

Tour Report

Kalahari Conservation Experience

12 – 21 September 2025

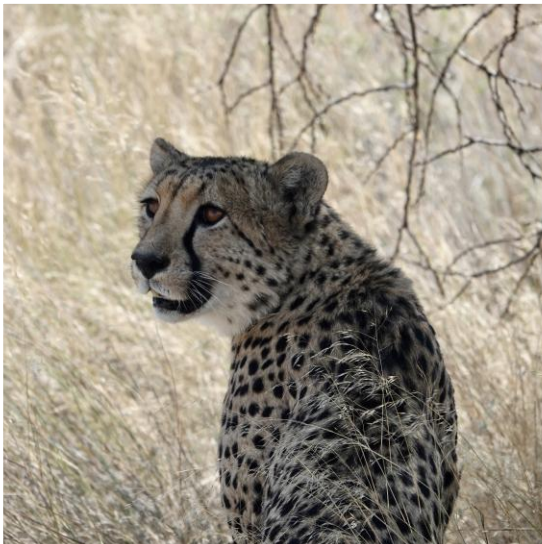
Pangolin



Wild dog



Cheetah



White rhino



Compiled by Helen Bryon

There really is no other safari quite like this in our portfolio. Being based on South Africa's largest private Big Five reserve, a wilderness experience is almost guaranteed, with just our comfortable camp and one luxurious lodge in operation. We do not share sightings, and it is unlikely that we will come across any other vehicles during our stay. Primarily, though, this trip differentiates itself down to its conservation initiatives. Data collection is our principal activity, monitoring wild dogs daily where possible, and following them off-road through the bush as they hunt in order to understand the frequency of kill success, prey preference, and pack dynamics. Two packs are currently collared, alongside one cheetah, and it is hoped that spotted hyena may be considered in the future, too, to learn more about these often-misunderstood predators.

During extended morning and afternoon game drives (often five to six hours followed by another four or so respectively), we hope to encounter all manner of species, diurnal, crepuscular and nocturnal. It would be prudent to advise that although elephant and leopard sightings are rare (we can easily arrange extensions to areas where these are more prevalent), black and white rhino and lions are very well represented. Pangolins are another draw card for this trip, as the reserve is currently home to four tagged individuals and more are expected imminently who have been rescued from poaching. A stipulation of their release is daily monitoring for their first eleven months back in the wild. We also log the whereabouts of the most significant mammals whilst out and about, to support the resident ecologist's ongoing PhD thesis. Little manual work is involved but a willingness to get involved with anything required is beneficial.

The final point to note is that this trip is thought-provoking. We are offered a unique behind-the-scenes glimpse into wildlife and conservation management, and we don't shy away from discussions on hunting, culling and poaching. Facts are presented on science rather than emotion, leaving you to draw your own conclusions, resulting in a fascinating insight into the safari business with exceptional sightings to boot.

Friday 12 September 2025

Day 1:

With some clients already in South Africa on extensions, the rest flew out from London Heathrow on the overnight direct group flight with British Airways.

Saturday 13 September 2025

Day 2:

Arrive Johannesburg, transfer to the Kalahari, evening safari

Weather: sunny and clear, 32 degrees

Meeting driver Brian in the Arrivals Hall at OR Tambo airport early this morning, the group commenced their day-long transfer to the Kalahari. Stopping for snacks in Ventersdorp and then for lunch at Vryburg, they passed ostrich, impala, springbok and sable along the way, and made exceptionally good time arriving at the reserve gate by 17:00. Gary and Helen met them there and escorted them to camp, just five minutes away. A solitary blue wildebeest welcomed them as did crowned lapwings, ring-necked (Cape turtle) doves, chattering white-browed sparrow-weavers and Cape (glossy) starlings.

Despite the lengthy journey to get there, everyone was up for a quick turnaround once they found that a pack of wild dogs were in the area. Given 15 minutes to familiarise themselves with their more than comfortable en suite tents, and gather warm gear, cameras and binoculars, the group gathered around the dining table to sign indemnity forms and then were raring to go. Boarding our open-sided, roofed game drive vehicle equipped with three rows of tiered seats, everyone settled into their window seat, was warned to watch out for overhanging branches, and off we went into the low, scrubby bush that characterises this part of the Kalahari. The cream pom pom flowers of blackthorns were prolific, as were the tiny yellow flowers of camelthorn, while dried out grasses covered the intermittently red and white soil under the vast and endless African sky.

It was 17:45, and we knew we were up against the setting sun, so everyone was warned that we'd do a proper introductory drive tomorrow, but for now, finding the dogs was our priority. Three dogs in this

particular pack wear collars that transmit both GPS and VHF signals, enabling us to head to their last known coordinates and then search for them using telemetry. As such, we drove towards them, hoping they hadn't started to hunt yet as they are capable of covering vast distances when they do. An eland darted across the road ahead of us, and we found two giraffe bulls being followed by fork-tailed drongos, but we continued undeterred. We did stop, however, for two bat-eared foxes that stood watching us before fleeing into cover.

We then drove off-road and delighted in successfully locating our targets. They were spread out beneath blackthorn thickets with enormously full bellies, and they proved to be very inquisitive at our arrival. They were beautifully relaxed in our company, milling around the vehicle, sneezing, and then moving off in twos and threes to find alternative patches of shade. We lapped up their proximity, finding it hard to believe that 24 hours ago, many of us were at Heathrow. The beauty of modern-day travel!

Analysis of their GPS readings indicated that they'd spent at least an hour in one spot earlier today, so we assumed that they may have made a kill. We set off to try and find the carcass as this data is recorded, noting what they eat and how often. We watched the deep red glow of the setting sun as we drove and upon reaching the site, we found a few small rib bones but not much else. Gary and Helen therefore had a quick search of the area on foot to see if any spoor might help support their theory that a hyena had potentially taken the kill, as so little of it remained. While Helen poured sundowners, Gary ventured further afield and came back advising that, indeed, hyena tracks were prevalent.

By this time, night had fallen so we re-boarded the vehicle and, using a spotlight, commenced our night drive home accompanied by a very strong smell of jasmine (we later deduced this to be from *Orphanthera jasminiflora*). A scrub hare kicked off our nocturnal species, followed by several springhares, endearing creatures often referred to as bush kangaroos. The spot of the night, however, went to one client who said, "I saw something walking back there, shall we go and check it?" Thank goodness we did, because upon reversing and turning into the bush, all but one of the group laid their somewhat disbelieving eyes on an aardvark! We could see the shape of its back as it trotted through the grass before disappearing out of sight down a burrow. Nevertheless, what a start! We were all on an absolute wildlife high as we made our way home, where a chicken and chorizo bake with salad awaited us. Welcome to the Kalahari folks!

Sunday 14 September 2025

Day 3:

Wild dog monitoring and checking camera traps

Weather: sunny and clear, 32 degrees

It was a chilly but clear morning when we gathered for breakfast at 07:00. Quite a few of us had heard a cacophony during the night which turned out to be wild dogs passing camp. As such, our plan was to try and find them again first thing to ascertain whether they had made another kill. We escorted Brian out of the reserve so that he could return to Johannesburg and then, stopping and starting to check for the dogs through telemetry, we made our way along the southern fenceline of the reserve. Scaly-feathered weaver, Burchell's sandgrouse, swallow-tailed bee-eater and a stunning lone pririt batis held our attention until Gary picked up new GPS readings suggesting that the dogs were much further east of our location. We did say they move a lot!

Cutting back through the reserve, we stopped to view red-billed spurfowl stealing the thunder from a calling red-crested korhaan, and passed crowned lapwings, a few small herds of Plain's zebra, and nesting white-backed vultures before finding the dogs.

One particularly nosy male came within metres of the left-hand side of the vehicle posing for photographs like a superstar! They didn't appear to have eaten. While they moved around us, Gary undertook a lengthy and fascinating discussion on the management of wild dog populations, during which we discussed habitat



loss, pack breeding habits, contraception, gene pool integrity and the logistics of moving dogs around South Africa and beyond. His expertise and passion shone through and by the time we'd covered this complicated topic, it was approaching 11:00 and heating up nicely, so we drove to the closest waterhole where large numbers of blue wildebeest and Plain's zebra were amalgamating. At the water itself, all was quiet apart from the comings and goings of multiple bird species. Namaqua dove, pearl-breasted swallow, wattled starling, red-billed quelea, blacksmith lapwing, red-faced and white-backed mousebirds were out in force.

We drove on, coming across our first pale chanting goshawk, and reaching a calcrete pan, a geographical feature synonymous with the Kalahari. Vast flat areas, these shallow depressions were once part of the Molopo River which forms the border with Botswana not far away. We stopped for tea, coffee and snacks there, noticing violet and yellow wildflowers alongside the pretty and multicoloured small blooms of everlasting. A few of the group spotted their first meerkats, beavering away under the by now hot sun, and a herd of springbok walked out of the thickets and into the open, their preferred habitat as predators then have no cover from which to ambush their prey.

Once on the road again, we came across our first red hartebeest lying down in the shade of a tree, passed several leaping steenbok, and then reached the first of two camera traps that we wanted to check. Mounted last week, we ran the SD cards for both through Gary's camera, seeing rhino and brown hyena, but what we were hoping for was lion. We were informed that another reserve had been in touch to request two young males to help diversify their gene pool (Kalahari genes are most sought after), but with no collared lions here, and with few vehicles on the reserve meaning that many individuals are not habituated to vehicles, it is not as easy as it sounds. Young males, too, often keep to the periphery due to several very strong and established coalitions on the reserve. We were tasked with trying to find them though and we looked forward to giving it our best shot. Camera trap footage is a good place to start as it can give away the recent location of lions, and we can then try to track them the old-fashioned way.

With no lion images captured, the SD cards were put back in their steel frame casings for protection, and we were heading for home when vultures were spotted flying low above the horizon. A lappet-faced could be seen amongst a rapidly increasing number of white-backed, and their numbers just kept on going up. We immediately cut through the bush towards them, hoping to find them landing, which would indicate a kill site. They were landing! We soon came across a fresh zebra carcass covered in vultures who were getting stuck in. Their heads were covered in blood, and we wondered aloud whether lions had pulled it down as much of the jaw was missing, something that wild dogs usually leave intact. In case they were still in the vicinity, we, of course, set about trying to find them. We drove in a large circle and then headed towards the closest waterhole in case they'd gone down to drink. There was no sign of them, and interestingly, no tracks for them, but plenty of white-backed vultures had the same idea and were lining the water's edge. It was already approaching 13:00 so we left the area and headed for home, stopping to view a crimson-breasted shrike, before tucking into fish cakes, chips and salad for lunch.



Our afternoon drive was dominated by wild dogs. We very much thought that they might hunt, and we wanted to try and keep up with them if possible. Initially though, after setting off at 16:15, we returned to

the zebra carcass to see what we could find. Once again, a multitude of white-backed vultures were in attendance but there was still no sign of any predators, so we made our way to the dogs.

They were lying in the shade (sensible creatures), spread out across quite a wide area, and we sat with them until 17:15 when we decided to dismount the vehicle and have a sundowner to while away the time before they started moving. As soon as we did, five or six dogs set off on a steady, rhythmical trot...of course! Drinks forgotten, we jumped back aboard and found them resting again not twenty metres away. The lead dogs had simply crossed the road, lay down, one actually flopped in the road, and we watched others bring up the rear one by one.

Within minutes, they set off in earnest with us in pursuit. The area through which they were moving was thick and scrubby so keeping eyes on the dogs was hugely important. The clients were tasked with doing so while Helen leant over the bonnet, keeping watch for stumps, logs and holes created by the myriad of burrowing animals found here. The dogs moved nimbly through the bush with barely a flicker of effort shown. At times we were level with them, at others lagging behind, but on and on we went, in a zigzag fashion as is their wont.

They regularly stopped to sniff the ground, gauge the whereabouts of each other, and then upon a silent command, continue their search for prey. They spread out wide, in a net formation, accelerating with heads down when spotting potential food. They sped up at one point and when we caught up with them, we saw that they had surrounded a nursery herd of blue wildebeest. We could see more and more wildebeest running to join the security of the others who were gathering in a tight circle, keeping their backsides well away from the dogs. It was almost over before it began as the dogs stood watching them, realising they weren't going to get anywhere here, and making no effort to get closer to those fearsome horns. The dogs continued.

One hour into the hunt, there was a sudden burst of speed, and we saw the net close as half of the pack sprinted after a screaming steenbok calf that had clearly been flushed out. We didn't see the exact moment of impact, but we heard it. Half of the pack were heads together, tails up, chattering excitedly as they tore the poor creature apart. It wouldn't have known what had hit it; it was over so quickly. This would not sustain the pack, so we watched some dogs move forward, continuing with the hunt, while others hung back to wait as the alpha female ate the majority of the kill. She got up and ran to rejoin the pack with a lengthy piece of skin still dangling from her jaws. She didn't give it up to any other dog.



On and on we followed the dogs, who passed a lone bull wildebeest and a lone male oryx almost without a backwards glance. As twilight gave way to night, however, the intensity of the chase took on a new urgency as they spotted another nursery herd ahead, this time of oryx. They didn't hang around. All hell broke loose as they ran after individuals, nipping at their back legs and we observed one oryx buck one off in self-defence. There was a sudden change of direction, and they homed in on one poor individual,

hurtling after it and successfully bringing it down. It was a hard watch, with the bellows of the oryx particularly distressing to hear, but within two minutes it was all over. By the light of our headlights, with the orange and red colours of the sunset deepening beyond them, we watched them demolish the carcass, leaving little for future scavengers.



They ate and ate, sometimes stopping to roll over repeatedly in the muck they'd created. By now it was dark, and we continued to sit with the dogs until things quietened. Processing the afternoon, experiencing the kill

with all senses had not been easy, but we'd just followed the dogs for one hour and 40 minutes, witnessed two successful hunts by one of Africa's apex predators, and had not had to share the sighting with anyone else. There can be few other places in Africa where this would be possible.

As the crow flies, we were not far from camp, which meant we were not too far from the zebra carcass we'd found earlier either. It was 19:00 and Helen suggested a quick visit to it to see if we might get lucky with brown or spotted hyena. We came up trumps with the latter. Although it moved away at our approach, it remained close by, and we were distracted by the looming outline of a white rhino bull close by.

We turned off all lights, allowing both species to relax and then sat beneath the Milky Way for a few silent minutes. When we spotlighted the scene once more, the rhino had disappeared into the inky blackness, but the spotted hyena was still there, behind a blackthorn some 20 metres or so away from the carcass. Not wishing to intrude on its night further, we headed for home and ate chicken, rice and roasted vegetables around the warmth of the campfire, assimilating all that we had been privileged enough to witness today.

Monday 15 September 2025

Day 4:

Cheetah monitoring, camera traps and pangolin monitoring

Weather: sunny and hot, 32 degrees

We had cheetah in our sights this morning and set off at 07:30, immediately coming across a roadblock of helmeted guineafowl. Running and flying down the road ahead of us, we spotted a pied crow at our waterhole and then a black-backed jackal when we drove past the zebra carcass for one last time. There was very little left of it, so we continued on our way. A lilac-breasted roller posed beautifully atop a dead tree, head and chest feathers fluffed up against the crisp, cool air. New sightings of grey hornbill and southern pied babbler saw us through to the first of three camera traps that we would check this morning. Porcupine and brown hyena had been captured once again on the fence camera, but the second showed nothing new.



We briefly witnessed a female warthog dart across the road followed by her three hoglets and then came across a pair of distant tawny eagles by a waterhole. A monarch butterfly drank next to our vehicle, and driving on, a buffalo stood in the road, seemingly vanishing as we approached. He literally disappeared. Next, came our first daylight viewing of the white rhino. A distinctly straight-horned female rhino and her calf crossed the road from right to left, giving us a good look at them before moving off into the scrub. Two yellow mongoose were spotted by Gary, followed by our first flight display from a red-crested korhaan. It was a good one, with the male not flapping his wings until he was almost safely back on solid ground. If we were females of his species, we'd certainly be impressed!

We pressed on further west, approaching the area in which the cheetah had last been seen. They were close to a fence line, but we struggled to pick them up with the telemetry set, doing a large circle before we spotted them. A coalition of four brothers, they were lying very close to each other; indeed, two sets of back legs were entangled, and we were faced with a mass of huddled spots. We sat watching these quietly charismatic cats for perhaps ten minutes before one got up and made a beeline for another shady spot. They all followed, giving us fantastic photo opportunities as they walked through grasses as tall as they were. All but one settled once again, as another made his way to a skinny tree with a tall trunk. He sniffed it, turned his backside towards it, and sprayed urine, scent-marking it repeatedly. He then sauntered back to the others and lay down.

Two proceeded to preen each other, rhythmically licking their head and neck areas, and then they were on the move once again, all four moving through the grass that stretched away to the horizon behind them. It was a quintessential safari scene, and we were loving it. We could hear them purring as they lay down, and with heavy eyelids, begin to snooze. We left them to their slumber, moved away and enjoyed morning tea and coffee a hundred metres or so from them. Time was running away with us, and it was heating up substantially as we meandered home via one last camera trap which revealed nightly sightings of a striped polecat.



African hoopoe, kori bustard, bataleur and South African shelduck accompanied us as we drove, but it was springbok who stole the show. As we stopped to count them on a large pan, we could see only two until we rounded a corner coming across a large breeding herd that to our utter delight, bounded away, pronging athletically as they went. This elicited oohs and aaahs of appreciation which sustained the last push back to camp. Getting home at 13:10, we went immediately to lunch which consisted of toasted sarnies with stuffed gem squash, after which we relaxed before departing for our afternoon activity at 16:15.

We knew we needed to check in with the wild dogs but hadn't been told what else we would be doing. As such, when the magic words, 'pangolin monitoring' were mentioned, we set off with hopes high. The dogs were thankfully close to camp, and we found them within ten minutes, noting that they hadn't eaten since their kill last night. They were spread out in two groups and upon our arrival, we watched two dogs get up and stalk others. They then all got up and greeted each other excitedly, before lying down once again. Gary used the opportunity to talk about pangolin conservation whilst with them, rather than outside the burrow of these notoriously shy creatures. Knowing that for the last day or two, the tagged pangolins on the reserve have emerged to feed at 17:30, we arrived in the area of the relevant pangolin bang on time.

Checking the latest GPS coordinates, it appeared that the male we hoped to see had not come out yet. We therefore decided to have our sundowners and bide our time in the hope that he would. We watched the sun disappear for another day and with still no movement from the pangolin, we concluded that we would need to try again tomorrow. Yes, we were disappointed, but it was early in the week, we had time on our side, and we'd all been around the bush enough to know that sightings are never guaranteed. We spotlighted our way home, viewing scrub and springhares once again, and a quick circuit of our waterhole revealed a white rhino who had clearly been wallowing. Dinner was oryx sausage, carrot salad and corn on the cob, after which we hit the hay early following a long but rewarding and hot day.

Tuesday 16 September 2025

Day 5:

Anti-poaching presentation, wild dog and pangolin monitoring

Weather: sunny and windy, 28 degrees

We luxuriated in a lie-in this morning, with breakfast set for 07:30, followed by a presentation on poaching within South Africa. Predominantly concentrating on rhinos, other species briefly covered included pangolin and abalone. Myths were busted, and due to Gary's previous career in anti-poaching, we were taken through the intricacies of the problem based on first-hand experience. During one of the breaks, the giraffe made a welcome return after their conspicuous absence over the last few days, walking past camp, something that they did again after our delicious lunch of tuna quiche bake and salad.

This afternoon's safari can only be described as a triumph! Building up to the crescendo, walking with a Temminck's ground pangolin, we observed a lone buffalo whose coat was covered in blackthorn flowers, a pale chanting goshawk, and had a very quick check in with our wild dogs. They looked as though they'd eaten and after a little play, they soon flopped down to rest shaded from the hot afternoon sun. We didn't hang around as Gary wanted to check the pangolin burrow site from yesterday afternoon, due to some

erratic walks by him. Perhaps he'd picked up the scent of a female?

Eland were out in droves, magnificent beasts as they are, and as we approached the burrow, Helen spotted the backside of a white rhino in thickets. When it moved, six others were exposed! We were thrilled to watch the crash of seven, but they soon moved away. Due to their presence, Gary checked the burrow on foot and alone, returning to advise that it was unoccupied. He checked the latest GPS coordinates for the pangolin, and we set off in his general direction. A great spot from a client gave us another kori bustard sighting and lion tracks in the road gave us hope that we may see felines later too, but our priority was the pangolin and hopes were high.

We pulled up and set off for the last part of the journey on foot, armed with the telemetry set, to find our scaly individual. Fingers were crossed, thumbs were held (as is the South African way) and we were advised that he was walking towards us. Scanning the ground hopefully, hearts exploded when Gary pointed to this much-sought-after creature feeding at the base of a tree. We came to an abrupt halt, fanned out and waited silently for him to finish and continue on his scent trail. This he duly did, walking on his back legs with tail held high, directly towards us. The light was perfect, he was glorious, and it was an emotional moment as lifelong dreams were realised. Our grins were incredulous and wide as we followed him.



After many precious minutes, he came to a stop and Gary proceeded towards him and quickly released a tag screwed onto one of his scales. A washer needed to be replaced to ensure it was secure, and Gary worked super efficiently, as he has done numerous times before. We watched on silently, taking in the dropped tail ants crawling all over him, and once the deed was done, we marvelled in his presence for a little longer before he ambled off into the bush. We all started talking at once, releasing the adrenaline inside. He was bigger than we'd been expecting, he was faster than we'd been expecting, and he was infinitely more wonderful than we'd

been expecting. Wow. Wow. Wow. Just wow.

We needed a G&T and we needed it now, so we drove to the closest waterhole for a celebratory drink (we also tried to send a message to camp to chill some sparkling wine)! Our path was curtailed for a while by the tiniest of tiny, crowned lapwings. They were complete 'mini mes' of the accompanying adults and couldn't have been more than five or six centimetres tall. They were all legs, utterly adorable, and elicited more vocal admiration from us than you could shake a stick at. Had the pangolin been usurped? Almost, but not quite!

As we approached the waterhole, we noticed a number of white-backed vultures coming into roost for the evening...or so we thought. Too many were gathering so once again, we began searching for a carcass. It didn't take long to find the zebra by the side of the road. Once again, much of it had been eaten, including the face, and spotted hyena spoor was around the animal, but we couldn't conclusively state who had made the kill.

Gary advised then that multiple zebras had been found dead across the reserve and that one had been sent to a renowned veterinary hospital in Gauteng for analysis. We therefore continued on our way and set up sundowners as planned, watching the dusk colours deepen as day gave way to night. Spotlighting our way home we enjoyed another standout sighting, this time of not one, but two, striped polecats. They ran ahead of us in the road, and we got a good look at them before they veered off to the right, disappearing into the bush. What a day, though. We sat in the boma where shepherd's pie was served, and after a little stargazing, took ourselves off to our beds. This trip was just getting better and better.

Wednesday 17 September 2025

Day 6:

Wild dog monitoring, camera traps and more pangolin monitoring

Weather: sunny and hot, 28 degrees

Shortly after leaving camp this morning, we spent time at our waterhole learning about various tracks before adding Gabar goshawk to the species list. We drove on to a nearby open area hoping to find meerkats, and luck was on our side. A number were spotted out in the open and we watched them from afar so as not to disturb them. We wanted to try and get closer to them though, so set off on foot. Although they disappeared into a burrow, we waited patiently and after some time, heads began to appear one by one above ground level.



Peeking out from their burrow, they appeared and disappeared in quick succession. Eventually, we counted 14, with some confidently crossing open ground and foraging. We spent 30 minutes in their enchanting company as they groomed and frolicked, with one causing a few giggles when it fell into the burrow, a mass of legs akimbo up in the air! Crimson-breasted shrike and chestnut-vented warbler flitted around as a Groundscraper thrush walked across the distant background.

Once again, we wanted to maintain our daily monitoring of the wild dogs, and once we'd left the meerkats to it, we stumbled across a large herd of springbok and watched as one nursed its young. We urged them to prong, but they didn't oblige, so we continued on our way, stopping to check a camera track for any sign of a lion. While doing so, a kori bustard strutted haughtily away from us and with nothing forthcoming re lions again, we drove on, passing the zebra carcass we'd found yesterday, complete with vultures still in attendance. We now knew that the cause of death was most probably linked to them eating the emergent shoots of Gemsbok cucumber. A creeper, the vine becomes entangled in their stomachs causing a blockage which leads to death. This has been recorded on the reserve before, but it is not an annual occurrence, so it is still a mystery as to why some years, it is an unfortunate sacrifice for creatures who



later rely on the fully grown cucumbers to survive the brutal dry season.

Stopping to view an old bull giraffe, we eventually reached the last known coordinates for the dogs and set about finding them with telemetry. They led us a merry dance and we drove around in circles, eventually finding them flat out in the shade. Their bellies looked full, and we had three potential kill sites that they'd spent time at early this morning, so we searched all three to try and note what they'd eaten. There was nothing to be seen anywhere but our search did throw up another four white rhinos. Giving up on the carcass search, our final task for the morning was to mount a camera trap by the pangolin burrow we'd visited yesterday and the day before. As we drove there for tea and coffee initially, locusts filled the air, eland bulls showed off their massive dewlaps, and we came across a rarely seen avian species here, the Cape vulture.

Upon arrival, Gary set to work mounting a camera on a long pole that could be inserted into the burrow to see whether it was currently occupied or not. It was not, however, literally a few metres away; we found another entrance, and then another. Checking all three, he was down on his hands, knees and stomach, hoping against all odds that honey badgers were not in attendance! We came across a wasp jumping like a springhare, as it carried its caterpillar prey across the earth and, eventually, with the camera trap established, headed for home. We got back after 14:00, had baked courgettes and macaroni cheese for lunch, and then power showered as we were due out again at 16:30. There's not a lot of downtime on this trip, but

none of us were complaining!

Gary had received notification that the battery pack on a female pangolin was running critically low, so we made it our mission to get to her as soon as possible. Another red-crested korhaan displayed in front of our vehicle and a kori bustard strode down the road ahead before we found her. She was face down at the base of a small blackthorn, feeding. We had to wait for her to move, or Gary's hands would be cut to shreds trying to replace the batteries. This she duly did, and once again, he got to work, making light work of the task. Once done, he sealed the pack with a water proofer and we watched enthralled, as instead of walking away, she remained at Gary's feet, repeatedly sniffing his boots. We wondered out loud whether perhaps she could pick up the scent of the male we'd been with yesterday. She was certainly curious, and we couldn't believe it when we were able to see her yawn, her ridiculously long pink tongue unravelling to its full 30-centimetre extent. Unusually, she stayed close to us, seemingly in no hurry to continue and get feeding. After two and a half years of intensive pangolin monitoring and research, Gary had never witnessed this behaviour before. We were more than happy to simply watch her. When she did eventually move off, we were able to capture her walking through the low scrub on camera and on video before we re-boarded the vehicle pinching ourselves that we'd spent the last two afternoons in the company of these perfectly adapted creatures, unchanged for millions of years. What a privilege.



Our destination for sundowners was the zebra carcass we'd come across earlier. It may seem like a strange choice but the method in our madness was that brown and spotted hyenas, black-backed jackals, and more, may appear after dark. As the sun set, a female giraffe blocked our way in the road ahead and she had a bone in her mouth. A way of obtaining calcium, osteophagia is commonly seen but we wondered if this bone had got stuck as she was throwing her neck around in a highly unusual manner. As we followed her, another female appeared to the right of us in the bush and she, too, thrashed her neck into the bushes. What was going on? Perhaps they were competing with each other. Whatever the reason, their silhouettes against the deep orange sky were a picture.

We had a quick visual of a Lanner falcon in very low light and then, upon reaching our destination, drinks were served on the vehicle, and we watched the carcass for scavengers. Venus appeared on the horizon and stars filled the sky, but as all remained quiet, we returned to camp for quinoa chilli served with sweet potatoes and roasted chicken after another superb day.

Thursday 18 September 2025

Day 7:

Camera traps and predator call ups

Weather: sunny and hot, 32 degrees

White rhino tracks were in evidence as we left camp at 07:45. We were shown how a bull had dragged his heavy head along in the sand before bumping into the real thing. As we watched him through our binoculars, he moved, revealing a female and her calf behind him. We were certainly doing well with rhino sightings. It was a beautiful morning, and we sat with them for some time, taking in the calm and peaceful scene before continuing to check various camera traps.

We disturbed three steenbok, two adults and a youngster, had a very interesting discussion on plant succession across the Kalahari, noticed rings of raised earth around blackthorns, the work of pugnacious ants, and then stopped next to a community nest spider's web. Black-throated prinia and ant-eating chat were spotted for the first time, and we watched two meerkats hunting for food on the edge of a calcrete pan.

Gary and Helen were very much on the lookout for any sign of lion activity, and we were all thrilled to come

across tracks in the road that we immediately started to follow. The presence of white-backed vultures and a juvenile bateleur had us driving off-road searching for a potential kill. Returning to the road, we picked up tracks once again but promptly lost them. We drove around a triangular block, ascertaining that the lions must be within it. We then checked two camera tracks revealing brown hyena activity, one walking past with potentially a scrub hare in its jaws (it was difficult to make out), but there was no trace of lion captured on film.



We stopped for morning tea and coffee overlooking another pan and as we left, driving away at 23 kilometres per hour, a ground squirrel ran level with us, unbelievably keeping up. Move over Brian Habana! At our waterhole, we waited for a magnificent dark giraffe bull to drink, and he indulged us a few times before moving off into the hot midday sun, to be followed up by a black-backed jackal. We had a hugely informative discussion on hunting, culling and lion management, and this emotive topic continued over lunch (broccoli salad with cheese and/or sausage rolls) and beyond, well after getting home at 13:00.

A secretary bird took off and flew low over camp but didn't make it on to the species list as only Helen saw it, unfortunately. Later though, rested and showered, we hit the road at 16:00, our course set for wild dogs en route to the reserve office, where we intended to fill up with diesel and pick up some meat to be used later to try and call in the lions we needed to find.

We knew the dogs had covered a huge amount of ground and were now some way east of our position. We didn't hang around getting to them, but did stop to view two buffalo bulls grazing contentedly next to the road. We found the dogs lying very close to part of the southern fence line and noted that they probably hadn't eaten since our last visit. Data logged, we pressed on to the office as we had a lot to accomplish. We loaded a leg of meat onto the back of the vehicle, filled up with fuel, and picked up a loudspeaker through which we would play the sound of a dying pig later to try and lure in lions.

Setting off for the triangle of land where we'd found lion tracks this morning, we slowed to watch a gemsbok kneeling in the road, rubbing his pre-orbital glands on some vegetation, and also stopped to log the discovery of yet another dead zebra. The sun had set by the time we reached our destination, but we had enough pale pink light through which to scan for fresh lion tracks. We found nothing, so we jumped down to have sundowners in a vast open area and as darkness fell, Gary positioned the loudspeaker in a tree. We re-took our seats, turned the lights off, played the recording for some minutes and then waited. Call-ups are not always successful, being dependent on predators being close by, not being full, and not mating. Sometimes they attract the wrong predator, but they are always worthwhile. Intermittently, we would flick the lights on but after 20 minutes or so, we called it quits and drove on to the site of an old pump, frequented by lions.

At the sound of an African Scops owl calling right next to the road, we turned off and did circles around the tree searching for the owner. Around and around we went but it was well hidden and evaded our spotlights. It didn't stop calling, though! We arrived at the pump, viewing springhares en masse as we drove, and set up the loudspeaker once again. Having played the dying pig recording repeatedly, we sat beneath the starry night sky and waited again for a response. We eventually called it quits once again and commenced the journey back to camp. With aardwolf and porcupine sightings on the way home, we were in merry mood and despite our late arrival back (21:15), we ate babootie, a Cape Malay speciality, around the fire and even had an unexpected but highly enjoyable belly dancing demonstration to the sound of Shakira before bed!

Friday 19 September 2025

Day 8:

Predators call-ups, wild dog monitoring and herbicide application

Weather: sunny and hot, 34 degrees

Red-billed spurfowl chicks crossing the road outside camp stopped us in our tracks first thing this morning. Utterly adorable, we watched an adult herd them along as it brought up the rear, and it was only a few minutes later that we bumped into three white rhinos. The crash consisted of a bull, a female and a calf and as we were very close to where we'd seen the same make-up yesterday, we assumed these were the same individuals. We still had our piece of meat on the vehicle, so we tried, unsuccessfully, a call-up from our waterhole. Driving to the next waterhole, the lion search intensified but there were simply no tracks to be seen. We hypothesised that perhaps with all of the dead zebras around the reserve, they did not need to work very hard for food, so we're not patrolling the roads.



We did, however, come across a journey of five giraffes, two females with three young bulls, who promptly departed when we tried calling up number two, biding our time birdwatching while we waited for any response. Once again, all was quiet. We decided to try one more location, back at the pump we had visited last night. This was a good decision as we came across sought-after tracks and realised that one male had responded after we'd left. Although we needed two, if an individual responds, it is preferable to feed it, or it may not respond in the future. We therefore sat surrounded by the yellow flowers of the January bush and bright white ox-eye daisies, waiting for it to appear, but it did not.

It was getting late and hot, so it was unlikely we'd call in any lions unless they were right under our noses, so we resigned ourselves to the fact that we had been unsuccessful this time. We were in no way upset or disillusioned with the lack of response; instead, during our tea and coffee stop, we decided to find the wild dogs and give them the meat so it wouldn't go to waste. This serves two purposes. Firstly, should the pack break up, they will still all have a positive connotation with the vehicle, and secondly, it helps should a vet get close to them should they need to be darted for collar issues or relocation purposes.

As happens so often, once we cut our losses and turned our attention away from lions, other wildlife came out of the woodwork. Eland, oryx, steenbok, Plain's zebra and blue wildebeest were out in droves, and we were absolutely delighted to come across a large elephant in the distance, looking almost white from the calcrete soil it had clearly bathed in. As we trained our binoculars on it, we saw another two standing under the shade of a tree nearby. They emerged and slowly, slowly made their way towards the road to cross over. Another appeared from the dense vegetation, then another, and another. Two teeny tiny calves were amongst them and as they too crossed the road ahead, we counted 13. A huge female blocked the road, watching us as the others passed behind her. It wasn't over, though, as one final female brought up the rear. At 14, we'd seen a large percentage of the reserve's deliberately small population. They are not seen often here, so this was a real treat!



Grinning widely, we approached our last stop of the morning, the last known location of the wild dogs. They'd moved, so we tracked them down a kilometre or so away through telemetry, only to find their bellies hugely rounded. We realised pretty quickly that they may not be keen on a free meal, but we had nothing to lose and hauled it to the ground regardless. Only one dog showed any interest in it, sniffing it, grabbing it in his jaws and then dropping it and walking away. We couldn't even give it away! We watched the dogs for a

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while as they partook in their usual habit of walking from shady spot to shady spot, but with their continued lack of interest in the meat, we ended up loading it onto the vehicle once more. Deciding to try and lure in spotted hyenas through call-ups tonight instead, we headed home, passing yet another kori bustard and a gabar goshawk, arriving back shortly before 13:00, in time for chicken and vegetable wraps.

We had very important business to attend to at the start of our final safari, driving to the reserve gate to meet our transfer driver Brian, who was arriving with replenishment supplies of gin and tonic! We watched two male giraffes browse on mesquite, an alien invasive introduced by cattle farmers in previous decades to provide shade for their herds. We couldn't work out whether eating the leaves would be beneficial in order to remove some of it or whether they would end up propagating it, but it was a lovely sighting regardless. We disturbed two young warthogs who shot out of the bush as if their lives depended on it when we passed, and then we proceeded to our waterhole. Checking for predator spoor in case any had responded to our call-ups this morning (they hadn't), a grey heron, an unusual sight here, took off at our approach and an acacia pied barbet flew from tree to tree.



In the absence of tracks, we planned to continue to a new waterhole, around an hour away, spreading herbicide onto blackthorns close to the road along the way. But that was curtailed as we finally, finally spied lion tracks in the road. Beautifully defined, they were either from last night or this morning as we hadn't yet driven this road today, so we immediately set about following them. They cut across the bush to a favoured resting spot for the species, so Gary suggested setting up the speaker in an open area close by. We readily agreed, played the call, and sat back to wait. With no sign of life, we re-visited the tracks, drove roads close by, checked the closest fenceline and probably confused a gorgeous herd of red hartebeest as we passed them repeatedly.

We returned to the open area and enjoyed sundowners very close to the vehicle, keeping a constant lookout for any interested wildlife. The sun set, the sound of barking geckos filled the air, and we took our time, chatting and committing the scene to memory. We then returned to our waterhole and tried calling from there. We also tried a different call, this time of spotted hyenas communicating to each other on a kill. By now it was dark and other than a patient pair of black-backed jackals loitering a fair distance from the meat, we sat in the darkness and continued our wait. Behind us, other black-backed jackals alarm called, and we fervently hoped that perhaps lion or leopard were making their way. Nothing appeared despite our valiant attempts, so we drove back towards the open area and excitedly came across two spotted hyenas. It looked as though they were heading to the waterhole, so we retraced our steps and returned to the meat lying there ready for them.

When they didn't come, we eventually returned to camp, arriving home at 20:00. It was a mild evening, and we quickly checked in online for our flight tomorrow before gathering in the boma for a braai (BBQ) served with new potatoes, bean salad, garlic ciabatta and a crisp green salad. It was delicious. Heading to bed as we had an early start in the morning, we all agreed that we'd had a simply fantastic week.

Saturday 20 September 2025

Day 9:

Transfer to Johannesburg, depart South Africa

Weather: sunny with a dust haze, 32 degrees

We breakfasted, had made our packed lunches and had said our goodbyes when we hit the road at 06:40. In the more than capable hands of Brian, we stopped briefly to view a dead Cape cobra in the road and then made our way back to Johannesburg. We passed steenbok, springbok and numerous new bird species, including Northern black korhaan, red-knobbed coot, African palm swift, greater flamingo and magpie

shrike between comfort breaks in Vryburg and Ventersdorp. We made good time, arriving at OR Tambo Airport shortly before 16:00. We said goodbye to one of our party who was continuing her travels to Botswana, swept through Security and Immigration formalities, and then set about the important business of shopping or hitting various lounges before boarding our British Airways flight home.

Sunday 21 September 2025

Day 10:

Arrive UK

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Checklist for Kalahari Conservation Experience



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9
	MAMMALS									
1	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>	✓							
2	Kudu	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>	✓							✓
3	Springbok	<i>Antidorcas marsupialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>	✓		✓				✓	✓
5	Sable	<i>Hippotragus niger</i>	✓							
6	Blue wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	Steenbok	<i>Raphicerus campestris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Eland	<i>Taurotragus oryx</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
9	Southern giraffe	<i>Giraffa Camelopardalis</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Bat-eared fox	<i>Otocyon megalotis</i>	✓							
11	Wild dog	<i>Lycaon pictus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Ground squirrel	<i>Xerus inauris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Scrub hare	<i>Lepus saxtilis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Springhare	<i>Pedetes capensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
15	Aardvark	<i>Orycteropus afer</i>	✓							
16	Plain's zebra	<i>Equus quagga</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Oryx (gemsbok)	<i>Oryx gazella</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Suricate (meerkat)	<i>Suricata suricatta</i>		✓			✓	✓		
19	Red hartebeest	<i>Alcelaphus buselaphus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
20	Spotted hyena	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>		✓					✓	
21	White rhino	<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
22	Black-backed jackal	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
23	Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>			✓	✓		✓		
24	Yellow mongoose	<i>Cynictis penicillata</i>			✓					
25	Cheetah	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>			✓					
26	Ground pangolin	<i>Manis temminckii</i>				✓	✓			

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27	Striped polecat	<i>Ictonyx striatus</i>				✓				
28	Aardwolf	<i>Proteles cristatus</i>						✓		
29	Cape porcupine							✓		
30	African elephant	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>							✓	
	BIRDS									
1	Ostrich	<i>Struthio camelus</i>	✓							✓
2	Lilac-breasted roller	<i>Coracias caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
3	Cape turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Helmeted guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Red-crested korhaan	<i>Lophotis ruficrista</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
6	Fork-tailed drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Cape starling	<i>Lamprotornis nitens</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	White-browed sparrow weaver	<i>Plocapasser mahali</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Crowned lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Scaly-feathered weaver	<i>Sporopipes squamifrons</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Burchell's sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles burchelli</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Pirit batis	<i>Batis pirit</i>		✓						
13	Swallow-tailed bee-eater	<i>Merops hirundineus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
14	Red-billed spurfowl	<i>Pternistis adspersus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
15	White-backed vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
16	Wattled starling	<i>Creatophora cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	White-backed mousebird	<i>Colius colius</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
18	Southern yellow-billed hornbill	<i>Tockus leucomelas</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Egyptian goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		✓	✓					
20	Namaqua dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
21	African red-eyed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus nigricans</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Yellow canary	<i>Crithagra flaviventris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
23	Blacksmith lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	Red-billed quelea	<i>Quelea quelea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
25	Red-faced mousebird	<i>Urocolius indicus</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
26	Pale chanting goshawk	<i>Melierax canorus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Fawn-coloured lark	<i>Calendulauda africanoides</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
28	Kalahari scrub robin	<i>Cercotrichas paena</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
29	Pearl-breasted swallow	<i>Hirundo dimidiata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

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30	Lappet-faced vulture	Gyps africanus		✓	✓		✓	✓		
31	Crimson-breasted shrike	Laniarius atrococcineus		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
32	House sparrow	Passer domesticus		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
33	Southern grey-headed sparrow	Passer diffusus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
34	Violet-eared waxbill	Granatina granatina		✓	✓		✓		✓	
35	Black-faced waxbill	Estrilda erythronotos		✓	✓			✓		
36	Red-billed buffalo weaver	Bubalornis niger		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
37	Black-throated canary	Crithagra atrogularis		✓	✓	✓		✓		
38	Great sparrow	Passer motitensis		✓		✓		✓		
39	Pied crow	Corvus albus			✓		✓			✓
40	African grey hornbill	Tockus nasutus			✓					
41	Groundscraper thrush	Psophocichla litsitsirupa			✓	✓	✓			
42	Southern pied babbler	Turdoides bicolor			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
43	Tawny eagle	Aquila rapax			✓					
44	African hoopoe	Upupa Africana			✓					
45	Kori bustard	Ardeotis kori			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
46	Bateleur	Terathopius ecaudatus			✓			✓		
47	South African shelduck	Tadorna cana			✓		✓			
48	Rufous-cheeked nightjar	Caprimulgus rufigena			✓		✓			
49	Shaft-tailed whydah	Vidua regia				✓				
50	Gabar goshawk	Micronisus gabar					✓	✓	✓	
51	Chestnut-vented warbler	Sylvia suncaeruleum					✓	✓		
52	Red-capped lark	Calandrella cinerea					✓			
53	Cape vulture	Gyps coprotheres					✓			
54	Lanner falcon	Falco biarmicus					✓	✓		
55	Black-chested prinia	Prinia flavicans						✓		
56	Ant-eating chat	Myrmecocichla formicivora						✓		
57	Grey heron	Ardea cinerea							✓	✓
58	Acacia pied barbet	Tricholaema leucomelas							✓	
59	Mountain wheatear	Oenanthe monticola								✓
60	Grey go-away bird	Corythaixoides concolor								✓
61	Red-knobbed coot	Fulica cristata								✓
62	Northern black korhaan	Afrotis afraoides								✓
63	Greater flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus								✓
64	African sacred ibis	Threskiornis aethiopicus								✓

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65	African palm swift	Cypsiurus parvus								✓
66	Yellow-billed egret	Ardea intermedia								✓
67	Magpie shrike	Urolestes melanoleucus								✓

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