Birding Africa Namibia Okavango Tour

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Tour Report by leader Tertius Gous

Photos by Tertius Gous on this tour
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 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. We were very lucky to see a desert adapted Elephant near Brandberg. Walvis Bay was spectacular with all its flamingoes and we explored the dunes of the Namib Desert for 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 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 315 birds seen or heard, and 40 species of mammals. We recorded all the endemic and near-endemic Namibian birds although Dune Lark was only seen very briefly, and Hartlaub’s Spurfowl was only heard.

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, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, White-backed Mousebird, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Acacia Pied Barbet, Black-faced Waxbill, Black-chested Prinia, Southern Masked-Weaver, African Red-eyed Bulbul and White-browed Sparrow-Weaver. A party of swifts overhead consisted of Little Swifts, with occasional
Bradfield's Swifts, while Rock Martins were common.

We then proceeded to the Erongo Mountains with a short detour at Karibib to add Sabota Lark, Pygmy Falcon, Pririt Batis, Chat Flycatcher, Desert Cisticola and African Grey Hornbill to the list. 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 Violet Wood-Hoopoe and Damara Hornbill 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, Green-winged Pytilias, Shaft-tailed Whydahs, and the occasional Yellow Canary and Golden-breasted Bunting. We experienced unusually windy conditions which made birding in the acacia woodlands and rocky outcrops tough, so we concentrated our efforts along the more sheltered dry riverbeds lined by huge Camellthorn, Winter Thorn and Leadwood trees. Here we managed to find Violet Wood-Hoopoe, Damara Hornbill, Carp's Tit, Ashy Tit, Burchell's Starling, Southern Pied Babbler, Long-billed Crombec, Bearded Woodpecker, Pearl-spotted Owlet, Groundscraper Thrush, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Brubru, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, and White-browed Scrub-Robin. Other good birds seen in the Erongo area included Monteiro's Hornbill, White-tailed Shrike, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Kalahari Scrub-Robin, Rüppell's Parrot, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Pale-winged Starling, Double-banded Sangrouse and African Hawk-Eagle. We also had good mammal sightings including Damara Dik-Dik, Damara Ground Squirrel and Dassie Rat. In the evening the calls of Southern White-faced Scops-Owl, Freckled Nightjar and Fiery-necked Nightjar could be heard in the distance from our lodge.

En route to Walvis Bay we stopped at the spectacular Spitzkoppe inselbergs where a pair of very active Herero Chats entertained us. They were particularly active and were often seen hawking and gleening insects attracted to the flowering Ringwood trees. After saturation views of this often tricky near-endemic, we focused our attention to all the other good birds Spitzkoppe has to offer, including Dusky Sunbird, White-tailed Shrike, Common Fiscal, Mountain Wheatear, Cape Penduline-Tit, Ashy Tit, Red-faced and White-backed Mousebird, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Pale-winged Starling, Monteiro's Hornbill, Cape Bunting, Cape Sparrow, Pririt Batis, Augur Buzzard, Lanner Falcon and a pair of Verreaux's Eagles. The plains around Spitzkoppe produced Rüppell's Korhaan, Northern Black Korhaan, Short-toed Rock-Thrush, Karoo Chat, Tractrac Chat, Spike-heeled Lark and Gray's Lark. Then we headed west and entered the seemingly empty plains of the Namib Desert where the occasional Tractrac Chat was often the only sign 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 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. 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. The weather was cool and overcast as we arrived at the target site but everything was eerily quiet. The area normally holds at least three resident breeding pairs of birds but none were calling or displaying. The reason for this soon became apparent as we discovered a Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk hunting in the area. Some of us did manage to see a single Dune Lark hurriedly scurry over a dune to hide under a succulent Nara bush, but unfortunately the bird did not venture out again. Dusky Sunbirds were plentiful however, and we were surprised to see a single Black Harrier quartering the dunes. 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, Ruddy Turnstone, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper and Ruff. There were also Cape Wagtail, Hartlaub's Gull, Grey-hooded Gull, Kelp Gull, Caspian Tern, Swift Tern, Common Tern and we managed to locate a single Damara Tern. 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 seaboard to venture inland towards the Brandberg, Namibia's highest mountain. We had to cross the gravel plains of the Namib Desert again and 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 Cape Crow, Tractrac Chat, Karoo Chat, Gray's Lark, Rüppell's Korhaan, Ludwig's Bustard, Lappet-faced Vulture, Black-chested Snake-Eagle and Benguela Long-billed Lark. Our lodge near the Brandberg produced Cape Starling, Southern White-crowned
Shrike, Red-billed Spurfowl, and amongst a chorus of Barking Geckos and Black-backed Jackals in the evening we heard Freckled Nightjar, Pearl-spotted Owlet and African Scops-Owl.

Early the next morning on the way to breakfast we were greeted by a lone Elephant bull feeding on the tall riverine trees in the camp along the Ugab River. This was one of the desert-adapted Elephants that are highly nomadic so finding one is always a big bonus. Leaving the lodge we had another bonus in the form of a Cape Fox at its den. The road to Etosha was interrupted by a stop at a farm dam where we found Namaqua Sandgrouse coming in to drink, Namaqua Dove, Alpine Swift, Lark-like Bunting, Red-billed Teal, Wood Sandpiper, Grey-backed Sparrowlark and a pair of Peregrine Falcons. We made a short fuel and lunch 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.

Shortly after entering Etosha, we were treated to a large breeding herd of Elephants coming to drink at the Ombika waterhole, and this was the first of many memorable experiences with these large pachyderms during our stay in the 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 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, Grey-backed Sparrowlark, Chestnut-backed Sparrowlark, Red-capped Lark, Ring-necked (Cape Turtle) Dove, Rock Martin, Red-breasted Swallow, African Palm-Swift and Little Swift. Birding in Okaukeujo Camp was very productive and we had great views of African Hoopoe, African Red-eyed Bulbul, Groundscraper Thrush, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Burnt-necked Eremomela, Sociable Weavers at their nest, Acacia Pied Barbet, Cardinal Woodpecker, 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, Spike-heeled Lark, Stark's Lark, Kori Bustard, Northern Black Korhaan, Crowned Lapwing, Ant-eating Chat, Eastern Clapper Lark, Sabota Lark, Scaly-feathered Weaver (Finch), Cape Crow, and Rufous-eared Warbler. The waterholes and springs in the area had large numbers of Elephants and Springbok, and we managed to find a mating pair of Lion 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 saw more Lions as well as a foraging Honey Badger. 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, Little Sparrowhawk, Red-headed Weaver, Southern Red-billed Hornbill, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Common Scimitarbill, Pearl-spotted Owlet and African Scops-Owl, and we found Bateleur, Tawny Eagle, White-backed Vulture, African Grey Hornbill, Purple Roller, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Southern Pied Babbler, Grey Go-away-bird, Helmeted Guineafowl and White-crested Helmet-Shrike in the surrounding woodlands. Mammals were plentiful and included Elephant, Giraffe, Greater Kudu, Blue Wildebeest, Burchell's Zebra, Red Hartebeest, Warthog, South African Ground Squirrel, Yellow Mongoose and Steenbok. At the Klein Namutoni waterhole close to Namutoni Camp our luck with Elephants continued and we spent several hours enjoying the company of two large breeding herds of elephants drinking, bathing, swimming, playing, rolling, running and dust bathing, while Giraffe, Impala, Burchell's Zebra, Black-backed Jackal and Spotted Hyaena looked on.

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,Namaqua Dove, Wattled Starling, Hottentot Teal, Little Grebe, Wood Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Black-winged Stilt, Common Moorhen, Red-knobbed Coot, Purple Swampphen, African Jacana 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, Kurrichane 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, Rattling Cisticola, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Red-billed Firefinch, White-bellied Sunbird, Yellow White-eye, White-browed Robin-Chat, African Fish-Eagle, Black Crake, Senegal Coucal, African Openbill, Western Cattle Egret, Little Egret, Green-backed (Striated) Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Rufous-bellied Heron, and Reed Cormorant.

The next day we travelled through the broad-leaved Kavango woodlands and made a few stops to add Red-billed Oxpecker, Mosque Swallow, Yellow-fronted Canary, Fawn-coloured Lark, Southern Black Tit, Chinspot Batis, Southern Black Flycatcher, Striped Kingfisher and the scarce and sought-after Souza's Shrike to the list. A lunch stop at Popa falls, more accurately an area of rocky rapids, on the Kavango River produced breeding Rock Pratincole, African Darter and African Pied Wagtail. We then explored the woodlands and floodplains along the Kavango River at the Mahangu Game Reserve. Here we found Elephant, Sable Antelope, Tsessebe, Red Lechwe, Southern Reedbuck, Impala, Chacma Baboon, Bushbuck, African Buffalo with attending Yellow-billed Oxpeckers, Nile Crocodile and large numbers of Hippos. The birding was exceptional and Mahangu produced Long-toed Lapwing, Blacksmith Lapwing, White-faced Duck, Wattled Crane, Spur-winged Goose, Red-billed Teal, African Jacana, Coppery-tailed Coucal, Southern Carmine Bee-eater, Retz's Helmet-Shrike, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Meve's Starling, Burchell's Starling, Greater Blue-eared Starling, Bateleur, White-backed Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture, Marabou Stork, African Spoonbill, African Sacred Ibis, Squacco Heron, Grey Heron, Goliath Heron, Western Great 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 along the road and Yellow-billed Kite as we passed Shakawe town to reach our lodge on the banks of the Okavango River (as the Kavango River is known in Botswana) in the late afternoon. From here we were perfectly basied 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, Black 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 Yellow-billed Stork, African Openbill, Hamerkop, Coppery-tailed Coucal, Pied Kingfisher, Malachite Kingfisher, Giant Kingfisher, Wire-tailed Swallow, Brown-throated Martin, Banded Martin, Southern Carmine Bee-eater, White-fronted Bee-eater, Little Bee-eater, Water Thick-knee, Long-toed Lapwing, Gabar Goshawk, African Marsh Harrier, Little Bittern and Goliath Heron along the river, while a flock of Burchell's Sandgrouse flew past. A lone Slaty Egret was seen patrolling a backwater and we found African Skimmer breeding on a newly exposed sandbank. A few White-backed Night-Herons were eventually seen well where they were hiding in the thicker reed beds with overhanging vegetation. The thick papyrus produced Greater Swamp-Warbler, and Chirping Cisticola and African Reed Warbler were seen in the reed beds.

A pair of Western Banded Snake-Eagles showed well and we located a Pel's Fishing Owl chick and 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. Brown Firefinch and Hartlaub's Babbler were common at our lodge and the riverine forest nearby produced Emerald-spotted Wood Dove, African Green Pigeon, Mourning Collared Dove, Green Wood-Hoopoe, Collared Sunbird, Ashy Flycatcher, African Paradise-Flycatcher, Terrestrial Brownbul, Black-headed Oriole, Black-collared Barbet, Crested Barbet, Swamp Boubou, Crested Francolin, breeding Yellow-billed Kites and we flushed an adult Pel's Fishing Owl which sat out in the open at close range, affording spectacular views. Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, White-bellied Sunbird, Scarlet-chested Sunbird and Black-faced Babbler were found in the mixed acacia 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 and late afternoon
enjoying old favourites but not adding anything new to the list. We made an early morning start from our lodge near Mahangu as a long driving day lie ahead. A birding stop in the Kavango woodlands was very productive and produced **Rufous-bellied Tit**, **Southern Black Tit**, **Green-capped Eremomela**, **Pale Flycatcher**, **Chinspot Batis**, **White-crested Helmet-Shrike**, **Black-backed Puffback**, **Fawn-coloured Lark**, **Black-chested Prinia**, **Yellow White-eye**, **Red-headed Weaver**, **Yellow-fronted Canary**, **Golden-breasted Bunting** and **Yellow-throated Petronia**. We then pushed on to the Waterberg Plateau Park and saw a **Wahlberg’s Eagle** at the nest along the way. We arrived at Waterberg in good time and managed to see **Rüppell's Parrot**, **Grey-backed Camaroptera**, **Acacia Pied Barbet**, **Golden-tailed Woodpecker** and **Dwarf Mongoose** shortly after our arrival. Some of us decided to hike up the plateau to watch the sunset. This was quite a strenuous walk but we did manage to see **Rock Hyrax**, **Chacma Baboon**, **Damara Dik-dik**, **Warthog**, **Red-billed Spurfowl**, **Bradfield's Swift**, **Alpine Swift**, **Pale-winged Starling**, **Short-toed Rock-Thrush**, **Rosy-faced Lovebird**, **Familiar Chat**, while **Rockrunner** and **Hartlaub's Spurfowl** were heard. Getting back down we discovered that **Rockrunner** was seen near our chalets by some of those that stayed behind! We did some relaxed birding the last morning of our trip and after breakfast started the journey back to Windhoek for our return flights, with a **Brown Snake-Eagle** and fine male **Red-crested Korhaan** seen along the way.

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