches amongst the passerine flocks, a Northern Black Korhaan taking a wary wander across the track and doodles of other stuff. Back in camp, a mid-afternoon siesta was a good opportunity to catch up with some of the fellow campers - drop-dead gorgeous Yellow Mongooses shuffling around, plentiful Ground Squirrels, semi-tame Cape Glossy Starlings and Crimson-breasted Shrikes and, still in their tree by administration, another chance to gander at the White-faced Scops Owls. An evening drive to a nearby loop failed to add a hoped-for Caracal, but Bat-eared Foxes and Black-backed Jackals were out in force, as were a number of passerines such as Kalahari Scrub-Robin and assorted sparrows, weavers and finches. No night safari for us this evening, we instead opting for a little spotlighting behind the tent - Black-backed Jackals zigzagging around, but the absolute star of the night was the appearance of shaggy long-haired creature of unkempt looks! Ambling down from a hillside opposite, looking every bit like a lost hippy, this mega of the night was Brown Hyena, a mammal never ever to find. What a good way to end the day, I have only ever seen one Brown Hyena before (an individual on Christmas Day some years back, also in Kgalagadi). 19 July. Kgalagadi, Auob & Nossob Valleys. This was to be our final day in the Auob Valley, the plan being to backtrack fairly quickly as far as the Kamqua Picnic Site, then cut across the central dunes to reach the Nossob Valley about midway between Twee Riviere and Nossob Camp.

By now familiar, the start was again sub-zero, White-faced Scops Owls seeing us off once more, a Pearl-spotted Owlet found not long after. Our trundle back down the Auob was marked by two quite superb African Wild Cats, the first scampering up a rocky slope, the second simply stunning as it sat half way up a dead tree right alongside the track. Also saw a good number of raptors again, including two Pygmy Falcons, plus the usual assortment of Kalahari passerines, such as Kalahari Scrub-Robin and Crimson-breasted Shrike, along with a most comical bunch of sunbathing Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters - eight in total, all fluffed up and packed closely together, clearly they were not too impressed by the cool mornings! At Kamqua, we veered eastward, entering a rolling expanse of vegetated dunes that lasted the entire 60 km or so to the Nossob Valley. A few Fawn-coloured Larks, some impressive Northern Black Korhaans in display, plus plentiful Southern Ant-eating Chats and Black-chested Prinias, but otherwise the birding was decidedly less rewarding than in the valleys, sentiments that could be echoed with regard to mammals, an Eland and a few Gemsbok the beast of most note.

A stop in another picnic site at the beginning of the Nossob Valley was again amusing for the antics of Sociable Weavers, hordes of them clammering for food, even to the extent of flocks attempting to land on open hands. Also Chestnut-vented Tit-Babblers here, along with Acacia Pied Barbet and Kalahari Scrub-Robins. Venturing north, destination Nossob Camp, the valley initially seemed a little of a disappointment, mainly due to the high sand banks either side of the track limiting our view - a higher car would certainly have been an advantage here. By Nossob Camp however, all was

forgotten, the valley opened out and the track sat level with the valley - and what a view it was, teeming with Wildebeest and Springbok, peppered with Kori Bustards and Ostrich, most magnificent. Also a Lappet-faced Vulture sitting with four White-backed Vultures. Nossob Camp was very nice, a dripping tap attracting vast congregations of birds, the campsite itself again alive with South African Ground Squirrels. After chucking up the tent in the far corner, I then took a wander around, soon bumping into an African Hoopoe, both Grey and Yellow-billed Hornbills, flocks of Cape Glossy Starlings and, at the dripping tap, at least a dozen species - loads of Red-billed Queleas, White-browed Sparrow-Weavers, Yellow Canaries and Southern Masked Weavers, smaller numbers of Grey-headed Sparrows, Shaft-tailed Whydahs and even Crimson-breasted Shrikes. Most of the remainder of the day was spent at a waterhole a few kilometres further north - a female Lion with two cubs had apparently killed something and dragged it into long grass. Arriving, the grass was very easy to find, and indeed it was long! So long in fact that the Lions were invisible. With a steady procession of Wildebeest, Springbok and Gemsbok still trying to use the waterhole, it seemed a nice enough place to settle down for the last couple of hours till sundown. Black-backed Jackals hovered at the grass's edge, a pair of Secretary Birds came striding in, but of the Lions, several mere glimpses of the top of an occasional head, ears poking up and that was that! Ah well, the sun was beginning to dip towards the horizon, day three over. Back at camp, a watch over a floodlit waterhole offered plenty of Gemsbok and Black-backed Jackals, plus a hunting Barn Owl. A silence of sorts, bar the scuffling hooves of the Gemsbok and occasional yelps of jackals, but then from the deep darkness to our left, a low throaty roar, oohh o'hhh o'hhhh o'hhhh o'hhhh, the haunting call of Lion somewhere close. Though it continued to call, perhaps a half kilometre distant, we eventually decided it was time to retire to the tent. Night of 19-20 July. Outside a tent in Kgalagadi. Before sleep, I had unwrapped my new trophy cam, a camera fitted with infra-red and designed to automatically trigger if anything walked in front. Tonight it would get its maiden outing. Already a pattering of Black-backed Jackals as I retired to my tent, the animals lurking in the darkness just a few metres behind. All was relatively peaceful however, and soon I was sleeping ...until 1.30 a.m.! A mighty roaring, the deep rumblings of the call almost vibrating through the tent. Oo er, I thought, that is close! I guessed this Lion had to be a few metres away at most, but with spotlight in the car, I chose to just lie there and enjoy the atmospherics, the beast calling for quite some minutes before beginning to wander away. Hmm, I wonder if the camera caught him! And next morning, an hour pre-dawn, I was up and checking ...a sharp intake of breathe, my camera had truly been christened! Not only heaps of shots of the jackals, but a number of murky images of the Lion, slightly distant to the camera, but distinctive enough. He had walked past three times! Continued to zip through the images, then another 'wow' - at 4.30 a.m., an African Wild Cat had also paid a visit, stopping to look directly at the camera!

20 July. Kgalagadi, Nossob Valley. What a phenomenal day, after the Lion and African Wild Cat caught on the night cam, we set off at dawn with a plan to travel up to Union's End, the northernmost tip of Kgalagadi, a remote outpost situated at the point where the borders of Namibia, Botswana and South Africa all converge. We never got there, far too many distraction on route! Barely five kilometres into our journey, the first rays of the sun cutting through an orange haze of dawn, the Nossob Valley was looking most exquisite, and there striding across the grasses of the valley, a pair of felines of spotted nature. Most resplendent, these were two Cheetahs were out on a morning hunt, the animals stopping to watch distant Springbok, the cats first crouching to edge in closer, but eventually giving up and continuing their way. What a good way to begin the day. Onward, oodles of Four-striped Grass Mice aside the track, also a few Brant's Whistling Rats and, on the open plains, both South African Ground Squirrels and a couple of Yellow Mongooses. The real treat however lay just a few kilometres further along - returning to the Bedinkt waterhole, I had hopes that the Lions of the day before might still be in the area. And indeed there were, not in the long grass, but stretched out in the dust aside the waterhole. One adult female and two well-grown cubs, all naturally enough in a state of semi-slumber. Cubs being cubs, it was too long before they got bored, the catalyst for action being the arrival of a mixed flock of Namaqua and Burchell's Sandgrouse. First one cub, then the other, most engaging were the sandgrouse, up got the Lions and plodded off in the direction of the birds, a whirl of wings and the entire flock was in the sky, the two Lions looking a little bewildered. With that, the cubs looked for further adventure, the next thing in their sight being us! Up they wandered, me still leaning out of the open window, they beginning to look with a slight tilt to their heads. Closer, closer, closer, there were now two metres distant and peering very intently at me through the window - I definitely thought it prudent to withdraw my arm from the window at this point!!! 'Ah boring', thought the Lions and ambled back to their mother for a little romp, pouncing on her tail tassel, much to her annoyance. Several Black-backed Jackals in the area, a Lappet-faced Vulture in a tree just beyond, it seemed the remains of the day before's kill might still be present, so when the family finally retreated into the grassy depths, it was no surprise. What came next was a surprise. Unbeknown to us, lying less than 40 metres away but concealed in the grass, there was another Lion, a big dark-mained male. I presume he had arrived overnight and was not related to the female, for just as she entered the grass so he made his presence absolutely clear, first sending the female and cubs darting the other way, then rising and hauling the kill straight towards us. A powerful animal, he was dragging a fully-grown Wildebeest, legs flaying, guts open. Straight past the car he dragged the thing, dumping it about three metres away under a small acacia. And then a cacophony of sounds, cracking and crunching of bones, ripping of hide and chewing of flesh, this male cared not one jot that we were watching just a breath away. Finally deciding we had seen enough, by now nearing mid-morning, we continued on our way, a herd of Red Hartebeest seen next, followed by assorted birds such as Acacia Pied Barbet, moderately common Fawn-coloured Larks, Booted Eagle and a good variety of other raptors. Absolutely incredible numbers of Kori Bustards too, a minimum

of 70 noted this day, the birds occurring literally everywhere. By midday, still less than half way to Union's End, we had a decision to make - either speed up considerably or change our plans. We opted for the latter, stopping to make coffee at Bedinkt, then beginning a slow return to Nossob Camp. Another pause at the Lions as we passed, the whole lot of them now resting under adjacent acacias, and then we continued to the Kwang waterhole, a mecca for flocks of passerines coming to drink, most particularly wheeling flocks of Red-billed Queleas. A pleasure to sit and watch, the reason for their apparent spookiness soon revealed itself, a Red-necked Falcon rounding a bush and piling into the masses of birds, they all plunging into the nearest acacia, the falcon then dancing along the top, trying to flush a bird out. A Gabar Goshawk tried a similar trick, but the Red-billed Queleas knew what was what, not a bird left the cover under the onslaught of attacks. Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes into this watch and a car pulled aside, 'Do you know there is a Leopard in the tree?', they enquired. No I did not! Stone me, it was in the very tree I was virtually parked under! Almost impossible to see from most angles, a little manoeuvring finally got us a few reasonable views, it was a young female devouring a jackal it had caught, I presume by pouncing from this tree as the unfortunate animal had come into drink. Presuming my views were going to be limited to assorted patches of leopard spots in the acacia, an occasional head to peer around, I was rather staggered by what happened next! With belly full, the Leopard began a less than graceful descent of the tree, flopping from one branch to another, then clambered down the trunk to land on the ground right besides us! A few paces more she walked, choosing a shady spot in the long grass. Simply stunning views, she then proceeded to wash paws and face, an occasional look in our direction, but otherwise fully engrossed in her beautification. And a beauty she was, relaxing for a while, before then moving a little further, slipping into the vegetation and immediately becoming totally invisible. What a super finale to the day's cat action! Or at least I thought it would be, still one last surprise to come. Back at camp, after getting a little waylaid by a Pearl-spotted Owlet, it was time for the last event of the day - a return to the floodlit waterhole. All initially seemed most devoid of life this evening, a lone Black-backed Jackal lingering a while, the Barn Owl reappearing for a couple of fly-bys, but was just about that. And then, a pair of small bright eyes on a distant slope, eyes heading straight for us. A few minutes later, there it was, the tenth cat of the day, an African Wild Cat trotting across the grass. A most fitting end to this very feline-centric day, two Cheetahs, five Lions, one Leopard, two African Wild Cats. 21 July. Kgalagadi, Nossob Valley. Last day in Kgalagadi, a farewell drive back through the Nossob Valley. Waiting for the camp gates to open, still a little before dawn, I nipped off to search for owls. Just as I was congratulating myself with a White-faced Scops Owl, up came my friend, even running to a degree. 'Er, what's up?' I enquired. The answer lay a couple of dozen metres back, the lumbering hulk of a Spotted Hyena prowling the perimeter fence, passing the main entrance and sauntering off. Hmm, nice... and with that, it was time for the gates to open. Out we went, straight into another Spotted Hyena, another big brute, this time lurking at the side of the track. He ambled off into the scrub, we continued on. And that was just about the end of the action for the day! Despite transiting a vast segment of the Nossob Valley, from Nossob Camp to Two Rivers, we saw no cats of any description, a mere six Black-backed Jackals (about a quarter of the numbers of previous days) and not a single Bat-eared Fox! Did manage both Slender and Yellow Mongoose however, plus plenty of Kori Bustards and, amongst the raptors, a Lanner Falcon and Martial Eagle. Other than that, not really any birds of special note either, the best of the rest being another flock of Burchell's Sandgrouse. We arrived at Two Rivers in the early afternoon, the idea being to fill up with petrol, then exit the park. Got there five minutes after the petrol station took a siesta break, so that stuffed that plan! Not wishing to risk the 250 km hop to Upington on a near empty tank, we instead opted for a siesta of our own, retiring to the shade of the adjacent bushes for an hour. Chucking titbits to the gathering flocks, it was not difficult to while away the time - amongst the photogenic arrivals, heaps of Red-eyed Bulbuls, White-browed Sparrow-Weavers and Cape Glossy Starlings, plus quite a few Yellow-billed Hornbills, a couple of Familiar Chats and a House Sparrow, the latter my first of the trip! The hour over, the petrol tank filled, it was then time to hit the road - in front of us lay a 1200 km drive, a long slog that we would do non-stop. Next port of call, Punda Maria in the great Kruger National Park, the start of the next part of the 'Felines and Critters of the Night' tour! For 'Part Three' of my trip, [CLICK HERE](#) Kruger National Park