

Part One. Kruger National Park.

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Hardly needs an introduction, 20,000 square kilometres of some of the best wildlife country in Africa. Started my trip in the far north, at Punda Maria and Parfuri, then worked southward, staying at various camps on route.

9 June. Mad dash across Amsterdam Schnipol airport, the late arrival of our first flight leaving a connection of only 20 minutes. Miraculously we made the flight, predictably our baggage didn't. So started the trip to South Africa, arriving late evening without camping equipment, change of clothes, etc. Completed the relevant baggage forms, took on trust that they would deliver my bags to the depths of Kruger, then picked up a rental car and headed out into the night, destination Punda Maria, 650 km to the north.

10 June. Punda Maria, Kruger. Snoozed a couple of hours at a petrol station midway, but otherwise made good time and was at Punda Maria gate at 7.00 a.m., the northern entrance to Kruger National Park. Red-winged Starlings my first birds of the trip, Cape Turtle Doves soon after, a couple of Red-billed Hornbills next. And so began the Kruger adventures, huge dollops of Elephant poo on the road, two of the mighty animals appearing barely five minutes into the national park. Abundant Impala and Nyala also along this first stretch, six Giraffe and a troop of Baboons too. Base for the first two nights was Punda Maria, perfect for explorations of the northern extremes of Kruger and fully loaded with Vervet Monkeys and wandering Bushbucks. Just before reaching the camp however, the first cats of the trip – a pair of Lions lurking, the content purring of the female a magical sound. Impressed, Lions within 20 minutes in entering Kruger! In the camp itself, I immediately got distracted by a number of weird and wonderful butterflies that were on the wing. With it now the southern mid-winter, I had not really expected butterflies on this trip, but there were some real stunners out here, albeit ones that I initially had no idea what they were! Amongst the best, the appropriately-named Guineafowl, a large grey-brown butterfly with pale speckles, plus gaudy Small Orange Acraeas, the diminutive Common Zebra Blue and several and a Purple-brown Hairstreak. Also several noted Cambridge Vagrants and quite a few African Migrants, a species that would turn out to fairly common over the next days and even one or two later on in Kgalagadi. Perhaps stunner of the day however was a single Spotted Joker, quite a vivid butterfly indeed. Had planned to camp at Punda Maria, but given our tent was still sitting in Amsterdam, we upgraded our booking to a chalet, something my little travelling companion quite rejoiced! Yellow-billed Hornbills, Crested Barbet, Greater Blue-eared Starlings all in the camp, Bateleur flying overhead. Pleasantly warm as we headed off for our first exploration of the surrounding area, including a slow circuit of the Mahonie Loop. Among the highlights, a family of Dwarf Mongooses residing in a termite mound, the pair of Lions again and a bunch of Crested Guineafowls complete with punk hair-dos. The real delights, however, were to come just after dark – adjacent to the chalet, big gazing eyes peering out of the bushes, slow lumbering bodies, chunky little fingers. And the owners, two superb Greater Bushbabies! Target number one of the trip at a range of just a metre or so, splendid! More good stuff with an organised night drive – no other tourists, so personalised service and a pretty good driver/guide too. Almost immediately encountered a Large-spotted Genet, then an African Civet. Next up, the two Lions again. Added a few Scrub Hares and Spinghars, then an intriguing mongoose – moderately large, distinctly pale tail, Meller's Mongoose seemed the best fit. Common Duiker and Sharpe's Grysbok also seen relatively fleetingly, two Spotted Hyenas rather more prolonged at they lolloped along the road for quite some way. Not bad bird selection too, a couple of Spotted Thick-knees early on, quite many Fiery-necked Nightjars and, surprise of the evening, a Small Buttonquail crouching on the track in the vehicle's lights. Ready to sleep at the end of the night drive, not a bad first day!

11 June. Pafuri, Kruger. Travelled to the extreme north of Kruger this day, the meeting points of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Leaving Punda Maria at sunrise, a Verreaux's Eagle Owl was among the first birds of the day, along with Swainson's Spurfowl sitting up. Other birds included Crested Francolin and Natal Francolin, numerous Magpie Shrikes and my only Dickinson's Kestrel of the trip. On the mammal front however, other than ever present Elephants and abundant Tree Squirrels, few mammals were noted on route, a Slender Mongoose about best. Destination one, the bridge over the Pafuri River – Wire-tailed Swallows on the bridge itself, Green-backed Herons, Hammerkop, Woolly-necked Storks, White-crowned Plovers and Water Thick-knees along the river, a splendid Gymnogene on a fallen tree at the water's edge, Nile Crocodiles and Monitor Lizards on sandbanks, plenty to see. Also an Ovambo Sparrowhawk and a Shikra, and in the skies above at least 80 Little Swifts, six Alpine Swifts and 15 African Palm Swifts. No spinetails of any description however. And then there were the Elephants, a massive family group appearing and having a wail of a time, first bathing, then sending clouds of dust into the sky as they took an extended dust bath. Following the river to the east, there seemed less game than on previous visits, perhaps too dry and better conditions further south – Impala, Nyala and Warthog as common as ever, but Giraffe, Zebra, Waterbuck, Buffalo, Kudu and Blue Wildebeest all appeared in pretty low numbers. Good for birds though - Green Wood-Hoopoe, oodles of Yellow-billed, Red-billed and Grey Hornbills, Lilac-breasted Rollers, Eastern Bearded Scrub Robins, Red-billed Buffalo-Weavers and Red-billed Oxpeckers among the many. At Crooks Corner, with the day's temperatures rising nicely, White-backed Vultures were rising on thermals over the expansive sands extending into neighbouring Mozambique, plenty of White-fronted Bee-eaters hawking too. With the warmth, so too were butterflies appearing – a most impressive Green-banded Swallowtail on a track near Crook's Corner, then a profusion of whites just beyond. Unfortunately in an area that you are not permitted to exit the car, photographing these was problematic, but the majority appeared to be African Veined Whites, Brown Veined Whites and Common Dotted Borders. Far better was at the Pafuri picnic site - to the accompaniment of grunting Hippos and Vervet Monkeys running amok, here I could explore to my heart's content. The fringes of the picnic area excellent for butterflies – mostly whites of assorted types, predominant were African

Veined Whites and African Small Whites, but also Brown Veined Whites and Common Dotted Border. Also found Autumn Leaf Vagrant, the attractive African Wood White, Common Grass Yellow and White-banded Swift (a skipper). Pretty good for birds too, with Arrow-marked Babblers, Southern Black Tit, Southern Black Flycatcher, Chinspot Batis, Yellow-breasted Apalis and White-crested Helmet-Shrike all noted. Spent a while back at the Pafuri Bridge, lots more Elephant action, then began to head back towards Punda Maria, one Red-crested Korhaan and eight Small Buttonquails on route, so too a pair of Dark-backed Jackal and, more impressive, a mean looking Snouted Cobra at the road's edge. No sign of our promised luggage, just an obscure message in German (!) that it was somewhere and might arrive next day. Called and told them I was leaving Punda Maria next day, heading to a new camp further south ...no problem they said, the bags would be waiting for me there. Another night in the chalet, hardly a hardship. Lion and African Civet on the night drive, another African Civet sauntering around in front of my night camera, so ended the second day in Africa. 12 June. Punda Maria-Shingwedzi, Kruger. Plan over the next days was to begin the slow transit south through Kruger, the first section being the 80 km to Shingwezi. Initially through kilometres of mopani forest, mammals were decidedly thin on the ground, occasional Impala, an odd Elephant here and there. Bar the abundant Yellow-billed and Red-billed Hornbills, not particularly rich in birds either. At the Babalala picnic site however, with Martial Eagle and Bateleur overhead and Wire-tailed Swallows and Magpie Shrikes all around, we then veered west onto the Mphongole River loop – this was superb, following the periodic river for many kilometres, isolated deep pools chock a block with wallowing Hippos and bathing Elephants, a few Woolly-necked Storks alongside and not a small number of Nile Crocodiles. Even more impressive, a massive herd of Buffalo straddling the track, an absolute minimum of 350 slowly plodding along. Good for birds too – one Cape Parrot, four Brown-headed Parrots, six Little Bee-eaters, 20 Yellow-billed Oxpeckers on the Buffalo, my only Crowned Hornbill of the trip, two African Paradise Flycatchers, plenty more too. And then we got to Shingwedzi, early afternoon and pretty hot. News on my baggage – it was in camp reception! Except it wasn't – KLM had messed up and tagged bags incorrectly, what was waiting for me was an enormous bag that I could barely lift and that certainly didn't belong to me! Ah well, so the courier returned and retrieved the bag, mine I was promised would appear perhaps next day! Booked a rather nice chalet again, this holiday becoming somewhat more luxurious than I had planned! Some rather attractive butterflies nearby - a number of Veined Oranges, plus African Migrants. Off for an afternoon drive, almost immediately finding a really weird mini-beast aside the track – saw one some years back in Swaziland, but got far better photographs of this one, an arthropod that looks every bit a cross between a spider and a scorpion, it was in fact a African Camel Spider. Supposedly totally harmless, I have to confess I definitely stayed well clear of its pincers when it became to threaten me whilst I crouched to take a few pictures!

Took the track to Kanniedood Dam, a very productive route though mature riverine woodland and past many pools - numerous Elephants along this way, quite a number blocking the track on many occasions, some rather nervy moments as we tried to sneak by, one or two of the Elephants none too impressed by this, mock charges, trumpeting and ear wagging order of the day. Coming to drink, Baboons and Vervet Monkeys, Giraffe, Kudu and Nyala, Waterbucks, a single Bushbuck, lots of Impala, my first Tsessebe of the trip and more. Lots of birds too, not least Woolly-necked Stork and Saddle-billed Stork, Pied Kingfishers and White-fronted Bee-eaters. Stubborn Elephant on the track made me late for returning to camp, got there just as the gates were closing, no problem. No night safari this night, but four Acacia Tree Rats in the camp at night, one in the rafters of our chalet. Small Spotted Genet in front of my night camera. 13 June. Shingwedzi-Letaba, Kruger. Southbound to Letaba, a couple of Side-striped Jackals the highlight, plus two separate Sharpe's Grysboks, one Steenbok and a number of Tsessebe, plus increasing numbers of Waterbuck and Blue Wildebeest amongst the more common mammals. Not bad for birds too, the first big flocks of Helmeted Guineafowl scurrying all over the place, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-larks in abundance, at least 25 Cinnamon-breasted Buntings in drier areas and, along watercourses, quite a few Goliath Herons and Green-backed Heron. And then to Letaba, incorporated into my itinerary primarily as it is supposed to be one of the best camps in Kruger to find roosting bats. And so it turned out to be – even as I checked in at reception, and rejoiced at the final arrival of my baggage, the squeaking of roosting bats could be heard! Investigating a little, I soon found them – dozens squeezed under the eaves of the building. Would be back to investigate those shortly. With my bag arrived, so camping could finally commence. Put the tents up, then searched for bats with quite some success – first a group of quite exquisite Whalberg's Epauletted Fruit Bats roosting under a palm (or in reality could also be Peter's Epauletted Fruit Bats, indistinguishable without examination of dental patterns), then hundreds of Angolan Free-tailed Bats in large bat boxes dotted about on high poles, quite a pong from them! Back at the reception building, many of the bats were squashed into tiny cavities and gaps, not too easy to see - but though some also appeared to be Angolan Free-tailed Bats, some at least were Little Free-tailed Bats, perhaps even most. Did spend a while poking around a line of static safari tents in the campsite - managed not to upset any campers, but also failed to find any of the Banana Pipistrelles that sometimes roost under the window flaps of the tents, a few telltale droppings the only sign of their presence. Also in the campsite, Bushbucks wandering around and, along the broad river that stretches in front of the restaurant area, many Hippos and Nile Crocodiles and numerous birds, including two dozen Marabou Storks, seven Woolly-necked Storks, two Saddle-billed Storks and about 30 Water Thick-knees. For all the day's highlights, the bats and all, the ultimate pièce de résistance however was still to come - on an otherwise moderately quiet evening drive to the east of the camp, albeit punctuated first by a Brown-hooded Kingfisher and then by rather close encounters with stubborn Elephants, we were about to hit it big time. I confess to not actually spotting it, but a mini screech from within the car, 'stop, reverse' immediately got the adrenalin going. Backed up and there it was - as the last rays of the sun cast dappled shadows across boulders dropping off towards a sluggish river, a fine Leopard sauntering up onto the rocks to catch the dying sun, most magical. And so ended another fine day on Africa. Two Spotted Hyenas appeared on the night camera. 14 June. Letaba-Satara, Kruger. To the grasslands of Satara, a pleasant day in this most open area of Kruger National Park, big increases in the numbers of Zebra, Blue Wildebeest, Impala etc, plus a number of Steenbok, the first Ostriches of the trip

and abundant open country birds such as Kori Bustards, Red-crested Korhaans, and, in the skies, Black-shouldered Kites, Tawny Eagles, Martial Eagles and Bateleurs. A stop at a viewpoint added Grey-rumped Swallows, Pearl-breasted Swallows and Brown-throated Martins along a river, plus a selection of butterflies – Bushveld Purple Tips, several African Monarchs drifting about and, a rather stunning duo, both Blue Pansy and Yellow Pansy. Equally pleasing were the butterflies at Satara camp - the discovery of a splendid flowering bush held the single best concentration of butterflies that I was to encounter on this trip. Many dozens of individuals, it was a sight to behold: along with numerous African Monarchs and Wandering Donkey Acraeas, Garden Acraeas and Small Orange Acraeas, some of the delights included Black-striped Hairtail, Grass Jewel Blue, Natal Spotted Blue, Sooty Blue, Common Zebra Blue, the exquisite Black Pie, the nice-named Striped Policeman and another Blue Pansy. A Squinting Bush Brown also seen on a track nearby. South Africans sure have good imagination when it comes to naming their butterflies! The camp was also excellent for birds – an African Scops Owl roosting near the camp reception, numerous Little Swifts overhead and African Mourning Dove, Groundscraper Thrush, White-breasted Scrub-Robin and Wattled Starlings all in the campsite, along with a change in the guard amongst the glossy starlings – gone the Greater Blue-eared Starlings of northern Kruger, now abundant Burchells Starlings and Cape Glossy Starlings! In the Satara area, didn't see a hoped-for Cheetah or White Rhinoceros, the mammal highlights limited to Black-backed Jackal and Spotted Hyena, plus a family of six Dwarf Mongoose, while the more notable birds included Grey-headed Bush-Shrike, Grey-headed Kingfisher and a female Small Buttonquail and six accompanying chicks. Back in camp, as night fell added a few active Schlieffen's Bats, then an African Wild Cat ambling across an open lawn just after dark. Failed to find Honey Badger, Satara camp apparently good for this species, but a productive night drive did add two male Lions at very close quarters, an African Civet and a Large Spotted Genet, plus Scrub Hare, Springhare and Spotted Thick-knee. Highlight for me though was a Bronze-winged Courser standing in the middle of a track, my first ever in South Africa. 15 June. Satara-Pretorius, Kruger. Final day in Kruger, winding south towards Skukuza. A heavily misted morning, a male Lion most evocative as it sauntered out of grasses hidden in the fog. Two Black-backed Jackals a little further, narrowly missed a Leopard that had crossed the track just before we rounded a corner. Bright sun soon broke through, an African Green Pigeon and a Bearded Woodpecker amongst the birds seen. On we continued, an abundance of typical Kruger mammals, but the only new species for the trip was a Banded Mongoose trotting along mid-afternoon. Did however find another group of Whalberg's Epauletted Fruit Bats, this time roosting under the eaves of the camp shop at Skukuza, plus two young Spotted Hyenas sleeping in the shade of a trackside tree. Departed Kruger late afternoon via Pretoriuskop, then zipped north-west to squeeze in a quick visit to the grasslands at Dullstroom just before dusk to add Grey Rhebok and Blesbok, three individuals and a herd of about 35 respectively. It was then time for the long trek westwards, an all-night drive of 1350 km to the opposite side of the country and the fantastic Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, a chilly minus 7 C in the final approaches, a number of Cape Hares and Bat-eared Foxes encountered in the last few dozen kilometres. For 'Part Two ' of my trip, [CLICK HERE](#) Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park