

Tour Report

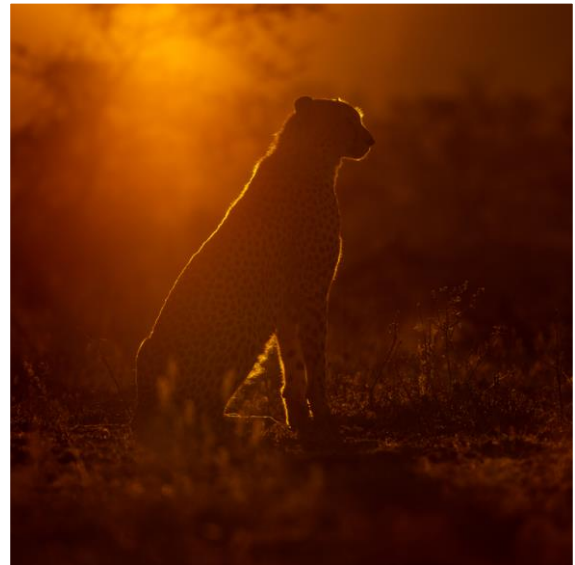
Zimanga - Night Sky and Wildlife Photography

04 – 13 July 2024

Buffalo



Cheetah



Lion



Caracal



Compiled by Sean Weekly

Day 1:
London Heathrow to Johannesburg

Thursday 4 July 2024

I arrived at Heathrow at the airport fairly early and had plenty of time to spare before catching our evening flight at 7:05pm to Johannesburg. I met up with four of the guests at the airport and we all enjoyed a nice catch up. Three of them I already knew from previous tours. It was eventually time to head to the gate and board our flight. The flight was on time and it was a nice smooth ride.

Day 2:
Durban to Zimanga

Friday 5 July 2024

After a quick transfer to Durban airport, we were greeted by our driver who drove us to the Zimanga reserve. The traffic was a bit slow, so it took us about four hours to reach the reserve by 3pm.

Once we arrived, we checked in swiftly and received a brief from our guide Matt. Eager to start our game drive, we hopped onto our 4x4 and were lucky to spot a local female caracal right away. We snapped some amazing photos of her as she roamed the lodge area. This exciting start set the tone for a fantastic week of photography.



Later, we went on a short safari before sunset. During the drive, we got a radio call from another guide named Hendri about a breeding herd of elephants. We followed the lead and found the elephants in an open area, despite the fading light. It was a wonderful experience to see around 15 elephants up close, including a young calf nursing. Although it was challenging to capture photos due to the protective behaviour of the herd, it was still a memorable sighting. Afterward, we returned to the lodge for dinner, spotting various animals like impala, white rhino, zebra, buffalo, hippos, and numerous bird species along the way. After a delightful dinner at the lodge, we retired to our rooms for a well-deserved rest following a long day of travel.



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Day 3:

Saturday 6 July 2024

I divided the group into two so that there would be enough space in the hides for the weekend. We had an early start, meeting at 6am for our game drive. Two of the guests were dropped off at the scavenger hide first. They had a great time with a white backed vulture, some wooly necked storks, and a beautiful tawny eagle who stayed for a while. The eagle even got mobbed a few times by the storks!

The other half of the group and I continued on to do our morning game drive. We got a radio call from one of the other guides called Hendri saying he had a sighting of a pair of cheetah brothers that had not long eaten and that they were both heading towards a stream to possibly take a drink. We headed there in the hopes that they would head straight towards us, which luckily enough for us they did. So we got out of the vehicle with guidance from our guide and laid down for a better vantage point. They were literally feet away from us as they walked past. It was a cold fresh morning so it was great to capture some breath from one of the handsome chaps too!



In the evening at the night hide tamboti, we saw an elephant as soon as we came into the hide, a male Nyala, and a huge herd of buffalo that eventually left then soon came back again each time breaking up into smaller groups to drink. It was great for images as we had a lovely purple afterglow in the sky after sunset. We had lots of visits from around five separate male buffalo throughout the night, one with a nice foliage hanging from its horns. In the morning, we saw lots of bird species including the southern yellow billed hornbill, common waxbill, crested barbet, yellow fronted canary, Burchells coucal, and Gymnogene.



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Day 4:

Sunday 7 July 2024

Umgothi hide I was with group two for their first night at the Umgothi hide. We were all excited to see what the session would bring. Not long after we settled in, a small warthog family came in for a drink. They didn't stay long, but we got a few pictures. Before sunset, three male buffalos came to drink.



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We had a few more visits from them, including one around 3am when we were lucky to see two bulls come in with the Milky Way core in the background.



In the morning, a male impala briefly drank. We also saw canaries, Karacane thrush, ox peckers, woolly necked stork, crested barbet, and orange breasted bunting.

The second group enjoyed their afternoon at the lagoon hide, spotting various species, including a baby crocodile, pied kingfisher, African Jacana, great egret, striated heron, and Egyptian geese.

During the afternoon game drive, we attempted to locate the lionesses that had been located in the morning, but unfortunately, we had no luck. They have been in a dense area near the river for approximately four days, indicating they may have made a significant kill there. We then shifted our focus and tracked down two cheetah brothers, who were mostly napping. Despite their inactivity, we stayed with them in hopes of catching some movement. As the session came to an end, we returned to the lodge and were delighted to see the resident caracal active, allowing us to capture some beautiful photos despite the fading light.

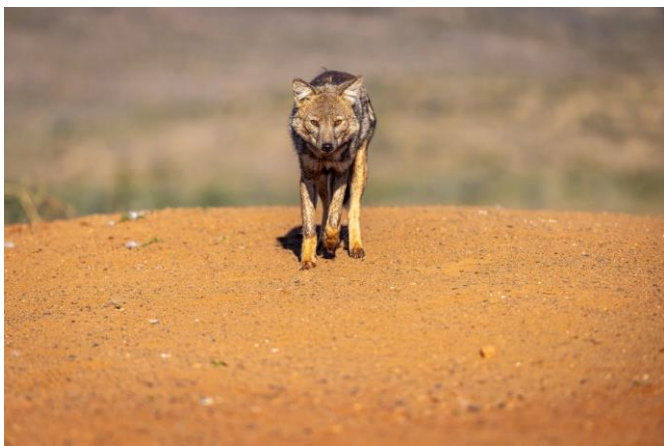


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Day 5:

Monday 8 July 2024

This morning we were in the scavenger hide. Probably one of my favourite hides. We saw a lot of action during the scavenger hide visit, with the side striped jackal making an appearance first. Also spotted were black backed jackals, plenty of white backed vultures, and two cape vultures. There was a lot of fighting among the white backed vultures, and we caught a brief glimpse of a tawny eagle. I was mostly filming during this session so unfortunately didn't take too many images.



We went on an afternoon game drive and tried to find lions, but no luck. They were still deep by the river.

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As the sun set, we watched the cheetahs gracefully move through the savannah, blending in with the landscape. We followed them in our safari vehicle, getting a rare look into their lives as they scanned the horizon for prey. We then got out of the vehicle and continued to follow them on foot. The male brother cheetahs moved in perfect harmony, showcasing the beauty and power of nature. As the sun went down, we took stunning silhouette shots of the cheetahs against the colourful sky, creating some lovely rim lit shots. It was an incredible encounter to end the day.



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Day 6:

Tuesday 9 July 2024

During our morning game drive, we set out again to try to locate the lions near the reservoir. While we were there, we observed a large male hippo making his way back to the water. We kept our distance as he seemed a bit startled. As we diverted our route for the hippo, we were fortunate to see the three lions, one male and two females walking right behind us!



We spent the entire game drive capturing photos of them as they roamed around. At one point, the male disappeared and the females called out for him. Eventually, they left without him and continued on their path. It was a remarkable morning. As we were photographing the females, the male suddenly reappeared and walked directly down the trail to greet the female. She leaped onto his back with her front paws. It was an extraordinary sight!



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Day 7:

Wednesday 10 July 2024

The afternoon drive was really peaceful. We spotted a Secretary bird perched on a tree and managed to get some nice close-up shots. As we continued, we came across a juvenile black shouldered kite that was very relaxed and allowed us to get some great portraits. We also saw a rhino by the river with a nasty leg injury, likely from a fight. Despite the quiet drive, we decided to head back to the lodge early in hopes of finding the female caracal that lives in the area. Luckily, we found her and spent some time with her before it got too dark.



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