

Tour Report

South Africa's Rare Mammals in Style

2 – 11 June 2023

Black rhino



Brown hyena



Cheetah and cubs



Wild dog and pups



Compiled by Helen Bryon

Tswalu Private Game Reserve, located in the stunningly beautiful green Kalahari, is the largest private reserve in South Africa. A place of great beauty, immense landscapes and space, it is home to four of the Big Five (there are no elephants here) along with a wealth of rare, nocturnal species. We spend a week here in winter, focusing on these rare species, in the hope that they will commence foraging in the late afternoon before the cold desert nights set in. Game drives are usually extended and we regularly embark on night drives to unlock the secrets of this vast area.

Day 1: London Heathrow to Johannesburg

Friday 2 June 2023

Travel day.

Day 2: Johannesburg to Tswalu

Saturday 3 June 2023

Weather: sunny and clear, 21°C

Arriving slightly ahead of schedule to a beautifully clear winter's morning in Johannesburg, we were met directly off the aircraft and escorted through Immigration. Our bags were collected for us and we were whisked, by private vehicle, across to Fireblade Aviation - just fifteen minutes away on the other side of OR Tambo airport's runway. We received a warm welcome with teas and coffees then we were shown around the facilities where we would while away the next two and a half hours before our flight to Tswalu. We tucked into an à la carte hearty cooked breakfast, used the shower facilities, and were getting to know each other as two more of our party arrived.

At 12.40 pm, we walked to our Beechcraft aircraft, climbed aboard and settled into our leather seats. Drinks were offered and we each had a small snack pack to keep us going (no one goes hungry on this trip!) Mark and Zach, our pilots, introduced themselves and advised us that we would be flying into a headwind, but that they expected calm conditions during our 90-minute flight.

Landing at 2.30 pm, having descended over the Korannaberg Mountains, we finally touched down on red Kalahari sand. For some, the distinctive landscape of this area created an immediate great first impression, while those who had travelled here previously declared it was wonderful to be back. We walked to the small thatched welcome area that sociable weaver birds (sharing their nest with pygmy falcons) had claimed as their own. There we met the final two members of our party, who had flown in from Cape Town. They'd arrived shortly before us. After having some drinks and snacks, and using the facilities, we retrieved our warm layers from our luggage before it was taken directly to our lodge. We then boarded our two seven-seater open vehicles (every seat is a window seat) and headed straight out on safari with our guides and trackers – Dave, Fez, Kevin and Jonnas. We were off!

Within a few minutes of leaving the airstrip, we came across a small group of eland and kudu. They watched us earnestly as white-browed sparrow weavers busied themselves in the *mellifera* (black thorn) around us. Continuing on, it was only a matter of minutes before we had our first rare mammal sighting of the trip, a black rhino! We simply couldn't believe it. It moved in front of us for quite some time, completely oblivious to our presence as we had ensured that we stayed downwind. When turning our vehicles on simultaneously, so that we could edge slightly closer, the rhino became aware of our presence and stood head-on to us, ears forward, listening acutely to see if we were friend or foe. We had maintained enough distance between us that the rhino's body language was alert, but not stressed. When we didn't move, it relaxed and stood in the shade of a tree. While sharing its space, we noticed a majestic roan antelope was also moving through the area.

While Kevin and Jonnas' vehicle moved on, encountering a herd of Hartmann's mountain zebra and a solitary giraffe passing through the canopy in the distance, Dave and Fez's vehicle came across a white rhino and calf. A little later, when approaching a small dam, we came across our first meerkats of the trip, associating as they so often do, with ground squirrels. As we sat at the water's edge, we also observed yellow canary, familiar chat, Marico flycatcher, Cape turtle doves, helmeted guineafowl, mousebirds and acacia pied barbet.

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Their larger cousins, a male and female ostrich, trotted beside us as we left. They were cruising along at a cool 30 km per hour, leaving us to wonder what a full sprint would be like!

Cresting a dune, we saw a large valley below us flanked by the Korannaberg Mountains. This seemed like a marvellous spot for sundowners, so we disembarked the vehicles and tucked into gin and tonics with snacks and got to know each other better. We were all in awe of the vast beauty of this ancient and remarkable land. The moon began its ascent as we were packing up, rising quickly in the east. It was one night before the full moon so the amount of light being reflected was staggering. As darkness grew, we came across steenbok, which scattered from the roadsides at our approach. Once dark, we saw the silhouette of our first blue wildebeest and shortly before arrival at our lodge, a lone buffalo.

Tarkuni shone in the darkness and we made our way towards the welcoming fire that is always at the heart of the lodge. We met Morah, Michael and Chef Adi, who would be looking after us in the afternoons. Following a quick welcome briefing and tour of our rooms, we reconvened for drinks and a wonderful à la carte dinner. The main course was either pork belly or beef fillet, both of which proved to be popular. The pannacotta afterwards was the icing on the cake. Shortly after 9 pm, we retired to hot-water-bottle-warmed beds, finding chocolates on our pillows along with a guide to local legends (stories collected from this area in the late 1800s).

Day 3: On safari

Sunday 4 June 2023

Weather: sunny and clear, 19°C

Our departure was set for 7.30 am and wake-up calls were provided according to each room's preference. Porridge, muesli, fruit, muffins and croissants were all set out and our morning team of Hardy and Megan were ready to fulfil our all-important coffee and tea orders!

Not far out from the lodge, we came across a sounder of warthogs, quickly followed by a large herd of springbok, perhaps 35 individuals. Oryx – a quintessential Kalahari and arid-dwelling antelope – began to appear in force, and as we stopped at a waterhole, we also took in African shelduck, red-eyed bulbul, little grebe, cape wagtail, red-headed finch and a black-winged stilt, to name but a few species. We proceeded west into the dunes, where standing obligingly in a camelthorn tree was our first raptor, a pale chanting goshawk (or PCG for short).

We were still on the lookout for cheetah though. Turning into a dune street, we began our search for a specific female and her four nine-week-old cubs. No sooner had Dave advised us to check the crests of the dunes, when Fez found her. Sitting tall on the crest of the dune, she was busy scanning the area below. Dave directed Kevin (who was on the other side of the dune) to the closest appropriate viewing spot and we approached from our side. A few precious glimpses of the cubs followed, but the mother was laying low and took up a position in a 'blind spot' for both of our vehicles - only the top of her head was on show.

After waiting a while to see if she would move, we decided to leave her for a while and have morning tea and coffee. Our chosen spot was Malori, a sleep-out point, and as we approached, we could see a sable grazing next to the deck. It moved away. As we dismounted the vehicles, drinks in hand, the sable moved away, but we were recompensed with incredible views.

Returning to the cheetah, we soon realised she hadn't moved and therefore getting a good sighting would still be challenging. As such, we commenced our journey home. One vehicle came across a number of bat-eared foxes and the other, a slender mongoose. A pair of ostrich also caused a chuckle or two and Kevin provided the group with a detailed description of the sexual dimorphism and colour differences between males and females, speculating that the need to incubate eggs by day and night might explain this. When greeted with a series of blank faces, the clients clarified that he'd said 'eland' rather than 'ostrich', thus a new egg-laying mammal was born!

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A stunning al fresco brunch awaited us when we arrived back at Tarkuni at 11.15 am. We then spent a few hours sitting by the fire pit overlooking the waterhole, affording us sightings of impala, warthog, gemsbok, kudu and wildebeest. There was barely any wind and the conditions were stunning. The magic of the Kalahari was unfurling.

We were ready to go at 3 pm and were seen off from the lodge by a very obliging brown-hooded kingfisher who posed for photographs right next to the deck. We set off into the dunes aiming for a pangolin burrow; the occupant had been seen a few days before. Upon reaching the area, we dropped off our two trackers, who were going to scour the area for tracks, and arranged to meet them a little later. Meanwhile, we traversed the area and waited for their update.

As we continued our drive, Kevin's vehicle quickly came across an aardvark in the road! By the time everyone had registered what it was, the aardvark had moved into the grass out of sight. Then Dave's vehicle arrived and his group walked to a nearby burrow to search for signs of life. With no sign of the animal, other than excavations in the earth, we waited quietly to see if it would emerge. After a while with no luck, we set off again and once again, Kevin's vehicle came up trumps with a glimpse of an aardwolf! Although we didn't all see it, we were encouraged by so much activity from these rare mammals in one afternoon. Foregoing sundowners, we travelled back to where the aardvark had been seen in case we could get another look, but when our efforts were unsuccessful, we carried on back to Tarkuni.

Arriving home around 6 pm, we enjoyed a delicious dinner under the stars in the boma, before setting off again at 8.30 pm for our first night drive. It was a full moon and we came across a tower of snoozing giraffe, their silhouettes beautifully illuminated in the light night sky. Shortly afterwards, we saw our first springhares (or Kalahari kangaroos as they are known!) and a porcupine - quills raised as it ran into the night. Scrub hares followed, including one that must have run the equivalent of a double marathon. It sprinted ahead of our vehicle before finally turning into the scrub.

Day 4: On safari

Monday 5 June 2023

Weather: sunny and windy, 18°C

Our plan for a day drive meant we all had a nice lie-in! Breakfast was available from 7.30 am and at 9 am we set off, driving south, into a clear but cold day with strong winds. Well wrapped up, we searched for wildlife and after a quiet start with just a lone male wildebeest and a herd of Hartmann's mountain zebra being seen, we headed for our destination, a wild dog den site! We had been advised that a pack were denning in a remote area behind the mountains and that, to get there, we would need to leave the reserve and drive back in through another gate. As we did so, we spotted a magnificent sable on a ledge, looking down into a grassy area below. When we approached for a closer look, eagle-eyed Fez spotted a cheetah lying low in the open area soaking up the sun. It ignored us completely, eventually rolling over, stretching luxuriously, and getting to its feet. After another deep 'downward dog' stretch, it slowly crossed right in front of our vehicles, before disappearing into the vegetation beside us. The beauty of the bush was striking again and the irony wasn't lost on us that we had spent the whole of the previous morning waiting for close visuals of the female cheetah and cubs, only to come searching for dogs today and stumble across this one!

Continuing on our way, we passed a few buffalo before arriving at the den site, where we were ecstatic to discover eleven pups and a female 'nanny' soaking up the sunshine. The pups were estimated to be between eight and nine weeks old. None of us had seen such little pups before and they proved to be utterly captivating! This was the first time that two vehicles had been permitted to visit the site. Once the pups settled down, they proceeded to huddle together and fall asleep, apart from one youngster who was gnawing contentedly on a piece of bone.

After a little while, the alpha female returned and very forcibly asserted her dominance over the beta female nanny, snapping, biting and vocally chasing her away to ensure that her pups would receive all of the food she was about to regurgitate. The beta moved a suitable distance away and watched, as we did, as the pieces

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of kill, some still quite large, and looking in no way partially digested, were set upon by the hungry youngsters. The pups had a voracious appetite and when Mum moved away, they followed her, chattering away in the grass, hoping for more. Later still, the alpha male returned and repeated the process of regurgitating meat for them. He did so in tall grass so although we could see him, we could only ascertain the whereabouts of the little ones by sound.

It had been a superb sighting and we celebrated the morning with a picnic lunch in an open area by a dam. Oryx, roan and warthogs surrounded us and afterwards, we re-visited the area in the dunes where the aardvark had been seen the previous day in the hope of experiencing another sighting. It was not to be, so we ambled home and were treated to an unexpected murmuration of sociable weavers along the way.

After arriving back at the lodge around 4.15 pm, we freshened up for cocktail hour and sat around the fire enjoying Michael's creations before dinner. A great evening was had by all!

Day 5: On safari

Tuesday 6 June 2023

Weather: sunny and clear, 23°C

Another clear day dawned and we were on our way by 7 am, heading to the northern part of the reserve. Our goal this morning was lion. Baboons scattered across rocks at the base of the mountains and kudu, roan, oryx, giraffe and springbok presented themselves as we travelled in the cool dawn. We scoured the earth for signs of lion spoor until Dave's vehicle came across a large, lone male. Walking steadily, and without any concern for our presence, he marked his territory, stopping to smell the air around him regularly. Then Kevin's vehicle approached and we enjoyed very close encounters with the lion as he walked by purposefully.

Two further males were found lying by the road a little way ahead and whilst one was what we call a 'flat cat', the other held his head high, eyes closed, seemingly soaking up the sun on his face after a cold night. The lions were beautifully positioned for photographs and we enjoyed their company for a while before setting off to search for the rest of the pride. We followed the spoor off-road until eventually Fez jumped off the vehicle and began searching the area on foot. Thanks to his efforts, we came across a pride that included several youngsters. The cubs were all different ages and they charmed us as they repeatedly moved in and out of the sun, settling down to snooze, often on top of each other! The attending females slept around them as the cubs watched us intently.

Eventually, the females gave in and their eyes closed, so we left them to rest and moved away to a nearby waterhole for morning tea and coffee. There we added kori bustard, cinnamon-breasted bunting and grey-backed sparrow-lark to our species checklist list.

During our drive back to Tarkuni for brunch, we encountered ground squirrels and meerkats at close range, as well as a 40-strong herd of eland (with quite a few young in their midst) and a lone kudu bull that was drinking at a waterhole. A handsome male giraffe watched us from the side of the road and when he stopped ruminating, Helen encouraged everyone to watch his neck. He regurgitated a cud ball, which moved back up his gullet. Always a wonderful sight!

Following our al fresco brunch, which included a fabulous vegetarian babootie (a South African speciality usually made with meat mince), a few clients indulged in spa treatments. We set off again at 3 pm, this time our destination was The Motse, another lodge on the reserve. The journey takes around half an hour (subject to sightings), and we took our time enjoying en route views of a warthog uncharacteristically halfway up a mountain and a herd of roan antelope. Upon arrival, we noticed a rock monitor sunning itself on the roof. Then we had a look around the communal areas of the lodge and made our way to the gallery for a little retail therapy. Afterwards, we settled by the pool for a drink, then had an early dinner overlooking the waterhole before our extended night drive, which would commence at 5.20 pm.

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Initially, we drove west into the sunset. Crossing dune after glorious dune, the sky deepened from orange to purple to deep red with a touch of yellow. The colours slowly became more and more concentrated, until just a crimson line appeared on the horizon as Venus and stars began to appear above us. Our first evening sighting was a black-backed jackal, running along the road ahead. As the sky darkened further, and the Milky Way intensified, we stopped more regularly to appreciate the night sky. As the drive progressed, we took in scrub hare, springhare, spotted eagle-owl, a resting kori bustard and porcupine, while those in Dave's vehicle came across yet another aardvark. This meant that all clients had now seen one - fantastic!

As we headed back towards Tarkuni, the air became noticeably warmer (due to the mountain rocks giving off their stored heat). We arrived home at around 9 pm, enjoying cheese and biscuits with a nightcap around the fire before retiring to bed.

Day 6: On safari

Wednesday 7 June 2023

Weather: Sunny and clear, 27°C

Shortly after our 7 am departure, we were able to appreciate oryx and other plains game beautifully illuminated in the soft morning light. Pulling up by a dam, we enjoyed a little birding, adding red-billed spurfowl to our list, and then dropped off our trackers to follow some cheetah tracks.

We continued towards a suricate (meerkat) colony, The Makalas, and waited for approximately half an hour for them to poke their heads up out of their burrows and grace us with their presence. It was worth the wait! The first to appear took his or her sentinel duties very seriously, peering in every direction and ducking back underground regularly as if to report back whether or not it was safe for the rest to emerge. Slowly but surely, more and more heads appeared, then whole bodies. They stood on multiple red earth mounds, soaking up the warmth of the sun whilst continuing to check for threats. After forty minutes or so, once the meerkats were sure that the coast was clear, they crept towards us, passing some of the guests within touching distance, as they commenced their daily foraging activities. We walked back to our vehicles grinning widely, utterly charmed by their endearing antics.

A quick radio to the trackers confirmed that they had found a male cheetah. As we made our way towards them, our trackers advised us they had just lost visual but, as the cheetah had a full belly, he was likely to be resting fairly close by. More tracks were found heading east, so we scoured the area just off road and Helen spotted him a minute or two later. He was sleeping off a rather large meal under a thicket. After watching him for a while, we returned to the dam for morning tea and coffee. A few male sable joined us, enjoying a salt lick behind our vehicles, while giraffes started to amass behind the dam.

One vehicle's exit from the dam was blocked by five roan antelope. They were walking towards the dam to drink. A lone giraffe joined them and took his time, spreading his legs wide to lower his centre of gravity and quench his thirst. We were heading home when several other giraffes approached, so we watched them come down to drink. We counted thirteen in all and it was a lovely sight.

After a delicious al fresco lunch once again, three more of us indulged in spa treatments. Those who relaxed on the verandah, overlooking the waterhole, were rewarded with sightings of roan, kudu, buffalo and even two waterbuck (not a common sight here). Throughout the afternoon we could hear kudu barking their deep calls, most likely in response to baboons coming too close.

By 4 pm, we were seated for an early dinner (more marvellous food!) that would sustain us during our next extended night drive. We headed off into the dunes an hour later, driving into the Kalahari sunset. Our target that evening was pangolin. We planned to drop our trackers off to trek the dunes near pangolin burrows that had shown signs of recent activity. En route, we heard that a pangolin researcher was already ensconced outside a burrow and that he would update us if there was any sign of movement. This enabled us to drive without agenda and we enjoyed the changing light as the sun dipped below the horizon.

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We stopped for a short comfort break and as we re-boarded the vehicles, we heard that the pangolin had emerged! Ten minutes later we were parking in the dune street and dismounting the vehicles for a safety briefing as we were to continue on foot. It was dark by now and we knew we needed to traverse a few hundred metres over uneven ground. We set off in single file and in silence, with Kevin leading and Dave bringing up the rear.

When we were close to the researcher and the pangolin, we stopped for a further briefing. To avoid crowding the animal, we split the group in two. The first five went in, in absolute silence, and then we swapped over. The pangolin, a young male, was very relaxed and was busy feeding on ants at the base of blackthorn thickets. Pugnacious and cocktail ants are their preferred diet at this time of year and they average a cool 200,000 a night! We started to hear slurping, breathing and sounds of movement from the bush, with intermittent sightings of the pangolin as he changed position or moved from one bush to another. The groups swapped over once again. Standing on the sand, listening to jackals crying around us and viewing the Milky Way far above us, we simply couldn't believe our luck. It was well after 9 pm when we got home and we toasted our good fortune with (proper!) champagne! Cheese and biccies were set out too, along with hot chocolate for those that wanted it. What an experience!

Day 7: On safari

Thursday 8 June 2023

Weather: Sunny and clear, 21°C

Another day, another 7 am departure! We headed west on the search for rhino. It was a cooler morning and it took a while before plains game began to appear. Starting with steenbok, we progressed to giraffe and then oryx, eland and wildebeest. Kori bustards were also flying in abundance. Soon Kevin's vehicle found fresh rhino tracks and then got a visual of a crash of seven white rhino in an open area, while Dave's vehicle had a brief visual of a single individual in undulating terrain. This rhino disappeared quickly into the thick scrub, so both vehicles enjoyed the larger sighting together. The rhinos were a little skittish and were spooking each other, so we gave them plenty of room and sat quietly observing them and their behaviour. They settled down, so much so that one had a lie-down until the distant sound of a helicopter spooked them and they took off. The rhinos disappeared in front of our eyes, which was quite a feat considering their collective bulk! We took this sudden departure as a good opportunity for morning teas and coffees and a tracking lesson.

As we drove back across the dunes towards home, we were advised to keep a look out for the cheetah mother and four cubs that we'd briefly seen earlier in the week, as they'd been spotted in this area. Three dunes later, we were driving up a dune crest, when we slowly started slipping back down. Fez jumped off the vehicle and we weren't sure what was going on until he circled a track right next to the side of the road. He asked us to guess what it was and we couldn't believe it when he said 'pangolin'. It was fresh too (he thought it was from the previous night) so we photographed it, noted its location and continued on our way.

No sooner had we crested the dune than Fez asked us to stop again. He directed our attention to the next dune crest, some way away, and pointed to a cheetah. Here was our female with cubs! We travelled closer and watched her from the base of the dune. As Kevin approached, we asked him to keep visual from there as we crossed to the other side of the dune. It was 'five out of five' - all four cubs slowly approached their mother and began to suckle. We watched them for at least 45 minutes. It was just us, the cheetahs and the blue, blue sky behind them. Utter magic.

By now it was almost noon, but we weren't returning to the lodge for brunch that day. Instead, we proceeded to a nearby valley where a surprise bush breakfast had been set up for us. A Land Rover had been converted into a bar and we tucked into Aperol spritz, G&Ts, wine and bubbles, before a delicious feast was served. We eventually got back to Tarkuni shortly before 2 pm for some well-deserved R&R. Those who amalgamated on the deck between drives, watched buffalo, kudu and impala come to the waterhole.

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By 4 pm we were off once more. Our two vehicles would part ways for the afternoon, both enjoying a game drive for two hours before dinner and then a brief night drive afterwards. One group headed south amongst plains game, encountering a brown hyena in the grass just off the road. The hyena walked away from the vehicle but looked back regularly, providing photo opportunities for the group before they returned to Tarkuni for dinner and a later night drive. This proved to be very productive as an aardvark was seen in an open area and they enjoyed its presence for a few minutes. Later, they came across a porcupine in the middle of the road. Porcupines are always much larger than people expect them to be - Africa's largest rodent never fails to delight and astonish onlookers.

The rest of the group headed through the mountains and were stopped in their tracks by a lone male kudu alarm calling. We searched the area, and drove past a few waterholes, but only came across a black-backed jackal. Then we heard impala alarming in the valley to our west, so we headed in their direction and watched them. We continued to drive through the area until finally, Fez exclaimed, "brown hyena". Sure enough, there it was, walking along the base of the mountain towards a small, fenced staff accommodation unit. We knew it would need to bypass this so we stopped, waiting to see where it would appear, and while we did so, were distracted by two porcupines illuminated in the late afternoon sunlight.

Suddenly the hyena was next to us. We'd warned the guests that hyenas are very shy and easily spooked, so we sat in silence, marvelling at its stripped forelegs, massive front paws, blond mane, shaggy coat and deep brown button eyes. We simply couldn't believe our luck when it walked next to us, stopping regularly, and then finally sat down in the road directly ahead of us and laid its head on its front paws to rest. Grinning from ear to ear, we had possibly encountered the most relaxed hyena in Tswalu! Imagine our faces then, as we left the sighting and immediately came across yet another brown hyena on the road ahead of us. Ridiculously brilliant!

After coming across another pair of porcupines a little later, we concluded our drive at Klein Jan, a restaurant on the reserve set up by South Africa's first Michelin-starred chef, Jan Hendrick van der Westhuizen. Our three hours there was an experience, not just a fine dining opportunity (complete with wine pairing). We thoroughly enjoyed our evening. An evening at Klein Jan is always full of surprises, so I will not say anything further in case anyone wishes to visit in the future!

With Fez enjoying a well-deserved evening off, Helen eagerly took on the role of spotter on our forty-five-minute drive home. It was a chilly evening and well after 10 pm when we got home, but on the way we saw a spotted eagle-owl as well as scrub and springhares.

Day 8: On safari

Friday 9 June 2023

Weather: sunny and clear, 20°C

Some members of the group wanted to spend the morning looking for the cheetah female with cubs again, in order to try and capture images of them in softer light. Those keen to do so jumped into Kevin's vehicle, while everyone else went with Dave on a general drive, but we agreed to keep in radio contact so that we could notify each other of sightings and come together if needs be.

Departing at 7 am, we went our separate ways. Shortly afterwards, Kevin dropped off Jonnas, enabling him to track the cheetah family on foot across the dunes. When he found them a little later, the group was able to spend the entire morning watching the cheetahs interacting with each other, playing, climbing trees, and harassing Mum (for want of another expression)! With no other vehicles joining them, other than one research vehicle for a short time, it was a magical few hours.

For the others, two consecutive buffalo sightings got the morning off to a good start and as the sun rose higher in the sky, we watched a very cooperative yellow mongoose warm up on a mound of raised red earth. Heading into the dunes, Fez picked up black rhino spoor and we stopped at the next dune crest to scour the area below. Helen spotted the owners of the footprints on the opposite slope, a female and her sub-adult

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calf. We approached cautiously, giving them plenty of space. The female's impressive horns and huge head emerged above the deep thicket, and we watched, enthralled for quite some time. As we left them to browse, slender mongoose, bat-eared fox and a few new bird species made appearances and kept us occupied.

We decided to see what the cheetah family were up to and joined Kevin and Jonnas's vehicle on top of a dune just as the female became mobile. Assuming she had stashed the cubs so she could hunt, we followed her. She then called the cubs and they ran out directly in front of our vehicle to join her! The family disappeared over the dune crest, so we returned to the road and crossed to the other side. When there was no sign of them, we retraced our steps and scoured the top of the dune for them. Helen happened to glance into the valley and there they were, Mum clearly visible and four little tails following at a pace behind her. One little cub even climbed. We followed the family through the long grass and at one point, despite the cubs calling for her, the female stopped responding and continued alone. The cubs made their way towards a thicket and sat down in the shade to await her return, hopefully with a kill. We lost visual briefly and after circling the area, spotted them all together again. We left them to it, hoping that the female would have a chance to hunt during the afternoon.

Lunch was served outside, shortly after our arrival home at noon. Oryx, warthog and kudu visited the waterhole at 3 pm before we set off again for our final afternoon safari. Both Kevin and Dave headed southwest searching for aardvark and Dave found success, not only with aardvark but also with aardwolf (though only a fleeting glance) and brown hyena too! Meanwhile, Kevin's vehicle had relocated the cheetah family. They were clambering on a steenbok kill and we watched the cubs playing tug-of-war with part of the carcass, tucking into the remaining meat, playing rough and tumble with each other and being groomed by Mum. The late afternoon light was perfect, so we had a simply stunning forty-five minutes with them. It was another very special sighting where both vehicles reunited to enjoy the scenes.

Shortly before sunset, we arrived at a dune crest to find Morah and Michael there waiting for us with sundowners around the fire. A semi-circle of chairs was positioned to watch the changing colours, as day gave way to night, and we raised a glass to a superb trip. Returning to Tarkuni for dinner, half of us opted to go on a night drive to try our luck for any final nocturnal creatures. Whilst we saw no new species, it was wonderful to be out experiencing the stars above us.

Day 9: Tswalu to Johannesburg and Cape Town

Saturday 10 June 2023

Weather: sunny and clear, 20°C

Our final morning dawned clear and cold, but beautifully sunny. Six of us were flying to Johannesburg whilst four were extending their stay and flying to Cape Town. We all met for breakfast to say our goodbyes to each other and to our wonderful lodge team.

'The Johannesburg Six' then departed on a game drive at 7 am, driving through Tarkuni Valley where there was still frost on the red earth. We watched the sun light up the mountain tops and came across a lone mountain zebra on the road ahead. It ran to catch up with a few more and we watched in awe as they cantered towards the mountains, putting more distance between us. Their hooves thundered and they ascended easily, the rocks proving to be little or no obstacle for them. Steenbok peeked out from underneath blackthorn thickets, a magnificent kudu bull peered at us and three male buffalo munched away nonchalantly.

We drove to a valley and dismounted the vehicles to follow a trickling stream to an ancient San petroglyph site. Helen immediately became aware of a distinctive smell, that got stronger as we arrived at the rock face etched with images of eland, circles, ostrich and suns. She mentioned it to Fez, who went off to investigate while we learned a little more about the etchings. Fez returned to advise us that he had come across multiple spotted hyena tracks and a brown hyena carcass. Some of us went for a closer look and we reckoned the carcass must be around a month old. The hide was stretched across the skeleton, with most of the hair removed, but the paw pads and teeth were still impressive.

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Returning to the vehicle, we continued our drive and Tswalu had one last trick up its sleeve. We were absorbing the landscape and committing the incredible scenery to memory, when suddenly: Lions! A large male and female were fast asleep in the morning sun and a little further on, another female was also snoozing. With her, were two 8-month-old female cubs. One was shy, moving behind the bush at our approach, while the other gazed at us over her left shoulder, posing beautifully for photographs in the soft morning light. What a wonderful ending to an incredible week of sightings in this fantastic reserve!

After the lion encounter, we were driven to the airstrip for Amarula coffee (of course!) and snacks before saying our final goodbyes to Dave and Fez. We met our pilots for the 90-minute flight back to Joburg and boarded our King Air 200 six-seater aircraft. Lost in thought and processing the events of the last week, we arrived back in Joburg before we knew it and spent the afternoon at Fireblade Aviation, using the facilities before being transferred to OR Tambo to commence the journey home with BA.

The 'Cape Town Four' meanwhile, left for a game drive at 8 am, hoping to view the wild dog den site one last time. Another vehicle reached the den just in time to see the alpha pair moving the pups to a new site. Jonnas had a quick look around, while the other tracker confirmed the presence of plentiful spotted hyena spoor, concluding that this was most likely the reason behind the relocation.

Returning to Tarkuni for brunch, this group departed for the airstrip in time for their 2.50 pm flight to the Mother City and thus concluded another wonderful departure of South Africa's Rare Mammals in Style.

Day 10: Arrive in London

Sunday 11 June 2023

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15	Acacia pied barbet	<i>Tricholaema leucomelas</i>	✓									✓
16	White-backed mousebird	<i>Colius colius</i>	✓									✓
17	Red-faced mousebird	<i>Urocolius indicus</i>	✓									✓
18	Sociable weaver	<i>Philetairus socius</i>	✓									✓
19	Double-banded sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles bicinctus</i>	✓									✓
20	Cape glossy starling	<i>Lamprotornis nitens</i>	✓									✓
21	Crowned lapwing	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>	✓									✓
22	Red-crested korhaan	<i>Lophotis ruficrista</i>	✓									✓
23	Fawn-coloured lark	<i>Calendulauda africanoides</i>	✓									✓
24	Black-chested prinia	<i>Prinia flavicans</i>	✓									✓
25	Kalahari scrub robin	<i>Cercotrichas paena</i>	✓									✓
26	African red-eyed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus nigricans</i>	✓									✓
27	Cape wagtail	<i>Motacilla capensis</i>		✓								
28	Blacksmith lapwing	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>		✓								
29	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓								
30	Black winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		✓								
31	Cape sparrow	<i>Passer melanurus</i>		✓								
32	Red-headed finch	<i>Amadina erthyrocephala</i>		✓								
33	Pale chanting goshawk	<i>Melierax canorus</i>		✓								

34	Common fiscal	<i>Lanius collaris</i>		✓								
35	Short-toed rich thrush	<i>Monticola brevipes</i>		✓								
36	Brown-hooded kingfisher	<i>Halcyon albiventris</i>		✓								
37	Southern yellow-billed hornbill	<i>Tockus leucomelas</i>		✓								
38	Ground scraper thrush	<i>Psophocichla litsitsirupa</i>		✓								
39	Fork-tailed drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>		✓								
40	Scaly-feathered finch	<i>Sporopipes squamifrons</i>		✓								
41	Verreaux's eagle-owl	<i>Bubo lacteus</i>		✓								
42	Chestnut-vented tit babbler	<i>Sylvia subcaeruleum</i>			✓							
43	Brubru	<i>Nilaus afer</i>			✓							
44	Brown crowned tchagra	<i>Bocagia anchietae</i>			✓							
45	Common scimitarbill	<i>Rhinopamastus cyanomelas</i>			✓							
46	Southern pied babbler	<i>Turdoides bicolor</i>			✓							
47	Pygmy falcon	<i>Polihierax semitorquatus</i>			✓							
48	Bokmakerie	<i>Telophorus zeylonus</i>			✓							
49	Violet-eared waxbill	<i>Granatinia granatina</i>			✓							
50	Pririt batis	<i>Batis pririt</i>			✓							
51	Black-faced waxbill	<i>Estrilda erythronotos</i>			✓							
52	Kori bustard	<i>Ardeotis kori</i>				✓						

53	Cinnamon breasted bunting	<i>Emberiza tahapisi</i>				✓					
54	Grey-backed sparrow-lark	<i>Eremopterix verticalis</i>				✓					
55	Spotted eagle-owl	<i>Bubo africanus</i>				✓					
56	Red-billed spurfowl	<i>Pternistis adspersus</i>					✓				
57	Great sparrow	<i>Passer motitensis</i>					✓				
58	Southern grey-headed sparrow	<i>Passer diffusus</i>					✓				
59	White-backed vulture	<i>Gyps africanus</i>						✓			
60	Rock kestrel	<i>Falco rupicolus</i>						✓			
61	Namaqua sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles namaqua</i>							✓		
62	Spike-heeled lark	<i>Chersomanes albofasciata</i>							✓		
63	Northern black korhaan	<i>Afrotis afraoides</i>							✓		
64	African grey hornbill	<i>Tockus nasutus</i>							✓		
65	Black-throated canary	<i>Crithagra atrogularis</i>									
	MAMMALS										
1	Eland	<i>Taurotragus oryx</i>	✓								✓
2	Kudu	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>	✓								✓
3	Hartmann's mountain zebra	<i>Equus zebra</i>	✓								✓
4	Black rhino	<i>Diceros bicornis</i>	✓						✓		✓
5	White rhino	<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>	✓					✓			✓

6	Impala	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>	✓									✓
7	Suricate (meerkat)	<i>Suricata suricatta</i>	✓									✓
8	Ground squirrel	<i>Marmotini</i>	✓									✓
9	Red hartebeest	<i>Alcelaphus buselaphus caama</i>	✓									✓
10	Steenbok	<i>Raphicerus campestris</i>	✓									✓
11	Common duiker	<i>Cephalophinae</i>	✓									✓
12	Blue wildebeest	<i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>	✓									✓
13	Buffalo	<i>Bubalus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Roan	<i>Hippotragus equinus</i>	✓									✓
15	Gemsbok	<i>Oryx gazella</i>	✓									✓
16	Giraffe	<i>Giraffa</i>	✓									✓
17	Warthog	<i>Phacochoerus</i>		✓								
18	Springbok	<i>Antidorcas marsupialis</i>		✓								
19	Black-backed jackal	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>		✓								
20	Cheetah	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			
21	Sable	<i>Martes zibellina</i>		✓								
22	Bat-eared fox	<i>Otocyon megalotis</i>		✓								
23	Slender mongoose	<i>Galerella sanguinea</i>		✓								
24	Aardvark	<i>Orycteropus afer</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓			

25	Aardwolf	<i>Proteles cristata</i>		✓					✓		
26	Porcupine	<i>Erethizontidae</i>		✓							
27	Scrub hare	<i>Lepus saxatilis</i>		✓							
28	Springhare	<i>Pedetes capensis</i>		✓							
29	Yellow mongoose	<i>Cynictis penicillata</i>			✓						
30	Wild dog	<i>Lycaon pictus</i>			✓					✓	
31	Chacma baboon	<i>Papio ursinus</i>			✓						
32	Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>				✓				✓	
33	Plains zebra	<i>Equus quagga</i>				✓					
34	Suricate (meerkat)	<i>Suricata suricatta</i>					✓				
35	Waterbuck	<i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus</i>					✓				
36	Ground pangolin	<i>Smutsia temminckii</i>					✓				
37	Brown hyena	<i>Hyaena brunnea</i>						✓	✓		
	REPTILES										
1	Rock monitor	<i>Varanus albigularis</i>					✓				
2	Kalahari tree skink	<i>Trachylepis spilogaster</i>		✓							
	BUTTERFLIES										
1	African monarch	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>		✓							
2	Orange tip	<i>Anthocharis cardamines</i>		✓							

