

# Deltas to Dunes: a Botswana Namibia Safari | Sept. 1 – 20, 2023 | Trip Report | by Bryan Shirley



With guide, Bryan Shirley, and participants: Ana, Carmen, Chip, Dennis, Glen-Marie, Jackie and Lisa



What an incredible journey! Remarkable wildlife and extraordinary experiences were everyday happenings. We encountered 11 leopards, had lions just a few feet away on several occasions, witnessed two different packs of wild dogs, and saw an abundance of elephants too numerous to count. The birdwatching was fantastic, with so many amazing birds to choose from. It's challenging to pick favorites, but seeing Wattled Cranes just a few feet from the vehicle was a standout moment. Another memorable experience was observing hundreds of vultures at an elephant carcass. Additionally, the cruise to the stork rookery was a highlight. Watching the Yellow-billed storks in the foreground with a stunning sunset behind us is a memory that will forever stay with us.

## Fri., Sept. 1

## Arrival in Botswana | Birding the Gardens

Since most of the group arrived last night, we decided to meet and go birding this morning. After a wonderful breakfast we met in the garden and started birding. The gardens were full of birds and the Thamalakane River



was just behind the hotel so there were lots to see. Hoopoes were hopping around the grass and Black-fronted Bulbuls were everywhere. A lively flock of Arrow-marked Babbblers offered great views as they foraged on the grass near the lobby. During our short walk around the block to the river access, we were treated to fantastic sightings of a Green Woodhoopoe perched on top of a telephone pole. Despite the river having water for only a few weeks (still lower compared to later in the season), there were plenty of waterbirds to keep us engaged. Flocks of White-faced Whistling Ducks moved along the river, and upon closer inspection, we spotted a Red-billed Duck and a pair of African Pygmy Geese. Various heron species, including the massive Goliath Heron, were observed. At one point, a Gray Heron walked past, providing a great comparison to highlight the immense size of the Goliath Heron. A Southern Red-billed Hornbill captivated us with a ground performance, later joined by an African Gray Hornbill. Magpie Shrikes and Fork-tailed Drongos perched prominently, reminiscent of our tyrant flycatchers in the Americas. On our way back to the hotel, I mentioned the great morning but expressed a wish to see a White-browed Robin-Chat. Remarkably, 30 seconds later, one appeared, offering all of us excellent views!

Back at the hotel, we split up. Some of the group stayed around to relax and prepare for our tour, while others explored Maun. They visited the local basket weaving co-op, where they not only purchased a few baskets but also received a lesson in weaving and had the chance to practice making one themselves!

In the evening some of us met & birding around the hotel gardens. We hardly moved for over an hour as we stood around birding and visiting. Most of what we saw was similar to our morning outing, but this afternoon there were lots of flocks of migrating Maribou Storks and African Openbills. There was one White-backed Vulture soaring with the storks and a gorgeous Black-chested Snake-Eagle was soaring over the river. A Crested Barbet perched low in a bare tree for great scope views. While we were watching it 3 Black-collared Barbets flew in and landed in the same tree! Now that everybody had arrived, we enjoyed getting to know each other and visiting during our nice meal in the hotel restaurant (some people claimed it was the best steak they have ever had!)

## **Sat., Sept. 2                      Travel to the Okavango | The Safari Begins!**

Wow – what a day! Today was a travel day, but we had about 45 minutes to bird around the hotel before we headed to the airport. We saw a lot in that time, but mostly the same birds as yesterday. Everything went smooth at the airport and before long our plane had left the city behind and we started seeing our first glimpses of the Okavango. The flight was exciting, and our group was constantly finding things and shouting out to everyone. “Giraffe on the left! First elephant on the right!”. At one of the stops before our camp there was



even 3 lions laying in the shade of a Sausage tree just next to the runway! We arrived at Kwara lodge and met our guides JR and Dalton, as well as our spotters See and Mike. We piled into the lad cruisers and once at the lodge enjoyed lunch, but it was hard to eat since there was so much to look at. After lunch we got situated in the rooms and spent the rest of the afternoon watching the abundant wildlife around camp. There were hippos in the lagoon, Red Lechwe along the shoreline, an elephant was so close to one cabin the guests didn't dare go outside, and a troop of baboons strolled around camp. Of course, there were lots of birds including a Slaty Egret feeding along the edge of the lagoon.

On our afternoon drive JR & Dalton informed us that last night a Lion pride had taken an Eland and that there was a very good chance that the lions might still be around. We had a long drive and tried to keep stopping to a minimum, but it was impossible because there were new things to see everywhere we looked! Elephants were everywhere and we had some very close encounters with them as they slowly walked and fed on the acacia bushes. We had a few giraffes with several Yellow-billed Oxpeckers scouring them for ticks. One of the highlights was a pair of Wattled Cranes only a few feet from the vehicle! It was hard to keep moving, but eventually we reached the lions, and it was unreal. We parked the vehicles only a few feet away from the lions and watched as they worked over the Eland carcass. There were 2 males, half a dozen females, and 4 juveniles. We watched them until nearly sunset – it was without a doubt an experience none of us will ever forget.

### **Sun., Sept. 3                      Early Morning Game Drive**

It was quite a wild night for some of us, with numerous elephants right in the camp. Add to that the presence of hippos, baboons, and who knows what else, and getting a good night's sleep proved challenging! Nevertheless, we rose early and hit the road, following fresh leopard tracks. While we made a few stops for bird sightings, our focus remained on tracking the leopard, leading us to the other side of the airport. Our guide, Dalton, heard a Reedbuck alarm call and confidently declared, "it must be there – Reedbucks do not lie!" Following the direction of the call, we indeed discovered the leopard stealthily moving through the tall grass. Although it was skittish and didn't offer prolonged views, most of us managed to catch a few seconds of its elusive presence.

The afternoon drive was equally enjoyable. A group of buffalo was spotted near the road, attended to by several Yellow-billed Oxpeckers. Bryan spotted a distant African Harrier, prompting us to drive closer. Eventually, it came to us and hunted around the marsh nearby. One of the evening's highlights was observing a herd of 15 cow and calf elephants drinking and cooling themselves in the river. We were close, and the lighting was perfect, creating another fabulous memory. Some members of the group were treated to a performance by a pair of Pearl-spotted Owlets just before darkness fell.



After our sundowner drinks and watching the sunset, we had productive night drive back to camp. We had very brief views of a Genet, but later got great views of a Marsh Owl hunting near the airport. One of the best birds of the trip came a little bit later though when Mike, our spotter, picked out a Verreaux's Eagle Owl on a perch. Luckily it never flew, and we watched it for about 15 minutes until the other vehicle was able to get there so everybody could get it. Today was one member of our groups birthday and she said in the morning that she hoped to see an owl for her birthday present today. She ended up with 4 and a surprise birthday cake as well!

## **Mon., Sept . 4                      Canoe Trip | Game Drive | Birding by Boat**

Today we started with a mokoro (traditional canoe) trip on the lagoon near the cabins. Originally, they were often hewn from a sausage tree, but ours were fiberglass. It was magical gliding across the quiet water with Hippos watching us from the deeper water, African Jacanas running across the lilies, and African Fish Eagle soaring above. We found several Angola Painted Reed Frogs – it is hard to imagine such a tiny frog making the large bell-like sound we all heard last night. Back on shore we finished the morning up with a game drive. African Buffalo, Greater Kudu, and Impala posed for photos. After some discussion between all of us and our guides we decided that the pipits we had seen were Buffy Pipits – a new trip bird.

Our afternoon excursion was by boat. We cruised the channel headed for the stork rookery. Along the way we were lucky to see Southern Carmine Bee-Eaters, a migrant that arrived for the spring just recently. Undoubtedly one of the most beautiful birds of our trip. Another long-distance migrant that just arrived was Black Kite (split as Yellow-billed by some authorities). Even though we are still near the beginning of our trip we have had countless amazing experiences, and the stork rookery was another. We maneuvered the boat until we had perfect light to watch the Maribou and Yellow-billed Storks carrying nesting materials into the rookery and squabble over nest locations. As we started back, we had another wonderful sighting – an elephant swimming across the lagoon. Sometimes it would go completely underwater and use its trunk like a submarine! On the drive back to camp was exciting as well. We had a female Spotted Hyena on a den and as we watched it a baby crawled out of the den and started nursing! What a wonderful day!



**Tues., Sept. 5**

## **Elephants in the Morning | Lagoon Camp**

Every day it seems like I use a lot of “wonderful” or “amazing” to describe our day. Today was no exception. We had elephants in our camp again overnight, but this time they were still in camp when we were trying to get to breakfast. Several were feeding around the cabins, and one was lying on its side sleeping right near the trail. We followed JR who safely navigated a trail to the breakfast tent. On our game drive today, we traveled out in the direction of the lions from a couple of days ago, but this time we were hoping for Wild Dogs. Like the Reed Buck who alerted us to the Leopard, once again we were helped by the other animals alerting us to predators in the area. This time it was a bunch of Helmeted Guineafowl making a commotion. We drove in the direction we could hear them and sure enough found the pack of Wild Dogs we had been searching for. They had recently fed and were laying in the shade looking very satisfied. It was a large pack – 27 in total including 7 pups that were a few months old. Adult Wild Dogs swallow large chunks of meat then regurgitate it later for their pups. We didn’t see them regurgitate, but the pups had chunks of meat that they were chomping on. It took a while for the other vehicle to catch up and find us, but they got there just in time because a few minutes moved out of sight. We started back towards camp and had only driven a few minutes when the guides got a radio call of a Leopard in a tree. We took off as fast as we could go on the sand tracks and got there in time to watch a beautiful male Leopard surveying his surroundings from the branch of a large sausage tree. We were able to watch him for about 10 minutes before he climbed down and disappeared into the acacia scrub. We did well on birds this morning too. We saw good numbers of all the regulars, but we focused on some of the more difficult pipits and larks and after a lot of comparison and discussion were able to ID several new birds for the trip. A Black-bellied Bustard was a lot easier to ID as it walked down the jeep track in front of us! As if that wasn’t enough for the morning, we were treated to a lone male lion snoozing in between our lodge and the airport!

After the morning drive, we took the 30-minute flight to Lagoon Camp. As soon as we got away from Kwara it was as dry as could be with very little wildlife to see until we neared Lagoon Camp. As soon as our guides greeted us they took us so see Wild Dogs between the airport and camp. They have a small pack here of 7 dogs including 2 pups. Pretty lucky to see these amazing, endangered canids twice in one day! Lagoon Camp is located on the Kwando River and as we pulled into camp the river was full of wildlife. There was a herd of hippos laying on a sandbar, Red Lechwe feeding along the shore, a large troop of baboons running along the riverbank, and several Elephants coming to drink.



That evening we took a game drive along the Kwara River. Our new guides here were Rico, and the spotter was KLB. Normally we use 2 land cruisers, but 2 of our group decided to take the afternoon off to relax around camp so we ended up using one so we could all be together. Tonight was fun – we drove slower than we had on previous game drives and stopped for every little bird. Hippos were common in the river and lots of elephants were coming to the river to drink. Sunset was beautiful again. Double Banded Sandgrouse were landing near us to get a last drink before dark and Collared Pratincoles were flying up and down the river as we enjoyed our sundowner drinks and snacks. Three Roan Antelope, one of the rarer antelope of this area, came to drink by us. On the drive back to camp we found a young Leopard who posed for a few photos before slinking away into the brush.

## **Wed., Sept. 6                      Safari Beauty**

This morning's game drive more or less followed the river north. We had quite a few new birds including Lesser Jacana – a key target for several members of our group. A huge Wahlberg's Eagle soared above and a few minutes later Small Buttonquail snuck around grass near the vehicle, one of the smallest birds of the trip. We had great views of 3 Leopards – one large male and later a female and cub in a tree with an Impala carcass. On top of that we had one of the most amazing sightings of the trip – an elephant carcass surrounded by hundreds of White-backed Vultures! It was so fun to watch the interaction as they jockeyed for position. There were a few Marabou Storks mixed in as well, and eventually we found 2 Lappet-faced Vultures as well. We also had another exciting mammal – a small herd of Sable Antelope.

After lunch back at the lodge we had a bit of a bird wave go through the camp. Southern Black-Tit, Gray-backed Cameroptera, Black-backed Puffbird, both Jameson's and Red-billed Firefinch, and Brown-crowned Tchagra all made an appearance within a couple of minutes. On the evening drive we were treated to a great time watching lions. First, we had two males who were mostly sleeping, but eventually one sat up and posted for photos. A few minutes away we found all the females and 4 cubs. The cubs were just like any other baby and wrestling, playing, and constantly nursing.



## **Thurs., Sept. 7                      Raptors, Impalas and Leopards, oh my!**

This morning we headed a bit to the west into some drier woodland habitat. We had a great raptor day: Several Bateleur Eagles, a pair of African Hawk-Eagles, a couple Tawny Eagles, and Dickinson's Kestrel were all wonderful, but the highlight was a gorgeous Martial Eagle perched. It appeared to have a full crop from a recent meal, so it had a large, white ball in the middle of its black throat. We found a Leopard sleeping in a large sausage tree. The sausage trees are all in bloom right now and have a large purple flower that is a treat for the antelope (or elephants we saw eating them at Kwara camp). While we were watching the Leopard a pair of Impalas went under the tree and started to eat the flowers that had fallen to the ground. Before long the Leopard stood up and snuck down the branch it was on, then waited for the right chance. Eventually the female Impala walked right under the Leopard, and it dove out of the tree missing the Impala by mere inches (it might have actually got one paw on it?). The Impala started snorting the warning call and the Leopard knew the game was up and it left to find a new hunting spot. But wait there is always more exciting things to write about! From there we drove a few minutes where this time a different Leopard had got the best of an Impala. The carcass was hanging in a tree and after a few minutes of searching we found a female Leopard resting nearby with 2 cubs!

In the evening we went back to check on them and the female was up in the tree sprawled out on a branch. We caught a glimpse of the cubs hiding in the brush, but they were a bit shy. From there we worked our way out toward mud lagoon. We saw the regular birds we have been seeing every day, plus got good looks at a Spotted Thick-knee. We spotted a male lion walking through the grass and went up and photographed him as he relaxed on a small rise overlooking the valley. We had one other male later on that caused a bit of excitement when he let out a growl at us.

## **Fri., Sept. 8                      Departing Botswana for Namibia**

Our flight was early this morning – 8:30 AM so we didn't have time for a game drive. Instead, we enjoyed a bit of birding around the lodge for an hour. As usual, the sunrise was gorgeous and the view of hippos, Kudu, and Impala feeding near the river still seem like a dream. We have seen most of the stuff around camp by now, but it was fun to bird there one last time. Eventually we found a new bird – a Walburg's Honeyguide in the trees above the lodge. After breakfast we headed to the airstrip and after spending a few minutes with the guide chasing the Baboons and Impala off the runway our plane landed and we loaded up. It was a short and easy 45-minute flight back to Maun. Several of the group headed out to the Dusty Donkey for lunch and to check out the shops near



the airport, while some of us opted on staying in the airport to catch up on emails before our flight to Namibia for the second half of the tour.

## **Sat., Sept. 9** **Namibia | Immanuel Wilderness Lodge**

Our charter flight from Maun, Botswana lasted about 2 hours, and it was a small plane—just large enough for our group and the two pilots. We landed at the smaller of Windhoek’s airports, Eros, making the immigration process a breeze since it was just us! Additionally, it saved us about a 45-minute drive from the other airport. After calling Sean, who was just a few minutes away, we had the perfect amount of time to complete the final bird checklist from Botswana. At the airport, we spotted a few Rosy-faced Lovebirds, a familiar pet bird and a well-established population in the Phoenix area. However, this is their natural habitat, and they are quite common here.

Our journey to the Immanuel Wilderness Lodge, about a 30-minute drive from the airport, allowed us to indulge in some birding around the lodge upon arrival. The bird feeder and water source were bustling with Red-billed Quelea, Rosy-faced Lovebirds, Red-faced Spurfowl, and a few Southern Cordonbleu. A visit from a Crimson-breasted Gonolek added to the excitement—a real crowd pleaser! The lodge, owned by a German family that emigrated to Botswana and now runs the establishment, provided us with exceptional meals. While the meals in Botswana were all fantastic, the ones here reached the next level, thanks to the owner who is also a chef.

## **Sun., Sept. 10** **Local Market | Okonjima Nature Reserve**

We had a nice pre-breakfast walk around the lodge this morning. One of our targets, a Short-toed Rock-Thrush, yielded himself quickly near the parking area. The water and bird feeders had mostly the same stuff as last night, but we did see a beautiful Green-winged Pytilia this morning as well. A flowering acacia tree near the entrance was full of Dark-fronted Bulbul and a few Mariqua Sunbirds. Breakfast was delicious with fresh baked bread, and assortment of Namibian cheeses, a variety of cured wild game, fresh fruits, etc.

Once we left and started our drive north, we hadn’t gone far when we had a flat tire. It only took a few minutes to change, and we were back on the road. In the next town Sean had to replace the tire so he dropped us all off at a very nice coffee shop with a craft market across the street. A few of us braved hordes of merchants eager for our business and scored some great deals on nice souvenirs. Before long we were back on the road. We got to





our destination, Okonjima Nature Reserve, and were greeted by loads of animals and birds. Giraffe, Oryx, and Springbok were at the waterholes and along the road. We had close looked at both Mountain and Plains Zebra, so it was fun to see them and be able to learn about the differences. At a water hole we had 3 Red-billed Ducks and a good variety of small birds including Black-cheeked Waxbill, Violet-eared Waxbill, Lark-like Bunting, Great Rufous Sparrow, and others. After getting checked in we had lunch a had a nice break until it cooled down a bit, then went out for a birding walk. After being on the safari drives in Botswana for the last week it felt nice to be out walking! Our target bird for the afternoon was a Rockrunner – a unique African Warbler that is found almost solely in rocky, arid scrub of Namibia. They are quite sulky and can be tough to see but have a nice melodious song. We heard multiple singing birds before we finally were able to locate it and with a little work, we were able to get great looks for everyone. Another target we connected with here was White-tailed Shrike – a strange name since they hardly have a tail and are not a shrike but a member of the wattle-eye family! We walked along the small, dry ravine and had scope views of Monterio’s Hornbill and found a couple of Rock Hyrax laying out on a rocky point. As we enjoyed drinks and the beautiful sunset back at the lodge we had a flock of about 25 Double-banded Sandgrouse come to the waterhole and during dinner had a Freckled Nightjar calling and flying around catching insects near the lodge lights.

After dinner, a few of us chose to embark on a night drive with the lodge guide and had an exceptional time. We encountered four Brown Hyenas, a species that is quite rare and declining. Additionally, we were entertained by the sight of a pair of Honey Badgers being harassed by a Black-backed Jackal. The jackal would stealthily approach, pull the tail of the smaller badger, and then dash away, leaving the badgers hissing and in pursuit. Our night drive also led us to discover an African Porcupine, but the highlight was the fantastic views of a Southern White-faced Owl perched on an open snag just a few feet from the vehicle!

While we searched for a leopard that had been feeding on a recently killed kudu, it didn't make an appearance that night. Our hopes were also high for spotting an Aardvark, but unfortunately, we missed it. Nonetheless, it was a fantastic outing, and we were delighted with our decision to go.

## **Mon., Sept. 11                      Kori Bustard | Etosha National Park**

This morning we had nice pre-breakfast walk before breakfast. It was very good birding and we had over forty species for the morning. A pair of Pearl-spotted Owlets were very obliging and there were well over a dozen Yellow-billed Hornbills in the garden. We had distant but good views of a pair of Ashy Tits, another of the many



near endemic species that are only found in Namibia and a bit of Angola. Another falling into that category is Ruppel's Parrot. We had a brief view of one that many of us didn't get on before it flew causing a bit of worrying, but later had great views of a pair at the waterhole. After checking out we are birding the entrance road and had an awesome sight of two Kori Bustards – the heaviest flying bird. Today was mostly a driving day. We arrived at our lodge at the entrance to Etosha National Park in the late afternoon and after being in the car all day didn't feel like going on a game drive, so we opted to enjoy the waterhole and around our cabins. All the cabins had small bird baths behind the balcony and there was quite a bit of activity. At the waterhole we had a couple of Dik Dik that drank just a few feet from us. Lots of Double-banded Sandgrouse came in after sunset too. There was a bit of excitement at dinner when two Honey Badgers started investigating around the diners and the outside tables!

## **Tues., Sept. 12**                      **Etosha National Park**

Today, we arrived early at Etosha and ventured into the plains on the north end of the park. The morning was truly fantastic as we explored the waterhole, which turned out to be the highlight among all the waterholes on this trip. It was teeming with large herds of various animals. Among our targeted birds was the Blue Crane, primarily endemic to South Africa. However, there is a small, isolated population of about 30-40 birds in this part of Etosha, and we were thrilled to spot around 20 of them on the plains near the waterhole! Additionally, we enjoyed excellent views of a Double-banded Courser and encountered our first Anteater Chats of the trip.

After a relaxing lunch and siesta back at our lodge, we returned to Etosha for the evening, this time exploring the Fisher's Pan area. Known as prime Cheetah habitat, our expectations were high, but the Cheetah had different plans for the evening. Determined, we went to bed, eagerly anticipating another try tomorrow.

## **Wed., Sept. 13**                      **Okaukuejo Lodge**

This morning was cool and windy. The wind made the birding tough at first, but it calmed down later in the morning. Today we moved from the eastern entrance of the park to our lodge at the western edge of the Etosha Pan. We stopped for any birds and animals we saw and slowly worked our way through the park. We were extremely lucky to have a male White Rhino feeding along the road. We popped the top and watched him at close range feeding. He slowly worked his way into the road right in front of us and marked his trail in several places. Cheetah was one of our main targets for the day and we scoured the plains as we drove. Just before lunch we found one sitting under an acacia in the shade. It would lay down for a few minutes then sit up and



scan the plains, presumably searching for some prey to wander into sight. Unfortunately, none ever did and eventually we carried on to Halali Resort for lunch. There was lots of good birding around the lodge. The garden was packed with Cape Starlings, a variety of weavers playing in the sprinklers, but the most exciting bird was a small flock of Bare-checked Babblers. Arguably the best-looking babbler in southern Africa and only found in NW Namibia and SW Angola it was a great bird, plus since it was a small family group used to all the people at Halali it allowed for easy and close viewing. In the afternoon we carried on to Okaukuejo Lodge, our home for the next 2 days. The waterhole here is one of the most famous attractions at Etosha and it lived up to its reputation. Elephants, Giraffe, Orys, and lots of Springbok were constantly coming and going all evening. We also had a pair of Tawny Eagles roost in the tree at the waterhole. The waterhole had artificial lights shining on it allowing for good viewing after dark as well. Our rooms were only a few yards from the viewing area, which allowed us to check it multiple times and during the evening we had multiple Black Rhinos come into drink.

## **Thurs., Sept. 14                      Etosha's West End | Watering Hole**

Today we covered part of the west end of Etosha. It was quite a bit drier and more open which meant a few new species for us. One bird that we were hoping for was Ludwig's Bustard. They are endemic to SW Africa and can be a bit tricky to find since they are not easy because they are nomadic – some years they are around here and some years they aren't. We saw lots of White-quilled Bustards fluffed up getting warm in the morning sun and a few Kori Bustards before eventually we found a Ludwig's! They can be quite shy and quickly run away from the vehicle, but this one stayed relatively close and gave us all great looks. We also worked on differentiating the several species of Larks found here. Red-capped Lark was the most common and in large numbers at the waterholes. With patience and Sean's expertise, we were able to ID 5 more Lark species: Spike-heeled, Sabota, Eastern Clapper, Pink-billed, and Stark's (all of which are endemic to southern Africa). We also had 3 Greater Kestrel this morning, a bird that we hadn't managed to find yet. There was pretty extensive road construction going on today and the waterhole we visited didn't have quite as much activity as we had hoped for, but in spite of the construction there was still a couple hundred Springbok, Wildebeast, and Oryx.

After lunch and a well needed siesta we drove a loop just to the east of camp. Most of the waterholes had several Ostrich. The males were showing good breeding colors – a red bill and bright red shins. At one waterhole we had a good time watching a group of Red Hartebeest coming into the water. They were extremely nervous, and we wondered if there was a lion or leopard in the area. After several attempts to drink and then running away from the water they eventually made it. Another highlight was a big male Black Rhino slowly walking across the low desert scrub. His trail brought him to within about 15 yards of us before he turned and paralleled the



road walking just past our window and clicking cameras. Back at the lodge the waterhole was great, as it always is. A herd of giraffe came in just before sunset and watching them drink with a beautiful African sunset just behind them was magical. The waterhole has artificial lights so even after sunset the activity kept up and at one point, we had six Black Rhino there at the same time. Three of them were bulls and spent at least an hour play fighting with each other. It wasn't too intense and appeared that they were just practice sparring, but they would bang their horns together and push and chase each other around the waterhole.

## **Fri., Sept. 15**                      **Erongo Mountains | Aiaiba Lodge**

We left Etosha early and started the drive south toward the Erongo Mountains. We stopped for a mid-morning snack at a wonderful bakery and coffee shop along the way and had several birding stops to target some of the specialties of the area. Sean was great today (as always) and knew exactly where to go for each species. We had a wonderful lunch at a nursery full of a variety of interesting cacti and other plants. After lunch we had a good birding break in a dry riverbed and while birding heard an African Scops Owl calling. It took a little work to locate, but we eventually found it roosting high up in one of the trees.

Aiaiba Lodge was beautiful – what a great place. It is in the middle of a granite cliffs and boulders and couldn't be any more picturesque. We had a bit of free time, so some people hiked one of the lodge trails, others tested out the pool, while others kicked back with a drink and watched the Rosy-faced Lovebirds and other birds coming into the waterhole in front of the lodge.

## **Sat., Sept. 16**                      **Hartlaub's Spurfowl**

This morning we started early with a serious target: Hartlaub's Spurfowl. They often call and are visible just above the lodge just at daylight, then disappear for the rest of the day so we wanted to make sure we were there early. It worked perfectly. Just a few minutes' walk from the lodge Sean played the call and a pair responded close by. Shortly the male and female both hopped up on a boulder in the cliffs and called a few times before continuing over the ridge and out of sight. They are nearly endemic to Namibia and a very sought-after bird, so we were happy to get good views before breakfast! Rock Kestrel was perched on the cliff, and we were able to see several Rock Hyrax hiding in cracks in the cliff watching us. We had seen Scimitarbill a couple of times during the tour but not well and had been missed by part of our group, so we were happy when one flew in a landed in an acacia by us. After breakfast we walked up and checked out a few rock art sites above the lodge. It was a



wonderful place, and we all were sad to leave, but we had more exciting birds to look for, so we loaded up and started our trek to the coast. Along the way we made some stops to target bird and look for more of the specialties of the area. We got great looks at Damara Hornbill, another near endemic that replaces Red-billed Hornbill in western Namibia. In the foothills of the Spitzkoppe Mountains, also known as Namibia Matterhorn, we took a short walk and found Layard's Warbler, Karoo Long-billed Lark, and got another view of a Herero Chat. As we continued toward the coast the vegetation got smaller and the ground got sandier, and eventually there were no plants at all. The ocean was a welcome sight, and we had a great time birding along the coast and in the salt pans nearby. We arrived in Swakopmund in time to walk around and enjoy the shops and explore a bit. It is a strange atmosphere in town – kind of like a whole German town got picked up and placed in the middle of the Namib desert. We had dinner at a great Italian place just around the corner from our hotel and the pizza was wonderful.

## **Sun., Sept. 17                      Walvis Bay | Swakopmund**

After being so hot and dry thus far on our trip, it was surprisingly cold this morning – definitely jacket weather. We started out with a bit of birding in the park next to our lodge to see if we could find Orange River White-Eyes and we found them after only a few minutes. From there we drove south to the large port city of Walvis Bay. We spent the remainder of the morning at a variety of locations primarily for waterbirds. Thousands of Flamingos, both Lesser and Greater, were definitely a highlight. We sorted through all the shorebirds and terns and ended up with a pretty good list. Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints were abundant – both recently arriving from their breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere. Damara Terns were a nice find, as was one Great White Pelican in the salt pans. The wind really picked up in the afternoon, so after lunch we opted to visit the museum in Swakopmund and have a relaxing afternoon. The museum was wonderful, and it was nice to explore the town a bit more and get caught up on trip notes. Dinner was at a local seafood restaurant.

## **Mon., Sept. 18                      Namib Desert | Namib-Naukluft National Park**

We checked out of our hotel and started our drive into the Namib desert. Our first destination was a spot to see Welwitschia plants. These strange plants can live up to 900 years old! We took a short hike looking at Welwitschias and trying to find the endemic chameleon to the area but eventually had to give up and carry on.



From there it was a pretty long drive, but we stopped and birded at a few locations along the way. We had a few Ruppel's Bustards along the road and found a couple of White-throated Canaries in the trees in a dry riverbed. We arrived at our lodge just inside Namib-Naukluft National Park at Sossusvlei in time to enjoy another beautiful sunset.

## **Tues., Sept. 19                      Deadvlei | Salt Pans & Dunes**

One of the benefits to staying inside the park is that we don't have to wait for the park to open, so we left before sunrise and got to the end of the road a Deadvlei before the masses of other people. We hiked into the saltpan and then spent the rest of the morning exploring the area. The old dead trees made great photos and there were a couple of very picturesque Oryx on the dunes surrounding the pans. The salt pan and surrounding dunes are mostly devoid of bird life, but there was a pair of Red-headed Falcons perched in one of the dead trees and a few Familiar Chats and Cape Sparrows. A Namib Sand Snake poking his head out of a hole in a sand bank was a great find. After a couple of hours, we made our way back to the vehicle. Sean found a beautiful Spotted Eagle Owl perched in the middle of an old Acacia tree. After lunch and siesta time, we headed back out in the evening. We did a shote hike through some vegetated dunes. There was a very tame Dune Lark and lots of interesting beetles. We had a few more Ruppell's Bustards pose for photos just off the road and a bunch of Oryx in perfect evening light working their way across the flats. Back at the lodge we had our last dinner together and enjoyed talking about all the wonderful experiences we had.

## **Wed., Sept. 20                      Departures**

Our final morning allowed us to savor the breathtaking beauty of the Namib Desert during breakfast. Afterward, we made our way to the airstrip for a short 45-minute charter flight back to Windhoek. There, we bid our farewells, embarking on the journeys that would take us all back home. What an incredible journey!

*Photos by Bryan Shirley: Group, Lion, Black-collared Barbet, Flamingos, Yellow-billed Oxpecker, African Elephants, Wattled Crane, African Gray Hornbill (Peg Abbott), Game Drive, Water Buffalo, Angola Painted Reed Frog, Makoro, Birthday celebration, Yellow-billed Storks, Giraffes, African Wild Dog, Lagoon Camp view, Dik Dik, Lion roar, Safari snacks, Leopard, Watering Hole, Waxbills (Peg Abbott), White Rhino, Kori Bustard (NJ Stock), Pale-chanting Goshawk, Hartebeest, Aiaiba Lodge, Rock Hyrax, Flamingos, Dune Lark, Welwitchia plant, Cape Sparrow, Deadvlei Hikers, Oryx herd, Oryx*