Field Notes from Africa

by Geoff Hammerson, November 2012

Africa! Few place names are evocative on so many levels and for such diverse reasons. Africa hosts Earth's most spectacular megafauna, and the southern part of the continent, though temperate rather than tropical, has an extraordinarily rich and unique flora. Africa is the "cradle of humankind" and home to our closest living primate relatives. Indigenous peoples in arid southern Africa have learned to live in one of Earth's most extreme environments. For early sea-going explorers, Africa was both an obstacle and a port of call, and later the continent proved to be a treasure-trove of diamonds, gold, and other natural resources. Sadly, Africa is also a land of human starvation, deadly disease, and genocide, and grotesque slaughter of wildlife to satisfy the superstitions and greed of people on other continents. It was a target for slave traders and a prize for imperialists. Until as recently as 1994, South Africa was a nation where basic human rights and opportunities were apportioned according to the melanin content of one's skin. Africa's exploitative and racist history has made it a cauldron of political and social turmoil. Given this mixture of alluring and repugnant characteristics, many potential visitors to Africa first pause and carefully consider the realities of visiting this turbulent yet compelling continent. After more than three decades of travel to some of Earth's most spectacular places, Cloud Ridge Naturalists decided it was time to explore our planet's second-largest landmass.

It would take a lifetime to appreciate Africa's full diversity, so our Cloud Ridge explorations necessarily focused on a limited but diverse region. We traveled in South Africa and Namibia for nearly five weeks in August and September 2012. Our journey consisted of two back-to-back trips, the first focusing on the globally renowned botanical wonders of South Africa, and the second devoted to close encounters with Namibia's spectacular animal life.

Our experience was greatly enhanced by the truly exceptional quality and efforts of our South African guide, Patrick Cardwell, who was frequently and superbly assisted behind the scenes by Marie-Louise Cardwell. Patrick's knowledge and experience repeatedly put us in the right place at just the right time. His energy and organizational skills made every day smooth and rewarding. We plagued him with questions for over a month, yet he retained his good humor and provided a wealth of information on every conceivable topic. On the rare occasions when he didn't know the answer to one of our inquiries, he quickly investigated and soon had an answer. If something beyond his control went wrong, he quickly put things right. As an expert on South Africa's wines, Patrick even made sure we were well served come supper time. Other guides with local expertise joined us at several of our field sites, and they, too, contributed much to our understanding and enjoyment.

South Africa's Fantastic Flora

We began our South African floristic explorations on the Cape Peninsula and Table Mountain National Park, encompassing Cape Point and the Cape of Good Hope. The Cape Floristic Region of South Africa supports more than 9,000 native vascular plant species, of which nearly 70 percent occur nowhere else on Earth. Everywhere we turned seemed to yield a beautiful new flower. Though we focused on plants, we also found lizards, tortoises, ostriches, and baboons, and we had close looks at bonteboks (one of southern Africa's rarest antelopes). Many of us familiar with the rocky intertidal zone of Alaska and the Pacific Northwest eagerly scrambled along the shores on the Cape and found striking similarities and differences. At Simon's Town (home of the Cardwells' tour company), we visited the Boulders Beach colony of African penguins. An abundance of penguins, so close to the town's seaside residences, gave the illusion that all was well, but this species has declined dramatically over the long term and in recent years, a sad result of human destruction of penguin habitat, depletion of the fish populations on which the penguins feed, and, formerly, direct exploitation of the penguins and their eggs.


African penguin

In Cape Town, the renowned Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden provided a magnificent panorama of native flora, and the flowers yielded a bird and bug bonanza as well; colorful blooms visited by sunbirds, sugarbirds, monkey beetles, bees, and other native pollinators kept our cameras busy. Nearby, we viewed from afar Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela spent most of his 27 years as a political prisoner.


king protea

From Cape Town and the Cape Peninsula we traveled northward in a small bus, stopping to botanize at wildflower reserves near Darling, Langebaan, and the West Coast National Park (WCNP). The dazzling wildflowers were immensely impressive even to a partially color-blind person such as myself. WCNP and nearby Langebaan gave us close looks at the noisy colonies and beautifully woven nests of cape weavers and red bishops. In Langebaan, a nocturnal cacophony of amphibians in a marshy pond caught my attention. I was out so late prowling the pond that my roommate contemplated sending out a search party!

We headed eastward to the Berg River and our lodging at Kersefontein, a Cape Dutch homestead established in 1770. Here farm life revolves around sheep, cattle, pigs, horses, honeybees, and other domestic stock, while majestic blue cranes feed and fly about farm fields. The trumpeting blue cranes immediately brought to mind the sandhill cranes of Colorado's San Luis Valley.


Kersefontein

To the north, we passed through the orange- and lemon-growing region of southwestern South Africa and the well-named town of Citrusdal, picturesquely situated in the Olifant's River valley next to the Cedarberg Mountains. Further botanical treasures awaited us northward at the Ramskop Wildflower Garden and Nature Reserve in Clanwilliam. We arrived in Clanwilliam right on time for the annual wildflower show. Set up in a spacious old church, the show was truly a work of art and labor of love for the local wildflower enthusiasts, who worked for 10 days to set up the naturalistic displays, arranged by region and habitat. An adjacent room with labeled wildflowers provided a perfect complement to the beauty of the main exhibit.

After ascending the Great Escarpment (a major topographic feature that rims all of southern Africa), we accessed a series of geologically based habitats that offered unique arrays of plant life in the vicinity of Nieuwoudtville. Among these were ancient glacial gouges made not during the Pleistocene but rather much earlier as southern Africa, as part of Gondwanaland, passed over the South Pole 300 million years ago. A hidden treasure in this region of relatively flat plains was the 100-meter waterfall on the Doring River. At a nearby tea/coffee break stop, we sampled *koeksusters* (cook sisters), a pastry favorite among South Africans. Later, we ate *bobotie*, a traditional South African dish consisting of Malaysian-spiced ground meat with an egg custard topping—wonderful comfort food!

Our northernmost destination in South Africa was Namaqualand and Namaqua National Park—the heart of the Succulent Karoo. Here we overdosed on a visual feast dominated by endless sheets of orange flowers. Nearby, on vast plains of quartz gravel, we strolled among a sample of the world's richest succulent flora. The plants were quite small and often hard to discern from the gravel, so we were soon down on hands and knees. As we peered closely at the plants, some of the nearby quartz pebbles actually hopped! But these turned out to be beautifully cryptic grasshoppers with gleaming quartzlike body parts.

Crossing the Cedarberg Mountain region eastward, we entered the extensive plains of the Great Karoo (the northern portion of the inland Nama Karoo), gradually making our way southward to the Inverdoorn Game Reserve. Bouncing along in traditional safari vehicles we found an amazing array of wildlife in this extensive private reserve and conservation center. Formerly eradicated species, such as African buffalo, giraffe, zebra, blue

wildebeest, and square-lipped (white) rhinoceros have been reintroduced, and the fenced and patrolled reserve is large enough to allow them to live more or less normal lives. The reserve hosts a cheetah conservation center that is attempting to raise these fast cats for eventual release in suitable areas.


Giraffe

Our route back toward Cape Town gave us an opportunity to visit Worcester's Karoo Desert National Botanical Garden—complete with wandering leopard tortoises—and the Worcester Museum. The partly outdoor museum added to our appreciation of the Cape region's centuries-old farming lifestyle, which we had experienced earlier at Kersefontein. Later that day, we had a major downpour, so we deftly took refuge in the Fairwinds Winery and before long we forgot it was raining!

Soon we were back in Cape Town and bid fond farewells to those who were heading home. Most of us stayed on for the Namibia excursion, and we took advantage of the trip interlude to visit the interesting exhibits in the Cape Town aquarium and South African Museum—useful and much appreciated complements to our field explorations. Some of us went out on a small boat to look for great white sharks around Seal Island, several miles off Simon's Town. A storm front had just moved through, and we were tossed around quite a bit in the rough seas, but we were alert and had our cameras ready, for the sharks sometimes launch themselves out of the water when attacking the seals. We didn't find any sharks that day but did see plenty of fur seals and some seabirds, including skuas and giant petrels, familiar to us from previous Cloud Ridge trips on the Southern Ocean. No doubt the pelagic birds were driven landward by the storm.

Namibia's Charismatic Mega- and Mini-fauna

Bolstered by several newly arrived participants for this second part of our African adventures, Cloud Ridge explorers flew from Cape Town to Windhoek, Namibia, on September 3. After a little leg stretch and wildlife tantalizer at the Heja Game Lodge, we boarded two small aircraft and flew southwest to the tiny airstrip in the Sossusvlei area of the Namib Desert and Namib-Naukluft National Park. The highlight of this area was the morning light on the endless expanses of wind-shaped dunes of red-orange sand. Ironically, photographing the shapely, sunlit dunes reminded me of photographing icebergs in the midnight sun in Greenland—each dune and iceberg had its own attractive shape and pattern of luminosity and shadow. Animal life here tended to be on the small side, though we also saw plenty of the charming, ubiquitous springboks. Wandering among the dunes, we discovered the tracks of gerbils and other small mammals. Careful tracking along fresh trails led us to active three-striped skinks, wedge-snouted lizards, and tok tokkie beetles.


Sossusvlei

Sossusvlei Lodge was a great place to observe sociable weavers. We watched these handsome songbirds working on their communal nests, adding thin dry grass stems one by one. Over time, the nests take on gigantic proportions. Nearby, Kalahari tree lizards and tree mice lurked about the camelthorn acacia trees. Evening found us examining examples of bushman rock art as the

setting sun set afire the heaps of rounded sandstone blocks that dominated the low hills. In addition to this feast of scenery, our local guides and lodge staff surprised us with champagne and a splendid candlelit sit-down field dinner under the starry Namib Desert sky, with background music provided by barking geckos.

The following day, as we drove northward, Hennie, our bus driver, slammed on the brakes—slang! (i.e., snake!). Of course, I was the first one off the bus and was delighted to discover a cape cobra crawling along in the sun. These cobras cause more human fatalities than any other serpent in southern Africa, but this individual, though surrounded by several photographers (most of the group watched from the bus!), was intent only on escape. The shade under the bus apparently looked like a good place to hide, and we became somewhat alarmed as the cobra went under the bus and started to climb up into the wheel well. Fortunately, the snake withdrew and just rested on the ground in the shade, whereupon we instructed Hennie to back up, and we were able to coax the snake into the bush and soon it was down a rodent burrow.

Happy to have seen and survived our first snake in Africa, we eventually arrived on the coast at Walvis Bay. Among a diverse assortment of waterbirds around the bay, the real eye-grabbers were the numerous greater flamingos. The sinuous S-curve of each flamingo's bill and neck contrasted wonderfully with its straight stilt legs. Many birds stood on just one leg, and it was remarkable that they were able to fold up the other long leg such that it almost completely disappeared.

Near Walvis Bay, in the Dorob National Park, we searched for animal life among the desert dunes. Among the vast expanses of bare sand, the bottom of the food web consists only of tiny patches of succulent plants, such as dollar bush (*Zygophyllum stapfii*), and wind-deposited organic detritus. Yet, as in North America, the desert dunes yielded a fascinating array of cryptic life—web-footed geckos, Namaqua chameleons, Peringuey's adders (its sidewinding locomotion was identical to that of North America's sidewinder rattlesnake), horned adders, Namib sand snakes, dancing white lady spiders, tok tokkie beetles, dune crickets with snowshoelike feet (reminding us of the sand treader camel crickets in Colorado's Great Sand Dunes), and tractrac chats (small songbirds).

The chameleons had an excruciatingly slow, tentative way of walking on the sand, even though they were fully exposed, and Peringuey's adders could quickly disappear completely beneath the sand simply by a forward-moving progression of body wiggles. That night, exploring near the Swakop River, we discovered that not only do scorpions glow under ultraviolet light (most of us already knew that) but so do web-footed geckos!

North of the Swakop River is Namibia's infamous Skeleton Coast, named for the large number of seal and whale skeletons and wrecked ships scattered along the shore. One source of seal carcasses is the Cape Cross Seal Reserve, a large breeding colony of African (cape) fur seals. The cape, or headland, is

named for a cross erected there by the Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão, who reached the site in January 1486. Our visit to the reserve was during the nonbreeding season, so the scene was relatively serene. Young seals born months earlier nursed right at our feet (we were on a boardwalk). However, tranquility does not always reign here. Cape Cross is one of Namibia's seal culling sites. About 85,000 seal pups and 6,000 bulls are killed annually in Namibia. According to *The Namibian* (17 June 2010), "The pups are clobbered to death with wooden clubs and the bulls are shot. At Cape Cross the killings take place from early in the morning until around 9:00 am, before tourists are allowed in to view the seal colony." Some Namibians are calling for an end to the killings and a shift to expanded seal-focused ecotourism.

African fur seal

Near the fur seal colony, we visited what had to be one of the world's unique nature reserves, prominently marked by a large sign: "CAUTION LICHEN FIELD—VEHICLES PROHIBITED." The expansive flat plain was scattered with a colorful display of lichen-adorned pebbles. As is the case in many desert regions, long-lasting damage caused by unrestricted off-road vehicle use is an ongoing conservation issue in Namibia, and it was heartening to see this reserve and learn of other attempts to protect the region's fragile natural landscape.

From Cape Cross, we headed inland toward the Brandberg. Along the way, we stopped where a group of Himba women were encouraging passersby to stop and buy their handcrafts. The Himba are a semi-nomadic ethnic group of northern Namibia. The stunning women were minimally clothed and, per their custom, anointed with otjize, a mixture of butter fat and ochre, which gave their skin a reddish glow and provided a plasticinelike coating to their hair braids. The pastoral Himba culture has struggled to maintain itself against the forces of war, drought, land development, and expanding modern culture.

The Brandberg is an isolated intrusion of early Cretaceous granitic rocks. The names translates to "burning mountain," and indeed the rocks of the massif glowed red in the morning and evening sunlight. Our primary focus in this region was to find the so-called desert elephants, known for their arid habitat, small body size, and relatively small tusks. Our field vehicle struggled to get through several areas of deep sand, but we eventually found sizeable groups of these elephants near the ephemeral Ugab River. Of course I had read about elephants and had seen videos of them, but I was immediately moved by their vividly obvious social structure and dynamics. We were seeing not just a group of elephants but something much greater. The experience was akin to eavesdropping on a large human family in its home, each adult and youngster clearly having its own place, role, and relationship to others.

African elephant

Our next destination—Etosha National Park—was the much-anticipated trip highlight for probably all of us, and it didn't disappoint. The park is dominated by a huge generally dry mud-salt pan, similar to features common in North America's Great Basin. But the similarity ends when you consider the living landscape. Etosha's large diverse populations of mammals and birds far surpass

anything in the Great Basin, even in pre-Columbian America. Our wildlife list was long: elephant, rhinoceros, giraffe, lion, leopard, African wildcat, oryx, eland, zebra, red hartebeest, kudu, black-faced impala, springbok, blue wildebeest, warthog, black-backed jackal, spotted hyena, banded mongoose, ostrich, kori bustard, secretarybird, and many others. Our visit at the end of the dry season ensured that most wildlife was concentrated around the limited number of water holes, so thirsty animals were easy to find and observe at close range.


lion

Our lodgings were near floodlit waterholes, and many of us spent hours quietly watching the progression of animals that came to drink at night. Particularly enthralling were the gentle interactions among several hook-lipped rhinos. In addition to water, shade seemed to be a precious resource for certain species in the sun-baked Etosha landscape. Seeing dozens of springbok packed into the thin shade of a small leafless tree right next to us was one of the many compelling experiences in Etosha.


hook-lipped (black) rhinoceros

Our final field site in Namibia was the Waterberg Plateau, a prominent topographic feature south of Etosha. The plateau's cliffs and scrubby woodland lie within a national park that serves as a reserve and reintroduction site for native wildlife, many of which we glimpsed during our forays. Perhaps most impressive were the herd of African buffalo that came to drink while we sat in an adjacent blind, and the tiny Damara dik-diks foraging around the woodland edges of our cabin lodgings. For some of us, the baboons were most memorable of all. A large troop—well habituated to people—occupied the woodland that included our cabins. These baboons were not only relatively fearless of people (particularly women, it seemed), but also quite plucky. One baboon defensively attacked (but did not injure) one member of our group who evidently was following too closely behind a baboon group that included juveniles. The baboons sometimes tried to open cabin doors and windows, so we tried to remember to keep them closed and latched. But a baboon came in through a briefly opened cabin door, grabbed some food items, and ran off. Another episode involved an intruding baboon that evoked a scream from the startled cabin occupant. Hearing this, her roommate burst naked out of the shower, flailing a bath towel at the astonished baboon. I regret that I missed that scene!

Our time in Africa ended in Cape Town, where many of us had started our trip more than a month earlier. Before heading for home, Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden warranted another visit, and we rode the tram to the top of Table Mountain for fine views of the city and close encounters with crag lizards, hyraxes, and sunbirds. Finally, we enjoyed a lively farewell dinner, complete with South Africa music, dancing, and traditional foods.

As you undoubtedly surmise from my account, South Africa and Namibia proved to be richly rewarding in flora and fauna, and we were charmed by the enthusiasm and good humor of our local guides and other people we met. Many of us vowed to return soon!


baboon


orange-breasted sunbird