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Birding Africa Namibia Okavango Tour

19 Sept - 4 Oct 2015 BAZ015BEE

Tour Report by leader Tertius Gous

Photos by Tertius Gous



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**, **Pirit 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**, **Pirit 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**, **Tracrac 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 **Tracrac 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 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 **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 than 35 **Rüppell's Korhaans**, **Ludwig's Bustard**, **Northern Black Korhaan** and **Benguela Long-billed Lark**. Our lodge near the Brandberg produced **Bare-cheeked Babbler**, **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 Hyenas* 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 Coursers** 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, 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, 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 Crake, 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

exceptional and Mahangu produced **Long-toed Lapwing, Blacksmith Lapwing, White-faced Duck, Wattled Crane, Spur-winged Goose, African Jacana, Coppery-tailed Coucal, Southern Carmine Bee-eater, Retz's Helmet-Shrike, African Pied Wagtail, Meve's Starling, Burchell's Starling, Rattling Cisticola, Lilac-breasted Roller, Bateleur, White-backed Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture, Marabou Stork, Yellow-billed Stork, African Openbill, African Spoonbill, African Sacred Ibis, Squacco Heron, Grey Heron, Goliath 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** 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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