

WildWings

SOUTH AFRICA: Mammals and Birds

17 September – 2 October 2022



Aardvark © John Warner

WildWings, Birds and Wildlife Limited, 9 Pound Close, Long Ditton, Surbiton, Surrey KT6 5JW

Tel: +44 (0)117 965 8333

email: tours@wildwings.co.uk • website: www.wildwings.co.uk

SOUTH AFRICA: MAMMALS AND BIRDS

17 September – 2 October 2022

Leader: Ewan Davies

Local Bird Guides: David Swanepoel and Selwyn Rautenbach

Text by Ewan Davies

Introduction

After a three year absence, WildWings returned to South Africa to, once again, search for animals including those not usually seen on your average safari. In a change to the previous itineraries, we added three days in the Western Cape at the beginning of the trip (one night at Hermanus and two at De Hoop) which allowed us an opportunity to see a number of Cape specialities, both mammals and birds.

On the Cape and Heidelberg sections, we employed the services of two local bird guides (David Swanepoel at the Cape and Selwyn Rautenbach at Heidelberg) and their knowledge of their local areas proved invaluable in extending our bird list and helping us to find a couple of additional mammals. We had great help too from the guides at the lodges we visited, in particular Charles/Takura at Madikwe, and Chris the minibus driver at Marrick.

A total of 67 mammal species were seen (excluding bats) and over 270 birds. For the majority of the group, the repeated close views of Southern Right Whales was the highlight of the trip, but throughout the trip we had many sightings that will stay long in the memory. An Aardvark foraging right in front of us for fifteen minutes, eleven Aardwolves, a pack of Wild Dogs out hunting, dolphins, hedgehogs, hyena cubs, and prolonged encounters with herds of Elephants. Too many to mention in detail but everyone certainly has their own individual views of their favourite encounters.

Among the birds, the displaying Denham's Bustard was a real spectacle but Cape Rockjumper, Black Harrier, Martial Eagle, African Finfoot, Secretarybird and six species of owl are all worthy of a mention.

Ewan Davies

November 2022

Itinerary

18 September 2022

Arrive Cape Town. Travel to Hermanus.

19 September 2022

Morning Hermanus. Travel to De Hoop.

20 September 2022

De Hoop

21 September 2022

Return to Cape Town. Flight to Kimberley and evening at Marrick.

22 September 2022

Marrick

23 September 2022

Warrenton and Marrick

24 September 2022

Fly to Johannesburg. Travel to Heidelberg with afternoon at Marievale.

25 September 2022

Suikerbosrand

26 September 2022

Travel to Madikwe

27 - 30 September 2022

Madikwe

1 October 2022

Return to Johannesburg.

Daily Diary

18 September 2022

The group arrived in Cape Town late in the morning where we were met by David Swanepoel our local bird guide. After introductions, we set off for a site for Cape Rockjumper seeing our first birds of the trip as we travelled, with these including Hartlaub's Gull, Cape Gull and Sacred Ibis.

Almost immediately, we encountered the only rain of the trip and David and Stephen saw the first mammal of the trip, a Cape Grey Mongoose. We were lucky to find the rockjumper within twenty minutes or so and other birds seen included Cape Sugarbird, Cape Bunting and Cape Rock Thrush, much to the delight of John Warner who had expressed a desire to see "almost anything with Cape in the name".

With our first bird target well seen, we drove on to Betty's Bay and on the way encountered our second mammal of the holiday with a troupe of Chacma Baboons feeding by the road. On arrival, we were greeted by Cape Spurfowl wandering the carpark, before easily finding our next target species, African Penguin, with at least a hundred of these on the beach and amongst the rocks.

For mammals, Cape Hyrax was very common and approachable around the carpark and on the rocks. We also found African Black Oystercatchers, Water Dikkop and four species of cormorant (Bank, Cape, Crowned and White-breasted).

Then on to Hermanus, where before going to our lodgings, we stopped for an hour on the seafront for the main attraction of the area, the Southern Right Whales. Although it was difficult to make an accurate count, there were at least ten of these massive animals in the bay with mothers with calves close inshore, whilst further out, others breached and rolled. It was a spectacular end to our first day!!



Southern Right Whale © Sue Cunningham

19 September 2022

The day began with a 06:00 bird walk in the gardens of our guest house which gave us great views of Cape Sugarbirds, as well as Southern Double-collared Sunbird, Southern Boubou, Cape Bulbul, Sombre Greenbul and a lovely Cape Batis.

After a fantastic breakfast, we packed up and headed back into town. There were fewer people than the previous evening and with great light for viewing, we enjoyed watching good numbers of whales, with two which cruised through the surf almost directly below us being an unexpected treat.

We then spotted two dolphins heading west and Sue's quick camera work resulted in a picture which was good enough to allow identification. They were Indian Humpback Dolphins, right on the edge of their range and identifiable by their humped backs and small dorsal fins. These dolphins prefer inshore waters and are, therefore, particularly at risk from human activities. A Cape Fur Seal was also seen briefly in the surf further out.

As for birds, we saw our first Cape Canaries, as well as Caspian Terns.



Indian Humpback Dolphin © Sue Cunningham

Moving on from Hermanus, we set off through the farmland towards De Hoop looking for bustards and cranes as we travelled. Several Jackal Buzzards were spotted and many small birds were added to our list including African Pipit and African Stonechat. Eventually, we began to see Blue Cranes in the fields, first in pairs then in larger numbers.

We found our first Steenbok in the farmlands and another Cape Grey Mongoose crossed the road ahead of us but, as before, it was not seen by all of the group.

Turning from the main road, we stopped at a water source and looked for birds. The stunning Yellow Bishops and Southern Red Bishops were in full breeding plumage and a beautiful Malachite Sunbird was also seen. For the keen birders, David also found several larks and cisticolas, before we headed on.

On the approach to De Hoop, three Grey Rhebok paused in the road before running on, and we saw our first Yellow Mongoose and Ostrich, with Brimstone Canaries and Greater Striped Swallows meeting us at the park entrance gate.

As we approached our accommodation, more Ostriches were seen, as well as Bontebok and our first Eland. While watching these, a Spotted Eagle-Owl was found in a nearby tree.

We settled in at our accommodation and took a dusk walk around the buildings overlooking the vlei before dinner. Here, we saw our first Cape Mountain Zebras and Cape Hares which were plentiful in the grazed areas. On the vlei, our first Black-crowned Night Herons and African Darters (Anhinga) were also seen. After a well-earned dinner, we retired to bed with an early start planned for the following day.

20 September 2022

With breakfast only being served later than we liked to start, we decided to go for an early drive and come back for food, in the hope of finding some nocturnal wildlife heading for home. In the event, we only found the early risers with the highlight being a displaying Denham's Bustard, although mating Ostriches was also a memorable sight. Spring was clearly in the air and over the next few days we saw a number of bird species mating.

Heading back for breakfast, the whole group finally caught up with a Cape Grey Mongoose that paused beside our vehicle where previous ones had always run away.



Denham's Bustard © John Warner

Over breakfast on the veranda, we kept an eye on the vlei and watched Pin-tailed Whydahs in the bushes nearby.

Having eaten, we left the park and headed back to Potberg Hut seeing more herds of Eland and Bontebok, along with a Secretarybird which was a major target for Stephen. It was close to the road and we enjoyed some excellent views before it was, unfortunately, scared off by a passing truck, although there would be plenty more later in the trip. Once we neared Potberg Hut, we had some great views of some Cape Vultures and had an excellent encounter with a Klaas's Cuckoo.

After returning to our guesthouse for lunch, we headed back along the road west behind the dunes finding more Denham's Bustards and Grey Rhebok before another excellent sighting, a highly venomous Puff Adder. This individual was very large and was basking on the road and gave us some great views.



Puff Adder © Ewan Davies

Moving on, we were able to watch a Black Harrier along the roadside before returning to the shore for some more magnificent views of the Southern Right Whales with Cape Gannets

streaming by. We enjoyed the spectacle until dusk before returning to our accommodation, pausing only to photograph a Spotted Eagle-Owl on the way back.

21 September 2022

We were due to return to Cape Town this morning, but there was time for a couple of hours before breakfast to make the most of our time at De Hoop and a drive eastwards behind the dunes gave us prolonged views of possibly the same Black Harrier we had seen before and somewhat briefer views of a Martial Eagle.

On the way back west, an honour guard of Striped Grass Mice stood along the track in the morning sun with one every few feet, along with several Southern Vlei Rats. As the birders got their final fix of larks with David, Ewan scanned for Caracal, but a moment's excitement unfortunately proved to be just a Steenbok.

We drove back to the airport at Cape Town, passing what we thought would be our last Blue Cranes, where we said farewell to David with our thanks for a job well done.

Once we had negotiated the airport, the short flight to Kimberley ended with a number of sightings before we even got off the plane. Herds of South African Springbok were seen as we came in to land as were the introduced Sable, that are common in the area. On landing, a Yellow Mongoose crossed the runway, but most impressively, Ruth was able to photograph a Meerkat from the plane.

Kimberley was much warmer than Cape Town and we soon met up with Chris, one of the drivers from Marrick. He drove us the short distance to the farm where we settled into our rooms which was followed by a quick dinner before our first night drive.

Initially we saw nothing but Cape Hares and nightjars before a Black-backed Jackal was spotted. Soon after that, we saw one of our main target species, an Aardwolf, but our focus moved on when an Aardvark was found digging. This gave spectacular views as it moved and dug near the vehicle for around fifteen minutes.

After this, a second Aardvark followed plus more Aardwolves, an excellent Cape Porcupine and numerous Springhares, Northern Black Korhaans and Barn Owls.



Cape Porcupine and Aardwolf © Sue Cunningham

22 September 2022

An early walk produced a few more birds, including Common Scimitarbill, Chestnut-vented Warbler and Black-chested Prinia and after breakfast, we then headed out for the morning, driven by Ricardo.



Meerkat © John Warner

Much of the focus was on ungulates with herds of Springbok, Gemsbok, Plains Zebra and Black Wildebeest, as well as the introduced Sable and Roan. Other new mammals for the trip included South African Ground Squirrel, Warthog and Bush Duiker. Mongooses were also out in force, and the group had good views of Cape Grey and Yellow on the road ahead of the vehicle. We were also able to watch a lone Meerkat foraging for around half an hour.

In the afternoon, Ricardo drove us to a nearby kopje where we waited until a Karoo Rock Sengi appeared. This bizarre mammal sat between rocks for around fifteen minutes allowing plenty of time for photographs, before we continued onwards to another kopje where we searched for and found a Mountain Reedbuck.



Karoo Rock Sengi © Sue Cunningham

After another fine dinner, we set off on our second night drive. Carol had requested we pay special attention to Aardwolves and they certainly seemed to have listened, as we saw no fewer than eight individuals !! Many more Porcupines, Springhares and Jackals were also

found, and new mammals for the trip included Scrub Hare, a family of Bat-eared Foxes and fantastic views of a South African Hedgehog.



South African Hedgehog © Sue Cunningham

23 September 2022

We set off early on our final full day at Marrick to the nearby town of Warrenton where the plan was to look for otters. Several hornbills were seen along the way, however, when we arrived at the site, we discovered that the water levels were low. As a result, waterbirds were few in number, although we did see our first kingfishers (Lesser Pied and Malachite). Fearing we might not find any otters in the very shallow river, we moved a couple of miles upstream and were soon rewarded with an otter swimming away.

Stephen saw it leave the water so we were able to confirm it as a Spotted-necked Otter. Whilst we waited, Chris (our driver) chatted to some local fishermen, which led us to a third site. This was a dam well away from habitation and although we were too late in the day for more otters, otter and mongoose tracks abounded and Stephen saw what was probably a Common Brown Water Snake.

On returning to Marrick, we discovered a large grass fire was fast approaching the farm so we gathered as many of the staff as we could into our vehicle and Chris drove us away.

With the farm safe but smoky, we made for the safety of Kimberley where we spent the night in a motel. We missed a night drive, but thankfully no one was harmed as the community had pulled together to fight the fire.

24 September 2022

We were able to return to the farm in the morning to see the damage and whilst the fire had come incredibly close to our rooms, breaking some of the windows and damaging some external plumbing, remarkably everything within was undamaged.

With our luggage smelling slightly smoky, we flew on to Johannesburg for the next stage of our trip where we met our next driver, another Stephen, and local guide Selwyn Rautenbach who would be helping us with his fantastic knowledge of local birds for the next two days.

Our first site, Marievale Bird Sanctuary, is a wetland area near Heidelberg and here Selwyn's expertise proved priceless, adding more than 30 species to our bird list including Long-tailed and Fan-tailed Widowbirds, African Rail, African Snipe, Lesser Marsh Warbler and Swainson's Francolin. We also looked for Cape Clawless Otters but these were not seen, possibly due to low water levels.

At dusk, we looked for owls and had excellent views of several Marsh Owls quartering the reed beds, along with another great bird, a Grass Owl. Scanning the reed beds, we were pleased to find a Common Reedbuck. We left Marievale scanning with the thermal imager as we went and were able to observe several Duikers, Cape Hares and jackals. We checked a few more sites around the area and had further views of these species, as well as our first Red Hartebeest of the trip.

25 September 2022

Sunday began with a detour to a clinic for a throat infection for one member of the group while Selwyn led the rest of the group on a short birding walk where they had excellent views of a Crested Barbet and African Black Duck.

Following this, we headed to our main location for the day, Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve. This picturesque reserve consists of rolling hills and grasslands where large numbers of ungulates can be found before even entering the park. Blesbok was a new species for us, and form an interesting contrast to the Bontebok seen at the Cape.

Black Wildebeest were also present in good numbers and are a much more impressive animal than their blue cousins more commonly seen in nature documentaries. Plains Zebra and Red Hartebeest were scattered across the hillside.

Heading towards the visitors centre, Selwyn found us many more birds included Mountain Wheatear, Mocking Cliff Chat, Bar-throated Apalis and a beautiful Black-collared Barbet. Along the road, we saw our first Slender Mongoose, as well as the colourful Crag Lizard.

Up in highlands of the park where large herds of Eland roamed, we searched the rocks for a long time before we were eventually rewarded when Selwyn spotted our second species of sengi, the Eastern Rock Sengi. This was a rare sighting so late in the day and was partially obscured by rocks but John C was able to see its face and it was also good for Carol, who had missed the previous sighting.

On our way out, we had good views of all the common ungulates of the area, plus more jackals and Secretarybirds. Dinner at a local restaurant followed and a quick check of the lake behind our accommodation for bats rewarded us with large numbers of Cape Serotines before we said goodbye to Selwyn.



Black-backed Jackal © Sue Cunningham

26 September 2022

After breakfast, we set out for Madikwe with our driver, Stephen, choosing a route which avoided the worst of the traffic around Johannesburg and we passed the South African cricket team heading in the opposite direction. From the road, we saw our first Blue Wildebeest and birds including European and Lilac-breasted Rollers.

Stopping for fuel and food for lunch, we watched a column of Cape and White-backed Vultures rising on the thermals. After a coffee stop at Zeerust, the country became wilder and as we approached the entrance to Madikwe, we began to see increasing amounts of wildlife including Impala, Greater Zambezi Kudu, Southern Giraffe, Warthog and small groups of Elephants.

We arrived at our lodge and quickly settled into our rooms. The rooms all have views overlooking the Limpopo River and various water birds, Nile Crocodiles and other reptiles can be seen, as well as mammals such as Warthogs and Elephants which come to drink.

Heading out on our first game drive in the evening light, we took a route along the edge of the park where Cheetahs had recently been seen, but we could not find them, although we did encounter a pair of Lions with mating Pearl-spotted Owlets another highlight.

As the light faded, we returned to the river lodge, with views of Cape Bushbuck and a very brief encounter with a Small-spotted Genet along the way.



Warthog © Ruth Turner

27 September 2022

We headed out early and no sooner had we come across our first White Rhinoceros of the trip when movement behind it proved to be ten Wild Dogs. We were able to get in front of them and watch in the dawn light as they hesitated before eventually crossing the river.

The pack then made several hunting attempts on Impala and Warthogs, before harassing another rhino. In total, we watched them for around 20 minutes before they moved on and out of view. Watching as they dispersed, regrouped and ran at full speed after Impala was unquestionably one of the highlights of the tour.



Wild Dog © John Warner

In the afternoon, we decided to stake out a Brown Hyena den, but along the way paused after Baboon alarm calls led us to spot a distant Leopard relaxing on some rocks. At the Brown Hyena den all was quiet, but after waiting patiently, a pair of ears finally emerged, followed by the head and eventually the whole body of a juvenile animal. It posed well for photos for several minutes before returning to the den.



Brown Hyena © Ewan Davies

After our evening meal, some of the group took a short walk round the camp to see what we could find. A Verreaux's Eagle-Owl flew off from a fence, Cape Bushbucks were common and Ruth proved her knack of finding galagoes in the dark, with some great views. As we knew the honeymoon suite was now empty, and this room had the largest balcony and best views, we checked to see if there was anything there and were surprised to find a pair of hippos on the bank as the water level was so low.

28 September 2022

It was another great start to the day, as we found four lions napping at the river crossing just south of the lodge. Leaving them to their rest, we headed out west, having a brief view of Spotted Hyena cubs at another den, although these proved frustratingly difficult to photograph.

Heading onwards towards where the Leopard had been the previous day, we increased our mammal list with Tree Squirrels, plus excellent views of Transvaal Klipspringer and Mountain Reedbuck.

Returning to the lodge as the temperature climbed, we saw a Rock Monitor emerging from a burrow and groups of Banded Mongooses that, as always, moved away as we approached.

Back at the lodge, we took over the now empty honeymoon suite, with Ewan moving in so the group could make use of the balcony view all day. With the Lions sleeping just out of view, the antelope stayed away, however, some unobservant Warthogs had a close shave as we watched one of the Lions stalk close before being seen.



Lion and Warthog © Ewan Davies

In the afternoon, we headed for some other water sources to see what we could find, but our only new mammal was a great view of a family of Dwarf Mongooses with new birds including Red-billed Buffalo Weaver and Yellow-billed Stork (remarkably our only stork on the entire trip).

After dinner, a walk around the camp gave us views of Waterbuck, the ever-present Cape Bushbuck and further sightings of Southern Lesser Galago.

Late in the evening, after everyone had gone to bed, a herd of African (Savanna) Buffalo crossed the river, rousing the lions. Unfortunately, this was seen only by Ewan, but heard by all. Once the Buffalo and Lions had moved on, a Brown Hyena was seen in the thermal imager coming to the river to drink.

29 September 2022

Lions again provided the morning spectacle, however, on this occasion, two lionesses had killed a Warthog and we watched as their seven cubs devoured the carcass, giving amazing, if fairly gory, photo opportunities. Around the kill site, Black-backed Jackals waited for their chance.



Lions © Ewan Davies

We then crossed the grasslands where up to twenty Kalahari Springbok could be seen at one time, as well as this being a good site for Kori Bustard. As the day grew warmer, activity slowed and a view of a Slender Mongoose by Sue was one of the more notable sightings in the middle of the day.

Back at the lodge, we settled down on the balcony to watch the river as herds of Elephants came in repeatedly to drink and feed. Impala, Blue Wildebeest, Plains Zebra, Giraffe and Waterbuck also all came down to the water and with kingfishers, babblers, and Red-throated Bee-eaters ever present, there was plenty to enjoy and when an African Fish Eagle appeared, this was a trip first for many of the group.

We had an early dinner and headed out at dusk for a night drive. We checked a site for White-tailed Mongoose but had no success before encountering an African Civet, an animal not often seen at Madikwe. Two Spotted Hyenas sauntered by and a pair of sleeping lions were also found.

We drove along the edge of the reserve to look for nocturnal animals trying to get in, or out, under the fence, but had only more brief views of Small-spotted Genets as a reward for our efforts.

Heading back, we had good views of a Verreaux's Eagle-Owl and near the lodge found huge numbers of Springhares before being finally rewarded with an African Wildcat running full pelt in front of us, with a second individual seen later by some of the group.

30 September 2022

For our last full day, we headed westwards into new territory to see what we could find. Good numbers of Kori Bustards were seen, and as we neared the rockier areas, a Verreaux's Eagle landed on a rocky outcrop. This was a much wanted species and we enjoyed some great views of it.

Checking the waterhole at another lodge, we finally got a long-awaited photo opportunity with some Banded Mongooses. Although most of them ran off as usual, three remained at their burrows and were seen well for ten minutes or so. A pair of Klipspringers also gave great views.



Banded Mongoose © Ruth Turner

Returning to our lodge, we found the same pack of Wild Dogs from earlier in the trip, however, on this occasion, they were relaxing in the late morning sun under what shade they could find. It was a fantastic end to the morning.

For our final afternoon drive we tried for hyenas again but were distracted by a very lively Elephant bathing session and another of Stephen's most wanted birds, Yellow-throated Sandgrouse. Moving on, we finally got good views of the Spotted Hyena cubs with three quite young individuals playing in the thick scrub. An adult seen nearby as we left may well have been the mother.

We then went back to the Brown Hyena den and not long before dusk, we again saw the juvenile with an adult not too far away, before enjoying a sundowner from a high viewpoint watching the sun set over the plains.

Heading back to the lodge, a distant genet was too far away to give good views, however, we watched two lions preparing to hunt Impala, and another African Wildcat was seen by Ewan in the spotlight, although this could not be found again despite our best efforts.

Back at the lodge, most of the group retired to bed but Ewan sat out late on the balcony having asked the group if they would like a phone call if any particular animals came by. John Warner wanted better views of an adult Brown Hyena, so when one did come by, he came running just in time to see it leave. He waited five minutes and then went back to his cabin, only to be immediately called again. This time he was too late, although Ruth had good views of it. It seemed that it just wasn't keen to be in the spotlight.....



Spotted Hyena © Ewan Davies

1 October 2022

At dawn, the Brown Hyena made its final appearance, coming to the river to drink, but once again it did not stay long enough for John, although he did have a unique experience when several galagos invaded his room and ran around on the bed and railings.

After a final breakfast, we said our goodbyes to the staff and took to the road for the drive back to Johannesburg airport where the group began to go our separate ways.



Southern Lesser Galago © John Warner



African Penguin © Sue Cunningham



Double-banded Courser © Sue Cunningham