

Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park by Rolf Wiesler

Karin eventually convinced/instructed me to accompany her on a trip to the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park with Reach Africa Safaris (Clive Hopcroft and Graham Snow).

For me, a non birder, I convinced myself that this was a short trip down the road, followed by a couple of hours birding a day - an hour or two in the mornings and evenings with the afternoons lazing by the pool - boy was I wrong!!!

Firstly the trip started at 04h00 in the morning followed by a full day drive to the Kalahari, only to find that the Kalahari was no longer there - it appeared that the Botswana Delta had slipped into South Africa. Due to the extensive rain the park now resembled a wet land with some of the roads closed on account of the water (we knew there was trouble when rangers were seen to be building a large wooden ship and ushering animals on two by two). In fact one of the camps had a pelican sighting recorded in their register. However, after an intensive discussion we decided that the "sighter" had been smoking some serious stuff.

The trip was ten days long (nine nights), and we stayed in four different camps, two of which were remote bush camps. At one of the bush camps the resident clan of hyenas visited the kitchen tent and took a "liking" to Graham's binoculars. The remains of which were found the next morning, ie, a few small pieces of plastic and strap. Obviously these hyenas have now got the hunting edge on their prey, the Ziess-edge.

Ok, this is a birding newsletter so let's get down to the birding. We recorded a total of 119 birds in the park (more if we include travelling time), including 18 lifers for Karin (only 15 for me, as I have already seen three of them, ha-ha, take that!).

This was not a relaxing vacation as the day starting at 05h30 and running to about 21h00 with only approximately 2 hours of "down time", the rest being birding (and even the down time not safe as there were sporadic shouts of glee from Graham or Clive and being woken up in the middle of a dream for yet another LBJ!!).

For anybody who needs, or wants, to get to grips with raptors a visit to the Kgalagadi is a must, as there are a great number and variety - with all the different stages of plumage available. We had great fun attempting to turn juvenile Lanner falcons into Saker falcons and Black-breasted Snake-eagles into Short-toed Snake-eagles. Owls are my favourite and we had great sightings of Pearl-spotted, White-faced, Barn and Giant Eagles. One of the Giant eagle owls had a Lanner falcon in its claws (photo's available at a reasonable cost).

We saw plenty of LBJs, ie, 10 larks including Pink-billed and Dusky. We also saw a roost of hundreds of Western Red-footed Kestrels. Other unusual sightings for the area were Kurrichane Buttonquails and a Marabou Stork.

We also had great animal sightings, including a cheetah and her cubs, 4 lion sightings, a leopard attempting to hunt a springbok, numerous bat-eared foxes, spotted hyena (with binoculars), extreme close-ups of brown hyena and a suicidal cape fox (ran in front of the vehicle).

Due to the lack of TV people need to create their own entertainment. Anyone going on this trip should ask Graham to give his short rendition of Michael Flatley's River Dance - all you need is a road and an aggressive puff adder!!

Overall an enjoyable and rewarding experience. The downside being that I gained two kilograms from the superb food, which included two breakfasts a day.