



# Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

*Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.*

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## SOUTH AFRICA

Date - October 2025

Duration - 18 Days

### Destinations

Cape Town - Stony Point Nature Reserve - Harold Porter National Botanical Garden - Hermanus - Walker Bay - Fernkloof Nature Reserve - De Kelders - Gansbaai - Kleinbaai - Dyer Island - Agulhas National Park - Bontebok National Park - George - Garden Route Botanical Garden - Addo Elephant National Park - Port Elizabeth - Mountain Zebra National Park - Karoo National Park - West Coast National Park - Hout Bay - Duiker Island - Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden - Table Mountain National Park - Chapman's Peak - False Bay - Simon's Town - Boulders Beach - Cape Point Nature Reserve - Cape of Good Hope - False Bay Nature Reserve

## Trip Overview

After an absence of almost thirteen years, my return to South Africa would coincide with a first ever visit for Karina and a first view of Cape Town and the iconic Table Mountain for me since 2007. The vast majority of the tour would take place in the Western Cape, with a few days in the Eastern Cape to visit Mountain Zebra National Park and Addo Elephant National Park, principally to include elephants for Karina on a tour that originally had none. For those who are not aware, this region of South Africa does not incorporate what are traditionally the best safari areas or the reserves that most wildlife enthusiasts would instantly recognise, so Kruger, Hluhluwe and the beguiling Kalahari wilderness of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, which is shared with Botswana. However, it does provide its own unique wildlife highlights, including some exceptional whale watching, both from boats and onshore, and, until fairly recently at least, a reliable opportunity to observe great white sharks. As I will further touch upon, that period has passed sadly, but the Western Cape remains a special destination, particularly for those who have enjoyed a number of more traditional safaris and are looking for a slightly different experience and a few different species. This was not going to be a trip where we would encounter packs of wild dogs for example, or probably even leopards, and although a number of private reserves have separate enclosures for lions, basically just to be



able to market themselves as 'big five' reserves, these are not wild animals in any true sense of the meaning. We would have the opportunity to encounter theoretically wild lions at the Karoo, Mountain Zebra and Addo national parks, but in reality, the lions of the region have a somewhat chequered history, as the Cape lion subspecies *panthera leo melanochaita* had already been extirpated by colonial settlers by the middle of the 19th century. Lions were first reintroduced to the region at Addo in 2003 and further reintroductions followed at the Karoo and Mountain Zebra parks in 2010 and 2013 respectively. Over the years, additional lions have since been released to enhance the genetic diversity of these small populations, but as recently as 2020, seven of these apex predators were intentionally killed at Karoo for simply moving beyond what is a tiny reserve and killing a few sheep. Not a great deal therefore appears to have been learnt in the intervening years and the simple fact is, if you are mainly interested in the continents top predators, you would not visit either the Western or Eastern Cape. Instead, this was a tour more designed to encounter a caracal than a lion, with far more emphasis on unusual African species, many of which either do not occur elsewhere or are pretty much overlooked. As such, the tour was designed in three distinct sections, beginning with a fairly gentle three-night introduction at Hermanus and Gansbaai, where I had booked a number of marine tours, one of which involved an organisation attempting to conserve the now critically endangered African penguin. From the perishing waters of the Atlantic, we would travel inland for the main wildlife section of the tour, which involved a more intense schedule and overnight stays of between one and three nights at five national parks, Bontebok, Addo Elephant,

Mountain Zebra, Karoo and West Coast, exactly in that order. This part of the trip also included one night at a private reserve, which I tend to avoid in this specific part of the world, largely because they can somewhat resemble zoos, with species that do not occur naturally in the region and, as I have already touched upon, separate enclosures for large predators. As I will cover in more detail, the one we visited was by no means the worst I have known, thanks mainly to a great deal of initial research, but it was still not a truly natural experience and I could not bring myself to recommend it, at least not in a wildlife sense. In all other respects, particularly the luxury tented accommodation and superb food, it was outstanding, but that is pretty much the case regarding the vast majority of these exclusive private reserves on the western cape and I would not choose any of them over an authentic African safari. Finally, we would spend three far more relaxing nights in Cape Town, partly to take in a few of the more famous sights for Karina and also to visit a number of wildlife spots that I know, including the incomparable Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden. Both the first and last sections of the tour included day visits to additional national parks, so Agulhas and Table Mountain respectively, and the middle section also included a marine tour out of Port Elizabeth, which was probably the most enjoyable of our six nautical voyages, all of which took place pretty much as planned. I had to swap the day of one, due to high winds and the resulting rough seas, but in reality, I had expected at least one or two to be cancelled entirely, given the tempestuous nature of the sea along this dramatic stretch of coastline. For those who are not aware, Cape Town and the surrounding region is famous for its severe winds and I had basically included extra tours in the likely event of maybe even several voyages being cancelled. As it was, they remarkably all went out, although a couple were fairly rough and one had swells well above four metres, which made photography pretty much impossible and was clearly far more fun for some of the passengers than it was for others. Whilst both of our marine tours out of Gansbaai were thoroughly enjoyable, that was not really the



case in terms of the three trips I booked at Hermanus and although I am reluctant to describe anything involving whales as ordinary, it has to be said, that these tours were all pretty poor. I used the same operator for all three, which is unusual for me, as I usually spread activities between companies, specifically to avoid this type of nightmare scenario. However, the operator I decided on had by far the best reputation, which does make me wonder just how bad the others may have been? To be fair, there may not have been a great deal of difference between them all, as none of the tours were awful as such, but all three basically involved leaving Hermanus at high speed to search for a southern right whale, the main whale species in these waters at this time of year. No effort was made to look for anything else, or to even slow down when other species were spotted, and on one occasion, as we were heading back to the harbour, a few of the passengers spotted a bryde's whale, which the captain barely gave a second glance to before dismissing. It really was just a case of spending a few minutes with the one target animal and most of the journey back was devoted to watching the drone footage of the whale we had just observed, which the crew were of course attempting to sell to as many passengers as possible. These lazy largely commercial tours take place all over the globe, indeed, I experienced several earlier in the year in New Zealand, but they are always disappointing and I feel particularly sorry for the vast majority of tourists, who have no real idea what they are missing. For some, this may be the trip of a lifetime that they have perhaps spent years saving for and the situation is even worse for those travelling to this corner of the world in order to view one of the greatest predators on earth, as until recently, little Gansbaai was known as the great white shark capital of the world. With good reason to be fair, as these beautiful and deadly sharks would hunt Afro-Australian fur seals here, often in the channel between Dyer Island and Geyser Island, which became known infamously as shark alley. If you looked at the websites and adverts of the operators in the area, you would very much believe that this was still the case, as they all still include multiple references to and images of great white sharks. However, the reality is very different, as it is now almost impossible to encounter one of these iconic predators in or around Gansbaai and during my stay, the annual anniversary was passed of the last sighting of a great white shark in these waters. When I put it to a couple of the operators that their shark cage diving marketing is at best now a little disingenuous, as it still largely involves photographs of huge great whites with rows of razor-sharp teeth, they basically argue that it remains technically possible to see a great white and that they never guarantee one, which is basically true, but pretty much substantiates the disingenuous case better than I ever could. In reality, the shark cage-diving at Gansbaai now involves copper sharks or bronze whalers as they are also known, which are impressive enough in their own right, but are of course not great whites. We saw a couple on a general wildlife cruise, when our boat briefly visited one of the cage-diving operations, and although I am always thrilled to encounter sharks, you would probably not travel half way across the world specifically to see this species, which the local operators know only too well. Instead they pretend that nothing much has changed and it is only when you dig a little deeper, which the vast majority of general tourists just never do, that you discover that great white sharks have more or less disappeared from the region since killer whales began preying on them. That at least is the theory and although it is certainly true that orcas did kill at least a few great whites in these waters, the reality of the situation is likely to be far more complex and probably involves a number of factors. I personally feel that one of these was the ever increasing tourist numbers and that the shark industry had its own part to play in the displacement of these magnificent hunters, particularly when you consider that in addition to the constant cage-diving, boats were dragging rubber seals behind them in order to lure sharks into making basically wasted attacks. Whilst the resulting shots were undoubtedly spectacular, this was clearly not a natural process and may ultimately have been a disturbance too far, particularly as these glistening killers can still be observed in areas where



they are far less disturbed. We were at least aware of the situation before we travelled, which was not the case with everyone I spoke to, and I was eventually just happy enough that the weather did not wreak havoc with any of my carefully prepared plans. Whilst we awoke to rain on our first morning at the Fernkloof Nature Reserve, where we hiked in the drizzle up to the Galpin Hut, much of our visit took place during an unseasonal spring heatwave, with temperatures hitting 110° at one point. I had partly arranged for our trip to take place in spring to provide Karina with the opportunity to encounter as many newborn animals as possible, but the weather can be mixed at this time of year, especially on the treacherous south coast, and I must admit that I did fear the worst when I had to put my camera away because of the rain on that first morning. As it was, I need not have worried, as we could not really have been a great deal more fortunate, both in terms of the weather and also our sightings, which were as spectacular as they were diverse and greatly surpassed even my expectations. Although South Africa is not without issues, some of which remain significant, much the same could be said of almost every destination on earth and in all we had a fabulous time, which I very much hope the following details will at least begin to convey.

## Mammal Sightings

### Order Carnivora - Family Felidae (Cats - 3)

#### 1. Lion - *Panthera leo*

As I have already touched upon, lions were wiped out in this region by the middle of the 19th century and were reintroduced at Addo Elephant National Park in 2003, Karoo in 2010 and Mountain Zebra in 2013. Although they still occur at all three parks, life in both the Eastern and Western Cape for these iconic African cats has been anything but settled. At Karoo, several lions were shot for leaving what is a relatively small reserve and killing a few domestic animals and other populations have been moved from park to park, largely as a result of how successful these ultimate predators have been. At Addo, which is home to one of the largest herds of disease free buffalo in the entire country, they slaughtered the buffalo like lambs, as these large herbivores had not been exposed to lions for around 150 years and had no idea how to defend themselves or, indeed, that they even needed to. Individuals would approach lions directly and within a short period, around 60% of the buffalo at Addo had been despatched. Lion populations have been controlled since those early days, and of course the buffalo have once again grown wary of their eternal adversaries, but the result remains somehow unsatisfactory, as if neither species are now living an entirely natural existence. For our part, we would only see female lions throughout the trip, one at Addo and four at Mountain Zebra, and the fact that this was the first time I have ever failed to see a male lion where the species occurs, pretty much sums up my feeling that all is not exactly right here. The only male lion observed was at the private reserve we visited for a single night, where they have three lions rescued from the shameful canned hunting industry, where animals are bred in captivity and shot basically for fun in a confined area. Whilst I was obviously relieved that these particular lions had been saved, you have to question the ethics behind this type of 'rescue', as many exclusive lodges are purchasing lions just to say they have them for potential guests or to market themselves as a 'big five' reserve. If they have purchased their lions from someone involved in canned hunting, the situation is even worse, as they are actively creating demand and directly supporting that abhorrent industry. The line is a fine one of course, as clearly you would always rescue one of these magnificent creatures if you could, but the lions that we saw have no possibility of living a wild existence and will spend the rest of their lives in a five hectare enclosure, which is certainly not cruel, but is far from wild. If you would like further information regarding canned hunting, I would recommend the Blood Lions website ([www.bloodlions.org.za](http://www.bloodlions.org.za)) and their film exposing this repugnant practice, *Blood Lions Bred for the Bullet*. There are various ways that you can help, financially of course, but also by avoiding any tourist activities involving contact with lions or other predators, which includes walking with lions and cub petting sessions, both of which are somehow still permitted. In terms of our sightings, at Addo our lone female spent much of our stay guarding a warthog she had killed and was eating her way through, until, that is, a clearly agitated young male elephant took exception to her during our second night drive and chased her away, not once, but continually until we departed. Our encounter at Mountain Zebra was a far more leisurely affair, with four outrageously relaxed females sprawled across the road as we returned to the rest camp after what had already been an extraordinary first night here. After all the excitement, they rounded our memorable evening off rather nicely and would prove to be the only lions encountered at close quarters throughout the trip.



## 2. Cheetah - *Acinonyx jubatus*

Having been eradicated from the region by hunters and farmers towards the end of the 19th century, cheetahs were reintroduced to Mountain Zebra National Park in 2007, where they initially did so well, herbivore populations crashed. In exactly the same way that buffalos did not recognise the threat of lions at Addo, so plains antelope had no idea what a cheetah was or how they hunted, particularly as there were no other major predators in the reserve until brown hyenas were reintroduced in 2008 and lions followed five years later. Since those initial tentative reintroductions, cheetah populations have been carefully managed at Mountain Zebra and many of the cubs born here have been translocated to other conservation projects, including in other countries, as cheetahs are not doing well anywhere in Africa and have already disappeared from more than 90% of their former range. Whilst their numbers have increased in some areas where they receive adequate protection, so mainly in secure national parks and some private game reserves, elsewhere the opposite is the case and there are now believed to be less than 7,000 cheetahs in all of Africa. One of the activities at Mountain Zebra is cheetah tracking, which involves a game drive and then a walk of maybe a couple of hours to hopefully watch a cheetah on foot. Given that this was the only park where it would be possible to observe one of these graceful predators, we did initially intend to participate, but were instead incredibly fortunate on our first guided drive here, as our guide knew where a female cheetah had killed a springbok and within a few minutes we were watching her and her five cubs on the carcass. Although the mother was wearing a collar, which I never like to see, there is no arguing that the conservation efforts taking place here are working and it was an absolute pleasure to spend around an hour with this next generation of cheetahs, all of which will hopefully go on to produce young of their own.



## 3. Caracal - *Caracal caracal*

Although I typically travel without any specific targets on this type of general safari, I was really hoping to show Karina one of these beautiful cats and had included West Coast National Park more or less exclusively for that purpose, as they are probably easier to see here than anywhere else in South Africa. That basically translates as anywhere else in the world then, as caracals are not a straightforward species to observe across their entire range, which includes much of Africa and the Middle East and as far north as Kazakhstan in Central Asia and as far east as India in South Asia. In fact, if I was forced to pick just one destination to search for this elusive feline, it would be this national park, as long as you had a few days and a thermal imager to assist. Fortunately, it did ultimately prove to be a good choice, as we would encounter three in all here, including one just before dusk and a female with a young kitten later that same night, which I have described in greater detail within the Trip Summary section of this report. That said, there was not any real pressure on us as we arrived at West Coast, as a caracal had already crossed our path quite literally at Mountain Zebra National Park, when it strolled across the road within the main rest camp.



Order Carnivora - Family Canidae (Dogs - 2)

4. Black-backed Jackal - *Lupulella mesomelas*

I have often seen black-backed jackals described as ubiquitous and it is fair to say that these resourceful and highly adaptable canids were the most commonly observed terrestrial carnivores of the trip. However, they are also one of the most persecuted species in all of Southern Africa and it is no coincidence that none were spotted beyond the protection of the national parks, where they are shot on sight in most areas, usually by farmers. All of our sightings occurred at the Addo, Mountain Zebra and Karoo national parks, both during the day and at night, and even when we were not watching them, we could often make out their distinctive calls. Whilst they were usually on their own or in pairs, sleeping directly beside the road in several cases, we were also able to observe a few around a carcass on a couple of occasions.



#### 5. Bat-eared Fox - *Otocyon megalotis*

There are two distinct populations of bat-eared fox, the Southern Africa subspecies *otocyon megalotis megalotis* and the East African version *otocyon megalotis virgatus*. They normally live in monogamous pairs, although apparently the males in East Africa may live with additional females, and that is how they are usually encountered, in twos. Our sightings were no exception, as we observed two sleeping a few metres apart in the early morning at a private game reserve and another pair on the second of our two amazing night drives at Mountain Zebra National Park. I was ultimately surprised not to see more, but this is equally a species you can easily miss entirely and at least we enjoyed good views at both destinations.



#### Order Carnivora - Family Hyaenidae (Hyenas - 3)

#### 6. Brown Hyena - *Parahyaena brunnea*

As I go on to describe in the Trip Summary section of this report, brown hyenas were encountered on four out of five nights in the three national parks where guided nocturnal drives are possible, so Addo Elephant, Mountain Zebra and Karoo. Five different animals were observed in all, which we were both thrilled about, as I actually advised Karina before we travelled that these shy and often elusive hyenas were one of the predators she might not be lucky with. In my experience, they are generally far easier to see in Namibia or the Kalahari region of South Africa and, to provide a little context to that warning, I once spent seven weeks in South Africa and was eventually grateful to see just one. My only slight disappointment, was that I was unable to take a decent photograph of what are remarkably attractive animals, but I did manage a few reference shots and even took a low quality film on my phone at Addo, as I was surprised to see one there and wanted some form of record.



#### 7. Spotted Hyena - *Crocuta crocuta*

I knew before we travelled that Addo Elephant National Park would provide our only opportunity to see a spotted hyena and thankfully, these iconic African animals were observed on two of the three guided night drives there. I think we encountered around ten in all, including an individual at a waterhole that initially wandered up to our vehicle and then decided to investigate a buffalo drinking in the shallows, principally by sniffing its rear end. Although remarkably calm given the rather indelicate attention, the buffalo did eventually have to indicate to the clearly surprised hyena, that it was very much alive and not yet quite ready to be consumed. Like several other major predators, including wild dogs and leopards, spotted hyenas are easier to see elsewhere in South Africa, particularly at the world renowned Kruger National Park, where they are routinely observed.



#### 8. Aardwolf - *Proteles cristatus*

This was another species that I thought we might struggle to observe, mainly because I had not been able to arrange any nocturnal drives on private reserves and you have no real control of what you actively search for on guided drives within the national parks. Occasionally, it can be possible to ask a guide to concentrate on specific animals, but equally, you can find yourself on a truck with a dozen tourists and a guide who basically stops for everything. The best guides ignore most diurnal animals at night and concentrate on only those species you are very unlikely to encounter during the day. It really is a matter of chance and on this tour we experienced a mixture of the two, as Addo is a busy park and the larger safari vehicles there were always full, but at Mountain Zebra and Karoo, which attract significantly fewer visitors, the vehicles take less guests and we were either on our own or with just one other couple on most occasions. As such, I was able to discuss targets with the individual guides, most of whom also allowed me to spotlight, which massively increased our sightings, as there is only ever one guide in each park vehicle and they are expected to both drive and spotlight, which, as I have experienced personally on countless occasions, is pretty much impossible to do well. However, with me taking care of one side of the vehicle and the guide now only having to cover his, the results between us, at Mountain Zebra at least, were utterly spectacular. As I have again further highlighted in the Trip Summary section of this report, we enjoyed two of the most memorable night drives I have ever been involved in and would ultimately encounter eight aardwolves across our two nights here, four of which, at the very least, had to be different individuals. When you consider just how difficult it can be to find even one of these delicate and generally shy insectivores, eight at random in a national park is almost unimaginable and we would actually observe nine in all, as we chanced upon one relaxing beside its burrow within a couple of hours of our arrival at Mountain Zebra. Interestingly, there is currently some debate in terms of whether the aardwolves found in Southern Africa are the same species as those that occur in East Africa and, on appearance alone, I have long wondered the same.

#### Order Carnivora - Family Herpestidae (Mongooses - 3)

#### 9. Yellow Mongoose - *Cynictis penicillata*

These attractive mongooses were regularly observed at two national parks, Addo Elephant and Mountain Zebra, with perhaps a dozen sightings in total. All but one involved individuals, which are always moving and are generally difficult to photograph well, and the picture below was taken at the only colony we encountered, where they are always far easier to shoot around their burrows. Around five or six were visible at any one time, including several young, none of which strayed far from at least one parent. Interestingly, yellow mongooses have been known to share burrow complexes with meerkats and the two species have a very similar range across Southern Africa.



#### 10. Cape Grey Mongoose - *Herpestes pulverulentus*

The most widespread terrestrial carnivore of the trip, grey mongooses were encountered at four of the five national parks we stayed at, they were only missed at Karoo, and were particularly abundant at West Coast National Park, where we saw at least ten. They were also one of the few animals viewed even reasonably regularly on our long transfer drives and happened to be the last mammal of the trip, when we stopped at False Bay Nature Reserve on the way to the airport to search briefly for a Cape dune mole-rat. Our drive to Addo Elephant National Park produced two highly contrasting encounters, the first of which involved an adult attempting to rouse an obviously dead individual, that was almost certainly its mate. A few miles on from that heartbreaking scene, I slowed down to watch another adult on the road, but thankfully this scenario was a great deal more uplifting, with a parent crossing safely with a tiny baby clasped firmly in its mouth. Despite their relative prevalence, I was usually driving when they appeared and never managed anywhere near a decent photograph, just a handful of low quality reference shots

## 11. Meerkat - *Suricata suricatta*

Meerkats were one of the few species we did not see at all well, as our only sighting occurred on a guided morning drive at Addo Elephant National Park, when our guide stopped for a lioness and I noticed a few in the distance. They were all moving around a small mound in fairly typical fashion and although I was able to take several reference shots, when they moved on, it was sadly in exactly the opposite direction. I assumed that we would see more, but as so often happens when you do not actively search for an animal, we simply did not. Also known as suricates, meerkats live in social groups and although they will share burrow complexes with ground squirrels and even yellow mongooses, they are highly territorial and will fiercely defend their home range against other meerkat clans. As such, almost 20% of meerkats are killed by other meerkats, which is the highest known conspecific mortality rate among mammals.

## Order Carnivora - Family Viverridae (Civets and Genets - 1)

### 12. Southern Small-spotted Genet - *Genetta felina* (Split from Common Genet - *Genetta genetta*)

Although not all sources currently agree the split, the southern small-spotted genet was previously classified as a subspecies of the common genet, *genetta genetta*, and is believed to replace that species throughout South Africa and Namibia. I had expected this small carnivore to be one of the most commonly observed nocturnal mammals and was ultimately surprised to encounter only two, one briefly on the second of our two astonishing night drives at Mountain Zebra and one at Karoo, where the animal in question was observed for longer and eventually walking out in the open. Despite this exceptional view, it remains almost unfathomable that we observed more aardwolves and armadillos, nine and three respectively, than genets, but that is the real beauty of what I do and once again highlights the fact that you can never take anything for granted when dealing with genuinely wild animals.

## Order Carnivora - Family Otariidae (Eared Seals - 1)

### 13. Afro-Australian Fur Seal - *Arctocephalus pusillus*

By far the most abundant mammal of the trip, fur seals were encountered in their thousands at Geyser Island off the coast of Gansbaai, where they were once famously hunted by great white sharks. Large numbers were also observed at Duiker Island off Hout Bay and on the coastal drive south from Simon's Town to Cape Point Nature Reserve. All but one of our six marine tours also included at least a few sightings of what are the largest of all fur seals and I had initially hoped to visit another massive colony at Seal Island in False Bay, but our schedule at Cape Town proved to be just too busy.



## Order Artiodactyla - Family Bovidae (Cattle, Goats, Sheep, Antelope and Goat Antelopes - 20)

### 14. Impala - *Aepyceros melampus*

Impala do not occur naturally in either the Western or Eastern Cape, but have been introduced beyond their natural range across much of South Africa and our only encounters took place on the private reserve we spent one night at on the Western Cape, where they were routinely observed on each of our two guided drives. They were also common at the small waterhole in front of the dining area of what was a luxurious lodge and were just one of several species that simply should not have been here. Nyala, common waterbuck, common wildebeest and giraffe were all encountered significantly beyond their historic range and, as I previously mentioned in terms of the lions maintained in separate predator enclosures, I actually tend not to use this type of exclusive private reserve in South Africa. Despite an abundance of diverse species, which I understand can be attractive, I prefer to observe animals where they occur naturally and it can be hard to escape how artificial these almost exotic private collections can feel. That said, I have a slightly different perspective regarding rhinos, which have been wiped out across so much of their former range, and our one-night stay here was designed specifically to see a white rhinoceros, which I knew we could not encounter at any of the national parks. I also wanted to break up what would have been an extremely long drive to Addo Elephant National Park and, having considered several alternatives, this was the best option available, which, with hindsight, does not really say a great deal.



### 15. Mountain Reedbuck - *Redunca fulvorufula*

Without doubt, in fact, without any real competition, mountain reedbuck were the most frustrating antelope of the tour, as we first observed one at distance on the private reserve we stayed at, where they would just about occur naturally, and then proceeded to miss them pretty much everywhere else, generally by minutes. On several occasions other tourists described how they had just seen one or a group and our only additional confirmed sighting occurred towards dusk at Karoo, when I spotted one, again at distance, and frantically pulled over to try for at least a few reference shots, which I did thankfully achieve. By this stage I was becoming fairly desperate, as I had almost certainly missed others in similar circumstances, given that I was always driving and by the time I stopped and reached for my binoculars, they had either disappeared over a ridge or scattered into the bush. Suffice to say, of the twenty bovids encountered across the entire tour, mountain reedbuck and Cape grysbok were the only species I was not able to photograph at least adequately enough to appear here.

### 16. Nyala - *Tragelaphus angasii*

Extensively introduced across South Africa, nyala only occur naturally in the northeast of the country and their traditional home range extends north through Mozambique and into southern Malawi and Zambia. At our private reserve they were observed on both game drives and again around the waterhole at the lodge. I have to admit, that despite any concerns regarding the legitimacy of the encounter, I was delighted to see what are striking antelopes, particularly in terms of the males, and I only later realised, I had not encountered a nyala for almost thirteen years. They were also introduced animals in South Africa and next year I should register an authentically wild nyala for the first time in approaching two decades, when I am due to visit Majete Wildlife Reserve in Malawi.



#### 17. Common Waterbuck - *Kobus ellipsiprymnus*

While common across much of its range, that range extends only as far south as KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa and waterbuck were consequently another species we would have missed if we had not visited either this private game reserve or one of several like it. Again, I was happy enough to spend time with one of the most photogenic of all antelopes and although we only encountered a single male on our first afternoon drive, we did come across a few more the next morning. When I first visited Africa, there were considered to be two distinct species of waterbuck, the common waterbuck, *kobus ellipsiprymnus*, the one with the white circle on its rear end, and the defassa waterbuck, *kobus defassa*, which has a solid white rump. They have since been classified as a single species, although there remains doubt whether that should actually be the case, but if they were still considered separate, it would be the common version that occurs in South Africa.





#### 18. Common Wildebeest - *Connochaetes taurinus*

Although not recorded here in any particular order, common, or blue wildebeest as they are also known, were the last antelope we would encounter beyond their natural range and again, they were observed on each of our two drives in the Western Cape. Although I was not aware of the exact situation when I booked, you know that with no major predators on these private reserves, a certain amount of culling must take place and our guide mentioned that they allow hunters in once a year to shoot some of the older animals. He described it pretty much as a big day out with all of the family taking part, but apart from confirming just how unnatural these game reserves tend to be, he displayed a remarkable lack of affinity for any of the animals involved, which are very much viewed as commodities, to be bought and sold, or shot and eaten, as and when necessary. If there was any doubt regarding this, our guide went on to inform us that of the 150 springbok introduced to the reserve, only ten had survived, largely as a result of disease spread by ticks. However, when I asked how they intended to proceed, he said they were unsure, as that level of financial loss was unsustainable. There was no mention of the animals that suffered and died or of the possibility that another 140 might meet the same fate, just the fact that it was a lot of money to risk. These reserves are businesses of course and I travelled having visited many over the years, but general tourists should have some idea how they operate and the type of industry they are supporting, because an industry it surely is.



### 19. Black Wildebeest - *Connochaetes gnou*

Unlike common wildebeest, which were observed on a private reserve well beyond its natural range, black wildebeest occur naturally at Mountain Zebra National Park and also at Camdeboo National Park, which is situated about 125 kilometres further west. I had intended to visit Camdeboo if necessary, but time would have been an issue and we were both satisfied with our black wildebeest sightings at Mountain Zebra, where we also saw the South African ground squirrel, another species that occurs at both reserves. Although their ranges do not overlap, except where they have been introduced, black wildebeest are easily distinguished by their white tails, in contrast to the black tails of the common wildebeest. Their horns are also a different shape, as they curve forwards and then up, as opposed to those of the common variety, which initially curve to the side.

### 20. Springbok - *Antidorcas marsupialis*

Excluding the ten survivors of the holocaust at the private game reserve we stayed at, which it was hard to feel anything but a bit depressed for, some of our most entertaining sightings involved these attractive and acrobatic antelope, which were encountered in healthy numbers at both Mountain Zebra and Karoo. Because of the time of year that we travelled, spring in the Southern Hemisphere, there were plenty of young around and plenty of calves to photograph aggressively nudging their way under their mothers to feed, some of which would have none of it and just walked off. We also experienced several impressive displays of 'pronking', which basically involves the springbok more or less bouncing high into the air with very straight legs, often at fairly high speed and usually with the white flap on their rump lifted. It is uncertain whether this behaviour is designed purely to confuse potential predators or is used more for display purposes among competing males, but in my experience, pronking is usually performed by juveniles and subadults and I would therefore imagine that it is more a kind of environmental or social learning or bonding behaviour, practised by the least experienced members as they become part of the herd. Whilst I have seen plenty of springbok at full speed and a few run down and killed, I have rarely seen adults pronking and given that both sexes display this behaviour, it is more likely to be a social interaction than a mating ritual.



### 21. Cape Grysbok - *Raphicerus melanotis*

This was another species that we struggled with somewhat, as I had a quick glimpse of what was almost certainly a grysbok whilst driving to Agulhas National Park from Hermanus, but we were already late and I decided not to stop and try to confirm, a decision I was beginning to bitterly regret almost two weeks later. I had just assumed we would see more, but they are scarce at Addo and do not occur at all at either Mountain Zebra or Karoo, which I should have had sufficient experience to have taken into account. Occasionally this can happen when you are spending much of your time searching for rarer targets and I did have additional sites for them in and around Cape Town if necessary. Thankfully, that was not the case and we encountered at least one more at West Coast National Park, the last reserve we were due to stay at. As with the mountain reedbuck, I was only able to take a quick reference shot of an animal that quickly disappeared into the dense vegetation, but there were almost certainly one or two more sightings at least, as I was using my thermal imager at night and basically ignored every heat signature that I could tell was not a caracal. Slightly smaller than the steenbok, with which it can easily be confused, the Cape grysbok is endemic to South Africa and largely occurs in the Western and Eastern Cape, where our entire tour took place.



#### 22. Grey Rhebok - *Pelea capreolus*

There remains confusion in terms of whether the grey rhebok is endemic to South Africa, Lesotho and Eswatini, as most sources suggest this is the case, but some indicate a small natural population in the extreme southwestern region of Namibia. Whatever the case, they occur over a relatively widespread but patchy territory within South Africa and are one of the antelope you are more likely to encounter beyond protected areas, as they are free roaming and can easily clear the fences erected for domestic animals. This indeed was the case with us, as we first observed what are highly distinctive antelope on the drive to and from Agulhas National Park and further random sightings followed around Hermanus, Gansbaai and on the Garden Route transfer towards Addo. They were normally spotted in small groups, which is typical, and of the seven national parks we visited in all, they were only encountered at Bontebok and Karoo.

#### 23. Common Duiker - *Sylvicapra grimmia*

The only antelope observed at all five of the national parks we stayed overnight at, so Bontebok, Addo Elephant, Mountain Zebra, Karoo and West Coast, but always in low numbers and usually at night. Indeed, I only managed daylight photographs on two occasions, both in the early morning, initially at Bontebok and then at Addo, where the picture below was taken. As is usually the case, they were only encountered individually and in all we saw twelve across the five parks, nine of which were spotted on night drives. Known elsewhere as either the bush or grey duiker, the common duiker is one of the most widespread of all antelope species and their massive range extends as far north as Senegal, Chad and Sudan across Central Africa.



#### 24. Steenbok - *Raphicerus campestris*

These small antelope occur in two distinct populations and are split accordingly into two main subspecies, *raphicerus campestris* in Southern Africa and *raphicerus campestris neumanni* in East Africa. Their territory includes most of South Africa and, as such, they are present in each of the seven national parks we visited. In addition to a handful of sightings beyond the actual parks, they were observed at Mountain Zebra, Karoo and West Coast, often in pairs. This is characteristic of solitary creatures that do not mate for life, but will commonly share the same territory for long periods, coming together to breed. Although they can be skittish with vehicles, they basically sit down when threatened and are consequently one of the easier small antelope to photograph. The picture below was taken at Mountain Zebra and illustrates a steenbok scent marking, which involves scraping dirt over its urine and droppings, most likely to preserve the scent, which is then spread in combination with the glands on their hooves to form unique territorial trails.



#### 25. Bontebok - *Damaliscus pygargus* ssp and 26. Blesbok - *Damaliscus pygargus phillipsi* ssp

Although they used to be classified as distinct species, bontebok and blesbok are now considered subspecies of the one species *damaliscus pygargus*, at least by most sources. However, I have recorded them separately here, partly to highlight the difference in appearance between the two, but also because I have never been fully convinced of their assessment as a single species. This is also the case across much of South Africa, where they are usually referred to separately and are sold as distinct animals. Both are endemic to South Africa, if you take the liberty of including the small landlocked countries of Lesotho and Eswatini, formerly Swaziland, but both now occur well beyond their natural territories, including on game and hunting reserves in Namibia. The bontebok version was hunted to the very brink of extinction in the 19th century, when it is believed just seventeen remained, and was ultimately only saved by the commendable efforts of a handful of landowners, who created a number of small reserves for its protection. In 1931 the first Bontebok National Park was established to fully protect the species, which was moved to its current location in 1961. As the smallest of all South African national parks, Bontebok protects less than 200 of the animals after which it is named, but the population elsewhere is now thought to exceed 5,000, although many of these occur on private reserve, again, often beyond their former range. We would encounter what are both highly attractive antelope at three national parks, bontebok at Bontebok and West Coast and blesbok at Mountain Zebra, and I have reproduced photographs of each distinct animal here, to illustrate the variations in appearance between the two. Whilst bontebok are considerably darker and have a solid white rump and uniformly white lower legs, blesbok have a brown patch on their rump and more brown on the lower sections of their legs. The white blaze on the face is also different, as blesbok usually have a brown patch that clearly divides the blaze, whereas that of the bontebok is generally continuous.



### 27. Gemsbok - *Oryx gazella*

Oryx have always been among my favourite antelope and I have been fortunate enough to encounter all four species in the wild, including two, the scimitar-horned oryx and the Arabian oryx, which were formally classified as extinct in the wild. Of the other two, the beisa oryx is relatively easy to see in East Africa and gemsbok adorn much of central and western Southern Africa, including two of the national parks we were due to visit, Mountain Zebra and Karoo. We would observe these supremely elegant creatures at each, but our sightings at Karoo, against a redolent desert landscape and in the most glorious light, were as memorable as any across the entire trip. For those who are not aware, the beisa oryx was previously considered to be a subspecies of the gemsbok, but is now afforded full species status, with two subspecies separated by Kenya's Tana River, the beisa oryx, *oryx beisa beisa*, to the north and the fringe-eared oryx, *oryx beisa callotis*, to the south.



### 28. Common Eland - *Tragelaphus oryx*

Whilst some people might consider that the common eland equally does not belong on the Western Cape, the opposite is in fact the case, as these impressive antelope once roamed all of Southern Africa and this is an example of an animal being reintroduced to its former range, not introduced artificially beyond it. I was therefore extremely pleased to encounter eland on the private reserve that we visited and even happier to see them in such healthy numbers at four national parks, Mountain Zebra, Karoo, Table Mountain and West Coast, where we watched a magnificent herd of approaching 200 from the similarly spectacular Seeberg viewpoint. The second largest of all antelope, only the Giant Eland of Western and Central Africa is larger, and not by much, common eland occur as far north as Ethiopia and South Sudan, but in South Africa, the only populations south of the Drakensberg have been reintroduced.



#### 29. Hartebeest - *Alcelaphus buselaphus*

One of the most regularly observed antelope, red hartebeest were encountered at four of the five national parks we stayed at, they were only missed at West Coast, as well as at the Cape Point Nature Reserve section of Table Mountain National Park. Of the eight currently accepted subspecies, two were previously assessed at full species level, one of which, the red hartebeest, *alcelaphus buselaphus caama*, is the version that occurs in Southern Africa, basically from southern Angola all the way down to Cape Agulhas, the most southerly point of the continent. Whilst we also missed them on what was a brief afternoon visit there, I made a point of stopping for these slightly unusual, but attractive creatures whenever the light was good, as the red coats from which they are named, are particularly photogenic in the right light.





### 30. Greater Kudu - *Tragelaphus strepsiceros*

Whilst not as widespread as some of the other antelope, they only occurred at three of the seven national parks we either visited or stayed at, greater kudu were routinely encountered at all three, as well as at the private reserve we spent a single night at. For the record, the three reserves were Addo, Mountain Zebra and Karoo, where they were observed in significant numbers on pretty much every drive. Another highly attractive and photogenic antelope, particularly the males with their distinctive spiral horns, greater kudu occur as far north as Sudan on the Red Sea and they overlap with lesser kudu, *tragelaphus imberbis*, across much of East Africa. However, the two species do not interbreed and the easiest way to tell them apart is by the vertical white stripes on their flanks, as greater kudu usually have between six to ten, while lesser kudu have eleven to fifteen. Lesser kudu also have white patches on their throat and neck, which is absent from their larger cousins.



### 31. Southern Bushbuck - *Tragelaphus sylvaticus*

This was a species that I was not entirely certain we would see, as they only occur at Addo in terms of the national parks we were due to visit and I knew they were far from guaranteed there. I was therefore delighted when we chanced upon a young male before we even reached Addo, at the Garden Route Botanical Garden. Having spoken to one of the gardeners, he has started visiting regularly from the adjacent forest and was incredibly calm as we slowly approached to within just a few metres. We did eventually see the species at Addo as well, with nice views of two adult males on a game drive and a few individuals at the main rest camp, usually around dusk. Recently split from *tragelaphus scriptus*, which is now known as the northern bushbuck, the southern variety occurs as far north as Ethiopia, where apparently the two distinct species are believed to overlap.

### 32. Klipspringer - *Oreotragus oreotragus*

Having spotted our first klipspringers within an hour of leaving the airport at Cape Town, whilst driving down to the African penguin colony at Stony Point, you could perhaps be forgiven for thinking that these petite mountainous specialists would be regularly observed throughout the tour, particularly as we would be spending much of our time in their preferred habitat. Unfortunately, this did not prove to be the case and you could literally count our klipspringer sightings on one hand, without even using your thumb. In addition to the pair observed on that first transfer, which were incidentally the first mammals of the trip, we saw an individual the next morning on the Galpin Hut hike at Fernkloof Nature Reserve and another solitary animal high on a cliff a week or so later at Mountain Zebra National Park. Our last encounter, which also featured a male and female pair, took place at Karoo National Park, where we finally enjoyed a superb close view and where the picture below was taken.



### 33. African Buffalo - *Syncerus caffer*

We would have only one opportunity to view these charismatic creatures across the entire trip, as they only occur at Addo Elephant National Park in terms of the destinations we visited, which is home to one of the largest herds of disease free buffalo in South Africa. That said, there are currently estimated to be around 400 buffalo at Addo, compared to the 48,000 or so that occur in Kruger National Park, despite the fact that Kruger, at almost 20,000 km<sup>2</sup>, is only about twelve times the size of Addo. Whilst the buffalo population is currently stable here, it has never fully recovered from the reintroduction of lions to the park in 2003, when around 60% of the buffalo were slaughtered because they had never seen a lion before and simply did not recognise them as a threat. Given the financial value of a disease free herd, some lions were removed from the park and over the years, it has been a case of attempting to find a balance between the reintroduction of these apex predators and the survival of such a valuable herd. This is of course the problem with fenced reserves and limited space, as you cannot allow nature to take its course and as soon as you intervene one way or another, you have to continually play God. Apparently buffalo are being observed more during the day now as a result of lion activity, but we generally encountered individuals or low numbers in daylight and our only relatively large herd was encountered on the second of our three night drives here. Ironically, I had originally included Addo purely for Karina, as elephants are her favourite animal, but I would have added it in any case, as soon as I had realised buffalo were not going to be seen elsewhere, as these belligerent and courageous beasts are one of my own personal favourites.



### Order Artiodactyla - Family Cervidae (Deer - I)

#### 34. Fallow Deer - *Dama dama*

Introduced by European settlers for hunting purposes, fallow deer are still hunted across much of the country and particularly in the Western Cape, where they also appear on many private game reserves. We chanced upon our one deer entirely accidentally, when I noticed a single female grazing on the lawn of a game lodge just before reaching Addo, but the fact is, I could have significantly increased the number of mammals encountered on this trip by carefully selecting the right private reserve. As I have already mentioned, several species encountered on the Western Cape should not have been there and other similar reserves are home to sable antelope, roan antelope and even southern lechwe, which do not naturally occur any further south than the Okavango Delta region of Botswana.

### Order Artiodactyla - Family Giraffidae (Giraffe - I)

#### 35. Giraffe - *Giraffa camelopardalis*

As was the case with some of the antelope, there would not have been any giraffes on this tour if I had not included a private reserve, as these iconic African animals do not occur naturally at any of the destinations we visited. Although we were staying more or less exclusively for white rhinos, I was aware that giraffe had been introduced here and was expecting to see the local subspecies *giraffa camelopardalis giraffa*, which occurs across parts of South Africa. However, the one male giraffe used for breeding purposes was actually a Maasai giraffe, which occur as far south as southern Tanzania, which is almost 4,000 kilometres away. The females were not Maasai and I did not even take the time to check where they were from, as there is absolutely no conservation benefit in breeding hybrid species. They cannot be reintroduced elsewhere beyond other private reserves and are really only being bred for commercial purposes, so to entertain paying guests and to sell on to other equally questionable reserves. Of course, most people have expectations in terms of the animals they hope to see on safari and one couple mentioned how lovely it was to see baby giraffes, but therein lies the problem, as visitors are always going to enjoy watching attractive animals against an equally appealing backdrop, but often with no idea of exactly what they are watching or indeed, why.

In outlining the above, I have used the historical taxonomy for what was always considered a single species, *giraffa camelopardalis*, with nine pretty much agreed subspecies. However, recent studies have confirmed that some of these subspecies should actually be classified at full species level and there are now believed to be four distinct species of giraffe with seven subspecies. I have therefore detailed below the revised taxonomy, which has been adopted by most sources, but not yet universally.

Northern Giraffe - *Giraffa camelopardalis*

Nubian Giraffe - *Giraffa camelopardalis camelopardalis* ssp

Kordofan Giraffe - *Giraffa camelopardalis antiquorum* ssp

West African Giraffe - *Giraffa camelopardalis peralta* ssp

Southern Giraffe - *Giraffa giraffa*

South African Giraffe - *Giraffa giraffa giraffa* ssp

Angolan Giraffe - *Giraffa giraffa angolensis* ssp

Maasai Giraffe - *Giraffa tippelskirchi*

Maasai Giraffe - *Giraffa tippelskirchi tippelskirchi* ssp

Luangwa or Thornicroft's Giraffe - *Giraffa tippelskirchi thornicrofti* ssp

Reticulated Giraffe - *Giraffa reticulata*

For the purpose of this report and considering the rather absurd mixture of species, subspecies and hybrids encountered at this private reserve, I have retained the original single taxonomic classification *giraffa camelopardalis*.



## Order Artiodactyla - Family Hippopotamidae (Hippopotamuses - I)

### 36. Common Hippopotamus - *Hippopotamus amphibius*

In marked contrast to the utter shambles involving the giraffes introduced at the private reserve we visited, the common hippopotamus did historically occur on the Western Cape and throughout much of South Africa, including along the entire length of the Orange River, which runs almost 2,500 kilometres from Lesotho to Namibia. Wiped out by European settlers across the vast majority of their range, hippos endured in parts of KwaZulu-Natal and the area that is now Kruger National Park within the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces. They are now being translocated to the Western and Eastern Cape, including to Addo Elephant National Park and this private reserve. As with the eland antelope described previously at the same lodge, I was thrilled to observe the four adult hippos reintroduced here, as well as the calf that one of the females produced earlier this year, the first hippopotamus born in this area for more than 300 years. This I felt was approaching some form of authentic conservation and at least offered visitors a tangible glimpse of the genuine good that can be achieved on these large areas of privately owned land. However, some of the other practices here were far more questionable, regrettable even in some cases, and I departed more with the feeling that this is very much a commercial enterprise, as opposed to a genuine conservation initiative. These though would be the only hippos encountered on the tour, as we did not spend time where they can be observed at Addo and also missed the small population introduced at False Bay Nature Reserve in Cape Town in 1981, where we stopped briefly to search for a Cape dune mole-rat before our flight home. These were the first hippos reintroduced to the Western Cape after an absence of more than 300 years and they are occasionally observed from the boardwalk or one of several observation towers and hides. Sadly, we had very little time to do anything justice here and consequently missed everything, which is so often the case.



## Order Artiodactyla - Family Suidae (Pigs - 2)

### 37. Common Warthog - *Phacochoerus africanus*

Of the seven national parks we were due to visit, I only expected to encounter warthogs at Addo, as they are not listed as occurring elsewhere, at least not within the actual parks. I was aware of a small population just beyond Karoo, but as we were spending all our time within the reserve, these were unlikely and elsewhere on the Western Cape they are pretty much absent. As anticipated, at Addo we enjoyed multiple sightings of what I have always considered to be rather charming pigs, but they are otherwise almost as uncommon on the Eastern Cape and I was surprised when we also chanced upon a few at Mountain Zebra. Four subspecies are currently recognised, including the southern warthog, *phacochoerus africanus sundevallii*, which, as the name suggests, occurs throughout Southern Africa, as far north as Angola, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique.

### 38. Bushpig - *Potamochoerus larvatus*

Our solitary bushpig was spotted on the first of three guided night drives at Addo Elephant National Park, when I was spotlighting on the right side of the vehicle and everyone on the left missed the animal running into the vegetation. Just minutes earlier, someone on the opposite side had spotted a porcupine, which we all missed on the right. Our guide, who was also driving to be entirely fair, missed both, but it can be very much like this with the larger vehicles they use at Addo, where the night drives are consequently fairly hit and miss. That said, our three nights here still produced our only view of these distinctive nocturnal pigs, albeit an extremely brief one, as well as two species of hyena, spotted and brown, and the first of three aardvarks on consecutive nights, the one here and then two at Mountain Zebra National Park.

## Order Artiodactyla/Cetacea - Family Delphinidae (Dolphins - 2)

### 39. Common Dolphin - *Delphinus delphis*

These widespread dolphins, they are the most abundant of all cetaceans and occur on the coastline of every continent except Antarctica, were observed on our first boat tour out of Hermanus, but not for long sadly, as the company I used here were really only interested in showing their passengers southern right whales. Guests were shuttled out and back pretty much to the exclusion of all else, which was a great shame in this case, as there were probably 200 or so of these delightful dolphins around our boat, many of which were porpoising and bow riding in typical fashion for the brief period we spent with them. Four subspecies are currently accepted, but until recently two common dolphin species were recognised, the short-beaked common dolphin, *delphinus delphis*, and the long-beaked common dolphin, *delphinus capensis*. They have since been assessed as a single species, but a great deal of debate remains regarding this classification and it is likely that further taxonomic changes will follow.

### 40. Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin - *Tursiops aduncus*

Whilst our southern right whale sightings at Hermanus and Gansbaai were undoubtedly spectacular, our best boat tour took place at Port Elizabeth, at least in terms of the ideology and the effort made to see as much as possible. The company here used a much smaller boat, with the captain and crew basically searching for anything and everything on our behalf, as opposed to fixating on a single species and then pretty much giving up. Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins were actually the first animals encountered on a voyage that also included humpback whales, a bryde's whale, Afro-Australian fur seals and African penguins. The dolphins were initially observed in a pod of about 40, which we were given plenty of time to enjoy as they swam and jumped around the boat, and we would go on to encounter a smaller group, which we spent less time with in order to devote more time to whales.

## Order Artiodactyla/Cetacea - Family Balaenopteridae (Rorquals - 2)

### 41. Humpback Whale - *Megaptera novaeangliae*

Our first whales of the same tour described above were humpbacks, with one observed briefly at distance followed by a close encounter with a mother and calf. This was another memorable highlight of what was an immensely enjoyable voyage, with both whales swimming close to the boat at times or the mother leading as her baby followed directly behind. We were able to watch them both fluking on several occasions, although the calf was far less successful in terms of arching its back and lifting its tail out of the water as it attempted to copy its mother. Looking back later, I commented that it felt like a particularly long sighting and when I checked my photographs, I was not at all surprised to learn that we had spent almost half an hour in the presence of these magnificent creatures. A widespread species, humpbacks appear in every major ocean basin and most populations migrate between cold-water feeding grounds and breeding and calving grounds in warmer waters. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, or the IUCN as it is more commonly known, humpback whale numbers are increasing and their last estimate in 2018 suggested a global population of 135,000, which will have grown significantly in the intervening period. Three subspecies are universally recognised, the North Atlantic humpback whale, *megaptera novaeangliae novaeangliae*, the North Pacific humpback whale, *megaptera novaeangliae kuzira*, and the Southern Hemisphere humpback whale, *megaptera novaeangliae australis*.



#### 42. Bryde's Whale - *Balaenoptera edeni*

The humpbacks were the first whales observed other than southern right whales and on the same tour from Port Elizabeth, we encountered our third and final whale species of the trip, a lone bryde's whale. I had been hoping to see this species before we even travelled, as unlike the humpback and southern right whales that migrate here annually, bryde's whales are permanent residents in these waters, where they follow their food, mainly anchovies, mackerel and pilchards, opportunistically up and down the coast. We had also just missed one at Hermanus, which can happen of course, but was slightly more annoying on this occasion, as a few passengers shouted the sighting out, but the captain did not even turn the boat to check and just continued back to port. It was therefore almost as much a relief as a pleasure to finally spot this whale and the sighting itself was an excellent one, which is not always the case with a generally elusive species that dives and surfaces erratically. Indeed, you can easily lose them after just one brief view, as you never know how long they are going to spend under the water and they can surface a kilometre away. On this occasion we were fortunate and were able to spend around ten minutes with an animal that did not appear at all concerned by our presence and was happy to stay around the boat. If time had not already been against we would have actually stayed longer, but, as the photograph above hopefully conveys, it had been a wonderful way to round off not just a superb final marine tour, but some of the best whale watching imaginable.

#### Order Artiodactyla/Cetacea - Family Balaenidae (Right Whales - I)

#### 43. Southern Right Whale - *Eubalaena australis*

As I have already explained in detail, the whale watching at Hermanus was perfunctory at best, but southern right whales were observed on all three tours and the two out of Gansbaai were considerably more enjoyable. In all, we probably observed twenty of these magnificent creatures, the majority of which had calves born within the last two to three months, as southern right whales migrate to these warmer waters each year specifically to mate and give birth. They will stay for around six months before heading back to the feeding grounds of Antarctica, by which time the calves will be around half the size of their mothers. Although we did not witness any of the adults breaching, this spectacular behaviour was fairly common among the calves, which would pick up speed and surge out of the depths three or four times in quick succession. Spyhopping, when the whales hold their heads vertically above the waves, was also regularly observed, as was tail and pectoral slapping against the surface of the water. Calves would swim up and onto their mothers, where they would rest for several seconds before rolling off, and after just a couple of trips, Karina already knew exactly why I had described Hermanus as one of the best whale watching destinations on earth. That said, however special the views were at sea, and they were pretty exceptional at times, our most memorable encounter occurred at De Kelders near Gansbaai, where you can watch whales from viewing platforms and car parks at the top of the low cliffs. There are also a couple of points where you are able to climb down and sit on the rocks at the very edge of the water, with whales less than ten metres away at times. We spent one early evening like this, by a small headland, where the whales stop and rest and the calves play beside them, almost within touching distance. Watching the mother and young bond like this, and listening to them breathe right beside you, it was impossible not to be humbled by these gentle behemoths, as the sun slowly slipped away on a truly magical experience.



## Order Perissodactyla - Family Equidae (Zebras - 2)

### 44. Plains Zebra - *Equus quagga*

Formerly known as the burchell's zebra, *equus burchellii*, the plains zebra occurs as far north as South Sudan and Ethiopia and in South Africa in KwaZulu-Natal and the northeastern provinces, most notably at Kruger National Park. Although also introduced at Addo Elephant National Park, it is doubtful they ever occurred that far south naturally and there is also a small population at Karoo, where I believe almost certainly the same concern applies. Whilst mountain zebra also apparently occur at both parks, we only saw one species at each, plains at Addo and mountain at Karoo. At Addo the plains variety were relatively abundant and were observed on every game drive, day and night. As you would expect in terms of a species that does not occur naturally on either the Eastern or Western Cape, they were only encountered beyond that national park at the private game reserve we visited, where they were viewed close to the vehicle, which is pretty much always the case on private reserves, but in fairly low numbers. One of three accepted extant zebra species, the third being the grevy's zebra, *equus grevyi*, the plains zebra has by far the largest range and is consequently the most commonly observed zebra across Africa.



### 45. Mountain Zebra - *Equus zebra*

The mountain zebra, on the other hand, pretty much only occurs in South Africa and Namibia, with a small population just across the border in southwest Angola. Two subspecies are generally accepted, the nominate Cape mountain zebra, *equus zebra zebra*, and hartmann's mountain zebra, *equus zebra hartmannae*, but some sources disagree with this classification and argue that each should be assessed at full species level. Whilst the numbers of the hartmann's subspecies, which is mainly found in Namibia, have remained relatively healthy, the Cape mountain zebra was almost wiped out by hunting and habitat loss and there were believed to be only 80 remaining in three fragmented populations by the middle of the 20th century. One of these was at Mountain Zebra national park, which was proclaimed in 1937 specifically to conserve the species. However, the original herd numbered just six animals, five stallions and a single mare, and by 1950 just two stallions remained. Further limited reintroductions followed and in 1964 the park was increased in size, since when the mountain zebra population has continued to slowly recover and the park has continued to grow with it, from just over 17 km<sup>2</sup> at inception to its current size of 284 km<sup>2</sup>. Although it remains a tiny reserve at less than 1.5% of the size of Kruger National Park, it is still significantly bigger than Bontebok National Park, which, at just 29.9 km<sup>2</sup> is by far the smallest park in South Africa. It is also where we would encounter these highly distinctive zebras for the first time, with a handful of mostly distant sightings and a largest herd size of six. That would change at both Mountain Zebra and Karoo, where zebras were routinely encountered, often in larger herds, although never more than perhaps a dozen, and at close quarters. In terms of the differences between the plains and mountain zebra, it is very easy to distinguish between the two, as per the photographs reproduced above and below.



#### Order Perissodactyla - Family Rhinocerotidae (Rhinoceroses - 2)

##### 46. Black Rhinoceros - *Diceros bicornis*

Although it is no secret that black rhinoceros occur at some of the national parks we visited, I am not going to disclose where we were successful with this species or how many rhinos were observed in total. Suffice to say, we enjoyed several exceptional encounters and these majestic and criminally persecuted animals were a major highlight of our trip, as they always are of course, wherever you are still able to observe them. Clearly it remains a profound sadness that their plight is such that I am unable to even share basic details, but if it sounds as if am perhaps exaggerating the threat, several guides specifically asked us not to post details of where the rhinos were seen on social media. They will not even discuss population densities with guests and when one guide was asked how many rhinos occurred in the park, as we were actually sitting watching one, he replied 'at least one'. Despite their reputation to the contrary, which has been largely spread by hunters trying to shoot them or guides who ignore their obvious warning signs and attempt to get too close, black rhinos are not naturally aggressive and will always try to avoid conflict if possible. As such, they are an easy target for poachers, armed with automatic weapons, and have been wiped out across the vast majority of their range. As is the case elsewhere, in South Africa they now endure in isolated populations within national parks and highly protected private reserves. I have spent a great deal of time watching these critically endangered creatures on foot and with the incredible rangers who sleep directly beside them at certain destinations to guard them at night, all of whom, without exception, have stated that there are far more dangerous creatures in the African bush. Particularly the poachers, who will routinely kill rangers to get to the pretty much defenceless animals they risk their lives to protect. Over the years I have supported a number of conservation projects involving rhinos and am a member of Save The Rhino, an organisation that works to protect all five rhinoceros species across the globe, two of which, the Sumatran and the Javan, are in far greater trouble even than the black rhino. If you would like to learn more about their critical work or to support it financially, please visit their website at [www.savetherhino.org](http://www.savetherhino.org).



#### 47. White Rhinoceros - *Ceratotherium simum*

The same registered charity supports the conservation of white rhinos, which have also been extirpated across much of their historic range, as their population continues to decline. Although there are more white rhinos than the other four global rhino species combined, they also now survive in a tiny percentage of their former territory and in South Africa they do not occur in any of the seven national parks we visited. Instead, I had included a private reserve more or less specifically for an animal that has always meant a great deal to me personally and whilst it was probably located slightly south of where these iconic African tanks traditionally roamed, I have different rules regarding rhinos, given the extraordinary level of persecution they have all suffered. As such, I have no objection to reputable game reserves introducing rhinos for conservation purposes and whether this reserve could be considered reputable, I am not entirely sure, but certainly they intend to protect and breed white rhinos, which is something that in general I will always support. Although I have not named the reserve in question, I will again not go into any detail regarding our one sighting, except to say that we very nearly missed rhinos here, eventually spotting them crossing a road towards the end of our final game drive. Fortunately, we were able to follow a short distance for an excellent, but relatively brief view, as they ambled off happily into the undergrowth.



## Order Proboscidea - Family Elephantidae (Elephants - I)

### 48. African Savannah Elephant - *Loxodonta Africana*

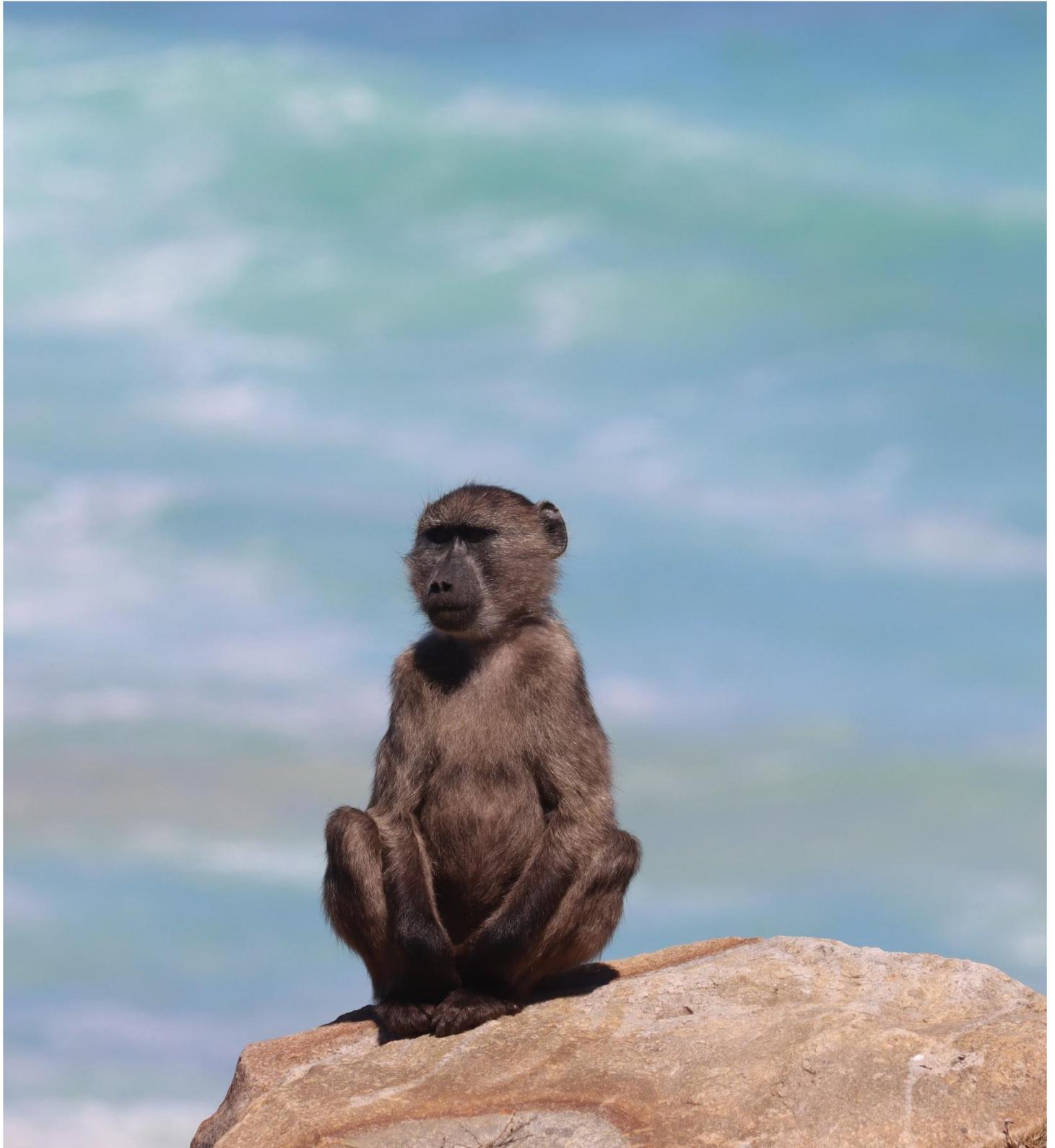
My original itinerary did not include the Eastern Cape at all and I only included it because Karina was dismayed at the thought of visiting Africa without seeing her beloved elephants, which I very much enjoy spending time with as well, but had initially planned something a bit different involving mainly small mammals. Of course I could have always included a private reserve with elephants on the Eastern Cape, where there are several, including reserves that allow you to walk with and even feed the largest of all land animals. However, whilst they all state that their elephants occur for conservation purposes, generally, in much the same way that a few random lions are released in separate enclosures, they are really only there to allow the lodges to market themselves as 'big five' reserves. The elephants are not truly free and your experience with them is not an authentically wild one. As Karina had only previously watched her favourite animals in the wilds of Zimbabwe, across some of the most breathtaking landscapes in all of Southern Africa, I could not inflict a private reserve on her for this species and therefore added Addo Elephant National Park, as well as Mountain Zebra National Park, which is fairly close. Although I had to either drop or reduce our time at other destinations, both turned out to be inspired choices, as Addo produced a host of species we would not encounter elsewhere, including elephant, buffalo and spotted hyena, and Mountain Zebra was the setting of two of the most incredible night drives I have ever experienced. In terms of the elephants, although Addo is not quite Mana Pools, it is now one of the largest parks in South Africa and is home to a population of some 600 elephants, at least according to the South African National Parks website. There are certainly a healthy number in any case and elephants were observed on every drive, both day and night, and at more or less every waterhole we visited, no doubt in part due to the fact that our stay coincided with the peak of a fairly fierce local heatwave.



## Order Primates - Family Cercopithecidae (Old World Monkeys - 2)

### 49. Chacma Baboon - *Papio ursinus*

Baboons were observed on our first day in South Africa, both on the drive to Hermanus, where we would spend our first night, and at the Harold Porter National Botanical Garden, which we stopped at on the way. On that drive we would encounter one of the volunteer patrol groups that help baboons cross busy roads and move on to their wild areas without too much carnage, usually through towns or other urban areas, where they can come into conflict with people. It is a nice touch in terms of trying to coexist with wild animals and we would encounter baboons on other transfers, as well as more naturally at the Addo Elephant, Zebra Mountain and Karoo national parks. Despite their fairly regular presence, we did not have what I would describe as a perfect baboon sighting until our final morning at Cape Point Nature Reserve, which is part of the Table Mountain National Park, where we encountered a large troop foraging along the shore. This was really the way that you need to see animals that many people do not understand and consequently dislike, calmly getting on with their lives in an entirely natural setting, not sitting at the side of the road and approaching cars where tourists have obviously fed them before. We spent well over an hour quietly appreciating the entirely natural behaviour on display, with baboons feeding, grooming and mating, all against the dramatic backdrop of Cape Point and the crashing waves of the Atlantic Ocean. It was quite a sight and a fitting way to end what had been a spectacular tour, as this would prove to be our final encounter of any note and the photograph below was one of the last that I took.



#### 50. Vervet Monkey - *Chlorocebus pygerythrus*

Excluding Cape Point, vervet monkeys were observed in the same three parks as their larger primatal cousins, so Addo Elephant, Mountain Zebra and Karoo, and were also spotted along the road on transfers, most notably on the drive between Mountain Zebra and Karoo. Our first encounter occurred at the private reserve we visited for white rhinos, but in general this was a species that got missed somewhat, which can happen with animals you see fairly regularly, but consequently do not always stop to see well. Our best sightings occurred at Mountain Zebra, where the picture below was taken, but again, you often overlook animals that you encounter routinely around the rest camps and that was slightly the case with this species.



#### Order Tubulidentata - Family Orycteropodidae (Aardvark - I)

#### 51. Aardvark - *Orycteropus afer*

One of the most widespread mammals on the continent, aardvarks occur across almost all of Sub-Saharan Africa, and yet they are very rarely observed, certainly not routinely and it is usually a case of searching for them at specific destinations. I had not included any of those destinations on this tour and although I had mentioned to Karina that aardvarks are easier to see in South Africa than anywhere else, I equally advised a modicum of caution, as these peculiar animals are strictly nocturnal and extremely skittish. They will inevitably run as soon as they hear a vehicle or see a light, which usually means they are gone without you even knowing they were there, and in many places they seem to leave the safety of their burrows later at night, when most night drives will have already returned to the lodge. As such, I had no real anticipation of Karina seeing her first ever aardvark and knew that it would just be a matter of chance, pretty much as it would be for aardwolves and brown hyenas, all of which we ultimately had extraordinarily good fortune with at the same two national parks, Addo Elephant and Mountain Zebra. As I have described in greater detail within the Trip Summary section of this report, we would go on to see both aardvarks and brown hyenas three nights in a row at these reserves, which I have never done purely randomly in terms of aardvarks before. The last of the three did not even make any attempt to run and we would have been able to watch for almost as long as we wanted I feel, but our guide made a small mistake in terms of moving the vehicle, at which point it did finally notice us and shuffle off. It was not a major issue, as you cannot really quibble after aardvark sightings on three consecutive nights and we were both aware that we had experienced something pretty special over three wonderful evenings on the Eastern Cape.



Order Hyracoidea - Family Procaviidae (Hyraxes - I)

52. Rock Hyrax - *Procavia capensis*

In stark contrast to the armadillos, we observed far less of these furry and often rotund little mammals than I expected and far less than I have seen previously in the areas visited. Our first and by far our best sighting occurred at the African penguin colony at Stony Point on day one, where we saw several, including mothers with small young. A few more followed around Hermanus and at the Fernkloof Nature Reserve, but we would not see another until the road transfer between the Mountain Zebra and Karoo national parks, when we noticed a mixed colony of South African ground squirrels and hyraxes. Further sightings occurred at the magnificent Seeberg viewpoint at West Coast National park and we finished basically where we started in terms of this species, watching hyraxes at an African penguin colony, this time at Simon's Town. Often referred to as dassies in this corner of the world, rock hyrax are one of the few mammal species that occur in both South and North Africa and they are also found across parts of the Middle East.





### Order Lagomorpha - Family Leporidae (Rabbits and Hares - 2)

#### 53. Cape Hare - *Lepus capensis* and 54. Scrub Hare - *Lepus saxatilis*

Three species of hare occur in South Africa, the two detailed here and the savannah hare, *lepus victoriae*, which some sources still refer to under its previous classification *lepus microtis*. I have to admit, I have no way to distinguish between the scrub hare and savannah hare in the field and I do not believe anyone else does either. Where their territories overlap, which seemingly no one can quite agree on, it is pure guesswork as far as I am concerned, but on this trip that was not a concern, as the savannah hare does not occur as far east as we ever reached, apparently. The remaining species do overlap in the areas we visited, but are considerably easier to tell apart, as Cape hares are significantly smaller than scrub hares and there are also variations in colour, although these can differ from region to region and can be difficult to distinguish in the field, particularly at night. You are consequently identifying based on size in this case, which was easy at Karoo, where the two species overlap and were regularly seen within the vicinity of each other. Our guide pointed out the first couple of each species and over the two nights, Cape hares probably outnumbered scrub hares roughly five or six to one. Scrub hares were far more common elsewhere, particularly at Addo, where they were routinely observed at night and outnumbered Cape hares by an even more significant margin. Often of course, you do not even attempt to identify between species you have already observed well and guides rarely stop for these more common animals, which is reasonable enough, but does mean that you might occasionally miss something rarer. Several rabbit species occur in South Africa, most of which are called hares in this part of the world, and we did have at least an outside chance of encountering a couple of these in the areas we visited. Whilst it is therefore possible we missed something on one of the guided drives, I did try to check everything we sped past and more realistically, these rabbits were sacrificed when I decided to add the Addo Elephant and Mountain Zebra national parks to our itinerary, as I had to let other destinations go, some of which were originally selected for these species. For the record, the photograph above is of a Cape hare at Addo and below is the larger scrub hare at Karoo.



Order Afrosoricida - Family Chrysochloridae (Golden Moles - I)

55. Cape Golden Mole - *Chrysochloris asiatica*

For all the aardvarks, aardwolves and brown hyenas so unexpectedly encountered, there is no doubt that the surprise of the tour was the Cape golden mole observed at Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, partly because they are rare, but largely because it made its appearance amid a large group of noisy tourists. I had actually noticed the earth moving slightly on its molehill and we sat down to watch, just in case a head appeared, which is more or less all you see of most mole species. As it was, within just a few minutes, the entire mole emerged and sat in the long grass around its mound. With so many people walking by and so much noise, I almost expected it to instantly return, but instead it ran, first in one direction and then another, clearly disorientated. At this point I thought I should probably intervene and quickly scooped it up, before moving it to a more secluded area within the garden. After asking Karina to take a couple of quick shots with my phone, I placed it on the ground and we both watched enthralled as it burrowed its way to safety. To describe the event as a highlight of our trip would be a massive understatement, as these blind little insectivores are endemic to just the Western and Northern Cape and I had never seen one before, let alone rescued one.



## Order Rodentia - Family Hystricidae (Old World Porcupines - I)

### 56. Cape Porcupine - *Hystrix africaeaustralis*

For the first part of the tour, it looked as if these prickly rodents were going to be our nemesis mammal, as we missed two on guided drives, purely as a result of being on the wrong side of the vehicle at the time, and kept hearing about other people seeing porcupines. Thankfully, the utterly insane night drives at Mountain Zebra came to our rescue and we would see four here in all, two on each night. Perhaps surprisingly given their extensive range, they occur across all of Southern Africa and well beyond, none were encountered elsewhere and this was one of the few mammals I was not able to take even a reference shot of.

## Order Rodentia - Family Sciuridae (Squirrels - 2)

### 57. South African Ground Squirrel - *Xerus inauris*

Of the reserves we were due to visit, South African ground squirrels only occur at Mountain Zebra and we ultimately devoted a significant amount of time to an animal that is usually easy to see. As it was, even with the assistance of a guide who gave us a good area to search, we only found one, which Karina spotted on her side of the vehicle and that I eventually got the rather ordinary shot below of. I think the fact that we were searching during the hottest part of the day in a heatwave probably did not help, but we were generally otherwise occupied at the best times of day and did not encounter any randomly then either. Having left Mountain Zebra, I thought our chances with this species had also departed, but one ran across the road on our transfer to Karoo and when I stopped, we realised we had stumbled upon a large mixed colony of ground squirrels and rock hyraxes. Unfortunately, the land was fenced, as most of South Africa is, and although we had nice views with binoculars, I could not improve on my pictures. Another option would have been to stop at Camdeboo National Park, which is situated between Mountain Zebra and Karoo, as these sociable rodents also occur there. However, as much as I would have liked to explore that park, it just did not make any sense in terms of our already tight schedule and I decided to sacrifice any chance of a better photo.



### 58. Eastern Grey Squirrel - *Sciurus carolinensis*

The same invasive species I photograph in England, these adaptable squirrels only occur naturally in the United States and Canada and were introduced to South Africa by the statesman Cecil Rhodes, purely for aesthetic purposes at his Groote Schuur estate in Cape Town apparently. Although they have not spread beyond Cape Town and Stellenbosch, grey squirrels are abundant in certain areas, including at Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, where I had expected to observe several. As it was, we would see only one all day and I was astonished to eventually leave having encountered as many golden moles at Kirstenbosch as we had grey squirrels. Our only other sighting took place at a park near our hotel in Cape Town, when we spotted one on the ground as we were driving by.

## Order Rodentia - Family Pedetidae (Springhares - 1)

### 59. South African Springhare - *Pedetes capensis*

A rodent despite its misleading moniker, these African kangaroos, they basically hop on two legs, occur all over Southern Africa and as far north as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A second distinct species, the East African springhare, *pedetes surdaster*, occupies much of Tanzania and Kenya and the two were previously considered conspecific. As our trip perfectly illustrated, whilst they can often be difficult to observe, at certain locations they are abundant, with a considerable number sharing a relatively small territory. As such, we observed just a few individuals intermittently at Addo and on our first night at Mountain Zebra, but on the second, we encountered well over twenty in one tiny corner of the reserve. Entirely bipedal, springhares sleep standing up in their burrows and are able to block the entrances quickly, which probably makes sense when you consider that almost everything eats them.

## Order Rodentia - Family Bathyergidae (African Mole-Rats - 1)

### 60. Common Mole-Rat - *Cryptomys hottentotus*

Before the golden mole at Kirstenbosch, this little rodent was very much the surprise of the tour, although to be fair, I was in the process of checking the burrow complex of what are social animals, when it crossed the road directly in front of our car at West Coast National Park. There were telltale mounds of earth on both sides of the road and in slowing down to check, we were able to experience a totally unexpected view of what are incredibly difficult creatures to observe. Whilst it disappeared into one of the mounds before I was able to even lift my camera, I did see it clearly and it was a fairly easy process in terms of distinguishing it from the other mole-rats that occur in the region, namely the Cape dune mole-rat, *bathyergus suillus*, which is around twice the size, and the Cape mole-rat, *georchus capensis*, which is similar in size, but has a distinctive black and white face. This creature was uniformly light brown and although it was not the Cape dune mole-rat I had hoped for, which I will have to devote more time to when I return, it was a fairly wonderful second prize.

## Order Rodentia - Family Muridae (Mice, Rats and Gerbils - 2)

### 61. Southern African Vlei Rat - *Otomys irroratus*

We no doubt observed several of these relatively common rodents, but there are several rats of a similar size across the region and this one was identified by our guide at the private reserve we spent a night at. Certainly, from its large size and dark colour, it appeared to be a vlei rat, but without a photograph, or even with one to be honest, I would not have been entirely confident without confirmation from our guide. For the record, this species is endemic to the Western and Eastern Cape and I am reasonably certain that we also saw one briefly at Kirstenbosch.



### 62. Cape Four-striped Grass Mouse - *Rhabdomys pumilio*

Again, I am fairly confident that this was a species we encountered on multiple occasions, as I spotted several characteristically striped mice throughout the tour, but was generally unable to take reference shots in order to confirm. This one was photographed at the private reserve we visited, when I noticed it darting among some rocks back at the lodge and sat down to hopefully get a picture, as they are usually easy enough to see, once you have established where exactly they live. Happily this did prove to be the case and the attractive little creature pictured above, would prove to be the only small rodent I managed to photograph across the entire trip.

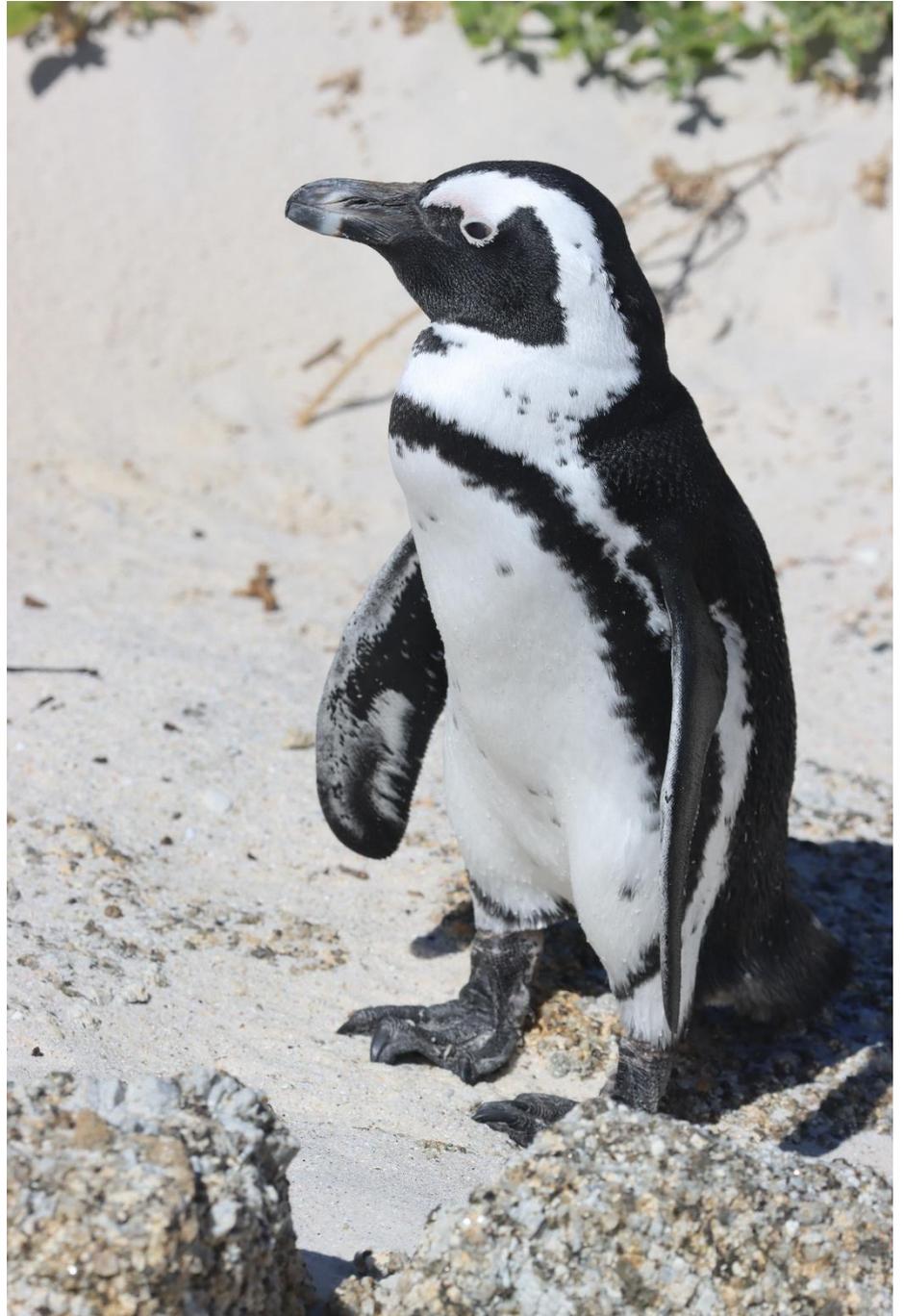
*Excluding a number of unidentified rodents and bats.*

## Trip Summary

In terms of our mammal sightings, the trip was an unqualified triumph and although I would have liked Karina to see a Cape fox and an African clawless otter, they were really the only two species I thought we might encounter, that did not ultimately prove to be the case. That said, all animals are of interest to us both and we experienced a number of truly exceptional sightings, involving a remarkable variety of wildlife. Reptiles, and particularly snakes, have always fascinated me and these days I tend to spend almost as much time photographing snakes and lizards, as I do mammals. This trip was no exception and in addition to a huge Cape cobra at Bontebok National Park, probably the largest I have ever seen at approaching two metres, puff adders were frequently spotted sunning themselves on the roads of West Coast National Park, where we also observed a large number of tortoises crossing the same roads. In fact, tortoises were a common sight throughout a tour that included at least four different varieties in all sizes, from a tiny hatchling of no more than about six centimetres to a few massive individuals that were basically stopping traffic at more than one national park. Lizards featured in the usual dazzling array of hues, including brightly coloured agamas, attractive skinks and the equally distinctive black girdled lizard, common among the rocks of West Coast National Park and Table Mountain. Chameleons, as you would no doubt expect given their amazing camouflage, were less conspicuous, but we still managed to find a few, one of which a gardener at the Garden Route Botanical Garden kindly took the trouble to show me at close quarters. As I have already touched upon, we were able to watch a couple of large copper sharks where great whites once menacingly lurked, albeit not in entirely natural conditions, and of the hugely diverse birdlife observed, including various impressive raptors and of course a large variety of seabirds, by far the most memorable encounter occurred



at Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden, one of my favourite destinations in and around Cape Town. In addition to being a stunning botanical garden in an idyllic setting, Kirstenbosch is known as a reliable destination for spotted eagle owls and during our visit, two very proud parents took turns standing guard over their large, fluffy and somewhat incongruous looking chick. Owls have always been honorary mammals as far as I am concerned and this chick was undoubtedly the star of the show, as it hopped about between naps, pouncing on sticks and twigs and basically looking a bit gormless. I think that in all we went back to watch and photograph it five times, with the parents alternating between various branches overhead and the bushes next to their young celebrity on the ground. Perhaps unsurprisingly in these media savvy times, a baby as cute as this has been a sensation on social media and if you access any of the platforms connected to Kirstenbosch, you can watch film of it at different stages of its young life. Unfortunately, this cuteness factor often determines whether animals receive any protection or not and African penguins have not done at all well in recent years, as their numbers have declined dramatically and the only penguin on the continent of Africa is now classified as critically endangered. Indeed, without significant and urgent action, the species is doomed to extinction, possibly in as few as ten years according to some estimates. Such an alarming decline has been caused by a number of factors, including the mass removal of eggs for human consumption, the use of penguin guano as fertiliser, oil spills, the introduction of domestic animals and habitat loss, which pretty much goes without saying in these troubled times. All of that said, commercial fishing has probably done the most damage, with thousands of penguins starving to death as a result of the collapse of sardine and anchovy populations. As has been the case throughout my travels, I try to support as many conservation initiatives as I can and on this trip I purchased a number of artificial shelters, which the penguins will hopefully adopt as homes in the absence of the guano from which they normally dig their burrows. Guano is basically their droppings, but most of it has long since been removed from their breeding colonies for use as fertiliser. Whilst these fibreglass shelters are known to work, they will not be sufficient to save this species and it is imperative that we urgently reduce the truly staggering level of overfishing that is currently destroying our oceans. It is perhaps ironic that there was once outrage at the barbaric way in which whales were killed, and obviously rightly so, but now, instead of slaughtering whales with harpoons, we are simply starving the creatures of the depths and when the oceans are finally depleted, that will pretty much be the end of us as well. We took time out to enjoy these fantastic little penguins at both Stony Point Nature Reserve and Simon's Town, as well as on several of our marine tours, and if you would like to help support the essential conservation work to save them, please contact either African Penguin Safe ([www.africanpenguinsafe.com](http://www.africanpenguinsafe.com)) or the Dyer Island Conservation Trust ([www.dict.org.za](http://www.dict.org.za)). From one flightless bird to another, albeit a slightly larger variety, as ostriches were observed at more or less every major destination, including a large number of fluffy chicks of assorted sizes and a male involved in a flamboyant courtship display for a clearly enraptured female. At least we thought she must be enraptured, as she watched the entire mesmerising performance and stood her ground as the exultant male approached, at which point she turned and ran into the bush at full speed, apparently never to be seen again. If I have ever witnessed a more appropriate interpretation of crestfallen, I really cannot recall it, but *'faint heart never won fair lady'* as they say and within minutes, our plucky lothario was heading in the direction of another female he had spotted on the horizon. Whilst I very rarely make any effort to search for specific species and seldom even record what I see, birds are still an integral part of my tours and I obviously see and am able to appreciate far more than I can begin to describe in this format. I find it time consuming enough to try and record even the majority of my mammal sightings, particularly when I am as successful as we would prove to be on this tour. Indeed, the only mammal I actively searched for and missed was a Cape dune mole-rat, but even then, the term searched for would be stretching the point somewhat, as I had planned to visit what should have been a reliable site, but simply ran out of time and had to make do with around an hour on the way to the airport for our flight home. It is not how I normally do things and although we quickly located an extensive network of burrows, we simply did not have sufficient time to wait for what is the largest of all mole-rats to appear. Miracles take longer as they say, but I had almost expected that one might just occur, as our luck to that point had been verging on the miraculous, particularly at night, when we experienced some of the most





memorable night drives I have known, certainly in terms of guided national park activities. Our remarkable run began on the last of our three nights at Addo Elephant National Park, where we had already enjoyed some impressive nocturnal sightings, but nothing to really prepare us for the sequence of events that was about to follow. At Addo it was not really the number of sightings, it was the species involved, as we encountered a brown hyena and an armadillo within a few minutes of each other and I have never seen either at this national park before. Indeed, we could have easily failed to see either throughout the entire tour, but this was just the beginning and the next day at Mountain Zebra National Park we chanced upon three cats before it was even dark. Having already spent time with a solitary lioness, a caracal strolled calmly across the road directly in front of our vehicle and a few minutes later we were watching a cheetah and her five cubs, which we stayed with for almost an hour. As dusk approached, we spotted an armadillo lying beside its burrow and on the main night drive we would observe another four, all different individuals in different areas. For a second night in a row we were destined to see a brown hyena, two actually on this occasion, as well as another armadillo, both of which can be almost impossible to observe unless you visit specific sites for them. Further sightings included four lionesses sprawled across the road, black-backed jackals, two porcupines and a couple of springhares. I remember telling Karina at the time, that night drives are not usually like this and to make the most of what was an exceptional and pretty much unique experience, particularly as the nocturnal part of what I have described, took



place within two very special hours. However, if anything, our second nocturnal drive at what is a relatively small reserve, was even more extraordinary, when we spotted an armadillo for an incredible third night in a row, which I do not believe I have ever done on an entirely random basis before. Whilst we had enjoyed good views previously, they were not particularly long, as armadillos are notoriously shy creatures and tend to run, or at least shuffle away, as soon as they become aware of your presence. The opposite was the case on this occasion, as this individual was extremely calm and we were consequently treated to close and prolonged views of one of the rarest and most unusual of all African mammals. Not to be outdone, our second drive at Mountain Zebra produced yet another brown hyena, which we had also now seen on three successive nights, as well as another four armadillos, to take our grand total to nine in little more than twenty-four hours at this remarkable park. New species appeared in the form of two bat-eared foxes and a first southern small-spotted genet, as well as more black-backed jackals, another two porcupines and at least twenty springhares. Given this almost unparalleled success, it is probably a little churlish to wonder if our amazing run could have continued as we moved on to Karoo National Park, but we were never really given the opportunity to find out, as Karoo is a magnificent reserve, but the guided night drives do not take place in the core section of the park. Instead, they occur on the periphery of the park, part of which is a largely unproductive buffer zone adjacent to the local town. The contrast is fairly stark, but even so, the second of our two night drives here produced the best southern small-spotted genet sighting of the tour, as well as one final brown hyena, a favourite animal of mine that we had now seen on four nights out of five across three different national parks. This final success marked the last of our seven guided night drives at these three reserves, but our exceptional run of good fortune was not quite over, as we still had two nights remaining at West Coast National Park, where you are able to drive yourself at night and where I had been hoping to show Karina a caracal. Indeed, this reserve had been added almost exclusively for that purpose and although we had already encountered one of these elegant cats at Mountain Zebra, I was optimistic that we could do even better and might be able to photograph one in daylight against a backdrop of what is a visually stunning park. Although that did not ultimately occur, just before dusk on our second day, Karina spotted something moving in the undergrowth, which did indeed turn out to be a caracal. As previously, it crossed the road directly in front of us and, again as

previously, we instantly lost it in the vegetation. No matter, as it was dark by the time we finished searching and within less than an hour, I had found another caracal with my thermal imager, but this time it did not instantly disappear. It perhaps would have, but for two significant reasons. Firstly, it had just killed something and was beginning to feed and secondly, and far more importantly, it had young, a kitten of probably no more than about four weeks. Fittingly, on a tour that had been designed more for a caracal than a lion, this would be our last cat sighting and we spent around half an hour watching the mother feeding in our spotlight, as the cub waited impatiently, initially at distance and then beside its beautiful mother. Whilst we would go on to have further adventures and wonderful sightings in and around Cape Town, this was an entirely appropriate way to end the main wildlife section of our tour, as well as one of the most successful sequences of night drives I have experienced in all of Africa. Of course, the main reason tours in South Africa are so productive, is the incredible national park system, which basically enables everyone and anyone to access some of the best wildlife habitat on the continent. Not only that, but you can do it all in the comfort of your own vehicle and do not even require a guide, at least not during the day. In many parks you can hike, cycle, kayak and even swim and although the infrastructure is creaking at the edges somewhat, certainly some of the accommodation needs a little updating, the system itself provides visitors with almost unparalleled freedom in terms of an affordable African safari, especially when you consider the private lodges elsewhere, which now cater almost exclusively to the wealthy. Some of the park guiding can also be a bit hit or miss, ranging from a small minority of people who clearly have almost no interest in the profession, to some deeply knowledgeable and committed guides who are an absolute pleasure to spend time with. On this trip most of our guides featured towards the latter end of that rather imprecise scale and in all we visited seven parks, five of which we stayed at, so Bontebok, Addo Elephant, Mountain Zebra, Karoo and West Coast and a further two, Agulhas and Table Mountain, we accessed during the day. I have to say, I would happily return to all seven, and am hoping that I will one day be able to spend a few months touring them all, as South Africa remains a superb wildlife destination, despite its very real issues and the generally bad press that it continues to receive.



## Review of the Year

Technically, my wildlife year is not yet over, as I will be travelling to Colombia towards the end of December and perhaps should include that tour as my tenth and final trip of what has been another busy year. However, the vast majority of that adventure will take place in January 2026 and any highlights will consequently have to wait until my annual review next year, when I have several exciting tours planned and will hopefully have a number of special sightings to share with everyone. Although it might appear strange to say given such a busy period with so many exciting destinations, 2025 was not a vintage year for sightings, certainly not in terms of exceptionally rare mammals or even notable target species. That said, every trip has something special and New Zealand in January was no exception, despite the rather obvious and somewhat depressing absence of terrestrial mammals. A few memorable cetaceans aside, including both sperm and killer whales, the highlight of this trip was actually a bird, as the extraordinarily sweet kiwi bird observed at Ōkārito completed my set of ratites, a group of flightless birds also including ostriches, rheas, cassowaries and the emu. One of my main successes took place in Romania a month or so later, where, having missed a European mink the previous year, I finally encountered what was the last carnivore on the continent I had never seen, as well as an incredibly cute Romanian hamster. In Chile in April I missed one of my three main targets, the Andean cat, which also happens to be one of only five cats I am still yet to observe in the wild, but the other two, long-tailed chinchilla and monito del monte, were both successfully negotiated and I also finally managed to take a decent photograph of a darwin's fox. Those last two were encountered on the rather wonderful Chiloé Island, where I was also hoping to see a kodkod, a cat I had seen before, but not well. Unfortunately, it was a tour entirely deficient in felids and it is now very much a case of back to the drawing board in terms of where I will next search for the elusive Andean pussy. I have to admit, that despite a nice selection of general wildlife, it is difficult to conjure any specific major highlights from Hungary in May, although I was surprised to encounter a western hedgehog well beyond its accepted natural range. This apparent anomaly aside, the fields of wildflowers were

stunning, as was the spectacular Art Deco swimming pool at the equally marvellous Corinthia Budapest hotel. An extremely hot Texas produced an interesting range of species in June and a month later Florida did much the same, on what was largely a family holiday with limited wildlife opportunities. In addition to possibly my finest ever North American river otter sighting at the gorgeous Silver Springs State Park, the Sunshine State provided me with a new species in the form of the tamanend's bottlenose dolphin, which had recently been split from the common bottlenose dolphin. The Azores noctule was another new species for me, but you do not really visit the Azores for bats and I was slightly disappointed that the nine cetaceans observed did not include any of the rare species I had been hoping for. That said, I am not sure I would have swapped any number of additional species for the sperm whale that Karina and I watched breach on three breathtaking occasions. In September Karina was extremely lucky that her first ever visit to Scotland coincided with something approaching a heatwave, at least for Scotland, and although there were no real surprises in terms of the animals encountered, we did both observe most of the species you would hope to see in what has always been the wildlife capital of the United Kingdom. This brings me rather nicely back to South Africa, which, if you exclude the family element of my Florida holiday, was by far the most enjoyable trip of the year, with a number of incredibly rare species, most notably a Cape golden mole and a common mole-rat, as well as some of the most astonishing night drives I have been fortunate enough to experience and the kind of whale watching you simply never forget. For all of these outstanding highlights, I cannot ultimately look beyond either the long-tailed chinchilla in Chile, as this was a species I had been desperate to see for years and had more or less given up on, or the European mink in Romania, as small carnivores have always been my main interest and I was again not certain I would ever actually see a mustelid that has been hunted to the point of extinction and remains critically endangered. If I forced myself to choose between the two, I would probably just about opt for the first stunning little mink spotted at the side of the river in the Danube Delta, as I had missed the same animal there just a few months earlier and it is not often that anyone can say they have now observed every single carnivore on an entire continent. Of course, I recognise the absolute luxury of being able to even begin to compare amazing trips and incredible sightings in this way, not to mention perhaps the absurdity of doing so, and over the years I have accordingly become far more content simply with the journey, than any definitive outcome.

*'every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.'* - Bashō



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