

Tour Report South Africa's Rare Mammals in Style 20 – 29 May 2025

Oryx & wild dog



Ground Pangolin



Brown hyena



Tswalu Private Game Reserve



Compiled by Helen Bryon

Tswalu Private Game Reserve, the largest private game reserve in South Africa, supports not only four of the Big Five (there are no elephants here) but wild dogs, cheetahs and spotted hyenas too. It was rare mammals that put this reserve on the wildlife map though, as the glorious landscapes of the green Kalahari support aardvarks, pangolins, brown hyenas, black rhinos, aardwolf, meerkats, and more. Finding these creatures is not a given. Effort and hours are required as we traverse the mountains, koopies (small hills) and stunning red sand dunes through extended game drives from the comfort of our homestead, Tarkuni. We take this lodge over in its entirety, and the warmth of the



welcome and care received during our stay is second to none. We hope that our patience will pay off, but rest assured that the memories made here will last a lifetime, regardless of what we see.

Tuesday 20 May 2025

Day 1:

London Heathrow to Johannesburg OR Tambo International

Coming together at London Heathrow, our group of ten departed on time for Johannesburg, flying nonstop overnight with British Airways.

Wednesday 21 May 2025

Day 2:

Johannesburg to Tswalu

Weather: sunny, clear and windy, 14°C

Arriving half an hour ahead of schedule due to strong crosswinds, we were met directly off the aircraft and fast-tracked through immigration formalities. Once all bags had been collected, we walked out of the terminal building to the airport's bus station where our transfer to Fireblade Aviation was waiting. Warmly welcomed by Grace, we made ourselves comfortable and partook in fresh coffee and a little later, brunch. We forwent the showers and gym available to us, instead, we spent an enjoyable hour or two chatting and getting to know each other. After rearranging bags to ensure access to warm weather gear for our game drive on arrival, we were ready promptly for our private 19-seater air transfer to the reserve at 13:00 (sharing the flight with guests staying at other lodges as well as Tswalu staff).

We were warned it would be 'choppy' but actually the flight was smooth with giraffes seen as we began our descent down into the reserve. We were met with ginger juice and snacks if we wanted them, and watched sociable weavers fly in and out of their nests in the thatched roof that they've extended.

Splitting across two vehicles with our guide and tracker teams of Sips with Dawid and Harrison with Ben respectively, we were not five minutes in when fresh lion tracks were spotted crossing the road. We ventured off into the bush and stumbled across the owners very quickly. While one vehicle sat with two huge females snoozing in the sun, the other viewed two young males who we learned had recently lost their mother to an oryx. We had arrived! We watched them breathing deeply, their pale tan coats shown off to perfection against the deep red Kalahari sand as scaly-feathered finch and Marico flycatchers flitted around us.

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We swapped positions and after twenty minutes or so, drove on, passing ant-eating chat, a southern yellow-billed hornbill and a hovering rock kestrel. Our second mammal was the steenbok, followed by the hugely prevalent raptor, pale chanting goshawk. Passing a wide valley, we kept our eyes peeled for rhino, unsuccessfully and then approached a waterhole surrounded by tracts of stunning Kalahari sunflowers. A little grebe swam out as blacksmith lapwings walked along the water's edge. It really was quite stunning.

Four giraffes were spotted next, followed by a Hartman's mountain zebra, living up to its name and standing proudly atop a ridge. A small herd of kudu appeared to the left of it, also on the ridge, the male's impressive horns glinting in the late afternoon sunlight. A fantastic spot by Dawid then saw us observing two very mobile klipspringers, bounding from rock to rock to rock with ridiculous ease. As we approached Tarkuni, our home for the next seven nights, two bull giraffe heads rose above the tree line, watching us steadily as we slowed to appreciate them.

Meeting Xolani, Alex and Rosy, we were shown around the lodge, sidestepping the striped owl moths dotted here and there, and had a little time to settle into our more than comfortable rooms before dinner. Soup with freshly baked rolls was followed by fillet steak, roasted cauliflower and broccoli, cheese risotto and salad. We wolfed it down and it was followed by a sticky toffee muffin to finish. The final touch was a dash of local brandy, whisky or Amarulla before our travels caught up with us and we retired to bed dreaming of all adventures yet to come.

Thursday 22 May 2025

Day 3:

On safari

Weather: sunny and clear, 18°C

Setting off shortly after 07.00, we were wrapped up well against the morning cold as we immediately came across a magnificent kudu bull who rather obligingly posed for photos right next to the vehicle. His mane and ivory tips to his horns gave away his maturity and as we continued, it became a steenbok kind of morning. They were out in force, males and females, skittish and stationary until our attention was taken by two pale chanting goshawks perched atop a huge sociable weaver nest. These structures are nothing short of extraordinary, pulling in predators in not only avian form but reptilian too, with cape cobras, puff adders and boomslangs prevalent here (although not generally at the time of year that we visit).

We drove towards the sun, heading east and summiting two beautiful dunes, where a one-and-a-half horned sable took on a blue wildebeest to chuckles from Harrison and Ben. Disappearing over the crest, we continued, eventually driving off the road and coming face to face with eight sleeping wild dogs. Barely lifting their heads to register our arrival, they stretched in a luxurious manner, occasionally getting up to re-position. Legs rested on the bellies of their siblings and we learnt that they were last year's litter, a whole year around the sun.

They weren't full but weren't hungry either, and as one vehicle moved to look for any accompanying adults, we came across the shaggy alpha female and male resting a little further on. We watched them for a while until the alpha female rose, sneezed and from behind another bush, the beta female appeared, acting submissively as they greeted each other. The female disappeared into a burrow immediately to our left and we could hear her vocalising from underground. We learnt that there were no pups this year so what had

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she come across? She popped up again and moved around, passing the pups who didn't stir.

A few minutes later the pups got up, went over to Dad, and greeted him enthusiastically. Were they going to set off? It certainly looked promising. A number of them also went into the burrow, coming up with snouts covered in Kalahari red dust, shaking it off, and then going down again. In and out they went and suddenly, on a silent command, they were off. Trotting south, we followed them off-road. Due to recent unseasonal rain, just their ears were visible above the beautiful inflorescence of the grasses but we kept up with them with ease. They repeatedly stopped, smelling and urinating with equal measure.



At one point, they all put their heads down, tentatively jumping forward and sniffing at the soil. Once they'd moved off, we went to see what had captured their interest. A puff adder! Upon closer inspection, we could see quite a build-up of sand around it, and upon closer inspection still, it transpired to be dead. The dogs ran on, with us in pursuit, until one eagle-eyed client spotted a lone male oryx ahead of us. My word, were they going to go for it?

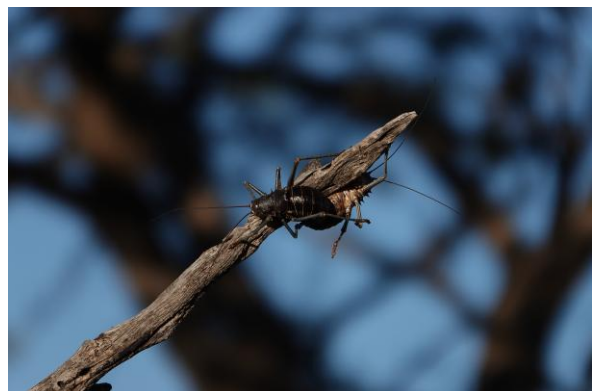


As we caught up with them, the oryx had reversed into a blackthorn, a clever move, leaving its lethal, impressive horns, out front to protect itself. The dogs were within a metre of it, ridiculously close. It lunged forward, stamping, horns down and ready for use, and almost imperceptibly the dogs carried on, perhaps realising that they'd bitten off more than they could chew. Our adrenaline levels were sufficiently raised, however, we had grins plastered all over our faces. What a morning and what an introduction to this wonderful reserve!

We continued to follow them as they re-grouped on the road. Trotting effortlessly ahead of us, they spotted a blue wildebeest and more oryx in an open area directly ahead. They sped up and appeared to have singled out one of the oryx. It too, took shelter in a cluster of thorn bushes on a slightly elevated piece of earth. The oryx stood his ground. The alpha and beta adults hung back, almost facilitating the pups to see how they got on. One by one they slumped down into the red soil, sitting, awaiting instruction, and realising once again that they weren't going to win this battle. Surrounded by dogs, we couldn't move so enjoyed their proximity and before we knew it, we realised we'd spent two hours and twenty minutes in their company! They looked settled so we left them to it and headed back towards Tarkuni. Along the way, dung beetles flew alongside us, two black-backed jackals hurried across the road ahead, chacma baboons hurtled through the bush, and we sat, quite serenely, with ten southern giraffes.

Brunch was served al fresco shortly after our arrival back at the lodge at 11.30. A mountain wheatear joined us as kudu and a single impala came to our waterhole to quench their thirst. Short-toed rock-thrush busied themselves around our gardens and brown-veined white butterflies flew intermittently in and out of our vision while we soaked up the serenity of our surroundings listening to calling waxbills and barbets.

At 16:00, we set off once again, this time heading west. A male pygmy falcon was joined by chestnut-vented tit-babblers and a solo crimson-breasted shrike in the



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branches of a dead tree not far from the lodge and then we began to cross the peaks and troughs of the stunning dunes, our single-track road cutting an impressive red line that stretched out to the horizon. We had the Kalahari gloriously displayed as far as the eye could see.

Turning into the dune streets (the flat areas of relatively low ground separating each crest), and between our vehicles, we came across a flying kori bustard, a strutting secretary bird, displaying red-crested korhaan, roan antelope, ground squirrel, meerkats, and a family of bold yellow mongoose. Tsamma melons littered the soil, a great source of moisture later in the dry season, and we sat next to a small shepherd's tree that was crawling with armoured ground crickets (also known as corn crickets). Looking through binoculars we could observe every detail of their body parts, akin to something out of a sci-fi movie, especially after we learnt that they are carnivorous.

As dusk approached, we stopped to check out pangolin tracks along a dune, our trackers following them for a while before deciding they were from last night. We were encouraged to see signs of activity for them and stopped atop a dune for sundowners. With a birthday girl in our midst, we had celebratory bubbles and watched the sun sink out of sight and the colours deepen until just a broad band of red was visible across the horizon. As we commenced our journey home, we came across a brown hyena and followed it off-road. It walked in our spotlight, eventually lumbering into a canter, at which point we left it alone. As we returned to the road we caught sight of our first springhare and once back home, tucked into a Middle Eastern feast of lamb, beetroot skewers, flatbread, baba ghanoush and hummus. Delicious! There's a lot to be said for a private chef you know!

Friday 23 May 2025

Day 4:

On safari

Weather: sunny and clear, 20°C



Leaving at 07:00 once again, Hartman's mountain zebras covered the slopes of Tarkuni Valley. We watched as they sure-footedly ascended the hills, the lack of stripes on their pale white bellies, belying their species. Approaching a waterhole, four pale giraffes were drinking in the clear morning light, backlit by the rising sun and beautifully reflected in the still water. We delighted in their presence, then passed a kudu bull and lone impala, whilst flushing out a gathering of black-throated canaries as we made our way north-east.

A female meerkat stood sentry on a perfectly rounded red mound of earth and we watched her for a while, but our aim this morning was to find a rhino. Black or white would do, both preferably (!), and between us we took different roads looking for tracks. Harrison's vehicle came up trumps, coming across a crash of seven white rhinos made up of females, a calf, a young male and an enormous bull with incredible horns. With both vehicles coming together, we enjoyed a magnificent sighting for at least 45 minutes as they grazed and slowly walked towards blackthorn thickets, disappearing into them one by one. Red hartebeest replaced them, stunning with their ochre coats and pale buttocks, and no sooner had Helen mentioned their tendency to prance stylishly like dressage ponies when one duly obliged. Thank you



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very much!

Our first plain's zebras crossed the road ahead of us and we picked up tracks for a black rhino. It had clearly been busy, crossing from one side of the road to the other throughout the night. We determinedly followed his spoor, again splitting up to cover more ground, but to no avail.

Re-convening at a small waterhole, we indulged in a little birding while tea and coffee (with Amarulla of course) were prepared, viewing yellow canary, cinnamon-breasted bunting, Namaqua and Burchell's sandgrouse, South African shelduck and excitingly, a male shaft-tailed whydah.

As we meandered home, one client had an unexpected close encounter with a locust as it flew into her face and latched onto her glasses! After setting them both free, we continued on our way with swallow-tailed bee-eaters lining the valley back towards the lodge. We stopped at the sound of a right old commotion coming out of the bushes as a male impala rounded up his harem. Welcome to mating season! A herd of female kudu with their young were spotted close to the lodge and during brunch, they, a male, and a single roan, visited our waterhole. Rock martins flitted against the azure sky and butterflies including blue topaz and African clouded-yellow seen alongside bright orange and bright blue dragonflies by the pool.

At 16:00, we set off once again, full of anticipation for what the drive may bring. It was fairly quiet in the dunes but between us, we saw warthog, sable, oryx and distant ostrich. As one vehicle watched an eland peering from afar through a blackthorn thicket, the other had come across pangolin tracks crossing the road. Too fresh to ignore, Sips and David both jumped down, leaving the clients on the vehicle, to try and follow them. Half an hour later, having weaved this way and that all over the dune street, we couldn't quite believe it but they succeeded! Walking over the ochre earth, through the constant beautiful grass inflorescence, we all followed and there it was. Head down, flat against the earth, it was as still as still can be for the entire 30 minutes or so that we stood quietly around it, taking in its scales and size. Either snoozing or perhaps hunkering down working out whether we were friend or foe, it didn't move as we grinned at our incredible fortune. For most of the group, it was their first pangolin, and for a few, their second. Always an incredible sighting, we veritably pranced back to our vehicles for a better look at the tracks that had led us to it, and then as the sunset flared behind us, we drove towards the Korannaberg Mountains to see what else we could find.



One brief visual of a buffalo, a brown hyena crossing the road and a kori bustard taking off into an ultraviolet sky later, and one vehicle just missed an aardvark sighting. Another team had found it but by the time our group got there, it had disappeared into the bush. The bush wasn't done with us yet though as we were almost home when a porcupine appeared in the road. It shot off beneath a low bush and with some manoeuvring off-road, one vehicle could just about see its quills but the other would need to wait another day. Once home, we headed straight to the bar for a celebratory drink that we enjoyed by the fire pit, returning there again for a nightcap after our fabulous ostrich steak, rice and cauliflower dinner.

Saturday 24 May 2025

Day 5:

On safari

Weather: sunny and clear, 20°C

Waking up to the cries of a pearl-spotted owlet, we were once again greeted by Hartman's mountain zebras as we departed the lodge bright and early at 07:00. Three sets of ears could be seen above the vegetation level on top of a rise, with a fourth individual a little further down. Setting off west into the dunes, we were

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advised that we were hoping to find a cheetah. To large smiles of encouragement, we spent at least an hour getting to the area in which the cheetah had last been seen. Cresting dune after dune, we stopped to view ostrich, a journey of a male giraffe (one with a collapsed left horn) and then we slowed down and began to look in earnest. Suddenly, a shout from tracker Ben had us all looking directly into the rising sun. "Cheetah!" He exclaimed.

We couldn't see anything despite turning our attention to the direction he was looking in. "Look on the top of the dune!" Again, the sun was simply too bright, but he was so

thrilled, and had clearly had his Weetabix this morning! We focussed through our binoculars, and sure enough, the clear silhouette of one individual was slowly walking to our right. There came a cry of "Two! There are two!" Scarcely believing our luck, we checked again and were advised that they were two sisters who had only recently left the security of their mother. Starting out on their own, they are together for security or now but will undoubtedly head off to lead solitary lives soon.

Not only were we with two cheetahs, but we were asked if we wanted to approach closer on foot. Er, yes, please! We didn't need to be told twice! Disembarking the vehicles, we could see one now sitting upright calling for her sister. Her short but insistent vocalisations accompanied us as we walked slowly in a wide arc up the dune, giving them plenty of space. When we were level with them, both sisters were lying down, one visible, and the other hidden by the brilliance of her camouflage. They lay silently, lifting their heads intermittently to survey the kingdom below.

We stood watching them for a good 40 minutes, loving their proximity, until one began yawning and grooming. This is a good sign, as we hoped she might have moved. Our patience paid off and she stretched in a downward dog pose, then a forward pose, and moved to the very top of the dune to sit on her haunches and check out the other dune street now before her. A herd of at least 15 oryx ambled through the valley and she watched them disinterestedly. Turning her head this way and that, she eventually moved back towards her stationary sister, flopping down into the soil next to her once more. They looked as though they had eaten recently so we didn't think they would move too far today. As such, we left them to it, returned to our vehicles, viewed a toktokkie beetle on the way down, and made our way towards a nearby waterhole for morning tea and coffee. A remarkably still warthog, a meerkat and a female pygmy falcon posed for photos en route.



In an area relatively devoid of grass, we lapped up the various species coming down to drink. Staples such as Namaqua dove and yellow canary were there but we also added red-headed finch, Cape sparrow, southern grey-headed sparrow and house sparrow to the list. The stars once again, were male shaft-tailed whydahs, often flying in tandem over our heads from tree to tree, their long tail feathers floating in the breeze. A giant millipede grabbed our attention and as we drove back to Tarkuni for brunch, we stopped to observe black-shouldered kites, three gorgeous young giraffes, crimson-breasted shrike and scimitarbill. Buffalo tracks dotted the access road to camp so once home, during brunch and afterwards, we kept vigil

for them by the waterhole but they didn't appear. Instead, kudu and impala kept us company for a few hours.

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Meerkats were on the wish list for this afternoon and we set off in the general direction of a mob known as 'The Rockstars'. Only fifteen minutes or so into the drive and we slowed down whilst traversing a wide open area littered with gemsbok cucumber and noticed a ground squirrel standing tall by a raised mound of earth. Perched next to a burrow entrance, it was adopting a very meerkat-type stance. Close, but no cigar. A little further on though, and we came across our target. The more slender outline of a meerkat appeared, its dark face checking all directions as it stood tall, slap bang in the middle of a thicket on sentry duty. As we dismounted and walked towards it for a closer look, passing wild sesame flowers en route, we noticed more individuals running towards us, pencil-thin tails held aloft before they disappeared underground. Intermittently they would pop up elsewhere, scurrying this way and that, and we could see red sand being thrown up as they foraged successfully for food, digging just below the surface. Meerkats 1, grubs 0.

We spread out in a wide arc, taking photographs and listening to their chatter. We sunk to our knees or crouched down to get eye level with them, as they busied themselves all around. The alpha was pregnant, fit to burst, and they seemed oblivious to us as they moved slowly north, making their way back to their main burrow system, cleaning out and utilising backup burrows as they went. They kept looking skyward and after much scanning of the cloudless blue infinity above us, a few of us finally caught sight of a raptor flying far, far, far above us. Their eyesight is insanely good.

We spent over an hour in the company of these utterly endearing creatures, observing one stand-out character who stood stooped forward, holding on to a tiny branch that kept on moving in the wind. Whenever it moved, the meerkat lost its balance, making us chuckle! As the sun slunk towards the dune horizon, we made our way east as we had been cordially invited to dine at Klein Jan, a fine dining restaurant devised by South Africa's first Michelin-starred chef, Jan Hendrik van der Westerhuisen. Arriving at a small farmstead flanked by two giant mesquite trees, we had a cocktail on the stoep and then made our way through a six-course taster menu, complete with wine pairings. Springhares and one scrub hare accompanied our journey home and after a nightcap around the fire, we retired to our beds.



Sunday 25 May 2025

Day 6:

On safari

Weather: Sunny and clear with a light wind, 19°C

We'd asked to see Kalahari black-maned lion if possible and boy, did this morning deliver. Our five-hour bush extravaganza of a morning safari started innocuously enough with kudu and impala lining our route away from the lodge. Egyptian geese with goslings and a little grebe swam across a waterhole as we passed, and we split up, taking different roads, to search for lion tracks. Shortly after stopping to view a black-chested snake-eagle perched on top of a tree, one vehicle came across a black rhino. Initially, all that could be seen was its back, a brown strip of skin amongst thickets of deep green blackthorn. It lifted its head though, and its colossal horns punctuated the view. We caught sight of another (wow!), this one with just its horns reaching above the vegetation. They were both facing us head-on, so we watched them and waited for a reaction. With no movement at all, we slowly drove off-road towards them,



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again, searching for any reaction. One hunkered down and we lost visual of it, but the other stood its ground, ears turned towards us. It was still quite some distance away, but there was no way we'd reach it penetrating the thick bush, so we returned to the road and continued our quest for lions.

We heard over the radio that the other vehicle had been successful and were with a small pride so we headed in their direction. We stumbled upon a few distractions before reaching them as from an elevated position as we crossed a koopie, tracker Ben was scouring another valley and found two more black rhinos! This time the pairing was a female and her calf, but by the time we followed his directions, they'd disappeared. We continued on our way with our progress waylaid first by our springbok, and then by a pair of black-backed jackals. In the gorgeous morning light, one's coat was shown off to perfection, a rich, orange chestnut, but the other was most unusually white. Quite possibly it was leucistic as it was quite ghostly. We soon lost them, so to the lions it was then!

Joining the others who by now had been with them, alone, for a gloriously long period (one of the great perks of a stay at Tswalu), we found ourselves in the company of four enormous, and very well-fed lions.



Their bellies were as full as full could be and one blond male and two adult females were out cold, breathing deeply as they slept off their recent meal. Meanwhile, a black-maned male was nothing short of magnificent, holding his head up high (but fighting off sleep), and we watched him with glee. He really was majestic. Handsome personified. After both of our vehicles had had our fill of them, we met up at a dam for coffee, watching birds come down to drink as springbok walked by. We drank in the landscape and slowly meandered home, a locust hitching a ride with one vehicle. A journey of giraffes waylaid us, happily so, as they watched us curiously watching them. Hartmann's mountain zebra came next, high up the sunny slopes of Tarkuni Valley, and finally a marvellous male sable held court in a drainage line close to home.



After brunch, Helen heard a pearl-spotted owlet calling and set off to find it before writing up the events of the morning. High in a dead tree right next to the lodge, it, unfortunately, flew off before anyone else saw it, but we all enjoyed the spectacle of swallow-tailed bee-eaters diving into our pool as well as impala and kudu drinking at the waterhole instead. All good things come to those who wait, though, and shortly after setting off for our afternoon safari, eagle-eyed Sips saw another pearl-spotted owlet being mobbed by black-chested prinias and violet-eared waxbills. We were heading far to the west, on a search for a black and white rhino, so sat back and enjoyed the scenery as we crisscrossed the glorious dunes.

Between our vehicles, we observed pygmy falcons taking locusts, flying red-crested korhaan (whilst we listened to their elusive northern black korhaan cousins calling), crowned lapwings, pale-chanting goshawk, roan antelope, a substantial herd of blue wildebeest and two striding kori bustards, one of whom flew off into the distance.

At a waterhole, we got our first really good look at three huge eland bulls. Although they were distant, they were standing out in the open, the dewlaps and hair on their foreheads indicative of their mature status. We didn't stop though, and a white rhino was soon seen on the horizon. It moved into the bush just as a black

was spotted also far, far off. We watched it and cautiously made our way closer. It moved and we lost it, but it soon reappeared, its back just visible above the thick vegetation. We approached closer still and it began to run. As it did so, a female black rhino with a calf shot out of the bush directly in front of us and out of nowhere. Crikey! They too were running away at great speed so we killed our engine as it wasn't fair to spook them unnecessarily. We'd seen their colossal bulk in their entirety though and as we returned to the waterhole we'd skimmed past earlier, we were blessed with three more rhinos, white this time, and a male warthog with the largest tusks we'd ever seen. What an afternoon!



It wasn't over yet though. We said cheers in Setswana (phonetically gihali bu-ha) and as we enjoyed sundowners and watched darkness descend to the sound of cicadas and murmuring crowned lapwings, we took an extended night drive home hoping to come across rare mammals. A Verreaux's eagle owl stopped us in our tracks as it stood slap, bang, in the middle of the road for an absolute aeon. Unphased by us entirely, we got a good look at its beautiful dark eyes rimmed by pinky purple upper eyelids. We then found the source of much digging along the road, a Damara mole rat, that scuttled off as we passed.

Monday 26 May 2025

Day 7:

On safari

Weather: Sunny and clear, 20°C

What a morning! We'd had a request to look for wild dogs again, so set off for a pack's last known location a fair drive east. 40 minutes into the drive we passed a vehicle parked up at the base of a koopie, so stopped to ask them what they were looking at. We were wonderfully surprised to hear, "spotted hyena". The vehicle left so we started scanning the rocky hillside for the hyenas, and it proved somewhat difficult to find them. At last one moved, and our guides and trackers pointed us in the right direction. Incredibly well camouflaged, they stood outside a cave entrance towards the top of the hill, their pale, almost golden manes picking up the morning sunlight. They tentatively made their way up and down over the rocks, and we could scarcely believe our eyes when a porcupine appeared out of nowhere at the cave entrance, disappearing inside it in a flash!

After our unexpected sighting, we continued east, with one vehicle coming across a buttonquail while another found a black-backed jackal and then brilliantly, tracks for the dogs. They had been busy in the night, running up and down a fence line in an area thick with grasses, three thorn and blackthorn bushes. We moved off-road and no sooner had Harrison and Ben started following their spoor on foot, when Ben said, "I can smell dogs". Almost on command, one popped its head up from the grass. Talk about excellent timing! Upon closer inspection, there were dogs everywhere, they were just very, very well camouflaged (a theme for the morning)! As both of our vehicles came together, it proved difficult to position the vehicles with any decent view of the dogs as they were flopped in the grass, so the suggestion was made that we walk into them. We duly did so and what a treat! Intermittently resting and moving, we slowly approached and walked with them, through the bush teaming with the petite yellow flowers of small rattle-pod, as they re-positioned. How your perspective of these creatures changes when off a vehicle. They are so tall!

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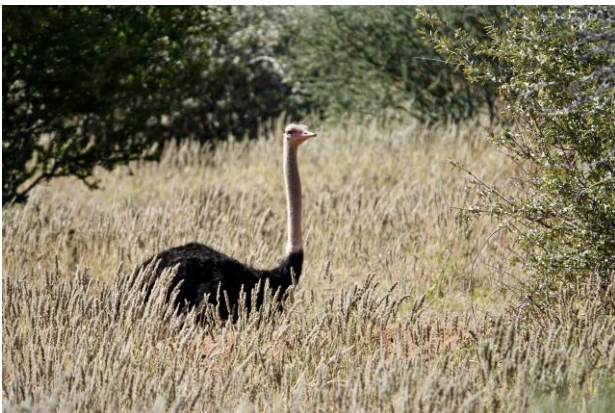
They walked towards the fence line so we jumped aboard once again and listened excitedly as the beta female began to vocalise. She held her face down towards the ground, to help the sound carry, and she produced a series of short, sharp contact calls. The alpha pair stood up and followed her with the youngsters in close pursuit. They lay down again and then the alpha female called. The beta jumped straight up and greeted her, then they all relaxed and the alpha male called. We wondered if they could sense another pack close by. The chatter amongst the pack intensified and white tail tips were raised into the air as they played and trotted away. Then all was quiet once again

and they appeared to settle down for a snooze.

As we'd spent one hour and 40 minutes with them (time flies when you're having fun), we decided to leave them be, along with a white-backed mousebird that had settled in a tree above us and headed off in the direction of Motse, another lodge on the reserve where we planned to have morning tea and coffee. Four young roan antelope held us up as they obligingly stopped and posed for photos. The same could not be said for an absolutely massive kudu bull who crossed the road next, plodding on in the direction of his choosing and ignoring us completely, as it should be really. Then came giraffes and a large, spread-out herd of oryx. Upon arrival at Motse, we could hear an acacia-pied barbet calling, and Dawid found it resting on the 45-degree angle of a dead tree branch. Heading in towards the pool overlooking a waterhole, some of the group ordered coffee and settled down to bird watch, whilst others whisked themselves off to the gallery and shop for a little retail therapy. A dusky sunbird was added to our species list and we watched enthralled as cape and house sparrows came down to bathe alongside red-eyed bulbuls and southern masked weavers.



Driving back just before noon, we came across a male ostrich sitting off the side of the road, a warthog, and closer to home, our usual pair of pygmy falcons and a pearl-spotted owlet. Impala was in the car park upon arrival, then kudu and warthog visited the waterhole during brunch, and a speckled pigeon was spotted nesting outside one of the lodge rooms.



Our plan for the afternoon drive was to scour the area immediately to the west of the Korannaberg Mountains as well as the first few dune streets on the lookout for rare mammals. With aardvark, aardwolf and bat-eared foxes yet to be seen, we slowed right down, scouring the tall grasses for signs of life. A sable was seen, standing in the shade of a tree, head and impressive horns down while it fed. Walking away, it blended into the bush, disappearing in front of our eyes and we drove on viewing chat flycatcher and more Kalahari scrub robins than we'd seen all trip so far. We stopped to admire a herd of oryx in the distance, framed beautifully by the mountains behind them. More oryx followed a little later, running across the dunes in an

impossibly stunning scene. A male and two female ostrich strutted through a valley and when we pulled up to a waterhole, we found a three-banded plover. A little later, a puff adder made an appearance, lifting its

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head impressively with menace before moving off out of sight and we smelt the distinctive aroma of sour grass.

We crested a dune and instead of driving down the other side, glanced to our left and found a semicircle of chairs set up, facing the sunset, and a smiling Xolani popping a bottle of MCC (local bubbles) for us. Wow! We disembarked the vehicles, grabbed a drink and some snacks, and spent a wonderfully pleasant hour watching the sun descend below the horizon. As the colours were squeezed intensely down before darkness took over, we were awed by silence as we drank in this incredible land.

The stars were glittering above us when we commenced our journey home and once again, we drove slowly, slowly through the bush, illuminating the grasses with our spotlights. Dawid suddenly flashed urgently and we reversed to find ourselves somewhat unbelievably within a few metres of an aardvark. Yeeeeeeesssss! What a wonderfully weird creature we were faced with, with its kangaroo ears, pig-like snout and rotund, pink, seemingly hairless body. It was big! It bundled through the bush, yet seemed quite relaxed, but soon disappeared. We called in Harrison's vehicle immediately ahead of us and set about relocating the aardvark as they left the southern white-faced owl that they'd been with, and turned around to join us. We caught a glimpse of the aardvark's face and ears again just as the others pulled in behind us, but by the time they'd passed us to see it, it had dived into a burrow. It was a bittersweet moment with the elation of some seeing it, but the others being so close. We still had tomorrow though, and over our oryx dinner, we toasted our good fortune so far and put our wish list for the last full day out to the universe. An aardvark for everyone to see was firmly positioned at the top, with caracal, aardwolf and tortoise not far behind.

Tuesday 27 May 2025

Day 8:

On safari

Weather: cloudy to start then sunny and clear, 22°C

Galloping Hartmann's mountain zebras crossing the road directly in front of our vehicle was a lovely way to start the day, and the unexpected cloudscape lent itself to a stunning sunrise that was perfectly reflected in the calm, still waters of a waterhole that we passed. Termite mounds blended into the hillside and we scanned our surroundings for signs of rhinos, black rhinos specifically being on the wish list once again. We followed white and black rhino tracks, intermixed with lion too, and Ben spotted a crash in the far distance. We made our way towards six white rhinos, the same we'd seen a few days ago, staying downwind of them as they grazed around our two vehicles. Coming very close at one point, they continued on their way, giving us a stunning sighting in the process. Sitting in silence, we enjoyed a serene 45 minutes in their company.

Driving further east, we continued our search for their black cousins. In the process, one vehicle came across two young male white rhinos and the other, three. It was proving to be a rhino-tastic morning! One vehicle then came up trumps with a black rhino but it was far away in the distance and running, so they left it to its own devices, not wishing to cause it unnecessary stress. Meanwhile, a constant ringing had us chuckling as we thought someone had left the sound on their mobile phone on, but it turned out to be the call of a bokmakeirie (a bush shrike found here)!

A lone bull giraffe stood tall, perfectly framed against the most superlative backdrop, adding a sense of perspective to this vast reserve spread out before us. A fly-by by a lanner falcon saw our species list extend once more, and as we headed for home, more Hartmann's mountain zebra dotted the valley sides and a brown hyena suddenly appeared, passing behind our vehicle and giving us all an absolute adrenaline high!



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The action continued with a puff adder roadblock, which moved to the side at our approach, and as we entered the next valley for a quick sojourn, we were wonderfully surprised to see our lovely team from Tarkuni smiling and waving us down. Welcoming us with a hot hand flannel and a glass of Buck's Fizz, we come across a cooking station, bar and table set up for a bush breakfast. How wonderful! Sitting under the now clear blue sky, our guides and trackers joined us as we tucked into a full English plus pancakes with cherries and cream, before driving us home for a little downtime. We couldn't quite believe our last afternoon safari lay ahead. Where had the week gone?

Between drives, three golden-tailed woodpeckers landed in one room's garden, and those who relaxed overlooking the waterhole were rewarded with sightings of a slender mongoose, one of a handful of waterbuck found here, impala, and you guessed it, kudu!

Once again Hartmann's mountain zebra were out in force when we departed for drive at 16.00. The late afternoon light was glorious and we came to a waterhole where a magnificent male sable was shown off to perfection. We stopped for photographs and when he moved off, we turned our attention to a lone buffalo that had clearly been mud-wallowing before our arrival. He was busy rubbing his face and horns on a thorn bush and as we followed him off-road, he stopped beneath a shepherd's tree and had a good body rub, presumably ridding himself of ticks and parasites. It looked as though it felt good!



A little further on, chestnut-vented tit-babblers were unhappy at the presence of a pearl-spotted owlet and we continued on our way scanning the grasses for any sign of small, sought-after mammals. With the sun lowering to our west, we stopped on a dune and filled our glasses to celebrate our last night in this remarkable part of the world. The colours condensed on the horizon and we set about searching for wildlife by spotlight. Two flap-necked chameleons were found in quick succession, followed by a spotted thick-knee, and as we approached Tarkuni, a spotted eagle owl perched in a dead tree, flying off as we switched off the engine. A delicious braai (BBQ) was served al fresco in the boma, after which we enjoyed our final nightcap before hitting the hay in preparation for a travel day tomorrow.

Wednesday 28 May 2025

Day 9:

Tswalu to Johannesburg and Cape Town

Weather: sunny and clear, 22°C

Our final morning dawned clear and bright with the mountains illuminated and committed to memory, by the rising sun. We had a lie-in with a full breakfast served at 07.00 before departure an hour later. We said our goodbyes to the simply fabulous Tarkuni staff who had gone above and beyond to care for us during our stay, expanding our waistlines in the process! We intended to spend two hours ambling towards the airstrip seeing what we could find along the way. Initially, all was quiet, other than a small herd of kudu with young and Hartmann's mountain zebras, but then the morning's sightings heated up with a vengeance!

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We noticed fresh lion tracks on the road ahead of us. We knew that another vehicle had recently driven the same road and the fact that the lion spoor was on top of their tyre tracks caused a rise in our adrenaline levels. Suddenly, rounding a slight bend, there they were, the backsides of two gorgeous lionesses sashaying down the road immediately ahead of us. We drove off-road, parallel with them, and then past them so we could turn and watch them come towards us head-on. We had the sun behind us, the light was perfect, and they were unbothered by our presence, passing so close to our vehicle that we could hear their pads hitting the deep red soil. The sun was reflected in their amber eyes and we

grinned with gusto! On and on we continued with them, watching them stop occasionally to scan the horizon and to sniff the base of a tree. A black-backed jackal appeared far ahead in the road, standing parallel, watching them get ever closer. It trotted off, only to stop and look back at them, again. Eventually, sense took hold and it sprinted off up a dune, running away at great speed.

One female flopped down onto the road, the other nuzzled her head and continued walking. Further on, one sat down in the shade provided by the back of our vehicle, enabling Helen to take selfies of clients with her. This was insane. A remarkable end to a remarkable trip... but it wasn't over yet.



As our second vehicle came into the sighting, we moved off and we were observing a steenbok when we heard, "Rhino!" Looking up, sure enough, we could see the back of a white rhino ahead. We drove slowly closer and one became two, two became three, and so on, until we found ourselves with six! A different group than yesterday, one of the females had one of the longest horns we'd ever seen. She also had a calf. Good grief, this was *our* kind of airport transfer! Before we left them, we experienced a bit of a commotion as a young male pushed his weight around, only to be shown his place by a larger bull. The sounds emanating from these 'tanks on legs' were extraordinary and we stayed until the dust settled!

Time was ticking on though and we could see our aircraft flying in low over the mountains and coming to land. We pressed on to the airstrip and said goodbye to two of our party who were continuing to Cape Town for a further safari. We then expressed our thanks to our superb guide and tracker team. They too, had well and truly exceeded our expectations with their passion, knowledge and quite frankly, ridiculous spotting abilities! After many hugs, we boarded our eight-seater aircraft and set off for Johannesburg, contemplating all that we had seen and experienced during the last marvellous week.

Back on terra firma, we spent a pleasant few hours at Fireblade Aviation, taking time to re-pack our bags, shower, and grab a bite to eat before being transferred to OR Tambo airport mid-afternoon, in time to commence our journey home. The magic of Tswalu will not quickly be forgotten.

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Thursday 29 May 2025

Day 10:

Arrive in London

Images by Helen Bryon

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Checklist for South Africa's Rare Mammals in Style



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9
	MAMMALS									
1	Lion	<i>Panthera Leo</i>	✓				✓			✓
2	Steenbok	<i>Raphicerus campestris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Southern giraffe	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Hartmann's mountain zebra	<i>Equus zebra hartmannae</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
5	Roan	<i>Hippotragus equinus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
6	Kudu	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Klipspringer	<i>Oreotragus oreatragus</i>	✓							
8	Oryx (gemsbok)	<i>Oryx gazelle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Sable	<i>Hippotragus niger</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
10	Blue wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Wild dog	<i>Lycaon pictus</i>		✓				✓		
12	Black-backed jackal	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Chacma baboon	<i>Papio hamadryas ursinus</i>		✓						
14	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Suricate (meerkat)	<i>Suricata suricatta</i>		✓	✓	✓				
16	Ground squirrel	<i>Serous inauris</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
17	Yellow mongoose	<i>Cynictus penicillata</i>		✓	✓				✓	
18	Brown hyena	<i>Hyaena brunnea</i>		✓	✓				✓	
19	Springhare	<i>Pedetes capensis</i>		✓		✓			✓	
20	White rhino	<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>			✓		✓		✓	✓
21	Red hartebeest	<i>Alcelaphus buselaphus</i>			✓		✓		✓	✓
22	Common duiker	<i>Gewone duiker</i>			✓					
23	Plains zebra	<i>Equus quagga</i>			✓		✓			
24	Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus africanus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		
25	Eland	<i>Taurotragus oryx</i>			✓		✓		✓	
26	Ground pangolin	<i>Manis temminckii</i>			✓					

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27	Buffalo	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>			✓				✓	
28	Porcupine	<i>Hystrix africaaustralis</i>			✓			✓		
29	Cheetah	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>				✓				
30	Scrub hare	<i>Lepus saxatilis</i>				✓		✓		
31	Black rhino	<i>Diceros bicornis</i>					✓		✓	
32	Springbok	<i>Antidorcas marsupialis</i>					✓		✓	✓
33	Damara mole rat	<i>Cryptomys damaraensis</i>					✓			
34	Spotted hyena	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>						✓		
35	Aardvark	<i>Orycteropus afer</i>						✓		
36	Slender mongoose	<i>Galerella sanguinea</i>							✓	
37	Waterbuck	<i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus</i>							✓	
	BIRDS									
1	Sociable weaver	<i>Philetairus socius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Marico flycatcher	<i>Bradornis mariquensis</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Common fiscal	<i>Lanius collaris</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓	
4	Scaly-feathered finch	<i>Sporopipes squamifrons</i>	✓							
5	Rock kestrel	<i>Falco rupicolus</i>	✓	✓						
6	Ant-eating chat	<i>Myrmecocichla formicivora</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Southern yellow-billed hornbill	<i>Tockus leucomelas</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Cape turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Pale chanting goshawk	<i>Melierax canorus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓			
10	Blacksmith lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓				✓			
12	Cape glossy starling	<i>Lamprotornis nitens</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	White-browed sparrow weaver	<i>Plocapasser mahali</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Helmeted guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>		✓				✓	✓	
15	Common scimitarbill	<i>Rhinopamastus cyanomelas</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
16	Kalahari scrub robin	<i>Cercotrichas paena</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
17	Short-toed rock thrush	<i>Monticola brevipes</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
18	Laughing dove	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Mountain wheatear	<i>Oenanthe monticola</i>		✓	✓					
20	Rock dove/feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
21	Namaqua dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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22	Swallow-tailed bee-eater	<i>Merops hirundineus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
23	Pygmy falcon	<i>Polihierax semitorquatus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	Chestnut-vented tit babbler	<i>Sylvia subcaeruleum</i>		✓					✓	✓
25	Crimson-breasted shrike	<i>Laniarius atrococcineus</i>		✓		✓	✓			✓
26	Secretarybird	<i>Sagittarius serpentarius</i>		✓						
27	Kori bustard	<i>Ardeotis kori</i>		✓	✓		✓			
28	Red-crested korhaan	<i>Lophotis ruficrista</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
29	Black-throated canary	<i>Crithagra atrogularis</i>			✓		✓			
30	African red-eyed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus nigricans</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Shaft-tailed whydah	<i>Vidua regia</i>			✓	✓	✓			✓
32	Burchell's sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles burchelli</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Yellow canary	<i>Crithagra flaviventris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
34	South African shelduck	<i>Tadorna cana</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	
35	Namaqua sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles namaqua</i>			✓					
36	Cinnamon breasted bunting	<i>Emberiza tahapisi</i>			✓	✓			✓	
37	Rock martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne fuligula</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
38	Red-faced mousebird	<i>Urocolius indicus</i>			✓					
39	Ostrich	<i>Struthio camelus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		
40	Crowned lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
41	African grey hornbill	<i>Tockus nasutus</i>				✓				
42	Red-headed finch	<i>Amadina erthyrocephala</i>				✓				
43	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				✓		✓		
44	Southern grey-headed sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>				✓				
45	Cape sparrow	<i>Passer melanurus</i>				✓		✓		
46	Black-shouldered kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				✓	✓			
47	Egyptian goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>					✓		✓	✓
48	Black-chested snake eagle	<i>Circaetus pectoralis</i>					✓		✓	
49	Fork-tailed drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>					✓			✓
50	Black-chested prinia	<i>Prinia flavicans</i>					✓	✓		
51	Hamerkop	<i>Scopus umbretta</i>					✓			
52	Violet-eared waxbill	<i>Granatinia granatina</i>					✓			
53	White-backed vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>					✓			
54	Verreaux's eagle-owl	<i>Bubo lacteus</i>					✓			
55	Common buttonquail	<i>Turnix sylvaticus</i>						✓		

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56	White-backed mousebird	<i>Colius colius</i>						✓		
57	Acacia pied barbet	<i>Tricholaema leucomelas</i>						✓		
58	Brown crowned tchagra	<i>Bocagia anchietae</i>						✓		
59	Southern masked weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>						✓		
60	Dusky sunbird	<i>Cinnyris fuscus</i>						✓		
61	Speckled pigeon	<i>Columba guinea</i>						✓	✓	
62	Chat flycatcher	<i>Bradornis infuscatus</i>						✓		
63	Three-banded plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>						✓		
64	Southern white-faced owl	<i>Ptilopsis granti</i>						✓		
65	Bokmakerie	<i>Telophorus zeylonus</i>						✓		
66	Lanner falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>						✓		
67	Golden-tailed woodpecker	<i>Campethera abingoni</i>							✓	
68	Spotted thick-knee	<i>Burhinus capensis</i>							✓	
69	Spotted eagle-owl	<i>Bubo africanus</i>							✓	
70	Wattled starling	<i>Creatophora cinerea</i>							✓	

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