

Tour Report Kalahari Conservation Experience 13 - 22 September 2024

Lion



Wild dog



Cheetah



Eland



Compiled by Helen Bryon

There are two key factors that set this safari apart from others. The first is that we won't just show you wildlife, but we will actively discuss the challenges faced by species with a no holds barred approach. That may include emotive subjects such as hunting, culling, poaching, fences and human wildlife conflict. The other is that we are highly unlikely to come across another vehicle during our time on the reserve... there 's no queueing for sightings here. Although another small lodge is being built and is due to open in mid 2025, with almost 100,000 hectares of the glorious Kalahari at our disposal, we will largely have South Africa's largest private Big Five reserve to ourselves. The value and freedom of that space can not be under-estimated.

Working with the reserve ecologists, every morning and afternoon game drive will have an objective. Over the last two years, the focus has very much been on predator monitoring so spending time with lion, wild dogs and cheetah has been key, finding them through GPS readings, telemetry and old fashioned tracking, to then sit with them, wait for them to hunt and try to follow them, recording any prey preferences they may have (leopards are also found here but it is worth noting that they are infrequently seen - the same applies to elephants). The reserve is also a designated release area for pangolins rescued from poaching. If our visit coincides with releases, daily monitoring is required. Other tasks may be to map the movements of prey species, perform herbaceous surveys and more. For a behind the scenes look into wildlife management and conservation in action, look no further.

Day 1:

Friday 13 September 2024

London Heathrow to Johannesburg

The group flew nonstop overnight to Johannesburg with British Airways.

Day 2:

Saturday 14 September 2024

Johannesburg to the Kalahari

Weather: sunny, light cloud and windy, 34 degrees

Meeting their driver in the Arrivals Hall, the group were on the road by 08:15am commencing their day long minibus transfer north west. Stopping for snacks and lunch en route, they made good time, viewing kudu, steenbok, common duiker and warthog en route, and were met at the reserve gate by tour leader Helen and lodge owner manager Gary at 17:15pm. Springbok and helmeted guineafowl lined the route into camp through which a fleeting dust storm had just swept covering everything in a thick layer of red Kalahari sand. Introductions were made to Gary's wife Edyta and their three rescued camp dogs; mongrel Betty, beagle Sweeney and Great Dane Pluto, who proved to be instant hits. An unseasonal rain shower fell as everyone was shown to their comfortable en suite tents to settle in... albeit briefly! Ten minutes later we re-convened in the dining tent to sign indemnity forms before jumping on to the game drive vehicle as wild dogs were in the area and trying to find them was too good an opportunity to miss.

Leaving camp we drove towards the most intense red setting sun beautifully framed behind a shepherd's tree as crowned lapwings and chacma baboons dotted the open area around us. Capturing a few images before the sun continued its inevitable descent, we enjoyed the height provided by our open sided, roofed vehicle equipped with three rows of tiered seats (thus ensuring that everyone has a window seat). We drove towards the last known location for the dogs, a breakaway pack of seven males, one of whom was collared just a few weeks ago. Upon reaching the relevant coordinates, our eyes were on stalks for our first viewing of them. Gary reached for his telemetry set to see whether he could pick up signal for them and we then successfully headed off road in their general direction. They were spotted lying under a tree to our right and we sat with them quietly as the day gave way to dusk and the sound of barking geckos filled the air. The dogs began sneezing and stretching, often considered a prequel to them setting off to hunt, so we stayed with them as they moved off into blackthorn thickets. They soon flopped down again though so we decided to leave them to it and drive home via the closest waterhole to camp (hereafter referred to as 'our' waterhole) to see if anything was enjoying a cooling drink.

Spotlight set up and held by Helen, we picked up the eyes of a gathering of Plain's zebra. Rather than

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shine on them, we passed by saving them for the morning. All was quiet at the waterhole and by now it was completely dark so forgoing sundowners, we returned to camp ready for a hearty meal and bed. Cottage pie with salad and garlic bread fitted the bill, followed by banoffee pie, and we turned in serenaded to sleep by softly bellowing blue wildebeest and the cry of a pearl-spotted owlet.

Day 3:

Sunday 15 September 2024

Predator monitoring

Weather: sunny and clear, 32 degrees

The serenading continued this morning with a 06:30am rendition of Happy Birthday for a member of our group who was presented with a candle lit croissant, a pressie, wine (to be consumed later obviously!) and a balloon, while the rest of us tucked into bacon, eggs, fruit, cereal and toast.

Shortly after 07:00am we were on the road heading east to search for the wild dogs we'd seen last night. Just 15 minutes later, having passed herds of blue wildebeest, a lone Southern giraffe and a majestic male oryx on the way, we found them. They were trotting in a hunting formation initially but then lay down moving from one blackthorn to another on a constant quest to seek shade.



We sat with them enjoying their proximity as Gary talked us through their social structure, behaviour and the challenges of managing populations. We learnt that high numbers of females are on contraceptives despite them being a critically endangered species. This would be the first of many such discussions and it is really a key point as to what sets this trip apart from other safaris. Yes, we will search for wildlife daily, especially predators, but in addition, we will focus on actively discussing challenges that species face - whether natural or man made.

After a fascinating hour spent in their company, we continued on our way passing five of the Kalahari's seven tree species as a particularly spectacular shepherd's tree was pointed out. We then laughed as a distinct raised ring of earth around the base of a blackthorn was described as 'ringus donutus' (it is actually the work of pugnacious ants that rise towards the surface as spring temperatures rise)!

We were headed for our waterhole to have tea and coffee when we noticed that contrary to many other areas in Africa where the optimum time for wildlife activity is crepuscular, the waterholes here are often quiet in the early morning and busiest during the intense heat of the day. A plethora of herbivores had gathered together and we had stopped to try and identify the species, count them, sex them and describe what kind of herd we were looking at ie breeding, bachelor or mixed sub-adults. We then logged this information onto an iPad app which would map their location and contribute towards the reserve ecologist's PhD thesis.

While we were doing so we heard lions roaring and they didn't sound too far ahead. Moving swiftly on, we reached the waterhole as a huge Kalahari black-maned lion appeared on the other side and then another followed. Wow! As we drove closer Gary recognised them as part of a coalition of three males usually found further north in the reserve, one being particularly distinctive due to a de-gloved lower lip (the result of an injury sustained years ago). Why on



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earth were they roaring mid morning? They appeared to be blatantly advertising their presence in this area. Were they looking for a fight with the usual territorial males?

Helen wondered aloud whether perhaps they'd picked up on the presence of two females that we'd been seeing regularly here over the last few days. Perhaps they were calling them? Whatever the reason, we followed them, marvelling at their sheer size and fantastic presence before parking directly opposite them as they began to drink. We could hear them slurping deeply (for want of a better word!) yet they were clearly on high alert, repeatedly looking up and around them. They were side by side reflected in the water and we, if you'll excuse the pun, lapped them up.



They walked right behind our vehicle and found some shade in which to relax but didn't sit still for long, returning to drink once again. We changed our position accordingly and watched them. They walked slowly off into the bush and we were able to follow them negotiating stumps, thickets and holes (the work of Cape porcupine, armadillo and pangolin). We were able to keep up with them and they soon stopped, fell flat down into the soft red sand and we sat with them as they dozed together, one's tail over the other's mane. As they settled,

Gary took us through the challenges of lion management, providing another hugely interesting insight into population dynamics, covering everything from infanticide to the transfer of individuals from one reserve to another to protect gene pool integrity and hunting to culling.

With them sleeping deeply, we returned to the waterhole where we finally dismounted for our morning break and we watched as springbok, eland, blue wildebeest, red hartebeest, oryx and zebra gathered to drink. With so many species together it was almost Etosha-esque and we took in Burchell's sandgrouse collecting water in their chest feathers, pearl-breasted swallows diving and a lone blacksmith lapwing busying itself around the water. A tawny eagle took off, a black-chested snake-eagle soared above and as we returned to camp we stumbled across five male giraffe.

A couscous salad with ridiculously tasty falafel awaited us for lunch after which we sat by the plunge pool watching a huge number of species attracted to various birdbaths placed around the perimeter fence. The iridescence of a male Marico sunbird was startling, as was the plumage of Cape glassy starlings that well and truly lived up to their name. Other showstoppers included violet-eared waxbill, acacia pied barbet and golden-breasted bunting. One client spent a wonderful hour sitting on her deck watching the antics of a honey badger outside camp and we all came for a good look.

By 16:15pm we were chomping at the bit to get back out into the bush and we set off into the sunshine noticing the very first yellow pom poms of a camelthorn in flower indicating that spring had sprung! Swallow-tailed bee-eaters swooped alongside us and shortly before 17:00pm we were back with the wild dogs.

We knew that they hadn't eaten in two and a half days and very much hoped that tonight may be the night that they set off to find prey. The moon was not quite yet full but it wasn't far off so would provide more than enough light for them to hunt in.

It was still hot and they were stationary so we had early sundowners with them and as the sun began to slink towards our scrubby western



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horizon, we lined up the vehicle to try and capture the dogs on film against the sunset red sky.

There was a lot of sneezing, downward dog stretches and brief excitable periods before they finally set off in a southerly direction with us following. They reached the fence-line and trotted along it one after the other, occasionally moving back into the bush before re-appearing. The lead dog reached a tree and turned 90 degrees facing into the reserve. The other dogs stopped and we noticed them move forward very carefully, peeling off into the bush at intervals one after another. Had they seen prey? They were certainly adopting hunting positions once more. We waited as scaly-feathered finches flittered in a blackthorn next to us. Before long however, they returned to the fence where we had waited, ears straining in case we heard any commotion in the now darkness. Once again they re-appeared and resumed their patrol, trotting effortlessly along. They approached a corner and sat just off the road. We heard one or two violent retches and then lost them as they disappeared into the bush.

We hadn't gone far from camp so decided to check our waterhole once again and were rewarded with a bull elephant drinking alone, beautifully illuminated by the almost full moon. We shared a precious few minutes with him before he silently walked away. We noted the presence of our first black-backed jackal as we followed from some distance away. Although we lost the elephant, we found numerous fresh tracks for lions eventually coming across the de-gloved male that we'd seen earlier sitting alone in an open area. He slept, resting his giant head on his colossal paws so we left him to it. Our route home was a good one providing us with sightings of a lesser-spotted genet, a blood stained and rather full (but stunning) spotted hyena, a scrub hare and numerous springhares.

Dinner around the camp fire was pasta bake with garlic bread after which we ended the day as we had started it by singing Happy Birthday once again, before tucking into apple crumble complete with sparklers! What a day.

Day 4:

Monday 16 September 2024

Predator monitoring

Weather: overcast, 30 degrees

Groundscraper thrush busied themselves outside the dining tent as we tucked into hash browns and fried eggs for breakfast. This morning had been ear-marked for an anti-poaching presentation but we decided to take a quick turn around the waterhole before returning to camp and as a result, the morning did not quite pan out as planned!

The waterhole was literally crawling with lion tracks. Slowly, slowly we circled the water checking every nook and cranny for big cats but to no avail. We were about to head home when suddenly the cry of 'Lion!' was heard after an eagle-eyed client spotted a male under a tree. As we approached we were thrilled to see that he wasn't alone. Behind him was a simply stunning female. Yes! They stood up and walked directly towards us. After they had passed us, we slowly followed them as they moved off into the bush, lying down close to each other, but not too close as the lioness was snarling occasional warnings at him. What an incredibly striking pair. We switched off our engine and settled down to sit with them, waiting to see what they'd do next. The quiet of the bush descended, broken only by the constant calls of Cape turtle doves. It was an overcast and cool morning and we heard leopard calling in the distance as the lions slept. They lifted their heads occasionally, only getting up once to reposition deeper in the bush.

After an hour had passed we decided to leave them to it. Navigating thickets to get back to the waterhole we noticed the de-gloved male in the distance. He too walked directly towards us so we waited for him and watched as he went to the water and began to drink deeply. Once done, he walked on, quietly vocalising and carefully sniffing the ground at intermittent intervals presumably searching for his brother.

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He took the road north and we followed as he passed Plain's zebra and red hartebeest, taking absolutely no notice of them whatsoever. A buffalo stepped out onto the road ahead of him, two more followed, and he just kept on walking steadily as they bolted. We approached the open area in which we'd left him last night and he turned off road heading directly for it. We drove to the next access road intending to pick him up again in the clearing but he had other ideas. He literally disappeared on us, doing a Houdini. Around and around we went, reading a significant number of tracks to try and work out which were freshest but there was no sign of him. Clearly though, a huge amount of patrolling had taken place during the night.



We drove on to the next open area wondering if he'd perhaps moved ahead of us but no, he remained elusive. Ground squirrels and meerkats however were out in force and we delighted in their rough and tumble antics for quite some time. We drove on again reaching our first calcrete pan where Gary explained the geology and geography of their existence. Synonymous with the Kalahari, it was filled with Plain's zebra, blue wildebeest and springbok... a truly timeless scene.

It would have been a lovely spot from which to enjoy morning tea and coffee but of course we had literally "nipped out for a quick look at the waterhole" so we had nothing on board! We therefore decided to head home, having to pass the waterhole on the way. As we did so, we stopped to record another large gathering of herbivores, heard a noise behind us and turned to find the male and female lion mating!



There was no way we could miss this so doubling back on ourselves, we figured we had 15 minutes or so to wait before they did it again. Thirty minutes passed and we were about to give up when the male got up, the female moved into position and there, right in front of us, they did the deed.

By now it was almost half past eleven so we finally headed for home...but the bush wasn't done with us yet. Right outside camp, a few giraffe appeared until we were surrounded by fifteen of them, a few of whom began to neck. Crikey, could this morning get any better?! Salad filled burgers with chips and onion rings were very welcome by the

time we finally got back to camp and we enjoyed a little down time, with all of the giraffe staying close to camp, before setting off again at 15:45pm.

Our goal this afternoon was to find the pack of seven male wild dogs again. Overnight they'd travelled at least 30 kilometres west so we had a fair way to go. We passed a large herd of red hartebeest en route and stopped to view them noticing a lone impala sticking close to them. Not usually found in the Kalahari, he is most likely the last known individual on the reserve, a remnant from the creation of the reserve 17 years ago!

As we drove on, we passed springbok herds and our first kori bustard took off right in front of us and we approached a waterhole where we had been warned that lions had killed a black rhino last night. We found the carcass with one male lion feeding on it whilst a number of black-backed jackals loitered nearby. We didn't stay long and continued our journey west to try and maintain our daily wild dog sighting for research purposes.

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Passing the odd oryx, a Gabar goshawk and displaying red-crested korhaans along the way, we finally picked up their signal using telemetry, and found them due to their raised white tails as they chattered excitedly amongst themselves at our arrival. Whilst they hadn't lost condition, we didn't think they'd eaten much since we'd seen them yesterday. A few of them however had matted hair around their necks and bloodstained necks so perhaps they'd killed a steenbok, but they certainly hadn't killed a medium or large sized antelope as is more usual for them here. We therefore hoped they'd hunt. We had sundowners with them while they lay in the grass around us and then they

trotted off with us following. After an hour with them we lost the light and lost them too so we commenced the long journey back to camp going via the rhino carcass en route.

Approaching the waterhole, a white rhino cow and calf ran off into the night and at the kill site itself, the male lion was still feeding but so was a female, a few sub-adult cubs and younger cubs too. We counted eight and could hear more nearby. We watched them through our spotlights as they made light work of the meat. It was getting late so after some time watching them feed, we headed for home getting brief visuals of bat-eared fox, Cape fox, rufous-cheeked nightjar and bronze-winged courser. We passed more springhares than you could shake a stick finally arriving home after 21:10pm. It had been a long day and after a stunning quinoa chilli dinner, we fell gratefully into bed.

Day 5:

Tuesday 17 September 2024

Anti-poaching presentation, predator monitoring and call up

Weather: overcast, cool and windy to start, clearing later, 28 degrees

We had a lie in this morning with pancakes served for breakfast at 07:30am followed by a presentation on poaching in Southern Africa half an hour later. Predominantly covering the rhino crisis, we gathered in the lounge and were advised that some of the content may be difficult at times but that a factual, non emotive account of the situation would be given. We were taken through misconceptions, media perpetuated myths and inter-related crimes on what proved to be an interesting and thought provoking morning.

Our afternoon was going to be a busy one as we needed to check in on the wild dogs who by all accounts remained in the far west of the reserve. Gary also very much wanted to do a predator 'call up' to try and find two young blond male lions that were seen last week and that were earmarked for re-location to another reserve. Call ups involve playing the sound of a dying animal over a loud speaker in order to attract the attention of predators in the area. Should they respond, they will find a piece of meat waiting for them, their ability to pinpoint exactly where the sound comes from being nothing short of impressive. Doing this just once or twice should make them feel comfortable enough around the vehicle to then be darted by a vet and re-located. With one of the northern males busy mating near camp and the other nearby, plus the fact that one of the southern males was still on the black rhino kill, this was a perfect opportunity to try and find the others without risking calling the wrong lions.

As we needed to cover a lot of ground Gary suggested heading out of the reserve through the



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closest gate, driving west along a main road, and then re-entering the reserve through another gate in order to half the travel time towards the dogs. He'd never done this with clients before but we understood the reasoning and were more than happy to go along with it. We found the dogs relatively quickly, judged that they hadn't eaten since we last saw them and waited long enough to feel confident that they weren't going to set off on a hunt any time soon. As such, we were back at camp just two hours later (it would have taken at least 90 minutes each way just to drive to their location through the reserve), having stopped to view a digging honey badger next to the side of the road. We picked up a leg of kudu that Edyta had brought back from the reserve office earlier, and our cooler box for sundowners, and made our way to our call up location soon thereafter. We passed a drinking giraffe, its neck adorned with red-billed oxpeckers, and the de-gloved lonesome male lion and got to our call up site as light was fading.

We dropped off the kudu leg by the waterhole, backed away, served drinks and enjoyed them on the back of the vehicle as we played the sound of a dying pig, loudly. The almost full moon rose swiftly, reflected beautifully in the still water as we quietly sat and waited for any response. Perhaps fifteen minutes later there was a rustle from behind the vehicle. We shone the spotlight in the right direction and there stood a spotted hyena. It moved behind a thicket, giving us a wide berth and kept walking towards the kudu leg. It finally emerged into the open area by the water to be followed by another, and another, and another. They cautiously moved towards the meat, one moving beyond it until all four of them fell on it.



One was noticeably smaller than the others and it was made clear that it wasn't welcome to eat. It moved in time and time again but every time was chased off, so it ended up jumping and nipping at another individual and they appeared to play with each other while the two adults, both females, ate their fill. They vocalised throughout, high pitched sounds that were distinctly domestic cat like. We watched them interact and all commented that we'd never had a sighting quite like this before. We may not have attracted

lions but we were happy with this. Little is known about the spotted hyena population on the reserve so this was a rare treat indeed.

While the two younger individuals seemed to play chase, one female showed her strength by lifting the leg effortlessly in her jaws as she walked towards the water. There, she dunked it, repeatedly, behaviour none of us had witnessed before. Could she be trying to disguise the smell? Tenderise it? They continued to eat and move the carcass in and around the water, tugging at it, until at one stage all four hyenas were standing on the water's edge perfectly reflected in the moonlight. It was utterly magical.

It was getting late so after sharing their world for an hour, we headed for home once again coming across the de-gloved male lion sitting not far away from the mating pair. She got up shortly after our arrival and walked away, the male watching her, never taking his eyes off her. He followed and when she sat down firmly on her rear, we assumed she did not want to mate. He stood next to her though and she got up, tapping his paws with hers, seemingly inviting him. She immediately sat down again though close to a tree stump denying him access so we continued on our way, arriving home after 21:00pm. We sat around the camp fire eating a South African classic dish, babootie, and then forced some homemade cheesecake down (!) before hitting the hay after another superb day.

Day 6:

Predator monitoring

Weather: Sunny and hot, 30 degrees

Wednesday 18 September 2024

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It was a case of being in the right place at the right time this morning. After a very cold night, the day dawned clear and beautiful. Setting off for morning drive at 07:30am, we got off to a good start with a client spotting a slender mongoose perched in a fork of a tree. A few metres off the ground, we had an unobstructed view its rich chestnut coat, dark tail and beady eyes glinting in the morning sun. After some time it disappeared into a hole in the trunk and we continued on our way, passing two meerkats almost flying down the road with speed as we made our way to a large pan nearby.



We stopped to record a large herd of eland and other plains game that were drinking from the two waterholes contained within it, and whilst doing so a large Kalahari dark maned lion was spotted walking out of the surrounding vegetation. He was massive! We quickly drove around the pan to try and get a closer view and as we did so we noticed movement close by. A male sub-adult stood in vegetation very close to the road and then lay down under a blackthorn next to the vehicle almost hidden by the scrub. A cub followed, crossing directly in front of us.

Grinning widely, another followed, then a female with quite frankly, the most incredible shoulder muscle definition we'd ever seen. Talk about a powerful animal, she was huge and magnificent in equal measure. She too was followed by yet more lions. All but one of them crossed in front of us, some barely registering our existence, while one decided a lie down right behind us would be lovely! Another large dark maned male brought up the rear giving us a total of nine lions. Fab-u-lous!



Their bellies were as full as could be and they slowly made their way to the water as the rest of the game unsurprisingly dissipated.

We thought it worth trying to find their kill so traversed an old road littered with black-backed jackals and pied crow while a male bateleur flew in circles above us. The surrounding bush proved too thick to investigate further so we doubled back to the pan, sat with the satiated lions for a while, and then continued to the reserve office to fill up with fuel.

From there we drove north-east into a less scrubby, more grass dominated landscape. It was truly beautiful as we passed buffalo, more plains game, our first few ostrich and a few new bird species including Northern black korhaan and South African shelducks. We were looking specifically for a male cheetah coalition and upon reaching a waterhole, saw white-backed vultures sitting in a tree. Ah ha. Did we have our boys?

Bypassing drinking warthogs we drove towards the vultures, passing the remains of a large dead baboon en route, and in the distance we noticed movement. A quick glance through binoculars confirmed it was them and we slowly approached finding three blood covered faces peering at us from the shade of the bush under which they were resting. A fourth was a little further beyond and he realised he was feeding. We edged closer and found him on a young wildebeest carcass. We positioned ourselves as best we could (there was a lot of grass around) and we watched as he had his fill, moved off, and another male came to continue feasting.

It was already late in the morning so we left them to it, stopped for a quick break and then made our

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way home around an hour and a half away. We drove over elephant tracks, passing signs of them feeding, depositing dung and sniffing the ground with their trunks in a serpentine manner. An African hoopoe framed in a dead tree against an azure sky was also too good a photographic opportunity to miss.



We eventually got home at 13:30pm, tucked into halloumi and salad wraps and after a relatively quick turnaround (there's no peace for the wicked!), set off again two hours later. We stopped to view a secretary bird and also to investigate why a tawny eagle couldn't take off, but we couldn't get close to it. So as not to cause it any further unnecessary stress, we continued on our way. We needed to find the wild dogs in order to maintain our daily monitoring streak and an hour and a half later, they had barely moved from yesterday. Again, they had not lost condition as such but didn't look as though they'd eaten either. We didn't stay with them long as the sun was already low on the horizon so we made our way towards the waterhole where the lions had killed the black rhino a few days prior.

A purple roller flew with us briefly as did plenty of displaying red-crested korhaans. We also passed a pair of honey badgers (most likely a female and her offspring who can stay with Mum until 16 months old) and two scurrying bat-eared foxes as we approached our destination. We were absolutely amazed at how the carcass had been stripped in such a short amount of time. Really, there was just hide left. With no sign of any predators or scavengers, we dismounted for sundowners and as we left, Helen spotted a rufous-cheeked nightjar very close to the vehicle. Plenty more flew up as we drove home passing one young black-backed jackal and springhares too. It was a relatively quiet night drive but the moon was full and after 11 hours out in the field today, we ate our wildebeest steaks and sausage with corn on the cob and broccoli salad before falling into bed tired but happy.

Day 7:

Thursday 19 September 2024

Wild dog and pangolin monitoring

Weather: Sunny and clear, 28 degrees

Our plan today was to try and find one of a few released pangolins on the reserve, a job best done late afternoon and around sunset. As such, our mission this morning was to find the wild dogs again and keep up our consecutive daily monitoring streak. We set off shortly after 07:00am into a bright and cloudless sky, stopping almost immediately to view gorgeous crimson-breasted shrikes going about their business. Passing our closest pan we noticed a solitary meerkat standing tall as sentry, surrounded by ground squirrels. No doubt there were others nearby but they were keeping a low profile. A Marico flycatcher was added to our species list as we watched a crowned lapwing bother a pale chanting goshawk that was too close to its ground nest for comfort. Gary pointed out the clay construction of a paper wasp in a young camelthorn and a little later we came across three giraffe, one of whom can't have been far off newborn. It's shock of hair atop its horns looked almost as if it had been electrified!

We reached the waterhole where lions had killed the black rhino a few days prior and all was quiet apart from the comings and goings of sparrows drinking alongside a lone Namaqua sandgrouse. A breeding buffalo herd came next, although it was largely comprised of bulls, before we reached the last known location of the wild dogs. Driving off road for at least a kilometre we finally caught up with them but the collared individual was much lighter than our usual dark male. Had the two breakaway packs joined together again? It certainly appeared that way as more and more sets of ears popped up and we counted 15 individuals. Their bloodstained faces gave away the fact that they'd eaten since yesterday afternoon and with all of the dogs looking full, we ascertained that they'd made a substantial kill. We set off to try and find the carcass having to bypass mole rat mounds and numerous porcupine excavations off road.

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We eventually admitted defeat but with the only plains game seen in the area being a handful of oryx, it was most likely one of those they'd killed. Ultimately though, we would never know.

We stopped at another expansive pan for a break, enjoying the view as we tucked into fresh citrus fruit as well as cappuccino muffins (just to keep us going you understand!) and then turned towards home. En route we skidded to a halt for two Cape turtle doves that were in the road and as we reversed, a pale chanting goshawk swooped down in front of us and took one off in its talons. It looked as though the force of its descent had injured the other, a chick, that crawled into vegetation at the side of the road, the instinct to hide kicking in.

After another long morning drive we returned to camp shortly before 13:00pm for a mixed lunch of sausage rolls, spring rolls and requested leftovers. We took full advantage of a few hours to rest as it was hot. When 16:00pm came around, we were on the vehicle and ready go, a female pangolin on our mind. Released after being rescued by poachers, we were provided with all the information known about her at this stage and were advised that we needed to replace the batteries in one of her tags. To do this, we needed her to exhibit typical pangolin behaviour at our approach which is to go head first into the base of a shrub or tree and freeze until she feels it is safe to move.

True to form, an hour later we were walking towards strong signal for her when we noticed her face down in a bush. Perfect. We all stood some distance away while Gary quickly removed the tag from one of her scales, replaced the batteries and re-attached it ensuring it was on securely. He then backed away,



joined us, and we waited. Sure enough, she soon scratched a little with her front legs and then began to move, digging quickly, feeding, and bustling through the undergrowth. She walked firmly on her hind legs, tail held high, showing all the signs of a healthy animal. We followed her cautiously, careful not to crowd her, and were surprised at just how quickly she manoeuvred through the bush.

A blue wildebeest satellite bull snorted and walked past as we were with her and we experienced a range of emotions. Such a sought after creature, this was the first pangolin sighting for everyone in the group and when one client

voiced what a privilege it was to be in her company, we all whole heartedly agreed. She moved to a more open area of red Kalahari earth with little vegetation shrouding her as the surrounding grasses glowed golden and she dug down, eating her fill of snouted termites. What a superstar! Moved to silence we stayed with her until the sun disappeared below the horizon.

Afterwards, we drove to a nearby waterhole for celebratory sundowners and watched as the colours in the sky deepened and were reflected to perfection. It was another cold evening as we commenced our night drive during which we saw scrub hare, spring hare and a Cape fox trotting down the road ahead of us. Risotto was on the menu for dinner and a lot of laughter ensued when Helen advised anyone who wanted to, to head to bed but Edyta ordered everyone back to the table as we'd forgotten about dessert. The brownies were well worth returning for!

Day 8:

Wild dog monitoring and extended sundowners

Weather: sunny and windy, 26 degrees

Friday 20 September 2024

Our last full day on the reserve dawned cool and windy. Wild dog monitoring for the final time was on the cards and shortly after 07:00am, fortified by scones and hard boiled eggs (not necessarily in that order!), we were heading west. We stopped to view a Cape penduline tit nest and passed a pan

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absolutely filled with plain's game. Otherwise, and three waterhole drive by later, it was generally fairly quiet, no doubt due to the cold air and brisk breeze.

We found the dogs in an area dominated by grassland, still together, and with very full bellies. They had obviously made another kill. After tea and coffee with them, we bade them farewell and wished them luck as we tried to find the carcass in order to identify what they'd eaten. We off-roaded to their early morning co-ordinates and despite a few vultures flying lazily overhead, we were unsuccessful in our quest so turned for home passing nursery herds of oryx and eland as we drove.

At one point, a long line of blue wildebeest slowly made their way along it and Gary pointed out a rhino rubbing post, the grey calcrete on the tree stump clear to see. We carefully checked around our waterhole once more as it had been literally littered with lion tracks again earlier and one eagle-eyed client spotted them, earning himself a beer in the process. Three big males, identified as the northern coalition, sat soaking up the sun looking very regal indeed. We didn't stay with them long, hopeful that they'd remain there during the heat of the day.



After a tuna salad and gem squash lunch, we reluctantly began to pack and ready ourselves for departure tomorrow. We had covered so many miles on the reserve due to the location of the wild dogs, that our plan, setting off at 16:00pm, was to simply head to our waterhole and sit quietly to see what may come down to drink. We were very much hoping for rhinos in particular.



It was still hot and as we correctly assumed, the lion trio had not moved. We sat with them for half an hour watching them sleep soundly, opening their eyes wide intermittently, in typical feline fashion, if they felt anything was worth investigating. They supported their black mane adorned heads on their paws and one rolled on to his back, letting it all hang out (so to speak)!

We moved closer to the waterhole and positioned the vehicle so that we had the sun behind us and as wide a view as possible to view wildlife, regardless of which direction it came from. It was a beautifully still scene, the fervent flapping of wings the only sound as Cape turtle doves came down to drink. Sitting in silence and just observing them gave us the opportunity to notice that they submerge their entire heads in the water, something we hadn't picked up before. Then, out of nowhere and directly opposite, we saw the facial profile of a white rhino! He was stationary and we froze, willing him forward to drink. He obliged and slowly approached the water, skirting around the edge. He didn't drink but continued a little further away, stopping in the wide open, clearly nervous. We were upwind of him and no doubt he had picked up our scent. We sat silently praying he'd come forward. Half an hour later and he hadn't moved. Herds of Plain's zebra and eland were gathering behind him and red hartebeest joined the throng too. If we were to turn on our engine and back away, he would run so we stayed put.

Another 15 minutes passed and the now large mass of plains game finally plucked up the courage to come to the water. The zebra were feisty, highly vocal and stallions were rearing up on to their back legs, colliding their limbs. The thud of impact as one bucked another reverberated through us much like a drum. They came in droves, lines of striped necks lapping at the precious water until something spooked them and they ran, the thunder of their hooves audible but still, the rhino did not move.

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A Haded a ibis came to the water and we realised the rhino had been waiting to drink for a hour. We felt it only right to leave the area in order to give him a chance to do so and as we drove away, slap bang in front of us appeared another white rhino bull (of course)! He too was rather skittish in our presence and trotted away so we drove on, stopping in to view the lion males one last time. They were still sleeping so we silently said goodbye and headed home for chicken, roast potatoes and veggies around the fire before having an early night.

Day 9:

Saturday 21 September 2024

Return to Johannesburg

Weather: cold, wet and windy, 09 degrees

After an early breakfast at 06:00am, we expressed our thanks and said goodbye to Gary, Edyta and the dogs before setting off for Joburg. Under Kalahari blue skies springbok and blue wildebeest saw us off en route to the gate and afterwards, we passed steenbok, impala, rhino and red lechwe (far from their preferred watery home) in other reserves. From Vryburg onwards, it was positively murky, wet and unusually cold. We arrived at OR Tambo International airport mid afternoon in plenty of time for our overnight departure back to London Heathrow with BA.

Day 10:

Sunday 22 September 2024

Arrive London



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Checklist for Kalahari Conservation Experience



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	MAMMALS									
1	Steenbok	<i>Raphicerus campestris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Kudu	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>	✓							
3	Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>	✓				✓			
4	Common duiker	<i>Sylvicapra grimmia</i>	✓							✓
5	Springbok	<i>Antidorcas marsupialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Chacma baboon	<i>Papio hamadryas ursinus</i>	✓	✓			✓			
7	Wild dog	<i>Lycaon pictus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	Plain's zebra	<i>Equus quagga</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Blue wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Oryx (gemsbok)	<i>Oryx gazella</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Southern giraffe	<i>Giraffa Camelopardalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
13	Eland	<i>Taurotragus oryx</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Red hartebeest	<i>Alcelaphus buselaphus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
15	Honey badger	<i>Mellivora capensis</i>		✓		✓	✓			
16	African elephant	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>		✓						
17	Black-backed jackal	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
18	Lesser-spotted genet	<i>Genetta genetta</i>		✓		✓				
19	Spotted hyena	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>		✓		✓				
20	Springhare	<i>Pedetes capensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
21	Scrub hare	<i>Lepus saxtilis</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
22	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>			✓					✓
23	Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>			✓		✓	✓		

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24	Ground squirrel	<i>Xerus inauris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Suricate (meerkat)	<i>Suricata suricatta</i>			✓		✓	✓		
26	White rhino	<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>			✓				✓	
27	Bat-eared fox	<i>Otocyon megalotis</i>			✓		✓			
28	Cape fox	<i>Vulpes chama</i>			✓			✓		
29	Slender mongoose	<i>Galerella sanguinea</i>					✓			
30	Cheetah	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>					✓			
31	Ground pangolin	<i>Manis temminckii</i>						✓		
	BIRDS									
1	Helmeted guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>	✓							
2	Cape turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>	✓							
3	Southern yellow-billed hornbill	<i>Tockus leucomelas</i>	✓							
4	Pale chanting goshawk	<i>Melierax canorus</i>	✓							
5	Red-crested korhaan	<i>Lophotis ruficrista</i>	✓							
6	White-browed sparrow weaver	<i>Plocapasser mahali</i>	✓							
7	Secretary bird	<i>Sagittarius serpentarius</i>	✓							
8	Pied crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	✓							
9	Cape glossy starling	<i>Lamprotornis nitens</i>	✓							
10	Crowned lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>	✓							
11	Southern pied babbler	<i>Turdoides bicolor</i>	✓							
12	Lilac-breasted roller	<i>Coracias caudatus</i>	✓							
13	Yellow canary	<i>Crithagra flaviventris</i>		✓						
14	Burchell's sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles burchelli</i>		✓						
15	African hoopoe	<i>Upupa Africana</i>		✓						
16	Fork-tailed drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>		✓						
17	Kalahari scrub robin	<i>Cercotrichas paena</i>		✓						
18	African red-eyed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus nigricans</i>		✓						
19	White-backed vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>		✓						
20	Black-chested snake-eagle	<i>Circaetus pectoralis</i>		✓						
21	Tawny eagle	<i>Aquila rapax</i>		✓						
22	Pearl-breasted swallow	<i>Hirundo dimidiata</i>		✓						
23	Blacksmith lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>		✓						
24	Common scimitarbill	<i>Rhinopamastus cyanomelas</i>		✓						
25	Acacia pied barbet	<i>Tricholaema leucomelas</i>		✓						

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26	Southern grey-headed sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>		✓					
27	Southern masked weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>		✓					
28	Violet-eared waxbill	<i>Granatina granatina</i>		✓					
29	Black-throated canary	<i>Crithagra atrogularis</i>		✓					
30	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓					
31	Great sparrow	<i>Passer motitensis</i>		✓					
32	Golden-breasted bunting	<i>Emberiza flaviventris</i>		✓					
33	Chestnut-vented tit-babbler	<i>Sylvia subcaeruleum</i>		✓					
34	Shaft-tailed whydah	<i>Vidua regia</i>		✓					
35	Laughing dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>		✓					
36	Marico sunbird	<i>Cinnyris mariquensis</i>		✓					
37	Chat flycatcher	<i>Bradornis infuscatus</i>		✓					
38	Red-billed spurfowl	<i>Pternistis afer</i>		✓					
39	Swallow-tailed bee-eater	<i>Merops hirundineus</i>		✓					
40	Scaly-feathered finch	<i>Sporopipes squamifrons</i>		✓					
41	Ground scraper thrush	<i>Psophocichla litsitsirupa</i>			✓				
42	African grey hornbill	<i>Tockus nasutus</i>			✓				
43	Fawn-coloured lark	<i>Calendulauda africanooides</i>			✓				
44	Black-chested prinia	<i>Prinia flavicans</i>			✓				
45	Cape sparrow	<i>Passer melanurus</i>			✓				
46	Kori bustard	<i>Ardeotis kori</i>			✓				
47	Gabar goshawk	<i>Micronisus gabar</i>			✓				
48	Bronze-winged courser	<i>Rhinoptilus chalcopterus</i>			✓				
49	Rufous-cheeked nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus rufigena</i>			✓				
50	Red-billed buffalo weaver	<i>Bubalornis niger</i>				✓			
51	Red-billed oxpecker	<i>Buphagus erythrorhynchus</i>				✓			
52	Bateleur	<i>Terathopius ecaudatus</i>					✓		
53	South African shelduck	<i>Tadorna cana</i>					✓		
54	Northern black korhaan	<i>Afrotis afrooides</i>					✓		
55	Ostrich	<i>Struthio camelus</i>					✓		
56	Purple roller	<i>Coracias naevius</i>					✓		
57	Crimson-breasted shrike	<i>Laniarius atrococcineus</i>						✓	
58	Marico flycatcher	<i>Bradornis mariquensis</i>						✓	
59	Namaqua sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles namaqua</i>						✓	
60	Namaqua dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>							✓

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61	Haded a ibis	<i>Bostrychia hagedash</i>							✓	
62	African palm swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>								✓
63	Common mynah	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>								✓
64	Greater kestrel	<i>Falco rupicoloides</i>								✓
65	Village weaver	<i>Ploceus cucullatus</i>								✓
66	Egyptian goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>								✓
67	African sacred ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopicus</i>								✓
68	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>								✓

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