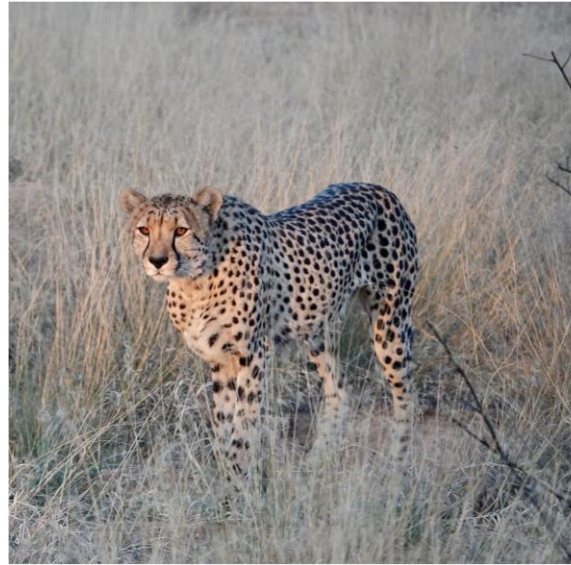


Tour Report Kalahari Conservation Experience 5 – 14 September 2025

Wild dogs



Cheetah



Lion



Pangolin



Compiled by Helen Bryon

Our ever-popular Kalahari Conservation Experience is a safari like no other. In a remote corner of North West Province, close to the Botswana border, we partake in conservation initiatives, directly contributing towards the re-wilding of South Africa's largest private Big Five game reserve. Whilst elephant, buffalo and leopard are here in very small numbers, so should be considered bonus sightings, black and white rhino alongside lion are well represented. During extended morning and afternoon game drives (often five or six hours in length), we record almost every mammal found with an emphasis on wild dog, cheetah and pangolin monitoring in particular. Distances covered are vast, and with only our camp and one small lodge operating here, a key selling point of this holiday is that we generally have sightings to ourselves, a fact that can not be underestimated. Although little manual labour is involved, we may be asked to help with projects from herbaceous surveys to herbicide application, but there is the option to remain in camp and sit these out if preferred. Another important aspect of this trip is that we will actively discuss emotive subjects such as poaching, hunting, culling and contraception, as well as looking into the movement of wildlife around South Africa and further afield. For a hugely interesting behind-the-scenes look into reserve and wildlife management, with great sightings to boot, look no further.

Friday 5 September 2025

Day 1:

With some clients already in South Africa enjoying pre-trip extensions, Helen met up with the final member of the group at Heathrow airport in advance of their direct overnight British Airways flight to Johannesburg.

Saturday 6 September 2025

Day 2:

Arrive Johannesburg, transfer to the Kalahari, evening safari

Weather: sunny and clear, 25°C

Landing at 07.30 local time, the group came together in the Arrivals Hall, and having met Brian, our driver, set off in a minibus for the day-long transfer to our reserve. Stopping at Ventersdorp two and a half hours later, we stretched our legs, grabbed some snacks and continued on to Vryburg, the same distance away again, where we stopped at a supermarket to buy lunch and collect a few pre-ordered groceries for camp.

It was approaching 17:00 when we arrived at the reserve, having passed impala, waterbuck, kudu, warthog, springbok, steenbok, a slender mongoose and a multitude of birds en route. We'd made good time and could see evidence of digging Damara mole rats lining the road as ring-necked (Cape turtle) doves, laughing doves, Southern yellow-billed hornbills, fork-tailed drongos and lilac-breasted rollers flew overhead. We waited at the entrance to the reserve for Gary, our camp owner and manager to let us in, and then having had fresh wild dog tracks pointed out to us, slowly followed him home viewing Plain's zebra, oryx (known locally as gemsbok) and blue wildebeest along the way. First impressions were great as we were shown around camp and met the three rescue camp dogs, Pluto, Sweeney and Betty, who we would shortly realise are an integral part of life here.

Walking the short distance along sandy tracks to our raised, spacious and en suite tents, we took 15 minutes or so to settle in, before gathering in the communal mess tent, complete with honesty bar, loo, lounge and dining area, in order to sign indemnity forms. Shortly thereafter, we clambered aboard our open but high-sided, roofed vehicle and set off to look for the dogs. With three members of the pack collared, we headed back towards the fence line, turning off the road, passing a steenbok, and venturing into the bush when we reached their last known location.

Navigating thick scrub, porcupine excavations, old logs and a lone steenbok, Helen spotted them straight ahead resting under a selection of trees in the low twilight. We registered that they'd eaten today and as we manoeuvred to get closer to them, they suddenly upped sticks and shot off like bats out of hell. We, of course, followed!

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Trying to keep eyes on the dogs and negotiate obstacles proved tricky but Gary drove like a boss until we lost sight of them. At that point we switched off the engine and were about to divulge a little more information about the conservation of dogs, when we heard an excitable squeal. They'd caught something! With adrenaline spiking, we drove at speed towards the sound, in time to see one dog trot past with a slender leg in its jaws. The steenbok. Getting a little closer, we could see two dogs together, one with a chunk of meat in its mouth, while the other tried to snatch it. It was well and truly warned off and withdrew quietly. Another dog was gulping down a long strip of skin, complete with fur. They'd made very quick work of the kill, with not all dogs getting a share of the spoils, but in reality, this was a snack for them.

We could smell them as they trotted off back towards the fence line in the diminishing light. One dog jumped in fright, and they all gathered closer together, staring ahead. Something had got their attention, and that something turned out to be an oryx standing in the road with its backside protected by the electric fence and its horns directed towards the dogs. We watched the standoff off, eagerly anticipating what might happen next. As we sat there, we could hear a donkey cart approaching on the road, and with the dogs distracted by that, the oryx took the opportunity to trot away to a safer spot. Oryx 1, dogs 0.

The full moon was glorious, rising steadily behind us and streaks of pink stretched across the deepening blue sky as the cloudscape was illuminated by the setting sun. As the colours of the sunset intensified, the dogs became silhouettes and we followed them down the road as they trotted away from us, intermittently stopping to scent mark and defecate.

Spotlighting our way home, we saw our first scrub hare and arrived back in camp to the gentle mewing of blue wildebeest just outside. After a hearty home-cooked dinner of spaghetti bolognese with Greek salad, we chatted, getting to know one another, before our beds called and we turned in around 21:30.

Sunday 7 September 2025

Day 3:

Wild dog and cheetah monitoring

Weather: sunny and clear, 28°C

After a chilly night where our electric blankets had been supremely welcome, we woke to a stunning sunrise accompanied by vocalising zebras and a dawn chorus of helmeted guineafowl and white-browed sparrowweavers. Breakfast was served from 07:00, and we set off half an hour later, coming across yellow canary, Burchell's sandgrouse, Marico flycatcher and white-backed mousebirds as we headed towards our closest waterhole, around a kilometre away.

Scaly-feathered weaver nests were pointed out, nestled deep within blackthorn bushes, with their creators out in force throughout the morning. At the water, four Egyptian geese flew in, with one amongst them clearly looking for a fight. After a lot of noise, wing flapping, chasing and jostling, they finally settled down and we observed red-eyed bulbuls, pearl-breasted swallows, violet-eared waxbills and black-throated canaries flitting down to drink. Elephant tracks were evident in abundance, as were those belonging to both black and white rhino, who had clearly been down to drink during the night. We followed them as we drove on, stopping to discuss tamma melons en route, and then reached a small dwelling utilised by the Anti-Poaching team. One member was there with his sniffer dog, and we took the opportunity to find out a little more about his work.

After a good chat, we pressed on as our mission was to find the wild dogs again. Passing dust-bathing swallow-tailed bee-eaters and a Gabar goshawk, we reached our first calcrete pan, a quintessential Kalahari feature of the Molopo River. Gary explained how they are formed and how their soil content differs dramatically from the surrounding deep sand, meaning that we do not drive over these sensitive areas; instead always skirting around them. A small herd of springbok were resting and feeding towards its eastern end, and we stopped to count them, sex them, and then watch enthralled as two tiny springbok lambs found their legs, pronging to and fro athletically. Anthropomorphising, they appeared to be jumping for joy! We applauded their efforts as ground squirrels and ant-eating chats tried to steal our attention, but to no avail.

At our second pan, a resting red hartebeest made its way onto our species list and shortly thereafter, so did a kori bustard. Two oryx with a youngster came next, and as we approached another waterhole, a female white rhino and her calf stood just off the side of the road. We stopped immediately but they bolted, not before we'd noticed the long straight horn on Mum, though. My word, she was impressive. Our Big Five sightings were off to a good start.

A little while later, as we neared the latest coordinates for the wild dogs, we could see white-backed vultures flying low over the scrub, coming into land on branches. They must have made another kill. We immediately set off into the bush to investigate and found the remains of a large female blue wildebeest. There was a fair bit of meat left on the carcass, but they'd made a good dent in it. We dismounted the vehicle for a closer look, noting clumps of chestnut hair between its hooves, its pre-orbital glands, its discarded stomach contents, and the fact that vultures had already removed an eye.

We then set off to try and find the dogs themselves using telemetry. Rather than guarding kills, they usually find a resting spot a kilometre or so away, so we tried to pick up a signal for them. This proved a little more challenging than it may sound, but after much off-roading, we made it. Although they were obscured by vegetation, we could see their huge bellies as they rested in the shade provided by a dense blackthorn thicket. We parked up a short distance away and dismounted for morning tea, coffee and hot chocolate washed down with rusks, freshly made banana bread and citrus easy peelers. A stunning and unusual coloured solifuge, otherwise known as a sun spider, caught our attention, its back being dotted with what looked like tiny, feathered beads.



It was late morning and getting warm by the time we turned back, passing multitudes of plains game along the way, plus a trio of warthogs, a trio of female kudu, a black-backed jackal and a splendid male giraffe who walked slowly up the road towards us to feed on a flowering camelthorn to our right. Once home, and after a lovely lunch of warm quiche and salad, we went our separate ways to relax on our decks, download photos, or sit by a number of birdbaths next to the plunge pool. Black-faced waxbills and others came down to quench their thirst, but the constant drilling of a woodpecker in camp had us on foot searching for it. We were rewarded with clear views of a beautiful, bearded female.

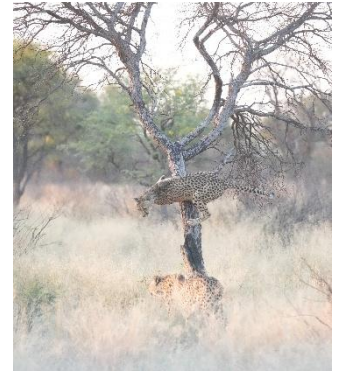


Our afternoon safari commenced shortly after 16:00, and cheetahs were on our minds. One individual, part of a coalition of four brothers, is collared, and his latest reading suggested they were around 45-60 minutes away to the east. We made a beeline for them, stopping at the impressive sight of a secretary bird taking off, and then sitting back to enjoy the ride under clear African skies. As we pulled up next to a small pan, Gary asked us to start looking for a cheetah. As if by command, we found one! Lying down but propped up on its front legs, its deep chest was clearly illuminated in the afternoon sun, but he appeared to be alone. Next to him, however, looked like two elephant or rhino bolluscs in the shade. Upon closer inspection through our binoculars, we realised it was another cheetah. We trained our eyes on the area, and another lifted his head a few metres away. We had three, but where was number four? Being unable to drive on the pan, we decided to dismount the vehicle and partake in a little liquid refreshment while we waited to see if they would get up, show us their stomachs so we could ascertain if they may be hungry or not, and therefore see if they may move. We were suitably far from them not to impact on their behaviour, but close enough to keep an eye on them should they need to hunt.

Crowned lapwings walked directly in front of the cats and a pair of red-headed finches sang close to our vantage point. We hoped they would start to yawn and preen, behaviour that is often considered a precursor to movement.

Perhaps 50 minutes or so later and one got up. Hoorah. Another followed. Both went over the brother number three and they sprayed a tree, scent-marking it, then as they moved out of our field of vision, up popped number four. We drove in the direction in which they were travelling and Gary relocated them as they walked directly towards the setting sun. Yes!

We drove parallel to them, as cheetahs do not like to be followed from behind, and watched as one jumped up into the fork of a tree (photo credit: John Chapman), clung on for dear life, trying to get its footing, before giving up and springing back down to earth. Another few metres on and as one brother slunk down into the grass, another pounced upon him. Playing just like house cats, we lapped up the different behaviours being displayed and watched as they scent-marked another tree, climbing up on it and lifting their tails high to spray the trunk with urine. At one point, we heard blue wildebeest murmuring ahead and all four brothers stopped, stared towards the sound, fanned out and began to trot at speed. Their heart wasn't in the chase, though, and they soon gave up, giving us the opportunity to follow and maintain proximity with them once again.

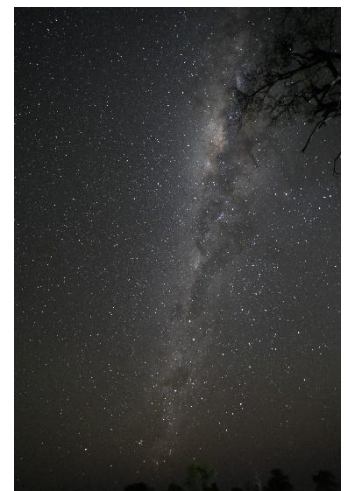


They walked into an area of thick vegetation that we knew we'd struggle to negotiate, so we returned to the road and drove towards the nearest pan, hoping we would intercept them there. It was a good plan and as the spectacular moon rose, we didn't have to wait long for them to walk directly towards us. A herd of springbok with four lambs were feeding in the pan, so we re-positioned to be able to view them, the cheetah and the moon all in one shot. The beauty of the scene unfolding before us, with the pink sky, initial faint outline of the moon, and the potential drama of what may happen next, was a heady combination.

We knew it was doubtful that they'd go for the springbok due to the latter's advantageous positioning in the centre of the pan. With no cover behind which to stalk, even with their acceleration potential, it would be an unlikely chase, but that being said, the springbok definitely had their attention. One by one they walked the perimeter scrub, slinking into cover and sitting down. They remained there, loitering surreptitiously, now with only their heads visible. They settled down, as did we, and a lone eland bull walked to our left, far away in the distance. The evening light by now was simply stupendous, and the moon continued to rise steadily, its white craters clearly visible, especially through binoculars. Glancing behind us to the west, the sunset was incredible, but I'm sorry to say it was largely ignored as we bided our time, watching the brothers.

As darkness descended, we lost visual of the wildlife before us, and our focus shifted to the moon. A shadow was slowly but surely creeping up it from the bottom and we realised we were watching the start of a lunar eclipse! It was the last blood moon of 2025, and as more and more was obscured, we decided to head home so that we could stand in camp and watch the Milky Way appear while the moon was obstructed.

A rufous-cheeked nightjar flew ahead of us, and our first springhares made an appearance. Once back, one client indulged in a little astrophotography, very successfully, I might add, (photo credit: John Chapman) and we dined under the stars around the campfire, enjoying a lovely and very memorable evening.



Monday 8 September 2025

Day 4:

Cheetah and pangolin monitoring

Weather: sunny and hot, 28°C

Two statuesque, stationary eland got our game viewing off to a good start today. Our initial plan had been to continue with our daily monitoring of the collared wild dog pack, but readings thwarted that plan as they were deep inside a thicket that Gary knew to be impenetrable with the vehicle. As such, we decided to check in on yesterday's cheetah coalition, as they had shown such an interest in the springbok last night, that we thought they may have killed it since we last saw them. Making our way to the relevant part of the reserve, we discussed alien invasive plant species at length, and herbicidal efforts to remove them, before stopping to view Orange River francolin right by the side of the road.

Much further on, an eagle-eyed client spotted a colony of meerkats, which was serendipitous as they were high on the wish list of mammals to see. In a very open area, we watched the sentries scatter as we came to a halt. Further in the distance and standing tall on the edge of a large burrow opening, stood another 12 or so individuals of all shapes and sizes. We delighted in their company, watching their pencil-thin tails held aloft as they darted from bush to bush. Just up the road from them were a herd of striking red hartebeest. With their heart-shaped horns, beautiful chestnut coats and pale flanks, they slowly moved away from us, and we were sidetracked by a kori bustard.

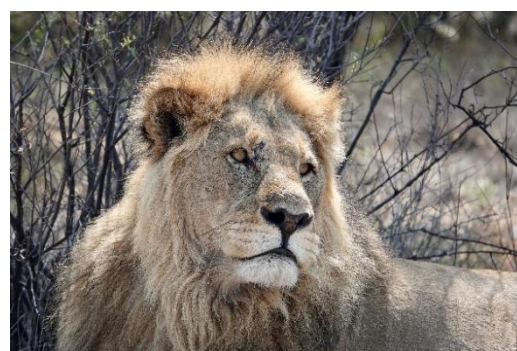


Driving on, we reached the last known coordinates for the cheetah, so slowed down to maximise our chance of finding them. We'd just turned off the road when two heads appeared, followed by another one, so again, the fourth was missing. As the cheetah repositioned, though, he appeared. Their bellies looked fuller, and as the two sat opposite each other, in a mirror image style, we could clearly see blood on the back of one's head. They proceeded to preen each other, long, deliberate licks and we clicked away with glee. We were only a few metres from them, and they were completely unconcerned by our presence. They yawned, groomed, licked their paws and rolled while we

sat with them for at least half an hour.

We eventually moved on, coming across fresh lioness tracks as we drove to the site of a camera trap set up above a pangolin burrow when Helen was here in March with our Green Season departure. We removed the SD card to check for any recent activity and although there were numerous images of honey badger and slender mongoose, there was no pangolin footage. As such, we removed the camera trap so that it could be used elsewhere, but not before noticing a lappet-faced vulture soaring in the thermals above us.

Heading back to the road, we followed the previously noted lion tracks, keeping eyes peeled for a sighting. It was hot, being late morning by now, but a lovely breeze was developing, and we intended to stop for tea and coffee at the closest waterhole. Suddenly, there was a shout for a "Lion!" A magnificent Kalahari male was lying under a blackthorn, and as we approached, we could see that he wasn't alone. He had a female with him. Once we had killed the engine, the female immediately got up, stretched in front of the male, and he used his colossal paw to manoeuvre him beneath her. He vocalised throughout their prolonged copulation, a low growl emanating from deep within that continued once they'd separated. He kept looking beyond our vehicle, seemingly right through us, and we deduced that other lions must be around.



Gary recognised the male as part of a coalition of three who hold this area in their territory, and sure enough, once the honeymoon couple had settled down again, a male with a glorious dark mane appeared through a gap behind us. He sniffed the air and tentatively took a few steps forward before standing still. The low growls from the mating lion continued. He was clearly being warned to stay away. Our attention swung back to the female as she moved a few steps forward. The attending male followed and we noticed he wasn't putting his weight on his front left paw, potentially the result of an injury sustained when fighting for the female. We watched them, hoping they might mate once more. Helen observed the onlooking male turn 180 degrees and slowly walk back from whence he came. We decided to stay for one last episode, thinking it would be within the usual 15-minute time frame, but it took another 40 minutes before the deed was done. In the interim, we soaked up their proximity and the fact that no one else was staying on the entire reserve, so there was no one waiting to come into the sighting.



Driving home, we passed a large group of Plain's zebra, complete with a number of little ones and four blue wildebeest. They stood watching us watching them and it was a little after 12:00 when we arrived back at camp. We met up for toasted sandwiches and stuffed gem squash at 13:00, after which we retired for a few hours of well-deserved rest.

Our afternoon's game viewing commenced with a fleeting glimpse of a black-backed jackal, and we had to slow the vehicle regularly to avoid a number of Burchell's sandgrouse chicks lining the road. A slender mongoose slid into the base of a blackthorn, and we came across our first African hoopoe. Our quest this afternoon, though, was to try and find a pangolin. The reserve is a designated release site for individuals rescued from poaching, and it is a veterinary requirement that they are tagged and monitored for their first eleven months in the wild to ensure that they feed well and remain healthy. This is where we come in.

Gary drove us to the last known location of a male, and we set off on foot using the telemetry set to locate him. We found him in a shallow burrow and were permitted to creep towards him to lay eyes on him for the first time, before backing off and standing silently some metres away. We waited perhaps 15 minutes or so, hoping that he would emerge. He did. Fantastically, his nose appeared at ground level, followed by the rest of him. He was big. He set off, walking on his back feet, tail held high, and we cautiously followed, making sure to give him plenty of space. He was faster than we expected, negotiating the grass and scrub with ease as he searched for food. We watched him smell a log, scratch it and start to feast as ants came to the surface. He didn't stay on the log for long, moving off and searching elsewhere. By this point, the sun was glowing red and descending quickly, making for a very special experience as we watched him walk off towards it.

Leaving him be, we carried on with our drive, and not being far as the crow flies from the lions we'd seen this morning, we searched for them once again. The bystander male was seen first, standing close to the side of the road. As he lay down, we heard grunting up ahead, so we moved on, coming across the mating pair. We sat with them until we lost the light and then we drove home, viewing scrub and springhares en route. Another boma dinner awaited, this time comprising of oryx sausage, salad and garlic bread.



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Tuesday 9 September 2025

Day 5:

Anti-poaching presentation and afternoon safari

Weather: sunny, hot and very windy, 32°C

The rising sun shimmered as the day dawned and we tucked into freshly made scones for breakfast. Afterwards, we gathered in the lounge for a morning-long presentation on poaching within South Africa. Gary is an authority on the issue and an interesting few hours were spent learning from his experience and expertise.

Later, the events of this afternoon led to more than one client advising that they'd had the wild dog sighting of their lives! We knew that the dogs were far away in the westernmost reach of the reserve and that we had quite a drive on our hands (subject to them not moving, of course). As such, we left home at 15:30 and prepared ourselves for a long afternoon.

White-backed vultures and a pale morph tawny eagle flying over our waterhole kick-started the events, and when passing our closest pan, two meerkats caught our attention. We watched them scurry along, feed, and search the sky and surrounding area for predators repeatedly. We noticed a double-banded courser, a resident of dry, arid land, and a short while later, stopped to identify a raptor in a tree. It revealed itself to be a juvenile bataleur, complete with distinctive blue-green facial markings that in time will turn bright red and yellow.

Plains game was out in force, and we recorded multiple small herds of blue wildebeest and zebra dotted intermittently with springbok. Gary and Helen had made a conscious decision to drive via a waterhole, rather than heading due west to the dogs, in order to try our luck with rhinos coming to drink in the heat. Their gamble paid off and we came across a bull, a female and a calf who ran off at our slow and steady arrival, but ahead of them stood a herd of buffalo. We stopped and started to get closer to them and then continued on our quest. We decelerated for two swooping pale-chanting goshawks, one of whom had something in its bill, and a little later, stopped to admire the flight display of a red-crested korhaan.

It was 17:30 by the time we reached the area the dogs had been in and using telemetry, we negotiated thick bush to eventually find them spread out and resting under thickets. They didn't look like they'd eaten. We dismounted the vehicle to get some eye-level shots, revelling in one inquisitive male who walked up to us, stopping around four metres away. We then cracked open our sundowners, knowing that if the dogs moved, we'd have to jump back on board and follow them. One or two were sneezing and stretching so we hoped it wouldn't be long.



Suddenly, they were off. As we started our engine, we noticed a stationary brown hyena sitting close by, its gorgeous mane glowing rusty orange in the late afternoon sun. It darted away, settling a few metres further on and as we approached, it took off at speed, but we'd all seen this marvellously curious-looking animal.

The dogs were trotting fluidly ahead now, fanning out in a wide, wide net. While the group kept an eye on them, Helen directed Gary around obstacles and holes.

On and on they went, their physiology perfectly evolved for covering long distances with minimal effort. Every now and again, they would stop and we would mirror that, moving with them as one pack. The sound of their lithe bodies moving through the grass was hypnotic and at one point, we reached a relatively open area where we drove parallel with them, and it felt like being in a BBC documentary. The dogs picked up speed, their heads visibly lowering, a clear indication that they had spotted potential prey.

Our heart rates increased exponentially as we raced to keep up with them, coming across six or so oryx running and coming together, bunching their backsides together for safety, and standing with their fearsome horns facing the dogs. The dogs hustled in and amongst them, trying to snap at their legs and trying to single one out, but it seemed they had reached a stalemate. As both species quietened, maintaining close proximity to one another, but with no contact, we waited with baited breath for what might happen next.

Two oryx started to walk away and the dogs immediately took up their goading, throwing themselves at them, chattering excitedly and trying to nip them once again. The oryx rejoined the others and once again, things calmed down. The majority of the dogs then turned their attention elsewhere, trotting off just a short distance away. Potentially, the oryx assumed the threat was over, as they started to split up, but they assumed wrong. The dogs came back en masse, darting between their prey, tails raised, and with their vocalisations turned up several notches into an absolute cacophony. Watching the proceedings was seriously intense. As we lost the light, it seemed to be game over for the dogs as they took off on their travels once again, and the oryx lived to tell the tale. What a sighting!

We made our way to a fence line close by and tried to process what we'd just witnessed. We had so many questions, and Gary answered them patiently as we prepared the spotlights required for our long night drive home. We passed more springhares than we could shake a stick at, scrub hares too, as well as stopping to try and find a striped pole that Helen had picked up, but when she tried to show the group, it had disappeared so did not make it on to the species list. We did all see a giant eagle-owl perched on a dead tree branch, and also a Verreaux's eagle-owl on the edge of our waterhole coming down for a drink. Eventually getting home at 20:15, we chatted animatedly throughout our traditional potjie beef stew dinner about what we'd been privileged enough to witness. It had been quite a day.

Wednesday 10 September 2025

Day 6:

Wild dog monitoring, camera traps and predator call ups

Weather: sunny and hot with a strong breeze, 32°C

Needing to know whether the dogs had successfully hunted overnight, we retraced our steps this morning, passing kori bustard and scimitarbill, before reaching their last known location around eight kilometres east of where we'd left them. We drove off-road into the bush and immediately noticed a black-backed jackal running away from a fresh oryx carcass. They'd clearly fed. There was limited meat left on the large, adult male and we went in for a closer look. We could see puncture marks where one dog had held onto its nose and counted 13 condensed rings on the oryx's horns, a sign that he was an older individual. We discussed wild dog conservation and management at length before setting off to find the dogs themselves. True to form, they were one kilometre away sleeping off their meal, yet constantly getting up and shifting position as is their way. They all moved off at one point, and we followed, watching them settle beneath the shady canopy of a shepherd's tree. Digging to create more comfortable sleeping positions, they went down one by one, so we left them to it, stopping for tea and coffee at a nearby, large and scenic pan. Littered with oryx (photo credit: John Chapman) and one lone blue wildebeest, we were delighted to observe four bat-eared foxes moving across the pan in the late morning sun.



We then set out to the important business of erecting two camera traps, one kindly donated by previous clients. The first we mounted at the confluence of four roads, and the second along the fenceline, before a purple roller completed the morning's new bird sightings. It was almost 13:00 by the time we reached our waterhole where an adult male bateleur took off into the sky, leaving a tawny eagle standing by the water. A black-backed jackal then ran off into the scrub and upon closer inspection, we noticed hyena tracks too. The only thing missing was vultures. Had something died here? If so, who had killed it and where were they? Vowing to return later, we had sausage rolls and salad for lunch, before resting until departure once again.

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At 16:00 there was an absence of vultures, so we drove east. No sooner had one client asked if there were murids here, when a mouse ran across the road in front of us. Too speedy to be identified, we thought it most likely to be a field mouse but continued on our way. Half an hour later, we spotted two white rhino bulls grazing in the distance and approached slowly and surely until they accepted our presence. Standing in the quiet of the afternoon, we spent at least 20 minutes in their company until we heard the first barking gecko of the evening.

We drove on, coming across a black-chested snake-eagle, and circumnavigating the pan where we'd spent time with the cheetah boys as the moon rose a few nights ago. We reached the reserve office where we filled up with fuel and collected a large piece of meat from a cold room, preparing ourselves for our evening activity, predator calls up. Our plan involved driving to a nearby waterhole where we would play the sound of a dying animal through a loudspeaker in order to try and attract predators. You might ask why? Well, another reserve in South Africa is looking to bring in two female lionesses in order to protect the integrity of their gene pool (common practice around the country) but with no collared lions here, we need to try and find some. Their hearing is so good that if they respond, they will arrive within centimetres of the sound played and it is important for them to find meat there. That way, they may come when the exercise is carried out again, this time with an attending vet and tranquilliser gun.

As we made our way to the chosen waterhole, the sun glowed red above the horizon, and we stopped regularly to try and capture the stunning scene on camera. Red hartebeest, two bat-eared fox, and the freshest of fresh elephant tracks tried to distract us, but we pressed on, arriving in time to see three white rhino run away from the water. Gary then spotted a black rhino bull in the diminishing dusk light. He moved behind a bush and watched us intently. Gary, reading his body language, advised that he was going to charge. We sat silently, prepared, and secretly enthralled at how this would play out. After much repositioning, he came. He trotted steadily right towards us, stopping in a cloud of dust around 10 metres away after Gary had lightly tapped the side of the vehicle and said, "Hey!"

He backed off, but it was clear he wasn't done yet. He circled slowly around to the left of us, turning repeatedly and getting within a few metres of us twice until Gary said, "Hey!" again. He backed off, giving us room to drive to the other side of the water and put a little distance between us. By the time we were facing his last position, he had disappeared. He had not come at us with all-out aggression; rather, he had seemingly weighed up his options, trying to work out what we were in order to remove the threat.

We gave it a few minutes, checking the coast was clear, before hauling the piece of meat off the back of the vehicle. We then backed off and played the recording, waiting in silence for a response. Nothing. We played it again ten minutes later and still nothing, so we called it quits on this particular location.

We drove home, stopping to try our luck at our waterhole. We repeated the process, putting the meat down in an open area and calling the sound of the dying animal. As soon as we drove a little distance away from the meat, ready to sit in the pitch darkness and wait, we noticed a bull elephant. Hmmmm, we daren't risk playing the dying call again, as we didn't know how the elephant would react. We therefore sat silently and watched him proceed to the water, under the light of the stars, and quench his thirst, taking a long, long time to drink.

By now it was almost 20:30, so we reloaded the meat and spotlighted our way home, passing a buffalo en route. Quinoa chilli awaited us and after a giggle-inducing dinner, we retired to bed, wondering what on earth tomorrow may have in store!

Thursday 11 September 2025

Day 7:

Predator call ups, camera traps and wild dog monitoring

Weather: sunny and hot with a good breeze, 32°C

White rhinos played a large part in this morning's drive, with us coming across five individuals over three sightings, the first being very close to camp. He was a big bull, standing in a relatively open area, and we sat with him for ten minutes or so before driving to our waterhole to try predator call ups once again. We played the sound of the dying animal yet again but to no avail. As such, we continued on to the fenceline to check on one of the camera traps put up yesterday. A brown hyena had been captured walking past during the early hours of the morning, which headed to a nearby bush and scent-marked. Gary and Helen decided to look for the secreted paste, found it and showed it to the group, who were able to smell its slightly bitter odour too. Returning the blade of grass to its original location, we carried on, passing numerous kori bustards (we were doing very well with sightings of them so far on this trip), and plenty of plain's game, including a young oryx sitting directly in the road.



We drove towards the last known location of the wild dogs, as we'd already decided to try and call them in, in order to give them the meat on the back of the vehicle as it would spoil otherwise. As the reserve holds the highest population of wild dogs in South Africa outside Kruger National Park, very occasional feeding helps keep them comfortable with the vehicle, should they need to be darted and relocated in the future.

We stopped three kilometres away from them and played the sound of another pack of wild dogs feeding. With no response to that, we played a 'Who call', the sound used by dogs to relocate each other when separated from the pack. This is usually catnip to them (for want of a better word), but today there was no response. We therefore drove closer towards them, finding them very close to another fenceline. There, we dropped the meat onto the ground and, with cameras poised, waited for the feeding frenzy to commence. It was the alpha female and a high-ranking male who tucked in, while the rest of the dogs waited patiently, adhering to their strict hierarchy ranking, before eventually dividing up the scraps. Quite a few of the dogs simply didn't get involved, resting on the periphery instead, while others play-fought with each other, jumping up onto their hind legs and 'boxing' with their fore paws. We watched them for 20 minutes or so before serving tea and coffee on foot, as the dogs moved from shady resting spot to shady resting spot around us. It was magic.



It was also heating up, so we decided to meander home via waterholes, seeing what we could find. First up came another big white rhino bull. On the edge of a pan and beautifully framed as he parked his backside under a tree, he provided a lovely vista. Carrying on, a slender mongoose ran across the road, where we checked the other camera trap installed yesterday. The steel casing had proved its worth as we came across images of a white rhino giving it a good going over during the night!

A stunning male and female ostrich pair appeared at the next waterhole, the male's chestnut ball of tail feathers a great contrast to his thick, black bulk. As we drove towards the next waterhole, we came across yet more white rhino, this time a trio consisting of a large bull, an adult female and her calf by the side of the road. Amidst much vocalising, we ascertained that the bull's intentions were not welcome, and she was letting him know that quite clearly. Once again, we spent time in their company, acutely aware of how fortunate we were. Later, we were nearly home when two stunning male giraffe heads loomed above the vegetation line. We admired them and then, with stomachs rumbling, returned home after five and a half hours in the field to a very welcome macaroni cheese lunch.

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Having undertaken a series of long, extended drives, we decided to depart this afternoon at 16:30, with the aim of setting up one more camera trap and then rewarding ourselves with a lengthy sundowner and a view. A black-backed jackal and four giraffe, three females and a male, held our attention, especially when one lowered its neck elegantly to drink. With a swish of its head to help defy gravity, they walked away into the afternoon light, their pale honey colouring and statuesque manner simply a delight.

We scanned numerous open areas for meerkats, but they didn't oblige with a sighting, so we searched for a suitable place in which to put up our camera trap. After being sidetracked by a fork-tailed drongo repeatedly mobbing a slender mongoose, we identified lion spoor in the road and set about following it. When the trail ran dry, we doubled back on ourselves, and all got stuck into hammering a metal post into the sand that would house the camera in front of a lone tree at a junction. Job done, and camera set up, we clambered back aboard the vehicle and set off west. Pulling in at a waterhole, we set up our drinks and snacks, then watched the sinking sun beautifully reflected in the water. It was still, quiet, and really quite lovely.

Arriving home at a very civilised 19:25, we gathered half an hour or so later for a traditional South African dinner, babootie with butternut squash. Delicious!

Friday 12 September 2025

Day 8:

Herbicide application and wild dog monitoring

Weather: hot and sunny, clouding over later, 33°C

Knowing that we would be spending the morning applying herbicide to blackthorn bushes close to camp, we took the opportunity to take a quick spin around our waterhole first thing. With fresh rhino and hyena spoor in the road, Gary took us through a lesson in tracking to start with, pointing out that a pair of porcupines had walked over our tyre tracks made last night. Very much being a species on our wish list, we had a good look around but were distracted by the arrival of a herd of wildebeest. Audibly rushing into the water, we watched as they waded in up to their bellies and drank before leaving almost as fast as they came. Remaining some distance away from the water, we sat at the waterhole for around 30 – 40 minutes or so, watching the comings and goings of wildlife.



Birds were particularly busy, with wattled starlings sharing tree perches with their Cape glossy cousins as red-eyed bulbuls, Namaqua doves and black-throated canaries darted to and from the water's edge. It was Burchell's sandgrouse who stole the show. Flocks flew in, low over the surrounding vegetation, turning acrobatically as they decided whether or not to come in and land. Often changing their mind at the last minute, the frantic flapping of their wings was audible as they passed, and the aerial extravaganza was fantastic, our very own air show!

Making our way back to camp to pick up gloves, buckets and the herbicide, we passed the tiniest steenbok sitting in an open area in front of its parent, a perfect mini mirror image of the adult. We didn't hang around as we didn't want to stress the newborn, so we gathered what we needed and set off to remove patches of blackthorn. Gary took us through the correct amount of herbicide to apply and how to identify the difference between young camelthorn, buffalo thorn and blackthorn, in order for us to target the correct plant. Scattering pellets as close to the roots as possible, we covered a substantial amount of ground over the next 90 minutes. Well pleased with our efforts, we learnt that the pellets will dissolve with the forthcoming rains, thus controlling this endemic, yet highly invasive encroacher in the future.

We decided to return to the waterhole to enjoy a well-earned tea or coffee, and as we stood around the vehicle, a male giraffe appeared who slowly walked to the water. He, in typical ungainly fashion, went down with front legs spread wide, and we watched him quench his thirst. A little later, Helen spotted a lone buffalo behind us, followed by a second, and we left them to come down and drink shortly afterwards. A little treat on the way home was a secretary bird taking off and flying low over the shrub line, followed by a nursery herd of oryx, full of adorable little ones.



We needed to find the wild dogs this afternoon, and readings suggested that they were much closer to our side of the reserve than they had been. Agreeing to meet up at 16:30 accordingly, when we set off to find them, Gary also advised that we needed to go and change the battery pack on a pangolin as we were dangerously low to losing signal for it. Oh, go on then!



We found the dogs relatively quickly, lying in the road ahead of us. They were excited at our approach, getting up and greeting each other noisily. They soon settled again, flopping down in the earth, and we continued our drive. An eagle-eyed client spotted two meerkats amongst a group of ground squirrels, who immediately dove into a burrow. We waited for them to reappear, a sentinel coming first, followed by a head of another who wasn't quite brave enough to emerge completely. A red-crested korhaan displayed right over the top of our vehicle and as we circumnavigated a large pan, we witnessed our best black-backed jackal sighting of the trip.

It stood watching us, then moved at a gentle pace and stopped once again. Photographs captured, we carried on and a herd of Plain's zebra ran across the pan in a storm of dust in a timeless Kalahari moment.

As we proceeded north, grassland dominated the horizon and wildlife noticeably thinned out. Other than a few large herds of blue wildebeest and eland, it was quiet, and Gary explained that this area had previously suffered from heavy herbicide usage. As we began to lose the light, we stopped, dismounted the vehicle, and followed Gary on foot to find the pangolin. We knew this was a wild individual that had been tagged after being removed from the fence line and that it had only half a tail, a distinguishing factor. We found it feeding face down at the base of a tree, and Gary carefully removed the battery pack from one of its scales, replaced the batteries and then fastened the pack securely again, getting covered in angry ants in the process.



By now it was almost dark, so we walked back to the road, quickly had our sundowners and then commenced our night drive home. Stumbling across a female white rhino and her sub-adult calf, we turned off the spotlights, drove on, and before reaching home had seen plentiful spring and scrub hares plus a new species, a dwarf hairy-footed gerbil. Our last dinner together was a South African braai with bean salad and jacket potatoes, after which we readied ourselves for departure tomorrow.

Saturday 13 September 2025

Day 9:

Transfer to Johannesburg, depart South Africa

Weather: overcast clearing to bright sunshine, 32°C

Following breakfast, the group departed at 06:40 with mixed emotions. It had been a fabulous week, blessed with superb sightings and lovely home-from-home hospitality. Re-tracing their steps to Johannesburg, they flew home overnight, dreaming, no doubt, of their time in the Kalahari. A very special place indeed.

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Sunday 14 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	Springbok	<i>Antidorcas marsupialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>	✓							
3	Kudu	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>	✓	✓				✓		
4	Slender mongoose	<i>Galerella sanguinea</i>	✓		✓			✓		
5	Waterbuck	<i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus</i>	✓							
6	Steenbok	<i>Raphicerus campestris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>	✓	✓						
8	Plain's zebra	<i>Equus quagga</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Oryx (gemsbok)	<i>Oryx gazella</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Southern giraffe	<i>Giraffa Camelopardalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
11	Blue wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Wild dog	<i>Lycaon pictus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Scrub hare	<i>Lepus saxtilis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Ground squirrel	<i>Xerus inauris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
15	Red hartebeest	<i>Alcelaphus buselaphus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
16	White rhino	<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Black-backed jackal	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
18	Cheetah	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>		✓	✓					
19	Eland	<i>Taurotragus oryx</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
20	Springhare	<i>Pedetes capensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
21	Suricate (meerkat)	<i>Suricata suricatta</i>			✓	✓			✓	
22	Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>			✓					
23	Ground pangolin	<i>Manis temminckii</i>			✓				✓	
24	Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>				✓	✓		✓	
25	Brown hyena	<i>Hyaena brunnea</i>				✓				

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26	Bat-eared fox	<i>Otocyon megalotis</i>				✓	✓			
27	Black rhino	<i>Diceros bicornis</i>					✓			
28	African elephant	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>					✓			
29	Pygmy hairy-footed gerbil	<i>Gerbilliscus paeba</i>							✓	
	BIRDS									
1	Pied crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	✓							
2	Ostrich	<i>Struthio camelus</i>	✓					✓	✓	
3	African sacred ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>	✓							
4	Blacksmith lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Cape turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Laughing dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>	✓							
7	Yellow-billed egret	<i>Ardea intermedia</i>	✓							
8	African palm swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>	✓							
9	Black-winged kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	✓							
10	Giant egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓							
11	African black duck	<i>Anas sparsa</i>	✓							
12	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓							
13	Egyptian goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
14	Greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	✓							
15	Alpine swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	✓							
16	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓							
17	Lilac-breasted roller	<i>Coracias caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
18	Cape starling	<i>Lamprotornis nitens</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Southern yellow-billed hornbill	<i>Tockus leucomelas</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
20	Pale chanting goshawk	<i>Melierax canorus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
21	Crowned lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Helmeted guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	White-browed sparrow weaver	<i>Plocapasser mahali</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Fork-tailed drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Swallow-tailed bee-eater	<i>Merops hirundineus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
26	Southern pied babbler	<i>Turdoides bicolor</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
27	Red-crested korhaan	<i>Lophotis ruficrista</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
28	Yellow canary	<i>Crithagra flaviventris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

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29	White-backed mousebird	<i>Colius colius</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
30	Burchell's sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles burchelli</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
31	Kalahari scrub robin	<i>Cercotrichas paena</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
32	Marico flycatcher	<i>Bradornis mariquensis</i>		✓				✓		
33	Scaly-feathered weaver	<i>Sporopipes squamifrons</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
34	Red-billed quelea	<i>Quelea quelea</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
35	African red-eyed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus nigricans</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Black-throated canary	<i>Crithagra atrogularis</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
37	Pearl-breasted swallow	<i>Hirundo dimidiata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
38	Violet-eared waxbill	<i>Granatina granatina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
39	Crimson-breasted shrike	<i>Laniarius atrococcineus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
40	African grey hornbill	<i>Tockus nasutus</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
41	Gabar goshawk	<i>Micronisus gabar</i>		✓						
42	Ant-eating chat	<i>Myrmecocichla formicivora</i>		✓		✓		✓		
43	Kori bustard	<i>Ardeotis kori</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
44	Namaqua dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
45	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
46	Southern grey-headed sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
47	White-backed vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
48	Fawn-coloured lark	<i>Calendulauda africanoides</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
49	Bearded woodpecker	<i>Chloropicus namaquus</i>		✓						
50	Red-billed buffalo weaver	<i>Bubalornis niger</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Black-faced waxbill	<i>Estrilda erythronotos</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
52	Marico sunbird	<i>Cinnyris mariquensis</i>		✓				✓		
53	Secretary bird	<i>Sagittarius serpentarius</i>		✓					✓	
54	Red-headed finch	<i>Amadina erythrocephala</i>		✓					✓	
55	Rufous-cheeked nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus rufigena</i>		✓	✓	✓				
56	Orange River francolin	<i>Scleroptila levalliantoides</i>			✓					
57	Lappet-faced vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>			✓					
58	Great sparrow	<i>Passer motitensis</i>			✓	✓		✓		
59	African hoopoe	<i>Upupa Africana</i>			✓		✓			
60	Southern masked weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>				✓	✓		✓	
61	Cape sparrow	<i>Passer melanurus</i>				✓		✓		
62	Red-faced mousebird	<i>Urocolius indicus</i>				✓		✓	✓	

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63	Black-chested prinia	<i>Prinia flavicans</i>				✓				
64	Tawny eagle	<i>Aquila rapax</i>				✓	✓			
65	Double-banded courser	<i>Rhinoptilus africanus</i>				✓				
66	Bateleur	<i>Terathopius ecaudatus</i>				✓	✓			
67	Spotted eagle-owl	<i>Bubo africanus</i>				✓				
68	Verreaux's eagle-owl	<i>Bubo lacteus</i>				✓				
69	Common scimitarbill	<i>Rhinopamastus cyanomelas</i>					✓			
70	Purple roller	<i>Coracias naevius</i>					✓			
71	Black-chested snake-eagle	<i>Circaetus pectoralis</i>					✓			
72	Wattled starling	<i>Creatophora cinerea</i>							✓	
73	Groundscraper thrush	<i>Psophocichla litsitsirupa</i>							✓	
74	Northern black korhaan	<i>Afrotis afraoides</i>							✓	

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