

## Tour Report

### South Africa – Rare Mammals of the Eastern Cape

21 – 30 October 2023

Caracal



Cheetah



Lion



White rhino



Compiled by Neil Aldridge

Kariega is one of South Africa's lesser-known gems. The family-run reserve gives a warm and welcoming experience for guests and having head ranger Wayne as our guide meant this trip was in excellent hands. We sampled everything that Kariega has to offer, from game drives and boat trips to boma dinners and night drives under the stars. This was a trip with a mission to find some of South Africa's rarer mammals, and while we were unlucky not to see an armadillo, the number of caracals that we saw was unexpected. As well as the big cats putting on a show for us, Kariega's most famous resident Thandi the rhino showed us that she is still a force to be reckoned with. The group fed off Wayne's enthusiasm for everything from dung beetles and narina trogons to wallowing rhinos and hunting cheetahs, making the trip a pure delight.

### **Day 1:**

**Saturday 21 October 2023**

London Heathrow to Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth)

Most of the group met before the flight, with some helpful t-shirt descriptions helping to pick one another out amongst the crowds at the gate at Heathrow. We rendezvoused with the final member of the group the following morning in Johannesburg and made our internal flight to Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth). With the flights out the way, the stress decreased and the excitement began to build the further we headed away from the city and into the rural Eastern Cape via our road transfer.

### **Day 2:**

**Sunday 22 October 2023**

Evening drive

After meeting our guide Wayne and settling in at the marvellous Ukhozi lodge, which is perched high up on the hilltops of Kariega's eastern section, we rolled out of camp for a gentle first evening drive. The plains below the lodge yielded giraffe, families of warthogs and beautiful nyala all feeding together in the evening sun. Unseasonal rains had swelled the river, making it impassable even in the Land Cruiser. That didn't stop us from enjoying the silence on the banks and taking in the feeling of being in the African bush, and enjoying hearing the transition from the daytime soundscape to the nocturnal chorus of frogs. We were rewarded first with a giant kingfisher – the largest of Kariega's five kingfisher species – getting in one last hunt for the day, followed by a black-crowned night heron emerging from the reeds, most probably on the hunt for the very frogs that were serenading us.

### **Day 3:**

**Monday 23 October 2023**

Morning drive

Our first full day started before dawn as we were keen to get out and start looking for the special species that call Kariega home. Any weariness was soon forgotten as we heard that a caracal had been spotted just up the road. Excitement quickly turned to desperation and then despair as the sleek red cat gave us all a lesson in why even seeing a caracal is a moment to be cherished. Wayne crept the Land Cruiser forward almost impossibly quietly for such a big machine. But it was exactly what was required as every bush and every tussock of grass needed to be inspected. Our patience finally paid off though; from deep within a bush, the unmistakable marked face stared back at us just long enough for us to get a tantalising first glimpse. And then, in true caracal style, it melted away.

The caracal wasn't the only special small mammal of the morning as just a short while later, a tiny cape grysbok antelope appeared in a clearing amongst the thick bush. Wayne did his very best to sell the rarity of the sighting to everyone on the vehicle as it was only his third in his 12 years at Kariega, but now that we had tasted caracal, there was only one prize on everyone's minds.

It seems strange to add sightings of male lions and white rhinos as almost footnotes here, but that is the beauty of Kariega. In all, it wasn't a bad first morning.

Afternoon drive

That afternoon, after a spot of tea and cake, we met Kariega's most famous resident, Thandi the rhino for the first time. It didn't take long to find her as she was grazing with her small group in the crater below the lodge. A large herd of buffalo disturbed insects as they moved across the plains, attracting the attention of cattle egrets. The

Find out more about our [Rare Mammals of the Eastern Cape](#) trip or [contact us](#)

01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com [www.wildlifeworldwide.com](http://www.wildlifeworldwide.com)

egrets and buffalo together made for some lovely photographs against the green plains. After taking the chance to drink and wallow in front of us, the buffalo moved on, leaving the lush plains all to Thandi. The only thing that was bothering her was the interest of a male rhino. But more on that later...

#### Night drive

After a beautiful dinner in the outdoor boma back at the lodge, we headed out on our first night drive. The strong winds meant that we had to work hard for our sightings. It seemed that even the giraffe were worried about being blown over as the spotlight and thermal camera picked out many of them lying down. Three separate large-spotted genet sightings proved to be the highlights, alongside an affable chameleon.

#### Day 4:

**Tuesday 24 October 2023**

On the Tuesday morning we took the chance to rest and sleep off the previous night's late drive and the last of the weariness from travelling from the UK. This gave Wayne the chance to rest too as it was becoming clear that our keenness for experiencing everything Kariega has to offer was matched only by the liveliness of the group. We spent the middle of the day looking at cameras and critiquing photos on laptops in the comfort of the lodge's lounge.

The wind from the previous night had not let up by the time we left on our afternoon drive, and so we chose to head deep into the wooded valleys to look for some of Kariega's resplendent birdlife. On our way out of camp, we were stopped in our tracks by a photogenic dung beetle rolling his magnificent ball of poo across the road. Just minutes later, while crossing the wind-swept plains, we were concerned to see Thandi having to physically fend off the amorous male rhino who clearly couldn't take a hint. The soft skin covering the wounds where the poachers removed her horn all those years ago was now bleeding profusely. Clearly, this was a mother who was not afraid to let it be known that her only interest was in keeping her calf safe. Our progress in getting to the sheltered valleys was again hindered as a short while later a young bull elephant chose to stand and feed in the middle of the road. There may even be photographic evidence of some people having to lean into the middle of the vehicle to avoid being brushed by the giant's thick, wrinkly skin as he passed.

With the elephant road block safely negotiated, we finally cruised into the calm of one of the deeply wooded valleys in the heart of the reserve. It wasn't long before we picked up the calls of Knysna turacos and narina trogons. The turacos made their appearance first. The flash of bright red on their wings helped us pick them out as they flitted about the canopy. This is a bird that is high on our list to find on this trip, and so to find three at our first attempt was a real bonus. Then came the trogons. Two of these stout green and crimson birds arrived and sat just long enough for pictures before melting away into the canopy. These are one of South Africa's most sought-after birds and so to add them to our list so early on topped off an eventful and varied drive.

#### Day 5:

**Wednesday 25 October 2023**

#### Morning Drive

Our final morning drive from Ukhozi Lodge again brought us new experiences. Wayne received word that lions had made a kill during the night but by the time we arrived, the pride had long since had their fill, leaving black-backed jackals to pick over the remains. As we watched the jackals, a mother and calf hartebeest appeared and wandered too close. Not just content with the lion's leftovers, the jackals switched from scavengers to hunters and took off into the bush in pursuit of the young hartebeest. Even hunting the calf, it's unlikely that the jackals would have been successful keeping up with one of Africa's fastest antelope.

Giraffe seemed to pop up everywhere we went as we wound our way through the reserve in search of well-fed lions. Wayne was hoping to find the current litter of cubs, but the two impressive male lions quickly made up for any disappointment. At first, we thought that we were going to be treated to the normal low-octane male lion sighting but after a few minutes, one of the impressive cats got our heart-rates pumping by getting up and walking straight towards us, his eyes staring down our lenses. As he got closer, nobody dared to move and there were more than a few nervous glances. This was the safari version of football's "squeaky bum time!"

We rounded off an exciting morning by rendezvousing with Kariega's anti-poaching unit who gave us a

Find out more about our [Rare Mammals of the Eastern Cape](#) trip or [contact us](#)

01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com [www.wildlifeworldwide.com](http://www.wildlifeworldwide.com)

demonstration of how their canine unit keeps the reserve's rhinos and other wildlife safe.

Then, after a hearty breakfast, we bid Ukhozi goodbye and made our way through the reserve to River Lodge, situated, well, on the river.

#### Evening drive

River Lodge proved to be a perfect location for launching our exploration of the south of the reserve. Our first evening drive from the lodge started with one of Kariega's secretive black rhinos enjoying a wallow in the mud. Shortly afterwards, we chanced across our second caracal of the trip, which hung around just long enough for a good view but not long enough for any of us to capture a photo before vanishing into the bush. As we continued our drive, a huge Denham's bustard, a herd of elephants feeding in the marshes and a sighting of gorgeous red bishops and weavers along the river all kept our spirits high. Just when we felt our evening couldn't get any better, we discovered two male cheetah hunting along the edge of the plains. The perfect evening light allowed for some beautiful photographs as the cats moved through the long grass. The evening light then turned into the perfect sunset to enjoy sundowner drinks in the middle of the plains accompanied by a small herd of inquisitive white rhinos.

#### Day 6:

**Thursday 26 October 2023**

#### Morning drive

The morning mist cleared just in time for us to find a small herd of white rhino in early morning light. Cattle egrets then joined the rhinos to feed on the insects disturbed by the giant grazers, making for some striking photographs. As we snaked through the plains, we found a herd of wildebeest feeding not far from a relaxed ostrich. A little while later, as we crossed the riverbed, we were able to pause and watch a tiny, colourful malachite kingfisher hunting from a perch in the middle of the river. It set us up perfectly for our next outing...

#### Boat trip

After breakfast, Wayne swapped the truck for a boat and we took off down the Bushman's River from the lodge. A huge goliath heron hunted from the riverbank while two fish eagles and their juvenile called from the skies above us. As we got closer to the beach at the river mouth, more and more waders came into view, from grey and whitefronted plovers to whimbrels and little and great white egrets. Before we stopped to feel the sand between our toes, a giant kingfisher paid us a visit, hovering next to the boat while African black oystercatchers combed the beach.

#### Night drive

Having taken the afternoon off to rest and enjoy the warthogs and a family of nyala visiting the lodge, we headed out on our second night drive after another magnificent boma dinner under the African night sky. The drive started with the two male cheetahs that we had seen hunting the previous evening. While the cats hunkered down in the middle of the plains, we watched barn owls quartering for rodents in the grass. The calmer weather conditions were clearly good for hunting as we lost count of the number of spotted eagle owls using acacia bushes to hawk from. A herd of male buffalo and a rare sighting of a water mongoose were the other highlights.

#### Day 7:

**Friday 27 October 2023**

#### Morning drive

The morning drive started well with a stunning caracal near the road, our third of the trip. This time, the beautiful cat sat long enough in the open for us to grab some special shots. A short while down the road we spent some time with a leggy secretarybird hunting for snakes on the plains. Nearby, alarm calls of guineafowl led us to search for a predator from the riverbank. Our hopes for a second caracal of the morning were dashed, but a malachite kingfisher, crowned eagle nest and a locust explosion amongst a meadow of flowers all topped off another memorable morning.

Find out more about our [Rare Mammals of the Eastern Cape](#) trip or [contact us](#)

01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com [www.wildlifeworldwide.com](http://www.wildlifeworldwide.com)

Following another excellent breakfast on the lodge's deck overlooking the river, we departed for Settler's Drift, the jewel in Kariega's crown. Once again, our journey was delayed by a dung beetle, this time burying its dung ball in the road.

#### Evening drive

As the late afternoon sun stretched the shadows across the plains, we took a drive up into the mountains. Citrus swallowtails and green-banded swallowtails danced around the truck in the last rays of sunlight, and we watched booted eagles and jackal buzzards soaring on the thermals rising either side of the mountain ridge. The drive finished off with a surprise that Wayne and his team had organised for us. After descending the mountain, we rolled into a forest glade lit up with fairy lights and a small fire. A drinks chest and a table of snacks greeted us and we toasted an end to another special day while enjoying the sanctity of our makeshift woodland hideaway. This proved to be just the warm up as, back at the lodge, we were treated to evening dinner tucked away in Settler's Drift's wine cellar.

#### **Day 8:**

**Saturday 28 October 2023**

#### Morning drive

Heavy rain delayed our departure until after breakfast. So, with our sleep topped up and batteries recharged, we headed out for a long drive to make up for lost time and to make the most of the break in the weather. On the plains immediately below the lodge, a pair of male giraffes sparred, whipping their necks against one another with deep thuds to assert dominance.

Wayne still hadn't lost hope in finding the lion cubs for us in the central part of the reserve and things started to look promising when we spotted one of the lionesses out in the open. As is so often the case when watching lions, we just had to sit and wait. Our hope that the cubs would venture out of the bush to join her or that she would lead us to the rest of the family were dashed and we moved on, still happy to have spent some time with our first big cat of the day.

As we trundled through the wooded valleys towards our lunch spot, large grey shapes started to become visible all around us. A large breeding herd of elephants was spread out, feeding peacefully across the landscape...well, mostly. As with the giraffes a little earlier, a few males were clearly pushing each other's buttons. Then, in an explosion of energy, a large bull decided to pull the younger ones into line. This all happened far too close for our long lenses but some of the group managed to get their mobile phones out just in time to catch a chastened young bull fleeing right around the vehicle. He was so close that a macro lens could have picked out a rare shot of a tick in amongst the wrinkles on the bull's backside, but we were all a little too in awe of the power and speed of these giants. We settled our nerves with a lunch deep in the forest surrounded by narina trogons and olive woodpeckers, while the calls of Knysna turacos rained down from the canopy.

Our route back to Settler's Drift took us along the river road and past the boat station. Subconsciously, you never expect to find any exciting wildlife around human infrastructure, and so we all did a double-take when we spotted a female cheetah crouching and staring intently at a herd of blesbok in between the road and the boat station. The rain had returned but we didn't care...and neither did she. She had flattened herself into the grass, waiting for the right moment. We all sat with bated breath. Then, like lightning, she darted across the wet grass, scattering the blesbok and a pair of noisy hadeda ibis. She narrowly missed her target but the experience of witnessing an animal at the very pinnacle of evolution doing what no other animal can do was incredibly special. We sat with her for a while as she contemplated hunting again before making our way back to the lodge for dinner.

#### **Day 9:**

**Sunday 29 October 2023**

#### Morning drive

The next morning, we caught up with the female cheetah again. She had successfully killed at first light and was finishing her breakfast in the bush along the river where red bishops flitted amongst the reeds. Having parked up on the plains to enjoy warming teas and Amarula coffees, Wayne led us on foot to approach some inquisitive giraffe. Our journey back to the lodge was delayed by a significant roadblock; Colin the white rhino - one of

Find out more about our [Rare Mammals of the Eastern Cape](#) trip or [contact us](#)

01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com [www.wildlifeworldwide.com](http://www.wildlifeworldwide.com)

Thandi's grown calves – was using the road to mark his territorial boundary.

#### Evening drive

Our final evening drive was a fitting end to a wonderful trip. Vast herds of giraffe lined our route from the lodge to the boat station, where Wayne had secretly planned to surprise us with a short final journey down the river through the reserve. From the boat, we watched pied kingfishers fishing, ostrich and warthog, and Wayne showed us where sections of fences were due to come down to open up the reserve even further.

We were met off the boat with our vehicle, ready for one final search for caracal. A rainbow stretched across the sky as a Denham's bustard wandered the plains with a small herd of springbok. Then, as we rounded the corner in an area where caracal had been seen recently, the rear end of a small red cat disappeared into the bush on the side of the road in front of us. Tantalising glimpses through the grass kept us on the caracal's trail as she headed towards the marshes. Wayne expertly read the lay of the land and avoided getting us stuck. He then got out and tracked silently on foot while Neil manoeuvred the Land Rover. The guiding teamwork paid off and afforded us the privilege to spend time with not just one caracal, but with her kitten too. And, just when we thought that our evening couldn't get any better, the two cheetah brothers appeared in a rare moment of sun and rain.

#### Night drive

Desperate to make the most of our dwindling time on Kariega, we headed out on one final night drive. A family of bush pigs was the highlight and added to our already impressive mammal list. The spotted eagle owls were again out in force, perching on the acacia bushes dotted across the plains. Content, and with a long day of travel ahead, we returned to make the most of the simply unrivalled comfort of the lodge.

#### Day 10:

**Monday 30 October 2023**

With heavy hearts but with minds (and camera cards) full of incredible memories, we said goodbye to Wayne and the wonderful team at Settler's Drift. Narina trogons and a tiny pygmy kingfisher paid us a visit as we departed under clear blue African skies and wound our way back to Gqeberha for the flight to Johannesburg.

#### **Sign up to our e-news**

Sign up to our e-news to find out more about our tours, events, late availability, offers and tour reports at <https://www.wildlifeworldwide.com/subscribe>