

## Tour Report Kalahari Conservation Experience 6 – 15 September 2024

Wild dog and zebra



Lion



Lion



Cheetah



Compiled by Helen Bryon

Join us in the incredible Kalahari for a week long safari with a difference. If you've ever wondered how lions are relocated from one reserve to another, why critically endangered wild dogs are on contraceptives or how to manage rhino populations in today's heavily poached world, this is the trip for you. With a no holds barred approach, take a look behind the scenes at conservation in action, and all the challenges that are faced, all the while exploring South Africa's largest private Big Five game reserve (please note that although elephant and leopard sightings are here, sightings are infrequent). From our comfortable camp (currently the only accommodation offered on the reserve although a new, small lodge should be operational by mid 2025) we will work closely with the reserve ecologists who will provide daily objectives for our extended game drives. While searching for the area's wildlife, we may monitor a select number of collared predators through a mix of GPS readings, telemetry and tracking. Of course, due to the size of the reserve, we may well come across other unknown animals too. Tasks may include camera trapping, herbaceous surveys, pangolin monitoring (the reserve is a designated release site for rescued poached individuals) or bush clearance amongst other things.

**Day 1:**

**Friday 6 September 2024**

London Heathrow to Johannesburg

Meeting up at London Heathrow, the group's nonstop overnight flight with BA to Johannesburg departed on time.

**Day 2:**

**Saturday 7 September 2024**

Johannesburg to the Kalahari

*Weather: sunny and clear, 27 degrees*

Arriving 15 minutes ahead of schedule, we completed arrival formalities quickly and having met up with our driver Brian, were on the road for our day long transfer to the Kalahari by 08:15am. Two hours later we stopped for snacks and a leg stretch at Ventersdorp before continuing to our next stop Vryburg. Here, at the last major town before the reserve, we stopped to collect pre-ordered groceries for camp and to buy lunch. Tucking into home made sandwiches followed by ice-cream, we were on our way not long afterwards. We'd been birding as we drove but during the last three hours, as villages diminished and we passed farms and bush, we began to notice more mammals including slender mongoose, kudu, steenbok and ground squirrels. By 17:15pm we'd arrived at the reserve and were meeting our hosts, Gary, Edyta and their three rescue dogs, Sweeney, Betty and Pluto who are an integral part of life here. We signed indemnity forms, were shown to our more than en suite comfortable tents and the decision was made to head straight to the closest waterhole (hereafter to be referred to as 'our' waterhole) for sundowners.

Jumping into our open-sided safari vehicle with three rows of tiered seats and a roof, we were immediately driving through herds of blue wildebeest and Plain's zebra and a few minutes later were fantastically enjoying the company of two white rhino bulls drinking at the waterhole. We sat watching them and once they returned to the task of drinking and were therefore relaxed with our presence, we quietly descended the vehicle and poured our own drinks.

A short while later another bull approached from the opposite side of the water. Although smaller, upon registering the other bulls he proceeded to run towards them, asserting his authority, and they bolted accordingly. They remained in sight but having put enough distance between them we watched all three as the sky burnt orange before dusk fell and they moved off.



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Barking geckos began to call, a quintessential sound of the night here and we noticed a shape appear on the edge of the water. Through our binoculars we identified it as a Verreaux's eagle-owl.

Returning to camp, we tucked into cottage pie and then gratefully turned in for some well needed sleep.

### **Day 3:**

**Sunday 8 September 2024**

Prey species collar retrieval and monitoring

*Weather: sunny and clear, 31 degrees*

Waking refreshed, we gathered for a hearty breakfast at 06.30am. Tucking into bacon, eggs, croissants, cereal and fruit whilst being serenaded by the chatter of white-browed sparrow-weavers and crowned lapwings, we departed promptly 30 minutes later on a mission to find the carcass of a blue wildebeest so that we could retrieve its collar. Collaring wildlife is not a decision taken lightly by the reserve ecologist but a number of herbivores had been collared in order to gather data for a PhD thesis. After receiving no signal for a while, it was assumed that the animal was dead and we were off to try and find it.

A Cape glossy starling flew in front of the vehicle as we set off, its iridescence glowing violet rather than its usual striking blue. We passed thickets of blackthorns, the soil raised like a rubber ring around the trunk by the work of pugnacious ants. We recorded all mammals seen as we drove, the relevant app being linked to a GPS system to again support the PhD thesis.

Our first stop was a spotted hyena den very close to camp found during a recent aerial survey. We waited patiently by the entrance for a while but with no sign of activity other than tracks (and strangely enough, swallows darting in and out of it), we moved on. The sun warmed us quickly and we were delighted to come across a porcupine in broad daylight, its presence given away by the sun catching its quills through the golden grass iridescence. It moved away swiftly once we stopped but it was truly a lovely sight to behold. Red hartebeest came next, crossing the road ahead of us, holding their tails out horizontally as they trotted, their grace and elegance a delight. Clear lion tracks for two males were noticed in the road ahead of us heading towards our waterhole and we made a mental note to search for them later this afternoon when it was cooler and they may move to drink.

We reached a calcrete pan where Gary explained the geography of their existence as we took in two springbok, a running black-backed jackal whilst another called, Plain's zebra, one satellite blue wildebeest bull (they leave the security of the herd to try and get first dibs - so to speak - on any passing females) and tracks for a lone wild dog. It was highly unlikely to have been alone but could have been on the periphery of a hunting party.

We came across our first Southern giraffe, a large and dark male who watched us nonchalantly before we reached the last known co-ordinates of the blue wildebeest that had died. Although there was no carcass to be seen, we found the collar lying on the ground completely intact although with several teeth marks were clearly visible on it. Picking it up to pass it on to the reserve ecologist, we carried on, passing a two month old carcass of another giraffe complete with fresh lion tracks passing it. We stopped for morning tea and coffee at a huge calcrete pan overlooking a classic Kalahari scene of Plain's zebra, blue wildebeest, oryx (or gemsbok as they are known as locally) and eland stretching as far as the horizon, occasionally kicking up dust when they ran. While we stopped Gary advised that he had just received a reading for some wild dogs not too far away and suggested that we perhaps try to find them on our way back to camp. Although in an area of dense blackthorn thickets, we didn't hesitate and set off around the pan as more and more plains game came to quench their thirst. A herd of eland spooked and ran across the road in front of us, kicking out their back legs as we marvelled at their agility.

As we left the pan we noticed the presence of pied crow and a male bateleur circling high in the sky and we stopped to see if they may land. If so, the dogs may well have made a kill. A number of white-backed vultures soon appeared too, peaking our interest further. Turning off road, we navigated thickets and stumps as we drove towards them. Two vultures locked talons repeatedly above us, tumbling through the air and another

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sat in a tree indicating that perhaps the dogs were still feeding. As such, we photographed it while Gary climbed onto the vehicle roof to get better telemetry signal to help us find the dogs. Turning one eighty, we knew they were close and were on full alert when suddenly there they were! Right in front of us and sitting in the shade of two trees, their heads were covered in blood and their bellies were full. Wow, what a thrill! We approached a little closer and counted seven in total. They were huge, all male, and in superb condition. Gary identified them as a recent breakaway pack with one male having being darted and collared only last week. They were therefore a little wary around the vehicle so we kept our distance. We watched them briefly and then tried to find the carcass. In an excavated gully nearby Gary found it, a huge mature kudu bull. The stomach contents lay abandoned and they'd had a good go at the meat, as usual starting from the backside and working their way up leaving the neck and head intact. We stepped out of the vehicle for a closer look as the dogs looked on from their shady resting points.

We began our journey back to camp a while later, spending a very pleasant few hours relaxing after a satisfying lunch of salad filled burgers with chips and onion rings. Sitting under the awning by the plunge pool we watched gemsbok and springbok outside camp whilst a number of bird baths on the perimeter fence attracted a myriad of visitors. Violet-eared waxbill, acacia pied barbet, red-eyed bulbul, various species of sparrow, black-throated and yellow canary and surprisingly, a pearl-spotted owlet all came to quench their thirsts.

Before we knew it, it was 16:00pm and we were setting off on our first full afternoon drive hoping to find a collared gemsbok whose readings have been rather erratic. We quickly changed our plans however after anti-poaching patrols radioed in lions around a 45 minutes drive or so away to our west.



Sure enough, by 17:15pm we were following two males walking slowly ahead of us on a road leading to a waterhole. Upon reaching the water they crouched down next to each other, their manes and amber eyes bathed in golden late sunlight and drank deeply. It was an entrancing sight as they lapped away for nigh on ten minutes. We sat enthralled as one male stood up and walked closer to the other and side by side, they continued drinking. Having had their fill, they got up and walked back the way they came and we decided to follow them rather than stop for sundowners.

They turned off road and a warthog ran out ahead of us sensibly disappearing into the grass. We followed the males for the next hour as the sun slowly dropped to, and below, the horizon. Upon reaching an open area they sat down majestically close to our vehicle. They eventually continued and we lost them as the light faded.

On the way back to camp, our night safari produced sightings of bat-eared fox, an unidentified owl flying away from us in the spotlight and Cape fox followed by three white rhino, one of which was a tiny calf. Lion tracks were prolific so our eyes were on stalks and our efforts were rewarded with two magnificent lionesses sitting right next to the road by our waterhole. They were sleepy as we snapped away, taking in their absolute beauty under the a twinkling, starry sky. Leaving them, we came across springhares right outside camp and spent the rest of the evening sitting around the camp fire tucking into pasta bake followed by chocolate mousse.

#### **Day 4:**

Anti-poaching presentation and pangolin monitoring

*Weather: sunny and clear, 26 degrees*

**Monday 9 September 2024**

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Our Monday morning started with the release of a horned adder that Edyta had captured in camp yesterday afternoon. Driving to an open area around five minutes away, we stopped en route to view a tawny eagle and once at our destination we opened the secure bucket and tentatively peered in, absolutely amazed at the snake's diminutive size.

Reaching between 25 - 35 centimetres only, we tipped the bucket slowly towards the sand and upon contact with it, it immediately contracted into a protective stance and proved itself to be the epitome of small but feisty. It hissed audibly so we gave it plenty of space to head straight into one of the many squirrel burrows around us, but it remained still and we watched incredulous as it surreptitiously began to burrow into the sand. Beginning with a slight regular flicking of its tail to cover the extremity, we watched as its core muscles expanded and sand particles were slowly displaced. It remained fairly still and exposed though and then began to repeatedly puff itself up and then shrink back down to size almost like us breathing heavily in and out.



Not wanting to stress it out, we left it to its own devices and came across lion tracks very close to camp. Unable to resist the opportunity of looking for them, we checked various roads and whilst doing so, Gary stopped the vehicle after hearing a noise and sure enough, a honey badger flew out of the grass and ran into the bush. An African hoopoe landed in a tree right next to us and others were highly vocal all around.

Giving up on our lion quest (for now), we returned to camp and spent the rest of the morning discussing the plight of rhinos across Southern Africa. With Gary's background in anti-poaching, this is a subject close to his heart and he proceeded to bust media driven myths about usage of horn and took us through the complexities of the issue. With no known solution, we went through what has been tried and why attempts have failed during an interesting, sometimes difficult, but certainly informative morning.

After a delicious lunch of chicken kebabs with couscous salad, we had a few hours to rest and most of us gathered by the bird tables and successfully waited for new species to appear. We were rewarded with red-billed sparrow-weaver and were, once again, out traversing the roads at 16:00pm. We started off by checking the spotted hyena den where all was quiet but a few new footprints satisfied us that the den is still being utilised.

We disturbed a drinking batleur that flew off as we passed our waterhole but otherwise it was 'suspiciously' quiet. We wondered if perhaps a predator or two were lurking close by as the usual gatherings of plains game were nowhere to be seen. We circumnavigated the water but with no obvious signs of big cats or dogs, we continued on our way coming across Southern giraffe in force.

In general however, it was proving to be quiet so we continued in the direction of a tagged pangolin, hoping for a sighting around dusk. We checked frequently for GPS readings but she appeared to be laying low and so far, had not emerged from her burrow. Gary was quite encouraged by this however as the vets who brought her here thought she was pregnant and hoped she would give birth in the spring, i.e. around now. Keeping our fingers crossed we remained in the area in case of any change in readings and while we drove, we found a lone, leaping eland and an old buffalo bull, a dugga boy. As dusk fell, we decided to cut our losses and leave the area and whilst approaching a nearby waterhole, we noticed three male giraffe and a white rhino female and calf who unfortunately took off at our arrival. The giraffe were bolder however and as the sun set behind them and the night sky colours deepened, we watched as they took it in turns to drink, gracefully splaying their legs apart and defying gravity during their efforts to do so. Hushed into silence by the scene in front of us, we made our way home afterwards driving over lion and rhino tracks galore.

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Although the owners remained elusive, we knew that tomorrow was another day. We did come across bronze-winged courser, a scrub hare by the camp gate and springhares though so were successful with some nocturnal species. Dinner was lamp chops with butternut risotto after which we retired to bed for an early night.

### Day 5:

Wild dog and pangolin monitoring

*Weather: sunny and clear, 31 degrees*

**Tuesday 10 September 2024**

Pancakes were a great start to the morning and we set off full of expectation at 07:00am. Wild dogs were our aim and they worked us hard. An early morning reading showed them on the fence-line close to camp so we set off to try and follow their tracks and catch up with them. Our first swallow-tailed bee-eaters accompanied us briefly and upon reaching the fence we had fresh tracks going east for lion and west for the dogs. We headed west. They continued all the way to a right angle in the fence-line where we lost them, but where fresh leopard tracks were found instead. We had the telemetry set tuned to the wild dog frequency but with no signal being picked up and no sign of the cat either, we turned back into the reserve and finding ourselves close to the spotted hyena den, went to check it out. All was quiet so we continued to our waterhole where Helen pointed out a lone male red hartebeest standing tall in surrounding vegetation and then had to double check her eyesight as what looked like a male impala was right behind him. It was indeed a male impala! Not naturally found in these parts, Gary advised that when old hunting farms were bought

up to form the reserve, impala were here and the decision had been made to leave them here and let nature take its course. It was known that there was one left but during the last aerial census, he hadn't been seen, so this was exciting news. He was still alive and he had our respect surviving in this harsh environment.



Continuing on to a pan, Gary saw a meerkat on the opposite edge so we carefully drove towards it and watched it keeping sentry for a while. Leaving it be, we passed an aardvark hole on the side of the road where the entrance was swarming with flies so we assumed the occupant must be asleep inside. We then checked a brown hyena den but that appeared

to no longer be in use. Passing our waterhole once again we stopped as a large amalgamation of eland, blue wildebeest, springbok and Plain's zebra spooked and ran across the road in front of us with several young amongst them.

Reaching the fence-line once more and picking up the dog tracks again, they appeared to have been running back and forth along it. We went in one direction, reversed and then reversed again, re-tracing our steps before finally coming across them laying under a tree at 10:15am. It was the breakaway pack of seven males again and they remained somewhat wary of us so we didn't hang around.

We stopped for tea and coffee back at our waterhole watching Burchell's sandgrouse collecting water in their chest feathers and white-throated swallows darting to and fro before returning to camp past pronking springbok. Our vegetable quiche and beer bread lunch was wolfed down and then, as usual, we did some birding by the pool enjoying the antics of black-faced waxbill, green-winged pytilia and the return of migratory Southern masked weavers.

What an afternoon we had in store! Departing camp for the reserve office around 40 minutes away, we watched a grey hornbill sitting obligingly in a tree next to us as Gary loaded our vehicle up a kudu leg that we intended to give to the male wild dogs we'd seen this morning. Following being darted last week they were clearly wary whenever we approached so by providing them with a piece of meat, they should then

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have a positive experience and be ambivalent about approaching vehicles in the future. This sort of thing happens all the time when swapping predators from reserve to reserve yet is a practice that normally takes place behind the scenes. Not on this trip.

Driving to where we'd left them earlier, we finally came across our first pale-chanting goshawk (probably the most prevalent raptor here that up until now had been somewhat elusive). Finding the dogs exactly where we'd left them, Gary parked a short distance away and then dragged the kudu leg into an open area while they watched. We then reversed to give any investigating dogs a little distance and waited. One dog got up relatively quickly and cautiously moved towards it. Another followed, and another, but only the lead collared animal actually touched it. Taking a little bite we moved away hoping this would spark a feeding frenzy but the dogs flopped down again, ignoring the meat and assuming their original positions.

We moved slightly further back wondering if perhaps our presence was putting them off. Still we waited but despite a little more interest, they all remained lying down away from the kudu. We withdrew back to the road admitting defeat in this instance, but suddenly they were up and moving as a pack towards the leg. One full bite was all it took and the dogs descended on the meat, pulling it like a tug-of-war between them and tearing off chunks. Chattering excitedly amongst themselves and fully distracted, we slowly moved back towards them and were able to watch, in glorious late afternoon light, dogs doing what they do best.



Around half an hour before sundown we left them to it and headed towards a set of burrows currently being used by a rehabilitated pangolin. The reserve is a designated release site for rescued poached pangolins and upon receiving new arrivals, they are monitored on a daily basis for their first 11 months. After that, they are checked on intermittently and today was the day for the male that we hoped to see. With GPS coordinates logged we set off and as we got closer, telemetry was used to pinpoint his exact location. Approaching on foot we heard him before we could see him, eating at the base of a dense thicket. As the sun set, we waited for him to emerge into the surrounding grasses and when he did so, we followed him on foot. As part of his release, he also has to be weighed, a process performed by walking behind him, picking him up by his hind feet and curling him into the crook of your elbow. Once held, we watched as he relaxed, uncurling himself and showing us his face, impressive claws and underside. What an incredible animal. He was then placed into a bag, weighed, and released as soon as possible. While we were weighing him an eagle-eyed client noted a spotted hyena walking right past us perhaps only 20 metres away. Concerned he may have picked upon the pangolin, we returned to our vehicle and poured sundowners aware that while the hyena watched us, the pangolin had plenty of time to move through the bush on his quest for food. We obviously also needed to celebrate a simply sensational afternoon so far!

It was dark when we left the area, still being watched by the spotty, and almost immediately we came across an owl perched in the branch of a dead tree nearby. Identifying it as a spotted eagle-owl, his huge yellow eyes positively glowed in our spotlight and he hooted repeatedly. We couldn't resist but hoot back!

Shortly before arriving home we did the usual loop at the waterhole to see what we could find and our luck continued not only with the two beautiful lionesses we'd seen previously, but while watching them we could hear white rhino vocalising at the water. Sure enough, we soon came across them and a Verreaux's eagle-owl (differentiated by size, black eyes and distinctive pink eyelids) from its cousin seen just 20 minutes earlier.

We toasted a fabulous afternoon over wildebeest steaks, sausage, bean salad, traditional pap and chakalaka all washed down with fine South African wine once back at camp. Thank you wildlife gods!

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## Day 6:

Predator monitoring

*Weather: Sunny, clear and windy, 29 degrees*

**Wednesday 11 September 2024**

Baboons walked past camp as we enjoyed French toast for breakfast before setting off with four objectives at 07:00am. Plan A was to try and find the lionesses from last night, Plan B involved finding a different breakaway pack of dogs to our west, Plan C was to hopefully catch up with a cheetah coalition and Plan D was to collect another piece of kudu meat from the reserve office.

It was definitely a milder morning but the wind was strong as we headed towards our waterhole. Although we came across tracks for the lionesses going to and from the water to drink, they had left no other clues as to their whereabouts or direction of travel. As such, we moved on to the closest fence-line (as these can be surprisingly productive in terms of finding predators), passing a gorgeous herd of sable on a neighbouring property as we went. The cats remained elusive so we abandoned our feline quest, deciding to try again this evening, and switched to Plan B. Kori bustards galore lined our route and driving off-road upon reaching the last known location for the dogs, we were distracted by a prevalence of very skittish black-backed jackals. Potentially indicating a kill, we searched for it and Gary found the carcass of a very young oryx. Recording this detail in order to feed it back to the reserve ecologist, we then did a wide loop to ascertain whether the dogs were still in the area. They didn't appear to be and so commenced Plan C.

Passing plenty of plains game as we drove east, an eland sprinted alongside us veering across the road and making us exclaim with delight. Yet another kori bustard was seen and it proceeded to take off in front of us, always hugely impressive appearing in slow motion. We stopped to try and work out a shape in the road way ahead and after a good look through our binoculars, we delightedly confirmed that it was an African wild cat. Nonchalantly walking towards us in broad daylight, we hoped it would come closer but it walked off into the grass, disappearing in front of our eyes.



We were grinning regardless and shortly thereafter came across our cheetah coalition lying in the shade by the side of the road. It was proving to be a catastrophic morning! One by one, the four brothers got up and walked the short distance to another shady patch, pawing at the ground to make a more comfortable resting place. Their stiff back legs proved they'd done rather a lot of snoozing already and we watched as one male flopped down and another followed suit so close to him that one's rump became the other's pillow! With the strong wind, they all looked up regularly, alert to potential danger, their incredible amber eyes glowing in the morning light. We talked a little about managing

cheetah populations before tearing ourselves away to continue the short distance to the office.

There we collected another piece of kudu meat with which we hoped to attract two female lionesses this afternoon. Earmarked for relocation to another reserve, the meat served to make them comfortable with vehicles so that next time, a vet can get close enough to dart them when the relation is due to happen.

With the meat loaded and Plan D completed, we slowly made our way back towards camp, stopping for tea and coffee en route. Wind whipping up dust at a large pan made for unusual photographs after which we made a final stop at our waterhole to check for any activity where another gathering of black-backed jackals and a number of 'tree-d' helmeted guineafowl had us on full alert for predators. Whether it was a snake, a leopard or our sought after lions we will never know as we could see no sign of anything. A final hoorah was

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provided by fighting zebra stallions rearing up at each other, before we reached camp and indulged in a lovely lunch of stuffed mushrooms with halloumi and vegetable wraps.

A little later than normal, we met up again at 17:00pm chomping at the bit to find those lions! We stopped at the waterhole and had sundowners while we waited for sunset as that is the optimum time to call in lions. We did a little birding as we chatted quietly but in general all was quiet. Just after 18:00pm we got the kudu leg out of the vehicle, placed in under a shepherd's tree (through which the sun was burning a brilliant orange) and hooked a speaker onto its branches. We hit 'play' and the sounds of a dying pig filled the air for the next few minutes. We waited knowing that predators and potentially scavengers in the surrounding area would now be alert to potential food. Nothing. At 18:20pm we played the recording again and almost immediately, one of the lionesses walked steadily, in stealth mode, towards the meat. We watched as she cautiously sniffed it. Her sister appeared from the scrub and once together, their confidence increased and they immediately settled down to eat. As they chowed down, we listened to them tear sinew from the rib cage and photographed them before we lost the light and viewed them through spotlights instead.

The more confident of the two kept looking up at the tree and we marvelled at just how accurately they were in terms of locating the meat from the sound recording. We did not want her getting her jaws on the speaker though. Before we knew it she leapt up onto the lowest overhanging branch, her curiosity piqued and we drove forward hoping she would move away. Achieving the desired response, she clumsily returned to terra firma where she re-joined her sister for more food. She kept looking up at the speaker and we knew we were now in a quandary. We needed to retrieve the speaker and had banked on the lions dragging the kudu leg away from the area in which we'd left it. We would have to sit it out.



We couldn't leave the sighting in case she went for the speaker again, so we sat there willing them to move a safe distance away once they'd finished feeding. They moved all of perhaps ten metres! One went to drink and we hoped the other may too but no, they of course went one at a time. They did however, return and settle slightly further away. Not far enough in an ideal world but it was doable. Keeping one spotlight on them and another on the tree trunk, Gary positioned the vehicle so that the tree was on the driver's side. He stepped out and looked for a reaction. Neither lioness bade him any attention. He therefore leapt on to the branch, grabbed the speaker and we moved away, giving them them opportunity to return to the kudu leg if they wished.

While we continued to watch them, Gary heard a leopard vocalise in distance and with our mission accomplished here of giving the lionesses a positive experience with the vehicle, we left them to the night and headed to the closest fence-line. There, clear as day, were tracks for one leopard. We followed them. Eye shine ahead raised our hopes and heartbeats but it turned out to be a lone gemsbok. We continued following the tracks which were joined by lion tracks and two more sets of eyes appeared. What had we here? We held our breath as we approached but we had two more gemsbok. The tracks were still clear so we carried on following them desperately hoping to be third time lucky.

Success! A gorgeous young male materialised in front of our eyes. He stepped off the road into the bush but did so slowly so we stopped, kept our engine on and watched him settle into the grass. He didn't appear concerned by our presence so we lapped him up and eventually turned off road to get a little closer. After watching him for a minute or two, he got up and walked away. We rounded a blackthorn and once clear of it, searched for him but he had simply vanished. You have to hand it to leopards, they are incredible at doing that! We were absolutely on cloud nine and returned to the lodge for pasta bake and a large glass of wine to celebrate our incredible fortune. They are rarely seen here so we had been well and truly blessed!

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## Day 7:

Predator and pangolin monitoring

*Weather: Sunny and clear, 33 degrees*

Thursday 12 September 2024

Setting off into another cool, crisp morning, it promised to be a beautiful Kalahari day. Once again we had predators on our minds as we wanted to try and find the two male lions we'd seen a few days ago. A reading for wild dogs however, showed that they were very close to camp, so we decided to try and spot them en route. We found them relatively quickly and watched as they jumped all over each other, vocalising and holding their white tails high in excitement at our approach. They were the seven males we'd been spending time with and it was good to see them far more relaxed around the vehicle. The piece of kudu meat had worked. Before long they moved onto the fence-line and trotted east. Initially side by side they then moved into a one behind the other formation (apart from one who lived by his own rules apparently!) and with the exception of one set of ears directly ahead of the other, they were almost indiscernible as separate animals. After half an hour or so of following them on and off road they moved towards, and then through a dense thicket of blackthorn so we continued on our way.

We stopped to record a number of plains game species together and while doing so Gary noticed a Cape pendulum tit nest in a nearby tree. We pulled up for a closer look and then headed north-west. A huge gathering of white-backed vultures circling ahead caught our attention. There were simply too many to ignore so we pulled off road, headed towards trees crawling with them and after some tough off roading, finally found the carcass of a large male gemsbok. Gary's immediate conclusion was that the kill had been made by dogs but then seeing that the lower jaw bone had been stripped, decided it was more likely to be lion. With no sign of any predators we slowly made our way back to a road and then continued to the closest waterhole hoping we might find the lions there sleeping off their feast. Sure enough, we found tracks for two males. At the waterhole though, all was quiet so we followed their tracks along a further road eventually losing them when they turned off into the bush.



Returning to the waterhole we enjoyed morning tea and coffee during which Gary received a reading for another breakaway pack of dogs not far to our west. As it was hot we figured they'd stay put until late afternoon so we had nothing to lose by trying to find them to see whether they had joined up with any new dogs. We were expecting to find a group of eight comprised of both males and females and sure enough, after passing two female ostrich and passing through dense thicket, we found them resting. Noting they had recently fed, Gary checked their readings and from where they'd travelled, it looked as though they were most likely responsible for the demise of the earlier oryx and that potentially vultures and

other scavengers had been gnawing at the lower jaw meat. We didn't stay with the dogs for long but started making our way home accompanied by many a scimitarbill as we went.

Passing our waterhole we disturbed three tawny eagles who soared up into the air as we passed last night's kudu leg. Two secretary birds then appeared on the other side of the water and we watched as they too took to the air.

The two lionesses were then spotted under a shepherd's tree and we left them to snooze as it was already 13:15pm. Over lunch of stuffed gem squash, spring rolls and samosas we discussed our morning and then retired for a short rest before hitting the road again at 16:30pm.

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The lionesses had moved but our search for them was interrupted by three white rhino drinking at the waterhole. Consisting of a male, female and calf, this was not a happy family picture as the male was clearly interested in the female and was nosying up (for want of a better word) to the calf. The calf wallowed as did the male and then all three trotted off into the surrounding thickets.

We set about looking for the lionesses, finding one alone who looked substantially larger and darker than our two from last night but surely another hadn't arrived and pushed the youngsters out? She didn't look like she was going to move any time soon so we set off on a 30 minute drive to the area in which the female pangolin is currently residing. If she was out feeding, we intended to place a camera trap around the burrow but if she was inside, we did not want to disturb her. We checked for a GPS update and she was still inside so we retraced our steps and returned to search for the lionesses.

We found the single female again and followed her as she moved and reconciled with her sister. Satisfied that they were our two females from last night we waited to see if they would move as the sun descended towards the horizon. Sitting silently overlooking the water after our sundowners we noticed a female white rhino and calf in the distance and hoped they would come down to drink but they simply disappeared. Our two female lions however came down to the water, walked right in front of us and continued into the bush. Spotlights at the ready, we followed them.

They split up and despite having lovely curved bellies, it appeared they were going to hunt. We lost one female as they split up but stuck with the second as she moved slowly but surely through the bush. We spotted eyes up ahead and immediately killed our lights so as not to put the prey at a disadvantage. We heard zebra whinny in the darkness and the lioness took off. We stayed with her, just, and then she slowed down. Our senses on full alert we assumed her sister had attempted a hunt and temporarily failed. We picked up on wildebeest ahead and heard the 'whoosh' as they ran in the dark. When you can hear but not see what is happening, it is spectacularly exciting! When all was quiet ahead we carefully switched on the headlights and watched as our lioness sat down in the grass and stayed put. It was almost 20:00pm by now so with her lack of movement we pushed on back to camp and sat around the fire tucking into chicken with roast potatoes and vegetables listening to the soft bellowing of wildebeest outside.



## **Day 8:**

Predator and pangolin monitoring

*Weather: Sunny and clear, 34 degrees*

**Friday 13 September 2024**

Well how on earth do you begin to explain this morning? The best paid plans and all that! Our plan was to search for the two male lions seen at the beginning of the week but once again we had a 07:00am reading for dogs very close to camp. Daily monitoring is optimum if possible so deciding to check on them quickly, we found their tracks by the fence-line and picked them up with telemetry. They were nearby but were moving. Quickly we turned off road and started following them holding the antenna high to maintain signal. Negotiating the usual holes, logs, stumps and blackthorn thickets, the signal strengthened and lessened as they raced through the bush. We found ourselves back on the road and there they were, well ahead of us in a hunting formation. One glance in our direction and they were off again, at speed. It looked like they were already on the chase.

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We set off after them off road once again, maintaining visual for around a minute or so before losing them. We continued our search stopping frequently to check signal direction before carrying upon with urgency. On and on we went, not actually travelling very far as the crow flies but they were changing direction (typical dog behaviour) and suddenly one client exclaimed, "There!" and we saw them heads down and tails up in a circle. They must have made a kill!

Edging closer we saw that they were on a female red hartebeest. No more than ten minutes since we'd lost them and they'd made the kill, demolished most of it and were in the last throws of feeding. We slowly dismounted the vehicle and took photographs from ground level. Their heads were covered in blood and body juices. These were the seven males we'd been seeing all week and while the confident collared individual remained busy at the carcass, others flopped in the dirt, bellies full. One rolled in the discarded stomach contents while two others pawed the ground. Once they'd had their fill, they moved to the shade of a nearby tree and we took the opportunity to take a closer look at the hartebeest. Other than the eye, it's head and neck were, as usual, untouched. Moving back to the vehicle, we poured morning tea and coffee and watched the dogs before they moved off. It wasn't even 09:00am and we'd had quite a morning. What we didn't know was that the best was yet to come.

We decided to check our waterhole around one and a half kilometres away, to see what else might be out and about. It was hotting up and we followed two beautiful springbok spring down the road ahead of us before reaching a large gathering of Plain's zebra, blue wildebeest and oryx near the water. Red hartebeest were drinking but moved off at our approach. We sat quietly for a while surveying the scene and were just about to leave when another client noticed the dogs approaching from our left. Quickly manoeuvring to the other side of the water so that the sun was behind us and we'd have head on shots of the dogs, we dismounted the vehicle once again and watched incredulous as they walked into the shimmering water, lay down, and began to drink.



They played, chasing each other through the shallows and occasionally lost their footing in a slightly deeper channel. This was magical. On and on they played and then rested, drinking their fill as blue wildebeest cautiously approached the water. They too drank and then the dogs walked towards them, heads and ears down, making them scatter. We watched the same story unfold for the next two hours as all manner of plains game approached the water, only to be goaded and driven away. While we watched, in walked a male buffalo. Make that two, and then three. They didn't move but continued drinking as they stared the dogs down.

Woweeeee, we had to pinch ourselves as yet another species, eland, also approached but then went for the cautious option and ran away.

The buffalo moved off, the dogs moved off, and we decided to follow them as we suspected they would now look for shade in which to rest during the heat of the day. By the time we'd got back on the vehicle, SD cards were filled, batteries were flat and the dogs had literally vanished so we returned to camp just after 11:00am nothing short of elated. This was not your every day sighting and we were thanking our lucky stars. We celebrated with an early beer and spent an hour or two trying to process the events of the morning before re-convening for lunch of corn on the cob, tuna salad and cheese and biscuits with dried fruit.



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Off again at 15:30pm we wondered how on earth we'd top the last 24 hours? Our aim was to try and find the two male lions once again and we set off in a north westerly direction. It was very hot and the bush was relatively quiet but we did stumble across two sub adult female white rhinos. They ran and we carried on, finding one waterhole literally crawling with lion tracks. Where the owners were however, was anyone's guess. We slowly travelled all roads leading from and to the water for a kilometre or two before retracing our steps, checking under shrubs and trees for resting lions. They were no doubt watching us but we could not find them. We doubled back to another waterhole where other than a kori bustard, all was quiet too.

We were in the area of the female pangolin and were armed with the spike upon which to mount the camera trap if she were to leave the burrow. We received a GPS reading and hoorah, she was out. We waited for the next reading which confirmed she was further away from the burrow so we headed there, cleared the area of swaying vegetation that could trigger the camera and set everything up. We then set about looking for the pangolin using telemetry. We found her and watched from a distance as she slowly moved through the bush following scent trails. The sun had set by this time and we were losing light so we left her to the sound of returning Diderick's cuckoos, had sundowners back at the waterhole in the company of a lone black-backed jackal, and then headed for home. Our night drive proved to be a quiet one but we were happy after a very successful week.

We enjoyed a final delicious dinner of chilli sin carne (made with quinoa rather than meat) with sweet potatoes sitting around the camp fire under a star and cloud strewn sky.

#### **Day 9:**

Return to Johannesburg

*Weather: cloudy then clearing, windy, 34 degrees*

**Saturday 14 September 2024**



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After breakfast at 06:00am, the group said goodbye to Gary, Edyta and the dogs, leaving the Kalahari and it's wonderful wildlife behind half an hour later. Baboons and blue wildebeest saw them off before they reached the gate and continued on their way to Joburg to catch British Airways back to the UK.

**Day 10:**

Arrive in London

*Weather: Sunny and clear, 33 degrees*

**Sunday 15 September 2024**

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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
	<b>MAMMALS</b>									
1	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>	✓			✓				
2	Springbok	<i>Antidorcas marsupialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Slender mongoose	<i>Galerella sanguinea</i>	✓							
4	Kudu	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
5	Steenbok	<i>Raphicerus campestris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>	✓		✓				✓	
7	Ground squirrel	<i>Xerus inauris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Common duiker	<i>Sylvicapra grimmia</i>	✓					✓	✓	
9	Blue wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Plain's zebra	<i>Equus quagga</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	White rhino	<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Black-backed jackal	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Red hartebeest	<i>Alcelaphus buselaphus</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
14	Porcupine	<i>Hystrix africaeauralis</i>		✓						
15	Oryx (gemsbok)	<i>Oryx gazella</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
16	Eland	<i>Taurotragus oryx</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Southern giraffe	<i>Giraffa Camelopardalis</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
18	Wild dog	<i>Lycaon pictus</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
19	Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
20	Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>		✓		✓				
21	Bat-eared fox	<i>Otocyon megalotis</i>		✓						
22	Cape fox	<i>Vulpes chama</i>		✓						
23	Scrub hare	<i>Lepus saxtilis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	Springhare	<i>Pedetes capensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

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25	Honey badger	<i>Mellivora capensis</i>			✓					
26	Suricate (meerkat)	<i>Suricata suricatta</i>				✓				
27	Ground pangolin	<i>Manis temminckii</i>				✓			✓	
28	Spotted hyena	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>				✓				
29	Chacma baboon	<i>Papio hamadryas ursinus</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Sable	<i>Hippotragus niger</i>					✓	✓		
31	Southern African wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris cafra</i>					✓			
32	Cheetah	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>					✓			
33	Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>					✓			
	<b>BIRDS</b>									
1	Helmeted guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>	✓							
2	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	✓							
3	Cape glossy starling	<i>Lamprotornis nitens</i>	✓							
4	Cape turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>	✓							
5	Ostrich	<i>Struthio camelus</i>	✓							
6	Hadeda ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>	✓							
7	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓							
8	Pied crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	✓							
9	Glossy ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	✓							
10	Black-shouldered kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	✓							
11	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓							
12	Dark-capped bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus tricolor</i>	✓							
13	Grey go-away bird	<i>Corythaixoides concolor</i>	✓							
14	African sacred ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>	✓							
15	Blacksmith lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>	✓							
16	Southern yellow-billed hornbill	<i>Tockus leucomelas</i>	✓							
17	Lilac-breasted roller	<i>Coracias caudatus</i>	✓							
18	Ant-eating chat	<i>Myrmecocichla formicivora</i>	✓							
19	Kori bustard	<i>Ardeotis kori</i>	✓							
20	Northern black korhaan	<i>Afrotis afraoides</i>	✓							
21	Fork-tailed drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>	✓							
22	Verreaux's eagle-owl	<i>Bubo lacteus</i>	✓							
23	Southern pied babbler	<i>Turdoides bicolor</i>		✓						
24	Groundscraper thrush	<i>Psophocichla litsitsirupa</i>		✓						

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25	White-browed sparrow-weaver	<i>Plocapasser mahali</i>		✓					
26	Crowned lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>		✓					
27	Burchell's sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles burchelli</i>		✓					
28	Pearl-breasted swallow	<i>Hirundo dimidiata</i>		✓					
29	Red-crested korhaan	<i>Lophotis ruficrista</i>		✓					
30	Kalahari scrub robin	<i>Cercotrichas paena</i>		✓					
31	Marico flycatcher	<i>Bradornis mariquensis</i>		✓					
32	Bateleur	<i>Terathopius ecaudatus</i>		✓					
33	White-backed vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>		✓					
34	Violet-eared waxbill	<i>Granatina granatina</i>		✓					
35	Yellow canary	<i>Crithagra flaviventris</i>		✓					
36	African red-eyed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus nigricans</i>		✓					
37	Green-winged pytilia	<i>Pytilia melba</i>		✓					
38	Cape sparrow	<i>Passer melanurus</i>		✓					
39	Laughing dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>		✓					
40	Golden-breasted bunting	<i>Emberiza flaviventris</i>		✓					
41	Black-chested prinia	<i>Prinia flavicans</i>		✓					
42	Southern grey-headed sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>		✓					
43	Acacia pied barbet	<i>Tricholaema leucomelas</i>		✓					
44	Pearl-spotted owlet	<i>Glaucidium perlatum</i>		✓					
45	Black-throated canary	<i>Crithagra atrogularis</i>		✓					
46	Fawn-coloured lark	<i>Calendulauda africanoides</i>		✓					
47	Secretary bird	<i>Sagittarius serpentarius</i>		✓					
48	Tawny eagle	<i>Aquila rapax</i>			✓				
49	Scaly-feathered finch	<i>Sporopipes squamifrons</i>			✓				
50	African hoopoe	<i>Upupa Africana</i>			✓				
51	Crimson-breasted shrike	<i>Laniarius atrococcineus</i>			✓				
52	Golden-tailed woodpecker	<i>Campethera abingoni</i>			✓				
53	Red-billed buffalo-weaver	<i>Bubalornis niger</i>			✓				
54	Red-billed spurfowl	<i>Pternistis adspersus</i>			✓				
55	Bronze-winged courser	<i>Rhinoptilus chalcopterus</i>			✓				
56	Swallow-tailed bee-eater	<i>Merops hirundineus</i>				✓			
57	White-throated swallow	<i>Hirundo albigularis</i>				✓			
58	Southern masked weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>				✓			
59	Black-faced waxbill	<i>Estrilda erythronotos</i>				✓			

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60	African grey hornbill	<i>Tockus nasutus</i>				✓				
61	Pale chanting goshawk	<i>Melierax canorus</i>				✓				
62	Spotted eagle-owl	<i>Bubo africanus</i>				✓				
63	Chestnut-vented tit babbler	<i>Sylvia subcaeruleum</i>					✓			
64	Common scimitarbill	<i>Rhinopamastus cyanomelas</i>						✓		
65	White-backed mousebird	<i>Colius colius</i>						✓		
66	Great sparrow	<i>Passer motitensis</i>							✓	
67	Shaft-tailed whydah	<i>Vidua regia</i>							✓	
68	Grey-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus cirrocephalus</i>								✓
69	Cape wagtail	<i>Motacilla capensis</i>								✓
70	African palm swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>								✓

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