

Focus on Lepidoptera, South Africa.

Contributed by Jos

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My second visit to South Africa in the space of six months, this three-week trip from 9-29 December 2017 very much focussed on the amazing butterflies of the country, though did begin with a few days in Kruger National Park searching for a number of iconic mammals, not least Wild Dogs, Leopards, Cheetahs and White Rhinos.

In comparison to birding, executing a butterfly trip in South Africa is rather harder – with over 660 species in the country, not only do quite a number present considerable identification challenges, but there is also generally a dearth of information available to help locate top butterfly localities or specific sites for particular species. As a result, my itinerary was very much speculative, the basic route designed to incorporate a range of habitats from upland grasslands to lowland forests, the actual sites then fine tuned once on the ground to find good butterfly areas. Incorporating southern Kruger, Swaziland, Kwazulu-Natal and the Drakensburg Mountains, and timing the trip to correspond with the beginning of the southern summer, I managed a total of 136 species of butterfly over the three weeks, a fairly respectable total and one that included personal favourites such as Common Woolly Legs, Southern Buff Skipper and Reilly's Copper.

In brief, my trip incorporated: - Kruger National Park: southern sectors of the reserve, specifically in the Berg-en-dal, Skukuze and Lower Sable areas. Superb days, with two packs of Wild Dogs, four Leopards, one Cheetah and one pride of Lions among the highlights, as well as both Greater and Lesser Bushbabies. Limited numbers of butterflies, mostly assorted whites, but also Foxy Emperor, Brown Playboy, Silver-spotted Grey and Black Pie. - Swaziland: highland grasslands at Malalotja; followed by the Hlane and Milwane reserves in the lowlands close to the Mozambique border. Was perhaps too early in the season for butterflies at Malalotja, though did see a range of species, including Long-winged Orange Acraea, Gaudy Commodore, Harlequin Skipper and Mocker Bronze. Hlane was most memorable for a splendid close encounter with eleven White Rhinos at a waterhole, while Milwane was good for butterflies, the species seen including Little Acraea, Broad-bordered Acraea and Guineafowl. - Mkuzi National Park: three days in this flagship Kwazulu reserve, Suni Antelope and Red Duikers among the mammal highlights, while birds included numerous waterbirds, plus Purple-crested Turaco, Trumpeter Hornbill and Neergard's Sunbird. Also encountered quite a number of butterflies, mostly around the camp and in other areas where walking is permitted, including White-barred Acraea, Natal Bar and no less than 16 species of Pieridae. - KwaZulu coastline, a week travelling down the coast from Kosi Bay in the north to Mtunzini in the south, concentrating on lowland forests, acacia woodland and coastal grassland. As expected, very much the best segment of the trip for butterflies, a total of almost 100 species seen, including Common Woolly Legs, Southern Pied Woolly Legs, Southern Buff Skipper and Coastal Hairstreak, as well as eight species of Acraea and three species of Emperor. Close encounters with Greater Bushbabies also memorable. - Drakensburg Mountains: a couple of days at Sani Pass, then Golden Gate National Park. Impressive landscapes on the Lesotho border, high terrain habitats offering birds such as Drakensburg Rockjumper, Gurney's Sugarbird and Ground Woodpecker, plus a small number of specialised butterfly species, including Water Bronze, Riley's Copper, Oreas Copper, False Silver-bottom Brown and Eastern Hillside Brown, as well as a number of skippers.

In hindsight, especially with summer rains proving late and most areas remaining extremely arid, my trip would undoubtedly have been more productive if I had timed it later in the season - though butterflies are on the wing throughout the year in both Kwazulu and the northern Limpopo districts, peak butterfly numbers are generally closely tied to the arrival of the summer rains and the best periods are often late-summer to early autumn, i.e. March to early April. As it was, travelling at the very beginning of the rainy season, few flowers were present and consequently butterfly numbers were generally lower than I had expected, not helped on several days by overcast skies.

DAILY LOG

9 December. Berg-en-Dal, Kruger. Sunny skies over Jo'burg as we landed at 11.30 a.m, hopes of quickly getting out into the field however dashed by an infuriating two-hour delay picking up the rental car (big queue, then long wait while they inefficiently organised insurance for Swaziland). Finally departed mid-afternoon, hit the highway east and watched the kilometres roll by as I headed for Berg-en-Dal, the southernmost camp in Kruger, a five hour drive from Otembo airport. Black-shouldered Kite midway, quite a number of[B] Long-tailed Widowbirds[/B], plus regular Pierids fluttering across the road, presumably Brown-veined Whites most. Crossed the Crocodile River into Kruger a half hour before sundown, Hippos in the river, Giraffes and our first Elephants soon after, a range of common birds too, but it was after dark that our first pleasant surprises were to appear. After getting totally enchanted by a glorious range of weird and wonderful bugs attracted to the lights, accompanied by Geckos chomping them and a couple of Praying Mantis, a wander over to a floodlit was soon disrupted by the oop-oo-oo of an owl calling ...soon tracked it down, a Pearl-spotted Owlet sitting at the top of a low acacia. More remarkable however, moments after finding the owl, a scampering of something in the lower branches and there appeared a Lesser Bushbaby! Classic start to our trip, two great species in a single tree! Sleeping Pied Kingfisher, Water Thick-knees and beady eyes of Crocodiles completed the evening roll call.

10 December. Berg-en-Dal to Skukuza, Kruger. So the trip began in earnest, grey skies and mist at dawn not boosting my mood too much, thoughts of butterflies this day already evaporating. Winding through a landscape of rock koppies and low hills, a remarkable lack of mammals too – Impala here and there, a few Kudu, three dopey Spotted Hyenas at a waterhole, but nothing to overly impress. Decided on a change of strategy – abandon the koppies and head for the riverine scrub along the Crocodile River at the extreme south of the national park. Excellent move: not only an immediate upswing in bird numbers, including Retz's Helmet-Shrike, two-a-penny Woodland Kingfishers, several

White-fronted Bee-eaters and both Green Wood-Hoopoe and Common Scimitarbill, but also a fantastic stroke of luck as I drove along a gravel road near the Crocodile River. On the stroke of 7.30 a.m., as I trundled eastward, a lone animal appeared on the track in front of me, lolloping up over the brow of a low rise, then coming down the centre of the road directly towards me. Stopped the car and watched in awe as it trotted at fair speed straight past the open windows of the car, a blood-stained face glancing my way as it passed a mere metre or two away ...clearly it had had breakfast! One of the rarest predators in southern Africa and my first for near 25 years, this was a Wild Dog, tremendous! Odd however it was only a single animal – classically a species that occurs in large packs I fully expected another bunch to appear at any moment. Sat and waited, but nothing happened, no more dogs, no further sign of the first individual. Eventually deciding to continue, low and behold, a kilometre further there I found more, six or seven resting under a roadside bush. Great animals, a menagerie of tawny-browns, blacks and whites, the dogs engaging in much licking and washing, clearly they too had participated in a kill some time earlier. And then returned the individual I had seen earlier, running in with much fanfare and excitement ... suddenly the six or seven Wild Dogs turned into a dozen as individuals jumped up from assorted bushes to all begin tumbling round after each other, play fighting and jumping. Still cloudy, but brightening considerably, these dogs were pure pleasure. Until they all suddenly upped and vanished into the scrubland. Two kilometres further, spiralling vultures identified the locality of their breakfast table, the dogs all gone now, but 70 or so vultures now in a mass squabble over the remains, White-backed Vultures in the main, but four big butch Lappet-faced Vultures too, plus at least nine White-headed Vultures and seven Hooded Vultures. And if all that wasn't enough, three stonking great White Rhinos were slowly ambling across adjacent short turf, a female and two well-grown youngsters, all attended by Red-billed Oxpeckers. The disappointing hour at dawn was now a long-distant memory! Doing a U-turn, my idea was to return to Berg-en-Dal and then meander up towards Skukuza, destination for the next two nights. I didn't get very far – the Wild Dogs had returned and were now all over the actual track, at least 20 of them! A car came the other way and there we were, sandwiched by Wild Dogs milling around, brushing against the sides of our cars, one even crawling underneath. Totally amazing, the whole pack then plonked itself down under bushes by the side of the road and went to sleep, happy looking dogs with well-extended bellies. And there they stayed, still apparently present a few hours later. Sun didn't come out all day, but was pretty good throughout – plenty of birds and, zigzagging north, also bumped into no less than eight more White Rhinos (a group of four near Berg-en-Dal, a single 15 km further north and a group of three near Skukuza). Predictably, limited results with butterflies, but did add a few species, mostly roosting individuals, the best being several stunning Azure Hairstreaks, but also a Foxy Emperor, a Blue Pancy, a Dark-webbed Ringlet, a Striped Policeman and a Pale Ranger. At Skukuza, chucked the tent up, had a quick look round, then decided on a late afternoon loop to the west – proved to be a spectacular way to end the day, first a Leopard sprawled across a branch high in a tree, then a few kilometres further a second Leopard half hidden in grass on an Impala kill! As dark descended, spots of rain began. Back at Skukuza, I didn't bother with a planned night drive, but were still some nice surprises awaiting – first a couple of Acacia Tree Rats in the acacias above the tent, then a Greater Bushbaby prancing around on a wooden fence aside our tent, two chubby babies trailing along behind. And so the day ended, 20 or so Wild Dogs, two Leopards, eleven White Rhinos, plus both Greater and Lesser Bushbaby in less than 24 hours, truly a great day in Kruger National Park!

11 December. Skukuza/Lower Sable, Kruger. Fairly quiet drive at dawn in the Skukuza area, grey sky again and just a Klipspringer on a koppie to serve as the main highlight. Fortunately the sun soon broke through this day, with both the weather and events brightening up considerably as we began a trip east to Lower Sable, especially so when we came across another pack of Wild Dogs, about 14 sleeping under roadside bushes this time! The event of the morning however was not these dogs, but was awaiting some distance up the road! All started peaceful enough, a large troop of Baboons strutting down the road, engaging youngsters on one side, assorted adults scattered around. Stopped to watch them walk past, windows open as always, Little One enjoying the spectacle. Baboons strutting past past, then a big male on the Little One's side, ambling straight and directly past the car. Or at least that is what I had expected to happen! What actually happened was a few moments of pandemonium as the Baboon suddenly jumped at the open window and clung on to the window frame, the great bulk of its shoulders and head leaning in, its large face complete with mighty canines peering in and, rather dangerously, not a huge number of centimetres from the face of Little One, who it has to be said was none too amused. I hit the accelerator, assuming the Baboon would immediately jump off, but instead the Baboon just hung on, we now travelling down the road little some comedy film act. Worrying the Baboon would freak out, and with Little One now screaming and scrambling for the back seat, unfortunately getting stuck between the seats, I decided it better to stop the car. And as I did, at the same time pushing Little One into the back, so the Baboon climbed fully into the car! Jeepers, I was on the driver's seat, a massive great Baboon was sitting on the passenger seat! It immediately started to route around in the door pockets, emptying rubbish to presumably look for food. What the Baboon would do next I had no idea, so I thought it prudent to abandon the car, telling Little One to exit via the opposite rear door. But then it was all over, just before we actually got out, the Baboon also decided it was time to abandon the car and clambered out. Oo, that was lucky, whole event had probably lasted only a few minutes, but it certainly got the adrenalin going - if the Baboon had attacked, it wouldn't have been pretty! Little One no longer likes Baboons! Well, regaining a bit of composure, we decided to leave the Baboons behind and continue to the Lower Sable camp, ice cream as compensation for Little One, a wander to look for butterflies for me. And reasonably good for butterflies it proved, especially a scrubby corner of savannah bush. Particularly rich in Lycaenidae, species included at least ten African Common Blues, 10+ Velvet-spotted Blues and 15+ Thorntree Blues, plus a couple of Sooty Blues, one smart Silver-spotted Grey, one Brown Playboy and two Black Pies, this latter a truly stunning species. Leaving behind the Hippos and waterbirds of Lower Sable, we then drove through quite a large area of arid savannah to the north – many European Rollers and Red-backed Shrikes, but few mammals and even fewer butterflies, the one exception being at the excellent Mlondozi Dam, where at least 250 Buffalo and 150 Elephants were coming to drink and a small picnic site

provided a few butterflies, the best being Blue Pansy and Zebra White. Vervet Monkeys here too, which Little One viewed with some contempt. Not much on the way back to Skukuza, but did stop at another big troop of Baboons crossing a road bridge - attempts at therapy for Post-Baboon Stress Syndrome didn't come to much, was forced to close the window! Bits and bobs in camp, two Large-spotted Genets during the early evening.

12 December. Skukuza, Kruger & Malalotja, Swaziland. Final day in Kruger and what a spectacular finish! Starting at 4.30 a.m., I looped round Waterhole Road following pretty much an identical route to the day before. Results however were certainly not the same - assorted roosting raptors atop dead trees started things off, 18 White-backed Vultures and a single Hooded Vulture in one group of trees, then a Steppe Eagle, followed not long after by four African Hawk-Eagles and a Brown Snake Eagle. Plenty of other birds too, a Small Buttonquail across the track, a Red-crested Korhaan, two Brown-hooded Kingfishers, several Magpie Shrikes, etc. But then came the first true highlight of the day - sprawled across a boulder on a at the base of a koppi, a most magnificent Leopard yawning away the dawn! And if that wasn't enough, ten minutes or so later, a second Leopard emerged from the rocks above and the two engaged in a bit of mutual head rubbing and general admiration of one another! Classic stuff, some minutes more of this and then up the rocks they clambered and slunk behind the koppi, show over. A few kilometres further, in an area of open bush savannah, the next cat of the day ...walking directly down the middle of the road towards us, a very pale sandy Cheetah! Stopped the car and was thrilled to have it walk straight past, a mere couple of metres distant. 'Where did it go?' I asked Little One, as I looked back to see an empty road. Jeepers, it had decided to circle the car and was now glancing up through the passenger window ...certainly a wow moment! Round the car it circled and then continued its way, down the road for a few hundred metres, then off into the grass to walk parallel for some kilometre or so more. Honoured indeed I was. A little bit further, five Spotted Hyenas sleeping in a dustbowl didn't give two hoots to the passing Cheetah, on the cat went, eventually veering away and lost to view. On route back to Skukuza, stopped to check another koppi for Klipspringer ...and then four White Rhinos ambled into view! We were certainly having some luck this morning! From Skukuza, the route was east to Lower Sable, then ultimately south to Crocodile Bridge to exit Kruger. Took a quieter back track and soon ran into a couple of cars stopped aside bushes and withered grass ...though initially hard to see, our luck was continuing - cat species number three, five Lions sleeping under a bush! With cubs seemingly intent on annoying the adults, occasional relocates allowed for rather better views, nice. And all this was before 9.00 am, not forgetting White-fronted Bee-eaters and European Bee-eaters too, plus a whole load of other birds, not least Saddle-billed Stork, Yellow-billed Stork, Green-backed Heron, eight Water Thick-knees and a range of passerines, including Red-billed Buffalo-Weaver, Chinspot Batis and White-crowned Shrike. Added Elephants and Buffalo at Lower Sable to score the 'Big Five' on the single day, then travelled south towards Crocodile Bridge, completing also the day's full house of rollers - one Purple Roller, 25+ Lilac-breasted Rollers, 40+ European Rollers and one Broad-billed Roller! Only one new butterfly species this morning however - a single Bushveld Purple Tip. Crossed into Swaziland mid-afternoon, then realising I didn't actually have a map of the country! Fortunately I remembered the way to Malalotja and got there in time to enjoy a final few hours of sunshine in the evening - a superb reserve famous for its upland grassland supporting large numbers of Blesbok and as one of the last breeding locations for Blue Swallow. Didn't see any Blue Swallows this time, but plenty of Blesbok grazing the slopes, plus Grey Rhebok and Mountain Reedbuck. I however was more intent on finding a few butterflies. Nowhere near the abundance I had hoped for, perhaps too early in the season, but some pretty good species among those found - main highlights a very mobile Gaudy Commodore, a rather nice Harlequin Skipper and, in damp areas aside a stream, two Mocker Bronzes and several Marsh Blues. Spent the night in a cabin overlooking the grasslands, Blesbok in abundance from the veranda as the sun set. 13 December. Malalotja & Hlane, Swaziland. After a night of impressive lightning storms, the day dawned to a blanket of thick fog. As it cleared a little, Greater Striped Swallows and White-necked Ravens around the chalets, then several Buff-streaked Chats and a Cape Rock Thrush on the surrounding slopes, also both Cape Longclaws and Yellow-throated Longclaws, Broad-tailed Warbler and Yellow-tufted Pipit. Walked across to a pool to check gathering swallows, flushed two Black-rumped Buttonquails in the process. At the pool, Black Saw-wing and White-throated Swallows among the more common species, plus plenty of widowbirds & Fan-tailed Widowbirds and Red-collared Widowbirds most common, White-winged Widowbirds also moderately common. No Blue Swallow. All a bit damp and drab though, Blesboks plodding through the murk, Grey Rhebok and Burchell's Zebras looking bedraggled. Turned to rain by 9.00 a.m., I predicted a total write-off for butterflies and decided to leave Malalotja and head to the eastern lowlands of Swaziland. But then I got the car stuck on a steep slope, the rain turning the red soil into a slippery sludge and the car simply sliding all over the place! Chucking tons of grass on the slope, took a good 30 minutes to nurse the car up a mere 100 metres of track. And by the time I was finally clear of the treacherous slope, a great slab of blue sky was appearing in the southern and western skies & time for change of plans again! And so it was, Malalotja was soon sitting in glorious sunshine, the slopes almost immediately warm and dry. The search for butterflies was back on & as day before, numbers proved quite low, but still nine species in the next couple of hours, including my only Long-winged Acraea of the trip, plus another Harlequin Skipper, another Gaudy Commodore and, all taking salts from soil next to a stream, Marsh Blue, Common Meadow Blue and a single Rayed Blue. Left Malalotja at midday and drove across the country to Hlane, a reserve set in thick bush savannah not far from the Mozambique border. Arriving quite late in the day, a Yellow Pansy, a Sulphur Orange Tip and a female Red Tip were the only butterflies seen, but not bad for other wildlife - loads of Nyalas and other antelopes, plus abundant birds including a colony of nesting Marabou Storks, several Crested Guineafowls, two Green Woodhoopoes, a couple of Bennett's Woodpeckers, quite a number of Violet-backed Starlings, an Eastern Bearded Scrub-Robin and quite a bit more. Camped at this locality, a Lion roaring from dusk pretty much through the night, a second on occasion ...most evocative.

14 December. Hlane & Mlawula, Swaziland. Curse of the overcast skies again at dawn ...but I was soon not thinking about that, a stroll over to the local waterhole leaving me astounded - no less than eleven White Rhinos gathered! Totally

amazing, sat myself down on ground and just took in the view, four here, three there, one plodding across in front, more just there, White Rhinos everywhere. Two took a mild interest in the human in their midst, this pair slowly ambling right up to me, stopping as close as four metres to just stand and stare, and to sniff the air. Very nice half hour or so in the presence of these gentle giants, a slightly sobering though being the black market value of the assorted giant horns assembled before me, a tragic reminder of the fate that so many rhinos are facing in southern Africa at present. Next up on my itinerary was Mlawula Nature Reserve, an area of riverside bush just 15 km or so up the road. From this point on in my trip, butterflies were to become the main target of the trip and the main reason I wanted to visit Mlawula was that walking was not in the least restricted, unlike Hlane for example where the chance of getting chomped by a Lion means that you have to stick to the car. Cloudy skies still at Mlawula, but super it proved to be, a small path leading from the campsite to the river producing a whole range of butterflies, many active on the wing and many being new species for me. Absolute stunners, Broad-bordered Acraeas were one of the real highlights, one freshly emerged from the pupa being particularly impressive as it pumped open its wings. Also my only Little Acraea of the trip seen here, as well as the only Bushveld Ringlet, the only Guinea fowl Butterflies (another impressive species) and one of only two Dark-webbed Ringlets recorded on this trip. Citrus Swallowtail, Brown Pansy, Broad-bordered Yellow, Common Scarlet and Ashen Smoky Blue all seen for first time, as were Black-striped Hairtails and Topaz-spotted Blues, both of these being present in their dozens. Amongst other species, also saw here five Yellow Pansies, several Azure Hairstreaks and quite a few Sooty Blues. The best site so far on this trip for butterflies. I was however left wondering how good it would have been if the sun was shining! The sun however had no plan to visit and as afternoon approached, clouds began to thicken and rain looked imminent. Decided to abandon Swaziland a little ahead of schedule and drive directly to Mkuzi in Kwazulu-Natal, 220 km distant. Arrived early evening and booked a chalet for three nights, high hopes for the next days.

15/16 December. Mkuzi Game Reserve. Mkuzi, one of the flagship Zululand reserves and one of South Africa's richest birding localities, this large swathe of bushland savannah and the extensive Nsumo Pan also harbours super abundant Nyala and Impala, a good range of other herbivores including Suni Antelope and Red Duiker, plus a select group of mammalian carnivores, these fairly elusive but including Lions, Cheetahs and Wild Dogs. Didn't manage any of the predators in my couple of days, but did see a single Suni and four Red Duikers. Spent most of my two days poking about in the grasslands in areas you are allowed to walk - and for quite a while getting a bit of a headache with the dizzying array of Pieridae! Identified sixteen species in all, though with the males and females varying considerably, it felt quite a few more! Some quite easy like the delightful Sulphur Orange Tips and Smoky Orange Tips, others quite a minefield, especially the females. Final tally of Pierids: Zebra White - 8+ Vine-leaf Vagrant - 1 Buquet's Vagrant - several Cambridge Vagrant - 2 Veined Orange - 1 Scarlet Tip - several Sulphur Orange Tip - common Common Orange Tip - several Smoky Orange Tip - several Bushveld Orange Tip - several Banded Gold Tip - 15+ Brown-veined White - common African Common White - several African Veined White - several African Migrant - fairly common African Wood White - 1

Partially corresponding to possibilities to leave the car and walk, three main areas proved to be excellent for butterflies:

a. Mantuma Camp. With the campsite unfenced, it was easy to wander off into the surrounding bush a little, marauding Baboons and passing Nyala aside. As well as many of the whites being in this area, also Yellow Pansy, Citrus Swallowtail and African Monarchs. Used butterfly bait traps here, dreams of oodles of species attracted by the fermented fruit failing somewhat, just a single Squinting Bush Brown being the result! Campsite area also good for birds, with a troop of tame Crested Guinea fowl ambling about, a Pygmy Kingfisher appearing by the rather green-looking swimming pool and species such as Black-backed Puffback, White-crested Helmet-Shrike, White-breasted Scrub Robin and abundant Violet-backed and Cape Starlings all present.

b. Kumasinga, Sand Forest. Good area for birds, Black Cuckooshrike, Sombre Greenbul, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Eastern Nicator, Eastern Bearded Scrub-Robin, Brown Scrub-Robin and Black-bellied Starling all seen in the vicinity, plus singles of the localised Neergard's Sunbird and Pink-throated Twinspot. Dry and arid, consequently not so good for butterflies, but did manage Thorn tree Blue and Grass Jewel Blue, plus my only Natal Spotted Blues and Wandering Sandman of the trip.

c. Nsumo Pan. A couple of car parks and short paths to lakeside viewpoints allowed good access and a nice selection of butterflies. Citrus Swallowtails, African Monarchs, Broad-bordered Acraeas, my first White-barred Acraea of the trip and Brown Pansies topped the big colourful stuff, while flowering bushes attracted a whole bunch of very nice butterflies, including whites, as well as a couple of stunning Natal Bars, two Common Scarlets and quite a number of Purple-brown Hairstreaks. After quite some effort, discovered at least one Coastal Hairstreak too, a localised species very similar to Purple-brown Hairstreak. Massive bird list here too - flocks of Pink-backed Pelicans mingling with African Spoonbills, African Openbills, Yellow-billed Storks, a couple of Saddle-billed Storks and a whole bunch of assorted herons and egrets, Goliath Herons amongst them. Also throngs of Glossy Ibises and Sacred Ibises in shallow area, so too loads of Spur-winged Geese and White-faced Ducks, dozens of African Jacanas and several Purple Swamphens. Alongside, Malachite Kingfisher and Pied Kingfisher (along with Woodland Kingfisher and Brown-hooded Kingfisher in adjacent woodland), plus Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters hawking the water's edge. Trumpeter Hornbill, Broad-billed Roller, Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike and Grey Penduline Tit also seen, as were African Cuckoo Hawk, Martial Eagle, Brown Snake Eagle and Wahlberg's Eagle. All in all, a top location.

17 December. Kosi Bay. Departed Mkuzi fairly early, seeing Purple-crested Turaco on route out, then headed north towards the Mozambique border and Kosi Bay. Stopped briefly at the Pongola River with the hope of finding butterflies, but found it suffering from the prolonged drought and basically devoid of butterflies, though did see Giant Kingfishers on the river. Pushed on to Kosi Bay for the beginning of a week exploring the Zululand coast from north to south, hopefully which would prove to be the most productive segment for butterflies. Stayed at a small campsite just east of the Kosi Bay section of the Isimangaliso Wetland, my initial assessment being one of concern - here too was extremely dry,

vegetation mostly withered and flowers absent. No butterflies to be seen! Fortunately however, a mere ten-minute drive took me to Kosi Bay Rest Camp, a network of paths and tracks set in dense tangles of sand forest. On arrival, large colourful butterflies zooming around the forest margins, additional black-and-white species drifting around the tops ...this was looking much better! Set up a couple of bait traps again, then set out to explore. The bright colourful species proved difficult for the simple reason they never seemed to settle, always highly mobile. Chased them up and down the edges waiting for the occasional pauses, patience and luck eventually sorting them up - gorgeous green and black Large Striped Swordtails in the main, a few Cream Striped Swordtails also present and at least three Citrus Swallowtails, two Mocker Swallowtails and one Green-banded Swallowtail. Equally happy to rarely settle, the black-and-white drifters caused me some identification problems for a while, quite a number of species being quite similar, but do believe they were all Common Wanderers, at least ten present, mostly in the low canopy. The next three or four hours notched up a splendid selection of species, many new for me and several that I would not see elsewhere. Amongst the best, several Broad-bordered Acraeas, my first Natal Acraeas of the trip and my only Blood-red Acraea, also my only Clouded Mother-of-Pearls, a ghostly-like species, and only Soldier Pansies. Several Golden Pipers also seen, plus plentiful Twin Dotted Borders (though some identification issues, perhaps Common Dotted Border also present) and assorted other Pierids, Smoky Orange Tip the most abundant. Amongst smaller stuff, Common Meadow Blue, two Sooty Blues and a nice trio from the confusion hairtail group - Otacilia Hairtail, Kersten's Hairtail and Pale Hairtail. Needed to photograph many of these to secure identification, even then some doubts on some! For all the big colourful species, my favourite butterfly of the day however rather smaller - fully living up to the 'woolly leg' label, one splendid Southern Pied Woolly Legs, a carnivorous butterfly whose caterpillars eat aphids, while the adults take honeydew. A territorial Honey Hopper was also rather pleasing. Back at my bait traps, no emperor species as I had hoped, but did catch a few Squinting Bush Browns and, another new species for me, one Boisduval's Tree Nymph. Back at the camp, quite an hour or two trying to sort out lingering identification issues, but a good day it had been, 30 odd species of butterfly recorded, plus a few localised birds, Red-capped Robin-Chats and Brown Scrub-Robin perhaps the most notable.

18 December. Kosi Bay. Headed a little to the north this day, to Kosi Bay River Mouth. Crossing sandy dunes, the last three kilometres are 4x4 only ...and a stinking hot walk it is, but as the day before, pretty good for butterflies. In the dunes, my only African Ringlet of the trip and, complementing a Broad-bordered Grass Yellow on the previous day, four Angled Grass Yellows this day. I had expected the coastal forest at the end of the track to be similar to that I'd visited the day before, and indeed for some species it was, but overall quite a different selection - Citrus and Mocker Swallowtails again, but no swordtails noted at all. In compensation however, I added yet two more to the trip list from the attractive Acraea family - several of both Fiery Acraea and Acara Acraea, the latter of which I only recorded at this locality. Also saw Natal Acraea, but this was a species that I would see daily throughout the coastal plain. Other butterflies of interest included a Coastal Hairstreak, Topaz-spotted Blue, at least 15 Cupreous Blues and, attracted to my bait trap, a Club-tailed Emperor. Had plans for the evening this day, so departed mid-afternoon for the trek back over the dunes to the car. A pause at a roadside puddle some kilometres further produced a couple of excellent species, both ones that I would see only here - taking salts on the damp mud, two Angola White Ladies and a single Dark Hottentot Skipper. Nice butterflies both. And so to the evening, clambered atop a 4x4 and set off on a two-hour bumpy drive to remote beaches far to the south, arriving at a long sandy beach just as it got dark. Beach for turtles - under the cover of darkness, regular Loggerhead Turtles and occasional humongous Leatherback Turtles haul themselves up to lay eggs. Strictly regulated with torchlight only permitted once a turtle is found and already settled to lay eggs, of we went, a walk of a couple of kilometres. Result, one female Loggerhead Turtle laying just above the highwater mark, rather nice. No Leatherback Turtle unfortunately, though the drag marks of one from the previous evening were mighty impressive, what a giant!

19 December. False Bay. Rain day, moved 120 km south to the False Bay section of Lake St Lucia and checked into Sand Forest Lodge, an excellent place with a good patch of habitat in the grounds, complete with trails. Rain did let up at around midday, but it remained damp and heavily overcast. Walked the grounds a couple of times and really felt it had great potential with no less than 11 species of butterflies noted despite the weather, this amounting to about 55 individuals. Smoky Orange Tips, African Common Whites and Sooty Blues the most common species, but Ashen Smoky Blue and Pale Ranger the most notable, both only recorded one other time on the trip. Less pleasing was the finding of a male Impala caught in an illegal snare, fortunately very much alive with the wire tight around the horns rather than neck. Alerted the lodge owner, collected wire cutters and returned to free the animal ...a feisty animal, was not quite so easy, but eventually the antelopes legs were grabbed and down it went while the wire was clipped. Off went one unharmed animal, a lucky individual. Systematic search of the area revealed another snare, both snares taken and destroyed.

20 December. False Bay. Most productive butterfly day of the trip, good numbers overall and almost 50 species, largely due to the finding of an excellent locality in the afternoon. Bright but overcast in the morning. Started out by checking roadside margins adjacent to False Bay Park - encouragingly, butterflies were already active by 8.00 a.m., this pointing to a good day ahead. On the wing, abundant Sulphur Orange Tips and Smoky Orange Tips, a medley of other common Pierids such as Brown-veined White, African Common White and African Veined White, plus less abundant species, including a half dozen very nice Vine-leaf Vagrants, a couple of Scarlet Tips, two Banded Gold Tips, two African Wood Whites and, the only ones identified on the trip, an Albatross White and a Common Grass Yellow. Plenty of non-Pierid action too - at least 30 Citrus Swallowtails, one Satyr Emperor vanishing over a canopy, an absolutely stunning Common Woolly Legs and, both representing my only sightings on the trip, a single Two-pip Policeman and a single Dusky Blue. Also saw Kersten's Hairtails and Black-striped Hairtails, assorted blues such as Topaz-spotted Blue and Thorntree Blue, plus quite a number of other common species. False Bay Park itself, by contrast, was disappointing - not many butterflies and not that good for birds either, a few White Pelicans offshore and a couple of Woolly-necked Storks about

the best of the bunch. Still rather overcast, so popped back to Sand Forest Lodge for a while, my bait traps here again not producing the masses of emperors that I had hoped, but at least attracting a couple of Squinting Bush Browns and, rather better, my first Evening Brown of the trip. A change in the weather in the early afternoon, blue skies and a nice warm sun dominating. Purely on a speculative basis, I decided to check the northern side of Lake St Lucia, taking a small road to Nbele. And it was here that I was to encounter one of the most pleasing butterfly spectacles of the trip - on otherwise nondescript roadside edges, the last few hundred metres of acacia scrub before the entrance to Nbele Lake Lodge were abuzz with butterflies! Sulphur Orange Tips, Smoky Orange Tips, Brown-veined Whites, African Common Whites and African Veined Whites all common as in many other localities, but here too quite a number of species that I recorded very rarely in other localities, these including at least 40 Scarlet Tips, 20 Veined Oranges, 20 Vine-leaf Vagrants, 10 Large Vagrants and eight Buquet's Vagrants, the latter also going by the very name name of Green-eyed Monster! Lots of big colourful things drifting about too, not least a minimum of 20 Citrus Swallowtails, plus a Green-banded Swallowtail, my only Constantine's Swallowtail of the trip, four Small Striped Swordtails and my only two Mamba Swordtails of the trip, stunning butterflies all. Truly was a pleasure to slowly amble along this roadside, sifting through the masses of butterflies to discover species after species of new butterfly. Amongst the many additional species, eight Novices, a Club-tailed Emperor, one Gaika Blue (only two on the whole trip) and both African Snout-nosed Butterfly and Green-marbled Sandman (both not recorded elsewhere). Also managed to identify at least one Coastal Hairstreak flying with Purple-brown Hairstreaks. Back at Sand Forest Lodge, as dusk approached, one more Evening Brown to round the day off.

21 December. Hluluwe & St Lucia. Decided for a slight change of focus this day - instead of heading directly to St Lucia and my next butterfly sites, veered slightly to the west to add the Hluluwe Game Reserve to my route. A massive chunk of hill country, a sizeable number of White Rhino inhabit this area, plus Lions, Wild Dogs, etc. Entering from the north, we almost immediately ran into a sizeable herd of Buffalo, perhaps 80 strong, then a large troop of Baboons. With hordes of wide-eyed youngsters, I thought these Baboons were quite engaging, all very busy in a mass grooming sessions ... Little One was inclined to disagree, still considering them her enemy number one! A little further, and certainly more intriguing, was the appearance of a Brown-hooded Kingfisher on a dead snag beside the tree. Nice enough in itself, but the intrigue was how it planned to deal with the Thin-tailed Scorpion it had caught. Brute force was the answer, the scorpion trying in vain to sting the kingfisher with the tail sting lashing at the bird's bill, but almost immediately the scorpion was being repeatedly smashed against the branch. Game over, soon the scorpion was becoming an ex-scorpion and soon to be tasty morsel! Overhead, Cape Vulture and White-backed Vulture added to the entertainment, while two Small Buttonquail scuttling across the road shortly after were also welcome. It was however getting quite hot and sunny in Hluluwe and overall numbers were not that amazing on this visit, so thoughts began to turn to St Lucia, maybe time to head out. However, some nice parting shots as we began to trundle towards an exit - first a single White Rhino in thick bush next to the track, then two more in a mudhole, then a mother and calf at a small pool and then yet another crossing the road! Six White Rhinos in half an hour, not bad. And with that, we departed and headed for the coast. Half an hour later I was in the pleasant town of St Lucia and even more pleasant apartment that we had rented for the next two nights. From a butterfly angle however, day one at St Lucia was remarkably poor - headed to areas north of town, but as with a couple of earlier localities, it was exceptionally dry with basically no greenery or flowers and few butterflies. On top of this, though sunny, it was exceptionally windy! This said, although numbers were mostly low, I did manage 18 species - hedgerows along the edge of town attracted three Common Wanderers, a few Natal Acraeas, a Forest Leopard and both Purple-brown Hairstreak and Southern Pied Woolly Legs, while open country offered Sulphur Orange Tips and Smoky Orange Tips, as well as Grass Jewel Blues, three Angled Grass Yellows and my only Spiller's Sulphur Yellow of the trip. Also saw a number of African Monarchs, at least 10 Black-striped Hairtails and four Kersten's Hairtails. On the bird front, best of the day was a Black Coucal. Highlight of the day though came with the discovery of a colony of about Natal Tree Nymphs. A new species for me, these would seem to patrol their territory every now and then, before returning to a favoured resting point on a branch. In the general area.

22 December. St Lucia. Having been largely underwhelmed by the butterfly selection around St Lucia the day before, I did not have big expectations this day, even less so as it was overcast again! Basic plan for the day was to give the Igwalagwala Trail a quick walk, then perhaps leave town. The Igwalagwala Trail, cutting through luxuriant forest, is primarily known to birders for Woodward's Batis, so to the site I went fairly early, hoping at least to see the batis. I was to be impressed, not only did I see the desired Woodward's Batis and a number of other excellent birds such as Trumpeter Hornbills, Crowned Hornbills, Red-capped Robin-Chats and Tambourine Doves, but it also turned out to be excellent for butterflies, including one small species that immediately became a contender for the title 'butterfly of the trip'. Even from early morning, abundant 'drifters' floated around open patches of forest, but this being the Amauris group and its associated mimics, the actual species yet again caused me quite some confusion - in quite some part due to their reluctance to settle and tendency to fly at about twice head height! Attractive butterflies though, I think a fairly accurate estimate of the relative numbers that I saw would be at least 40 Novices, at least 15 Friars and two of the larger Laymen. Also big and bold, one Mocker Swallowtail, one Green-banded Swallowtail, four Small Striped Swordtails and, my only ones on the trip, two Veined Swordtails. Lots more nice stuff too, not least a Fiery Acraea and a White-barred Acraea, as well as several Natal Acraeas, along with three Golden Pipers and, subject to possible identification error, one Forest Leopard. Really was a pleasure ambling around the maze of tracks, new butterflies at every turn - amongst the big, the bright and the wonderful, quite a number of interesting Pierids, including my only False Dotted Borders of the trip, plus Vine-leaf Vagrant, Cambridge Vagrant, Diverse White and Angled Grass Yellow, while non-Pierids included one Southern Pied Woolly Legs and two Purple-brown Hairstreaks, plus plenty of Kersten's Hairtails, at least six Pale Hairtails and a couple of the more distinct Black-striped Hairtails. Top Lycaenidae of the day however was a single Babault's Blue, a slightly problematic species to identify and one of only two recorded on the whole trip. Far and above

all other species though, and the contender for butterfly of the trip, was a little butterfly quietly roosting in the underside of a leaf - partially translucent, variously described as a bird dropping on a leaf, and a species I was very much hoping to find, the price was a splendid Buff-tipped Skipper. Very pleased indeed I was with this one! Also very welcome, especially given the date, a Christmas Forester and, a short while later, its cousin a Clouded Forester. Could easily have stayed in the forest the whole day, but from about 3 p.m. the skies darkened considerably - the sun had not come out at all during the day, but now it was looking more and more ominous. An hour later, the rain began and it absolutely bucketed it down for the remainder of the day. Final sighting of the day, twelve soggy Banded Mongooses dashing across the lawn behind our apartment.

23 December. Mtunzini. In beautiful bright sunny conditions, shifted another 110 km south to the Mtunzini area, largely to have a nice base for the Christmas period and to day trip Dlinza Forest in the interior. First stop near Mtunzini was the Raffia Palm Forest - have never seen vert much at this locality, and didn't buck the trend today! An hour or so wandering not revealing the Palm-nut Vultures that inhabit the area and also not producing much in the way of butterflies - the main exception being an unfortunate Giant Emperor that was being attacked by a mass of ants! A new species for me, I thought this stunning species deserved a second chance and I tried to save it, brushing off the swarms of ants ...I do fear however it was probably too late. In Mtunzini itself, checked into the rather upmarket Mtunzini Forest Lodge, accommodation being a very nice wooden cabin set in luxuriant forest, a buzz of butterflies on the trails around and a very nice deserted beach just a short stroll away. Plenty of good butterflies here - Green-banded Swallowtail, Mocker Swallowtail, Citrus Swallowtail and Common Leopard, also a White-barred *Acraea* (as well as more common Natal *Acraea*), at least six Golden Pipers and one Friar. Caught a Squinting Bush Brown in my bait trap, while assorted Peirids included abundant African Common Whites, along with a single Diverse White, an African Wood White and a Broad-bordered Grass Yellow. Still having a desire to see Pam-nut Vulture, popped out to the small forest strips just west of town ‐ and was soon rewarded with a fine adult Palm-nut Vulture sharing a thermal with a couple of Woolly-necked Storks, Not only Palm-nut Vulture here, but a pleasing selection of butterflies too, including two new species for me - Rusty Swift and Olive-haired Swift ‐ and an impressive colony of mixed woolly legs, a single shrub attracting at least 15 Southern Pied Woolly Legs and Common Woolly Legs, many attending ants. Also here, four Brown Pansies, a single Blue Pansy, a Babault's Blue, about ten Sooty Blues and a couple of Grass Jewel Blues. Easy evening around Mtunzini Forest Lodge, a number of mammals including Water Mongoose, four Red Duikers and many Vervet Monkeys.

24 December. Dlinza Forest. Sub-tropical forest, 25 C and sun, Christmas approaching! The only elements missing to a perfect Christmas at Dlinza Forest were the hordes of butterflies that I had expected! For locality that should have held abundant emperors and other species, I can only assume I was a little early in the season. As it was, I managed a mere 12 species and a couple of these only in adjacent meadows. From an aerial walkway that offers splendid views across the canopy, not a single emperor did I see, nor very much else for that matter. A few *Amarius* butterflies were flying around, landing on occasion, all Common Leopards I think, though I am not confident of my identification and I can not exclude Forest Leopards. Also from the aerial walkway, though never landing close enough for good photographs, were my first new butterflies of the day ‐ my ninth *Acraea* of the trip, a pair of the very appropriately named Tree-top *Acraeas*! Three Mocker Swallowtails up here too. Down below, in the dark of the forest, even fewer butterflies! Quite a lot of walking for not very many butterflies was the order of the day - in dappled patches of sunlight, a few Common Bush Browns and a couple of Squinting Bush Browns, while a broad relatively sunny track did provide a little more variety in the form of three Southern Pied Woolly Legs, four Twin Dotted Borders, one Angled Grass Yellow, three Sooty Blues and, the only one recorded on the trip, an Orange Spotted Hopper. Wandered round for most of the morning, even tried an area of meadow nearby with little extra success (one Blue Pansy, several African Common Whites and a few African Migrants), then decided it was time to call it quits, a mere dozen species under my belt. Headed to the local town, did a bit of Christmas shopping, not very peasant, and then returned to Mtunzini fairly early. Relaxing late afternoon, two Giant Emperors near our cabin, plus two Golden Pipers, one Vine-leaf Vagrant, a Common Hairtail and my only False Chiefs of the trip and only Coast Purple Tip. Wandered as far as the beach for a few moments, then began to prepare for nightfall ‐ treats for Santa set upon the table, plus a great pile of chopped apples on a small feeding platform in a tree near the Mtunzini Camp restaurant. And there we sat as it got totally dark, a wait then of only 15 minutes or so before some rustling in the trees. Flicked on a flashlight to see that the guests had arrived, four quite amazing Greater Bushbabies, one already stuffing its face with the fruit, three more clambering down the tree to join him. And fabulous it was, the four feeding for the next 20 minutes unabated, occasionally retreating to higher branches if they thought they heard something, though quickly returning. As appetites were satisfied, lips licked and I like to think a content smile upon their faces, they clambered back up the trees and vanished into the darkness. A wonderful experience indeed. Walked back to the cabin only to find two more Greater Bushbabies there two, chopped a last apple or two and left it for them, though to bed it was for me.

25 December. Sani Pass. After bunches of Vervet Monkeys invading the chalet early morning, polishing off the fruit left for the Greater Bushbabies, it was time to leave Mtunzini for the four-hour drive to the Drakensburg highlands. Upon the horizon, the dramatic settings of Sani Pass appeared early afternoon, all the more pleasing that the towering cliffs were bathed in sun. Wasting no time, we navigated the rough track that zigzags up to the South African border post and left the car (only 4x4s permitted past this point), an adjacent bush attracting quite a number of Garden *Acraea*. Commonplace Cape Robin-Chats and Dark-capped Bulbuls, Cape Vulture and Jackal Buzzard overhead. Continued upward on foot towards Lesotho, a trio of Ground Woodpeckers hopping about on boulders, a Barratt's Warbler in streamside vegetation, a Buff-streaked Chat in open country, also Malachite and Greater Double-collared Sunbirds, a few Cape Grassbirds and several Karoo Prinias. Butterflies however were relatively few and far between ‐ highly mobile skippers kept flitting around, those eventually tracked down morphing into several Common Hottentot Skippers,

three Mafa Sandmen and a single Unique Ranger. Also added a tatty Marsh Blue, my first Long-tailed Blue of the trip and two rather stunning Water Bronzes. Also at least five Common Hairtails, a couple of Yellow Pansies and two African Monarchs. Unfortunately, after just a couple of hours, ominous clouds began to blot the otherwise blue sky and not long after it was a picture of grey and temperatures plummeted somewhat, pretty much crushing hopes of any further butterflies. Walked down to the car and bumped back down the track to Sani Backpackers, home for the next two nights. Cloud and mist for the remainder of the day, walks adding no more butterflies. Though I had managed a total of just ten species during the day, half of these were new for the trip. Plans to climb to Lesotho next day, the high grasslands there hopefully adding a few speciality butterflies.

26 December. Sani Pass. Heavy rain through the night, low cloud and drizzle at dawn, cold. A slight brightening at 9.00 a.m. hinted at things might improve, returned to the South African border post and began the long hike up to Lesotho. Clouds rolling in, the brightness vanished, found Ground Woodpeckers again, plus one Black Bushcap and several Southern Boubous. Appearing through the mist, a flock of 33 White Storks heading into the valley, circling round, then dropping onto the slopes. Found two butterfly species only, both roosting – one Long-tailed Blue and a couple of Garden Acraea. Thinking Lesotho itself, the top of the pass at near 2900 metres, might be above the cloud, we decided to hitch a lift with a passing bukkie. Bounced about quite a bit as the track deteriorated in the steep upper sections, several Rock Hyrax seen in this section. Then we got to the Lesotho border post – cloud-bound, thick swirls of mist rolling over the lip of the plateau, visibility a hundred metres at best, more often a mere 10-20 metres! A fascinating area nonetheless, but needless to say saw almost nothing - one Sentinel Rock Thrush on some rock huts, four White-naped Ravens at the edge of the cliffs. After a short stroll, getting considerably chilled in the process, wandered over to Sani Top, Africa's highest pub, one that on a good day offers the possibility of eye-to-eye Lammergeiers and other raptors from their veranda. No chance of any of those on this foggy day, couldn't even find the pub to begin with! In between toasted sandwiches and coffee, did pop out a few times to endure the cold mist – added four Drakensburg Siskins and photographed one Sloggart's Ice Rat. And with that, decided to head back down. Quickly hitched a lift in another bukkie and a half hour or so later was back at considerably lower altitude, beneath the cloud. Walked along a stream area, Cape Grassbirds and Dark-capped Yellow Warbler the main birds seen, then retrieved the car and continued down the valley. Stopped at a patch of proteas and finally found the bird I had been looking for, Gurney's Sugarbird - a pair of these iconic birds feeding at close quarters, then another pair at more proteas a few hundred metres further. Returned to Sani Backpackers about 4 p.m., one Baboon wandering down the road just nearby, decided to call it a day.

27 December. Golden Gate Highlands National Park. Leaving Sani quite early, it was pleasing to see blue skies on the northern horizon, the approximate direction we were heading and in not too long at all, we were indeed in full sunshine. A random stop at a patch of blackberries proved productive – blackberries for breakfast and a Gold-spotted Sylph as an expected bonus, an attractive skipper species and the only one that I would see on this trip. Travelling further, as flocks of Amur Falcon adorned roadside wires and White Storks populated agricultural field, the high crags of the Golden Gate National Park appeared on the horizon, destination for this day. The edge of the Drakensburg Mountains, Golden Gate encompasses some fine upland grasslands, nicely dotted by Blesbok et al, plus some fairly impressive flat-topped sandstone buttresses. Atop just two of these pinnacles (Brandwag Buttress and Mushroom Rock), amounting to just a few hundred square metres in total area, lies the entire global population of the endemic Golden Gate Brown. Reportedly even 'rare' on these isolated peaks and with a limited flight season somewhere in November-December, I eyed these tops with anticipation. For this day however I chose to explore rolling grasslands on the opposite slope. In lower areas, Meadow Whites and African Migrants fluttered across an area of rank grass. Further up, enticed by herds of Blesbok and Burchell's Zebras, I took a walk along a narrow crag line. Good decision – shortly after flushing a couple of Black-backed Jackals, I encountered another contender for the title of 'butterfly of the trip' – small and plump bodied, but I thought a most exquisite species, it was a Riley's Copper. Settling on patches of open shingle, I got a few photographs before it flitted up, caught the wind and vanished down the slope. A hundred metres further I then found an Oreas Copper, then a bit further again another Riley's Copper! Grey Rhebok trotted off up the slope, herds of Black Wildebeest eyed me from afar. Hiked up to domed mountain top adjacent – more new butterflies on the way up, False Silver-bottom Browns and Eastern Hillside Browns both appearing in small numbers, then got to the top. Fine views, a bit windy, no butterflies at all. Scrambling down again, soon came to a sliding stop – upon boulders, one male Drakensburg Rockjumper! Usually a moderately common bird, I had missed this charismatic Drakensberg endemic at Sani Pass, so having one popping about here was most welcome. As afternoon progressed, checked in at the reserve headquarters, got a nice rondavel for the next couple of nights, then decided to check out the 'vulture hide' – one humongous solitary Baboon on the way, but not a single thing at the hide, a withered old carcass long picked clean and nothing to attract in the Cape Vultures. Did however find a Painted Lady nearby, a new species for the trip and just about the only butterfly that I can see both in South Africa and on my local patch back home. Late afternoon, fatigue began to hit me, time for a rest I thought. Sleep was not going to come, began sweating profusely. A rough night was to follow, alternating hot and cold, the sheets becoming a pool of water, me needing to change bedding and tee-shirts several times. Symptoms were reminding me of a trip to Mozambique some years earlier, thoughts were drifting to my timing in northern Kwazulu, hmm ten to twelve days earlier - perfect incubation period for ...

28 December. Golden Gate Highlands National Park. After a fairly sleepless night, I can't say I felt amazing at sunrise, a mild headache and general feeling of absolute fatigue not contributing. Still, in glorious sunshine, the towering summit of Brandwag Buttress did look quite attractive. A steep hike of an hour or so, punctuated by several stops, some simply for rests, some for occasional butterflies, and then we reached the sandstone walls of the buttresses. Here though, an impressive sight greeted us - a mass congregation of Garden Acraeas, some attracted to flowering bushes, some simply on the wing, an absolute minimum of 40 dancing around the rugged track, very nice indeed. One African Monarch too.

Rested a while to regain some energy, then clambered up the final part of the route to reach the flat summit – I was now in the land of the Golden Gate Brown, whether I had enough energy left to explore was an open question! Did zigzag about for about an hour, did encounter many browns, almost all of them highly mobile. I did not however encounter Golden Gate Brown, all the butterflies identified being False Silver-bottom Brown and Eastern Hillside Brown, at least 20 each seen. Cloud rolling in at about 11 am gave me the perfect excuse to climb back down the stack, though enticing thoughts of collapsing back into bed were dashed by the brevity of the cloud – by the time I was back in camp, it was full blue sky again! Popped into the local town a while, slept a while, felt like I had zero energy, my body ached and still I had a headache, Probably not too wise, I pushed my self to hike to the top of Mushroom Rock, the second of the buttresses known to support Golden Gate Brown. Didn't see the desired species, notching up only a few more False Silver-bottom Browns and Eastern Hillside Browns on the summit, plus six Rayed Blues near camp. Enough for one day, parked myself in the darkened chalet and tried to sleep. Floods of sweat again during the night, soggy tee-shirts and sheets. Bar the headaches remaining only mild, seriously did wonder if I had malaria.

29 December. Departure. Final day in South Africa, an overnight flight scheduled for late evening. My plan had been to spend this day in the grasslands of Wakkerstroom, but truly I could not be bothered. Stopped for a butterfly as departing Golden Gates, which proved to be a Gaudy Commodore, but otherwise opted for no lengthy walks. More Amur Falcons as we reached lower altitudes, then coming under pressure to visit a doctor, made an unscheduled stop in Harrismith. Doctor agreed with symptoms pointing to malaria, though a rapid diagnostic test pointed to negative, antigens not detected. They recommended more tests, no time though, a flight to catch. And so ended our trip to South Africa, limped back to Johannesburg, crashed out at the airport for a while, then boarded the plane and back to Europe we went. Sitting back in my seat and pondering the trip, a smile appeared on my face - a very enjoyable trip it had been, 136 species of butterfly identified, one or two additional to remain with question marks.