

Kruger National Park Photographic and Wildlife Tour

17th to 22nd September 2007

Trip Report



Steenbok (*Raphicerus campestris*).

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Tour Summary

Tour Participants:
Brian and Carol Casey

Specialist Tour Guide: Leon Marais

Photo acknowledgements: Leon Marais

Total Distance Travelled: 640 kilometres

Temperature Range: 8 - 36 °C

Trip Report Compiled By: Leon Marais

Trip Breakdown

Day 1: Monday 17th September 2007 ~ KMIA to Berg-en-Dal

Route: Kruger / Mpumalanga International Airport to Berg-en-Dal via Numbi Gate.

Distance: 105 kilometres.

Weather: Sunny and warm.

Temperature range: 11 – 25 °C.

Day 2: Tuesday 18th September 2007 ~ Berg-en-Dal to Skukuza

Route: Timfene Loop AM; H3 north to Skukuza; Sabie River Road PM.

Distance: 75 kilometres.

Weather: Cool to start, warming later on.

Temperature range: 11 – 29 °C.

Day 3: Wednesday 19th September 2007 ~ Skukuza to Satara

Route: Sabie River Road AM; H 1-2 and H 1 – 3 to Satara; Nsemani Loop PM.

Distance: 100 kilometres.

Weather: Clear and hot.

Temperature range: 17 -32° C.

Day 4: Thursday 20th September 2007 ~ Satara region

Route: S 90 / Mavumbye AM; N'wanetsi Loop PM.

Distance: 86 kilometres.

Weather: Cool to start, hot in the afternoon.

Temperature range: 8 – 33 °C.

Day 5: Friday 21st September 2007 ~ Satara Region

Route: Sweni Waterhole AM; Muzandzeni Loop PM.

Distance: 90 Kilometres.

Weather: Cool to start, hot in the afternoon.

Temperature range: 9 – 34 °C.

Day 6: Saturday 22nd September 2007 ~ Kruger National Park to Timbavati Game Reserve.

Route: S 100 AM; Satara to Timbavati Main Gate.

Distance: 184 kilometres.

Weather: Clear and hot.

Temperature range: 14 – 36 °C.

Trip Report

Day 1: Monday 17th September 2007 ~ KMIA to Berg-en-Dal

I met Brian and Carol at Kruger / Mpumalanga International Airport after their flight up from Cape Town. It wasn't long before we had our cameras and binoculars out and were on our way to the Kruger National Park. We were staying in the south-eastern corner of the park, and entered at Numbi Gate close to the airport, with a few hour's drive ahead of us. It was quite a long way to the camp and we didn't have much time for stopping, but did see a few Giraffe, a lone Spotted Hyena, several Southern Ground Hornbills and distant views of White Rhino and Cape Buffalo close to the camp. We had a quick detour to the bridge over the Crocodile River, just outside Malelane Gate, where we saw all manner of water birds, such as Saddle-billed Stork, Great White Egret, Little Egret, Green-backed Heron, Giant and Pied Kingfishers and Nile Crocodiles all trying to catch fish in the shallow waters, as well as a herd of Elephants browsing in the reedbeds downstream. We saw some more White Rhino in the distance before arriving at the camp in the late afternoon, and then had time to settle in before meeting for dinner in the camp's restaurant. The meal was good, as was the bottle of cold white wine that went with it, and we retired satisfied and ready for a full next day ahead of us.

Day 2: Tuesday 18th September 2007 ~ Berg-en-Dal to Skukuza

The three of us met for coffee and rusks at 5:45 AM, and then headed out as the gates opened at 6:00 AM. I chose to drive out back towards Malelane Gate and then take the Timfene Loop ('Timfene' is the plural for 'baboon' in Shangaan) before doubling back to camp. We saw two or three pairs of White Rhino, and then came across a Lioness and two young male Lions walking eastwards down the road. There appeared to be another Lioness lying a bit further down, off the left of the road, though the first three appeared to not want to join up with her. We then rolled down to watch the single Lioness for a while, and then saw the rest of the pride – another 7 members, making 11 in total – come out of the bush, seemingly having consumed something large out of sight in the bushes. Leaving them to rest off their substantially distended stomachs, we drove on for a while longer, and then headed back to camp for breakfast. After breakfast and departure we took the Matjulu Spruit loop to the north of the camp, where we saw, among other things, a large Rock Monitor, a colony of Dwarf Mongooses, Martial Eagle, Crested Barbet and a lovely Kudu bull. We then rejoined the tar road and drove north to Skukuza, where we checked in, had some lunch and a rest before an afternoon activity. For the afternoon we took a slow drive along the Sabie River Road, where we saw, among other sightings, Chacma Baboons, Giraffe, a large herd of Elephants heading down to the river to drink, and, on the way back to camp, a lone Black Rhinoceros (a scarce animal, and my first sighting for the Kruger National Park). We arrived back at camp at sunset, and had some time to relax and edit our photographs before heading down to the restaurant for a lovely buffet dinner and a cold draught beer to quench the thirst.

Day 3: Wednesday 19th September 2007 ~ Skukuza to Satara

We began the day in the same manner as the day before, with coffee and rusks prior to heading out into the reserve. Once again we headed down along the Sabie River, with the hopes of coming across a leopard. Alas, no spotted cats were forthcoming, but we did start off with two different Spotted Hyenas, and a bit later on, after seeing numerous birds, Impala and Cape Buffalo, we came across a small pride of Lions – two females and three young males – resting on top of a large rock in the riverbed. A few hundred metres on we saw a large male Lion disappearing into the reed growth in the riverbed, setting the tone for the rest of the tour (lots of Lions!). We took plenty of photographs during the drive, and meandered back to the camp for a 9:00 AM breakfast. After the breakfast we made ready for the long drive north to Satara, seeing plenty of game on the way (including three Lions with the remains of an Impala kill, and Hooded and White-backed Vultures eating the left-overs, a single Lioness

a bit further on resting in the shade of a tree, Elephants digging for water in a dry riverbed and almost every bit of solid shade occupied by Impala, Kudu and Giraffe). We eventually made camp in the afternoon and took some time for lunch and a bit of a rest before heading out on an afternoon drive. We headed out westwards from the camp, passing by a large herd of 500+ Cape Buffalo heading towards a watering hole. We continued on and, at another water hole, saw a White Rhino bull, a Black-backed Jackal, lots of birds and another herd of Elephants. Moving on we found the huge herd of buffalo busy watering at Nsemani Dam (or the remains of it anyway), stirring up huge clouds of dust that caught the setting sun to create a wonderfully atmospheric scene to round off a fine day of game viewing.

Day 4: Thursday 20th September 2007 ~ Satara region

After the usual morning routine we drove out of camp and headed north-east to the dry plains of the area. Here we saw lots of birds, such as Purple Roller, Red-billed Quelea, Kori Bustard, Grey-backed Sparrowlarks, Swainson's Spurfowl, Black Crake and Grey Heron, as well as Elephants, Giraffe, Blue Wildebeest, Impala and a male / female Lion pair. After a very pleasant morning observing and photographing birds and animals we drove back to camp for a hearty breakfast, and afterwards took a walk around the camp, photographing birds such as Bennett's Woodpecker, Black-headed Oriole, African Scops Owl, Burchell's Starling, Cape Glossy Starlings, Red-billed Buffalo Weavers, Yellow-billed Hornbill and others. With the heat building we took a break in the coolness of our huts, and then had some lunch before going out for the afternoon. This time we took the N'wanetsi River loop to the south-east of the camp, where we saw and photographed birds such as Lilac-breasted Roller, Marabou Stork, Saddle-billed Stork, Hadeda Ibis, African Jacana and others, as well as various mammal species. With the sun setting and purple / pink hues on the horizon we drove back to camp, narrowly missing seeing a leopard on the way – but that's the way it goes! We met once again for a buffet dinner and a bottle of cold white wine, before walking back to our huts under a star-studded African night sky.

Day 5: Friday 21st September 2007 ~ Satara Region

Heading out early from the camp once again, we drove south and took the Sweni Waterhole road to the west. Along the way we came across a fresh zebra kill, with two Lionesses and a male Lion feeding on the bloody remains, and a brave Black-backed Jackal hanging around looking for scraps. Further on we came across another lone Spotted Hyena (yes, they are social animals, but often forage alone or in two's and three's), a herd of Elephants, White-backed Vultures, Burchell's Zebra and White Rhino, among others.

Back at camp we had breakfast and then took the middle of the day off to rest and photograph camp subjects such as birds, bees and flowers. For the afternoon we took the Muzandzeni Loop, and the excessive heat drew out lots of Elephants to the waterholes. We had a lovely tea-stop at the Muzandzeni Picnic Site before carrying on, passing more Elephants, a breeding herd this time, Zebra and Impala clustered in the shade, and the same Lions at their zebra kill, with hordes of White-backed Vultures waiting to move in as soon as they left. Further on we photographed a stunning Lilac-breasted Roller and a beautiful Steenbuck next to the road. Not far from the camp we came across a flock of angry Grey Go-Away Birds in distress, obviously perturbed by a predator of sorts – a large owl perhaps – in their midst. Unfortunately we couldn't find out what was upsetting them, and headed back for a final evening in the Kruger National Park.

Day 6: Saturday 22nd September 2007 ~ Kruger National Park to Timbavati Game Reserve.

Once again we opted for an early morning drive, out along the S 100 once again, where we spent time photographing Impala (not the easiest subjects to photograph successfully, despite being so common), a spectacular Kudu bull, Cape Buffalo, etc etc. We returned at 8:30 AM for breakfast and by 9:00 AM were on route to Orpen Gate to exit the park. We were waylaid however by a gathering of White-backed, Hooded, White-headed and awesome

Lappet-faced Vultures, which were feeding on a large, unidentified carcass at Nsemani Dam. We then continued on the gate and drove north and then east to the main gate of the Timbavati Game Reserve, where Brian and Carol were met by their guide from Kambaku Game Lodge, giving us a chance for a brief but fond farewell and best wishes for the rest of the journey. All in all it was a superb six days in the Kruger National Park, where we were fortunate enough to enjoy countless wonderful moments in nature. It wasn't a trip where we were too concerned about how much we saw (hence the lack of a detailed bird and mammal list), but rather one where we just took our time, had no expectations and were free to just enjoy what we did see.

Photo captions, left to right, top to bottom: Buffalo herd, Nsemani Dam; Lioness, Day 5, AM drive; Saddle-billed Stork; Cape Glossy Starling; Bennett's Woodpecker; young Chacma Baboon; Lilac-breasted Roller; Kudu bull; Martial Eagle.

