

# BIRDING NAMIBIA'S OUTBACK

July 2009 Trip Report



Etosha by Michael Poliza

**By Kim Frost, Denmark**

After three extraordinarily successful birding trips to South Africa an irresistible appetite for the many endemic species of Namibia lead to the quick decision of late winter birding in the outback of Namibia. As usual, Patrick from Avian Leisure of Simonstown, SA, was my guide.

From the time our north bound flight out of Cape Town started its descent over the rolling red dune fields of the Kalahari desert for Walvis Bay, a sense of eager anticipation started to well up inside of me, as the reality of a long thought about birding trip in search of as many of Namibia's enigmatic endemic birds was fast becoming an achievable reality...

To the west the cold and nutrient rich Benguela current traced the inhospitable coastline northwards along the infamous wreck strewn Skeleton Coast and on to the dune fields of Angola.



Trac Trac Chat by Warwick Tarboton

Far out to sea a great grey fog bank was creeping eerily shorewards pushed by a light onshore westerly wind that would shroud the coastal plain in heavy fog during the course of the night. A dew point and cold current related phenomenon that has repeated itself with monotonous reliability over the millennia for the benefit of the many forms of moisture dependent life inhabiting the Namib Desert.

Now with the bump of the undercarriage going down for the final approach the parallel lines of red sand dunes finally gave way to the sprawling gravel plains of the Namib Desert, geologically separated from the Kalahari by what remains of the non-perennial Kuiseb river wending its fossilized way westwards across the scrub dotted landscape to the salt pan system south of Walvis Bay.

Immigration procedures were promptly attended to and in no time we had collected our hire car and first new 'tick' in the form of the pale race of the Trac Trac Chat in the car park, before heading out across the Namib plains with more lifers in mind.

First off was the much sought after Dune Lark to add to my collection of South African larks already seen. Not one but several were observed, including a confiding pair that provided a close approach as they quietly foraged about in a nama melon encrusted tussock. An added bonus was the presence of three hyper active male Dusky Sunbirds sparking off one another in an acacia tree, a bird I had missed earlier down south in the Karoo.

From here we headed directly across the dunes to the sprawling matrix of commercially mined salt pans dotted along the southern end of Walvis Bay in search of palearctic waders and, in particular, Damara Tern. This diminutive tern with its black bill and yellow legs winters far to the north off West Africa . However, we had been reliably informed that there was always a chance of one or two in the area provided we were persistent and allowed sufficient time for a thorough search of the tidal area.

After a series of up close views of Greater Flamingo and early wader arrivals in the form of Ruddy Turnstone, Curlew Sandpiper, still in resplendent breeding plumage, Ruff, Greenshank, Marsh Sandpiper



Damara Tern by Warwick Tarboton



Orange River White-Eye by Warwick Tarboton



Rosy-faced Lovebird by Warwick Tarboton

and Sanderling, we had a small white tern fly by and settle in perfect light a short distance away facing into the wind. Sure enough it proved to be our target bird and we enjoyed an extended scope view before heading back to town for the night.

An early and fog bound start to the day kicked off with Orange River White-Eye in the guest house garden followed by African Reed Warbler, Black-chested Prinia, Dusky Sunbird, Southern Masked Weaver and White-backed Mousebird in a stand of isolated tamarisk trees. From Walvis Bay we took a direct line for Spitskop, and isolated granite inselberg situated in the heart of the Namib Desert, picking up Karoo Long-billed Lark, Chat Flycatcher, Stark's Lark, Grey-backed Sparrowlark in quick succession along the side of the road.

A 'fly by' of five very pale larks that could have been Gray's Lark didn't stop for further examination but the surrounding area delivered up excellent sightings of Double-banded Courser and Namaqua Sandgrouse. Closer to Spitskop, Ruppell's Korhaan, Monteiro's Hornbill, Sabota Lark, Pale-winged Starling, Lark-like Bunting, Rufous-eared Warbler, Red-eyed Bulbul and Mountain Wheatear were added to the list. Within the surrounding granite complex of mega sized boulders Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, Pirit Batis, Great Sparrow, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Red-headed Finch, Chestnut Weaver, Purple Roller and, best of all Herero Chat was soon added to the bag!

Our afternoon route across a matrix of dry river beds and acacia dotted plains to the distant Erongo Mountains yielded views of Black-breasted and Brown Snake Eagle, Pale Chanting Goshawk, Greater Kestrel, Red-billed Francolin, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, Acacia Pied Barbet, Marico Flycatcher, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, Red-crested Korhaan, Double-banded Sandgrouse, Namaqua Dove, Red-faced Mousebird, Bokmakierie, Yellow-bellied Eremomela and lastly a Freckled Nightjar 'yapping' away at dusk to bring the day to a close.

An early start into the surrounding boulder strewn hills and granite shields delivered early sightings of the enigmatic Hartlaubs Francolin, closely followed by Short-toed Rock Thrush, White-tailed Shrike, Damara Rock Runner, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Scaly-feathered Finch, Long-billed Crombec, White-browed Sparrow Weaver,



Red-billed Francolin



White-tailed Shrike



Pearl-spotted Owlet

Grey-backed Camaroptera, a pair of stunning Violet-eared Waxbills and the multi-colored Green-winged Pytilia before we headed north to a lodge on the western edge of the Etosha National Park.

On arrival our quest for new birds commenced afresh with Pygmy Falcon, Ruppell's Parrot, Bare-cheeked Babbler, Damara Red-billed Hornbill and Meve's Starling being added in quick succession. The birding in and around Etosha was proving to be as excellent as the rest of Namibia!

A slow trawl through open woodland along the approach road yielded good views of Carp's Tit, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Black-backed Puffback, Crimson-breasted Shrike, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Cape Penduline Tit - Southern Africa's smallest bird, Red-eyed Bulbul, Groundscraper Thrush, Black-faced Waxbill and Pearl-spotted Owl to our now rapidly expanding list of sightings.

Keeping an eye to the sky paid off in the form of great views of Augur Buzzard, as it circled low overhead, while loose flocks of Bradfield's Swift foraged low down over the open plain. Dusk at the waterhole provided good views of Double-banded Sandgrouse in the failing light....

Traversing east across the Etosha National Park added Lappet-faced and White-backed Vulture, Tawny Eagle, Burchell's Courser, Northern Black Korhaan, Chestnut-banded Plover, Grey-backed and Chestnut-backed Sparrowlark, Red-capped Lark, a foraging party of the pale form of Spike-heeled Lark, Ant-eating Chat, Sociable Weaver, Lilac-breasted Roller, Palm Swift, Kori Bustard, the heaviest flying bird in the world, and the totally unexpected sight of a magnificent male African Lion striding purposefully across the open plain in the heat of the day...

A lunch break in mopani woodland produced close up views of two White-faced Owls and a single diminutive African Scops Owllet in their day time roosts, Grey Hornbill, Gabar Goshawk, White-crested Helmet Shrike and Violet Wood-Hoopoe, while a patch of acacia produced Pied Babbler, Bearded Woodpecker, Kalahari Scrub Robin and Barred Warbler.

Dusk at a waterhole east of the Park provided floodlit views of a lone male Greater Painted-Snipe as an unexpected bonus bird feeding along the shoreline in a totally exposed position in the company of a family party of Blacksmith Plovers!



Namibia Lion



Lilac-breasted Roller



Golden-breasted Bunting by Warwick Tarboton

Further south on the final run back to Windhoek for the flight out we added Cinnamon and Golden-breasted Bunting, Swainson's Francolin, Harlequin Quail, Small Button Quail, Fawn-colored Lark, Cape Glossy and Burchell's Starling, Red-billed Hornbill, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Familiar Chat, Ashy Tit, African Hoopoe, African Scimitarbill, Blue Waxbill, Desert and Rattling Cisticola.

Aside from the more important birds singled out for mention within the mix of well over 150 recorded along the route, over thirty mammal species were recorded and several reptiles, including Puff Adder and Desert Chameleon were encountered.

All in all a really great six day mid-winter safari across the deserts and Great Plains of central Namibia!

Thanks go to Patrick & Marie Louise Cardwell of Avian Leisure [www.avianleisure.com](http://www.avianleisure.com) for organizing all arrangements of my most productive and enjoyable birding safari with a total of no less than 242 bird species.

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