Sally and Andrew Smith’s Trip to Namibia Okavango, with Tertius Gous from Birding Africa (Sept–Oct 2014) – client’s trip report.

We both agreed this was the best birding trip we have been on, out of many good ones. There were quite a few contributory factors. The first was that we were, amazingly, the only participants. When Tertius Gous picked us up at our hotel we said ‘we suppose we now go to pick up the others’, to be told that ‘there are no others’! Many thanks to Birding Africa, for not cancelling the trip. Apparently next year is so popular that two trips have already been organised so fluctuations in popularity are difficult to understand.

We got on really well with Tertius and found much in common, in addition to birding. We owns up to having very little African birding experience (4 days self–guided with a bird book in Tanzania, plus a Birding Africa trip to Madagascar where the birds and terrain are quite different), and so were treated to personal introductions to both common and special birds and of course the endemic and near endemic species. The trip was a continuous ‘birding tutorial’. There was none of the trouble of being the last in a line of enthusiasts on a narrow path, all trying to see the same bird, not hearing what it was and craning past people who were trying to get shots with huge cameras. Tertius did indeed have a large camera. At first he used it rather little, but later more and more. It never imposed and we look forward to seeing some of the results. We went intending to take a lot of notice of the mammals and again were in luck. Tertius is a real expert and enthusiast (and a veterinary pathologist with wild as well as domesticated animal experience), so we saw and hope to remember at least 33 different species of land mammal. As to the birds, we saw 340 species pretty well, of which about 65% were new to us. We had seen many of the waders and herons, but the bush birds were not only new species, but new families and new genera. We missed out on a few (probably 15 species) which means that Tertius saw/heard at least 350 species. This was well beyond our expectations and at the top end of what Tertius hoped for. Of the specials, highlighted in the tour info, we missed out on Hartlaub’s Spurfowl (Tertius saw/heard it), Pygmy Falcon (none were at home in the Sociable Weaver nests), African Pygmy Goose and Augur Buzzard (luckily we had seen both of these before in Madagascar or Tanzania), Western Banded Snake Eagle and a few others for which conditions were not right or we ran out of energy to search (Smiths, not Tertius). However, we have no complaints at all in this regard! We took our scope on advice from Marje of Birding Africa, and it was certainly well worth–while. The weather was warm to hot, especially in the north, with the maximum temperature recorded by the vehicle as 39.5 °C. Plenty of water, wide-brimmed sunhats and sunblock were the order of the day. One feature of the small group was that the option of rests in the heat of the day were fine by us and did not need negotiation. Often they were on verandas overlooking gardens with birds present to be observed at our leisure. We did not feel the need to be birding every second and were really glad to have a chance to sort our heads out with respect to all the new birds and experiences. The birds mentioned in this diary are personal choices and not necessarily key birds for this trip or special endemics or near endemics, though we have tried to note these. Sal kept the ‘Smith List’ progressively during the day and Andrew took pictures with his Lumix.

Other reasons for enjoyment were the great landscapes (see some pictures later) which we had not realised would be so spectacular, very good infrastructure (roads of good bitumen and well–graded dirt) and very friendly people, with efficient rest–camps and comfortable accommodation. There were no flies, unlike central Australia, and mosquito repellent kept any mozzies away effectively. We ate a variety of meats, including Kudu and Oryx, both very good. Thanks again to Birding Africa for the choices and organisation.
Diary.

25th/26th October (Day 0) Adelaide to Windhoek. We set off from Adelaide on 25th September flying Qantas to Perth and then South African Airways from Perth to Jo’Burg and Jo’burg to Windhoek. The flights were good, but the waits in Perth and Jo’burg rather long and boring. However, we arrived on time (26th September, Day 0) and were met by the manager of the Onganga Hotel in Klein Windhoek. We settled into our room, had a light lunch and a rest on our terrace, with bird watching (e.g. Black-faced Waxbill, White-backed Mousebird and African Red-eyed Bulbul) and then walked up the dirt track from the hotel to Avis Dam at about 3.30 pm, trying to avoid the dust raised by numerous passing 4WDs. This reservoir is the main water supply for Windhoek and was rather low, emphasising the future problems the city may face as it grows. As recorded on a birding web page we had looked at, the park was populated by people walking enormous dogs and by fisher folk, but the birds seemed acclimatised to these. We began to get our eyes in and saw a few birds we had not seen before (Cape Wagtail, White-browed Sparrow Weaver, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater and Three-banded Plover) as well as some remembered from Tanzania and more generally (Egyptian Goose, Blacksmith Plover, Common Sandpiper and Grey Heron). We had missed the Three-banded Plover in Madagascar, so it was great to see it here. (Full lists for each day are in the attached excel file, though lists for 26th and 27th September have been merged). On return we had an early dinner in the hotel restaurant and a couple of beers, and then collapsed to bed to try to get ahead of jetlag.

27th September (Day 1). We were picked up by Tertius as planned at about 10.15, with a VW minibus and set off to shop in Windhoek for water, sandwiches and a few snacks. On the way Bradfield’s Swifts were spotted, so we stopped to take a good look. The location was a bit of wasteland with bushes and Tertius introduced us to his ‘little trick’; whistling the call of the Pearl-spotted Owlet. The call, which played a very big role in the trip, brought in a nice varied group of bush birds, including Long-billed Crombec, Dusky Sunbird, Acacia Pied Barbet, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Southern Masked Weaver, Pririt Batis and quite a few others. What a very good start!

Shopping completed, we set off for the Erongo mountains, via Karibib and Usakos, with stops along the way. At Usakos we scrambled around on a rocky hillside below the town water tank in search of the Herero Chat (Namibian speciality, NS), which was not positively identified from Familiar Chat. However, both male and female Short-toed Rock Thrush, White-tailed Shrike (NS), Martial Eagle and the first of the tricky (for the Smiths) larks (Sabota Lark) were seen there or while travelling. The last stop before our overnight accommodation was in the sandy bed of the (dry) Kahn River. This was a great place where we met the Pearl-spotted Owlet ‘in person’, the first of many Red-billed Spurfowl, and an array of bush birds like the beautiful Violet-earred Waxbill, Carp’s Tit (NS), Great Sparrow, Black-backed Puff back, White-browed Scrub Robin and Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, as well as Rüppell’s Parrot (NS) and Bearded Woodpecker. The last stretch of road into our accommodation in the Erongo Mountains gave us Northern Black Korhaan, Pale Chanting Goshawk and a group of starlings including Burchell’s, Cape Glossy and Pale-winged. Altogether we saw 57 species for the day, with Tertius seeing or hearing a few more including Hartlaub’s Spurfowl (NS). The maximum temp for the day was about 30°C.

Dinner at 7.00 pm, was accompanied by a couple of Windhoek Draft beer each (very good and presumably a legacy of the German phase of government of Namibia), birdlist and a lot of chat (features that became well established through the trip). Tertius revealed that he was going on
the Madagascar trip in November, so there was a bit of reminiscence about our trip with Birding Africa in 2013.

The Lodge was great and beautifully sited below a large mountain glowing in the sunset. The setup included an outside sitting area overlooking a nice, ‘bird infested’, pool. There were good paths into the scrub and down to a dry watercourse with watering points to attract birds.

28th September (Day 2). Up early for a 6.00 am walk to a nearby kopjie (little rocky hill) in search of two more Namibian specialities, Rockrunner and Hartlaub’s Spurfowl. The air was distinctly crisp, with Andrew wearing his gloves and Tertius his beany. The Rockrunner was seen well, together with quite a few other good birds, including Kalahari Scrub-robin, but the Spurfowl did not cooperate. Apart from that, the sunrise from the top of the kopjie was magnificent. After breakfast (cereal, yoghurt, 2 fried eggs and bacon all round) we took a walk (about 9.15–11.30 am) down the dry riverbed and past waterholes where there were quite a few birds including Common Scimitar-bill, Black-chested Prinia, Rosy-faced Lovebirds, White- and Black-throated Canaries, Ashy Tit, Lark-like Bunting and, surprisingly, a White Stork, soaring in the thermals on the mountain (definitely a write-in). Rock Martins were common. We saw Blue Wildebeest (aka Brindled Gnu) quite close too. On return the day was warming up so we spent about half an hour before lunch and another couple of hours after lunch observing the visitors to the pool which included a Dassie Rat, as well as Red-headed Finch, Shaft-tailed Wydah (sadly not in breeding plumage), Lesser Masked Weaver, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow and Namaqua Doves. At about 3.00 pm, as the temperature dropped, we took to the vehicle for a drive into the Erongo Mountains, with stops to walk into roadside scrub and up rocky hillsides. (Climbing sticks would have been a good idea for us oldies – we had them in the bus on that day.) At one stop in the scrub the ‘Pearl-spotted Owlet call’ brought in a splendid group of birds: Dusky Sunbird (nearly always the first to show up), Cinnamon-breasted, Golden-breasted and Cape Buntings (making 4 buntings for the day), plus Barred Wren-warbler, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater and others. Scrambling over and squeezing between rocks we found more Short-toed Rock Thrush, Mountain Wheatears, Lanner Falcon and Rock Kestrel. A highlight was a ‘sky show’ of three Verreaux’s Eagles, riding on thermals over the cliffs. On the way we saw Monteiro’s Hornbill (NS), Double-banded Sandgrouse (sitting in the middle of the road) and Red-crested Korhaan.

Tertius’ GPS was often in play to check turnoffs, locations or record good spots.

A second night at our lodge in the Erongos. Same ritual of beer, dinner, chat and birdlist (57 species today, with some overlaps with previous days of course!).

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2 Cape Wagtail at Avis Dam 3 Pearl-spotted Owlet 4 Sunset in the Erongos
29th September (Day 3). Spitzkoppe (Herero Chat) Day. Today the aim was to travel to Walvis Bay, via the spectacular Spitzkoppe mountains. Up for breakfast at 7.00 am, for a 7.40 departure (planned for 7.30, but...). The route took us back to Usakos, where we made another brief ascent of the water-tower hill but again failed to find any Herero Chats. However, other new birds were seen, like African Hawk Eagle, Rüppells Korhaan (NS) and Karoo Chat. By 9.30 we were at the Spitzkoppe camp site and entry into the park. What a spectacular rock formation rising from the flat desert; eat your heart out central Australia!

A combination of driving and walking took us about halfway round the mountain. The elusive Herero Chat was found quite soon and in the end at least 6 were spotted and photographed extensively! Other new birds included Grey-backed Cisticola, Desert Cisticola and Layard’s Tit-babbler, plus Bokmakierie (a shrike, patterned rather like a Golden Whistler) and Cape Sparrow. The birds and ground-squirrels at the lunch spot were well acclimatised to picnickers and made free with bits of sandwich.

After lunch it was time to move on across the desert, and I mean desert. It was flat and very dry with little vegetation. The road was straight and the drive to Henties Bay seemed pretty long, straight and free of wild-life. It could be quite intimidating if you were not used to dry environments. However, we did see Double-banded Courser, Tractrac Chat and Grey’s Lark (NS). The lark was nesting on the ground and had laid two eggs. We had a quick refuelling stop at Henties Bay and on down the coast on the ‘salt road’ to Swakopmund and Walvis Bay. The salt road is indeed made of hard-packed salt, very straight and rather narrow, and with no line-markings of course. The lack of rain makes this surface OK and on the return trip we saw watering carts involved in maintenance. The coast is a mecca for fishing, both commercial and sporting, so there were many numbered turnoffs from the road to the beaches. On the other side of the road was a most interesting ‘lichen field’ with the sand stabilised by a lichen crust. Some was fenced off to keep out the ubiquitous off-road 4WD vehicles. We took the Swakopmund bypass, so did not see the town today. In any case as the wind got up so did the sand and the final run in to Walvis Bay was through a sandstorm, making difficult driving on a narrow straight road. One odd feature was the change of wind direction, but the sand kept blowing even though the distance from the coast was not great! We found Lagoon Loge (Lodge) easily by about 5.30 pm and as Marje’s instructions said, it is bright yellow with blue trimmings and right on the front opposite the lagoon (‘you can’t miss it!’). It wasn’t long before we were looking out onto the lagoon for waders and keeping our eyes open for Damara Tern. The new birds seen at once were Hartlaub’s Gull (very like the Australian Silver Gull) and Kelp Gull, but we were pleased to see old friends like Curlew Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstones, Greater and Lesser Flamingos, Sanderlings and Greenshank. We had an excellent dinner at The Raft Restaurant on stilts over the lagoon,
recommended by the proprietor of Lagoon Loge. He is French and interestingly quite a bit of the furniture in Lagoon Loge was beautiful French antique. Today the bird list reached 68.

30th September (Day 4). Dune Lark day. Up at 6.30 am for breakfast at 7.00 and departure at 7.45 taking our lunch packs with us, on a chilly morning of 7.5°C. It took about 30 mins to reach the dunes of the northern tip of the Namibian Desert, at Kuiseb River. We parked in the scrub not far from an isolated church and set off into the dunes, which were pretty spectacular but did not contain many bird species. The Dune Larks (the only true Namibian endemic) took a while to locate, but in the end really delivered, with 6 birds displaying spectacularly, and photographed repeatedly. The bushes contained the ever-present Dusky Sunbird, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Common Fiscal, Cape Sparrow and Tractrac chat. There were also some amazing beetles that manage to gather enough water via specialised appendages even though there is no rain. We departed the dunes at about 10.40 am (18°C) and returned to Walvis Bay, to tour the lagoon and salt-fields in the car and have our lunch while looking at the great variety of waders. The salt-fields are amazingly extensive and we saw lots of birds, but sadly could not get right out to the junction with the sea because the road was impassable to all but 4WD vehicles, thanks to the sandstorm. This meant that there was no chance of seeing Cape Gannets and other seabirds. Highlights included Damara Terns, which were just turning up to nest in the dunes, 19 Red-necked Phalaropes in the shallows and Chestnut-banded Plovers on the dryish and highly saline flats. We were interested to see Little Stints scavenging by fluttering in the shallows and flamingos stirring up prey by paddling with their feet. The Orange River White-eye turned up in the shrubs in Lagoon Loge Garden. We were back to Lagoon Loge quite early and had dinner at about 6.00 pm at the Lyon du Sable, another recommendation of our host. Birdlist recorded 50 species.
Ist October (Day 5). Walvis Bay to Brandberg. The ‘standard’ breakfast at 7.00 am and departure with bags and lunch packs at 7.35 am, when the weather was grey and cool (13°C) with condensation on the vehicle. This must be a fairly rare event. Our route took us up the coast to Henties Bay once again, this time passing through the pretty town of Swakopmund with its German–style buildings. We stopped at the guano platforms (no longer in commercial use) which were covered with resting cormorants, as well as skeins and skeins flying over the sea. This abundance is a testament to the excellent offshore fishing. They were mainly Cape and White-breasted Cormorants, but there were a few Crowned Cormorants among them. On the shore were African Black Oystercatchers, as well as some waders. Here we also saw Cape Fur Seals and Heaviside’s Dolphin, and later at the Mile 32 turnoff there was a mob of Meerkats.

We reached Henties Bay at about 10.15 am and stopped to get cash at a hole in the wall and had a coffee at the café next door (the Something Special Coffee House). There were very good mottos on the Huletts sugar packets, for example ‘The miracle is not to fly in the air or walk on the water, but to walk on the earth’ (Chinese Proverb). Our plans to invent new proverbs came to
nothing, as we seemed to be too busy. Then off across the flat desert again towards Uis. There were quite a few birds along the way, with Stark’s Lark in small groups, Grey’s Lark again and a successful hunt on a stony hillside for the Karoo Long-billed Lark. A Greater Kestrel was nesting in a thorn bush close to the road and another Pale Chanting Goshawk was perched up over the road. We had lunch about 1.00 pm at one of the numerous and excellent wayside stops, under a camelthorn tree. Shade was welcome as the temp was up to 31°C. Continuing towards Brandberg, the chief target was the Benguela Long-billed Lark (NS), which was seen but ‘Better Looks were definitely Desired (BLD)’. We did get good views of the Spike-heeled Lark and both Marico and Chat Flycatchers.

We arrived at our chalets at about 3.15 pm and were given a ‘welcome drink’ and shown to our rooms. This was an attractive but rather an odd place, in that the garden was full of spiny exotic plants and had a few caged exotic parrots. One of the ponds contained Mallards! However, the location was great, overlooked by the huge Brandberg Mountain, and the accommodation and meals fine. We had a very short settling in time and then went out in the vehicle to the Ugab River bed (temp up to 40°C) and on the way had good views of the Benguela Long-billed Lark (Better Looks Obtained, BLO), Northern Black Korhaan displaying, Ludwig’s Bustard, Purple Roller and two hornbills, Monteiro’s and Yellow-billed. Andrew and Sal at last got good views of the Red-faced Mousebird, which had been eluding them. Sunset over Brandberg was great.

Dinner at 7.30, with beer of course, and the birdlist for a day of very varied habitats was up to 71 species.

2nd October (Day 6). Into Etosha. Not too early a start at 7.00am for breakfast (bags to the car at the same time) and departure in the cool at 7.45 am. The route towards Etosha’s Andersson Gate started to take us through bushveld, with more low trees which are attractive to browsing mammals. The birds along the road were similar to those we had seen before, but a stop at a river and nearby dam were very interesting. Stock was being watered by the locals and there were South African Shelduck (the only ones for the trip), Namaqua Sandgrouse (the first of a great many), Rufous-backed and Grey-backed Sparrow Larks, Pearl-breasted Swallows, Blacksmith Plovers with two chicks, Red-headed Finch and Red-billed Quelea amongst the birds.
We went on to Outjo on the bitumen for a short stretch, with a wayside stop at about 10.45 am (up to 36°C). After a short stop at Outjo, for cash to pay for fuel, we reached the Andersson Gate at about 1.25 pm and ate our packed lunches in the shade of the trees. Once inside the park we had to stay in the vehicle for safety reasons and in any case the air-conditioned comfort was welcome. Soon more mammals were in evidence, and a good list started to develop. The Okaukuejo Rest Camp, to be our next stay, was large and busy. It is clearly very popular, not only for overnighters, but also for day visitors. After finding our accommodation we had a walk round the camp, including its waterhole, until about 3.30 pm and then off on a ‘game drive’ round the Okonondeka Waterhole loop. A highlight was a lion with a zebra kill, but the Black Rhino, Impala, Elephant, Giraffe, Steenbok and Oryx and more were also in evidence. The photo of the lion kill gives a very good idea of the enormity of the Etosha Pan. Birds new for the trip included Sociable Weavers, with their huge composite nests, Spotted Thick-knee, and two pipits (Plain-backed and African), Red-capped and Pink-billed Larks. We looked for Pygmy Falcon, which nests in Sociable Weaver nests, but sadly never found any. We also kept our eyes open for Kori Bustard and Secretarybird. Eventually we found plenty of the bustards, but never spotted the other target.

Back into the rest camp before the gates closed at sunset (just before 7.00 pm). Rock Martins were wheeling round the tower. After dinner (and beer) in the restaurant we again visited the camp waterhole, where a highlight was Rufous-cheeked Nightjars displaying. The ‘birdlist’ for the day included 77 bird species and about 11 species of large mammal.
3rd October (Day 7). Round Eastern Etosha. As the weather promised to be hot again we had breakfast as early as possible (6.00 am) and started with a walk in the cool (12°C) round the rest camp area, followed by a 'game drive' through desert with stops at waterholes, including Rietfontein, which is natural and has good reeds and mud. A highlight was the Rufous-eared Warbler which responded to calls just where Tertius said it would! We got more good looks at birds we had seen before, giving the chance for the Smiths to learn and recognise them later (not always successful). New birds for this stretch included Burchell's Courser and White-crested Helmet Shrike. The waterholes contained good birds of all sorts, including finches, sparrow-larks and waterbirds like Kittlitz's Plover, Three-banded Plover, Little Stint, Wood Sandpiper, African Jacana, the ubiquitous Blacksmith Lapwing and, very pleasingly, a pair of Greater Painted Snipe.

We arrived at our next rest camp (Halali) at about 11.00 am, by which time it was already warming up. Our accommodation was excellent. We had a 2–roomed unit, with outside area which we used to dry the much-needed washing. The temperature was so high and the air so dry that most things dried within an hour! This camp was considerably smaller and more homely than Okaukuejo. It is overlooked by a small pointed hill, fringed with small trees and with a mast on top. We had a look at the waterhole that could be viewed from shade inside the camp, walked around the camp (Little Sparrowhawk, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Damara and Southern Red-billed Hornbill, and Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill and others), had lunch in the restaurant and rested out the hottest period from 2.00–4.00 pm. At 4.00 it was still hot, but we drove out till 6.00, when we returned to walk round the camp and out to the camp waterhole (Violet Wood-hoopoe again, amongst others), have dinner etc. The birdlist for the day was 66 species, with mammals at about 14 species.

4th October (Day 8). Seeing the real Etosha Pan. Breakfast at 6.00 am again, followed by a walk in the cool up the hill til about 8.00 am. As we started off a vigorous clamour in the shrubs pinpointed a Barn Owl being mobbed by a range of other birds like Grey–backed Cmeroptera, Green–Winged Ptilia, Violet–eared Waxbill and especially the near–endemic Bare–cheeked Babblers (one babbler down and four to go). Carp’s Tit was feeding young, and further up we spotted the Little Sparrowhawk again, this time with prey.

We set off for a game drive about 8.10 am, making a round of the waterholes of Rietfontein (again), Homob and Sueda. Birds new for the trip (and the Smiths) included newly–arrived Red-breasted Swallow (closely associated with culverts, in which they nest) and Desert Cisticola. We learned that the Bataleur gets its name from its rocking flight, like a tightrope walker and got really good views of Tawny Eagle on its perch overlooking a waterhole. A hot afternoon game drive took us through Etosha Lookout, Springfontein and Goa Waterhole and back to Halali for another comfortable night. Beer, dinner and birdlist, in that order (54 species).
5th October (Day 9). Further East in Etosha. Breakfast at 6.00 am again and bags to the vehicle for departure at 6.45. Our first stops were Goas and Kalkheuwel waterholes to see a nice array of birds, from eagles (Tawny) to finches, with later visits to Fisher’s Pan and Tsumcor (Two Palms) waterholes. Two palms produced the expected (by Tertius) Red-necked Falcon and we got preliminary BLD (Better Look Desired) views of Wahlberg’s Eagle and saw the first Black-winged Kite of the trip, plus Burchell’s Sandgrouse, Emerald-spotted Dove, Eastern Paradise Wydah (not in breeding plumage, sadly) and Fawn-coloured Lark. A highlight was our next babbler (Southern Pied Babbler). We checked into Namutoni Rest Camp, had a leisurely lunch and rest throughout the heat of the day and went out again at about 3.30 pm to visit the Klein Namutoni Waterhole and the Dik Dik loop. The rest camp is small and interesting, especially because it includes an old German Fort, dating from about 1904. It replaced a smaller fort that was attacked and burnt down by the local tribes, as described in the small museum room, which also shows changes in the size and boundaries of the Park over the years since it was established under the German regime. We tried to fill up with diesel at the camp filling station, but they had run out (delivery expected tomorrow, but when?) and told us that the next place outside the park (Mokuti Lodge) didn’t have any either. This caused a little concern about making our next destination, so the afternoon drive did not go far.

The afternoon drive gave us first views of Blue Waxbill (a smart bird, and one of Andrew’s favourites), Common Sandpiper, Crested Francolin and Grey-headed Gull. We also had splendid close-up views of three Damara Dikdiks marking their patch. Besides all this, the real highlight of the day, and in some ways the trip, was on our return journey to the camp via the waterhole. There were lots of 4WDs around and it turned out we had just missed seeing a family group more than 50 African Elephants drinking, but they were on their way into the scrub and in very good spirits. We got great views. Babies were rolling in the dust and young males were showing off by destroying termite mounds and generally making themselves noticeable. There were a lot of vehicles observing the carry-on, and at one point we moved out of the way as it did seem as
though elephant exuberance might be turned upon a vehicle! We got back to the camp just before sunset. Beer, dinner, talk and ‘birdlist’ of 68 bird species and 12 mammals, plus a Leopard Tortoise.

6th October (Day 10). Etosha to the Okavango. Breakfast at 6.00 am for departure at 6.50 when it was already warm. The first excursion was round Dik Dik Drive again (economising a bit on fuel). We reached the boundary of the park and made for the Mokuti Lodge to find that they did actually have diesel. The pumps were not labelled, so rather determined questioning was needed to ensure that we got the right stuff! There were birds around of course and we were delighted to find our third babbler (Black-faced) in the nearby gardens of the Lodge. As we turned towards Tsumeb and Grootfontein and northwards to Rundu the landscape started to change; trees showed green and hills started to appear. We had a short stop in Grootfontein to buy more water and a sandwich lunch, which was eaten at a roadside stop, with birding. As the vegetation changed, birds were different too, with Pallid Flycatcher, Scarlet-chested and White-bellied Sunbirds, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird and Tinkling Cisticola new for the trip. We had a very good stop at Rundu ‘sewage works’, which held a variety of ducks and waders, Red-Knobbed Coot, Black Crake and Baillon’s Crake (write in), Black-headed Heron, Swamp Boubou, Brown Snake Eagle, African Fish Eagle, Western Osprey, Collared Pratincole, Lesser Swamp Warbler and many others too numerous to mention here. It was a place where we could easily have spent longer, even though it was rather an ‘odd’ place, with different activities involving a variety of people. Today brought our first real indication of how the local subsistence farmers lived, as we passed a great may compounds surrounded by rush fencing and carefully swept. Inside would be a group of thatched rush huts, many of which were being refurbished with new roofs, presumably in preparation for the wet season to come. Some compounds clearly had fairly new plastic toilets, but others none. Water was clearly carried for long distances in a variety of utensils. A hard life, but interestingly we did pass quite a few primary schools. This run was also the only one where we saw evidence of cropping, with irrigated vegetable gardens along the river.

It had been quite a long driving day for Tertius and we needed to move on to our next accommodation, N’kwazi Lodge on the Kavango (aka Okavango) River at Rundu. We had excellent thatched units and the communal areas were partly ‘underground’. We learned that after repeated floods it had been more economical to build up the sand round the buildings than to rebuild them. Some complex solar/generator electricity management was required as each unit had its own small solar system. The Lodge was in a tree-studded garden right on the river, so there was immediate birding. The manager showed us an African Hoopoe’s nest with fledglings, there were Hartlaub’s Babbler (pale rump), Kurrichane Thrush, Coppery-tailed Coucal, Meyer’s Parrot, African Paradise Flycatcher, Pied Kingfisher, Magpie Shrike, Red-eyed Dove and others. We
skipped the entertainment – dancing by children from a local school that is supported by the lodge, and concentrated on the birds, the beer and the food! Birdlist of 88 species.

7th October (Day 11). Into Botswana via the Caprivi Strip. The day started with a 6.30 am pre-breakfast walk in the garden, and continued afterwards as there was plenty to look at. Hartlaub’s babblers were quite common and forward and we also saw the Arrow-marked Babbler as we drove out. The bulbul around here is the Dark-capped Bulbul and the common weaver the Brown-throated. We had our first sighting of the African Openbill, African Marsh Harrier, Wire-tailed Swallow and first and only sighting of Black-headed Oriole. On the riverbanks Tertius and Andrew saw Little Bittern, and we had a glimpse (BLD) of Wattled Lapwing. At about 9.00 am we set off towards Divundu, with a few stops in hot sandy Kavango broadleaf woodland. Good sightings included nesting Yellow Whiteye, Neddicky, White-bellied Sunbirds, Fawn-coloured Lark, Chinspot Batis, Yellow-fronted Canary and Pale Flycatcher. We pulled off at Popa Falls (really rapids) and had our lunch sandwiches in a partly built new shelter in the Community Campsite in the Bwabwata National Park overlooking the river. Specials were Rock Pratincole, Crested Barbet, Meves’s Starling, very skulking Terrestrial Brownbul and our first African Darter of the trip.

Proceeding on, we quickly passed into Botswana through the visitor-friendly border controls at Mahango about 3.45 pm and arrived at Drotsky’s Camp, Shakawe, at 4.15 pm along a sandy track. The elegant accommodation was elevated on poles (flood escape) and located in a tree-studded garden on the river, fenced off from the ‘outside’ scrub. The banks of the Okavango were steep cliffs, so risk of meeting Hippos at night was not high, but we certainly heard their characteristic grunting calls and saw them in the river about 100 m away. Along the way and after arrival we saw our first Southern Carmine Bee-eater, plus Grey-hooded Kingfisher, White-fronted and Little Bee-eaters, Malachite Kingfisher, Holub’s Golden Weaver, Banded Martins, Brown-throated Martin and other birds typical of the huge flood-plain marshes on the opposite
bank of the river. Dinner was preceded by a beer on the terrace overlooking the swimming pool and river. Birdlist of 78 species, plus the Hippos and Vervet Monkey as new mammals for the trip.

8th October. Day 12. Boat trips on the Okavango River. These trips were a real highlight of the tour. Sal was woken by Hippos rather early and we were up breakfasting at 7.00 am and ready at the boat ramp at 7.30 am (equipped with plenty of water, sunblock and hats), to meet Ray our local guide. While waiting (not for long!) we saw Black Saw-wing, Wire-tailed and Lesser Striped Swallows, a team of Pied Kingfishers and (guess what) more Hartlaub’s Babblers (why are they a write in on the Birding Africa list?). We proceeded up the river, which was thickly fringed by reeds inhabited by quite a few species. Ray was an expert in local birds and a real enthusiast. Between him and Tertius there should have been no excuse for us to miss anything. There was a new cormorant, the Reed Cormorant, Great Kingfisher, Malachite Kingfisher with young and quite a few herons/egrets (Western Great Egret, Cattle Egret, Purple, Black, Goliath, Squacco and Black-crowned Night Herons). The most skulking item was a White-backed Night Heron that very nearly beat the combined skill of our leaders to find and our abilities to see it. It has huge eyes, which possibly make it very sensitive to light, so it lurks in the inner depths of the reeds. We had
several incredible sightings that vied for position in the top 10 events of the whole trip: African Fish-eagle, swooping for fish thrown by Ray; huge river-bank collections of nests of the Southern Carmine Bee-eater, sometimes associated with White-Fronted Bee-eaters; a large group of African Skimmers, both skimming and resting on sand banks; and Pel’s Fishing Owl, lurking in a large tree overhanging the river. On our morning trip the Owl was located but not seen very well. On the ‘sunset tour’ (4.30 – 6.30 pm, with beer as well as water) we had the scope and with great care managed to get good views from the boat without too much wobble. Although the river was fringed by reeds, there were open spaces where cattle were grazing (and presumably Hippos at night). Landings revealed Water Thick-knee, Collared Pratincole, Plovers (Blacksmith, Long-toed and White-fronted), Hamerkop, Wood Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Ruff, Little Bittern, White-fronted Duck, Spurwinged Goose, Cape Teal and Cape Wagtail. Despite a lot of searching, no Slaty Egrets were found. A whole tree–full of African Darters, several more African Fish-eagles, African Marsh Harriers, and a good view of Red-necked Falcon were seen. Both Greater and Lesser Swamp Warblers were glimpsed, though fleetingly. The morning trip took about 4.5 hours and we were back for lunch and a short rest, followed by camp birding before the sunset tour (2 hours), during which the full moon rose over the marshes. Garden watering attracted quite a few birds like Brown Firefinch, Grosbeak Weaver, Common Waxbill, Yellow–fronted Woodpecker, Golden Weaver, Yellow–bellied Greenbul, Meve’s Starling and Fork–tailed Drongo.

The river traffic included Hippos (which needed to be carefully avoided), very keen holidaying fisher folk, as well as local fishermen with nets, and others collecting reeds in bundles, presumably for building or refurbishing huts. At several places bundles were stacked on the banks, for later collection. Dinner at 7.30 after a very good day indeed. Birdlist of 86 species.
9th October (Day 13). Bush and riverine birding on the Okavango. After a 7.00 am breakfast we set off towards Shakawe via Drotsky’s access road (dry scrub), ending up at about 11.00 am at the campsite on the river bank (a steamy 37°C), which had the highest trees we had seen on the whole trip. A Marabou Stork flew over at one point. The scrub had Yellow-breasted Apalis, Black-faced Babblers (uncharacteristically silent), Red-billed Firefinch, Grey Tit-flycatcher, Ashy Flycatcher and many others like the ubiquitous Grey Go-away Bird and Crimson-breasted Shrike. The campsite and river bank were great, with Violet-backed Starling, Black-collared and Crested Barbets, Terrestrial Brownbul, Tropical Boubou (slightly orange underparts, compared with pure white Swamp Boubou), Fantailed Widowbird and Spectacled Weaver. Tertius heard a Narina Trogon and managed to get it to fly in on response to a call, so we all had a good look, though photography was difficult in the dappled shade. A return visit to the campsite at 4.15 (after lunch and a rest through the heat of a hot humid afternoon) was very quiet, but we did see lots of Black Crake (why had I thought this would be hard to see?), Arrow-marked Babbler and a better view of Greater Swamp Warbler. A Willow Warbler was calling, and the sighting of a single Barn Swallow indicated that these species was beginning to turn up from the Northern Hemisphere. It seemed strange but very interesting to see these familiar but migratory birds in their ‘other’ habitats. The beer before dinner was especially welcome and the birdlist was 81 species.

10th October (Day 14). Return to Namibia. Bags to the car at 7.00 am, followed immediately by breakfast. We drove off along the access road and into the local town, where we collected our pre-ordered packed lunch at a local café at 8.00 am. This was quite the best packed lunch of the trip and well worth repeating. Crossing the flood-plain on the way back to the Namibian border we saw fantastic mammals. There were large groups of Roan and Sable Antelope, plus Lechewe and Tsessebe (antelopes we had never heard of), Reedbuck, plus many of the ‘usual suspects’. New sightings of birds included African Barred Owlet (Tertius had heard it on 9th Oct) and Burnt-necked Eremomela. After passing through the border post we again made a few stops to scan the flood-plain and accompanying scrub, seeing a few good species mainly for the second or more time. New ones were the African Green Pigeon and Jameson’s Firefinch, in company with lovely Blue Waxbills, Swainson’s Spurfowl, Pin-tailed Wydah, Dark Chanting Goshawk and Rufous-naped Lark. At one flood-plain stop Tertius spotted a Lesser Jacana, but it failed to show itself above the grass again. A highlight was two Ostrich parents with 29 chicks in tow! They had obviously just been to drink and were striding out well. Sadly there was one scruffy runt, lagging further and further behind accompanied by the father. It looked very much as though this was its last day before becoming a meal for one of the carnivores. We ate our lunch in the bush at 11.30 am, and got to the Mahango Safari Lodge at 12.15. We were out again into the bush at 1.00, taking a few hot and sandy walks in unsuccessful search for Racket-tailed Roller. We did see quite a few birds though, including Red-billed and Yellow-billed Oxpeckers, Greater Blue-eared Glossy Starling and Bradfield’s Hornbill and a quick stop at Popa Falls gave us Rock Pratincole and Common Sandpiper again. A group of locals were enjoying the cool of the riverside, washing cars and a few youngsters were braving the crocodiles while trying their skills at running the rapids in dugout canoes. Back to the lodge for dinner at 7.00. The restaurant, on a deck overlooking the river, was packed with tourists and the staff were kept very busy. However, eventually we did get the essential supplies and dinner! The birdlist was an extraordinary 114 birds (not counting the Lesser Jacana), again presumably the consequence of the varied habitats we visited today.
11th October (Day 15). A long drive southwards to the Waterberg. An early start was needed today so we collected both breakfast and lunch packs at 6.00 am and set off. The two types of packs were identical and very substantial, so there was no shortage! En route to Rundu we made three stops for woodland birding (including eating a selection from the ‘breakfast pack’), involving sandy walks into the scrub. This yielded several new bird species, including Brown-backed Honeybird, Rufous-bellied Tit, African Black flycatcher, Dark-Capped Eremomela and our first Cuckoo (Diederik), as they really hadn’t arrived in the south yet. We got some excellent views of Fawn-coloured Lark, but missed out on a Grey Penduline Tit (seen by Tertius). Tertius reckoned that four walks into the scrub are really needed to have a chance at most of the birds present, but there wasn’t time and the temperature was rising. So we pushed on to Rundu, arriving there at about 11.00 am. The temperature dropped as we followed a light shower of rain, but rose again as it dried. We had lunch at a wayside stop at about 1.00 pm. The next stretch of road took us through the quarantine gate, towards Grootfontein, arriving at about 2.00 pm. The quarantine gate is to control Foot and Mouth disease in cattle and marks the divide between northerly subsistence farmers and developed, commercial cattle production. At the gate we walked through mats with antiviral solution and the wheels of the bus were sprayed. The next stretch took us through Kombat and Otavi on the bitumen. The last bit of road, on the back route to Waterberg, was dirt and the worst stretch of washboard (common “Australian” standard) of the whole trip. However, we really got a good impression of the immensity of the Waterberg as we seemed to drive for ages with it rising above us. A few birds were seen, including Coqui Francolin. We got in at about 4.30 pm, settled into our rooms and met for a walk up the stony hillside at 5.30 to 6.30. Bradfield’s and Alpine Swifts were sailing over the huge rock and a pair of Verreaux’s eagles were riding the thermals. In the scrub were Violet Wood-hoopoes, African Grey and Damara Hornbills and a variety of other birds. Quite a few mammals were about, with a family of Warthogs grazing outside the restaurant, and Dikdiks, Banded and Slender Mongoose seen around the site. Dinner in the restaurant was at 7.15 pm and afterwards an African Scops Owl was heard in the car park, but we failed to see it. Considering the long driving day, a birdlist of 64 species, mainly seen on the walks in the scrub, was pretty good.
12th October (Day 16). The ‘Last Day’. We were up for another walk (6.00 –7.00 am) up the rocky slopes to the base of the rock. A target was the Rockrunner again, but it didn’t show. There were a few Rock Hyraxes lurking in crevices, keeping absolutely still to avoid the attention of the Verreaux’s Eagles that were also up early and soaring on the thermals. A few birds were seen, including the Violet Wood-hoopoes again, Lesser Masked and Southern Masked Weavers and the ubiquitous Red-billed Spurfowl. We had breakfasted and were off again by 9.00 am, for the last run into Windhoek arriving at 12.30 pm. We found somewhere for a chicken-burger lunch together and were delivered back to the Hotel Onganga, where we said our farewells. Tertius departed in plenty of time to return the vehicle and catch his flight to Cape Town. There was a little confusion over our booking, as the it had been made for Monday 12th October (not Sunday 12th!). However, there was a room available for us and we were able to sort out our luggage, repack and relax. Onganga made a booking at a very good local restaurant (O’Portuga) in Klein Windhoek, and booked a taxi to take us there and back, because the Onganga restaurant was closed on Sunday. The O’Portuga was a big improvement on the Onganga and very cheap. We had our first wine of the trip! We booked the taxi driver to pick us up in the morning for a tourysty trip into Windhoek. We did our own birdlist of the day, which was also the lowest at 27 bird species with nothing spectacular.

Monday 13th (Day 15) Tourism and Farewell. We had a relaxed breakfast in the Onganga breakfast room and were picked up as planned by our taxi driver, who dropped us at the new museum in the centre of Windhoek. We did an extensive tour of the very new museum, which was very patriotic, with many displays about progress to independence. Next door was the old German fort, which had housed the museum, but was now somewhat derelict with interesting old vehicles and statues. We also visited the church next door and the gardens of the Parliament Building. We observed the cricket pitch being mowed with a small motor mower. No ride-on mowers there. A few birds were around, but we did not keep a list (!). The taxi took us back to the Onganga, where we had lunch, settled up and arrived at the airport in good time. The idiosyncrasies of the Onganga were highlighted by the fact that they forgot to include the room charge on the bill and we had to remind them.

The flights home via Jo’burg and Perth (W.A.) to Adelaide were all in order and on time, and we were met by our friend Teresa with her taxi. What a great trip!

Sally Smith (24/11/2014)

Note: Photos were taken with a Panax DMC-FZ47 (24x optical zoom) – not a high-quality ‘birder’s’ camera. Not all have been cropped and edited, so as to show landscape features as well as animals.