

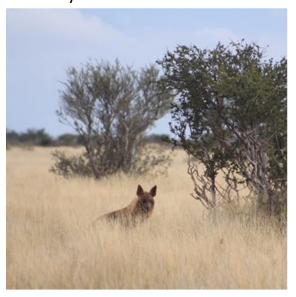
Tour Report South Africa's Rare Mammals in Style

17 – 26 June 2022

Yellow mongoose



Brown hyena



Meerkat



Cheetah



Compiled by Helen Bryon





Tswalu Private Game Reserve in the 'green Kalahari' is home to four of the Big Five (no elephant) as well as a myriad of arid-loving creatures and sought-after rare mammals such as pangolin, aardvark, aardwolf and brown hyena. Travelling in the South African winter, we hope these nocturnal specialists will start foraging in the afternoon against a backdrop of big skies, dunes that stretch as far as the eye can see and scenic mountains. This is a land of superlatives. Our private lodge comes with two vehicles, two guides and two trackers as well as our own chef to ensure that meal times fit around extended safaris. Expect to be out in the field for 9-10 hours per day exploring this incredible wilderness.

Day 1: Depart London Friday 17 June 2022

Day 2: Arrive Tswalu, afternoon game drive

Saturday 18 June 2022

Weather: Sunny, 23°C

Arriving in Johannesburg one hour later than planned (due to delays at Heathrow), the group were met and transferred to Fireblade Aviation where they relaxed and got to know each other before their early afternoon flight to Tswalu. By 14:30, they were back on terra firma and were met by tour leader, Helen, and their guide and tracker teams of Jon and Mangaliso plus Mike and Fez. After drinks and snacks, the group opted for an afternoon safari over a transfer to the lodge, and we boarded our two open-sided and unroofed vehicles and set off. Every seat was a tiered window seat and with warm coats, binoculars, cameras and Helen's reference books at the ready, we were all set in case of any sightings. We couldn't believe our luck, when literally a few hundred metres from the airstrip, we came across three beautiful lions resting just off the side of the road. They comprised of two adult females and a young male and we were informed that they appear to be breaking away from one of Tswalu's prides. Sitting in the afternoon sun preening, they watched us lazily and we marvelled at the condition they were in and that we were finally here (most clients had booked pre-pandemic)! Leaving them to snooze, we passed numerous common bird species including ant-eating chat, Kalahari scrub robin, sociable weavers, fawn-coloured lark, white-browed sparrow weavers and white-backed mousebirds as we headed further into the reserve.

The two vehicles split up and whilst one continued birding on a dune and took in their first common duiker, another descended to the valley below. Fresh spoor for rhino was seen in the valley, and working together, those of us on the crest of the dune were able to scan and locate a white rhino to then give its position to the vehicle below. We were off to a good start!

Continuing, both vehicles followed fresh leopard tracks that ended up going into thick bush, so we stopped by a waterhole for our first sundowners of the trip. Wispy clouds above us signalled an advancing cold front and we watched the sky turn from pale apricot to pink and deeper before giving way to the first stars, and later, the Milky Way. Helmeted guineafowl fussed around us and blacksmith lapwings busied themselves by the water's edge as we breathed in the big skies and African air before slowly making our way to Tarkuni in the dark. En route, we came across Cape fox, black-backed jackal and a remarkably relaxed Verreaux's eagle owl.

After a fabulous three-course meal and some South African wine (of course), we retired to bed, eager for what may lay ahead.

Day 3: Morning and afternoon safaris

Sunday 19 June 2022

Weather: Sunny, 24°C

Wake-up calls were arranged for 06:30 in preparation for our 07:30 departure. Wrapping up warm and loving our hot water bottles on the vehicles, we headed east, spotting Southern giraffe, sable and Hartmann's mountain zebra all within the vicinity of the lodge. Winding our way through Tarkuni Valley and around the mountains, ungulates took centre stage as we stopped to view kudu, roan, gemsbok, wildebeest and



springbok. We then headed west and came across a small bachelor group of Cape buffalo busy feeding. Unconcerned by our presence, we enjoyed the photographic opportunities presented by these almost one-ton animals before heading into the dunes to try and escape the wind on our tea and coffee break. As we approached the first dune, we stopped at a meerkat burrow as two babysitters were out trying to control five youngsters that immediately stole our hearts! Not more than perhaps ten days old, we watched enthralled, finally tearing ourselves away to have our break. A black-chested snake eagle rode the thermal above us, closely followed by a black-shouldered kite and after packing everything up, we couldn't resist going back for more meerkat action. For most clients, this proved to be the highlight of this morning's drive but we also saw a herd of around 40-50 eland running parallel to the mountains, a fabulous and impressive site.

Returning to Tarkuni for brunch, everyone took advantage of exploring their new surroundings in daylight, familiarising themselves with the outside areas of the lodge. A small herd of kudu, some warthog and a lone giraffe joined us at our waterhole as we sat back, relaxed and took them in.

Rare mammals were on our mind this afternoon and set off at 15:00 to give ourselves time to search for them before sunset. Driving slowly and carefully checking for signs of recent activity, we drove into the dunes with one vehicle coming across wild (i.e. not habituated) meerkats and bat-eared foxes along the way, before dropping off one of our guides to walk the area an area in search of pangolin activity. The sun was low on the horizon when we heard that an active burrow had been found and we walked to the crest of a dune hoping to proceed further if there was any sign of movement. Taking in the sunset and the changing colours in the sky above us, it was dark when we decided to admit defeat and return to the vehicles. Although unsuccessful with pangolin, Cape fox, springhare and scrub hare were seen by one vehicle while the other had a 'monster' drive home viewing spotted hyena, black rhino, lesser spotted genet, spotted eagle owl and no less than four porcupine sightings!

Dinner was served underneath the stars in the boma and one of our party was presented with a surprise birthday cake and pressie. A wonderful day all round!

Day 4: Morning and afternoon safaris

Monday 20 June 2022

Weather: Sunny, 26°C

There are days when you search hard for an animal and the bush doesn't deliver. Then again, there are days when you search hard, are about to give up hope and hey presto, there it is. This morning we experienced the latter and oh my, was the reward a sweet one!

Departing at 07:30 after unseasonal rain and a thunderstorm last night, we headed south, to an area where cheetah tracks had been found the previous evening. We dropped off both trackers by a waterhole and they immediately began searching for spoor. Appearing to go in multiple directions, we watched them head off into the bush discussing their findings as they went. Our plan was to check the roads for fresh tracks and as we drove off, Mike noticed one paw print on the side of the road. Calling Mangaliso and Fez over, they had quite an animated chat about whether it was more recent than the others, and once a decision had been made, we left the trackers to it and set off in the vehicles. Little did we know it would be three hours before we would join up with them again!

Keeping in radio contact, they advised that the cheetah, two of them, were hunting. Their tracks were therefore a little erratic to follow and were covering a lot of ground. As we drove southwest, we saw that a porcupine had been busy digging holes on the roadside, searching for nice juicy plant roots. It had also had a nibble on a tsamma melon that was lying in the road and we chatted about the various species that make use of them to obtain water during the dry season. Carrying on, we covered a lot of ground over the next hour or so but noted that roan, wildebeest and springbok were feeding without showing any awareness of predators in the area so we decided to break for morning tea and coffee. We maintained radio with the



trackers who were still following the cheetah spoor and as we re-boarded the vehicles, there was a general feeling that we'd be returning to the lodge without a sighting. Suddenly though, and not quite believing our eyes, two cheetah males walked directly in front of our vehicle towards the mountains and we followed offroad. They were totally relaxed in our presence, calling each other and searching for prey. On and on we went, with us blissfully photographing and watching their every move. It looked as though they were heading towards a waterhole so one vehicle moved ahead to wait for them, but their interest was piqued by a small herd of wildebeest. The herd had seen them and a male walked directly towards them, head on as if to say, "We see you, so move on." The body language of the brothers changed. Their heads and ears down, they slunk lower into the grasses and undertook a large horseshoe loop around the herd, as if to indicate that they would pass by. They then changed direction towards the herd again though and before we could blink, had accelerated towards them and disappeared into the distance ahead. We tried to follow but it seemed like an age before we caught sight of the brothers again. Panting hard, they had clearly been unsuccessful in their attempt at a kill but our adrenaline levels were soaring! They lay down and we approached them slowly, watching them recover from their exertion. Before leaving them, we were offered the chance to walk into them to get a little closer. We jumped at this and the experience proved to be popular!

Heading back to the lodge on an absolute high, we didn't tuck into brunch until well after 13:30, and therefore decided to delay our departure in the afternoon to 16:00. We set off, still in high spirits, to explore the mountains and one group relatively quickly came across four beautiful lions walking down the road in front of them. Today was clearly going to be big cat day!

Following them for quite a while, they called the other vehicle to join them and we followed them through a dry drainage line to a waterhole. Here, four became six, then seven and finally eight lions! A mixture of females and subadults, we went on experience what two members of the group called, "The best lion sighting of our lives!" Pouncing, rolling, drinking, climbing trees, play fighting, cuddling and some of the best vocalisations we'd ever heard, ensured that we were grinning from ear to ear for the rest of the day! As dusk fell, the lions moved off and we set up sundowners and toasted a simply fabulous day. Our drinks were interrupted by a black rhino approaching the waterhole, but it moved off as we admired its silhouette by spotlight. Driving home, the wildlife gods weren't finished with us yet as one vehicle had a fantastic brown hyena encounter and the other, a porcupine.

A fun-filled evening back at Tarkuni finished off an amazing day. We were all on cloud nine!

Day 5: Morning safari

Tuesday 21 June 2022

Weather: Wet, windy and cloudy, 16°C

We had been warned that the next two days would be wet, which is highly unusual for this time of year as Tswalu receives summer rainfall between November and April. It had been raining overnight and it continued to do so during breakfast, but we decided to brave it and wrapped up warm in our fleece ponchos, covered by waterproof ponchos. Looking like Michelin men or Ewoks, we laughed as we said to ourselves welcome to sunny Africa folks! We boarded our vehicles in a light mist and it seemed to ease as we set off. It was very quiet wildlife wise but then one vehicle came across a black rhino that bolted as soon as we slowed down to view it. Around an hour later, two slender mongoose were added to the species list and after seeing a lone roan and a few wildebeest dotted here and there, we crossed the dunes and came across two white rhino. They were also very skittish so we continued on, only to find another four charge across the road ahead of us. The rain was falling harder now so we decided to head for home as the journey would take at least an hour. Plains game became more evident as we traversed the dunes with gemsbok, ostrich and sable all making an appearance as well as a pale chanting goshawk with a kill in its talons.

We had a date at Klein Jan tonight so decided to knock an earlier afternoon drive on the head as it had not stopped raining and the wind had really picked up too. Travelling in closed vehicles, we transferred to Jan Hendrik van der Westhuizen's restaurant (South Africa's first Michelin-starred chef) for an experience where



food is theatre. Think Heston Blumenthal in the bush! We hadn't seen the sun all day but it put on a hell of a show for ten minutes as it set below the dunes with a gap between the cloud on the western horizon where the sky glowed deep orange.

Day 6: Night safaris Wednesday 22 June 2022

Weather: Wet, stormy and windy, 15°C

The rain had been falling all night and was due to continue all day so we decided against a morning drive. The Land Rovers were on stand-by should we change our minds but we enjoyed a lie-in and gathered for a full-cooked breakfast at 08:00. We then chatted and relaxed around the fire as the wind gusted through the valley. As the morning progressed, so did the weather with thunderstorms, hail and even heavier rain falling.

We passed the time reading and doing pop and online pub quizzes before a wonderful brunch. We had a break in the rain for an hour in the middle of the day during which we were able to do a little birding from the lodge. The rain set in again all afternoon though but was due to stop around 19:00. We therefore opted for an early dinner and arranged a night drive to depart shortly afterwards.

Setting off at 19:40, we were rewarded almost immediately with a brown hyena walking ahead of us down the road towards a drainage line. Notoriously skittish, we cut the engine, leaving plenty of room between us. It stood in the road watching us and then turned its attention to the side of the road, where it lifted its tail high and we thought it was about to scent mark. Instead, it carefully manoeuvred over an old kudu skull, stepping over the still impressive horns. It then proceeded to gnaw on the skull, practising a little osteophagia, a method of obtaining calcium. We watched it for quite a while before it ambled off into the bush in the search for food.

We continued through the valley, passing a small herd of buffalo and coming across scrub hare and a dead helmeted guineafowl on the side of the road. There were fresh spotted hyena tracks next to it so we had potentially disturbed the animal before it had a chance to feed. We waited quietly to see if it may appear but then carried on and spent ten minutes or so sitting in silence, star gazing by a waterhole. Following shooting stars, the show continued with quite a few springhares and porcupine sightings before getting home around 22:00. A nightcap by the fire toasted a lovely evening, (it had been well worth going out), and we headed to bed hoping for better weather tomorrow.

Day 7: Morning and afternoon safaris

Thursday 23 June 2022

Weather: Variable, 16°C

We woke to light rain and set off in 'mizzle' (misty drizzle) at 07:30 to see what we could find. A drenched juvenile pale chanting goshawk was looking pretty sorry for itself but shortly afterwards we found buffalo in a nice open area and slowly but surely, the cloud began to lift. It wasn't for long though and the cloud descended once again though so we decided to visit Tswalu's other lodge, The Motse, for morning tea and coffee. En route, we passed Hartmann's mountain zebra and giraffe and we took our time through one valley as guineafowl were complaining and we hoped to find out why. When it all went quiet, we continued and reached Motse just as it started drizzling again.

A little retail therapy in their Gallery later, and we were on our way in bright, glorious, delicious sunshine! What a difference it made. We marvelled at the cloudscapes and colours around us, the red earth against straw-coloured grass now shining brilliantly, and as we made our way back towards Tarkuni, we saw our first bokmakierie, a wonderful splash of colour flying through the bush. We were then waylaid by a strange screeching that proved to be a Verreaux's eagle owl being mobbed by a pair of pale chanting goshawks. Incredibly well camouflaged, we watched it for quite some time before taking in a journey of at least 14 giraffe cantering across the base of the mountains. Simply stunning!



To make up for lost time, we had a quick brunch and then immediately headed back out into the bush. Usually split across two vehicles, we were on a serious pangolin hunt so Jon and Mangaliso went ahead to try and track these elusive creatures whilst the rest of us boarded one Land Rover with Mike and Fez to see what else we could find. It was wonderful to be back in the dunes and we came across numerous black-backed jackals, including one that was making light work of getting meat off the skull of a juvenile gemsbok that had been killed. Hyena tracks were in the area, and they may well have made the kill, but there were no signs of the owners. We also came across bat-eared foxes in the road but the sighting of the afternoon was undoubtedly thanks to an incredible spot by Fez. Driving down a dune street, a road that runs parallel to, and between, the dune crests, he stopped the vehicle and exclaimed, "brown hyena!" We focussed our eyes on the appropriate spot and sure enough, a curious face stared at us from afar. It continued down the dune, coming closer and closer, before crossing the road in front of us and continuing in the northwesterly direction. We'd recently passed a giraffe carcass and wondered if it was heading that way as it certainly appeared to be on a mission. We, therefore, crossed to the next dune valley and proceeded to wait. Sure enough, it crossed right in front of us once again, and we clicked away happily!

We intended to meet up with Jon and Mangaliso for sundowners as they had located a burrow with recent signs of pangolin activity. After all of the rain, we weren't sure if it would come out or not but we had to give it a try. As we approached, Jon radioed to say they had just had an aardvark walk right past them! By the time we reached them, however, it had disappeared, but we scoured the grass through binoculars to try and relocate it and whilst doing so, one of the clients found a female cheetah! You just never know what you're going to get in the bush!

A fantastic sunset later and we went back to the burrow to see if it had emerged. We gave it until 19:45 before calling it quits and started to head home. Would you believe it, as we left the area, we saw an aardvark slap bang in the middle of the road. Once again, it is never over until it is over!

Day 8: Morning and afternoon safaris

Friday 24 June 2022

Weather: Mixed, 17°C

It had rained during the night once again but we awoke to cloudy and dry conditions with the sky moody above us and rather atmospheric. Heading northeast, one vehicle soon came across six white rhino, complete with a small calf, and the other, a small herd of eland climbing a dune and standing tall atop it. We came across tracks for lion and found that a large male was with them. In communication with another vehicle, we discovered that they'd been found further ahead and we went to join them. We came across six individuals, comprising two females, a male, two incredibly handsome young males and a young female. We watched them soak up the sun and at one point, when the large male moved position, we noticed that he was limping and had some recent battle scars. We searched the area for any other males and came across another with a nasty wound underneath his right eye. They'd obviously been scrapping and had some recovering to do.

Time flew by whilst we watched them and we eventually left them to have a tea and coffee break with a trio of curious ostrich. The journey home provided both vehicles with good visuals of yellow mongoose, but it was the skyscapes that wowed us. Driving through the mountains, the valleys below were doused in sunshine and framed by the most beautiful rainbow. The colours ebbed and flowed, intensifying and waning in succession.

As per yesterday, we had a quick brunch, let Jon and Mangaliso go ahead to search for pangolin, and boarded Jon and Fez's vehicle to see what we could find. The sun was shining but it was cold as we travelled along the base of the mountains initially, coming across the same cheetah brothers that we'd searched so hard for earlier in the week. They groomed each other and then walked north as we went ahead of them to maximise our photographic opportunities. The light was fantastic and after spending in excess of an hour with them, we travelled across and through the dunes enjoying a brilliant sighting of another yellow mongoose successfully digging out food from the middle of the road directly in front of us. Looking north, thick cloud



lent everywhere a beautiful silver light whilst south, it was clear. Later, we had a brief glimpse of an African wild cat before meeting up with Jon and Mangaliso for sundowners. We waited for signs of movement from the pangolin burrow but unfortunately, luck was not on our side so we headed for home one last time. Dinner was another superb three-course affair and laughter was in plentiful supply.

Day 9: Morning safari and departure

Saturday 25 June 2022

Weather: sunny, 17°C

It was a unanimous decision to have one last safari this morning and with an azure blue cloudless sky above us, we set off from Tarkuni after saying our goodbyes to the wonderful team who had looked after us so well. A magnificent kudu bull stood tall on the mountainside as we passed en route to a meerkat burrow to try our luck with these endearing creatures once again. A cold wind was blowing as we walked a few hundred metres across a dune to wait for them to emerge. They took their time, but finally, two, three, four and then more popped up, closely followed by five pups. We delighted in their presence and spent as long as we could with them before heading to the airstrip, soaking up the scenery and savouring gemsbok and springbok sightings along the way.

Reluctantly, we thanked our superb guide and tracker team for an incredible week (despite the weather!) and boarded our charter flight at 10:30 for our 90-minute flight back to Joburg. We then settled in at Fireblade Aviation, ordering lunch and making use of the showers and facilities before transferring across to OR Tambo late afternoon in time for our BA nonstop overnight flight home.

Day 10: Arrival home

Sunday 26 June 2022

Please note that in the list 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



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9
	BIRDS	AVES								
1	Sociable weaver	Philetairus socius	✓							
2	Ant-eating chat	Myrmecocichla formicivora	✓							
3	Kalahari scrub-robin	Cercotrichas paena	✓							
4	Pygmy falcon	Polihierax semitorquatus	✓							
5	Fawn coloured lark	Calendulauda africanoides	✓							
6	White-browed sparrow-weaver	Plocepasser mahali	✓							
7	White-backed mousebird	Colius colius	✓							
8	Cape turtle dove	Streptopelia capicola	✓							
9	Yellow canary	Crithagra flaviventris	✓							
10	Cape glossy starling	Lamprotornis nitens	✓							
11	Helmeted Guineafowl	Numida meleagris	✓							
12	Fork-tailed drongo	Dicrurus adsmilis	✓							

13	Burchell's sandgrouse	Pterocles burchelli	✓				
14	Crimson-breasted shrike	Laniarius atrococcineus	✓				
15	Southern yellow-billed hornbill	Tockus leucomelas	✓				
16	Acacia pied barbet	Tricholaema leucomelas	✓				
17	Red-crested korhaan	Lophotis ruficrista	✓				
18	Chat flycatcher	Bradornis infuscatus	✓				
19	Blacksmith lapwing	Vanellus armatus	✓				
20	Verreux's eagle owl	Bubo lacteus	✓				
21	Lilac-breasted roller	Coracias caudatus		✓			
22	Ostrich	Struthio camelus		✓			
23	Tawny-flanked prinia	Prinia subflava		✓			
24	Pale chanting goshawk	Melierax canorus		✓			
25	African red-eyed bulbul	Pycnonotus nigricans		✓			
26	Short-toad rock-thrush	Monticola brevipes		✓			
27	Crowned lapwing	Vanellus coronatus		✓			
28	Kori bustard	Ardeotis kori		✓			
29	Black-shouldered kite	Elanus caeruleus		✓			
30	Laughing dove	Streptopelia senegalensis		✓			



	1				l	l	l	l	1
31	Black-chested snake eagle	Circaetus pectoralis	✓						
32	Red-billed quelea	Quelea quelea	✓						
33	Scaly feathered finch	Sporopipes squamifrons	✓						
34	Common scimitarbill	Rhinopomastus cyanomelas	✓						
35	Northern black korhaan	Eupodotis afraoides	✓						
36	Spotted thick-knee	Burhinus capensis	✓						
37	Spotted eagle-owl	Bubo africanus	✓						
38	Purple roller	Coracias naevius		✓					
39	Little grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis		✓					
40	Namaqua dove	Oena cape sis		✓					
41	African grey hornbill	Tockus nasutus		✓					
42	Brown-crowned tchagra	Tchagra australis		✓					
43	Chestnut-vented tit-babbler	Sylvia subcaeruleum		✓					
44	Double-banded sandgrouse	Pterocles bicinctus		✓					
45	Common fiscal	Lanius collaris		✓					
46	Swallow-tailed bee-eater	Metops malimbicus		✓					
47	Gabar goshawk	Micronisus gabar			√				
48	Ashy tit	Parus cinerascens				✓			



49	South African shelduck	Tadorna Cana		✓			
50	Speckled pigeon	Columba guinea			✓		
51	Crested barbet	Trachyphonus vaillantii			✓		
52	Violet-eared waxbill	Granatina granatina			✓		
53	Black faced waxbill	Estrilda erythronotos			✓		
54	Pearl-spotted owlet	Glaucidium perlatum			✓		
55	Bokmakierie	Telophorus zeylonus			✓		
56	Marico flycatcher	Bradornis mariquensis			✓		
57	Mountain wheatear	Oenanthe monticola			✓		
58	Green-winged pytilia	Pytilia melba			✓		
59	Fiscal flycatcher	Sigelus silens			✓		
60	Golden-tailed woodpecker	Campethera abingoni				✓	
61	Egyptian goose	Alopochen aegyptiaca				✓	
62	Rock Martin	Ptyonoprogne fuligula				✓	
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA					
1	Lion	Panthera leo	✓				
2	Common duiker	Sylvicapra grimmia	✓				
3	Red hartebeest	Alcelaphus buselaphus	✓				



4	White rhino	Ceratotherium simum	✓				
5	Steenbok	Raphicerus campestris	✓				
6	Impala	Aepyceros melampus	✓				
7	Kudu	Tragelaphus strepsiceros	✓				
8	Gemsbok	Oryx gazella	✓				
9	Black-backed jackal	Canis mesomelas	✓				
10	Cape fox	Vulpes chama	✓				
11	Southern giraffe	Giraffa camelopardalis		✓			
12	Sable	Hippotragus niger		✓			
13	Roan	Hippotragus equinus		✓			
14	Blue wildebeest	Connochaetes taurinus		✓			
15	Springbok	Antidorcas marsupialis		✓			
16	Warthog	Phacochoerus africanus		✓			
17	Hartman's mountain zebra	Equus zebra hartmannae		✓			
18	Buffalo	Syncerus caffer		✓			
19	Meerkat/suricate	Suricate suricatta		✓			
20	Ground squirrel	Xerus inauris		✓			
21	Eland	Taurotragus oryx		✓			



22	Dat saved for	Otanian magalatia	 					
22	Bat-eared fox	Otocyon megalotis	+					
23	Black rhino	Diceros bicornis	✓					
24	Small-spotted genet	Geneta genetta	✓					
25	Springhare	Pedetes capensis	✓					
26	Scrub hare	Lepus saxatilis	✓					
27	Spotted hyena	Crocuta crocuta	✓					
28	Porcupine	Hystrix africaaustralis	✓					
29	Cheetah	Acinonyx jubatus		✓				
30	Brown hyena	Hyaena brunnea		✓				
31	Slender mongoose	Galerella sanguinea			✓			
32	Plains zebra	Equus quagga				✓		
33	Yellow mongoose	Cynictis penicillata					✓	
34	African wildcat	Felis silvestris cafra					✓	
	OTHER							
1	African Monarch butterfly	Danaus chrysippus						