

Part Two. Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park & Augrabies Falls

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Rolling red dunes of the Kalahari punctuated by the shallow valleys of the Auob and Nossob, slithers of grassland and acacia savannah supporting abundant life, both birds and mammalian. Renowned for felines in particular, this slab of land protruding up between Namibia and Botswana is truly one of the gems in South Africa's rich crown of wildlife localities.

16 June. Kgalagadi. Sun rising over the dunes, still a considerable chill to the air, so began the slow meander up the Auob Valley towards the destination for the coming night, Mata Mata Camp. With pink eyelids blinking, a pair of Verreaux's Eagle Owls adorned the top of an acacia, then as we crossed a section of dunes at the outset, two Northern Black Korhaans, a party of White-backed Mousebirds, several Southern Anteating Chats and a number of Fawn-coloured Larks. Four-striped Grass Mice super abundant, many dozens feeding aside the track, a few Brant's Whistling Rats too, chunky things that live in colonies, whistling from burrow entrances. Then a shout from my smaller travelling companion 'What that's running through the grass?' What was that indeed? Only a stonking Honey Badger! Zigzagging about in the sunlight, this was a critter on a mission, seemingly trying to catch the Four-striped Grass Mice. Better still, it had attracted a pair of attendant Pale Chanting Goshawks – as the Honey Badger went from bush to bush, so the Pale Chanting Goshawks kept following to watch for mice disturbed by the Honey Badger. A successful strategy it appeared, in not many minutes the hawks had swooped down on several mice, devouring them pretty quickly. From the dunes, into the Auob Valley, open grassland and dotted acacias, plenty of Gemsbok, Springbok and Blue Wildebeest. Ostriches plodding about, Kori Bustards too. Marico and Chat Flycatchers commonplace, a few Pale Flycatchers, Kalahari Scrub Robins strutting from acacia scrub, quite a number of vivid Crimson-breasted Shrikes. Flocks of small stuff too, these including Scaly-feathered Finches, Cape Sparrows, Southern Grey-headed Sparrows, White-browed Sparrow-Weavers, Red-billed Queleas, Violet-eared Waxbills, Red-headed Finches and Yellow Canaries. Naturally, also that classic bird of the Kalahari, the Sociable Weaver, along with their massive nests that were forcing trees to collapse.

And with this mass of small birds and rodents, so too raptors to prey upon them, several Gabar Goshawks at the waterholes, four Pygmy Falcons, four Red-necked Falcons, both Rock and Greater Kestrels, an absolute minimum of 40 Pale Chanting Goshawks and a range of other raptors, including both Secretary Birds and Black Harrier. In all fifteen species of raptor this day. Venturing further up the valley, the temperature now rising towards a pleasant 20 C, encountered three Lions resting under a stunted acacia, one male and two females, also Giraffes nearby and at least 80 Namaqua Sandgrouses dropping in to drink at a waterhole, two Burchell's Sandgrouses tagging along too. And then our first Meerkats of the trip, eight standing alert in classic pose - Kalahari at its best!

All in all a very pleasant day and it was quite late in the day that we finally reached the campsite. Shoved the tents up, immediately attracting the attention of Ground Squirrels, Yellow-billed Hornbills and Cape Glossy Starlings, all trying to scrounge titbits, then had a quick look round for roosting owls to no avail, about the best birds in the camp being Crimson-breasted Shrikes, Long-billed Crombec and Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler. A couple of Yellow Mongoose also sauntered by. Had hoped to find Brown Hyena at dusk, but neither an evening drive nor scanning from the camp after dark managed this, we did however notch up an impressive 19 Bat-eared Foxes taking in the evening sunshine, plus six Black-backed Jackals. A pleasing first day in the Kalahari. 17 June. Kgalagadi. Long day, crossing from the Auob Valley to the Nossob Valley, then heading up to Nossob Camp before returning to Mata Mata. Both Red-crested Korhaan and several Northern Black Korhaans on the transit between valleys, as well as seven Burchell's Sandgrouse and a dead Spotted Eagle Owl, but the greater rewards were at a picnic stop at the beginning of the Nossob Valley, a nice selection of ultra-tame birds descending as soon as we were out of the car in the expectation of hand-outs – not only Sociable Weavers on mass, many even coming to the hand, but also several Yellow-billed Hornbills, a couple of Acacia Pied Barbets and even Kalahari Scrub Robins strutting out from nearby cover. Dozens of White-crowned Sparrow-Weavers and Cape Glossy Starlings too, plus quite a few Four-striped Mice gingerly sneaking in from scattered burrow. An hour or so here, photographing the assorted attractions, plus keeping an eye on the sky for raptors from Tawny Eagles to Lanner Falcons, then onward to Nossob Camp. Failed to find a White-faced Scops Owl that I have seen here in the past, but did find a Pearl-spotted Owlet instead, couldn't complain too much. Also present, a bunch of highly photographic Yellow Mongooses and ever present Ground Squirrels. Nothing of major note on the way back to Mata Mata, the highlights a particularly large Mole Snake, my first Red Hartebeests of the trip and no less than 30 Bat-eared Foxes. I did however manage to draw a complete blank on felines this day, quite an achievement in this cat-rich environment! 18 June. Kgalagadi. Fantastic morning, Kgalagadi at its best – a Spotted Eagle Owl and Pale Chanting Goshawk having a showdown just after dawn, the two perched nose to nose hissing at each other for some five to ten minutes, the owl hunching down and raising its wings, the larger goshawk bobbing in return. Then, as the owl finally gave up and flew

to another tree, then bumped down the sandy track a few hundred metres more to find two African Wild Cats playing around an old stump, chasing each other, rolling around in the grass, jumping up and down the stump. And then things got even better! A mere kilometre or so further, a gasp as I looked right - sauntering across the hillside through acacias and open grass, a mean looking beastie long-haired and dark, no less than a Brown Hyena! Only my third ever, all in the Kgalagadi, this one was absolutely nonplussed by its admiring fans, on it walked, always parallel to the track, occasionally glancing our way, but seemingly intent on some distant destination. Gemsbok and Springbok eyed it with suspicion, I with pure admiration. Eventually our paths veered apart, onward we continued ...perhaps our luck could continue with a Cheetah I optimistically hoped. Not quite, did add a Leopard Tortoise, a couple of Steenbok and a range of birds, including 15 Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters all stuffed up against each other in a tight bundle, but not another feline of any sort. Arrived at Twee Riverien early afternoon and set up camp, a usual assortment of birds waiting for snacks as usual. Realising I was running out of time for a Cheetah, set out pretty early for an afternoon/evening drive back up the Nossob Valley. Oodles of Kori Bustards and Ostriches, quite a number of Red Hartebeest, a party of Meerkats and both Slender Mongoose and Yellow Mongoose, but things didn't quite go according to plan – not only did we not find a Cheetah or indeed other cat, but we also destroyed one of our tyres and lost a wheel hub cover! Changed to the midge emergency wheel and limped back to camp, needless to say rather later than we should have, fortunately incurring no further problem. White-fronted Scops Owl calling somewhere in the darkness, still a very good day it had been.

19 June. Kgalagadi & Augrabies Falls. Lions roaring in the pre-dawn, so started our last day in the Kgalagadi. No possibility to replace the tyre locally, the nearest option being Uppington, 250 km down the road. Debated the wisdom of heading back along the Nossob valley without a back-up tyre, the sandy tracks frequently strewn with acacia thorns. Still no Cheetah though, so we decided to take the risk – would just mean an expensive rescue if worst came to worst.

And what a good move it was, our final morning in the Kgalagadi proving most fine. As well as an impressive raptor haul, including six Secretary Birds, three Tawny Eagles, two Booted Eagles, a Bateleur, another Black-chested Snake-Eagle and three Lanner Falcons, mammals were also much in evidence – along with expected Gemsbok, Springbok and Blue Wildebeest, we encountered no less than 18 Black-backed Jackals, four Bat-eared Foxes, five Yellow Mongooses and eleven Meerkats. Eventually, having ambled north for a couple of hours with the critical Cheetahs still remaining unseen, we decided it wise to begin our journey south, ensuring we'd get to Uppington for the tyre change in office hours. Greater Scimitarbill flitting between acacias, plenty more Kori Bustards, then midway back towards Twee Riverien, a movement towards the top of an adjacent ridge ...and there they were, just when we thought we were doomed in our quest, two most elegant Cheetahs walking up the slope, fantastic! Up the rocky slope they went, paused a while on rocks at the ridge top, then one stepped out of view, moments later the other. A classy way indeed to end our time in the Kgalagadi. Exited the national park, made good time to Uppington and changed the tyre, then headed west to stay the night at Augrabies Falls, arriving early evening. Spectacular landscapes of massive granite boulders and impressive gorge, the Orange River plunging over a precipitous drop. Abundant Rock Hyrax taking in the evening sunshine, Vervet Monkeys bouncing around the campsite and chalets adjacent. As dusk fell, large numbers of Alpine Swifts and Rock Martins over the gorge, then a surprise African Wild Cat found by spotlight just after dark. Thought I'd try to catch the cat on my night camera, succeeded in capturing a Small-spotted Genet!

20 June. Augrabies Falls. Dawn at Augrabies, acacias around the campsite and chalets, Cape Robin Chats and Karoo Thrushes, flocks of Southern Masked Weavers, a number of Acacia Pied Barbets, Bokmakieries and Chestnut-vented Tit-Babblers, pretty good birding overall. Didn't take long to find the specials of the area either, four Orange River White-eyes flitting down onto a barbecue grill to peck at fat remnants, very nice birds indeed. My main aim at this destination was to find Hartmann's Mountain Zebra and Klipspringer, both usually fairly easy here. Headed across the rocky landscapes to the west, occasional tracks leading back to the Orange River. Mountain Wheatears, Pale-winged Starlings, Dusky Sunbirds, Red-faced and White-backed Mousebirds on route out, a few Large-billed Larks too, plus three most impressive Ludwig's Bustards in a small grassy gully. In slightly more open areas, a scatter of large mammals - 16 Giraffe, 22 Eland, five Gemsbok, about 30 Springbok and six Kudu, but scanning rocky outcrops, not a sign of Mountain Zebra or Klipspringer. As often the case though, just as I gave up and began to return, so I did bump into one of the targets – a pair of Klipspringers complete with youngster on boulders right adjacent to the track. And with that back to the chalet area, a quick look at the Orange River again, Rock Hyraxes out bathing in the sun, Pied Kingfisher along the river and both Cape Wagtail and African Pied Wagtail on the rocks, one Pirit Batis moving through acacias. Packed and departed, a Yellow Mongoose and a couple of Ground Squirrels the final mammals, flocks of Sociable Weavers the finale birds. Ahead lay a journey of about 550 km, fairly uneventful and marked by just a couple of Small Grey Mongooses dashing across the road. Destination however was the property of Marrick Safari, a locality that I had high hopes for. For 'Part Three' of my trip, [CLICK HERE](#) Northern and Western Cape