

Tour Report South Africa – Kalahari Conservation Experience 16 – 25 September 2022

Cheetah



Wild dog



Lion



Zebra & wildebeest



Compiled by Helen Bryon





If having over 100,000 hectares of the Kalahari to yourself for seven nights sounds appealing, look no further! Being the only camp on a remote South African reserve means that we have free reign to explore and enjoy uninterrupted sightings. In addition to wildlife viewing, our Kalahari Conservation Experience provides the opportunity to tackle and understand the challenges facing wildlife management and conservation today. There is also the chance to give something back by getting involved in work required by the reserve's ecologist. This may include, for example, predator monitoring, removal of alien and indigenous vegetation, removal of signs of previous human habitation, conducting tree surveys and understanding the role of Anti-Poaching Units.

Day 1: Depart London

Friday 16 September 2022

Day 2: Arrive Johannesburg, transfer to the reserve

Saturday 17 September 2022

Weather: Sunny, 31°C

The group met in the Arrivals Hall at Johannesburg's OR Tambo and commenced a long transfer to the reserve. Due to a delayed inbound flight, they stopped for lunch and dinner en route arriving late in the evening. Mark (our guide), Gary and Edyta (the camp owner-managers), Helen (tour leader) and the camp dogs, Sweeney and Betty, greeted them and introductions were made. A cup of tea later and everyone fell into bed eager to get exploring in the morning.

Day 3: Morning safari, bush encroachment and afternoon safari

Sunday 18 September 2022

Weather: Sunny, 35°C

Meeting in the dining tent at 07:00, we tucked into a hearty breakfast of scrambled eggs, cereal, porridge and fruit whilst taking in the views from camp and starting our species list. Blue wildebeest, red hartebeest and gemsbok walked in front of camp as Gary delivered a general introduction to the reserve and indemnity forms were signed). We then set off on our first game drive just after 08:00.

It was a hazy morning and we were expecting it to really heat up, with a hot wind preceding an approaching cold front. Birds were out in force and we soon came across a herd of Plains zebra at the waterhole closest to camp. A little later, approaching our first calcrete pan, a lone wildebeest lay in the centre of it with a springbok and newborn calf standing close by. It was two black rhino, however, who stole the show. A kori bustard strutted past and continued, and it wasn't long before we saw steenbok and ground squirrels. When stopping for morning tea and coffee by a waterhole, we were joined by a Cape sparrow (who wouldn't leave the tree above us) and a large male warthog who after quite some time, plucked up the courage to come closer to us and drink. Missing his right tusk, his left was huge!

We continued to a further waterhole where we came across our first Southern giraffe as well as zebra, blue wildebeest, red hartebeest and Africa's largest antelope, eland. Lying under a camel thorn to the side of the water, were two white rhino, a mother and her calf. We watched them from some distance before approaching slowly and quietly for a closer look. After some time they stood up and trotted off into the bush. Turning towards home, we were distracted by a series of great bird sightings including a male bateleur giving us a close fly-by, scimitarbills, crimson-breasted shrike, Southern yellow-billed hornbill and a pair of secretary birds.

We returned to a tuna and/or cheese bagel lunch, with pasta salad, and then had two hours to relax, shower and unpack. A golden-tailed woodpecker was heard calling and was located by Helen and Edyta, posing beautifully, right outside the kitchen door. A black-backed jackal walked past camp as preparations were being made to set off again at 16:30 and we soon came across another one fast asleep underneath a shepherd's tree.



A few African hoopoes later and we disembarked for an introduction to this afternoon's conservation exercise. We aimed to lay poison as close to blackthorn (mellifera senegalensis) roots as possible by siphoning pellets down metre-long cut pieces of tubing. We set to work in pairs and quickly moved through the area. Mark kept an eye out for wildlife while we did so and before long, we were back in the vehicle making our way to a pan for sundowners. Taking in the scene, we watched the colours in the sky change and as the sun set and dusk approached, two black rhino came down to drink.

Commencing our first-night drive, Helen jumped into the back of the vehicle to spotlight and saw an unidentified large owl (a Verreaux's eagle owl or a spotted eagle owl) flying away from us into the darkness. A light shape close to the trunk of a tree gave away a sheltering pale chanting goshawk and we came across our first scrub hares and springhares. Three Cape porcupines, quills raised, were found in a clearing and later, in the road, was our first Cape fox. By the time we arrived home, we'd seen another and after a delicious risotto dinner, we hit the hay, ready to do it all over again tomorrow.

Day 4: Morning (curtailed) tree survey and afternoon safari

Monday 19 September 2022

Weather: Sunny and very windy, 27°C

Waking to strong winds, we donned our layers and set off at 06:30. We had a relatively quiet first few hours, passing intermittent gemsbok, red hartebeest and wildebeest, and seeing a few new birds including South African shelduck with chicks and the tiniest and most endearing double-banded courser chick too! A herd of zebra gathering together on a pan caught our eye, a quintessential Kalahari image. A violet-eared waxbill flew right across the vehicle at speed but didn't make the species list as only Helen saw it.

We approached a waterhole where we were going to have our bush breakfasts but had to change our plans as four lion had beaten us to it! One large male looked like he was trying to mate with a female, holding himself tall, raising his tail and spraying repeatedly. She was not particularly receptive and two other females (one very mature and the other perhaps around a year old) sat 20 metres away. We sat with them for a while before noticing five buffalo bulls come down to drink. The lions watched them but the buffalo appeared unaware of their presence. They drank and then suddenly bolted. At that point, we noticed another big male lion had appeared on the other side of the water. The males watched each other but were showing no animosity towards each other so we deduced they were part of the same coalition. The mature female rolled on her back repeatedly, offering herself to him, but he ignored her. He clawed into the damp, cooler soil on the edge of the water and flopped his belly down into it. He then proceeded to watch the potentially mating pair as they watched him back.

After plenty of photo opportunities, we eventually left them to go and have breakfast and find the site of our tree survey. Our GPS coordinate was not locating the marker stones we needed to find so after going in circles for a while, we curtailed the survey and returned to the pan for more lion activity, coming across a small herd of eland en route. They started and ran with one individual doing a donkey kick as it ran. When we got there, however, the lions were nowhere to be seen, instead, a breeding herd of buffalo were resting there. In the absence of any lion spoor leading away from the pan, we anticipated that the buffalo had forced them deeper into the bush. We set off in the direction we thought they may be and sure enough, found them all resting together in the shade of a tree. One male moved into the sun and posed gloriously for us so enjoyed his proximity before returning to camp for lunch (soup and freshly baked beer bread) and a welcome break from the wind!

At 16:30 we set off, layered up against the cold as despite it being 27°C, the wind chill was considerable. We headed south, exploring a new part of the reserve and with the wind now behind us, passed plains game basking in the late afternoon sun. Bearded woodpecker and red-billed spurfowl made it onto our growing species list and we meandered towards a pan as the sun began its descent towards the horizon. Arriving just as it dipped below the tree line, we parked in the road joking that it wasn't like we'd cause a traffic jam (we



are the only camp on the reserve so are the only vehicle traversing here). Then, as if on cue, an anti-poaching vehicle drove up and indicated to pass us. We couldn't believe it!

As the orange sky deepened to red, we toasted Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and held a minute's silence in her memory and honour. We then headed for home as the wind had picked up further, but not before spotting, reflected in the water by starlight, a crash of seven white rhino drinking at a waterhole. We were delighted and bolstered against the cold by this stunningly beautiful sighting. A few scrub hares later and we were home and tucking into cottage pie and a warming shot of Amarula before heading to bed.

Day 5: Morning anti-poaching and afternoon safari

Tuesday 20 September 2022

Weather: sunny, 21°C

A later breakfast of homemade hash browns and fried eggs was served at 07:30. We then met in the lounge for a presentation from Gary on poaching in South Africa. Blowing away several preconceptions and false media representation, we spent the morning learning about the whys and wherefores of predominantly rhino poaching, as well as other key issues facing wildlife conservation across Africa. This proved to be hugely interesting and informative. After lunch, we met some of the reserve's Anti-Poaching Unit (APU) to learn more about their work at the site of a rhino carcass poached six months ago. As we left the site and commenced our afternoon game drive, the first mammal we came across was a large male white rhino who tolerated us for a few minutes before trotting off into the bush.

Next, we saw a large male lion sitting just off the side of the road in tall grasses, whose blond mane was gloriously backlit by the lowering sun. He was fabulous and we drank him in. We then drove west, into the setting sun, stopping to enjoy our second giraffe sighting of the trip plus a massive lappet-faced vulture cradled in the fork of a dead tree. Sundowners followed before we started the long night drive home viewing bat-eared fox, Cape fox, six white rhino drinking at a waterhole and springhare galore. Once back, we enjoyed mushroom and spinach wellington plus eland on the braai (barbecue) along with corn on the cob and salad around the fire.

Day 6: Morning tree survey and afternoon safari

Wednesday 21 September 2022

Weather: sunny, 25°C

Today started with a giraffe walk by during breakfast! Once out on the drive at 07:30, we came across first a bachelor herd and then a breeding herd of kudu, creatures not found here in abundance. Marvelling at their horns, we also came across a flock of white-backed mousebirds perched on the top of blackthorn, stomachs facing the sun to aid digestion. Shaft-tailed whydahs flew from tree to tree on the outskirts of a pan and we drove to the site of the tree survey we were to undertake.

There are 60 designated sites on the reserve where data is collected for ecologists on an annual basis. We set about recording dimensions at 10:30 (height, canopy width and height of first leaf growth amongst others) for shrubs and trees within a specific area. Stopping for tea and coffee as well as plenty of water breaks, we completed the task in around two and a half hours. Meandering back to camp, we passed flying pririt batis, perching red-eyed bulbuls and a pan where zebra, wildebeest, springbok and baboons were gathering. It was too good a photographic opportunity to miss so we took our time and then noticed two white rhino too. To top off a very productive morning, just outside the camp we were stopped in our tracks by a white rhino cow and her three-month-old calf walking down the road directly towards us. The female was instantly recognisable as her front horn grows forward and out rather than up. She stopped and watched us and we watched them. We were captivated. After some time, the spell was broken as the vehicle radio crackled into life and the pair walked into the bush. Although it was now 15:00 and we'd had a long morning, we couldn't have been happier!



Halloumi wraps, jam-packed full of fresh salad vegetables as well as courgettes and sweet potato awaited us for lunch before a quick turnaround saw us heading off again at 16:15. Our objective this afternoon was to try and find African wild dog, and we knew cheetah were in a similar area. We prioritised the dogs but ended up having an incredible afternoon of sightings, starting with white rhino. Traversing a cutline, we saw a grey image sitting in the middle of the road. As we approached, it stood up and as we approached closer still, we saw that on either side of the road were two more rhinos, a female and her perhaps 18-month-old calf. They collated together on the side of the road and were a lovely scene to behold. Driving on, a herd of wildebeest were gathered on the road. They dispersed to both sides of the road and we drove on. Awaiting us a little further down were eland. This felt like the parting of the Red Sea! As we drew level with the eland, we realised we had stumbled across a huge herd and watched as they began to run away from us. We turned left shortly after they'd disappeared and we calculated that we'd cross paths with them again shortly. Sure enough, they crossed ahead of us. They just kept on coming and it was wonderful. Our luck continued when we saw wild dog coming to investigate us. A pack with numerous pups gathered around us and then settled under a nearby tree to play and rest. The late afternoon light was stunning and after some time, the adults began to move towards the road, followed by the pups, followed by us! Hundreds of photographs later, they moved off into the bush and we decided to try our luck with the cheetah, rather than following them. It was a wise decision.

Heading towards the setting sun once again, we couldn't believe our luck when not one, not two, but four cheetah males were spotted walking through the tall grass in our direction. We had come across a coalition! They walked past us, quite unconcerned at our presence and scent-marked a tree. Continuing, and to our absolute delight, they next jumped up onto a dead tree truck and scent marked again. We followed them until sundown as they continued their patrol. We couldn't quite believe everything we'd been lucky enough to see and experience this afternoon!

We were a long way from camp so again, enjoyed an extended night drive home seeing porcupine, bat-eared fox, bronze winged courser, nightjars and finally, four white rhino. Our pasta bake dinner with garlic bread around the fire was a lively affair discussing the day's sightings.

One of our party did not accompany us this afternoon, heading to a waterhole close to camp instead, where brown hyena and a wallowing white rhino proved to be highlights.

Day 7: Morning human habitation clear up and afternoon safari

Thursday 22 September 2022

Weather: sunny, 29°C

After breakfast at 07:00 this morning, departure was set for 07:30 and a troop of meerkats were an instant hit! Sharing burrows with ground squirrels, they darted to and fro, letting us enjoy their antics for a few minutes before disappearing off on their daily hunt for food. Giraffe were out en masse and a white rhino and her calf were spotted at a waterhole. Today's conservation initiative was to clear the site of an old farmhouse/cattle kraal of barbed wire, glass, bricks and any other signs of human habitation. The group worked well and hard together, gaining a real sense of satisfaction once they'd finished.

Lunch back at camp consisted of spring rolls, samosas, spare ribs and salad after which there was a little time to relax before heading back out at 16:00. One of our party went looking, separately and successfully for wild dog this afternoon whilst the rest of us headed out on another game drive. It felt considerably warmer without any wind and just out of camp we came across a pale chanting goshawk tucking into a lizard (unidentified!) perched on a dead tree. A large white rhino bull grazed in the golden afternoon light and we off-roaded for a closer look at him. He was quite comfortable with our presence and we looked on in awe at his sheer size. Looking like he'd been pieced together with play-do, we watched him eat and then walk parallel with us as we started back towards the road.



We were ideally on the lookout for elephants but they proved elusive. We found old tracks, but no fresh ones and couldn't hear any sign of breaking branches or tree canopies shaking, often such a giveaway to their presence. We decided to head to a pan for sundowners, seeing a spotted thick-knee land close to us, before deliberately parking close to the water hoping that the elephants may appear for a drink. As soon as we had set up the bar and snacks, what should appear on the other side of a pan but a large bull elephant?! He was walking around the pan as opposed to towards the water so we jumped back onto the vehicle, drinks in hand, and headed towards him. He walked towards us, coming exceedingly close and lifting his trunk for a good smell of us. He provided us with some superb photographic opportunities before backing off a little, watching us for a while. Simply magnificent!

He turned towards the water and as we watched him move towards it, we noticed another smaller, brown creature with the same idea. A brown hyena! We quickly returned to our original sundowners position but the hyena walked away from us in a relaxed manner across the pan, disappearing into the stubby vegetation. We were pleased to see it though and discussed how they differ from their spotted cousins. We disembarked the vehicle once more and watched the sky turn a hazy shade of purple before progressing to the deep oranges and reds that characterise Kalahari sunsets. We stood trying to take 'arty' group shots as three white rhino approached the water that waited cautiously for us to board the vehicle before coming closer to drink. On our night drive home, we saw lesser spotted genet, porcupine, springhares, scrub hares and nightjars.

Our lamp chop dinner was served around the fire again with accompanying broccoli salad, potato salad and braai broodjies (a toastie made on the barbecue/braai). The stars were incredible and the Milky Way was visible.

Day 8: Morning species removal and afternoon safari

Friday 23 September 2022

Weather: sunny, 33°C

Another 07:00 breakfast fuelled us for our 07:30 departure. It was hotting up so the group set to work removing mesquite, an alien invasive, just outside camp. Introduced here from the USA, it is fast growing (as opposed to the very slow growing, but hardy trees found here naturally in the Kalahari) so was ideal for producing shade for cattle. Removing the thorny branches comes first, they are then raked away and once the roots are exposed, a combination of diesel and herbicide is applied to kill the plant.

Returning to camp for morning tea and coffee, we left again at 10:15 for a morning game drive. Despite the heat, the usual suspects (wildebeest, eland, gemsbok and steenbok) were plentiful and as we turned left at a junction, a distinctive mustard yellow and black-tipped tail disappeared from the road into the grass. It was a Cape cobra! Stopping immediately and scanning the grass, we all saw the individual move into a nearby dense shrub for cover. We discussed its dietary habits and its neurotoxic venom before continuing our drive. As we neared a waterhole, we could see several gemsbok drinking but they ran away at our approach. A lone jackal had an unconcerned extended drink instead. At our next waterhole, a white-backed vulture stood on the ground and we watched it for a while, hoping it would drink. It did not oblige so we headed home viewing a pair of Gabar goshawks right outside the camp gate.

A leisurely lunch of potato rosti, falafel, creamy mushrooms, beetroot and other salads was followed by a little downtime before we set off for our last drive at 16:30. It turned out to be a white rhino-filled afternoon! Whilst following lion tracks we flushed out our first two individuals from a blackthorn thicket. Soon after, driving through predominantly grassland scattered with intermittent mature shepherd's trees, we came across a bull, cow and calf grazing quietly with some springbok. A little further down the road and we saw another three before stopping to watch a small herd of red hartebeest with three youngsters who bounced away as if they had springs in their hooves.

Taking a little-used two-track, we passed aardvark excavations and kept our eyes peeled for the real thing. Out of the blue, we spotted a male lion lying under a tree on the side of the road. He looked a little unhappy



at being interrupted so we sat quietly enabling him to get used to our presence. He stood up and stiffly walked a little further from the road before stopping to look back at us. After a while, we approached and then followed him off-road as he walked ahead of us into the setting sun. Beautifully illuminated in the golden light, it was a lovely farewell from the big cats.

As daylight gave way to night, we approached a waterhole, coming across another five white rhino en route. We set up drinks close to the water and waited patiently for them to come down and drink. With the sky on fire behind us, they obliged, wallowing too as the stars began to appear above them.

Back at the lodge and over dinner, we discussed our favourite sightings of the week. The cheetahs came out on top but we all agreed we'd been spoilt for choice. A lion roared continuously through the night as if the Kalahari was seeing us off in style.

Day 9: Departure

Saturday 24 September 2022

After an early breakfast at 05:30, we said our goodbyes to Gary, Edyta, Mark and the dogs, getting on the road just after 06:00. Jackals ran along beside us, a yellow mongoose darted across the road in front of us and we reached Johannesburg late afternoon in time for homeward and onward flights. What a week!

Day 10: Arrival home

Sunday 25 September 2022



Please note that for the birds listed below, species have been listed on the first day that they were seen. We may have seen many of them again later in the itinerary.

Checklist

ļ	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	BIRDS	AVES							
1	Helmeted guineafowl	Numida meleagris		✓					
2	Crowned lapwing	Vanellus coronatus		✓					
3	White-browed sparrow-weaver	Plocepasser mahali		✓					
4	Cape turtle dove	Streptopelia capicola		✓					
5	Fork-tailed drongo	Dicrurus adsmilis		✓					
6	Pale chanting goshawk	Melierax canorus		✓					
7	Burchell's sandgrouse	Pterocles burchelli		✓					
8	Blacksmith lapwing	Vanellus armatus		✓					
9	White-throated swallow	Hirundo albigularis		✓					
10	Fawn-coloured lark	Calendulauda africanoides		√					
11	Swallow-tailed bee-eater	Metops malimbicus		✓					

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12	Sabota lark	Calendulauda Sabota	✓		
13	Yellow canary	Crithagra flaviventris	✓		
14	Kori bustard	Ardeotis kori	✓		
15	Red-faced mousebird	Uracolius indicus	✓		
16	Cape glossy starling	Lamprotornis nitens	✓		
17	Common scimitarbill	Rhinopomastus cyanomelas	✓		
18	Southern yellow-billed hornbill	Tockus leucomelas	✓		
19	Crimson-breasted shrike	Laniarius atrococcineus	✓		
20	Chat flycatcher	Bradornis infuscatus	✓		
21	Red-crested korhaan	Lophotis ruficrista	✓		
22	Southern pied babbler	Turdoides bicolor	✓		
23	Secretary bird	Sagittarius serpentarius	✓		
24	Lilac-breasted roller	Coracias caudatus	✓		
25	Bateleur	Terathopius ecaudatus	✓		
26	Red crested korhaan	Lophotis ruficrista	✓		
27	African grey hornbill	Tockus nasutus	✓		
28	Golden-tailed woodpecker	Campethera abingoni	✓		
29	African Hoopoe	Upupa africana	✓		



30	Cape sparrow	Passer melanurus	✓				
31	Kalahari scrub-robin	Cercotrichas paena		✓			
32	Southern masked weaver	Ploceus velatus		✓			
33	White-backed mousebird	Colius colius		✓			
34	Namaqua dove	Oena cape sis		✓			
35	South African shelduck	Tadorna Cana		✓			
36	Marico flycatcher	Bradornis mariquensis		✓			
37	Ant-eating chat	Myrmecocichla formicivora		✓			
38	Red-billed spurfowl	Pternistis adspersus		✓			
39	Bearded woodpecker	Dendropicos namaquus		✓			
40	Red-billed quelea	Quelea quelea		✓			
41	Double-banded courser	Rhinoptilus africanus		✓			
42	Northern black korhaan	Afrotis afraoides		✓			
43	Red-headed finch	Amadina erythrocephala		✓			
44	Pied crow	Corvus albums		✓			
45	Lappet-faced vulture	Torgos tracheliotus			✓		
46	Desert cisticola	Cisticola aridulus				✓	
47	African red-eyed bulbul	Pycnonotus nigricans				✓	



48	Pririt batis	Batis pririt				✓		
49	Shaft-tailed whydah	Vidua regia				✓		
50	Hadeda ibis	Bostrychia hagedash				✓		
51	Bronze winged courser	Rhinoptilus chalcopterus				✓		
52	Rufous-cheeked nightjar	Caprimulgus rufigena				✓		
53	Ground scraper thrush	Psophocichla litsitsirupa					✓	
54	Spotted thick-knee	Burhinus capensis					✓	
55	White-backed vulture	Gyps africanus						✓
56	Gabar goshawk	Micronisus gabar						✓
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA						
1	Gemsbok	Oryx gazella	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Red hartebeest	Alcelaphus buselaphus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Blue Wildebeest	Connochaetes taurinus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Eland	Taurotragus oryx	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Ground squirrel	Xerus inauris	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Black rhino	Diceros bicornis	✓					
7	Covinchal	Antidorcas marsupialis	√	√	√	✓	√	√
•	Springbok	7 includicus marsuplans		_	,			'
8	Steenbok	Raphicerus campestris	✓	· ✓	√ ·	√	✓	√



9	Plains zebra	Equus quagga	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Warthog	Phacochoerus africanus	✓			✓		
11	Southern giraffe	Giraffa camelopardalis	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
12	White rhino	Ceratotherium simum	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Scrub hare	Lepus saxatilis	✓		✓	✓	✓	
14	Chacma baboon	Papio hamadryas ursinus	✓	✓		✓	✓	
15	Black-backed jackal	Canis mesomelas	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Porcupine	Hystrix africaaustralis	✓			✓	✓	
17	Springhare	Pedetes capensis	✓		✓	✓	✓	
18	Cape Fox	Vulpes chama	✓		✓			
19	Lion	Panthera leo		✓	✓			✓
20	Buffalo	Syncerus caffer		✓				
21	Kudu	Tragelaphus strepsiceros				✓	✓	✓
22	Slender mongoose	Galerella sanguinea				✓		
23	African wild dog	Lycaon pictus				✓	✓	
24	Cheetah	Acinonyx jubatus				✓		
25	Bat-eared fox	Otocyon megalotis			✓	✓		
26	Brown hyena	Hyaena brunnnea				✓	✓	
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27	Meerkat	Suricata suricatta				✓	
28	African elephant	Loxodonta africana				✓	
29	Lesser spotted genet	Genetta genetta				✓	
30	Yellow mongoose	Cynictis penicillata					✓
	REPTILES	REPTILIA					
1	Fork-marked sand snake	Psammophis trinasalis			✓	✓	
2	Kalahari tree skink	Trachylopis spilogaster			✓	✓	
3	Cape cobra	Naga nivea					✓