Birding Africa Namibia Okavango Tour

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Tour Report by leader Tertius Gous

Photos by Tertius Gous

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Summary

Our tour to Namibia and Botswana has once again 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 Rockrunner, Hartlaub's Spurfowl, Monteiro’s Hornbill, Damara Hornbill, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Violet Wood-Hoopoe, White-tailed Shrike, Carp’s Tit, Rüppell's Parrot, Herero Chat, Rüppell’s Korhaan and Benguela Long-billed Lark. Walvis Bay was spectacular with all its flamingoes and we explored the dunes of the Namib Desert for some close-up sightings of Dune Lark. The Etosha National Park was the undoubted mammal highlight of the trip with numerous sightings of large herds of Elephants, several Lion sightings, Leopard 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 and the Kavango woodlands, and then it was back south to Windhoek via the Waterberg Plateau Park.

We ended the tour with a total of 355 birds seen or heard, and 49 species of mammals. We had good views of all the endemic and near-endemic Namibian birds.

Tour report

The tour started in Windhoek where we soon got to know most of the more common birds of the dry western areas of Namibia, including Marico Flycatcher, Marico Sunbird, Pririt Batis, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, White-backed Mousebird, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Burnt-necked Eremomela, Acacia Pied Barbet, Black-chested Prinia, Blue Waxbill, Southern Masked-Weaver, African Red-eyed Bulbul, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver, Rosy-faced Lovebird and Rock Martin. A colony of Lesser Masked Weavers was a nice surprise.

We then proceeded to the Erongo Mountains and along the way managed to see Black-shouldered (-winged) Kite, White-backed Vulture, Black-chested Snake-Eagle, Rock Kestrel, Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk and a Double-banded Courser with a large chick. A quick stop near Usakos produced Sabota Lark, Pearl-spotted Owlet and Lesser Honeyguide. Our lodge on the western edge of the granite massifs of Erongo was the perfect setting to explore the mountains, acacia woodlands and dry riverbeds of this region. Here we had our first taste of some near-endemic birds, with Rüppell's Parrot and Carp's Tit showing particularly well. The small rock pool at our lodge was very productive and was constantly visited by birds, with Lark-like Buntings in abundance, and smaller numbers of Red-headed Finches, Black-throated Canaries, White-throated Canaries, Great Sparrows, Violet-eared Waxbills, Black-faced Waxbills, Green-winged Pytilias and the occasional Shaft-tailed Whydah. An early morning walk to some rocky outcrops near our lodge produced Rockrunner and a covey of very vocal Hartlaub's Spurfowl, while Orange River Francolin was heard in the distance. The shady dry riverbeds lined by huge Camelthorn, Winter Thorn and Leadwood trees were very rewarding and here we managed to find Rüppell's Parrot, Violet Wood-Hoopoe, Common Scimitarbill, African Hoopoe, Damara Hornbill, Carp's Tit, Ashy Tit, Grey Go-away-bird, Burchell's Starling, Southern Pied Babbler, Long-billed Crombec, Pririt Batis, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Bearded Woodpecker, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Groundscraper Thrush, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Brubru, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, White-browed Scrub-Robin and Gabar Goshawk. Other good birds seen in the Erongo area included Monteiro's Hornbill, White-tailed Shrike, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Long-billed Pipit, Short-toed Rock-Thrush, Red-billed Buffalo Weaver, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Kalahari Scrub-Robin, Chat Flycatcher, Familiar Chat, Karoo Chat, Desert Cisticola, Barred Wren-Warbler, Red-faced Mousebird, Cape Penduline-Tit, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Pale-winged Starling, Double-banded Sangrouse and Booted Eagle. We also had good mammal sightings including Klipspringer, Rock Hyrax and Dassie Rat.
En route to Walvis Bay we stopped at the spectacular Spitzkoppe inselbergs where the main target of the area, Herero Chat, was soon found. After saturation views of this often tricky near-endemic, we focused our attention on all the other good birds Spitzkoppe has to offer, including Dusky Sunbird, White-tailed Shrike, Common Fiscal, Mountain Wheatear, Bokmakierie, Ashy Tit, Red-faced and White-backed Mousebird, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Pale-winged Starling, Monteiro’s Hornbill, Acacia Pied Barbet, Cape Bunting, Cape Sparrow, Pririt Batis and Layard’s Tit-Babbler. The plains around Spitzkoppe produced Rüppell’s Korhaan, Augur Buzzard, Lappet-faced Vulture, Chat Flycatcher, Tractrac Chat, Sabota Lark, Karoo Long-billed Lark and Spike-heeled Lark. Then we headed west and entered the seemingly empty plains of the Namib Desert where the occasional Tractrac Chat and Rüppell’s Korhaan were often the only signs of life.

After reaching the Atlantic coast 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, Arctic Jaeger, Cape Gannet, Hartlaub’s Gull, Kelp Gull and White-fronted Plover to the list. We then stopped to appreciate the extensive and colourful lichen fields of the Namib Desert near the coast. A short detour to find Gray’s Lark was successful. 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 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. We managed to find at least three displaying individuals and one bird landed almost on top of us, allowing for spectacular views! We were very surprised to see a lone Ludwig’s Bustard fly over the dunes in the distance. 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 African Black Oystercatcher, Grey Plover, Common Ringed Plover, Kittlitz’s Plover, Three-banded Plover, White-fronted Plover, Chestnut-banded Plover, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Bar-tailed Godwit, Common Whimbrel, Common Greenshank, Marsh Sandpiper, Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper and Ruff. There were also Cape Wagtail, Red-knobbed Coot, Cape Shoveler, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Hartlaub’s Gull, Grey-hooded Gull, Kelp Gull, Caspian Tern, Sandwich Tern, Swift Tern, Common Tern and Brown (Subantarctic) Skua. Rafts of Black-necked Grebes were visible on the lagoon as well as Great White Pelicans in the company of Cape Fur Seals and Atlantic Bottle-nosed Dolphins. 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 seacoast 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 Common Ostrich, Cape Crow, Martial Eagle, Burchell’s Courser, Karoo Long-billed Lark and Rufous-eared Warbler. We made a detour to a
remote area where large numbers of the bizarre *Welwitschia mirabilis* plants can be found. These relics from the Jurassic period are only found in the Namib Desert in isolated communities adapted to grow under arid conditions receiving regular fog. Birds along the road included Tractrac Chat, Karoo Chat, no less that 35 Rüppell's Korhaans, Ludwig's Bustard, Northern Black Korhaan and Benguela Long-billed Lark. Our lodge near the Brandberg produced Bare-cheeked Babblers, Damara Hornbill, Cape Starling, Mountain Wheatear, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Red-billed Spurfowl, and in the evening Freckled Nightjar was found roosting on the roof of the lodge.

Shortly after breakfast the next morning we found a Cape Fox at its den, and then we headed for Etosha, interrupting our journey with a stop at a farm dam where we found Namaqua Sandgrouse coming in to drink, Namaqua Dove, Alpine Swift, Lark-like Bunting, Little Grebe, Red-billed Teal, Wood Sandpiper, Red-capped Lark, Grey-backed Sparrowlark, and a juvenile Lanner Falcon. We made a short fuel stop at Outjo before proceeding 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 Okaukeujo Camp was a highlight and during the day we watched a constant procession of animals coming to drink including Springbok, Burchell's Zebra, Greater Kudu, the endemic Black-faced Impala subspecies, Southern Oryx, Giraffe, Elephant and Black-backed Jackal, while at night it was the turn of more Elephant as well as Black Rhino and Lion. There were also large numbers of birds and the flocks of Namaqua Sandgrouse that came in to drink was supported by a pair of Tawny Eagles, Helmeted Guineafowl, Grey-backed Sparrowlark, Chestnut-backed Sparrowlark, Red-capped Lark, 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 Okaukeujo Camp was very productive and we had great views of African Cuckoo, African Hoopoe, African Red-eyed Bulbul, Groundscraper Thrush, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Sociable Weavers at their nest, Acacia Pied Barbet, Cape Starling, Dusky Sunbird, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, Brubru and Southern White-crowned Shrike.

We explored the dry plains and open woodlands around Okaukeujo Camp where we found Common Ostrich, Greater Kestrel, Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk, Double-banded Courser, Burchell's Courser, Spike-heeled Lark, Stark's Lark, Kori Bustard, Northern Black Korhaan, Red-crested Korhaan, Crowned Lapwing, Ant-eating Chat, African Pipit, Eastern Clapper Lark, Pink-billed Lark, Sabota Lark, and Cape Crow. The waterholes and springs in the area had large numbers of Elephant and Springbok, and we also managed to find Lion at their Southern Oryx kill next to the road, as well as several Spotted Hyaenas emerging from their den.

From Okaukeujo we headed east to Halali and Namutoni in the more wooded section of the Park. On the way we had close-up sightings of three Lionesses drinking water at the Newbroni waterhole, and a pair of Double-banded Courser with a tiny chick. Halali Camp is situated at the base of a small dolomite inselberg amongst mopane woodlands and the camp produced birds such as a flock of Bare-cheeked Babblers, Violet Wood-Hoopoe, Little
Sparrowhawk, Red-headed Weaver, Southern Red-billed Hornbill, Grey-backed Camaroptera, White-rumped Swift, Pearl-spotted Owlet and African Scops-Owl at its daytime roost, and we found Secretarybird, Bateleur, Tawny Eagle, Martial Eagle, White-backed Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture, Red-crested Korhaan, Spotted Thick-knee, African Grey Hornbill, Purple Roller, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, European Bee-eater, Grey Go-away-bird, Cardinal Woodpecker, Greater Striped Swallow, Kalahari Scrub-Robin, Scaly-feathered Weaver (Finch) and White-crested Helmet-Shrike in the surrounding woodlands. In the evening the waterhole at Halali Camp was a highlight and produced Elephant, Black Rhino and an amazing Leopard that sneaked in almost undetected. During the day we were treated to many different mammal sightings including Bat-eared Fox, Honey Badger, White Rhino, Elephant, Giraffe, Greater Kudu, Blue Wildebeest, Burchell's Zebra, Red Hartebeest, South African Ground Squirrel, Steenbok and Damara Dik-dik.

The sadness of leaving Etosha was soon replaced by the excitement of venturing 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. We made a quick stop at the sewage works at Rundu before reaching our lodge and here we saw Magpie Shrike, Lilac-breasted Roller, Pied Kingfisher, Red-eyed Dove, Mourning Collared Dove, Namaqua Dove, Wattled Starling, Hottentot Teal, Little Grebe, Greater Painted Snipe, Wood Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Ruff, Black-winged Stilt, Common Moorhen and Lesser Swamp-Warbler. 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, Swamp Boubou, Black-backed Puffback, Kurichane Thrush, Southern Brown-throated Weaver, Collared Pratincole, Wire-tailed Swallow, Lesser Striped Swallow, Little Bee-eater, African Golden Weaver, Spectacled Weaver, Red-faced Mousebird, Dark-capped Bulbul, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, African Paradise-Flycatcher, Willow Warbler, Chirping Cisticola, Tawny-flanked Prinia, White-bellied Sunbird, Yellow White-eye, Violet-backed Starling, White-browed Robin-Chat, African Fish-Eagle, Black Crane, Senegal Coucal, African Openbill, Western Cattle Egret, 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 through the broad-leaved Kavango woodlands and made a few stops to add Dark Chanting Goshawk, Red-billed Oxpecker, Yellow-fronted Canary, Fawn-coloured Lark, Pale Flycatcher, Green-capped Eremomela, Tinkling Cisticola, Southern Black Tit, Chinspot Batis, Golden-breasted Bunting and the scarce and sought-after Souza's Shrike to the list. Upon reaching the Kavango River again we scanned the exposed rocks in the river and soon found several Rock Pratincoles and African Darters. We then proceeded to the Mahangu Game Reserve where we explored the woodlands and floodplains along the Kavango River. Here we found Elephant, Warthog, Sable Antelope, Burchell's Zebra, Greater Kudu, Tsessebe, Blue Wildebeest, Red Lechwe, Southern Reedbuck, Impala, Chacma Baboon, Bushbuck, African Buffalo with attending Yellow-billed Oxpeckers, Nile Crocodile, Water Monitor Lizard and large numbers of Hippos. The birding was

The border crossing to Botswana was quick and uneventful, and shortly after we found Bradfield's Hornbill and Yellow-billed Kite as we passed Shakawe town. Both Black-faced and Southern Pied Babblers were found along the road. We had to do a transfer by boat to reach our lodge situated on a remote peninsula of the Okavango River (as the Kavango River is known in Botswana), and this trip resulted in great views of birds such as African Skimmer, Malachite Kingfisher, Pied Kingfisher, Giant Kingfisher, Little Bee-eater, White-fronted Bee-eater at their nesting colony, African Reed Warbler, Hartlaub's Babbler, nesting Wire-tailed Swallows, Brown-throated Martin, Banded Martin, Lesser Striped Swallow, Little Bittern, Green-backed (Striated) Heron and Hamerkop.

From our secluded and picturesque lodge on the river's edge 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 lodge held a pair of White-backed Night-Herons with a juvenile, and we managed several close-up sightings of them during the course of our stay. The lodge grounds were also home to a pair of African Wood Owls. The next day saw us cruising the river again to reach a secluded backwater and surrounding floodplains that were teeming with birds, including Yellow-billed Stork, African Openbill, African Spoonbill, Glossy Ibis, African Sacred Ibis, Western Great Egret, Little Egret, Purple Heron, Rufous-bellied Heron, Squacco Heron, African Pygmy Goose, Spur-winged goose, African Jacana, African Marsh Harrier, Long-toed Lapwing, Black Crake, Water Thick-knee, Coppery-tailed Coucal, Whiskered Tern, Barn Swallow, Sand Martin, South African Cliff Swallow, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Luapula Cisticola, Southern Red Bishop, Fan-tailed Widowbird, Pin-tailed Whydah and African Stonechat. We also managed to locate a single Slaty Egret. The thick papyrus produced Greater Swamp-Warbler while Chirping Cisticola was seen in the reed beds. Along the papyrus-fringed channels we observed large numbers of Western Great Egrets, Little Egrets, Squacco Herons and Marabou Storks, accompanied by several African Fish-Eagles, foraging in recently burnt areas as well as following 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.

A walk in the riverine forest surrounding our lodge produced the main target of the area, a roosting Pel's Fishing Owl chick with an adult bird nearby. Other great birds seen here consisted of African Barred Owlet, Black Cuckoo, Meyer's Parrot, Grey Go-away-bird, Brown Firefinch, Common Waxbill, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Yellow White-eye, Grey Tit-Flycatcher, Spotted
Flycatcher, Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, African Green Pigeon, Lesser Honeyguide, Greater Honeyguide, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Cardinal Woodpecker, Green Wood-Hoopoe, Retz’s Helmet-Shrike, Collared Sunbird, Amethyst Sunbird, African Paradise-Flycatcher, Terrestrial Brownbul, Black-headed Oriole, Black-collared Barbet, Crested Barbet, Swamp Boubou, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Thick-billed Weaver and Orange-breasted Bush-shrike. One of the main attractions of the Shakawe area is the 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.

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. We enjoyed old favourites and also added Roan Antelope, as well as a few new birds to our list including Verreaux’s Eagle-Owl, Knob-billed Duck, Burchell’s Sandgrouse, Ashy Flycatcher, Greater Blue-eared Starling and Long-tailed Paradise Whydah. We made an early morning start from our lodge as a long driving day lie ahead. An early fuel stop produced several Mosque Swallows while a birding stop in the Kavango woodlands was very productive and produced Rufous-bellied Tit, Southern Black Flycatcher, Green-capped Eremomela, Pale Flycatcher, Neddicky, Chinspot Batis, Black-chested Prinia, Brubru, Black-backed Puffback, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Fawn-coloured Lark, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Black-chested Prinia, Yellow White-eye, Yellow-fronted Canary, Golden-breasted Bunting and Yellow-throated Petronia.

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. A pair of Verreaux’s Eagles performed well. Other birds seen included Rock Kestrel, Rüppell’s Parrot, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Red-billed Spurfowl, Speckled Pigeon, Pale-winged Starling, Acacia Pied Barbet and Grey-backed Camaroptera. Both Banded Mongoose and Damara Dik-dik showed well. We did some relaxed birding the last morning of our trip and after breakfast started the journey back to Windhoek for our return flights in the afternoon.

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