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Sharks, Whales, and Rare Mammals in South Africa Trip Report July – August 2015

Overview

Before 1976 not many people knew of the great white shark, but the Spielberg film *Jaws* made the animal infamous and scared a generation out of the water. The real great white is very different from the marauding, blood-thirsty killing machine that the film portrays, but it has taken until very recently for this view to be shared with the wider public. South Africa is one of only three or four places in the world where you are able to come face to face with this incredible animal. But it is the only place where you can witness natural predations and behavior on a regular basis, one of the amazing behaviors that are commonly displayed here being the spectacular ‘Polaris Breach’ hunting technique. This trip focused heavily on the breaching behavior and the great white shark in general for the first week or so. While focused on the sharks around False Bay, south of Cape Town, we would also explore the city and its vast environs, some of which are home to stunning scenery and wonderful wildlife.

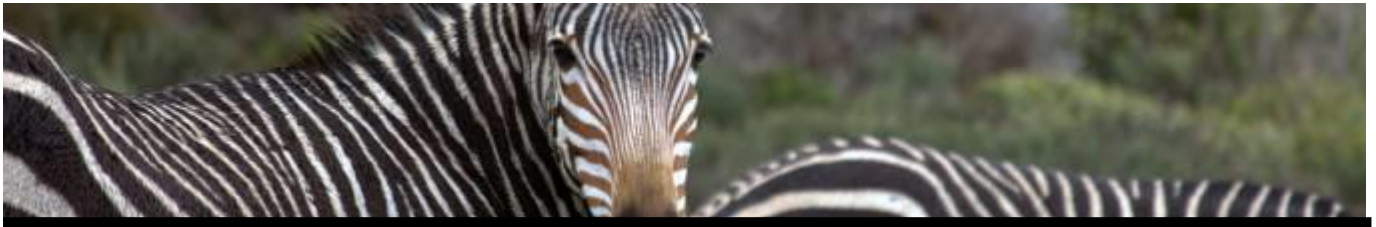
From here we would head further east along the coast to Hermanus and the best land-based whale watching in the world, but we would not only watch the whales from the land but also from the sea and the air. The whale in question, the once nearly extinct southern right whale, now coming back in numbers, is one of the world’s largest ever organisms and comes to the bays of South Africa in the southern winter to calve and breed. Also around here are various birdwatching destinations, and we would take these in too before traveling back to Cape Town and further onward.

This time we headed north-east into the Kalahari. This dry ecosystem stretches from north-west South Africa into Botswana and Namibia and is home to huge numbers of wildlife, but it was not the ‘normal’ big five and other typical safari animals that we would be targeting here. We would also be visiting an

aesthetically similar (although ecologically distinct) ecosystem called the Karoo. With the help of a local specialist guide we would be visiting some farms that are well off the beaten track in search of rarities like armadillo, armadillo, Smith's red rock hare, and Temminck's ground pangolin. All of these animals are very elusive, usually endangered, and very difficult to see elsewhere.

On the face of it South Africa is a very typical and common safari or wildlife-watching destination, and a three-week tour here would be of no surprise to anyone. But when you mention the wildlife that this particular tour was targeting, it becomes a wildlife-watching trip with a difference. Great white shark, southern right whale, blue crane, armadillo, and elephant-shrews all in one trip is not the normal return from a safari in Southern Africa. And it is that which makes the country of South Africa such an incredible and wonderful place to visit for wildlife. With the country boasting many of the amenities of the modern world and great food and hospitality we were very confident before the trip that this would be a success, and with the various sightings we had I think the trip couldn't have gone much better.

Navigating the perils of bad weather (as so much of this tour is weather dependant), long distances of traveling, sea sickness, and late nights in the cold windy air of the Karoo would be challenges for the guides, Martin and John, to overcome, but with so many options to do and so much wildlife to see in South Africa the trip barely skipped a beat when the storms, wind, or a cold-front stepped in. A great attitude from our clients also helped, as the long hours and sometimes unfavorable conditions threatened to take their toll. But by persevering and visiting the well-researched locations we were able to see the vast majority of what we had targeted (no mean feat for such a specialist tour).



Day by Day Breakdown

Day 1

Simonstown

Arrival & Wildlife Watching

Accommodation:

Mariner Guest House (4* Guest House)

Food:

Only dinner was taken today and this was at a local restaurant in Simonstown.

Transportation:

Private Vehicle & Walking.

The arrival flight for Derek and Sally was delayed by an hour, which is not too bad, and we still had the best part of a full day to explore the area around Simonstown. They shared their flight with their friend Joyce, who would be joining the trip for the final week or so. For now there was a brief introduction to Martin at the airport, and then she would spend the time preceding joining us with her sister in the town of Onrusrivier.

We then left Joyce with her sister at the airport and Martin, Derek and Sally loaded the luggage into the hire car and headed south through the suburbs of Cape Town towards the large bay on the southern edge of the sprawling city, False Bay. Driving from Kommetjie to Fish Hoek took us over a rise, and the bay lay out in front of us. After driving from Fish Hoek around the bay to Simonstown and checking into our accommodation we decided to visit Cape Point inside Table Mountain National Park as we had made such good time.

On the way to the park we had a very brief view of a **southern right whale** in False Bay; the whale only surfaced once and fluked, but we would be spending more time later in the trip with the southern right whales, and so we didn't wait for the animal to surface again and headed to the park's entrance. The park is a vast expanse of limestone and fynbos. The fynbos is one of the world's six floral kingdoms and the only one confined to one country and by default by far the smallest floral kingdom. Comprising some 9,000 plus species of plants, the fynbos is unique to the Western Cape of South Africa. This high level of plant endemism has led to speciation on a vast scale, and many of the species of invertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, and birds (as well as a surprising number of mammals) are endemic to the Western

and Northern Capes of South Africa. The fynbos is defined by the Protea, a genus of flowering plants, one of which – the king protea -- is the national flower of South Africa, and which grows the largest flowers of the fynbos. They have very brightly-colored blooms and attract many of the region's most colorful bird species. But many of the fynbos species are small, usually lower than 30cm, and that is ideal for the very windswept coastal plains and rocky points that they inhabit.

We arrived, however, during the height of the southern winter, and as a result many of the fynbos plants were not in flower. The park is also subject to natural (and manmade) fires to help fertilize the soil and continue the natural cycle of the region. The combination of low and usually dull-colored vegetation and burnt sections gives a barren and desolate appearance, an appearance which vanishes, however, when you spend a good amount of time moving slowly through the park. By doing this you can see the occasional burst of color of some of the fynbos that flowers during the winter, as well as the iridescent sunbirds as they move from flower to flower, collecting the sweet nectar.

We moved slowly through the park and visited a couple of the bays, firstly Buffels Bay. This is a nice sandy beach with a rocky spit of land. Baboons sometimes come down to this beach and comb the rocks exposed by the low tide for food, and also during the Austral autumn it is possible to see aggregations of spotted gully sharks in the breakers as they come together to breed. While we didn't see either the baboons or sharks in Buffels Bay, we did have lots of bird sightings today, including the omnipresent **Hartlaub's Gull, Kelp Gull, White-breasted Cormorant, Cape Cormorant, Hadada Ibis, African Sacred Ibis, and Cape Wagtail**, as well as nice sightings of **Rock Kestrel, Southern Double-collared Sunbird, Greater Flamingo, and White-necked Raven**.

We then went to the world-famous Cape of Good Hope, part of Table Mountain National Park and the most south-western point of the African continent. Around here we found a pair of **Common Ostrich**, male and female, and we had a great sighting as they walked close to the car and away into the fynbos. Also around here was a small herd of **common eland** – the largest antelope in the world seems a little out of place in this windswept and rain-battered low vegetation, but the eland are naturally found here and have survived the extinctions of several other species as Europeans started to hunt the lions, leopards, elephants, rhinos, giraffes, and other animals from the Cape region around 400 years ago (up until as recently as the 1940's).

Rain started to fall a little as we left the park around sunset. We headed back to the accommodation and then left for dinner in the evening. We dined in a seafood restaurant near the famous Boulder's Beach penguin colony and we had several **African Penguins** around the entrance of the restaurant. The heavy rain that fell overnight was not a problem for the penguins, however, the wind was picking up and, more importantly, from the south-east, and these conditions are very bad for the shark diving trips. We had an email at the guest house confirming that the trip had been cancelled for tomorrow. This was unfortunate but not unexpected news and was the reason we had budgeted many trips out on the boat for the sharks. We would further explore the park tomorrow and see if we could find some of the other wildlife that eluded us this afternoon.

Day 2 Cape Point

Wildlife Watching

Accommodation:

Mariner Guest House (4* Guest House)

Food:

Breakfast at the guest house, lunch in the park and dinner in a restaurant in Simonstown.

Transportation:

Private vehicle & Walking

With the weather making shark trips today impossible, we decided instead to visit Cape Point once again. It was a wet and windy day, but this didn't stop us from seeing a beautiful **Malachite Sunbird** as well as the usual bird species in the park.

Today we drove directly to Cape Point and took the Flying Dutchman Funicular up the last hundred meters or so and then walked around some of the lookouts, including one that offered a great view over a colony of the endemic **Cape Cormorant**. These small black birds make their nests on the steepest and seemingly slipperiest narrow rock ledges high up overlooking the Cape of Good Hope. Nearly the entire world's population of Cape Cormorants lives in the Table Mountain National Park, and this is one of the largest colonies.

We also climbed to the lighthouse that marks Cape Point itself and offers views both east and west, east into False Bay, west into the Atlantic, and of course south out over the rocky peninsula of Cape Point to the South Atlantic, Southern Ocean, and Antarctica the further south you go. The rain closed in on us here.

We watched the advancing rain as it moved over the raging ocean, and once it reached us we headed down to the café and had some tea and coffee to warm up. After having arrived here early and having had the park to ourselves when we arrived, the car park was now chock-a-block with vehicles and tour buses, the funicular was full on each journey, and viewpoints we had had to ourselves were now occupied by hordes of people. This is one of the busiest parks in the whole of Africa, and today, despite the inclement weather, was no exception.

We then drove around to the Cape of Good Hope again and found a group of seven **Common Ostriches**, including four chicks, which were around half the size of the adults and had lost most of their stripy feathers. They were accompanied by an adult male, which is normal in ostrich society. The females in a group will lay their eggs in a communal nest, and the resident male (or sometimes males) will take over the incubation and protect the clutch and the chicks once they hatch. We watched the chicks following the male and also other adults (two females) feeding just next to the road, picking up seeds, insects, and anything edible really. Ostriches are not very fussy eaters and have been found with all sorts of objects in their stomachs. They are known to swallow large objects, which is due to their rock-eating behavior. By swallowing rocks these are stored in their gizzard and used to help digestion by physically breaking down the plant material in the gizzard, as the birds cannot chew their food into smaller pieces before swallowing.

We then went to the Dias monument, which marks the spot where the Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias landed in 1486; this was the first time a European was documented to have landed in South Africa. Around the monument were some nice birds, including **Cape Grassbird**, **Egyptian Goose**, **Hadada Ibis**, **African Sacred Ibis**, **Cape Spurfowl**, **Orange-breasted Sunbird**, and **Southern Double-collared Sunbird**.



Orange-breasted Sunbird

From there we tried Buffels Bay again, and this time we found the resident troop of **chacma baboons**. But after the high-profile removal of Titus (the dominant male of the largest and most famous troop in Cape Town) a few years back the baboons have been under a regime of intimidation. The attempt to reinstall the fear of people into the baboon population with the hope that the home raids, car raids, ambush food snatches, and the rare human attacks came to an end were rather successful. As a result the usually very confident baboons were very wary of our vehicle, and we were not allowed very close to them before they moved off into deeper vegetation.

Further around in Buffels Bay we found a pair of **Common Ostriches** and a small family of **Cape mountain zebra**. We approached the zebras to see if we could get closer looks and were amazed at how close we were able to get to them as they fed on the grass growing around the fynbos. The group was composed of a male and female and their two foals. It was amazing that they tolerated our presence for as long as they did and remained very calm and ignored us. Eventually we did outstay our welcome, however, and the stallion snorted and positioned himself between us and the foals. We took this polite signal as a sign to move off. So we left the small zebra family to their foraging and carried on around the

park. We then enjoyed very nice sightings of the stunning **Orange-bellied Sunbird** feeding on fynbos flowers next to the road, following the small nectar-feeding bird as it patrolled the flowers in its roadside territory. We got a very close-up view and also some great pictures. We also had nice views of a pair of **White-necked Ravens** in the car park of Buffels Bay before leaving.

We now headed to the opposite side of the peninsula, to Olifantsbos. Here we had more ostriches and also a group of three endemic **bontebok**. This Near Threatened (IUCN) antelope only has a range of around 250 kilometers along the Western Cape, and the Table Mountain National Park is one of the last strongholds of the species, which did very well to survive amidst much hunting for food and trophies over the years. Up on the hillside were a couple of huge **common eland**, their enormous size further exemplified in comparison with the dainty bontebok. Getting out of the vehicle at Olifantsbos and walking along the beach, we had some time photographing the waves breaking on the shore as well as close-up views of a small colony of **Sandwich Terns**, **Rock Martin**, many **African Sacred Ibises**, and some interesting fynbos species such as **Cape Grassbird**, **Southern Tchagra**, **Southern Boubou**, and **Cape Rock Thrush**.

From here we headed back to the guest house, and despite the weather having cleared up a lot the swell and wind were still not favorable, and, unsurprisingly, the disappointing note from the shark boat met our arrival, and we were informed that tomorrow's shark trip was cancelled again. But the forecast for the following days was much improved, and we were very confident that we would be out on the water with the magnificent sharks of False Bay in no time.



Day 3 Boulders Beach & Rondevlei

Wildlife Watching

Accommodation:

Mariner Guest House (4* Guest House)

Food:

Breakfast in the guest house, with lunch and dinner in a restaurant in Simonstown.

Transportation:

Private vehicle & walking.

This morning we once again had breakfast at the guest house, looking out over the bay at the increasing swell, but the skies were clearer today and we decided to head to Boulders Beach. This is a section of Table Mountain National Park located inside Simonstown and dedicated to a colony of African Penguins. In 1982 a pair of African Penguins arrived at the rocky beach and bred; since then the area has seen a rapid rise in the number of penguins and reached a peak of over 4,000 at one point. The area is a great location, as it is sheltered, close to the deep waters off Cape Point, and also free of terrestrial predators because of its proximity to human habitation (that is until cats and dogs started to take their toll). But the largest threat to the penguins currently is the decline in their natural food, the shrimp around the Cape. Increases in shrimp farming around the Cape have seen drastic declines in their numbers. This has resulted in equally large declines in the penguin numbers. In fact one of the most reliable theories as to why the penguins arrived here in the first place (penguins were a rare occurrence here before 1982) is that the shrimp fisheries along the west coast of South Africa and southern Namibia had seen them abandon their former colonies in search of new ones. The population is declining at a slower rate than previously now, and there is pressure building on the fisheries to introduce tighter quotas and also off-seasons to allow the stocks to naturally recover from the harvests. Since the birds started to arrive in the early 80s and because of their international status as an Endangered (IUCN) species the beach was incorporated into Table Mountain National Park.

We arrived in the morning; with the colony being only around 300 meters downhill from our guesthouse we didn't have to get up at the crack of dawn to get there in time for the early morning light. As usual the area around the beach was full of **African Penguins**. It was the beginning of the nesting season, and we watched as the penguins were in various stages of their courtship and nesting, and there were also about 12 of last year's chicks still with their down. These chicks must have hatched late and were well behind the other yearlings, which played and surfed in the water just off the beach. So we sat and watched the different age classes of penguins – the black-and-white adults; most of which were running back and forth

from the ocean and entering into courtship rituals, the slate blue sub-adults, and then the downy chicks huddling together and hoping for the day when they would have their waterproof feathers and could enter the water. We also walked the boardwalks and saw that some of the nests already had eggs in them, with attentive parents keeping an eye on them.

We then left the main breeding area and went to another beach nearby, this is where one can go onto the beach itself with the penguins. There are usually some penguins here, but as people can go here too there are usually fewer. But we thought it was worth a try, and also the rock hyraxes are often seen sunbathing around the beach huts. When we entered the beach there were some penguins, but they left as a family with children came running onto the beach and swam away, presumably to the other side of the colony, where the noisy bipedal primates have to stick to the boardwalk. But we did get nice close-up views of the **rock hyraxes** using the benches for their own sunbathing and, being very used to people, allowing us to get very close. We then left and spotted **Malachite Sunbird** and **Cape Rock Thrush** in the vegetation before heading into Simonstown center for lunch.

After lunch we headed further east around the bay to Rondevlei Nature Reserve. This small wetland sanctuary just between Muizenberg and Macassar Beach is a haven for waterbirds, as well as some hippos, Cape grysbok, marsh mongoose, caracal, and reptiles and amphibians.

The wind was picking up considerably, and we could understand why the shark trip had been cancelled. Even though the water looked calm from Simonstown and Fish Hoek, the wind and swells could be massive at Seal Island. The island is in a straight line from Macassar Beach and the opening of False Bay, and when the wind is blowing from the south-west it brings swells from the South Atlantic / Southern Ocean, and the effects can be very disconcerting when on a small boat surrounded by large great white sharks.

Because we were now in the line of the wind we were chilled a bit, and the strong wind blowing across the water and reeds also affected the birds. We saw some birds, including **Yellow-billed Duck**, **Cape Shoveler**, **Red-knobbed Coot**, **Purple Gallinule**, **Greater Flamingo**, **Hadada Ibis**, **African Spoonbill**, **Red-billed Teal**, and **Grey Heron**, among others, but we didn't see the numbers that are often present at Rondevlei.

On the way back to the guest house we stopped at Sunrise Beach, and Derek went to photograph some of the acrobatic kite surfers that were taking advantage of the strong winds. They were sailing back and forth along the surf before jumping high into the air and hoping to land gracefully back on the waves, but often splashing back down into the breakers. At sunset we arrived back at the guest house, changed and showered, and then headed out for dinner. The best news were that we had no news about cancellations, so tomorrow we would be out on the water, and, better still, the forecast looked very good for the next few days.

Day 4 Seal Island

Shark Watching

Accommodation:

Mariner Guest House (4* Guest House)

Food:

We had a packed breakfast / lunch on the boat, with dinner at a restaurant around Simonstown.

Transportation:

Private vehicle & Shark cage diving boat.

This morning we rose earlier than usual, and with packed breakfast from the guest house in hand we headed down to the harbor. We were greeted by Kim, who would be one of the crew on the boat, and we waited for the rest of the group to get there. Once everyone was assembled we headed onto the boat and met Rob (the skipper and an old acquaintance of Martin's) as well as Gary and Luke, who would make up the rest of the crew. A short safety briefing was done and we departed for Seal Island.

The sky was still inky dark when we set off, but as we got nearer and nearer to the island the sun started to peer from the eastern hills overlooking the bay, and then the golden glow started to fill the sky. The sunrises over the bay can be spectacular, and this was no exception. The conditions were pretty good, but not perfect, as the wind was a northerly, and it really is a south-easterly that gets the sharks especially active.

But there were some **Cape fur seals** in the water and around the "Launchpad". The Launchpad is the area around the south tip of the island; this area is very shallow, with large waves regularly breaking over it. Here the seals aggregate and play in the surf until they pluck up enough courage and leave en masse to the safety of the open ocean and their offshore fishing grounds. However, this dash for freedom comes at a cost, for about 50 meters around the island there is a deep channel, which is the gauntlet that the seals

have to run. This channel allows the sharks the perfect ambush location, and the sharks here have perfected the “Polaris Breach”. Most great white sharks attack fast-moving fur seals and sea lions with a powerful and quick hit from below and behind, aiming to incapacitate the seal in one hit and then feed on the dead or dying animal at its leisure. The sharks here have the added advantage of a deeper channel than most other populations, and so the speed they can muster in their vertical attack is phenomenal and often enough to propel even the largest shark clear out of the water in a breach that rivals any predatory behavior in the natural world.

Because this hunting is best done in the first hour or two around sunrise (because the sun’s rays do not penetrate deep enough into the water for the seals to see the sharks but the sharks can see the silhouette of the seals well and therefore have all of the advantages), we waited on the boat and scanned the island and waters for breaches, chases at the surface (which occur if the shark misses the seal and then attempts to grab the seal at the surface; this only usually lasts a short while as the shark is not very maneuverable compared to a seal and tires quicker than the seal), or flocks of gulls, which often indicate a successful hunt. At any of these three things we would speed over and see what was going on and hopefully see the action close up. On a very good day there could be up to 50 of these events per morning, on average during this time of year there are between 20 and 30 predations per morning.

However, as the wind was not perfect we didn’t have those numbers. Although Rob did see one breach, it was very far away, and from his experience by the time we would get there the shark and seal would be gone and we could be missing the potential of more predations around the island. So we stayed a while longer. But after a while the seals didn’t look like they were in the mood to leave the Launchpad, and no groups were coming back to the island after a few days out at sea.

So we decided to try the decoy. If the sharks are not very cooperative with the live seals, and the seals are not coming and going freely from the island, we have a trick up our sleeves. A large rubber seal decoy (made to look like a seal pup) is towed behind the boat at the speed of the average traveling seal. Then all eyes and cameras are trained on the decoy, waiting for the explosive eruption of a one-to-two-ton white-and-grey missile out of the sea. So we tried the decoy around the island twice and then went out to York Shoals, an offshore rocky reef in the central part of False Bay. This is a shallow reef where sharks are also known to aggregate, and it is close to where Rob saw the breach this morning. But, sadly, no shark was interested in the decoy.

We then went back to the Launchpad and set the cage. The visibility was not very good; the wind was not clearing lots of the debris from the island, so we didn’t hope for great underwater sightings, but we could see well enough from the top deck, looking down into the gloom. Finally, the chum and baits went into the water.

The chum used now is only water and frozen flathead and tuna heads, and the baits were one tuna head and one flathead. Neither of the baits is allowed to be eaten by the shark, and the chum is designed not to have any nutritional value, so as not to lead the sharks to associate boats and people, etc., with food. Of course this is not always abided to by every operator. But Rob is very conscientious in his approach and very vocal about people who break these simple rules. Having been established in the bay for around 20 years and having been the first person to run shark trips in False Bay, he feels like he has a sense of ownership and of responsibility. When shark cage diving is done properly, the sharks are left uninjured (from not being led by the bait into the cages), and they are also left (if anything) a little frustrated and hungry, so if the sharks learn to associate anything with humans and boats it would be that they are not edible and that all of the effort they exert in trying to get some of the food that they can see and smell are in vain.

Everyone who thinks cage diving is leading to an increase in shark attacks is mistaken. One has to consider that shark dive operators are not ‘training’ sharks to attack people, because even if sharks did associate boats and cage diving with food, there is no correlation to surfers and swimmers getting attacked, as cage diving operation and surfers or swimmers do not look or act alike in any way. Instead, what shark diving operators are doing is showcasing sharks, animals very misunderstood and difficult to see in the wild, doing what they do, which is usually just swimming gracefully around like any major top predator and minding their own business. This should be increasing good feelings towards sharks and also educating people about the realities of sharks, which is that they are definitely not mindless, man-eating killing machines, but intelligent predators, which have the same roles and social structures as any other large carnivores such as wolves, big cats, and dolphins.

After around 15 minutes of the baits being in and chum slick having been established, we were ‘buzzed’ by our first **great white shark**, the huge 4.6-meter female known as Prop Guard. This particular shark is one of the larger sharks that are regularly seen at Seal Island. Her name comes from an incident last season, when she was sporting scars on her back and leading edge of the dorsal fin that were made by a

run-in with a boat propeller. The scars were only just visible, and the massive gashes that were present last year had pretty much healed. This is a great example of the healing power of sharks, which is now subject of much scientific investigation, as the ramifications for the medicinal world are fantastic.

After skirting by the back of the boat a couple of times she left, and it was another 20 minutes before a smaller (2.5m) shark came past for a few minutes. This shark then disappeared also, but another one of the three or four operators out of Simonstown had a shark with their boat for a short while. In general, however, it was quiet. But as we collected the cage and started to make our way back to Simonstown we considered that we had five different sharks (measuring between 2.5 – 4.6m) come and visit our boat this morning. We had had a couple that stayed around the baits for a few minutes and others that did little more than swim past us. It was a nice introduction to the sharks and the island, but we hoped for better in the coming trips, one of which was coming up this afternoon.

So back on shore we headed to the café next door to Rob's shop and had some tea and coffee before meeting up with the next group and going back out. The sun was very high in the sky, and the day was turning out to be a very good one. Conditions in the water had not improved very much, but we still hoped for more activity around the boat and baits. On the way out we heard of two southern right whales that were in the bay, and we decided to have a little look for them on the way back in.

The pattern of the afternoon was slightly different than in the morning, as the sharks do not naturally hunt very much after 9:00 a.m., so we didn't wait and watch for natural predations. Instead we went straight for the cage diving (trying a different spot from this morning) and then after this we towed the decoy for a while before departing for home.

Early on we had a playful shark around the boat. This shark was very quick and not very big (around 2.3m long), and she was only interested in the bait. After realizing she wasn't going to get any she left and was quickly replaced by a slightly larger shark (2.8m), which stayed around a little longer. This second shark was very pale and appeared to be grey all over, a nice distinguishing feature. This one was then in turn scared off by a larger shark (3m), which stayed around yet a while longer.

When the sharks come and stay a while they typically circle the boat near the surface, then go deeper (just out of view from the surface), and then go underneath the boat before coming up and trying to get at the baits. It is then the job of the bait boy (in this case Gary) to keep the shark away from the bait but leading the animal toward the boat and then parallel with the cage. Some operators (including one we saw every day doing this) would even lead the shark into the cage, so that the divers see the open mouth and teeth coming right at them. This is of course an incredible sight and experience, but one that comes at the cost of abrasions, lost teeth, and injured noses and eyes for the shark, which swims fast into metal and fiberglass, expecting a tasty lump of tuna. If people did the same thing with tigers in India or lions in the Serengeti they would be in court being sued and imprisoned, but with sharks such a practice seems to be acceptable. Well, it wasn't from our boat, and Rob is very vocal about his disapproval of such practices, practices he says come from the more competitive and 'showy' cage diving industry around Gaansbai and Mossel Bay further east along the coast.

It was by sheer luck that, while Martin and a couple of other people were watching the other boat and cursing their approach, they saw a breach just off to the side of that boat, while no one on that boat appeared to have seen it, and the shark was probably only 10 meters off the port side. Back at our boat the pale shark was back, but not for long, as another, larger shark (around 3m) came and spooked her.

That was about it for today, and while we had seen another two or three new sharks and had sharks near and around the boat nearly continuously this afternoon, we still wanted the breach shot and to get some more activity around our cage.



Accommodation:

Mariner Guest House (4* Guest House)

Food:

We had a packed breakfast again, with lunch and dinner being served in restaurants in town.

Transportation:

Private vehicle & Shark cage diving boat.

Today we met up at the harbor in the morning, the same as yesterday, and made it to Seal Island in time for another great sunrise. And this time we spotted a breach almost straight away and rushed over to it. We arrived in time to see a short chase.

The seal will do its best to stay as close to the shark's dorsal fin as possible, and from there it will turn in tight circles and force the shark into a tired submission. Despite the cartilaginous skeleton of sharks being very flexible they cannot turn so sharply as to catch an animal that is on their back. With this tactic, and if the seal was not hit by the shark during the initial breach, the seal will nearly always get away. However, the polaris breach is so effective here that around 55% of attempts are successful in providing the shark with a meal. This is in stark contrast to lions, which average around 10-15%, and to tigers, whose success rate is even lower than that.

When we arrived at the scene we found that the chase was going to be a very short one. The seal was severely injured, with a huge bite revealing most of the internal organs of the poor thing. It was struggling to get to our boat, knowing that any land (even the 'land' of a moving fiberglass boat) was a refuge, but before it even got close the shark came up from the deep, and with one cavernous mouthful took the whole seal down to the depths. The sight of the shark's huge mouth coming up and engulfing the seal was incredible and another reminder of the predatory power of this otherwise serene and graceful denizen of the deep blue.

When we had just finished watching this incredible predation, a second one was spotted, and we raced to this one, which had the opposite result to the first one. The seal pup had not been hit in the first attack, and although now separated from the rest of its group it managed to get away to safety.

These exciting experiences were followed by a real lull in seal activity around the island. We towed the decoy with no joy and then deployed the cage. The visibility was still bad as the wind was still blowing from the 'wrong' direction, but finally we did get some shark activity around the cage. Three different sharks came (between 2 and 3.5m long), before we had another visit from the colossal Prop Guard. Today we had a couple of sharks spending about 15 to 20 minutes around the boat and chasing down the bait (skillfully kept at bay by Gary). Derek managed to get a good shot of one of them coming up from below and mouthing towards the bait. By now we were also able to notice more of the behavior of the sharks and to begin predicting the movements and possible patterns that they would do when approaching the boat and the bait. All of this would serve well, as we had more trips coming up.

On our way back from the island we had a brief (but good) view of one of the most elusive marine mammals, the **Bryde's whale**. This tropical rorqual (meaning that their throat is grooved, which allows their mouth to open to a huge size when lunging at prey items) is part of a species complex that is not currently fully understood. At present there are three recognized species, the Bryde's whale, the Omauri's whale and Eden's whale. The latter two are found around Japan and the eastern Pacific and the former in more general tropical waters worldwide; however, it is suggested that the resident population that is coastal in South Africa may be a separate species that has not bred with the other species for hundreds of thousands of years. So we may have seen South Africa's largest endemic species. But for now a good view of a Bryde's whale is more than enough to satisfy us. They often only show a little part of the back and then the heavily hooked dorsal fin when breathing and do it very stealthy, but we managed to get photographs of the whale, which is rare for this species.

In the afternoon we returned to a terrestrial ecosystem and once again made our way around the western side of False Bay to Table Mountain National Park and Cape Point. This was our first time visiting this park in the glorious sunshine, and the colors of the few fynbos plants in flower made a considerable difference to the appearance of the park. We had some nice birds along the roads, including a very good sighting of an **Orange-breasted Sunbird** and some **Olive Thrushes, Fiscal Flycatcher, Red-winged Starling, and Cape Grassbird**, among others.



Cape Grassbird

We also managed to see **Common Ostrich** and **common eland** in the sun and had three **bontebok** in the sunshine as they grazed the short grass near the beach. Other than that it was a quiet afternoon. We returned to the guest house around sunset, showered and changed, and headed into Simonstown for dinner, before an early night due to another day with the sharks tomorrow.



Day 6 Seal Island

Shark Watching

Accommodation:

Mariner Guest House (4* Guest House)

Food:

We all had a packed breakfast with lunch on shore and then dinner in the town.

Transportation:

Private vehicle & Shark cage diving boat.

The day started with another nice, clear morning. The south wind was blowing stronger than yesterday, but the conditions were still very good. On arrival at the island we quickly saw three predations, of which one was successful. This was very close to the boat by the time we got to the breach site. We saw the end of the chase and the shark take the seal. When we arrived, the blood in the water indicated that the seal had been fatally wounded, and then we saw the shark thrashing at the surface and realized that it had the carcass in its mouth and was sawing off chunks to eat. We watched as the last section of seal (a floating, fat-rich piece) was swallowed by the colossal grey-and-white shape from the deep, before the shark silently glided back under the waves and away.

At this point we decided to tow the decoy, knowing that at least two sharks were in hunting mode and had not made successful hunts this morning. We did get a little nip at the decoy, but nothing more than a bump, before we noticed a natural predation. We reeled the decoy in quickly and made our way to the breach site. The chase was on, the seal was clinging as well it could to the back of the shark, and the shark twisted and turned with incredible and surprising flexibility. Despite understanding that the shark's skeleton is made of cartilage and allows the kind of bone-defying turns that a shark can make, it is still hard to believe your eyes when a three-to-four-meter long animal is turning on a sixpence. Eventually the seal's extra capacity for energy storage paid off, and it made the short dash for freedom back to the island,

before the shark realized the seal had gone. After this we made a second run with the decoy, hoping to peak the interest of this particular shark, but we realized that it was likely that this shark had little energy left to continue the hunt at the moment. Having a unique system called a 'counter current heat exchange' that keeps their body warmer than the outside conditions by +/- 10-15 °C, they are not capable of sustained bouts of intense activity and need rest periods to recharge. On towing the second decoy we had a **Cape Cormorant** fishing nearby, and a second boat also towing their decoy (and, to be honest, a little too close to ours – whilst there are no hard and fast rules for how the boats interact with each other at the island, the general code of conduct is not to be too close and not to 'poach' other boats' sharks when they have them around the cages) got a full breach on their decoy. Luckily it was right in front of our decoy, and many of us got great views of the white belly bursting out of the water and landing in a white spray. We were just pulling our decoy in and were about to move to another part of the island for a third tow (with the action still so hot we were confident of getting a shark on the decoy this morning), when we did get a shark on the decoy. However it was not a breach. Instead a huge 4-meter plus shark came out from nowhere, took the decoy, and dived down. Luke managed to get the decoy to the surface and into the boat, after the shark had spit it out once it had realized that it was only rubber and neoprene and not nutritious fat and protein. The damage was significant but didn't affect the structure or shape of the decoy, and so it was not in any need of repair. But the puncture marks from the teeth were evident and large. While all of this was going on, another boat (the third operator) had a natural predation occur very close to them. It was on the other side of the island, and as we had seen a very close predation and a close chase, in which the seal had won, and we had a shark at the back of the boat and take the decoy, we decided to leave this predation to the other boat and not surround the shark and seal.

At this point we threw the cage in and started chumming. We had three sharks around the cage this morning, including (the now regular) Prop Guard. We enjoyed behavior similar to what we had seen the preceding days, and the visibility still not being great we were not treated to the fantastic experiences that can be possible here.

This afternoon Sally stayed at the guest house, while Derek and Martin left on the boat for the afternoon trip. We would meet up with her later this afternoon before dinner. On our return to the island we went straight to the northern tip of it, where a lot of the activity this morning had been centered, and straight away we had a shark around the boat. It was a brief visit but was then followed up by two other sharks, one of which grabbed the bait (coming straight up from below and blindsiding Wellington – who was on the bait today), and a little tug of war ensued. Trying his best not to lose the bait, Wellington did manage to get the majority of the bait back, the shark taking only a little. I think this was a victory for us, however, only a small one, as the shark had used its millions of years of evolution to launch the perfect vertical attack and surprise a boat full of people, who were all focused on looking out for sharks. The tug of war did provide a nice show. The splashing and triangular head thrashing at the surface with flashes of white teeth is the typical image we have of great whites (other than the black triangular dorsal fin). However, this behavior is rarely mirrored in the natural life of the shark. We saw a shark attack, kill, and eat a seal only this morning, and at no point was this behavior seen. Yes, the shark did trash a little at the surface, but the chomping down to break the prey apart was done horizontally to the water; only when a human is holding the bait vertically does the shark show this impressive behavior. It is images and footage such as this which is a major reason behind the shark's bad reputation, which is unjust, as it is us humans who induce this non-natural behavior to 'showcase' the predatory 'instincts' of the shark.

It was at this stage that the massive flock of **Cape Cormorants** started to arrive back at the island from a day out fishing in the open ocean. This procession of around 100,000 cormorants (nearly in neat single file) took at least 30 minutes to file past our boat to their roosts on the island. The island is called Seal Island after the 60,000 – 70,000 Cape fur seals that live here. However, at times it really should be called Cormorant Island, but then I guess that doesn't have the same ring to it, and it certainly doesn't have the same shark connotations, as seals and sharks are so inextricably linked together.

The rest of the afternoon went very well with four more sharks coming around the boat, most of which interacted with the bait and gave the cage divers great views as they turned and 'pursued' the bait, which was being towed parallel with the cage. We even had another visit from Prop Guard, who once again didn't stay around very long. This was beginning to be the pattern with this particular large female, coming in and scaring the other sharks away and not staying around herself. We do not mind a larger shark coming in and scaring the smaller ones away, as long as the bigger one stays around and takes their place. Prop Guard seemed to always have other ideas. Then last but not least we had a huge male (around 4.3 meters long) cruise past the boat, turn around, show his claspers (to confirm his sex), and then swim nice and close by the cage, allowing everyone by far the best views of a shark from the cage we had on

our time on the boat so far. With this and the fading sunlight we packed up the cage, hoisted the anchor, and departed for Simonstown. Meeting up with Sally at the guest house we then had our dinner.

Day 7 Seal Island & Fish Hoek

Wildlife Watching & Rest

Accommodation:

Mariner Guest House (4* Guest House)

Food:

We all had a packed breakfast with lunch on shore and then dinner in the town.

Transportation:

Private vehicle & Shark cage diving boat.

This morning the northerly wind was still blowing, and the sea was a little bumpy on our way out to the island, but the weather was producing perfect winter conditions, and with the relatively low predation activity recently and the change to normal winter conditions we were expecting a good amount of shark activity around the island. We were also very hopeful of lots of action because this was likely to be our last trip, as a front was coming in at around 11 a.m., so we would likely have to call the trip early. Also the next two or three days were likely to be canceled. We were due to leave for Hermanus the day after tomorrow, so we would not be too badly affected (assuming we got the breach today). We still had not seen or photographed the breach on our decoy, and, despite having lots of sharks all around the boat and seeing natural predations, it was the breach we were really keen on seeing.

As soon as we arrived we started seeing activity and a total of five predations. Two resulted in kills, and one we saw very well and close as the shark rose to the surface and started to take chunks from the carcass. We happened to have the decoy in the water at this stage, and the predation occurred nearby. Then the shark, after feeding on the seal, came by and nosed the decoy, following it for a few seconds as Gary tried his best to tow it in quickly so we didn't lose the decoy. The visibility was very poor, and this was affecting the seal movement. The combination of a northerly wind and a front coming in was stirring up the water and creating conditions that were excellent for the sharks and not very good for the seals. This resulted in more seals leaving the island than we had seen recently, but not in the massive numbers that are usually common at this time of year. So we were getting much more activity and hunting around the island compared to recent days, but it still was way down on the averages for this time of year. Whether this would turn out to be an anomaly or another marker of global climate change we would not know for a while. But the weather had had a severe impact on the amount of shark predation activity we had seen. Just the subtle change in conditions today had dramatically increased the hunting rates of the sharks. We continued to tow the decoy around the island; the second tow had a shark come up quickly behind the decoy and take a nibble. However, this was very quick and only the nose and a flicker of the dorsal fin were seen.

We then took a break from towing the decoy as a large group of seals left the island. They were acting very nervously, and we stayed and watched, and then one of the smaller seals on the outside of the group was taken. It wasn't a full polaris breach, but the seal was snatched just at the surface and taken down. The seal or shark never came up again, and so presumably the seal was small enough to have been swallowed whole, or the shark so large that any seal could have been swallowed whole.

We then towed the decoy for a third time. We were doing more decoy tows today, as we would not have time to get the cage in the water, since the front was visibly coming in from the mouth of the bay. This third decoy run finally resulted in a breach. The 4-meter shark came bursting out of the water at around 20 kilometers per hour and fully exposed itself out of the water. It came down vertically, and we all got shots of the breach. This is what we had been waiting for, and it is one of the most incredible natural hunting behaviors in the world. Whether it was the same shark who had investigated the decoy earlier we do not know, but it was a large shark and almost as large as they get and still breached so quickly and came clear of the water. In fact, before the breach we had a shark investigate the decoy again, this time the whole tail came out, and Martin even got some pictures. These pictures show that this shark was not the same as the one who launched the full breach, so at least two different sharks had investigated our decoy on the third tow.

We were so buoyed by this success and, looking at the weather, realized that we had a little more time. So we decided to run the decoy a fourth time. But we didn't get another breach and so anchored briefly and spent around an hour to try and get a shark around the boat before the weather started to come in strong. However, there weren't any sharks coming around the boat, only a couple of sharks briefly skirting the periphery.

So we called it a day and headed inshore towards Macassar Beach in an attempt to see if we could find any whales; there are sometimes southern right whales that come close to the sandy shore when storms are brewing. But we didn't see any whales, as it was still very early in the season for southern right whales to be in False Bay. They tend to travel from the east to the west at this time of year as they find their birthing and mating bays and usually get to False Bay later on.

Once back at the harbor we went to the guest house and changed and then traveled to Fish Hoek for lunch and also to visit a couple of camera shops. We then had the rest of the afternoon to rest and relax before dinner in Simonstown.



Day 8 Kommetjie, Hout Bay & Camps Bay

Sightseeing

Accommodation:

Mariner Guest House (4* Guest House)

Food:

We had breakfast in the guest house, lunch on the road and a special birthday dinner at Harbour House in Kalk Bay

Transportation:

Private Vehicle & Walking.

Today was Sally's birthday, and, with the weather closing in and the shark trips cancelled (which was fully expected), we decided to explore some areas we had not visited yet. A storm had blown overnight, and while the rain and wind had picked up and the swell was increasing throughout the morning, the rain and skies cleared a little, and so we decided to head for Kommetjie on the western side of the Cape Peninsula after breakfast.

While we had breakfast in the guest house we had a brief flyby from a **Peregrine Falcon**. These rapid avian predators are usually seen around the rocky coastal areas of most of the world, but recently they have been found more commonly in urban areas, with buildings being perfect manmade nesting cliffs and the proliferation of feral pigeons forming a huge and constant food source.

After breakfast we left Simonstown and drove around the bay towards Fish Hoek and from here west and over the shallow hills and new housing estates toward the long and windswept beach of Kommetjie. With Derek having had some good success with photographing the kite surfers the other day, we went to see if there were any around at Kommetjie and the Soetwater beach, which is usually a good haunt for kite surfers. However, there were none here today, and only a couple of pairs of rare **Bank Cormorants** were feeding in the surf zone and a small flock of **Rock Martins** feeding on sand flies and sand hoppers on the decaying kelp. With no kite surfers around we left after some photography of the rolling waves that make this beach famous.

So we left the beach and headed towards the Slangkop Lighthouse, which is usually reached through a campsite, which, however, was closed at this time of year. So we drove and walked around the coast to the lighthouse. Various birds were around, including many **African Sacred Ibis**, **Kelp Gulls**, **Helmeted Guineafowl**, **Cape Cormorants**, and **White-breasted Cormorants**, as well as lots of other species like **Olive Thrush**, **Cape Rock Thrush**, **Cape Spurrow**, **Hadada Ibis**, and **Cape White-eye**.

The greens around the campsite were dotted with many mole hills, the sign of some of the regions most unusual and highly endemic species. The Cape region of South Africa is home to a large number of Cape golden moles, Cape mole-rats, and African mole-rats, most of which are never seen and some are only known from a handful of observations by scientists. We didn't spend any time trying to get views of the moles, since, while some of the hills looked fresh, there were no obvious signs of current activity.

On leaving the lighthouse and driving towards Hout Bay on the scenic road of Chapman's Peak, we had one more chance to see if Table Mountain was visible from Soetwater beach, but the cloud cover was pretty low, and we didn't hold much hope until later in the day. The drive around Chapman's Peak takes in some of the best views over Kommetjie and then Hout Bay. The nine-kilometer route is one of the most spectacular marine routes in the world, and with 114 curves and lined with olive trees and the occasional

southern right whale or humpback whale in the bay it is a must for anyone visiting the Western Cape. We stopped at the various view points and continued around to Hout Bay.

From here we carried on around the coast road toward Cape Town. This road took us along the western side of Table Mountain National Park and around some of the more upmarket and modern suburbs of Cape Town, including Camps Bay. Once at Cape Town we visited the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront and had our first good views of Table Mountain. The clouds had cleared by now and the views were great. We spent a bit of time around the Waterfront before heading back south towards Simonstown. Along the way we stopped at a small beach (Clifton beach) just south of Camps Bay. Derek was keen to try wave photography, and before it got too late and dark with the setting sun we had some good photography on this perfect little beach located in between a few roads containing some of Cape Town's most desirable houses.

On arrival back at Simonstown we rested for a while before heading to the nearby and award-winning seafood restaurant, Harbour House Restaurant in Kalk Bay. After a spectacular meal and some really good local wine we turned in for our final night in Simonstown. Tomorrow we would visit Cape Town again and then head east around the bay to Hermanus. Hopefully the whales would be there after their migration west along the coast.

Day 9 Robben Island & Hermanus

Sightseeing & Traveling

Accommodation:

Hermanus Beach Villa (4* Guest House)

Food:

Breakfast in the guest house, lunch at the V&A Waterfront and dinner in a restaurant in Hermanus.

Transportation:

Private vehicle, Ferry, Tour bus & Walking

This morning we left the guest house early and drove to Cape Town and the V&A Waterfront, once again taking in the scenic Chapman's Peak drive. On arrival at the Waterfront, Table Mountain had its table cloth on once again, as is so often the case on winter mornings. We got to the Nelson Mandela Gateway, boarded the Thembekile (meaning 'trustworthy') Ferry, and began to head to Robben Island. Located just 6.7 kilometers off the coast in Table Bay, this small island has had a very infamous history, some of which we would explore this morning.

After the 20-minute journey over the bay to the island we disembarked and boarded a coach to take us around some of the sites. Our guide was Thabo, and our driver was called Serge. They started by taking us out of the harbor and to a sacred Muslim pilgrimage site on the island. The Moturu Kramat was built in 1969 to commemorate Sayed Abdurahman Moturu, the Prince of Madura. He was one of Cape Town's first imams, who was exiled to the island in the mid-1740s and died there in 1754. After its construction Muslim political prisoners would pay homage at the shrine before leaving the island.

We then went past the old maximum security prison and the leper cemetery. The island's history of exile from the mainland started well before the apartheid era. In the 1800s it was used as a leper colony and an animal quarantine station, but in fact it was the Dutch in the 1600s who first used the island as a prison, and even then it was mainly used for political prisoners with political leaders of various overseas Dutch colonies being kept here (particularly from Indonesia – hence the establishment of the Moturu Kramat). The leper cemetery is in surprisingly good condition, as are many of the places on the island.

However, most of our visit today was focusing on the modern history of the island, and this includes the private prison for Robert Sobukwe. This political prisoner was kept in solitary confinement and in fact in his own personal prison, because he was deemed so dangerous because of his leadership of the Pan African Congress, which was a very active group trying to destabilize the apartheid government.

Next we went past the church built especially for the lepers in the 19th century, which is still used occasionally today, to the convict prison. Around the prison is the main village on the island, whose population is around 200 people. Most of them are former political prisoners, guards, and their families. There was a functioning community on the island until quite recently, when the local economy dried up and the school closed, shops closed more and more, and many of the residents had to travel to the mainland for jobs. Most of the youngsters nowadays do not want to live isolated on the island permanently.

Traveling further around the island we passed the lighthouse, old World War II gun battlements, and other derelict buildings. The lighthouse has always been critical for the island, as the waters around it are very treacherous. There are many shipwrecks around Robben Island, and we passed one from as recent as August 2014, the *Claremont*. The island is also home to some interesting wildlife, and we had distant

views of **springbok**, a **Cape grysbok**, **Blue Cranes**, and **common eland** before arriving at the limestone quarry. Many of the political prisoners worked at this quarry, including Nelson Mandela, and during all the years he spent working in the quarry, with the bright sun shining off the white limestone, his eyes were permanently damaged.

We then came to the prison where Nelson Mandela himself was incarcerated. Our guide was Nzoki, who was also imprisoned here from 1984 to 1988 after a two-year sentence served in Paarl prison on the mainland. Like many of the guides he was a political prisoner, who worked tirelessly for equality throughout Southern Africa. We were shown around the prison, including the mess hall (with different meal allocations for white, black, and colored prisoners), the courtyard (in which Mandela grew plants and wrote many of his letters), and then of course his cell, number 7, which is complete with all of the furniture and supplies that were given to each prisoner as standard.

After visiting this prison the tour was completed, and we made our way back to the harbor and boarded the ferry back to the mainland. Once back at the V&A Waterfront we had lunch and then started our journey east, first out of Cape Town and back to False Bay and then around and beyond Macassar Beach, over the Cape Hills, and into Hermanus. We checked into our accommodation and then went into town for our dinner.

Day 10 Hermanus / Walker Bay

Whale Watching & Scenic Flight

Accommodation:

Hermanus Beach
Villa (4* Guest
House)

Food:

Breakfast was eaten at the guesthouse with lunch and dinner at cafes and restaurants in Hermanus.

Transportation:

Private vehicle,
Boat & Chartered
Flight.

This morning after breakfast we went to the harbor, and after a briefing from Ken (our whale-watching guide), which included being shown baleen plates, how to identify different whales, and a little on the distinctive callosities that grow on the faces and flukes of southern right whales we boarded our boat, the Mirosha. With the way of the weather at the moment it was likely that the whales in the bay would be aggregated around the sandy beaches farther east, toward the famous shark-diving hotspot of Gaansbai.

Along the way we passed a couple of **Cape fur seals**, before our guide spotted the first whales. We were treated to three **southern right whales** just off sandy beaches; there was one female and two males, and the males were eagerly trying to engage in courtship. The courtship involves lots of body contact, and the males will wrestle each other in shows of strength to win over the females and establish mating and dominance hierarchies. The mating of southern right whales is not as violent as that of other whale species; instead, the males are likely to mate with many females and the females with many males, so that the main form of competition is sperm competition and not male-male competition. As we watched the whales at the surface they started to move closer and closer to the boat. Whales here are very used to boats and are very curious; they come close to boats often to look at the people on board. One of the males seemed to lose out in the unseen below-surface battle of the males, and we then had the other male and the female at the surface involved in lots of rubbing. We had good views of the pectoral fins and some tail lobbing, but mostly the whales were poking their noses out of the water. One of them had a whitish chin, making it easier to identify the two different whales. While we rolled in the swell and watched this pair of whales, another pair of whales were involved in a far more energetic behavior, including a couple of breaches and tail lobbing displays, around 700 meters away. We did go a little closer to this second pair, and on our way (they had stopped displaying at this stage) we found another whale near the beach. We only had a quick view of this one before we decided to head out into deeper water to try and find a humpback whale. We didn't see any humpbacks, but on the way back to the harbor we saw a few **African Penguins**.

Once we returned to the harbor we grabbed some lunch in one of the ocean-front cafés. Hermanus is world-famous for having the best land-based whale watching in the world; in fact, many times during our drives around the coast, to and from the harbor, we saw several whales just below the cliffs that line the coastline here.

After lunch we headed out of Hermanus into the wine-growing country just inland and to a small airstrip. Here we met David Austin, our pilot, and departed for an hour-long scenic flight over the bay. This chartered flight in a small Cessna would give us a very different view of the whales and maybe other wildlife in the region. Setting off we started on a course that took us over Pearly Beach and then over Dyer Island. This island is adjacent to Seal Island (a different one to the one in False Bay), and the channel of

water in between is called Shark Alley and is reported to have the highest density of great white sharks in the world. They do not breach here, and to observe natural predations here is very unlikely (which is why we didn't come here for our shark watching), but we hoped to see some from the plane. We could already make out several cage diving boats around the islands and lots of seals basking all over Seal Island, but very few on the similar-looking Dyer Island. Just after leaving Pearly Beach we found a very shy **southern right whale**, and then around Shark Alley we spotted several **great white sharks** as they swam between the cage diving boats, which all were trying hard to get them to their boat and the cage and some interaction with the bait handlers. Having spent so long on the shark boat in False Bay it was great to see the sharks and the whole cage-diving operation from this angle, giving a very different perspective, as the sharks casually and gracefully cruised between the boats and often dived just out of visibility when approaching the boats at first, to go underneath and then come to the surface on the other side of the boat to launch a deeper assault on the bait and hopefully not to be seen by the bait handler.

We then flew over Gaansbai and into Walker Bay; here we quickly found a group of four mating **southern right whales**. While this was one more than we had around the boat this morning, the behavior was much the same. However, from the air we were able to see the whales clearly and to see their whole bodies (something which is very difficult from the boat, and with more than one whale it can also be hard to identify the different anatomy of them from the boat). The whales were all jostling for position, and the larger female seemed to be being buffeted from pillar to post by the three males. There was no mating observed, and we left the group to find another one. On the way we found a **Cape fur seal** and a **common bottlenose dolphin** traveling together.

Further into the bay we saw many more whales, including another breeding group of four males and a female as well as several pairs. These pairs happen after the males have established the breeding hierarchy and one of them gets first breeding rights. Many of these pairs were shyer than the groups and wouldn't let us get lower to see them. The visibility of the water from the air looks very good, but it was amazing how the whales didn't have to dive down very far to be completely obscured from view. Dave and Martin then spotted a whale breaching a little way off, and while it did this more than once, by the time we got there it had stopped.

At this point we were in danger of running out of fuel, and so we headed back towards the airstrip. Along the way we passed over the brackish lagoon, which at the right time of year (a little later in the year) can be full of flamingos and other migrating birds, as well as over farmland and vineyards. On the way back huge scars in the landscape were visible from the many fires that occur here annually, some of them manmade and some natural. However, all have impact on the vegetation and the wildlife, including the many birds here. This is part of the famous Overberg region and a birding hotspot of the world, and tomorrow we would see if we could encounter some of these birds after another whale-watching trip.

On arrival back at our accommodation, Sally and Derek went down to the beach just at the front of the guest house before dinner, and just as if to top off a whale-filled day there was a **southern right whale** in the water, just beyond the breakers.

Day 11 Hermanus / Walker Bay

Whale Watching

Accommodation:

Hermanus Beach
Villa (4* Guest
House)

Food:

Breakfast was eaten at the guesthouse with lunch and dinner at cafés and restaurants in Hermanus.

Transportation:

Private vehicle &
Whale watching
boat.

This morning we had breakfast in the guesthouse, looking out onto the bay. We had two **southern right whales** visible before setting off for another whale watching trip. As the Mirosha cruised away from the harbor and into the bay the sea mists were rolling in along the coast and blanketing the cliffs in a very atmospheric view back towards the shore. In fact, before we left the harbor we had a very photogenic **Grey Heron** silhouetted in the mist of the early morning. The sunrise was very pretty this morning, rising over the peninsula that forms the eastern edge of Walker Bay.

As the sun was rising higher we had brief views of a whale traveling along the shallows, but it was not hanging around, and so we moved on. We then saw a mother and her calf near the beach; the calf was from 2015 and very small. To reduce our impact on the young whale we kept a good distance, and while we could see them through binoculars we didn't stay very long and left them to find other whales that we could approach closer. This was the fifth calf that the whale-watching operators had seen this season, and because it was quite early in the season this was a good sign of many babies to be born.

Around the eastern edge of the bay we came across two traveling **humpback whales**. The humpbacks are not usually as forthcoming when it comes to staying close to the boats here, and so we had to keep moving as they came up to breathe regularly. We had nice close views of these whales as they swam eastwards. They didn't breach for us, but before they carried on and swam out to deeper water they did give us nice views of their tail flukes as they dived down.

Turning around and slowly coming back towards the harbor we had three **southern right whales**. This mating group included a male brindled whale. These are paler in color and appear brown or bronze. It is just a mutation and doesn't stop them from living a full and normal life, but there are not many in the population, so to see one and get nice, close views was special. It also meant we could easily identify the different parts of the whale as they all came to the surface in contact with each other and flukes and tails flying everywhere. They were very accommodating of our boat, and as we idled they swam closer and closer, until they were only around 10 meters away from us. Being this close we could see the whales' eyes very clearly. The eye is located flush on the side of the head at the end of the mouth, and so to raise the eye out of the water the whale must either lift his entire head clear of the water (rare – spy-hopping is only raising the nose out of the water) or lie on its side, drifting up to the surface. This is what the female and the brindled whale did a lot during this very close and curious encounter. By now the third whale (the black male) had left the group and swam off. Whether this was because the brindled whale had wooed the female successfully and beaten off the other male's challenge or because the black male was just not confident enough to be that close to our boat we do not know. But the female and particularly the brindled male hung around for a long time and allowed us to get very good views of the eyes. A whale's eye is a very unusual sight; it is large and very mobile, swiveling in the huge socket to take in as much of its surroundings as possible.

After around 30 minutes with these whales we departed and slowly made our way back to the harbor. The weather (wind mainly) was looking bad for tomorrow, and so we rearranged our activities to have another whale-watching trip this afternoon and our birding tour of the western Overberg tomorrow morning.

So we returned to town and had lunch before going back to the harbor for our second whale-watching tour of the day. This was to be our last trip on a boat for this tour, and for land-loving Derek and Sally this was very welcome news. So far the experience of being out at sea had paid off with fantastic sightings of sharks and currently some nice and close whale watching, but we were hoping for a special whale encounter, and this afternoon would be our last chance.

As we left the harbor many **Greater Crested Terns** were flying around. We also did not need to go very far, as a fishing boat had radioed the Mirosha to let the captain know that a pair of whales had been spotted just near the harbor only a few minutes before. So we stopped around the entrance to the harbor and searched; alongside a couple of **Cape fur seals** we then found the **southern right whales**, but there were three instead of the two the fisherman had seen. They hung around the boat for over an hour and came so close that it would have been possible to touch them as they came up and spy-hopped at the back of the boat and near the dive step at water level. Being this close (within two meters of us) and at eye level with the huge whales was an unforgettable and magical wildlife experience and one that words cannot do justice to. The water was so clear here that we could see the whales moving towards the boat and then swimming underneath. This was a great way to see the true size of the whale, the tail being around five meters across and the enormous body weighing between 40 and 50 tons. The whole whale experience is different when the whales are this curious and playful and the views are this close; everything is amplified, the blows are loud, and the spray is ejected many meters into the air. The cloud of water vapor spraying over the boat and covering the people stands downwind. The flippers when raised out of the water are larger than a double-bed mattress and weigh more than a fully grown cow (each), and the tip of the noses are a good four meters away from the end of the mouth and the eye. These were the two parts of the animals that we saw the most as the whales put on the show around the boat.

After spending over an hour in the presence of these two denizens of the deep we made the short journey back to the harbor and over dinner reveled in the incredible encounter with the whales. Tomorrow we would begin our new land-based wildlife watching section of the trip and leave the sea behind, and with the spy-hopping and tail-lobbing display we were treated to this afternoon we felt like we had achieved the vast majority of what we had set out to do on the ocean wildlife section of this tour.



Day 12 Hermanus / Walker Bay & Overberg

Whale & Bird Watching

Accommodation:

Verde Hotel Cape Town Airport (4* Hotel)

Food:

We had breakfast in the guesthouse, lunch with Joyce in Onrusrivier and dinner at the hotel at the airport.

Transportation:

Private vehicle & Walking.

This morning we met Billy, our birding guide, and departed straight to Fernkloof Nature Reserve, which is just on the north-east side of Hermanus and stretches high into the hills and onto the Overberg. This is one of the best reserves for the endemic fynbos of the Western Cape and a birding hotspot. We would start here and then head around the farmland to find as many of the local and hopefully endemic bird species as possible.

We first explored the gardens of Fernkloof. Here nearly every species of fynbos is planted, and Billy took us through some of the more spectacular and unusual examples, including the species that uses ants to collect seeds by housing nectar pods at the ends of its leaves to help protect them from fires (which are common here). The seeds are collected by the ants, which have to walk all of the way to the end of the leaves to get the nectar then take the seeds underground into their food store. Here some may be eaten, but many will be left over and begin to germinate. Even when the seed starts to germinate the ants cannot get rid of them as they begin to fill up the food store, because the seed pod excretes a waxy substance that makes it too slippery to be carried out to the surface. The proteas which are one of the largest groups of plants in the fynbos, and also probably the most famous, are a major source of sugar for many birds, mammals, and invertebrates, as well as for the first peoples to inhabit the Western Cape. Among the unusual-looking fynbos are some more familiar-looking plants belonging to the *Erica* genus that heather belongs to. South Africa has over 700 species of heath plants, while Scotland, for example, has a mere eight. The huge diversity of plant life is just one of the reasons for the high numbers of birds, and after a quick look in the visitor center, which has a very good display of the different flowers here, we began our quest for birds.

As we walked through the gardens and up one of the trails a short distance into the fynbos we saw some **Sunbirds (Orange-breasted and Southern Double-collared)** and had great but distant views of a **Pale Chanting Goshawk** perched in the glorious morning light as the sun rose above the hills.



Pale Chanting Goshawk

We then tried to get the endemic **Cape Sugarbirds** to us and had nice views of a female that came quite close to the pathway. But then we decided to depart and try another area, as the birds were not as prolific here as we would have hoped for. On leaving we did see a **Peregrine Falcon** flying overhead; maybe this was the reason why there were relatively fewer birds here than usual.



Cape Sugarbird

After leaving we drove towards Rotary Way and a viewpoint high above Hermanus on the way to the wine-growing regions. On this drive we had brief views of a **Cape grey mongoose** and some **chacma baboons**, which often wait around the viewpoint in hope for picnickers coming here and leaving behind some snacks. As we took in the magnificent scenery over Walker Bay we had nice views of a female **Orange-breasted Sunbird**.

We then visited the Hamilton Russel Vineyards. They have a large vineyard, an olive orchard, and a small manmade lake that sometimes has good bird life. The lake was quiet, but we took advantage and had a wine tasting.

We then carried on toward the wheat-growing fields and a different set of bird species. Along the way we had great views of a male **Orange-breasted Sunbird** complete with his yellow pectoral tufts. These colorful patches are a part of his breeding plumage, and this male was clearly in full breeding mood. In the fields we found a herd of **grey rhebok**, a small antelope that inhabits the hills of the Western Cape and resembles a small goat more than an antelope. Also close to the rhebok was a small flock of six **Blue Cranes**. This is South Africa's national bird and one of the most impressive and beautiful birds in the whole of Africa. However, they are still illegally hunted and poisoned around farmland, as they are believed to be large seed feeders and therefore pests. The reality is that while they do take some seeds their main diet are insects, including grasshoppers and crickets, and also small vertebrates like lizards, frogs, and rodents. Most of these are genuine pests to the farmer's crops. So they provide a good service for the farmers more often than not, but they are still being killed. As a result of this persecution they are quite skittish, and we were unable to get very close, but we were able to get nice views and photographs of them as they foraged in the fields. Carrying on around the agricultural area we had a great sighting of a **Black-winged Kite**, typically perched on the roadside wires looking for prey in the grass below. We also saw many smaller birds such as **Cape Canary**, **Karoo Prinia**, **Yellow Bishop**, **Cape Siskin**, **African Stonechat**, and **Zitting Cisticola**, as well as larger species like **African Marsh Harrier**, **Cape Crow**, **African Darter**, and the rare and stunning **Black Harrier** that Billy and Derek saw flying close to a small conifer plantation. Heading back to Hermanus we made one last stop at one of the many viewpoints along the coastline of Hermanus, where we found a couple of **rock hyrax** resting here, but no whales below in the surf.

We then went to collect our luggage from the guest house before loading up the vehicle and heading the short way west to the town of Onrusrivier to pick up Joyce. After getting Joyce we had lunch in Onrusrivier and then departed back to Cape Town. The drive up and over the hills was very windy and the traffic not too bad, so we made it to our hotel in time to rest and relax before having dinner, after which

we turned in for the night. Tomorrow we would leave the coast and head inland to the dry and seldom-visited regions of the Karoo and to the Kalahari around the old mining towns of Upington and Kimberley.

Day 13 Witsand

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

Accommodation:

Witsand Kalahari Reserve (Private Chalets)

Food:

We had breakfast at the hotel with lunch en-route and dinner in Witsand.

Transportation:

Domestic Flight & Private Vehicle

This morning we departed for the airport early and caught our flight to Upington at 7:10. The plane made good time, and we arrived a little early. After collecting our luggage we met our new guide / driver, John. He would be taking us through the Karoo / Kalahari ecosystem in search of some of Africa's most elusive species. John has spent a long time painstakingly researching and building up working relationships with the various farmsteads and local researchers, who either have these elusive species on their properties or are working with them in their line of research. This work would enable us to try and get views of animals like aardvarks, aardwolf, black-footed cat, and other species.

Today we would be traveling into the Kalahari and toward the sand dunes of Witsand. This drive would be a long one today, heading through the Kalahari. After leaving the small town of Upington and the highway we entered dirt roads and started to see many species of birds perched on the fence posts and wires alongside the road. We stopped a few times, the highlights being **Burchell's Sandgrouse**, **Cape Starling**, **African Grey Hornbill**, and **Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill**, as well as a group of **South African ground squirrels**, one of which ran across the road and the rest of the group disappeared off into the bush, occasionally stopping and standing up to observe us as they departed into the Karoo scrub. A further highlight was a huge Sociable Weaver nest, one that was so large that it had brought down a huge branch, which must have weighed a good ton. Close to the reserve we had a **steenbok** on the side of the road, and then on arrival had our lunch.

In the grounds of the reserve we saw **common duiker**, many **springbok**, and a troop of **vervet**. As we were having lunch at one of the chalets we were joined by **Familiar Chat** and a pair of very friendly **yellow mongooses**. After lunch and after settling in, and when the sun had gone down a little and the temperature dropped, we walked down to the bird hide. We set up the camera traps around the waterhole near the bird hide, and at the hide we had some good birds, including **Ant-eating Chat**, **Cape Starling**, **Karoo Scrub Robin**, **Long-billed Crombec**, **Red-faced Mousebird**, **Orange River White-eye**, **Acacia Pied Barbet**, **White-throated Canary**, **Scaly-feathered Weaver**, **Laughing Dove**, **Golden-breasted Bunting**, **Black-chested Prinia**, and **Golden-tailed Woodpecker**, to name just a few of the birds that we spotted from the hide this afternoon.

On leaving the hide and heading down the short pathway to the vehicle we found fresh (from last night) aardvark tracks and a hole dug to get underground termites. The tell-tale marks (apart from the massive hole that could have only been made by very few species) was the long, flat, and round impression in the sand, where the naked and muscular tail of the aardvark had been dug into the ground and used as an anchor as the animal ripped into the earth, using its very powerful claws and forearms.

We then headed back to the chalets, spotting a **gemsbok** lying next to the road in the glorious evening sunshine. Once back at the chalets Zaki made our food for the night and we had dinner. After dinner we went on our first night drive and began our search for some of Africa's most elusive species. There are so many **common duikers** here and also **spring hares**, and these two species made up the majority of the animals seen. The duiker, a small, solitary, forest-dwelling antelope, is usually rather difficult to see, but we must have seen over a dozen this evening alone. The spring hares are very cute and unusual animals. Related to rodents and not hares, they are like enlarged gerbils but are in a family all on their own. Other than these species we did see several diurnal species, such as **springbok**, **gemsbok**, and **red hartebeest**, but the nocturnal species were our main focus.

Along with a high number of **Cape hares** we also spotted a couple of **scrub hares** and a very rare **Smith's red rock hare**. The difference between the Cape hare and the scrub hare is the rusty-colored nape that the scrub hare has, compared to the dark or pale (but never rusty) nape of the Cape hare. Smith's red rock hare is a small hare and more like a rabbit, identifiable by smaller ears, shorter legs, and a more rabbit-like run than typical hares, and of course a different and more rufous coloration all over.

Along with a couple of **Spotted Thick-knees** this was a good night drive and a nice introduction to the wealth of life that can be seen in the South African rural landscape after dark. Yes, we didn't see the main

targets of armadillo, armadillo, pangolin, or black-footed cat, but the Smith's red rock hare was a very unexpected and wonderful surprise.

Day 14 Marrick Game Farm

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

Accommodation:

Marrick Game Farm (Farmstead Guest house)

Food:

We had breakfast at the reserve, lunch en route and dinner at Marrick Game Farm.

Transportation:

Private vehicle.

This morning we had a dawn game drive, which included many **common duikers** again as well as a **Cape hare**, and as the sun rose higher and higher **Familiar Chats** and other birds. We then went to the bird hide and settled in for a couple of hours of birding there. The first birds around were **Laughing** and **Red-eyed Doves**; the still water and the morning sun rays made photography of these birds just perfect with near perfect reflections. A little later other birds began to come along, including **Red-headed Finch**, **Red-faced Mousebird**, **Yellow Canary**, **Acacia Pied Barbet**, **Orange River White-eye**, **Cape Starling**, **African Red-eyed Bulbul**, **Rufous-vented Warbler**, and **White-browed Sparrow-Weaver**. We also watched as a flock of **Red-faced Mousebirds** in a tree, all warming themselves in the sun; the berries that the mousebirds like to eat are hard to digest, and the warmth of the sun speeds along the process. More species began to arrive, including **Violet-eared** and **Black-faced Waxbills**, **Golden-breasted Bunting**, and many unidentifiable female weavers. In between the bird sighting a **common duiker** came down to drink; he didn't hang around but twice came down, and we had nice views of this usually hard-to-see antelope. On our way back to the chalet and breakfast Martin collected the camera traps, and we had a **common duiker** come and drink as well as a couple of **gemsbok** overnight. Before getting back we had further birding highlights, including **Common Scimitarbill**, **Ashy Tit**, and the stunning **Crimson-breasted Shrike**. At breakfast **yellow mongoose** and **Familiar Chat** were around again, expectant of food, and then after breakfast a **South African ground squirrel** came and paid us a visit.

At around 11:00 a.m. we left the reserve and began the 280-kilometer journey to Marrick Safari in Kimberley. We stopped at an old colonial post office building for lunch and in Kimberley met Brian, one of John's friends and a passionate birder, who would be helping us out while here. After a brief stop at Marrick's reception we went to the farm, checked in and took our rooms in the huge old farm house. The farm is a hunting and game farm, where they raise springbok, zebra, black wildebeest, blue wildebeest, red hartebeest, and ostrich for game meat (which can either be purchased by hunters who want to go out and shoot their own animal or rounded up, slaughtered, and sold by the farm). But by keeping vast areas of veld free from predators and domestic livestock, the smaller wildlife abounds here, and at night we would head out with hopes of some special species. The farm also has three very friendly and overweight dogs as well as two orphaned and semi-tamed meerkats. These meerkats were good fun to spend time with and photograph; it is not every day you get close to meerkats like this. Before dinner we also had a nice **Golden-tailed Woodpecker** sighting around the garden and a pair of pretty **Gabar Goshawks**.

Martin was then taken out briefly with the farm manager to set the camera traps up around a couple of waterholes. We then had dinner, and afterwards prepared to head out into the chilly / cold night in search of the speciality species for the farm, the armadillo. Excluding the many **springbok** and **spring hares** that we saw, the first animal was a snuffling and foraging **armadillo**. We watched and quietly followed the largely naked and strange-looking animal as it ambled across the ground. It stopped every now and again to dig a little into the earth, perhaps picking up a few termites or just investigating a potential nest by scent. The armadillo looks like a strangely-designed animal, but every aspect has been honed to perform one task, and it does that task very well indeed. It is a champion termite- and anteater. The large and powerful forearms and huge curved claws are capable of digging down into earth as tough as concrete, the sparsely-haired skin is great for not accumulating dirt and dust from constant digging, the arched back and short round and heavy tail form a perfect anchor when the animal needs leverage for digging, the characteristic long nose and elongated, sticky tongue need no real explanation for an ant-eating species, and the large ears help to locate the subterranean nests of many species of ants and termites. We were allowed to follow the armadillo for around 10 to 15 minutes before he finally trotted off and away into the night.

We then went on to see two **African wildcats** (one of which ran and climbed onto a small termite mound and almost posed for us perfectly), two **black-footed cats** (both seen distantly, but their markings and size were clearly-recognizable indicators), and two **bat-eared foxes** (which both emerged from a small termite

mound, a mound that could barely have been big enough for a pair of bat-eared foxes). As the night drive continued we saw many more **bat-eared foxes** and a family of **Cape porcupines**, including three very young and small babies, complete with smaller black-and-white-banded quills. They were by far the smallest and youngest porcupines anyone with us had ever seen, and little miniatures of the adults – this was a very nice and interesting sighting. At this point we called it a night and headed back to the farmstead for a good night's sleep.



Day 15 Marrick Safari

Wildlife Watching

Accommodation:

Marrick Safari
(Farmstead Guest house)

Food:

All our meals were eaten at the farm in between wildlife watching activities.

Transportation:

Private vehicle & Walking.

This morning after breakfast we left the farm and met Brian at Kamfers Dam. Here one of only three **Lesser Flamingo** breeding grounds in Africa is found, and the vast numbers of birds were clear to see as we approached the lake. We walked along the banks of the lake and along the railway to get to the area of the lake where the tens of thousands of Lesser Flamingos and smaller numbers of **Greater Flamingos** were feeding. The breeding population was lost here around 20 years ago, when a nearby mine allowed all of its chemicals to leak down into the lake and kill off many of the animals that the flamingos feed on. Since then the outrage of this forced the mine to clean up their act and also forced the local government to take effect and clean up the lake. To help encourage the return of breeding flamingos a manmade island and concrete nests were built. These worked with great effect, and in good years there can be over 80,000 flamingos here. Today there were around 40,000, and the sight was breathtaking. As we walked closer we had very nice views of the birds, so many, and all moving so coordinated that they appeared as a pink slick moving along the surface of the lake. Over the years of the flamingos coming back and growing in number they have now made their own natural mud nests and have expanded their breeding ground to nearly all banks of the lake, including near to where we were, and we could see the mud nests very clearly from our vantage point.

From here we went to another wetland area, located on the property Springbok Farm. This is one of Brian's favorite birding spots, and we were not disappointed with the wealth of birdlife. We had only just started in the farmland when **Red-knobbed Coot, African Snipe, Black-winged Kite, Black-headed Heron, Reed Cormorant, Lesser Swamp Warbler, Western Cattle Egret, African Stonechat, Cape Shoveler, Spur-winged Goose, Common Moorhen**, and many other birds all became abundant.

From the wetland areas we continued to the wheat fields, where we saw **African Marsh Harrier** flying low, hunting over the fields, as well as a **Common Quail**, the latter being one of the hardest birds to find due to their incredible camouflage and habit of remaining perfectly still. On our way to a salt pan on the farm we had great views of a pair of **Black-winged Kites** perched and then taking off and flying together away over the farm. The salt pan had many **Greater Flamingos** and **Little Grebes, Chestnut-banded Plover, Kittlitz's Plover, and Wood Sandpiper**. The diversity of habitats in such a small area of farm was amazing, and the resultant bird life was spectacular. We then began to turn back, having further views of **Black-throated Canary, Red-capped Lark, Neddicky, Plain-backed Pipit, and Ant-eating Chat**. On leaving the farm we watched as an **African Fish Eagle** called out and then circled above us.

At this point we split up, with Derek going with Brian to try and see whether he could get his camera fixed in town, while the rest of us went back to Marrick for lunch. On the way back we spotted a very nice male **Namaqua Dove**, and then a **slender mongoose** crossed the road. The road we took back took us through some hunting and breeding farms, and we found some animals on both sides of the road, such as roan antelope, nyala, and lesser kudu, and then there were some species that were not confined to the fenced-in paddocks, such as **meerkat, common warthog, and slender mongoose**. On arrival back at the farm the two semi-tame meerkats were walking through the corridors of the house, and the wonderful sight of one

of the meerkat standing up and peering at itself in the mirror greeted us as we headed to our rooms before lunch.

Martin then went out to collect the camera traps and see if we had seen anything. We did manage to get a family of **bat-eared foxes** who had come down to the waterhole to drink, plenty of **springbok**, **red hartebeest**, **plains zebra**, and finally an **aardvark**. So little is known about aardvarks and their wild behavior that many of the books say that they seldom ever drink. However, we have camera trap footage of the same aardvark coming to the same waterhole two nights in a row (at almost the same time both nights) and drinking. The sound of the tongue flicking in and out of the water quickly was clearly heard as the aardvark drank for over 30 minutes.

Then we waited for the evening game drive, and in the afternoon we milled around the farm house and particularly tried to get nice and close photographs of the meerkats. At around 16:00 we left for Brian's house, changed into two smaller cars, and drove to back to Kamfers Dam. The flamingos are flying from the lake to their roost sites just before sunset, and we were hoping that if we positioned ourselves on the opposite side of the lake (for this we would need a smaller vehicle than John's to get under the low railway bridge) then we might be able to get good shots and views of the birds as they came flying across the pastel-colored sky to their roosts. We did see the flamingos close and also observed them as they were flying across the lake and to their roost. They were closer to us on this side of the lake, but they were more skittish than we had expected and didn't fly en masse (in their thousands) for us as we had hoped. But nonetheless it was a good wildlife experience.

On the way to Rancher's farm (the farmer whose land most of the lake is located on) we had a large **meerkat** clan run across the road. The fully wild meerkats never stop moving and spend much time traveling from one feeding ground to another and then back to their network of dens. With their speed and the failing light we didn't try and pursue the clan and instead headed straight to the lake. We left when the sun had drifted away beyond the horizon, and on the drive back to the farm the golden sky was filled with the large black silhouettes of hundreds of flamingos.

After dinner we went back out for a spotlighting safari. Almost straightaway we had an **aardvark** come and cross the road, pretty close. The aardvark then carried on foraging and feeding in much the same way as the one yesterday. They move so quickly along the uneven ground, and watching it amble across, stopping and starting at every termite mound, was amazing again. It seemed that Marrick Game Farm really is the place for aardvarks. The animal was in a very similar location to yesterday, and being a similar time, it was a very good chance that this was the same aardvark and this was its nightly routine. It also was quite close by the waterhole that Martin had his camera traps set up, and so again it was a good bet that this was the same one we had seen drinking.

Later on we saw another **aardvark**, this one a little more distant, and the views not as good, but no one is complaining at seeing three aardvarks in two nights here! There were also more views of **bat-eared foxes**, including one digging into the road ahead of us and allowing us to get quite close before running off. We also had brief views of **Cape porcupine**, **black-backed jackal** near the farm house, and of course many **spring hares**, as was becoming usual at night here. As we returned to the lodge we found 10 stunningly-colored sleeping **swallow-tailed bee-eaters** perched in a tree above the road. They were all huddled together for warmth as the nights get rather cold here during the winter.

Day 16 Mokala National Park

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

Accommodation:

SAN Parks Lodge
(Safari Bungalow)

Food:

Breakfast was eaten at the farm with lunch en-route and dinner at the restaurant.

Transportation:

Private vehicle &
National Park
Vehicle.

Today started warm and progressively got hotter and hotter; it was by far the hottest day so far on the tour. At sunrise we took a drive around some of the rockier parts of the farm in search of Smith's red rock hare. These hares live among rocks most of the time, and in the morning they can sometimes be seen basking in the morning sun. We scanned the ancient lava flow and the basalt rocks for an hour or so, unfortunately without success, and then headed out into the fields.

We watched a herd of **springbok** pronking away in the distance. When they pronk they raise the hair on their backs, show off a white pouch, and release pheromones, which alert other springboks to a potential threat that they are pronking away from. This pouch is the reason for the animal's scientific name,

Antidorcas marsupialis; “marsupialis” meaning pouched and not the fact that the springbok is known for jumping.

Also around the grasslands this morning was a family of **Spike-heeled Larks**, feeding next to the road. On our way toward the camera traps we also had nice views of a family of **plains zebra**, including some very young foals, as well as close views of a small flock of **Double-banded Coursers**. These terrestrial birds are so well camouflaged that it is very difficult to get good views of them, but we persevered and were rewarded with nice views close to the vehicle.

On our way back to the farm for breakfast, after collecting the camera traps, we had sightings of various birds, including **Pirit Batis**, **Mourning Collared Dove**, **Laughing Dove**, **Cape Sparrow**, **Cape Wagtail**, **Crowned Lapwing**, **Yellow Canary**, **Kori Bustard**, **Red-headed Finch**, **Spike-heeled Lark**, **Red-crested Korhaan**, **White-browed Sparrow-Weaver**, **Ant-eating Chat**, **African Pipit**, and other arid-region birds. The camera traps revealed the **aardvark** back, drinking once again, as well as (presumably) the same family of **bat-eared foxes**, **Cape porcupine**, and **springbok**.



Kori Bustard

We then had brunch and left the farm for Mokala National Park at around 12:30. As we were preparing for leaving and loading up our luggage into the vehicle we had an **African striped skink**, the two meerkats, and a **Golden-tailed Woodpecker** all around the farm house.

Mokala is one of the newest national parks in South Africa, being established in 2007. The park is continually growing, as SANParks are buying up neighboring farms and expanding the park. The park is used principally as a breeding centre for rare and endangered herbivores, as it doesn't have spotted hyenas or lions present. This means it is a good place to see roan antelope, sable antelope, and the population of plains zebra that are being bred back to the extinct quagga, but also a good place to try and see smaller carnivores that here are under no competition from larger predators.

On the way to the Mokala main gate we drove alongside the boundary fence of a large game farm, which had all of the different species and morphs of springbok (golden, black, white, red, etc.) in different pens, and the sight of black and white springboks was a little strange. There was also a pen containing white rhino babies. This was the wildlife conservation of South Africa conundrum in front of us. On the one side of the road is a national park set up to breed wildlife back, including white rhinos, and then on the other side of the road is a farm with rhinos and many different (non-natural) morphs of animals, specifically bred to be shot.

We carried on down this road until we reached the gate, entered the park, and headed to our camp. Along the way we had more bird sightings, including **Rufous-eared Warbler**, **Violet-eared Waxbill**, **Scaly-feathered Weaver**, and the rare **Short-toed Rock Thrush**. As far as mammals are concerned, we had sightings of **common warthog**, **blue wildebeest**, and **tsessebe**.

After settling into the rooms we went back out for an afternoon game drive, where we had close views of **gemsbok**, **springbok**, great views of **impala** resting underneath acacia trees next to the road, and many families of foraging **common warthog**. As the sun became lower in the sky we spotted another pair of

Short-toed Rock Thrush, the glowing sunlight showing their colors very well. Continuing before it was too dark we came across **roan antelope** and **greater kudu** all around the more rocky areas of the park, the kudu in particular being mostly obstructed by thick vegetation. Greater kudu usually occur in single-sex herds at this time of year, and as well as seeing some females including young and mature females we watched a bachelor group including some males with very large horns. We also visited a bird hide overlooking a muddy waterhole, where the glare of the sun was very harsh and there were not many birds around, just a handful of doves and **Black-winged Stilts**. So we left and continued around the loop route. Shortly before arriving back at the camp we spotted **giraffes** and **tsessebe** moving across the more open savanna of the park in the glorious golden light of pre-sunset.

Back at the camp we had some time to get some warmer clothes and have dinner before heading out on our night drive. Jared Wright was our SANParks driver, and we told him that our major target was the aardwolf. So he decided that he would drive quickly through the first part of the park and then head straight to the grassland, where he had seen aardwolf in the past. As soon as we arrived there we found an **aardwolf**, the smallest member of the hyena family, which feeds exclusively on termites (of the *Trinervitermes* genus). Aardwolves are active only at night as they walk from termite mound to termite mound, licking up several hundreds or sometimes thousands of termites from each one and then moving on. We got decent views of the skittish aardwolf before it bounded off across the grassland, and once we could not find it again we slowly headed back.

Along with many diurnal species such as **blesbok** (a subspecies of the bontebok from the Western Cape coastline) we had brief views of a **zorilla** (striped polecat) and a **South African small-spotted genet** as they ran away from our vehicle and into the dense bush. We could see both species well enough to positively identify them, but they are not very used to vehicles at night. With the park being so new and also with so few people visiting here and then even fewer taking the option of the night drives, the animals are just not very used to vehicles and spotlighting and so are skittish. When we arrived back at the camp we retired for a good night's sleep.



Day 17 Mokala National Park

Wildlife Watching

Accommodation:

SAN Parks Lodge
(Safari Bungalow)

Food:

We had brunch and snacks at the camp restaurant with a packed dinner taken on the evening / night drive.

Transportation:

Private vehicle & National park vehicle.

Today started in a similar vein as yesterday with high temperatures once again. We went out at dawn in the vehicle and found large male **greater kudus** with very impressive spiraled horns. After photographing the kudus we then came across a **common duiker** quickly running away from us and across the road. Carrying on we watched a large family herd of **plains zebra** walking alongside the road and feeding sporadically as they went. Many of the zebras here are very pale and have far more brown and white than black on their coats. This is a result of the breeding project trying to breed back the subspecies of zebra called the quagga. We didn't see any 'true' quagga, but the zebras were certainly not the 'normal' plains zebras that we are used to seeing.

The sun continued to rise, and in a more open area of vegetation we had great views of backlit **giraffes** and **Common Ostriches**. We also visited the bird hide again; there was not much difference from yesterday with doves and stilts being the only birds around, other than a solitary **Cape Wagtail**. Moving off from the hide there was a large herd of **African buffalo** nearby. The rocky hillsides were dotted with euphorbia bushes, and in the absence of black rhino the only herbivore that has a tolerance for this poisonous plant is the **greater kudu**, and we spotted several along the rocky ridges. This very large antelope (the second largest in Africa and third in the world) was dwarfed by **common eland**, which were also around the rocky slopes this morning. Scanning the hillsides we also spotted a **chacma baboon** right

at the top of the ridge, soaking in the morning sun. On the road back to the camp we found a small group of **four-striped grass mice** feeding on seed underneath a couple of bushes next to the road. We also had great views of a male and female **Short-toed Rock Thrush** close to the road, and John was able to call them closer for better views of this Kalahari-endemic bird. Our last sightings this morning were close-by **Common Ostriches** and **common eland** crossing the road.

In the afternoon we stayed around the camp, with some nice birds, including **Jackal Buzzard**, **Rock Martin**, and **Speckled Pigeon** around the lodge, and also a large troop of **chacma baboons** and a small group of **common warthogs** coming down to the waterhole near the cottages. Martin spotted a **Fairy Flycatcher** through the window of the bar, while John had taken Derek, Sally, and Joyce out to try and find this species. We had brunch in the restaurant before meeting up with Jared again and heading out to the large grasslands at the far end of the park, where we hoped to find the sable antelope.

So at 15:45 we set off for Lilydale at the far end of the park. We drove quite quickly to get there, and so we didn't see too much along the way. But en route we had another very quick view of a clan of **meerkats** as they crossed the road and once again didn't hang around, disappearing into the vegetation. On the savanna we started to see larger numbers of animals than we had seen in the thicker vegetation; large herds of **African buffalo**, **tsessebe**, and **red hartebeest**, groups of **black wildebeests** and **gemsbok** as well as solitary **Common Ostriches** were all becoming more and more common along the road. We drove out into the savanna and watched as the sun began to set. We had further views of a pair of **Spotted Thick-knees** and a few **black-backed jackals** walking through the long grass. In the evening light we managed good photography of **red hartebeest**, **springbok**, **roan antelope**, and **common eland**, as well as of **Red-crested Korhaan** too. Having dinner at the vehicle as the sun set was a great experience, and after dark we started to head back to the camp, the only antelope species to have eluded us being the sable.

But then shortly after dark we found all 34 **sable antelopes** that are known in the park. They were sleeping in a small thicket, and while we sure had found them it was not great for photography, as it was pretty dark by now. We decided we would try and find the herd tomorrow on our way out of the park. The official park number of 34 seemed to be inaccurate, as there were a handful of young calves in this group, which is a good sign that this rare species is doing well again. Animals from this herd will be relocated to other parks and reserves around South Africa to help increase their lost range. Further along we found a group of four **white rhinoceros** and then another three, another very protected and secretive animal that is doing quite well at Mokala. We also had sightings of a huge lone bull **African buffalo**, a **common genet** running and then climbing a tree, **zorilla**, great views of a male **mountain reedbuck**, many **spring hares** (once again), and then a female **nyala** close to the camp.



Day 18 De Aar Karoo

Traveling & Wildlife Watching

Accommodation:

Karoo Experience
(Farmstead Guest house)

Food:

We had breakfast at Mokala with lunch en route and then dinner at the farm.

Transportation:

Private vehicle.

In the morning we had a short drive around the camp area. It was quite quiet this morning, with a male **Common Ostrich** dancing and **common eland**, **springbok**, and **plains zebra** feeding by the side of the road all easily seen. Then we found a huge male **greater kudu** walking towards the road. We decided to wait and position ourselves to get good pictures if the kudu continued its pathway onto the road in front of us. However, he had other ideas and just remained in the bush half-hidden and watching us until we left. In fact, a little while later we came by this area again, and the kudu had not got very far; clearly he had remained in the bush hiding for quite a long time, and we were justified in not waiting for him to come out. We did spot a couple of new birds on our way to the hide, such as **Yellow-bellied Eremomela** and **Karoo Lark**. The hide didn't produce anything once again, and so we didn't stay there very long.

We then went to the Kameeldoring Picnic Site to see what birds we could find there, as picnic sites are often very good places for birds. While we were all taking in the birds, Martin spotted the distinctive rounded back of **Temminck's ground pangolin** moving around 75 meters away through the scrub bush. Without thinking about the potential buffalo or rhinos that could be around, Martin just ran off in the direction of the pangolin, getting within about 20 meters, and then saw a large flock of **Helmeted Guineafowl** in the same area. So Martin convinced himself that what he had seen was a guineafowl and turned to come back to the group. Explaining what he saw and what he thought, looking back at the spot where the pangolin had been seen, realizing then that the guineafowl were nowhere near that spot, and then seeing the guineafowl at this distance, it became plainly obvious that it was not a guineafowl that had been seen. Just the rareness of the pangolin had made Martin doubt his initial thoughts. So then Martin and Derek walked back over to the spot where the pangolin was seen, but it had gone. They are deceptively quick across the ground when they want to be, and there were plenty of thick bushes around for the pangolin to hide in. But there were some tracks and also the very tell-tale signs of pangolin feeding, the round holes dug into the ground around termite mounds, which are the perfect hallmark of the pangolin feeding. We searched for a few minutes but couldn't find where the pangolin had gone. Being such a rare animal (an almost once-in-a-lifetime animal), Martin was kicking himself for days after, but it was a view, albeit brief and partial. But this was a good sign that there are pangolins here.

We then had to begin our journey back to the camp so we could have breakfast and then leave. On the way back we had more great sightings of **Common Ostrich**, including males with the white parts of their plumage being stained red with the color of the earth here. As we watched the ostrich at the waterhole, a herd of 23 **African buffalo** arrived. We watched the adults and young babies drink, socialize, and a couple of young bulls play-fighting. Before breakfast we had further sightings of **giraffe** and feeding **red hartebeest**.

At breakfast we decided to give the sable another shot and leave the park via the Lilydale gate, which would give us a nice game drive through the savanna area of the park. We were in a bit of a rush and were focused solely on the sable, so we didn't stop for the **black wildebeest**, **African buffalo**, **giraffe**, and other herbivores, but then came across a male **sable antelope** sitting in the grass. We couldn't find the larger herd we had seen last night, but this beautiful male did pose well for us and allow for nice close-up views. We then left, with some **vervets** near the gate of the park.

We headed across the Kalahari / Karoo biome border toward the small town of De Aar and the game farm Karoo Experience. This is one of the main locations in the only black-footed cat research project in the world, and we would hopefully team up with one of the researchers to find this elusive and tiny predator. Along the way we found another clan of **meerkats** close to the side of the road, including some on sentry duty. Here we had brief (but so far our best) views of meerkats. We then crossed the Orange River back into the Western Cape Province before we left the main roads and headed deep into the Karoo lamb and game farming areas. The lamb here is very famous because of its rich flavor. There is a species of Karoo fynbos that has a strong rosemary flavor, and since this is one of the main food crops that the sheep eat here they are naturally 'seasoned' with the wonderful flavor of rosemary. Nearer to the farm we had a red morph **slender mongoose** run across the road, which here are distinctively red and very different, but are not a different species. The redder color of the earth around here obviously selects for a redder coloration of the animal for better camouflage.

We arrived late in the afternoon, but the colder temperatures here (the Karoo is slightly higher in altitude and during the winter is very cold) force the usually nocturnal species to emerge earlier to take advantage of the warmer temperatures in the daytime. This was evident when we saw three **bat-eared foxes** at the side of the road. At the farm we met Steri, the owner, and Martin went out with him to set up the camera traps. We found a small pond where blue cranes often come and overnight, and there were also tracks of spot-necked and Cape clawless otters here, but there was not anywhere very good to set the camera up, and so we were not sure if the camera positions would result in any images. At dinner we met Elsie, Steri's wife and cook, as well as Martina Kusters, who is a researcher for the Black-Footed Cat Working Group and would hopefully be able to find some of the radio-collared cats for us to see over the next couple of nights.

Then after dark we went out into the cold. Although it was very cold tonight, the wildlife was still around, including many **bat-eared foxes**. They were everywhere and very curious. Steri would play the call of an injured rabbit or antelope calf, and they would come very close to the vehicle. We also saw **mountain reedbuck** as well as having great sightings of an **aardwolf**. This target animal was coming out of a termite mound, presumably its den for the day, and started out very close to the road before running away and off into the night. We were very unlucky with the lack of multiple aardwolf sightings, as in the warmer times of year they often see dozens of aardwolves every night. But we did spot a **common genet**

running in and out of the koppies and followed it for a short while before it returned to the bushy rocks and disappeared.

While we were out in the farmlands looking for wildlife, Martina was out with the VHF antenna, trying to locate the radio-collared cats. We then made a phone call and found out that she had located one of the research animals, a very well habituated female, and so we went to meet her. We found the **black-footed cat** feeding on a spike-heeled lark, and the fierce little feline allowed us to get within two meters of her as she ate the small bird. She finished the bird, not leaving very much at all, and then moved off to find another prey item. These cats are very small and have a high metabolism and therefore have to hunt throughout the night. We followed her but had to use the antenna to find her again. When we did relocate her we had more incredible views as she just sat in front of our vehicle and seemed to be completely ambivalent to our presence. The confidence and aura of this small predator was awesome to behold. This certainly is one of the most incredible animals in Southern Africa, and thanks to Martina we were able to have the best possible views at such close quarters.

We then made our way back to the farm, defrosted (because with the wind chill from being in an open vehicle it was well below freezing), and prepared for another day around the farm, where we would look for some of the smaller diurnal mammals such as rock-hares and elephant shrews.

Day 19 De Aar Karoo

Wildlife Watching

Accommodation:

Karoo Experience
(Farmstead Guest house)

Food:

We had all of our meals at the farm today, in between wildlife watching activities.

Transportation:

Private vehicle.

In order to have a good chance for some of the smaller mammals we had to wait around for the sun to come up and the air temperatures to rise high enough that the sengis (elephant shrews) and rock hares start to bask in the sunlight. We started our search at a prominent and large koppie in the main springbok breeding paddock. This huge field had many **springbok** in it, but they were spread thin over the vast farm. We did have views of a flock of **Blue Cranes** that often come into the fields to feed on the grain that is used to supplement the livestock's diet. We tried to get close to the cranes, but they were even more skittish here than around Hermanus. The reason for this is that some of the farmers on their huge and unpoliceable farms poison and shoot the cranes as they are seen as a large problem (much bigger than they actually are), and so the cranes are very wary of people. One of the farmers around here is currently under police investigation after killing over a dozen or so.

When we arrived at the koppie we scanned the rocks in the sunlight with a scope. While scanning Martin spotted a **Karoo round-eared sengi** twice, just being in the right place at the right time with the scope. The sengi came out and stood still on a rock in the sunlight for a few seconds before disappearing again. Awhile later, while the scope remained aimed at the same place, the sengi came back. Sengis always use the same pathways and are very set in their habits, so we waited a while longer for it to come around again, but this individual didn't make a third pass.

As the day got hotter and hotter we moved to a small dam, where Martin had his camera traps set up. We sneaked around the backside of the dam in order not to disturb any birds or other wildlife that might still be there this morning. We were too late for the Blue Cranes (which often leave just before dawn), but we did see a couple of new birds for the trip, including **Mountain Wheatear** and **Lark-like Bunting**, but at the dam itself there were only a couple of plovers.

We then returned to the farm house for brunch and afterwards headed out to see if we could get any closer to the **Blue Cranes** again. We struggled to get close once more; the cranes only ever allowing us to get to around 100 meters from them before flying off and landing further away. We decided not to stress them out any more and gave up. Then we did some birding around the various farm tracks for larks, warblers, and pipits (for which this region is famous). We did stop for nice views of **Black-headed Canary** as well as a few large **Karoo girdled lizards** basking on the rocks. These large lizards are flat and have overlapping sharp scales that give a girdled appearance. As we were watching the lizards on the koppie Martin spotted another sengi, this one being smaller and darker with relatively large and pointed ears; this was a different species, the **Karoo rock sengi**. This time, though, at least Derek also had brief views of the sengi as it moved quickly among the rocks, searching for invertebrates. When we carried on we found a **yellow mongoose** and three **Karoo Korhaans**, which took off and flew above us and close to the road. This is one of the largest birds in the Karoo region and beautifully patterned.

The rest of the afternoon was relaxed before an early evening drive. This time we were joined by Peter, Steri's son, as Martina once again went looking for the black-footed cats and would let us know later if she had managed to find one on the right property (while she has permission from the surrounding farms to visit their land for research, she would not be able to take us onto their land should the cats be outside of Steri's farm). Early on during the drive we found a displaying male **Karoo Korhaan**, showing off his prominent black beard, which is usually very hard to see in non-breeding display. We then saw one of the korhaan's bigger cousins as a **Ludwig's Bustard** was spotted, which, however, took off and flew away. Once again the huge population of **bat-eared foxes** was out in force, and we had several great views of this cute animal.

After dark we met up with Martina and she told us that a male and female black-footed cat were on a neighboring farm, but that there also was another female with a collar that is rarely seen. After dinner she would go out to try and find that particular cat.

After dinner the decision was made that Derek, Sally and Joyce would stay at the farm and Martin and John would join Martina and have a quick look at the cat and also a hibernating **Southern African hedgehog** that Martina had spotted yesterday in an open termite mound. We did find the hedgehog, and how Martina managed to find this particular termite mound in the field in the dark was incredible, but we didn't manage to find the third cat. So Martin and John returned to the farm for the night and left Martina to carry on her nocturnal research.



Day 20 De Aar (Karoo) - Cape Town

Wildlife Watching & Traveling

Accommodation:

Verde Hotel Cape Town Airport (4* Hotel)

Food:

Breakfast at the farm with lunch in Kimberley and then dinner at the hotel in Cape Town.

Transportation:

Private vehicle, Domestic flight and Airport

This morning we started at 8:30 a.m. again and went out looking for wildlife before completing our packing, having brunch, and departing for the large gold mining town of Kimberley. Driving around the farm roads Derek spotted a **meerkat** sentry standing on top of a termite mound, with the rest of the group running off with tails held high above their backs. They stopped periodically to turn and look at us and then carried on as they moved away and into the bush. We then went to the dam to collect the camera traps (which unfortunately, but not unexpectedly here, didn't result in any images). Leaving the little dam we had great views of four **Ludwig's Bustards** taking off and flying away over the fields. At a small koppie Martin and Joyce spotted a **Karoo rock sengi** scurrying around; again this tiny mammal didn't hang around for prolonged views.

We then departed for the farm house. We left at 11:45 a.m. and began the 350-kilometer drive to Kimberley. Along the way and before we joined the main highway we had views of **Pale Chanting Goshawks** circling around the farmhouses, **Blue Cranes** in the springbok breeding paddock, another clan of **meerkats** running away, a few pretty **steenboks**, **Ludwig's Bustards**, and then a **meerkat** right next to the road. While this one was close and not running head-long into the bush away from us, we had all packed our cameras away in preparation for our flight from Kimberley. Then on the highway and traveling past the many game farms around here we saw a helicopter chasing game with the intention of darting it for capture. This was quite intense and not the usual everyday sighting.

We then met up with Brian again and had lunch in one of the malls in Kimberley before arriving at the airport in time to fly back to Cape Town. On arrival we were shuttled back to the hotel a short distance away and then had dinner there.

Accommodation:

NA

Food:

Breakfast only today and that was at the hotel.

Transportation:

Airport shuttle & International flight

This morning we had breakfast at the hotel. Joyce was due to be picked up by a driver and taken back to her sister's house in Onrusrivier, and we were all able to say our goodbyes before Martin had to leave for the airport for his afternoon flight back to the UK. Derek and Sally left for the airport a little later.

SHARKS, WHALES AND RARE MAMMALS IN SOUTH AFRICA BIRD LIST JULY - AUGUST 2015		
Bold = country endemic Status: NT = Near-threatened, VU = Vulnerable, EN = Endangered		
Common Name (IOC 6.1)	Scientific Name (IOC 6.1)	Trip
	STRUTHIONIFORMES	
	<u>Struthionidae</u>	
Common Ostrich	<i>Struthio camelus</i>	1
	ANSERIFORMES	
	<u>Anatidae</u>	
White-faced Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>	1
Spur-winged Goose	<i>Plectropterus gambensis</i>	1
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>	1
South African Shelduck	<i>Tadorna cana</i>	1
Cape Teal	<i>Anas capensis</i>	1
Yellow-billed Duck	<i>Anas undulata</i>	1
Cape Shoveler	<i>Anas smithii</i>	1
Red-billed Teal	<i>Anas erythrorhyncha</i>	1
Hottentot Teal	<i>Anas hottentota</i>	1
	GALLIFORMES	
	<u>Numididae</u>	
Helmeted Guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>	1
	<u>Phasianidae</u>	
Cape Spurfowl	<i>Pternistis capensis</i>	1
Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	1
	SPHENISCIFORMES	
	<u>Spheniscidae</u>	
African Penguin - EN	<i>Spheniscus demersus</i>	1
	PROCELLARIIFORMES	
	<u>Procellariidae</u>	
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	1
Sooty Shearwater - NT	<i>Ardenna grisea</i>	1
	PODICIPEDIFORMES	
	<u>Podicipedidae</u>	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	1
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	1
	PHOENICOPTERIFORMES	

	<u>Phoenicopteridae</u>	
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	1
Lesser Flamingo - NT	<i>Phoeniconaias minor</i>	1
	PELECANIFORMES	
	<u>Threskiornithidae</u>	
African Sacred Ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>	1
Hadada Ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>	1
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	1
African Spoonbill	<i>Platalea alba</i>	1
	<u>Ardeidae</u>	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	1
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1
Black-headed Heron	<i>Ardea melanocephala</i>	1
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1
-	SULIFORMES	
	<u>Sulidae</u>	
Cape Gannet - VU	<i>Morus capensis</i>	1
	<u>Phalacrocoracidae</u>	
Reed Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo africanus</i>	1
Bank Cormorant - EN	<i>Phalacrocorax neglectus</i>	1
White-breasted Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax lucidus</i>	1
Cape Cormorant - EN	<i>Phalacrocorax capensis</i>	1
	ACCIPITRIFORMES	
	<u>Anhingidae</u>	
African Darter	<i>Anhinga rufa</i>	1
	<u>Accipitridae</u>	
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	1
White-backed Vulture - EN	<i>Gyps africanus</i>	1
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	1
Gabar Goshawk	<i>Micronisus gabar</i>	1
Pale Chanting Goshawk	<i>Melierax canorus</i>	1
African Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus ranivorus</i>	1
Black Harrier - VU	<i>Circus maurus</i>	1
African Fish Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus vocifer</i>	1
Jackal Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufofuscus</i>	1
	OTIDIFORMES	
	<u>Otididae</u>	
Kori Bustard - NT	<i>Ardeotis kori</i>	1
Ludwig's Bustard - EN	<i>Neotis ludwigii</i>	1
Karoo Korhaan	<i>Eupodotis vigorsii</i>	1
Red-crested Korhaan	<i>Lophotis ruficrista</i>	1
	GRUIFORMES	
	<u>Rallidae</u>	
African Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio madagascariensis</i>	1
Purple Gallinule	<i>Porphyrio martinicus</i>	1
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	1
Red-knobbed Coot	<i>Fulica cristata</i>	1
	<u>Gruidae</u>	
Blue Crane - VU	<i>Grus paradisea</i>	1

	CHARADRIIFORMES	
	<u>Burhinidae</u>	
Spotted Thick-knee	<i>Burhinus capensis</i>	1
	<u>Haematopodidae</u>	
African Oystercatcher - NT	<i>Haematopus moquini</i>	1
	<u>Recurvirostridae</u>	
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	1
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	1
	<u>Charadriidae</u>	
Blacksmith Lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>	1
Crowned Lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>	1
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	1
Kittlitz's Plover	<i>Charadrius pecuarius</i>	1
Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>	1
Chestnut-banded Plover - NT	<i>Charadrius pallidus</i>	1
	<u>Scolopacidae</u>	
African Snipe	<i>Gallinago nigripennis</i>	1
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	1
	<u>Glareolidae</u>	
Double-banded Courser	<i>Rhinoptilus africanus</i>	1
	<u>Laridae</u>	
Grey-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus cirrocephalus</i>	1
Hartlaub's Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus hartlaubii</i>	1
Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	1
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	1
Greater Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	1
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	1
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	1
	<u>Stercorariidae</u>	
Brown Skua	<i>Stercorarius antarcticus</i>	1
	PTEROCLIFORMES	
	<u>Pteroclididae</u>	
Namaqua Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles namaqua</i>	1
Burchell's Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles burchelli</i>	1
	COLUMBIFORMES	
	<u>Columbidae</u>	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	1
Speckled Pigeon	<i>Columba guinea</i>	1
Mourning Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decipiens</i>	1
Red-eyed Dove	<i>Streptopelia semitorquata</i>	1
Ring-necked Dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>	1
Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>	1
Namaqua Dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>	1
	STRIGIFORMES	
	<u>Strigidae</u>	
Spotted Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo africanus</i>	1
Verreaux's Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo lacteus</i>	1
	APODIFORMES	
	<u>Apodidae</u>	

Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	1
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>	1
White-rumped Swift	<i>Apus caffer</i>	1
	COLIIFORMES	
	<u>Coliidae</u>	
Speckled Mousebird	<i>Colius striatus</i>	1
White-backed Mousebird	<i>Colius colius</i>	1
Red-faced Mousebird	<i>Urocolius indicus</i>	1
	CORACIIFORMES	
	<u>Meropidae</u>	
Swallow-tailed Bee-eater	<i>Merops hirundineus</i>	1
	BUCEROTIFORMES	
	<u>Upupidae</u>	
African Hoopoe	<i>Upupa africana</i>	1
	<u>Phoeniculidae</u>	
Common Scimitarbill	<i>Rhinopomastus cyanomelas</i>	1
	<u>Bucerotidae</u>	
Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill	<i>Tockus leucomelas</i>	1
African Grey Hornbill	<i>Lophoceros nasutus</i>	1
	PICIFORMES	
	<u>Lybiidae</u>	
Acacia Pied Barbet	<i>Tricholaema leucomelas</i>	1
	<u>Picidae</u>	
Golden-tailed Woodpecker	<i>Campethera abingoni</i>	1
	FALCONIFORMES	
	<u>Falconidae</u>	
Pygmy Falcon	<i>Polihierax semitorquatus</i>	1
Rock Kestrel	<i>Falco rupicolus</i>	1
Greater Kestrel	<i>Falco rupicoloides</i>	1
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1
	PAASSERIFORMES	
	<u>Platysteiridae</u>	
Cape Batis	<i>Batis capensis</i>	1
Pirit Batis	<i>Batis pririt</i>	1
Black-throated Wattle-eye	<i>Platysteira peltata</i>	
	<u>Malaconotidae</u>	
Bokmakierie	<i>Telophorus zeylonus</i>	1
Southern Tchagra	<i>Tchagra tchagra</i>	1
Southern Boubou	<i>Laniarius ferrugineus</i>	1
Crimson-breasted Shrike	<i>Laniarius atrococcineus</i>	1
	<u>Laniidae</u>	
Southern Fiscal	<i>Lanius collaris</i>	1
	<u>Dicruridae</u>	
Fork-tailed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>	1
	<u>Corvidae</u>	
House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	1
Cape Crow	<i>Corvus capensis</i>	1
Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	1
White-necked Raven	<i>Corvus albicollis</i>	1

	<u>Stenostiridae</u>	
Fairy Flycatcher	<i>Stenostira scita</i>	1
	<u>Paridae</u>	
Ashy Tit	<i>Melaniparus cinerascens</i>	1
	<u>Remizidae</u>	
Cape Penduline Tit	<i>Anthoscopus minutus</i>	1
	<u>Alaudidae</u>	
Spike-heeled Lark	<i>Chersomanes albofasciata</i>	1
Karoo Long-billed Lark	<i>Certhilauda subcoronata</i>	1
Karoo Lark	<i>Calendulauda albescens</i>	1
Cape Clapper Lark	<i>Mirafrapa apiata</i>	1
Red-capped Lark	<i>Calandrella cinerea</i>	1
	<u>Pycnonotidae</u>	
African Red-eyed Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus nigricans</i>	1
Cape Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus capensis</i>	1
	<u>Hirundinidae</u>	
Brown-throated Martin	<i>Riparia paludicola</i>	1
White-throated Swallow	<i>Hirundo albigularis</i>	1
Rock Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>	1
	<u>Macrosphenidae</u>	
Cape Grassbird	<i>Sphenoeacus afer</i>	1
Long-billed Crombec	<i>Sylvietta rufescens</i>	1
	<u>Acrocephalidae</u>	
Lesser Swamp Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus gracilirostris</i>	1
	<u>Cisticolidae</u>	
Levaillant's Cisticola	<i>Cisticola tinniens</i>	1
Neddicky	<i>Cisticola fulvicapilla</i>	1
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	1
Black-chested Prinia	<i>Prinia flavicans</i>	1
Karoo Prinia	<i>Prinia maculosa</i>	1
Rufous-eared Warbler	<i>Malcorus pectoralis</i>	1
Yellow-bellied Eremomela	<i>Eremomela icteropygialis</i>	1
	<u>Sylviidae</u>	
Chestnut-vented Warbler	<i>Sylvia subcaerulea</i>	1
	<u>Zosteropidae</u>	
Cape White-eye	<i>Zosterops virens</i>	1
Orange River White-eye	<i>Zosterops pallidus</i>	1
	<u>Promeropidae</u>	
Cape Sugarbird	<i>Promerops cafer</i>	1
	<u>Sturnidae</u>	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	1
Cape Starling	<i>Lamprotornis nitens</i>	1
Pied Starling	<i>Lamprotornis bicolor</i>	1
Red-winged Starling	<i>Onychognathus morio</i>	1
Pale-winged Starling	<i>Onychognathus naboroupp</i>	1
	<u>Turdidae</u>	
Olive Thrush	<i>Turdus olivaceus</i>	1
	<u>Muscicapidae</u>	
Karoo Scrub Robin	<i>Cercotrichas coryphoeus</i>	1

Kalahari Scrub Robin	<i>Cercotrichas paena</i>	1
Fiscal Flycatcher	<i>Malaenornis silens</i>	1
Cape Robin-Chat	<i>Cossypha caffra</i>	1
Cape Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola rupestris</i>	1
Short-toed Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola brevipes</i>	1
African Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>	1
Ant-eating Chat	<i>Myrmecocichla formicivora</i>	1
Mountain Wheatear	<i>Myrmecocichla monticola</i>	1
Capped Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe pileata</i>	1
Familiar Chat	<i>Oenanthe familiaris</i>	1
	<u>Nectariniidae</u>	
Orange-breasted Sunbird	<i>Anthobaphes violacea</i>	1
Malachite Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia famosa</i>	1
Southern Double-collared Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris chalybeus</i>	1
Dusky Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris fuscus</i>	1
	<u>Passeridae</u>	
White-browed Sparrow-Weaver	<i>Plocepasser mahali</i>	1
Sociable Weaver	<i>Philetairus socius</i>	1
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	1
Cape Sparrow	<i>Passer melanurus</i>	1
Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>	1
	<u>Ploceidae</u>	
Scaly-feathered Weaver	<i>Sporopipes squamifrons</i>	1
Cape Weaver	<i>Ploceus capensis</i>	1
Southern Masked Weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>	1
Red-billed Quelea	<i>Quelea quelea</i>	1
Southern Red Bishop	<i>Euplectes orix</i>	1
Yellow Bishop	<i>Euplectes capensis</i>	1
	<u>Estrildidae</u>	
Red-headed Finch	<i>Amadina erythrocephala</i>	1
Violet-eared Waxbill	<i>Uraeginthus granatinus</i>	1
Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	1
Black-faced Waxbill	<i>Estrilda erythronotos</i>	1
	<u>Viduidae</u>	
Long-tailed Paradise Whydah	<i>Vidua paradisaea</i>	1
	<u>Motacillidae</u>	
Cape Wagtail	<i>Motacilla capensis</i>	1
African Pipit	<i>Anthus cinnamomeus</i>	1
Buffy Pipit	<i>Anthus vaalensis</i>	1
Plain-backed Pipit	<i>Anthus leucophrys</i>	1
	<u>Fringillidae</u>	
Black-throated Canary	<i>Crithagra atrogularis</i>	1
Cape Siskin	<i>Crithagra totta</i>	1
Yellow Canary	<i>Crithagra flaviventris</i>	1
Streaky-headed Seedeater	<i>Crithagra gularis</i>	1
White-throated Canary	<i>Crithagra albogularis</i>	1
Cape Canary	<i>Serinus canicollis</i>	1
Black-headed Canary	<i>Serinus alario</i>	1
	<u>Emberizidae</u>	

Lark-like Bunting	<i>Emberiza impetuani</i>	1
Cinnamon-breasted Bunting	<i>Emberiza tahapisi</i>	1
Golden-breasted Bunting	<i>Emberiza flaviventris</i>	1
TOTAL		191

SHARKS, WHALES AND RARE MAMMALS IN SOUTH AFRICA MAMMAL LIST JULY - AUGUST 2015		
<p>Bold = country endemic Status: NT = Near-threatened, VU = Vulnerable</p>		
Common Name (IUCN)	Scientific Name (IUCN)	Trip
	TUBULIDENTATA	
	<u>Orycteropodidae</u>	
Aardvark	<i>Orycteropus afer</i>	1
	AFROSORICIDA	
	<u>Chrysochloridae</u>	
Sclater's golden mole	<i>Chlorotalpa sclateri</i>	1
Cape golden mole	<i>Chrysochloris asiatica</i>	S
	MACROSCELIDEA	
	<u>Macroscelididae</u>	
Karoo rock sengi	<i>Elephantulus pilicaudus</i>	1
Karoo Round-eared sengi	<i>Macroscelides proboscideus</i>	1
	HYRACOIDEA	
	<u>Procaviidae</u>	
Rock hyrax	<i>Procavia capensis</i>	1
	PRIMATES	
	<u>Cercopithecidae</u>	
Vervet	<i>Chlorocebus pygerythrus</i>	1
Chacma baboon	<i>Papio ursinus</i>	1
	LAGOMORPHA	
	<u>Leporidae</u>	
Cape hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>	1
Scrub hare	<i>Lepus saxatilis</i>	1
Smith's red rock hare	<i>Pronolagus rupestris</i>	1
	EULIPOTYPHLA	
	<u>Erinaceidae</u>	
Southern African hedgehog	<i>Atelerix frontalis</i>	1
	CARNIVORA	
	<u>Canidae</u>	
Black-backed jackal	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>	1
Bat-eared fox	<i>Otocyon megalotis</i>	1
	<u>Felidae</u>	
African wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris lybica</i>	1
Black-footed cat - VU	<i>Felis nigripes</i>	1
	<u>Herpestidae</u>	
Yellow mongoose	<i>Cynictis penicillata</i>	1
Cape gray mongoose	<i>Galerella pulverulenta</i>	1
Slender mongoose	<i>Galerella sanguinea</i>	1

Meerkat	<i>Suricata suricatta</i>	1
	<u>Hyaenidae</u>	
Aardwolf	<i>Proteles cristata</i>	1
	<u>Mustelidae</u>	
African clawless otter - NT	<i>Aonyx capensis</i>	S
Spotted-necked otter - NT	<i>Hydricetus maculicollis</i>	S
Zorilla	<i>Ictonyx striatus</i>	1
	<u>Otariidae</u>	
Cape fur seal	<i>Arctocephalus pusillus pusillus</i>	1
	<u>Viverridae</u>	
South African small-spotted genet	<i>Genetta felina</i>	1
Common genet	<i>Genetta genetta</i>	1
	PHOLIDOTA	
	<u>Manidae</u>	
Temminck's Ground pangolin - VU	<i>Smutsia temminckii</i>	1
	PERISSODACTYLA	
	<u>Equidae</u>	
Plains zebra	<i>Equus quagga</i>	1
Cape mountain zebra - VU	<i>Equus zebra zebra</i>	1
	<u>Rhinocerotidae</u>	
White rhinoceros - NT	<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>	1
	ARTIODACTYLA	
	<u>Balaenidae</u>	
Southern right whale	<i>Eubalaena australis</i>	1
	<u>Balaenopteridae</u>	
Bryde's whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>	1
Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	1
	<u>Bovidae</u>	
Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>	1
Red hartebeest	<i>Alcelaphus buselaphus caama</i>	1
Springbok	<i>Antidorcas marsupialis</i>	1
Black wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes gnou</i>	1
Blue wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes taurinus taurinus</i>	1
Tsessebe	<i>Damaliscus lunatus lunatus</i>	1
Bontebok - NT	<i>Damaliscus pygargus pygargus</i>	1
Blesbok	<i>Damaliscus pygargus phillipsi</i>	x
Roan antelope	<i>Hippotragus equinus</i>	1
Sable antelope	<i>Hippotragus niger</i>	1
Southern lechwe	<i>Kobus leche</i>	1
Gemsbok	<i>Oryx gazella</i>	1
Grey rhebok	<i>Pelea capreolus</i>	1
Steenbok	<i>Raphicerus campestris</i>	1
Cape grysbok	<i>Raphicerus melanotis</i>	S
Southern mountain reedbeek	<i>Redunca fulvorufula fulvorufula</i>	1
Common duiker	<i>Sylvicapra grimmia</i>	1
African buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>	1
Common eland	<i>Tragelaphus oryx</i>	1
Nyala	<i>Tragelaphus angasii</i>	1

Greater kudu	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>	1
	<u>Delphinidae</u>	
Common bottlenose dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	1
	<u>Giraffidae</u>	
Giraffe	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis</i>	1
	<u>Hippopotamidae</u>	
Hippopotamus	<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>	S
	<u>Suidae</u>	
Common warthog	<i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>	1
	CHIROPTERA	
	<u>Vespertilionidae</u>	
Cape bat	<i>Neoromicia capensis</i>	1
African yellow house bat	<i>Scotophilus dinganii</i>	1
	RODENTIA	
	<u>Hystricidae</u>	
Cape porcupine	<i>Hystrix africae australis</i>	1
	<u>Muridae</u>	
Grant's rock rat	<i>Aethomys granti</i>	1
Brants's whistling rat	<i>Parotomys brantsii</i>	1
Four-striped grass mouse	<i>Rhabdomys pumilio</i>	1
	<u>Pedetidae</u>	
Spring hare	<i>Pedetes capensis</i>	1
	<u>Sciuridae</u>	
South African ground squirrel	<i>Xerus inauris</i>	1
TOTAL		61

SHARKS, WHALES AND RARE MAMMALS IN SOUTH AFRICA REPTILE LIST JULY - AUGUST 2015		
Bold = country endemic		
Common Name	Scientific Name	Trip
	SQUAMATA	
	Scincidae	
Cape skink	<i>Trachylepis capensis</i>	1
African striped skink	<i>Trachylepis striata</i>	1
	Cordylidae	
Karoo girdled lizard	<i>Cordylus polyzonus</i>	1
TOTAL		3

SHARKS, WHALES AND RARE MAMMALS IN SOUTH AFRICA CARTILAGINOUS FISH LIST JULY - AUGUST 2015		
Status: VU = Vulnerable		
Common Name (IUCN)	Scientific Name (IUN)	Trip
	LAMNIFORMES	
	Lamnidae	

Great white shark - VU	<i>Carcharodon carcharias</i>	1
TOTAL		1