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## **Birding Africa Namibia Okavango Tour**

17 September - 02 October 2016

Tour Report by leader Tertius Gous

Photos by Tertius Gous all taken on tour

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### **SUMMARY**

Our tour to Namibia and Botswana exceeded expectations and the biodiversity of the vast and diverse landscapes we encountered did not disappoint. All agreed that this was a truly unique desert to delta experience. During the 16-day tour we visited the mountains and inselbergs of the Namib escarpment at Erongo, Spitzkoppe and Brandberg where most of Namibia's near-endemic birds were found, including **Hartlaub's Spurfowl**, **Monteiro's Hornbill**, **Damara Hornbill**, **Rosy-faced Lovebird**, **Violet Wood-Hoopoe**, **White-tailed Shrike**, **Carp's Tit**, **Bare-cheeked Babbler**, **Herero Chat**, **Rüppell's Korhaan** and **Benguela Long-billed Lark**. Walvis Bay was spectacular with all its flamingos and we explored the dunes of the Namib Desert for some close-up sightings of several **Dune Larks**, Namibia's only true endemic bird. The Etosha National Park was the undoubted mammal highlight of the trip with numerous sightings of *Elephant*, *Giraffe*, *Southern Oryx* and *Springbok*, several *Lion* sightings, three *Cheetahs* and many *Black Rhinos*. From Etosha we went to the "panhandle" region of the Okavango Delta near Shakawe, with an overnight stop along the Kavango river near Rundu. From our lodge at Shakawe we did a boat cruise on the Okavango River and had great views of all our target birds: **Pel's Fishing-Owl**, **White-backed Night-Heron**, **Slaty Egret** and a spectacular breeding colony of **Southern Carmine Bee-eaters**. Back in Namibia we explored the floodplains of the Mahango Game Reserve where **Verreaux's Eagle-Owl** on the nest was a particular highlight, and later we found **African Wood Owl** which was the ninth species of owl recorded during the trip! Then it was back south to Windhoek via the Waterberg Plateau Park where we found **Rockrunner**, **Rüppell's Parrot** and **Bradfield's Swift**.

We ended the tour with a total of 338 birds seen or heard, and 46 species of mammals. We had good views of all the endemic and near-endemic Namibian birds.

## FULL REPORT

The tour started in Windhoek at our lodge where we soon got to know most of the more common birds of the dry western areas of Namibia, including **Marico Flycatcher**, **Dusky Sunbird**, **Pirit Batis**, **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater**, **Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler**, **White-backed Mousebird**, **Burnt-necked Eremomela**, **Acacia Pied Barbet**, **Black-chested Prinia**, **Southern Masked-Weaver**, **Long-billed Crombec**, **Cape Penduline Tit**, **African Red-eyed Bulbul**, **Black-throated Canary**, **Crimson-breasted Shrike**, **White-browed Sparrow-Weaver** and **Rock Martin**. A very vocal **African Reed Warbler** showed well.

We then proceeded to the Erongo Mountains and along the way managed to see **Tawny Eagle**, **Brown Snake-Eagle**, **Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk** and **Monteiro's Hornbill**. Our lodge nestled amongst massive granite boulders was the perfect setting to explore the mountains and arid woodlands of this region. The area was experiencing a major drought and bird activity was low but the rock pool at our lodge was very productive and was visited by a continuous procession of birds including **Green-winged Pytilia**, **Rosy-faced Lovebird**, **Pale-winged Starling**, **Great Sparrow**, **Southern Grey-headed Sparrow**, **Southern Masked-Weaver**, **White-browed Sparrow-Weaver**, **African Red-eyed Bulbul**, **Cape Bunting**, **Black-throated Canary**, **Short-toed Rock-Thrush**, **Mountain Wheatear**, and **Lesser Honeyguide**. We were rewarded with fantastic close-up sightings of a pair of **Hartlaub's Spurfowls** foraging around the lodge. Other birds in the area included **Monteiro's Hornbill**, **Carp's Tit**, **African Grey Hornbill**, **Grey Go-away-**



bird, Familiar Chat, Speckled Pigeon, Pririt Batis, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, White-browed Scrub-Robin, Acacia Pied Barbet, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Cape Starling, Red-billed Spurfowl, Dusky Sunbird, Marico Sunbird, Rock Martin and Rock Kestrel. We found a Pearl-spotted Owlet one morning that was being mobbed by several African Red-eyed Bulbuls. We were entertained in the evenings by Freckled Nightjars calling and flying around us while we were having supper. There was an abundance of Rock Hyraxes while Kirk's (Damara) Dik-dik, Greater Kudu, Common Warthog, Klipspringer, Common (Small-spotted) Genet and Dassie Rat also showed well. The mammal highlight was the scarce and elusive Black Mongoose.

En route to Walvis Bay we stopped at the spectacular Spitzkoppe inselbergs in the hope of finding Herero Chat, but all our efforts proved fruitless. However, the area had many other great birds to offer, including Dusky Sunbird, White-tailed Shrike, Common Fiscal, Mountain Wheatear, Bokmakierie, Red-faced and White-backed Mousebird, Kalahari Scrub-Robin, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Pale-winged Starling, Monteiro's Hornbill, Acacia Pied Barbet, Cape Bunting, Cape Sparrow, Pririt Batis and nesting Cardinal Woodpeckers, while the plains around Spitzkoppe produced Chat Flycatcher, Sabota Lark and Brown-crowned Tchagra. We then headed west and entered the seemingly empty plains of the Namib Desert before reaching the cool Atlantic coast. From here we slowly headed south for Walvis Bay and made a few scenic and birding stops along the way. The first stop was at a shipwreck to add White-breasted Cormorant, Cape Cormorant, Cape Gannet, Hartlaub's Gull, Kelp Gull and White-fronted Plover to the list. A short detour to find Gray's Lark was unsuccessful but we did find a pair of Tractrac Chats. Closer to home we made a stop at the Swakop River bridge to get our first glimpse of Greater and Lesser Flamingo, and also managed to add Chestnut-banded Plover, Kittlitz's Plover, Three-banded Plover, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Common Whimbrel, Common Greenshank and Cape Teal with all of these seen in greater numbers later at Walvis Bay. When we arrived in Walvis Bay, the lagoon was almost blanketed in pink as sheets of Greater and Lesser Flamingos covered the bay.

The next day we did a morning excursion into the dunes of the Namib Desert south of the Kuiseb River to search for Dune Lark, Namibia's only true endemic bird. After a quiet start we eventually found one bird but soon after started seeing more until



we had a total of 12 individuals! A pleasant surprise while searching for the lark was **Marsh Owl** which flushed before our feet. The rest of the day was spent at the lagoon and salt works of Walvis Bay and here we enjoyed the flamingo spectacle again, as well as seeing many waders such as **Grey Plover, Common Ringed Plover, Kittlitz's Plover, White-fronted Plover, Chestnut-banded Plover, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Bar-tailed Godwit, Common Whimbrel, Common Greenshank, Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff, Red Knot** and **Red-necked Phalarope**. There were also **Cape Wagtail, Little Egret, Hartlaub's Gull, Grey-hooded Gull, Kelp Gull, Caspian Tern, Sandwich Tern, Swift Tern, Common Tern** and **Great White Pelican**. Sea watching revealed **Crowned Cormorant** and a raft of **Black-necked Grebes** on the ocean, while we surprised a pair of **South African Shelducks** that were foraging on the beach. The garden of our lodge produced **Orange River White-eye** and **Common Waxbill**.

After the birding spectacle of Walvis Bay we left the cool Atlantic seaboard to venture inland towards the Brandberg, Namibia's highest mountain. We had to cross the gravel plains of the Namib Desert again where we found *Meerkats* as well as **Gray's Lark, Rüppell's Korhaan, Tractrac Chat, Cape Crow, Pied Crow, Martial Eagle** and **Karoo Long-billed Lark**. Closer to the town of Uis we recorded **Benguela Long-billed Lark, Karoo Chat, Mountain Wheatear, White-throated Canary, Pirit Batis, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Chat Flycatcher** and **Marico Flycatcher**. Our lodge and surrounding areas near the impressive Brandberg massif produced **Common Ostrich, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Damara Hornbill, Monteiro's Hornbill, Cape Starling, Pale-winged Starling, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Groundscraper Thrush, Bare-cheeked Babbler, Violet Wood-Hoopoe, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Gabar Goshawk**, and in the evening **Freckled Nightjar** was found roosting on the roof of the lodge. Extensive searching on the morning of our departure finally delivered **Herero Chat**.

We then proceeded to the Etosha National Park where we would stay for four nights, giving us ample time to savour the biodiversity of this world-famous Park. The waterhole at Okaukuejo Camp was a highlight and during the day we watched a constant procession of animals coming to drink including *Springbok, Greater Kudu, Southern Oryx, Elephant* and *Black-backed Jackal*, while at night it was the turn of more *Elephant* as well as *Black Rhino*. There were also large numbers of birds and the flocks of **Namaqua Sandgrouse** that came in to drink was supported by a **Tawny Eagle**, a melanistic **Gabar Goshawk, Red-capped Lark, Red-headed Finch, Ring-necked (Cape Turtle) Dove, Rock Martin, Red-breasted Swallow, African Palm-Swift, Little Swift** and at night **Rufous-cheeked Nightjars** displayed and foraged around the waterhole. Birding in Okaukuejo Camp was very productive and we had great views of **African Hoopoe, African Red-eyed Bulbul, Groundscraper Thrush, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Sociable Weavers** at their nest, **Cape Starling, Dusky Sunbird, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler** and **Southern White-crowned Shrike**. We explored the dry plains and open woodlands around Okaukuejo Camp where we found **Common Ostrich, Greater Kestrel, Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk, Double-banded Courser, Spike-heeled Lark, Kori Bustard, Northern Black Korhaan, Crowned Lapwing, Ant-eating Chat, Eastern Clapper Lark** and **Spotted Eagle-Owl**. A surprise was a lone **Eurasian Curlew** at the Okondeka waterhole. Mammals on the plains consisted of two lazy *Lions*, *South African Ground Squirrel, Black-backed Jackal, Giraffe, Springbok* and *Southern Oryx*.

From Okaukuejo we headed east to Halali in the more wooded section of the Park. On the way we had sightings of *Lion*, *Spotted Hyaena*, *Burchell's Zebra*, *Red Hartebeest*, *Giraffe* and *Blue Wildebeest*, while large mixed flocks of larks were found that consisted of **Red-capped Lark**, **Spike-heeled Lark**, **Sabota Lark**, **Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark** and **Stark's Lark**. An open grassy plain had no less than 11 **Kori Bustards** feeding together. The Rietfontein waterhole had two **Burchell's Coursers** as well as **Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Lark**, **African Jacana** and large numbers of **Blacksmith Lapwings**. Halali Camp is situated at the base of a small dolomite inselberg amongst mopane woodlands and the camp produced birds such as flocks of **Violet Wood-Hoopoes** and **White-crested Helmet-Shrikes**, **Southern White-crowned Shrike** on the nest, **Little Sparrowhawk**, **Damara** and **Southern Red-billed Hornbill**, **Grey-backed Camaroptera**, **Brubru**, **Groundscraper Thrush**, **Southern Grey-headed Sparrow**, **White-browed Scrub-Robin**, **Red-billed Quelea**, **Pearl-spotted Owlet** and **African Scops-Owl** at its daytime roost. *Smith's Bush Squirrels* were common in the camp. In the evening the waterhole at Halali Camp was a highlight and produced large flocks of **Double-banded Sandgrouse** coming in to drink while being watched by three *Black Rhinos*.

We then proceeded further eastwards to the Namutoni area of the Park and en route found a large flock of hornbills consisting of **Monteiro's**, **Damara**, **Southern Red-billed** and **African Grey Hornbills** all feeding together, while **Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill** was found nearby. The drive also delivered **Purple Roller**, **Red-breasted Swallow**, **Marico Flycatcher**, **Sabota Lark**, **Spotted Thick-knee**, **Scaly-feathered Weaver (Finch)**, **Red-headed Finch**, **African Pipit**, **Double-banded Courser**, **Common Ostrich**, **Pale Chanting Goshawk**, **Crowned Lapwing**, **Namaqua** and **Double-banded Sandgrouse**, **Cape Crow** and **Desert Cisticola**. Mammals included *Elephant*, *Red Hartebeest*, *Giraffe*, *Greater Kudu*, *Steenbok* and *Blue Wildebeest*. After our arrival at Namutoni Camp we decided to spend the afternoon at the Klein Namutoni waterhole where we saw many *Giraffes* coming in to quench their thirst. They were joined by good numbers of *Impala* (the local black-faced subspecies) and *Burchell's Zebra*, while the waterhole attracted birds such as a pair of **South African Shelduck**, **Little Grebe**, **Cape Teal**, **Three-banded Plover**, **Kittlitz's Plover**, **Little Stint**, **Curlew Sandpiper**, **Common Greenshank**, **Tawny Eagle**, **Helmeted Guineafowl**, **African Palm-Swift**, **Barn Swallow** and **Grey Go-away-bird**. The diminutive *Kirk's (Damara) Dik-dik* was found in the thickets nearby. At the end of the day we watched the sunset from the waterhole in Namutoni Camp and recorded **Rattling Cisticola**, **Red-billed Quelea** coming in to roost in the reed beds, calling **African Reed Warbler**, **Common Moorhen** and **African Jacana**.

The next morning after breakfast we decided to head back to the Klein Namutoni waterhole and shortly after arriving, witnessed a battle of dominance between nine *Spotted Hyaenas* and a lone young male *Lion*. Fortunately for the lion the hyaenas eventually decided to back off and the lion was left to live for another day. Our luck with predators continued and a short while later on the plains north of Namutoni Camp, we stumbled on three *Cheetahs* crossing the road and making themselves comfortable in the shade of a small Corkwood Tree. There were also some *Lion* nearby and we suspected that the lions drove the cheetahs off a recent kill. Birding in the area was great and we recorded **Burchell's Starling**, **Red-billed Buffalo Weaver**, **Swallow-tailed Bee-eater**, **Purple Roller**, **Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill**, **Pale Chanting Goshawk** and **Black-chested Snake-Eagle**, while a nearby waterhole had **Namaqua Dove**, **Emerald-spotted Wood Dove**, **Red-**

**headed Finch, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, Black-throated Canary and Red-billed Quelea.** After lunch we departed for our lodge adjoining Etosha and here we had great views of **Black-faced Babbler, Chestnut Weaver, White-browed Scrub-Robin, Marico Sunbird, Grey Go-away-bird and Southern Red-billed Hornbill.** The gardens of the lodge had a large troop of *Banded Mongooses* working the lawns and flowerbeds, and *Smith's Bush Squirrels* were also plentiful, while *Kirk's (Damara) Dik-dik* and *Bush Duiker* lurked in the thickets.

After the excitement of Etosha we were eager to venture north to the well-watered and more tropical Kavango region of Namibia on the border with Angola, for an overnight stop near Rundu en route to the Okavango Delta in Botswana. Our lunch stop delivered a large flock of non-breeding **Long-tailed Paradise Whydahs, Golden-breasted Bunting, Violet-eared Waxbill, White-bellied and Marico Sunbird, Emerald-spotted Wood Dove and Crimson-breasted Shrike.** We made a quick stop at the sewage works at Rundu before reaching our lodge and here we saw **African Marsh Harrier, Magpie Shrike, Black-faced Waxbill, Shaft-tailed Whydah, Swamp Boubou, Senegal and Coppery-tailed Coucal, Pied Kingfisher, Namaqua Dove, Lesser Masked-Weaver, Zitting Cisticola, Red-billed Quelea, African Darter, Collared Pratincole, Hottentot Teal, Little Grebe, Purple and Squacco Heron, Little Bittern, African Snipe, Wood Sandpiper, Little Stint, Ruff, Common Moorhen, Red-knobbed Coot and Lesser Swamp-Warbler,** while **African Swamphen and African Rail** called from deep within the reed beds. Our lodge on the Kavango River provided a whole suite of new birds and we quickly added **Meyer's Parrot, Arrow-marked Babbler, Hartlaub's Babbler, Black-backed Puffback, Kurrichane Thrush, Southern Brown-throated Weaver, Wire-tailed Swallow, Brown-throated Martin, African Golden Weaver, Spectacled Weaver, Red-headed Weaver, Dark-capped Bulbul, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Terrestrial Brownbul, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Yellow White-eye, Violet-backed Starling, White-browed Robin-Chat, Black-crowned Night-Heron, and Reed Cormorant.** The evening produced **Fiery-necked and Square-tailed Nightjars,** and a *Large-spotted Genet.*

The next day we travelled further east towards Botswana and upon reaching the Kavango River again, scanned the exposed rocks in the river and soon found several **Rock Pratincoles and African Pied Wagtails.** A herd of cattle nearby had a few **Red-billed Oxpeckers** in attendance. We then proceeded to the Mahango Game Reserve where we explored the woodlands and floodplains along the Kavango River. Here we found *Warthog, Sable Antelope, Burchell's Zebra, Greater Kudu, Tsessebe, Red Lechwe, Southern Reedbuck, Impala, Chacma Baboon, Vervet Monkey, Bushbuck, African Buffalo* and a few pods of *Hippos.* The birding was exceptional and Mahango produced **Slaty Egret, Temminck's Courser, Long-toed Lapwing, Blacksmith Lapwing, White-faced Duck, Spur-winged Goose, African Jacana, Southern Carmine Bee-eater, Meve's Starling, Burchell's Starling, Lilac-breasted Roller, Bateleur, White-backed Vulture, Yellow-billed Stork, African Spoonbill, African Sacred Ibis, Squacco Heron, Grey Heron, Western Great Egret, Little Egret, Intermediate (Yellow-billed) Egret, African Fish-Eagle and African Marsh Harrier.**

The border crossing to Botswana was quick and uneventful, and shortly after we found **Bradfield's Hornbill** as we passed Shakawe town to reach our lodge on the banks of the Okavango River (as the Kavango River is known in Botswana). From here we were perfectly based to explore the papyrus-fringed river and its slow-

flowing channels and wetlands along the upper reaches of the Okavango Delta. The next day saw us cruising the river and looking at large numbers of **Western Great Egrets**, **Little Egrets**, **Purple Herons** and **Squacco Herons** as they followed the seasonal "barbel run". This event occurs when the receding river results in small fish moving from the drying out floodplains into the permanent water of the main channel, attracting large numbers of predator fish such as *Sharp-toothed Catfish (Barbel)* and *Tiger Fish*, as well as herons and egrets. The boat gave us the perfect vantage to observe this phenomenon at close range and we also saw **Black Heron**, **African Openbill**, **Hamerkop**, **Coppery-tailed Coucal**, **Pied Kingfisher**, **Malachite Kingfisher**, **Giant Kingfisher**, **Wire-tailed Swallow**, **Banded Martin**, **Southern Carmine Bee-eater**, **White-fronted Bee-eater**, **Little Bee-eater**, **Water Thick-knee**, **Long-toed Lapwing**, **African Jacana**, **African Wattled Lapwing**, **Black-winged (shouldered) Kite**, **Luapula Cisticola**, **Little Bittern**, **African Skimmer**, **Whiskered Tern** and **Goliath Heron** along the river, while small flocks of **Burchell's Sandgrouse** flew past. *Water Monitor Lizard* and *Nile Crocodile* lurked in the reed beds. A few **White-backed Night-Herons** were eventually seen well where they were hiding in the thicker reed beds with overhanging vegetation. We had particularly good sightings of three **Slaty Egrets** on the floodplain and found **African Skimmer** on a recently exposed sandbank. Both **Yellow-billed** and **Red-billed Oxpeckers** were found on livestock on the floodplain, while a flock of **Fan-tailed Widowbirds** were seen nearby. Everybody was elated when we located a **Pel's Fishing Owl** roosting in a large Sausage Tree near Shakawe town.



The town is also home to a breeding colony of **Southern Carmine Bee-eaters** and we had ample time to observe and photograph these colourful birds as they congregated at the colony in the late afternoon. The thick papyrus produced **Greater Swamp-Warbler**, and **Chirping Cisticola** and **Lesser Swamp Warbler**

were seen in the reed beds. **Brown Firefinch** and **Hartlaub's Babbler** were common at our lodge. Other good birds seen at our lodge were **Yellow-breasted Apalis**, **Lesser Masked-Weaver**, **Meve's Starling**, **Burchell's Starling**, **Violet-backed Starling**, **Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike**, **Yellow-bellied Greenbul**, **Golden-tailed Woodpecker**, **White-browed Coucal**, **Black-collared Barbet**, **Southern Brown-throated Weaver** and breeding **Lesser-striped Swallow**. The riverine forest nearby produced **Yellow White-eye**, **Emerald-spotted Wood Dove**, **Collared Sunbird**, **Lesser Honeyguide**, **Ashy Flycatcher**, **Terrestrial Brownbul**, **Crested Barbet**, **Swamp Boubou**, **Crested Francolin** and breeding **Yellow-billed Kites**. We found **Southern Pied Babbler**, **Retz's Helmet-Shrike**, **Crimson-breasted Shrike** and **White-bellied Sunbird** in the mixed acacia and broadleaved woodlands near the lodge.

After an amazing time in Botswana we headed back to Namibia to start our journey back to Windhoek. Another quick border crossing saw us back in Mahango Game Reserve where we spent the morning before reaching our lodge nearby. At Mahango we enjoyed old favourites and also added *Roan Antelope* and **Verreaux's Eagle-Owl with a chick** on the nest, to the list. The owl was nesting on top of what we thought was an old inactive Hamerkop nest, but when a Hamerkop shot out from the entrance hole beneath we realised the nest was still active! Our lodge produced **Green Wood-Hoopoe**, **Greater Blue-eared Starling**, **African Green Pigeon** feeding on the berries of a Jackal Berry Tree, soaring **White-headed Vulture**, two **African Skimmers** skimming the Okavango River in the late afternoon, and **African Wood Owl** at night. A waterhole on the opposite bank of the river had large herds of *Elephant* and *African Buffalo* coming down to drink in the late afternoon while we were having sundowners.





We made an early morning start from our lodge the next day as a long driving day lie ahead. A birding stop in the Kavango woodlands was very productive and produced **Tinkling Cisticola**, **Green-capped Eremomela**, **Pale Flycatcher**, **Neddicky**, **Chinspot Batis**, **Black-chested Prinia**, **Amethyst Sunbird**, **Yellow-fronted Canary** and **Golden-breasted Bunting**. We then pushed on to the Waterberg Plateau Park and arrived there in good time for birding. The towering sandstone cliffs glowed in the afternoon light and screaming parties of **Bradfield's and Alpine Swifts** wheeled in the sky above. This was our last chance of finding **Rockrunner** and **Rüppell's Parrot** and all were elated when both were seen in short succession. Other birds seen included a pair of **Verreaux's Eagles**, **Rosy-faced Lovebird**, **Red-billed Spurfowl**, **Speckled Pigeon**, **Pale-winged Starling**, **Grey-backed Camaroptera** and **Freckled Nightjar**. Both *Banded Mongoose* and *Damara Dik-dik* showed well. We had great views of **Rüppell's Parrot** again the last morning of our trip and after breakfast started the journey back to Windhoek for our return flights in the afternoon. This journey resulted in the addition to the list of **Long-billed Pipit**, **Wahlberg's Eagle** and **Cape Vulture** as the final bird of the trip.

