

Part Three. Northern and Western Cape.

Contributed by Jos

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Encompassing half the sub-continent, this section of the trip incorporated the property of Marrick Safari and the nearby Mokola National Park in the Kimberly area, before dropping south for a few days at the excellent De Hoop coastal reserve and a number of sites near Cape Town.

20-21 June. Marrick & Mokola. With nocturnal mammals the key targets of this trip to South Africa, the lands of Marrick Safari truly had the potential to amaze – in the hours of darkness on these expansive grasslands just south of Kimberly, a mouthwatering array of critters were possible, top amongst them the iconic duo of Aardvark and Aardwolf and, at one of the only reliable localities for the species, the diminutive Black-footed Cat. The basic plan was simple - safaris on two consecutive nights, these organised by Marrick Safari, then the intervening day exploring the nearby Mokola National Park, a true gem of a place with superb grasslands supporting a very good selection of large mammals.

Night One. So it was, with a dash of anticipation that I arrived late afternoon and settled into a chalet to await darkness. A Cape Serotine fluttered around at dusk and then the lights of my safari vehicle arrived, an open top 4x4 with driver and a dedicated spotter equipped with powerful spotlight. A clear night, no wind, temperatures were already nudging down towards zero, it was certainly darn cold atop that open-top. Off we went, bumped down the track, almost immediately encountering two Smith's Red Rock Rabbits on a rocky outcrop, a good start. Dozens of Springhares hopping all over the place as we reached more open grasslands, scattered eyes of Impala catching the light too. Taking one track after another, we slowly quartered the Marrick property, the spotter pretty good I have to say, but also explaining that calm conditions were rarely the best for finding mammals, a light wind usually helping so he said. An hour did pass, an African Wild Cat had ambled along, so too Dark-backed Jackal and a couple of Cape Hares. No sign of any of the main targets though, nor strangely any of the several gerbil species or other small rodents that are supposed to be common. Wrapped up in a blanket, I still was slowly turning into a block of ice, Steenbok and then Common Duiker zipped off from rank grass, a little later a moment of excitement as a young Cape Porcupine came shuffling along, snuffing around in a dusty patch of dirt. The two-hour mark came and went, a quartet of Bat-eared Foxes appeared, plus endless Springhares. I however was not only beginning to fear a complete blank on the special ones, but I was also freezing half to death! But then, just as I was actually thinking it would be quite nice to get back to my comfy chalet, a raised whisper from the spotter shot warmth through my veins … the immortal word 'Aardvark'. And there it was, an absolute cracker of an animal, an Aardvark at close quarters, superb. No thoughts of the cold anymore, this was a species I had long dreamt of seeing. And most cooperative it was, trotting along in the short turf, long piggy nose and big ears, a really great animal. As it finally wandered off, on we continued. Didn't find Aardwolf or Black-footed Cat, did see a Spotted Eagle Owl in an acacia tree. Back at the chalet, it took a good hour to defrost, I would be better prepared for the following night! Night Two Far better equipped this night, toggled up with all the clothes I had and brought my sleeping bag too! No Smith's Red Rock Rabbits this night, but other small mammals seemed in greater numbers – tallied at least 50 Springhares and, in contrast to just two Cape Hares the night before, saw six Cape Hares and two Scrub Hares on this. Also a Pygmy Mouse darting along in front of the jeep, freezing in the spotlight. Followed pretty much the same route as the night before and for a good half hour or so results were rather similar ...until the spotter picked up bright eyeshine. Ahead, left, two relatively small mammals were pacing a patch of grassland, we pulled up adjacent. Aardwolves! A pair slowly zigzagging the ground, peering our way occasionally. Superficially similar to small hyenas, this was another much desired species and I was very pleased to be finally watching them. Over the next ten to fifteen minutes they wandered about, crossing over the track in front and slowly wandering up a gentle slope adjacent. Then something remarkable – as they disappeared between acacia bushes, the spotter began to swing the spotlight back and fro to refind then, me following with binoculars. A pair of eyes in the grass just to the right of where they had vanished. Yep, a Aardwolf again I supposed, albeit partially hidden. Then it jumped out into the open however ...an audible gasp from me, it was not an Aardwolf, but a small spotty cat! Black-footed Cat! One of Africa's most localised and difficult cats to see, there it was ...for all of two or three seconds until it moved into the acacia scrub and vanished. Brief but memorable. Further, one Barn Owl quartered the grasslands, seven Bat-eared Foxes occupied the dusty patch where four had been the night before and then, right on cue, the same Aardvark as the night before came trotting past at its spot ...success, the grand slam of 'aards', Aardwolf, Aardvark, Aardcat (broad translation of the Afrikaans for Black-footed Cat, 'Anthill Cat'). Returned to the chalet rather happy that night.

Mokola National Park. The day to kill between the two nights at Marrick, I had not originally planned to visit this national park and thus had not done any research. Indeed, as I found out, I did not even know exactly where it was, eventually having to stop at a rural police station to ask where the entrance was! In the event however, Mokola was a revelation, truly an excellent locality – I was tempted there by the possibility of Black Wildebeest, I left with far more, 22 mammal species included!

A reserve of rolling grassland and acacia savannah, I picked up a map at the national park reception and then headed off, not before finding out that White Rhino also inhabited the reserve, a very pleasing surprise. Wary of potential poaching though, the reserve staff do not share information as to the best areas to find these mighty beasts, thus I would have to hope for luck. Fairly thick bush in the first area I explored, Spotted Thick-knee roosting under an acacia, Acacia Pied Barbet, Lesser Honeyguide and Golden-breasted Bunting also seen, plus a range of common mammals such as Springbok, Gemsbok, Blue Wildebeest and Warthog. Also nice, both Tsessebe and Red Hartebeest seemed rather common, small herds of each ambling through the mixed grassland/bush environment. Even better however was what I

encountered a few kilometres further: rounding a corner, some rather unmistakable dollops aside the track, large fresh dollops almost elephant-like – it had to be rhino poop, I was in rhino country! And sure enough, in a grassy clearing not more than a few hundred metres further, there stood two most impressive White Rhinos. Two White Rhinos doing absolutely nothing, just standing back to back and appearing to largely snooze! No complaints from my car though, having not seen them in Kruger, I thought we had missed out on this trip, so this was really an unexpected bonus. But then the bonuses went on and on ...bumped into another three half an hour later, then a mother and youngster and then yet another three, these last ones trotting in to a waterhole. Ten White Rhinos in the space of an hour!

Still hadn't seen Black Wildebeest however, so began to traverse the national park to reach the northern end, an area far more open. Sickle-winged Chat and Wattled Starlings on route, so too Kudu, Vervet Monkeys and Baboons. And then I got to the open grasslands, a herd of Buffalo at the fringe and then a majestic swathe of golden grass stretching into the distance, nicely dotted with Burchell's Zebras and, just as I had hoped, Black Wildebeests! Zigzagged the area, counted at least 90 Black Wildebeest, all most distinctive with their shaggy white manes, plus encountered plenty more too – amongst the mammals, six Bat-eared Foxes, 18 Meerkats and, looking most resplendent, two elegant Sables. Good birding too, grassland species including two Small Buttonquails running along the track, two Ludwig's Bustards in the grass, one Northern Black Korhaan, a Three-banded Courser also beside a track and quite a number of passerines in good numbers, Southern Anteating Chats and Capped Wheatears included, plus African Pipit, Buffy Pipit, Shaft-tailed Whydahs and Yellow Canaries.

All in all, for a locality that I had not planned to visit, I was impressed no end. Departing, I also added Steenbok and Yellow Mongoose, as well as two Roan on neighbouring property, though these were likely stocked animals.

22 June. Kimberly-Karoo. Mostly a travel day, but first a quick stop in Kimberly, the plan being to find Bradfield's Swifts. Initial idea was to check the De Beers Big Hole, a breeding locality, but a touristy entrance and requirement to pay both parking and entrance fee brought out the Scrooge in me and I instead opted for coffee in the downtown McDonald's, the car park as good a place as any to scan the city skies, an also reliable way to find the swifts. And indeed it was, swifts were whirling around in no time at all – in a fairly short period, a grand total of 30+ Bradfield's Swifts, plus 20+ Alpine Swifts and 40+ Little Swifts. Also had ideas of checking a large dam to the north of town, but access was problematic and I didn't fancy leaving the car, so a shimmering pink mass of Lesser Flamingoes aside, I departed without seeing anything at all. And then it was southbound all day, just under 500 km to Beaufort West in the Karoo. Only species of note on route was a Little Grey Mongoose. A night drive on backroads adjacent to the Karoo National Park was also fairly unproductive, adding only a bunch of Steenboks and numerous Cape Hares. 23-25 June. De Hoop Nature Reserve. Situated a couple of hours east of Cape Town, De Hoop is one of my favourite localities in Cape Province. What is there not to like? A vlei absolutely jam-packed with thousands of waterbirds, a quaint coastline with Southern Right Whales just off the beach, bunches of Bonteboks and Mountain Zebras grazing the turf, a rich assortment of land birds with everything from Cape Sugarbird to Knysna Woodpecker and, to top it off, very nice accommodation with birds and mammals from the front step. Add to this the surrounding Overburg farmlands and their Blue Cranes, Ludwig's Bustards and assorted passerines, and it really is a superb area. I had intended to stay just a single night, ended up two nights. 23 June. Moderately early arrival via the Overburg farmlands, a Ludwig's Bustard and 45 Blue Cranes just before the entrance, plus plenty of Capped Wheatears, flocks of African Pied Starlings and various larks et al. Picked up the permit at the entrance and entered the reserve, Malachite Sunbirds and Southern Double-collared Sunbirds in the fynbos, Karoo Prinias commonplace. A little further, we turned towards the accommodation area, open grasslands here dotted with a couple of dozen Ostrich, numerous Bonteboks, a herd of 15 Mountain Zebras and several Grey Rhebok. Opted against camping, partly due to Baboons trashing my tent last time I was here, so instead took one of the rather resplendent Dutch chalets, very nice indeed – all the mod cons, even electric blankets, plus birding on a platter. Within a few metres of the door, a briefest of wanders brought Cape Francolins, Cape Bulbuls, Cape Robin-Chats, Bar-throated Apalis, Fiscal Flycatchers and Southern Boubous, most hyper tame and, in the case of the francolins, even clambering over you if you sat upon the grass and blocked their route!

And then there was the vlei – stretching perhaps five kilometres or more and bordered by low cliffs, the sheer number of waterbirds is always astounding, literally thousands of Spur-winged Geese, Egyptian Geese, Yellow-billed Ducks and Red-knobbed Coots, richly laced with abundant Cape Cormorants, African Anhingas, Great-crested Grebes, Little Grebes and lesser numbers of Black-necked Grebes, Cape Teal and Cape Shoveler. On an exposed sandbank, a flock of about 60 White Pelicans, in tree overhands 50+ Black-crowned Night Herons and scattered along the margins at least 45+ African Spoonbills, numerous Hadeda Ibis and Sacred Ibis. All in all, excellent birding, further enhanced by a pair of African Fish Eagle and two Giant Kingfishers.

Hopefully in the evening I would also see Cape Clawless Otter here. In the meantime though, I had high hopes for a bit of whale spotting, the first Southern Right Whales of the season having apparently arrived back off the De Hoop coast about three weeks previously. Southern Black Korhaan and flocks of Speckled Mousebirds in the fynbos en route down to the coast, then it was a short wander to the top of the dunes to scan the seas beyond – and there they were, a half dozen Southern Right Whales wallowing in the shallows, flopping fins and tail flukes in the sky, occasionally bottling a little, generally just lounging about. Swift Terns patrolled the surf, several Grey-headed Gulls sat on the beach, a number of Black Oystercatchers also. After a while sitting watching, strolled across to a small visitor centre/tea shop ... Cape Grassbirds and Karoo Prinias in a gully, Red-winged Starlings around the picnic tables and ever-present Cape Robin-Chats hopping about. Two Karoo Robin-Chats too. Evening entertainment failed to materialize – waited out by the vlei until last light, no Cape Clawless Otters however, a disappointment. Many Black-crowned Night Herons already active though, plus three Water Thick-knees and quite some gathering of Brown-throated Martins and Rock Martins. 24 June. A bit nippy at dawn, but still a good selection around the campsite at dawn, not least several Southern

Tchagras and a pair of Spotted Eagle Owls. Also Fiscal Flycatchers, Southern Boubous, Bokmakierie et al, but I didn't however find a Knysna Woodpecker, a localised resident that favours the dense trees around the camping area. As for the rest of the day, fairly relaxing with another visit to the coast, this time notching up at least 10 Southern Right Whales, plus a couple of Cape Sugarbirds and four Cape Grassbirds, then a visit to the nearby Potburg section of De Hoop. Fifteen Blue Cranes and a gang of 25 White-necked Ravens on farmland just before, then Bushbuck and Greater Honeyguide around the parking area as I arrived. The main reason for visiting Potburg however was already hanging low overhead – impressive Cape Vultures swinging in towards the cliffs above, locality of the only colony in the Western Cape. At least fifteen drifting about while I was there, plus, on rather smaller scale, my only butterflies seen in Cape Province on this trip – a couple of Brown-veined Whites very active. My main target of this day however was to try again for Cape Clawless Otter. Well before dusk, I positioned myself some kilometres north of the camping area and perched upon a rock pinnacle to scan the waters below – masses and masses of birds to keep me entertained, including three Giant Kingfishers, but most impressive was the mass flights of cormorants for the last couple of hours of the afternoon, all heading into roost in a small wooded inlet – thousands upon thousands of Reed Cormorants streaming past, hundreds of White-breasted Cormorants and African Anhingas too, very nice. Also found a small Thin-tailed Scorpion on a rock and, just a dusk was beginning, finally found a Cape Clawless Otter, a single rather distant individual nosing around in the rocky shallows, clambering up onto boulders. Pretty rubbish views it has to be admitted.

A nicer surprise was an African Wildcat darting across the track on route back to camp and, nicer still, was what was awaiting at the small boathouse near the campsite – at exactly the same spot that I had checked the night before, five Cape Clawless Otters coming straight across the vle! As the sun set, so they swam right under the rock I was sat on, spiralling around in crannies at the cliff edge trying to catch fish. An excellent end to the day, six Water Thick-knees also at the boathouse, plus a big swift flock overhead – Alpine Swifts, Black Swifts and Little Swifts. Back at the chalet, a Fiery-necked Nightjar sitting on the lawn!

25 June. De Hoop, De Mond & Rooi Els. A quick look round De Hoop before departure, again concentrating on the campsite area – Southern Tchagras and Spotted Eagle Owls again. But one notable addition too – a very quiet tapping attracting me to the final remaining star of the area, a Knysna Woodpecker. Very difficult to actually see, it spent the whole time edging up trunks and branches right in the depths of the thickets, rarely visible at all and only a few times in full view. Still a nice bird to end the De Hoop experience and so it was we departed, seven Mountain Zebra and 16 Grey Rhebok as we went.

Thereafter, a fairly rapid drive through the Overburg farmland proved productive with five Denham's Bustards and 45 Blue Crane, several Jackal Buzzards and Black-shouldered Kite, plus Agulhaus Long-billed Larks and Large-billed Larks, quite a few Capped Wheatears and mixed flocks of African Pied Starlings and European Starlings, occasional Red-winged Starlings too. Partly on the off-chance of Damara Tern, also made a stop at the De Mond, a compact coastal reserve consisting of a small estuary opening out to grand golden beaches. No Damara Terns present this day, and moderately poor in birds overall, about best of the bunch being seven Black Oystercatchers, 12 White-fronted Plovers and a scatter of unseasonal Palearctic migrants, Terek Sandpiper at the head of the list, six Curlew Sandpipers and two Grey Plovers nearby. However, what I was not ready for was a major bonus with the finding of a Cape Dune Mole Rat foraging on a lawn in the bright sunshine, a creature that generally ventures above ground very rarely. As it hunched facing away from me, I initially thought it was a pet rabbit (!), but what a splendid animal - almost blind, its squinty little eyes combine with buck teeth protruding at obscure angles to truly produce a glorification of ugliness!

And with that, we then headed towards Cape Town, a pause on the fire-damaged slopes at Rooi Elys producing a bunch of Baboons, a male Cape Rockjumper, a male Sentinal Rock Thrush and a Cape Sugarbird, then a few more short stops around False Bay adding numerous Cape and White-breasted Cormorants, two White-chinned Petrels and, at the roadside, a couple of White-necked Ravens. Cape Fur Seals in the water, an unexpected Bryde's Whale cruising in False Bay. Arrived in Cape Town as dark fell, base for the next couple of nights.

26 June. Lambert's Bay & Cape Town.

Pretty much an easy-going day - popped up to Lambert's Bay in the morning on the offchance of a few Heaviside's Dolphins (a good locality for them) - failed in this, the only mammals being a whole bunch of Cape Fur Seals flopped across the rocks at the rear of the Cape Gannet colony. As expected though, picked up all four species of cormorant – Cape Cormorants abundant, Crowned Cormorants common, White-breasted Cormorants a few, and Bank Cormorant, just one. Thereafter, back to Cape Town for touristy afternoon around the Waterfront area. Hartlaub's Gulls and Grey-headed Gulls all over the place, plus one new mammal for the trip - a Grey Squirrel in the Company's Garden, a small city centre park.

27 June. Cape Peninsula. Final day. A tour of the Cape Peninsula, a perfect ending to the trip - four Humpback Whales and one Southern Right Whales off the Cape of Good Hope, 15 Cape Fur Seals in the choppy waters, tens of thousands of Cape Cormorants in vast feeding flocks, smaller numbers of White-breasted Cormorants. Wandering across the fynbos, added a couple of Cape Sugarbirds, four Cape Siskins and a cocktail of sunbirds - two Malachite Sunbirds, four Orange-breasted Sunbirds and two Southern Double-collared Sunbirds. Then, via a number of Baboons, Bonteboks and Elands, stopped in at Simon's Town for a good gawp at the African Penguins - always impressive, even more so these days as the colony continues to grow. Eyeball to eyeball with penguins, can't complain about that. And then, as the clock ticked towards the end of my trip, time to squeeze in a visit to the botanical gardens at Kirstenbosch - lost the sun a little as clouds began to hug Table Mountain, but still a very pleasant finale to the trip. Amongst the birds, Sombre Greenbuls, Olive Thrushes, Cape Robin-Chats, African Dusky Flycatchers and Cape White-eyes all common, at

least 35 Southern Double-collared Sunbirds also present, plus two Orange-breasted Sunbirds and one Malachite Sunbird, then four Swee Waxbills to round things off, plus my final mammal of the trip - a Small Grey Mongoose sauntering around on a lawn, scattering Hadedda Ibis and Helmeted Guineafowls. And with that, off to the airport for a mid-afternoon flight out, a Red-winged Blackbird at the terminal my goodbye to South Africa.

28 June. Via Johannesburg and Amsterdam, back in Lithuania for midday.