

Guided birding trip with natural history specialities Namib, Etoscha, Okavango, Chobe to Victoria Falls:

„Avifauna Jane’s Initiative“

Company: LeafLove Safari cc
Guide: Albert Voigts von Schütz

Due to the long connection delays and flight disruptions from Canada and the USA, Jane and Paul arrived already on the 7th, while George and Maryanne reached Windhoek on the 8th. For that reason, I came to Windhoek a little earlier, simply to avoid unnecessary taxi logistics for dinners and to allow everyone to settle in gently at the beginning of the tour.

Last night we went for dinner at the Stellenbosch Wine Bar. I chose it because most of the seating is outdoors, the atmosphere is lively with mostly local guests, and the food offers a wonderful variety. It turned out to be an excellent choice and we had a very enjoyable evening.

This morning we decided to start early with a short sunrise birding walk. Since everything was new for Jane and Paul, we took it slowly and focused on the more common species typical for the area. In the end we spent nearly two hours birding and walked no more than about 300 meters, yet still recorded close to 40 species.

Not bad at all for a little before breakfast excursion.

Southern Red Bishops were very active in the reeds, while Black-faced Waxbills showed themselves beautifully in fresh breeding plumage. We also encountered typical local species such as Crimson-breasted Boubou, Rattling Cisticola, Diederik Cuckoo and Jacobin Cuckoo, along with several species of doves and many Rosy-faced Lovebirds.

Barred Wren-Warblers and Pririt Batis appeared in splendid breeding plumage, and we had several excellent views of the Damara Rockrunner. What I particularly enjoyed this morning was how vocal the rockrunners were, calling energetically from the rocks.

Overhead, large numbers of Bradfield’s, Little and Common Swifts were moving through the sky.

At one point I briefly played the call of a Pearl-spotted Owlet. Not only did several birds immediately respond and came in to investigate, but the Pearl-spotted Owlet itself appeared as well, giving us a very nice sighting.

Mary Ann and George arrived later in the day and were understandably quite jet-lagged and tired after their long journey. We therefore decided to take things easy. Some of us went into town to run a few errands and to briefly visit a well known birding spot north of the city in the hope of finding Grey-backed Cisticola, before meeting again at 15:30 for an afternoon birding excursion.

I had to think carefully before deciding to include the following events in this trip report. In the end, I believe that honesty is important, and that even negative experiences should be recorded so that a report reflects things as they truly happened:

In the afternoon we drove to a rugged, rocky area in the hills just outside town, close to the president's residence. Ironically, one would assume that such a location would be well guarded. At the time the area appeared completely deserted and quiet, and after checking carefully and seeing no one around, we stepped out of the vehicle to follow a Swallow-tailed Bee-eater and a Common Scimitarbill moving through the scrub. A particularly nice moment was the discovery of a very vocal Cape Penduline Tit, which gave us excellent views.

What followed happened within seconds.

To my shock and disbelief I suddenly saw two young men, criminals, approaching from behind our vehicle. Before we could react they jumped into the car, started the engine and drove directly towards us. We ran and shouted, but the men clearly had no concern for whether they might hit us. As the vehicle passed, I managed to reach the driver's window and pull the key from the ignition.

This only enraged them.

They jumped out of the car, picked up stones and began threatening us aggressively. The situation escalated quickly and ended with us being robbed. The men took our money, our cell phones, Jane's rings, and my camera.

The shock of the moment was intense.

In the confusion the car keys disappeared, they probably stole them, and we were unable to move the vehicle. We therefore had to walk in search of help. Fortunately a concerned and rather outspoken neighbour assisted us and drove us back to the scene. Meanwhile George and Mary Ann remained at their house and I was able to call my friend Andrew, who kindly collected them and brought them safely to the hotel.

The following hours were consumed by police reports, statements and investigations. Thanks to Apple's Find My iPhone we were even able to locate the house where the stolen phones had ended up. The police decided to monitor the location first rather than immediately intervene, and experience tells us that unfortunately little may come of it. Later the tourist police visited the house to check on my clients and to record an additional report.

Despite the ordeal we eventually managed to meet for dinner at the Stellenbosch Wine Bar, where we were grateful simply to sit down together and regain some calm after a very difficult afternoon.

Thankfully none of us were seriously harmed. Paul suffered a few bruises, Jane had been struck during the confrontation, and I was left with a painful shoulder from the struggle when I pulled the key from the ignition. In the end we lost possessions that can be replaced, except the rings obviously, although the emotional impact was considerable.

What impressed me most was the resilience and positive spirit of Jane and Paul. Despite everything they remained determined to continue the journey. Two admirable and remarkably strong characters.

Meanwhile my wife Lisa reacted swiftly from Swakopmund by sending us a spare key for the vehicle. My loyal driver Paul guarded the car, Andrew helped with the transfer, and before long we were able to retrieve the vehicle and return to the restaurant. Her quick thinking and reaction made the situation far easier to manage.

In hindsight I must acknowledge that I made a mistake in assuming that this particular area would be safe. It was a valuable lesson. From now on all birding excursions around the city will immediately head outside town rather than exploring areas within it.

In the end, experiences like this, difficult as they are, also shape us as professionals. They remind us how important awareness, preparation and caution are when guiding guests in unfamiliar environments. Over the years we have learned that not only the wonderful sightings and beautiful landscapes build experience, but sometimes also the difficult moments.

While this incident was certainly unsettling, it strengthened our determination to protect our clients even better in the future. Every experience, positive or negative, adds to the knowledge and awareness that allow us to operate as a responsible and professional safari company. In that sense, even this difficult day became part of the learning process that ultimately makes us stronger guides and better hosts for those who travel with us... a promise we would like to keep!

We got up early the next morning and started birding before dawn in the rocky hills above Ti Melen Guesthouse. It did not take long before I heard the distinctive calls of the much sought after Orange River Francolin echoing through the mountains. To make sure everyone felt comfortable after the events of the previous day, we took Walter, a young worker from the lodge along with us.

The birding was immediately rewarding. We enjoyed very good views of Damara Rockrunner, always a delight to see hopping among the boulders. As we slowly worked our way up the slope, the Orange River Francolin began calling *I need coffee I need coffee I need coffee* again... As is often the case with these birds, they sounded very close, yet remained frustratingly invisible.

We circled around behind the rocks and soon spotted them. Walter carefully climbed up from another side and I asked him to move slowly forward. His movement gently pushed the birds in our direction. Three birds suddenly burst into flight, giving us quick but clear glimpses before disappearing behind the rocks. One bird, however, remained behind and gave us a few wonderful seconds of observation before it too flew off.

We could say with good conscience that we had enjoyed excellent views of a very special and much desired bird.

After a scrumptious breakfast at Ti Melen Guesthouse, we headed to Avis Dam for some relaxed morning birding. Later we visited Avis Dam, but by then the wind had picked up considerably and birding was only moderate rather than truly productive.

On the walk back to the car we decided to head out of town and drive about thirty kilometers north of the city to a farm belonging to a friend of mine, where a few taller acacia stands promised interesting birdlife. I had high hopes for the area. Although we did find one or two interesting species, the strong wind made bird activity extremely low and several of the birds I had hoped to show my clients remained elusive. The bush was unusually quiet and the wind relentless.

Eventually we decided to call it a day, return to the guesthouse for a shower, and head out for dinner at the Cape Town Fish Market, which turned out to be an excellent choice. The restaurant served a truly fantastic meal. George and Mary Ann ordered a large plate of seafood paella, and all the other dishes looked equally tempting. It was a wonderful way to end the day.

The following morning I arranged another very early breakfast. Although the itinerary only mentioned the drive to Dead Valley Lodge, I decided to take a detour along the way. We drove past my farm Nomtsas, home to the LeafLove protection area.

We stopped for some birding at the Springbokhaar dam, which is normally teeming with birds. Unfortunately a very strong east wind once again made conditions difficult. Still, every cloud has its silver lining. Suddenly I heard the call of a Rufous-eared Warbler. I briefly played the call and the bird immediately responded, flying up and perching high on a bush, calling loudly and displaying beautifully. We had magnificent views of a perfectly plumaged male, a truly memorable sighting.

We also checked the surrounding mud edges of the dam, where a few remaining waterbirds were present, ranging from Little Stint and Kittlitz's Plover to Cape Teal and Red-billed Teal. Nearby I showed the group a charming little natural lily pond that had formed at the edge of the dam.

Afterwards we stopped at the farm itself. I showed them the house and the surroundings while I quickly tried to sort out some banking issues on the computer following the robbery.

Soon we continued our journey towards Dead Valley Lodge, driving along the dramatic scenery of the Naukluft Mountains. The landscape here is simply breathtaking. At one point I had to stop the vehicle so we could take photographs of the scenery. The view looked almost like an oil painting, with soft light falling across the rugged mountains and open plains.

We arrived at the lodge in the late afternoon and enjoyed a good dinner. Our arrival was welcomed by a rather enthusiastic chef who drummed us towards our table while loudly playing what he proudly described as traditional music. Whether the music was truly traditional or not remained questionable, but it was certainly entertaining and we all had a good laugh, especially at George, who gave a little "good-mood dancing sidestep" while rhythmically walking towards our dinner table.

One particularly funny moment occurred earlier that day when George helped me open a farm gate. As he got out of the vehicle he left the car door wide open. Mary Anne laughed and commented that he always does that at home as well. I drove through the gate with the door still open, and when George walked back towards the car he was clearly expecting some criticism. Before anyone could say anything, he simply announced:

"I left the door open to save the hinges, extend their life!"

That comment immediately triggered a round of laughter.

Slowly but surely the tension and the memories of the previous day began to fade. We were finally settling back into the rhythm of the journey and focusing on what we had all come here for, the birds, the landscapes, and the joy of travelling together.

Today's first important bird was the Dune Lark, although the taxonomy has recently changed and the southern populations in Namibia and the Northern Cape are now often treated together with Barlow's Lark. Either way, this species remains one of the most sought-after birds for visitors coming to Namibia.

Despite its reputation, the Dune Lark is not always easy to find. The birds move around quite a bit and it can be somewhat unpredictable where exactly they will appear.

We decided to do the touristy thing first thing in the morning. We got up at five, had a quick coffee, and left the lodge early to walk the dunes at Sossusvlei at sunrise. The scenery was breathtaking. After several days of heavy wind we were extremely lucky to experience a completely calm morning, bright sunshine and beautiful colourful clouds glowing in the western sky.

We walked towards Deadvlei, where I dug up a Barking Gecko for the clients and explained some of the fascinating desert plants, for example the famous Nara plant (*Acanthosicyos horridus*), which plays an important role in the culture and traditional economy of the indigenous people of the Namib.

After enjoying the scenery, making what we jokingly call a "Japanese stop" with lots of photographs, we moved on to an area where I was fairly confident we might find Dune Larks. At first I had my doubts, because I could not see any tracks in the sand. But then the first, second and third set of tracks appeared.

I tried playing the call of the Dune Lark, but it did not help at all. At this time of year they simply do not respond much to playback. So we continued walking slowly through suitable habitat and eventually found three birds.

They were fantastic. The birds were extremely confident and fed right near us, allowing perfect views and wonderful photographic opportunities.

We also encountered several Shovel-snouted Lizards in the dunes, which added nicely to the experience. After spending some time with the birds we left the area very satisfied.

On the way back we found two other Namibian specials. First were a few Burchell's Coursers standing next to the road. As coursers always do, they allow you to stop and watch them for a moment before they slowly start walking away. We managed some decent views, although we could not leave the road and they eventually moved quite far off.

Later we encountered Rüppell's Korhaan, lovely birds that were very tame and gave excellent photographic opportunities.

After this successful morning we continued to Sesriem Canyon for a bit of sightseeing before returning to the lodge.

I must honestly say that in over 30 years of tourism I had never stayed at Barkhan Dune Lodge before. One can never know everything. A friend of mine recommended the place to me, and I must say, what a lovely and beautifully kept lodge this is.

It is completely secluded and wonderfully private, with charming individual bungalows and excellent service. The rooms are spacious and very comfortable, simply a wonderful place to stay.

I was particularly happy that my clients could spend the rest of the day relaxing at this beautiful lodge.

The garden was full of life. The large tree right in front of the lodge was filled with birds, including Rosy-faced Lovebirds, Great Sparrow, White-throated Canary, and several other species moving through the branches.

It was the perfect peaceful ending to a very successful day in the Namib.

Early in the morning at Barkhan Dune Retreat, we headed up the mountain slope. At LeafLove Safari we deliberately choose only good and very good accommodation for our clients, as it is a company principle that everybody should be well rested and very comfortable during their safari. Everybody seemed very chuffed with the excellent quality of accommodation at Barkhan Dune Retreat, and when everyone appeared for the early morning birding walk, all were smiling, happy and clearly well rested.

We heard a few Rockrunners, but they were too far up to approach. A large Leopard Tortoise was seen in the gully, and while we were paying a bit more attention to the birds, George went to fetch his camera to take a photo of the tortoise. It would seem unlikely that the animal could have moved such a distance in such a short time, but when we came back we actually did not manage to find it again, joking that it must have galloped away.

Paul is a remarkably talented painter, his works resemble those of renowned artists, so much so that one might almost suspect he is a famous artist who simply never mentioned it. He is clearly also a gifted writer and recently shared a poem that, in his own words, describes me as a person. I am not sure whether I can truly live up to such praise, but I found the poem deeply expressive and particularly meaningful for someone living in the complex world we experience here in Namibia.:

Between Two Worlds

*I walk the line where two worlds meet,
not claiming either,
not denying either,
but carrying what each has taught me.*

*I do not stand in the circle of the First Peoples,
for that circle is theirs to hold.
Nor do I stand among settlers who believe the land is silent.*

*I walk beside them instead,
speaking softly of rivers that remember,
of forests that grieve,
of soil that knows the names of those who loved it.*

*I am not here to save anyone.
I am here to remind the younger people of this continent
that the land is older than their stories,
and that belonging is earned through care,
not claimed through title.*

*My task is simple, and lifelong:
to tend the small piece of earth entrusted to me,
to listen for the voices that machines drown out,
to honour the beings who share my home,
and to help others learn the difference
between ownership and relationship.*

*This is the path between worlds —
not a void,
but a way of walking
with humility,
with memory,
and with the land itself as my teacher.*

As we drove through the magnificent scenery of the Gaub Pass and the Kuiseb Pass, I included a bit of history and storytelling along the way. I told the guests about the two German geologists, Henno Martin and Hermann Korn, who survived in the Namib Desert for two years during the Second World War because they did not want to have anything to do with the war. The story fascinated everyone, and it felt like the perfect backdrop for wide angle landscape photography in this dramatic desert scenery.

Once we reached the gravel plains of the Namib, I stopped at a few well known spots where Gray's Lark is usually plentiful. It did not take long before we managed to get very good looks at this wonderful desert specialist. As we continued, we also encountered Karoo Chat, and when approaching the Tinkas Plains, I began calling for Karoo Eremomela, one of the more difficult birds of this area.

Unfortunately the wind was blowing and it was extremely hot, extremely hot, making the chances of seeing the species rather slim. Nevertheless I tried. At every suitable patch of habitat I stopped the vehicle, got out into the heat, and tried again, playing the bird's well known but rather monotonous song. Every spot where I had previously found the species over the years was checked carefully. After a while this began to work a little on everybody's nerves. It was probably almost as irritating that I kept trying again and again as it was to hear the repetitive call.

George eventually became a little frustrated, and when I asked him whether he was alright he simply said he could not quite see the sense of searching for one bird for such a long time. But since it was the only really rare and special bird I could realistically offer in this habitat, I persisted, unfortunately without success. The Eremomela therefore jokingly turned into the "rare-mo-mela", which in the end became quite a fitting nickname.

Along the way I also learned a new English expression. A few times I had started explaining things without switching on the microphone, which meant the people in the back seats could not hear me properly. Mary Anne then told me that I was "spitting in the wind", meaning I was wasting my energy talking.

As we crossed the endless plains of the Namib, I stopped along Welwitschia Drive and made a short detour to the largest Welwitschia plant known from the area. I hoped we might also find Tractrac Chat, which often occurs around these ancient plants, but in the intense midday heat not even the usual resident bird felt inclined to appear. Instead we took our time admiring the now flowering Welwitschias, and I told the group the story of Friedrich Welwitsch, Thomas Baines, and David Livingstone, also referring to the blog I had written about these remarkable desert plants.

After a long but fascinating drive through the Namib, everyone was therefore very happy to arrive in Swakopmund early in the afternoon.

On arrival we were treated to a nice sighting of Common Waxbill and Orange River White-eye. After checking in at Brigadoon Guesthouse, everybody had a bit of time to freshen up before we met again later for dinner.

For the evening we went to a little „secret spot“ that we know in Swakopmund. We were lucky enough to have the courtyard entirely to ourselves in an absolutely stunning and relaxed atmosphere, enjoying the best weather one could imagine. The chef at that place simply cooks out of this world. From mussels to sole and other delicacies, the small but very refined menu is prepared with a lot of love and care.

The place is called Charming House, a charming house indeed. I was also very happy that my wife Lisa could join us for dinner, freshening up the conversation a little and adding a lovely personal touch to the evening.

Early after breakfast the next morning I picked everyone up at Brigadoon and we headed for the Walvis Bay Lagoon.

I was fairly confident that along the way at Dolphin Beach we would find the small population of Red Knots, but it seemed that the strong east wind and the heat had driven these birds away from the shoreline.

Nevertheless, in the wonderful weather we enjoyed some superb sightings, including Swift Tern, Common Tern, Sandwich Tern, Crowned Cormorant, and of course many Sanderlings and Ruddy Turnstones, before we continued on to the Walvis Bay Lagoon.

I must admit I got a bit of a fright at the beginning because it appeared that all the birds had left the front section of the lagoon as we drove along. Thankfully, however, most of the birds had gathered on the western side of the lagoon, where we were able to find what we were looking for.

Among the highlights were beautiful sightings of White-winged Tern and Black Tern, and of course hundreds of thousands of Common Terns, with the occasional Caspian Tern mixed in. There were

also many waders present, including Common Ringed Plover, Little Stint, Chestnut-banded Plover, and White-fronted Plover.

We also enjoyed a particularly nice sighting of a Eurasian Curlew, as well as many Great White Pelicans, a few Flamingos, and several African Oystercatchers, although most of the flamingos were still inland at their breeding sites.

The sad part was that we had come at a very good time of the year to see many of these waders, and I had expected one hell of a lot of specials along the way. Unfortunately the weather and the heat really seemed to have erased quite a number of species from the area, which was rather disappointing.

However, we did have a fantastic sighting of a Damara Tern, one of the specials we were hoping to see here. We also enjoyed excellent views of hundreds of Black-necked Grebes, and in the backdrop there was a huge swarm of Bar-tailed Godwits, probably already preparing for their long journey north again.

We then visited Bird Paradise, just east of Walvis Bay. Sadly, parts of this area have unfortunately become a dumping site for rubbish from local workers in Walvis Bay. Seeing that made me quite agitated, irritated and honestly a little angry that people could be so careless with such a beautiful place.

Nevertheless we still had some pleasant sightings, including Blue-billed Teal, Maccoa Duck, and various grebes, moorhen and coot. The many waders I had hoped to find here, however, had clearly also been chased away by the heat and the wind.

In the back of my mind I was already thinking that we would hopefully make up for many of these missing waders later in the journey when we head north towards Etosha Pan.

The afternoon was at everybody's own leisure, and I had promised Paul and Jane that I would help them exchange some money. What followed turned into a rather unexpected and truly African little adventure, something I was not really used to in this context.

We went to draw some cash and then approached the exchange office. The lady asked for the slips from the ATM, which I duly handed over together with the passport and the necessary documents, only to be told that she actually had no US dollars left to exchange. At that moment Paul looked at me with a great "*What?*" expression, and we both simply started laughing and shaking our heads before walking across the street to try the next exchange.

At the second exchange office they could offer us only 100 US dollars. At that point I was quite happy that I suddenly remembered that I might still have some US dollars at home. I told Paul and Jane to leave it with me for the moment so that I could go and check.

Back at home I also phoned the Zimbabwean border, where my „brother“ Themba, the term brother has nothing to do with family, but rather friendship, who works there, confirmed that they would accept euros in cash for the vehicle entry. That solved the problem rather nicely. I decided that I would pay the vehicle fees in euros and then made a small private exchange for the clients, so that

they would still have US dollars available for their time in Zimbabwe. In the end everything worked out perfectly well.

In the evening we all went together to the Ankerplatz Restaurant, a place actually more for locals than tourists to eat in Swakopmund. The food was excellent. The kabeljou served there is simply far better than in many of the touristy restaurants that are always recommended. I do not quite know what the chef does differently, but he really knows how to prepare kabeljou, and it remains one of the main reasons why we like coming back to this restaurant.

We had Swakopmund just disappearing in the far rear view mirror when my phone suddenly rang. It was David, the manager of Brigadoon, informing us that my clients had forgotten their pills. So we had to turn around and collect them. I could already feel the heat rising, so once we had the pills I rushed towards Spitzkoppe in order to arrive early enough for the Herero Chat.

Paul explained today the meaning of the expression "at sixes and sevens," a phrase my sons and many others seem to use quite frequently these days. The saying goes back to old English and probably to dice games, describing a moment when one has to weigh different options and make a decision. Turning around to collect the forgotten pills suddenly put me into exactly such a sixes and sevens situation. I had to decide whether it would be wiser to stop at two or three spots along the way to try for Karoo Eremomela, or rather push straight through to the Herero Chat. I knew that once the heat of the day set in properly, our chances of seeing the bird would be practically gone.

The Herero Chat is a difficult bird in the heat and in windy conditions, and it was already getting hot. It was only 8:30 in the morning, yet it already felt like midday. I therefore made a beeline for a spot where I knew a pair of Herero Chats lived. I walked straight up to the area, did not waste time cooling down, and only started searching once I knew I was standing exactly at the perfect spot.

Thank God the bird reacted pretty quickly and we had some very nice views. The bird was not extremely close, but certainly close enough for some good photographs and satisfying looks.

Other species joined the show in the surrounding bush and rocky slopes, including Pririt Batis, Dusky Sunbird, White-throated Canary, Red-eyed Bulbul, Sabota Lark, Grey-backed Sparrow-Lark, and several Stark's Larks.

After this success we continued towards the beautiful Hohenstein Lodge, a lodge of very good class. I had booked the superior chalets for my clients, knowing they would be extremely happy to stay in such comfortable bungalows for the night.

All in all this turned out to be a very successful day, and I was very happy for my clients.

Although March is usually a fairly warm month, this March has felt exceptionally hot. Even so, it did not stop us from heading out at four o'clock in search of birds in the tall umbrella thorn, red bark

acacia, and camelthorn acacias lining the dry riverbed just below the lodge. We found two species of woodpecker, Cardinal and Golden-tailed Woodpecker, along with the usual bushveld birds such as Pririt Batis.

Before long, however, the heat became too much for Jane and Paul, and they made their way back to the lodge. A little later we saw Jane with pool-armor, bikini and sarong, ordering a drink at the bar, clearly enjoying a quiet break from the heat.

Meanwhile, Mary Anne, George, and I continued a little farther along a small loop. Suddenly George said, "There's an interesting pratincole or something in the far distance." It could hardly have been a pratincole out here, but I immediately sensed that it must be something special. And indeed, a moment later we spotted a group of four Temminck's Coursers running across the open area beside the waterhole. What a fantastic sighting. Thank you, George, that was a great find.

When I later saw Mary Anne sitting down for a short rest in the heat, I knew it was time to head back. So we returned to the lodge and took an hour to relax before dinner.

Dinner that evening was served outside on the "stoep", as we call it here in Namibia. The warm evening air, the soft sounds of the bush around us, and the relaxed atmosphere made for a wonderful end to the day. During dinner George ordered himself a pink gin and tonic, which of course invited a few comments from my side and caused quite a bit of laughter within our group. I suspect that some of the other guests around us were not entirely amused by the cheerful mood and the laughter coming from our table, but for us it felt simply right.

We had actually planned an early morning bird walk, but since I did not hear anything particularly interesting calling from the valley, I decided it would be better to have an early breakfast, check out, and head straight to my friend Didi Rusts farm, Erongo Rocks and Farmhouse. As it turned out, this was a very good decision.

We arrived at Erongo Rocks and began exploring the various habitats that Didi has created and preserved on the property. The absolute highlight came very quickly and was truly spectacular, a pair of Hartlaub's Spurfowl calling nearby. We managed to locate the female, which was sitting in wonderful view on a huge granite slope. She hopped about across the rocks before suddenly flying right past us and disappearing into the granite boulders.

At first I proudly announced that we had found a Hartlaub's Francolin, but in my excitement the name somehow turned into a "Heart-throb" Francolin.... Say no more :-)

Shortly afterwards we connected with a small group of White-tailed Shrikes, about four birds moving through the bushes. We also found two Carp's Tits, and with a bit of patience we eventually located a Layard's Tit-Babbler. The bird activity around the granite outcrops was excellent, and everyone in the car was in high spirits.

Naturally we could not pass the opportunity to stop at Didi's little restaurant for coffee and cake. They make absolutely outstanding date cake and carrot cake, served with good coffee, and they also offer light lunches. We had a few good laughs and thoroughly enjoyed the stopover.

Afterwards we continued on to Ondudu Safari Lodge. Along the way I tried for a few additional species, including Violet Woodhoopoe, but by then the heat had really set in and bird activity had slowed down considerably.

We eventually arrived at Ondudu and enjoyed a relaxed afternoon. The lodge is set in a fantastically beautiful landscape, surrounded by gigantic granite boulders that look almost like blown up balloons rising out of the earth. These enormous formations frame the property and offer a most magnificent view across the valley, creating a setting that feels both dramatic and wonderfully peaceful.

The bungalows, although technically tented chalets, are spacious, rustic and comfortable. Each one enjoys its own scenic vantage point and private lookout onto the surrounding landscape, making the stay feel intimate and very much part of nature.

The surroundings are beautiful and invite everyone to explore a little on their own. The bird bath near the main reception area provided a lovely little show, with Rosy-faced Lovebirds regularly coming in to drink, a pleasant way to end the day.

The heat was really starting to get to us and the day was becoming intensely hot. To lighten the mood a little, I told the group a story about my grandfather. A tourist once approached him and complained that it was already 45 degrees in the shade. My grandfather simply replied, "Well then you must be an idiot, why are you standing in the shade?"

Another story came to mind from a quick meeting I once had with my workers out in the field. I said to them, "Come on, let's stop standing in the sun and move into the shade. Only donkeys and tourists stand in the shade at midday." Isaac, one of my workers, immediately replied, "No, no, that's not quite right. Donkeys actually do seek out the shade."

After an early breakfast we had originally planned to head straight to Etosha. However, I decided to make a quick stop at a birding spot where I normally find Violet Woodhoopoes. Unfortunately, I did not manage to find them again, but we were rewarded with excellent views of a male Bearded Woodpecker accompanied by his female.

As we were still well on time, we continued towards Etosha, doing some birding along the way and finding a few Lesser Striped Swallows, a quite southerly sighting for these. As we came closer to the park I also spent some time looking for Bare-cheeked Babblers, Chestnut Weavers, and the ever-present Red-billed Queleas, finding all, before we finally checked in at the lodge.

We stayed at Etosha Village from the Taleni group, which is actually a very pleasant lodge to stay at. The bungalows are set far apart from one another, very private, and surrounded by relatively thick vegetation. This not only allows for a quiet and secluded stay, but also brings quite a lot of birdlife into the surrounding area. It is a rather large lodge and we normally prefer smaller, more high-end places, but this one is so well designed and nicely laid out that we really enjoy using it.

In the afternoon, we headed out onto the plains along the western boundary of the pan, an area we fondly call the Lark's Plains. Our main target here was the Pink-billed Lark, a species that can be surprisingly tricky to locate. At first, it proved rather frustrating, not only to find the birds, but also to explain their exact position in such an open landscape, where there are virtually no landmarks to guide the eye. After some time, and more than a little swearing when passing vehicles flushed the birds we had just located, we eventually succeeded, and everyone was able to enjoy good views of this special species.

We continued our drive and came across two lions, although "seeing" them might be an exaggeration. The lioness was lying completely flat on the ground, while the male remained hidden in the bushes, offering us little more than the back of his impressive mane. Yet the setting around them was nothing short of spectacular, literally thousands of zebras were grazing and moving across the plains, creating a scene of constant motion and life. The lions hardly needed to move at all, simply waiting for the right moment to step out and hunt. It was an extraordinary sight, and Paul summed it up perfectly when he said, "Who needs to go to the Serengeti when you have it all right here?"

Rather than joining the growing cluster of vehicles, we decided to move on, a decision that soon paid off when I spotted two Quailfinches. True to form, they waited until the cameras were ready before taking flight, but the sighting was still a delight.

Equally memorable was a large flock of Abdim's Storks sweeping across the plains, feeding on the abundance of newly hatched insects. It truly felt like one of the most beautiful times to visit Etosha, the landscape alive with lush vegetation, an incredible diversity of grasses and perennials, seeds and flowers, and an endless spectrum of green hues. Driving through the park in such conditions was pure bliss.

A particularly charming moment came when we observed a pair of Red-headed Finches perched together on a twig, looking very much like a newly married couple. We eventually made our way out of the gate in good time and ended the day with a relaxed buffet dinner back at the lodge.

Today was a true good mood day from start to finish. We rose very early, met at 5:30 for breakfast, and got a perfect head start into the park. Everything ran smoothly, and we were rewarded with an incredible number of fantastic sightings throughout the day.

I will not go into great detail listing every species, although there were many highlights, from Shaft-tailed Whydahs to various kestrels, falcons and eagles, as well as Cape Penduline Tit, Black-chested Prinia, Kalahari Scrub Robin, Yellow Canary, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, and many more.

The true highlight, however, came when I quickly stopped to check a Sociable Weaver's nest for a Pygmy Falcon. We did not find the falcon, but what we witnessed instead was one of the most remarkable wildlife encounters imaginable. A large opening in the nest revealed several Barn Owls inside, clearly agitated as they watched a Gymnogene, better known as an African Harrier-Hawk, working its way along the structure. With its extraordinary long legs, the hawk probed deep into the chambers of the nest, searching for a chick. It was an intense and beautiful spectacle to witness, raw

nature unfolding right in front of us. Eventually, the hawk succeeded, pulling out a chick, flying off to a nearby branch, and feeding before moving on.

Did you know that the African Harrier-Hawk has remarkably specialised legs adapted for reaching deep into holes and around corners? Its inter-tarsal joint can bend both forwards and backwards, an extraordinary ability among raptors. This unique adaptation allows it to probe into cavities, nests, and crevices in search of prey such as nestlings, geckos, and even bats, making it one of the most versatile and ingenious hunters in the African bush.

As if that was not enough, we then observed a Red-necked Falcon and a Gabar Goshawk in the same tree, clearly engaged in a dispute. The atmosphere in the car could not have been better. Spirits were high, and George broke into song, "Come a little bit closer and you will be my kind of bird," or something along those lines. I thoroughly enjoyed his spontaneous little bird songs, which have become a charming soundtrack to the trip.

On our way toward Halali, we were treated to yet another special sighting, a pair of Blue Cranes with a lovely chick walking alongside them across the open plains of Salvadora.

By the time we reached Halali, the heat had intensified, but we still went for a short walk. It proved worthwhile, as we found Damara Red-billed Hornbills with their distinct dark eyes, alongside Southern Red-billed Hornbills with noticeably different head patterns and bright yellow eyes. A group of Southern Black Tits, with their greyish underparts, clearly distinct from Carp's Tit, moved through the area, joined by a lively party of Bare-cheeked Babblers.

And still, the day kept delivering. As we approached Namutoni, we came across a small muddy puddle alive with activity, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Larks and Red-capped Larks gathering to drink and feed. This came shortly after already enjoying excellent views of Spike-heeled Larks earlier in the day.

On the tarmac road on our way out, I spotted a lovely group of Southern Red-billed Hornbills, always a pleasure to see. Just moments later, a Swainson's Spurfowl darted into the bush. I reversed slightly and called it out, not expecting much of a reaction. "Do you guys see them?" I asked. Suddenly, excited voices erupted from the back, "They're out, they're out, they're coming right at us!" And indeed they were. A Swainson's Spurfowl hen with her chicks calmly walked right past the vehicle, offering everyone absolutely fantastic views.

Wow, what a perfect way to end such an extraordinary day.... a "Lecka" day, as we Namibians would call it... coming from the Afrikaans word lekker, which means lovely or tasty or just simply good.

Mushara Outpost, what a wonderful place. It was clear that everyone truly enjoyed staying here and as we gathered for the barbecue dinner, I could see the many smiles on the faces of my guests.

Mushara, whether at the Outpost, which is my personal favourite for its intimate and high-end feel, or at the Bush Camp or Mushara Lodge, consistently delivers outstanding service, excellent food, and beautiful accommodation. I do love the Onguma Lodges as well though...

Enough said.

After an early breakfast and departure from Mushara, we headed straight into the eastern section of Etosha. A chorus of Crested Francolins greeted us as we stepped out in the car park.

At Namutoni, we enjoyed a relaxed morning walk through the grounds. Birdlife was rewarding, with sightings of Icterine Warbler, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Red-faced Mousebird, and several other typical woodland species. A large hive of African honeybees added a bit of insectlife! As we left Namutoni, a lively discussion unfolded around the description of the Black Crake, which had been referred to as a "nippy" bird. Various theories were put forward about what the term might mean, until we later realised that "nippy" simply describes its quick, agile, and darting movements, a perfect fit for this lively little species as it dashes along the water's edge.

Before continuing north via Klein Okevi, we paused at a small waterhole where marsh terrapins were basking. One memorable moment was a smaller terrapin riding on the back of a larger one, a "piggy-backly" charming scene. Burchell's Sandgrouse came in to drink, offering classic Etosha views.

We then made our way toward Fischer's Pan, which held an abundance of waterbirds. Among the highlights were Spur-winged Goose, Great White Pelican, Glossy Ibis, and a variety of other expected pan species, all taking advantage of the water.

From there, we pushed north onto the Andoni Plains, where a real surprise awaited us. Not just one, but three Pectoral Sandpipers, a very scarce and exciting record for the area, allowed excellent views. I immediately documented the sighting and shared it with the relevant authorities, who were just as thrilled as we were.

The plains were alive with birds. Hundreds of Kittlitz's Plovers were scattered across the flats, along with a few Ruff. Continuing our search, we successfully located Eastern Clapper Lark on the northern plains, a satisfying find. Additional sightings included Whiskered Tern and several Pink-billed Larks.

As we made our way back to the lodge, we felt deeply satisfied with a truly rewarding day in the field. Tired but happy, we looked forward to a few well deserved hours of rest and relaxation.

Namibia is divided into a southern commercial farming area and a northern communal region by a veterinary cordon fence known as the Red Line. As we Namibians often say, once you cross it, you enter "Africa."

Today required a long drive from the Etosha region to the northeastern Zambezi area, a journey of roughly five hours. Due to extensive flooding, we were unable to access Hakusembe River Lodge directly. Heavy rains in Angola over the past month have pushed water levels far beyond expectations. Even major areas such as the Okavango Delta, including Moremi and the Khwai

region, were completely closed to tourism. These high waters pushed through the smaller channels and effectively left Hakusembe as an island.

As a result, we had to reroute via Mupiri and take a short boat transfer of about ten minutes to reach the lodge. Once there, we did some relaxed lodge birding, which was very rewarding, connecting with babblers, flycatchers, and, now being in a completely different habitat, encountering several new dove species. The afternoon was calm and enjoyable.

Dinner, however, was moderate. The food was acceptable, but not more than that and not quite up to the standard one usually expects from Namibian lodges.

We departed early, just before 06:00, still in darkness. After a short boat transfer back to the mainland, we set off immediately towards an area where Souza's Shrike is usually found. We arrived in good time, but still had to work quite hard for it. The walk itself was only about 1.6 kilometers, yet in thick sand and humid warmth it felt considerably more demanding.

Souza's Shrike typically perches lower down, but this individual was an exception, sitting high up in a tree and giving us good binocular views. Arnot's Chat was much easier to find and showed very well. I could hear Sharp-tailed Starlings calling in the distance and we moved in that direction, but unfortunately they took off before we could get any views.

We then had our breakfast pack, which again was not all too professional and not up to the standard one usually expects in Namibia, but it kept us going for a while. I had specifically requested a gluten free breakfast pack, which was confirmed done, but unfortunately this was not prepared at all.... Poor Jane, Gondwana, wake up!

We then crossed the border into Botswana, which required a bit of patience on the Botswana side. The immigration lady seemed more occupied with her cell phone in the next room than assisting us, so we had to wait our turn, but eventually we got through. The word "phlegmatism" has suddenly acquired a deeper and more intensified meaning.

We reached Drotsky's Cabins in good time, did a Broad-billed Roller along the way, and headed out for an afternoon boat cruise. Birdlife was exceptional. Although we made a proper effort to find Pel's Fishing Owl, it remained hidden from us. Still, we were rewarded with wonderful sightings of various bee-eaters, kingfishers, and swallows. A massive flock of African Green Pigeons burst into the air like a cloud as we arrived, a spectacular sight.

We also saw the very rare White-backed Night Heron quietly skulking in riverside vegetation, and had good views of Greater Swamp Warbler. As Paul remarked, this is exactly how one imagines birdwatching should be, being out on a boat adds an entirely different and very pleasurable dimension to the experience.

Dinner at Drotsky's Cabins was excellent. We were treated to a very good soup to start, followed by a buffet that, although not large in variety, offered beautifully prepared food. The fish in particular stood out, complemented by very good vegetables and everything one would want. Dessert was also well taken care of, and I think everyone went to bed very happy.

After so many visits to this area, I must say this was one of the most disappointing days I have experienced in over 30 years.

We started early with a morning walk in search of Narina Trogon. I am fully aware that in March they are far less vocal than earlier in the season, as they are usually busy feeding chicks. Still, I was confident we would at least get a glimpse of one bird. Unfortunately, the forested area around Drotsky's turned out to be eerily quiet.

Even the Red-capped Robin-Chat, which I had seen on the previous trip, did not respond at all to playback. Normally, the forest here is alive with the calls of White-browed Robin-Chats, but this time it was as if everything had fallen silent. You could quite literally hear a needle drop. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

After an hour of fruitless walking, we decided to have breakfast and shift focus to the Pel's Fishing Owl. Having never failed to see this species in this area before, I was still confident. The plan was simple, a short boat trip, a quick sighting of the owl, and then a relaxed remainder of the morning.

Otto, our guide, who I must say is both persistent and an excellent local expert, led the search. We systematically scanned what felt like every tall jackalberry tree along the river. The effort was immense. By the time we finished at around one o'clock, we were exhausted, still somewhat refreshed from being out, but undeniably disappointed.

I am not entirely sure the group felt the same level of disappointment. They seemed to take great pleasure in the more common sightings along the river. The bee-eaters were particularly active and put on a lovely show. We also saw a distant Long-crested Eagle, while hundreds, if not thousands, of swallows lined a single wire crossing the river. Large flocks of Brown-throated Martins moved through the area, creating impressive scenes.

So there was certainly plenty to see and enjoy. Yet for me, as a guide, the pressure was mounting. Missing the Pel's Fishing Owl was not something I was used to here. Otto suggested continuing the search later on foot, checking areas where the owl might still be roosting or moving through, and I was not ready to give up just yet. Still, my expectations had dropped, and my energy levels were running low.

Given the intensity of the past days, the group needed a break. We therefore decided to take the afternoon off, allowing everyone some time to rest and recover from what had already been a demanding and eventful safari....it rained all afternoon anyway.

Seven o'clock breakfast. The plan was to still go and look for that Pel's Fishing Owl. I just could not leave this lodge without having shown this to my clients. The Pel's was a key species we simply had to see.

Suddenly, a lady from the other group came running and told us that a Narina Trogon pair had been seen close to the lodge. We grabbed optics and cameras and made our way to where she had seen them. As we arrived, the typical birding scene: "they had just been there, sitting right there until a few seconds ago. Then they had flown off, but I managed to get a nice photo", and the lady tried to

show Mary Anne the picture. I had to grin a bit, because Mary Anne was really not interested in seeing the photo, she wanted the bird live and in her real time view, and she wanted it badly, as we all did in that moment.

We heard the Narina Trogon call, and I saw it flutter off to the left. I went around the bush, but it was nowhere to be seen. Thankfully, the guide of the other group heard the call further down the road, and we walked down at a steady pace. He must have had eagle eyes because he could spot it through the leaves. I am not even sure whether he really saw it at first, but all of a sudden a Narina Trogon flew overhead and landed in clear view for everyone. It was high up, but still very nicely visible. We were ecstatic.

After breakfast, we were supposed to head out again, but Donovan, the lodge manager, instructed Otto to check another spot first before coming to pick us up. We had quite a long wait before Otto finally arrived. Unfortunately, he had not been successful in locating the owl. We got into the boat and did a fast run up to Shakawe to scan the trees again. It initially seemed fruitless. A few drops of rain started to fall, and after the first minutes without success, I had the uneasy feeling that we might be wasting our time.

Then Otto suddenly said, "There, I've got one!" Deep inside a Jackalberry tree, the Pel's Fishing Owls were sitting. Otto manoeuvred the boat carefully into the reeds, and we all had a beautiful, clear view of the owl. Paul then discovered another owl, but that one was completely obscured.

With great relief, we returned to the launch, packed up, and set off.

We had to drive through the Mahango National Park on our way east, and we did a lengthy loop along the riverside, talking about the gigantic Burchell's Starling compared to the more elongated Meves's Starling and the differences in Greater blue-eared and Cape Glossy Starling. We saw the awaited Marsh Sandpiper and enjoyed great views of the more common birds in the park.

Many animals were seen next to the road, literally hundreds of Impala, many Red Lechwe, some Reedbuck, a few Giraffe, as well as plenty of Baboon and Vervet Monkey.

Then, as a wonderful surprise, in the middle of the water, which was still rising due to heavy rains in Angola, stood a huge ancestor or jackalberry tree, its dead remains rising starkly from the floodplain. On top of it were African Pygmy Geese. What a beautiful sight, like little jewels set on the trunk. They were obviously breeding, using the crevices and cracks of the old tree, slipping in and out of the holes, flying small circles, and landing again. It was truly a beautiful birding experience to watch these, probably the most beautiful of all little ducks.

Heavy, heavy rain awaited us on the long tar road and made driving difficult, with potholes filled with water. It was not all too pleasant, but we made it to the Bwabwata National Park Kwando area in good time. As we got out of the vehicle, we were treated to a spectacular sight of Racket-tailed Rollers displaying ever so lovely.

I had actually stopped for another bird when I suddenly heard them in the distance. I played the tape, and they came flying in, two pairs, giving a wonderful display, swooping steeply into the air, then dropping down in sharp curves, calling loudly. What a display that was. Four Racket-tailed Rollers all at once.

A Kurrichane Thrush made an appearance, and we were absolutely bird-saturated. Along the way, so many birds flushed from the roadside, Wattled Lapwings running along the road, and the bush filled with hornbills, Grey, Yellow-billed, and Red-billed. It was just fantastic.

When we reached the beautiful Nambwa Tented Lodge, everybody was in awe of how stunning it was. George remarked that he felt like he was in the 1950s movie scene and was amazed that a place like this could exist in the middle of the bush. That evening, over a fantastic dinner, everyone was very happy with the quality of the food and the experience of dining in the wilderness, while a Scops Owl was calling softly right next to us in the tree.

The morning boat cruise started very productively. We could see all the martins, Brown-throated, Banded, and Sand Martin. In addition, Lesser Striped Swallows repeatedly tried to build a nest in the roof of our boat while we were moving, which was quite amusing to watch, and Wire-tailed Swallows could be seen in beautiful light.

We saw a stunning Black Coucal close to the boat, calling its strange high pitched pop-pop... pop-pop call, with perfect light on it for photography. Then a yellow female sunbird appeared. I was not sure at first, but then the male came in, and the Copper Sunbird revealed itself as a perfect sighting. Unfortunately, it was quite far away, but still very special.

We also had a few Coppery-tailed Coucals and many Pied Kingfishers actively fishing. The atmosphere on the boat was relaxed, especially after a Malachite Kingfisher lightened everybody's day with its vibrant colours.

After the boat cruise, we had a lengthy breakfast and then went out for a good drive within the park.

While we had good views of Chirping Cisticola on the morning boat cruise, the afternoon drive produced mostly Rattling Cisticola. However, we had some wonderful sightings of Wattled Cranes and Senegal Coucal, as well as various starlings and doves, and Great Egret.

We drove right through lunchtime and soon realised that this was not the optimal time of day for birdwatching. We therefore returned to the lodge just in time for high tea, where we had an interesting discussion about where the term actually comes from. In fact, historically "high tea" referred to a more substantial early evening meal, typically eaten at a high dining table by working people, while "afternoon tea" was the lighter, more refined tea taken by the upper classes in low, comfortable seating. Over time, however, the term "high tea" has often been used more loosely, and many lodges today use it to describe the elegant afternoon tea experience.

Back at the lodge, we checked the waterhole and found a beautiful Lesser Moorhen right at the pond, which kept us nicely entertained while we enjoyed coffee and a few drinks.

After a good breakfast, we left the lodge in high spirits and set out for the eastern reaches of Katima Mulilo. However, I had already been warned about the Zambezi flood, which is exceptionally high this year. Many locals claim it is the largest flood in the past twenty years, and indeed, most of my usual birding spots were completely inundated.

Nevertheless, we enjoyed a relaxed drive out of Bwabwata National Park, picking up some excellent species along the way. Highlights included Wahlberg's Eagle, Cardinal Woodpecker, Bennett's Woodpecker, Eurasian Golden Oriole, and African Golden Oriole. A lively group of Retz's Helmetshrikes and White-crested Helmetshrikes shared the same tree, as they so often do, while a confiding Kurrichane Thrush added to the morning's enjoyment.

The abundance of elephants normally seen from August through to the end of the year was absent this time, most likely due to the heavy rains. Instead, we enjoyed beautifully coloured Chobe bushbuck, large numbers of red lechwe, a few common reedbuck, and even a sighting of sitatunga. We also encountered quite a number of greater kudu and large herds of common impala. Big troops of chacma baboons kept everyone thoroughly entertained along the water's edge, while the air was filled with the deep, resonant grunting of hippopotamuses.

Eventually, we reached the main road and continued straight to Caprivi River Lodge. After check-in, we headed out once more, this time towards the western pans. Here we encountered species such as White-backed Duck and Lesser Moorhen, but the heat had become intense...once again. As George so aptly remarked, only mad dogs and Englishmen go birding in the midday sun.

With that in mind, I decided to call it a day and return for a couple of hours' rest before our late afternoon boat cruise. As JG had enthusiastically put it, we would head out to "scratch around in the deeper lagoons" in search of more special birds.

The Zambezi had turned into a vast inland sea. Areas that I once knew as islands, with dense vegetation and reliable birding spots, were now completely submerged. The river had risen more than seven meters above its lowest level, an extraordinary sight.

Despite these conditions, the boat cruise with JG turned out to be exceptional. I have never seen so many Little Bittern in flight. It is hard to say how many there were, but certainly four or five individuals, constantly moving through the flooded reedbeds.

Even more special were several sightings of Allen's Gallinule. We encountered at least three different birds and were fortunate enough to get some excellent photographs, which was a real highlight.

It was a real pleasure to watch Tawny-flanked Prinia darting in and out of their beautifully constructed nests along the reeds, something I hardly ever get to observe. Although this is a common species and often seen, witnessing them actively nesting is truly special.

Their nests are quite different from those of weavers, delicate structures stitched together from fine grasses, carefully concealed within reedbeds and low vegetation. The level of detail and craftsmanship is remarkable, especially for such a small and restless bird.

And then, to our delight, a Yellow-throated Leaflove appeared in a tall riverside tree, calling actively. I still refuse to adopt its newer name, but regardless of taxonomy, it was a wonderful sighting that lifted everyone's spirits.

At Drotsky's Cabins a few years ago, I was fortunate to see an olive woodpecker, quite possibly the first and perhaps the last record of this species so far west. There is, in fact, a small and isolated population of Olive Woodpeckers in the Zambezi region, and we were lucky enough to observe a pair, a male and a female, sitting motionless against the trunk of a tree.

All in all, it was a fantastic boat cruise, despite high waters and impossible Finfoot-observation. Back at camp, the food was, as always, excellent, especially the fish, which was beautifully prepared.

In the evening, I called for African Wood Owl, and they responded immediately. In fact, they responded almost too well. Not only did they show nicely, but they continued calling for what felt like the entire night, keeping us awake far longer than "needed".

After an early breakfast, we set off straight away, heading through the Ngoma border, as we were eager to meet Stone. Stone is a local birding guide based around Muchenje who truly knows his craft. I am very aware of my own limits when it comes to spotting birds, whether it is age or simply not being permanently based in this part of the Zambezi, and I deeply appreciate a skilled local guide. Stone is undoubtedly one of the best in the area.

Although he was not quite where we had initially agreed to meet, we soon linked up, and the effort was well worth it. We enjoyed excellent views of Orange-winged Pytilia, Marsh Warbler, and also tried for River Warbler. Along the way, we picked up some very good supporting species, including Jacobin Cuckoo and Levaillant's Cuckoo.

The walk through the thick bush, however, started to take its toll. The humidity was intense, and it became clear that the group was getting tired, even though the birding remained highly productive and we recorded an impressive number of species. We therefore agreed to meet Stone again early the next morning before departure and made our way to Chobe Elephant Camp.

We were welcomed with a refreshing lunch and soon settled into our comfortable rooms. In the afternoon, after high tea, we headed out on a game drive. It turned into a very rewarding outing, with excellent sightings of birds and mammals alike, including elephants and various antelope such as greater kudu, impala, and waterbuck. Particularly interesting were the Red-billed Oxpecker actively feeding on these animals.

Raptors and migrants were also well represented, with Amur Falcon, Lesser Kestrel, and one or two Red-footed Falcon passing overhead.

We also encountered quite a number of doves, drawing our attention to the tops of tall trees, often sharing these perches with numerous Red-backed Shrike, which seem particularly abundant this year. While I was explaining where a Rattling Cisticola was calling from, Paul jokingly remarked that the bird was not "sitting" in the tree, but "zitting" in it. Whether he was gently teasing my

pronunciation is open to debate, but as I always say, being German, I of course have no dialect at all, others, however, certainly do. The comment caused quite a bit of laughter in the group.

One particularly memorable sighting was a small group of Harlequin Quail, which I flushed from low vegetation while searching for wild basil to show my guests where that lovely scent in the air was coming from. These birds kept us busy for quite some time, as we carefully manoeuvred around them to try and get a few good photographs.

The sundowner was nothing short of magical. While enjoying our gin and tonics, a group of elephants walked past us and drank water barely fifteen meters away, an absolutely magnificent moment.

Just as we were about to settle in, I heard the deep, resonant calls of Southern Ground Hornbill echoing through the landscape. I immediately told Lee, our guide, that we had to move. Without hesitation, he packed everything up, and we set off. Luck was on our side, as we soon found these impressive birds perched high in a dead tree in the distance, a truly spectacular sighting.

Mary-Anne simply remarked, "Well, this is really nice!" which summed it up perfectly and made me feel warm.

What I really like about Chobe Elephant Camp is that they start their game drives well before sunrise. We met as early as 5:30 for a quick coffee before heading out into the park, right at first light.

Our guide Lee soon received word from other guides that lions had been sighted at a waterhole we had just passed. So we turned around and rushed back, and what we found was simply spectacular, two pairs of lions, two massive males and two equally impressive females, resting, interacting, moving just enough, and presenting themselves in the most beautiful morning light. They truly did their part for tourism and photography, yawning at just the right moments, and I found myself constantly pressing the shutter. It honestly could not have been a better lion sighting.

Lee proved to be an excellent and very considerate guide, always positioning the vehicle so that everyone had a perfect view. That made a real difference and was very much appreciated.

During the early morning drive, we encountered Dickinson's Kestrel, which was a real highlight, as well as an immature Martial Eagle, an Osprey, several bee-eaters, and a good variety of waterbirds along the shoreline.

One of the absolute highlights for me, however, was the abundance of Lesser Kestrels, flying together with Red-footed Falcons and even the occasional Amur Falcon. Watching these birds in flight, seeing their elegant shapes and distinctive tails, was simply beautiful. It is such a refreshing change compared to the kestrels we usually see in Namibia.

We also recorded African Hawk-Eagle and African Harrier-Hawk, along with large numbers of Red-backed Shrikes, both males and females, often sitting right next to the road, calling loudly and offering fantastic photographic opportunities in the soft morning light.

There were also countless oxpeckers, especially Yellow-billed Oxpeckers, sitting brightly on Cape Buffalo, feeding actively. Red-billed Oxpeckers were equally abundant, moving through the coats of Greater Kudu and Impala. Some of the kudu were literally covered in them, I counted up to twelve oxpeckers on a single animal. It truly looked like a full morning treatment session, with every tick carefully removed.

Before departing on this trip, Jane made it very clear that she did not want to simply tick off birds. She wanted to see many species, of course, but more importantly, she wanted time to truly observe them, to understand them, and to watch their behaviour. This was something I made a conscious effort to incorporate throughout our time in the field.

A perfect example of this approach was a Black Heron feeding along the water's edge. We spent a considerable amount of time watching this fascinating bird as it formed its characteristic umbrella shape with its wings, creating a shaded area beneath which it could more easily spot and catch fish. It was a wonderful moment of quiet observation and exactly the kind of experience Jane had hoped for.

The same procedure followed in the afternoon. We headed back into the park, once again immersing ourselves in the richness of Chobe.

We marveled at elephants, giraffes, and large herds of Red Lechwe, alongside equally impressive numbers of impala. The density of wildlife along the river is always remarkable.

We then continued with a slow and very deliberate screening drive along the shores of the Chobe River, carefully scanning every patch of vegetation and open water, before eventually making our way back to camp.

The reason why we, at LeafLove Safari, deliberately plan four nights in the Chobe region, with two nights in the Upper Chobe, is to make use of the more remote bush camp areas. Game drives in these parts are not only exceptionally productive, but also far less crowded, allowing for a much more intimate and authentic safari experience.

The landscape itself adds enormously to this feeling. The Upper Chobe is more densely vegetated, more diverse, and especially in March, when everything is lush and green, simply breathtaking. Towering baobab trees line the riverbanks, creating a scenery that is almost impossible to describe. Seeing these giants together with elephants, antelopes, and abundant wildlife, framed by flowering vegetation, creates a truly magical atmosphere.

Particularly striking are the flowering wild hibiscus, with the hemp leaved hibiscus standing out in particular. These plants add both colour and texture to the landscape and open up endless photographic opportunities. Combined with the wildlife and the dramatic presence of the baobabs, it becomes a setting that feels almost surreal in its beauty.

The other two nights are then spent in the lower Chobe, where the river holds significantly more water and completely changes the experience. Here, boat cruises become the optimal way of approaching wildlife, allowing for incredibly close and intimate encounters.

This combination of land based and water based activities creates a wonderfully diverse safari experience. From the vehicle, one gains perspective and variety, while from the boat, one enters the animals' world from a completely different angle. The result is an overwhelming abundance of wildlife, not just hundreds, but often thousands of animals, making Chobe one of the most rewarding and dynamic safari destinations in all of Africa.

After a leisurely breakfast at 7, we got our things together, packed the car, and picked up Stone. I figured that two additional experienced eyes could only add value, and so we headed towards Kasane.

We managed to locate a Thrush Nightingale, a highly secretive species that is notoriously difficult to observe properly, as it prefers to stay deep within dense thickets. Although we were unable to watch it for any extended period, we did catch brief glimpses of it moving through the vegetation, and at one point it flew past us. Not the longest view, but certainly a satisfying sighting.

The previous day, I had also enjoyed good views of Grey Penduline Tit on my own, so naturally we tried again at the same spot. Unfortunately, this time they did not show themselves.

En route, Stone suggested a very reliable spot for Green-capped Eremomela, which turned out to be highly productive. The birds were actively moving and almost dancing through the foliage, allowing for some really satisfying photographic opportunities.

We then attempted to locate Three-banded Courser, but this quickly turned into a rather exhausting walk in the heat without any success. I decided to call it off early, and at that point Stone and I parted ways. I paid him for his time, and we continued on our own.

Instead, I took the clients to the camping grounds at Chobe Safari Lodge, where we could enjoy some shade and relaxed birding.

This turned out to be a wonderful decision. We had excellent views of Collared Palm Thrush and Schalow's Turaco, both coming down from the trees to feed right in front of us. Seeing that shimmering green starling, with its rich tones and flashes of reddish flight feathers, at such close range was truly special.

Nearby, a White-browed Robin-Chat was singing loudly, adding a beautiful soundtrack to the moment. A Spectacled Weaver also appeared. At first glance it resembled a Golden Weaver, but the reddish bill gave it away. Having seen them breeding here in November last year, it was incredibly satisfying to now see a youngster moving around in the area. Moments like these, when you realise that the birds have successfully bred and made it!

Earlier that morning, we had already been treated to an unforgettable sighting. While driving, I suddenly spotted a Cheetah right next to the road. We stopped immediately, and to our delight, it

showed no intention of disappearing. Instead, it scent marked, moved calmly around a tree stump, walked back and forth, and even approached us slightly, offering outstanding photographic opportunities before eventually melting back into the bush. What an absolutely fantastic experience.

At the harbour near the immigration point, Peter from Zovu Elephant Lodge was already waiting for us. We quickly completed the passport formalities, boarded the boat, and enjoyed a relaxed transfer across the water, Gin Tonics included. "Now that's a welcome drink!" Paul responded...

Upon arrival at the lodge, we were warmly welcomed by the singing staff, a lovely and very personal touch. After a light lunch, we took some time to relax before heading out again for our first boat cruise on the Chobe River.

Since the river was extremely full, much higher than any of us had anticipated, all the islands I normally scan for snipes, Slaty Egrets, and other interesting species were not merely covered by water, but completely submerged. Peter from Zovu Elephant Lodge was understandably very nervous, as the water had already reached the bungalows. He feared that, should it rise any further, the entire sanitary system might be flooded. Fortunately, we had no such problems ourselves and were able to enjoy our stay at the lodge thoroughly.

The boat cruise nevertheless turned out to be a very pleasant outing. We went for a long drive along the river, upriver or downriver depending on one's perspective, the direction of travel, and the time of year, because the Chobe River is famous for flowing in both directions. When the Zambezi pushes water back up, the flow reverses, and when it retreats again, the river returns to its usual course.

Among our better sightings, apart from White-faced Whistling Ducks, was a group of Fulvous Ducks flying past the boat, offering excellent photographic opportunities. A short walk on one of the last remaining exposed patches of soil on an island rewarded us with very good views of a pair of Rufous-naped Larks flying around. Unfortunately, they soon disappeared again, and it became difficult to keep track of them because the ants were eating us alive. They were pestering everyone on that tiny island, so we quickly retreated to the boat and continued our trip.

Close to the border, we drifted slowly along the river and enjoyed the many Long-toed Lapwings, White-crowned Lapwings, and of course the ever present Blacksmith Lapwings, as well as African Jacanas, plenty of Stonechats, and various herons. We had lovely opportunities to compare Yellow-billed Egret, Great Egret, and Cattle Egret at close range, which was most enjoyable. All in all, it was a very successful outing, made even better by the various kingfishers, including Malachite, Brown-hooded, and Grey-headed Kingfisher. We also heard a pair of tropical boubous engaged in a quarrel at Elephant Bay, enjoyed a wonderful sundowner with gin and tonics, and returned home in very good spirits.

Thankfully, although the water levels were very high, they were in fact too high for breeding mosquitoes. Over the entire stay, I saw only a single mosquito that could have been an Anopheles, which put my mind very much at ease. I really do not want my clients, nor myself, to be exposed to any malaria risk. I also chose not to take prophylaxis, as repeatedly taking it on these frequent visits is not exactly a healthy long term option. So I was more than happy not to be pestered by these creatures.

Dinner that evening was a very personal and truly lovely experience, rounding off a great day.

The next morning, we rose very early and, after a quick coffee, set off on a gentle boat cruise into the rising sun. We navigated the channels of the Impalila River, which proved to be highly rewarding. Along the shoreline we had a fine sighting of a Long-crested Eagle, along with various warblers, including an excellent view of a Sedge Warbler. We also found a few Grey-backed Camaropteras, as well as a few Luapula Cisticolas and, of course, the ever-present Chirping Cisticolas.

At one point, I saw what looked like a Slaty Egret flying straight towards us. My excitement rose immediately, but unfortunately the bird turned away before we could properly confirm it, so we could not count it. A real pity.

I asked Peter to work the Botswana shoreline carefully, and suddenly he called out, "Giant Kingfisher!"—a species still missing from our list. A beautiful female flew low along the bank and perched in a tree. At first we struggled to relocate her among the dark branches, but George managed to pick her up. She then dropped down again and continued along the shoreline, with Peter expertly following her movement. Eventually, we had excellent views. I even played the call briefly, and she responded by reappearing, giving us a few open views and a fine flyby. A truly wonderful encounter with this impressive kingfisher.

We continued scanning the shoreline, this time for Half-collared Kingfisher, which I managed to spot quite easily, sitting quietly on roots deep inside a riverside bush. These birds can be notoriously difficult to see, as they tend to remain well hidden, but this time we were in luck. In fact, we found a pair, giving us ample opportunity not only to admire them but also to take some very good photographs. Very cooperative birds, indeed.

After that, we returned to the lodge, enjoyed a relaxed breakfast, and settled into a well-deserved midday rest.

In the afternoon, Peter and I decided to explore the flooded areas behind the lodge. We both expected excellent birdlife in these newly inundated zones, but, to be honest, the outing turned out to be rather disappointing and quite time consuming. The propeller kept getting tangled in submerged grass, which slowed us down considerably and made progress frustrating.

Apart from a few rewarding sightings, a fine view of a Greater and Lesser Swamp Warbler, a Brown-throated Weaver, countless Tawny-flanked Prinias, and several African Jacanas, there was very little else to show for our efforts. Considering that our trip list had already exceeded 400 species, I was still hoping to add a few special birds to share with my clients, but this was not the place to find them.

Eventually, I urged Peter to head back towards the Botswana shoreline, where we had previously enjoyed better birding. Thankfully, the boat is fast when needed, and we made our way there quickly. However, despite our renewed effort, the cruise did not produce any particularly exciting encounters this time.

On the return, George took over the steering and clearly enjoyed himself, expertly navigating the boat back to the lodge with a big smile on his face.

In the end, a good dinner and pleasant evening weather more than made up for the rather slow afternoon. And, although the birding itself was not spectacular, we still enjoyed the experience nonetheless.

I had arranged an early breakfast at Zovu Lodge, as we wanted to cross into Botswana as early as possible. On the way, we stopped at a site where I had previously seen Three-banded Courser, hoping for another encounter. However, the area was now heavily overgrown due to the excellent rains and widespread flooding, and despite our efforts, we were unable to relocate the species. That said, the stop was still rewarding, with beautiful Cut-throat Finches and an immature Diederik Cuckoo showing well.

We then continued across the Zimbabwe border and made our way straight to Victoria Falls. Knowing that viewing conditions from the ground would be challenging due to the high water levels and heavy spray, I arranged a helicopter flight for my clients at a site just outside of town. The "Flight of Angels" provided a spectacular aerial perspective, and it was absolutely the right decision, as the immense spray currently obscures much of the falls from below. From above, however, the dramatic zigzagging of the gorge and the sheer scale of the cascading water were fully visible, and everyone was thoroughly impressed.

After checking in, we headed out for a bird walk around Victoria Falls. Here we managed to find the sought-after Red-faced Cisticola, along with good sightings of Spectacled Weaver. A Bearded Scrub Robin gave us an absolutely wonderful performance, sitting out in the open, fanning its tail and singing loudly. Unfortunately, the thunder of the falls was so overwhelming that we could not hear its song, despite clearly seeing the bird in full display. Unfortunately, the usually reliable Jameson's Firefinches were absent this time, most likely due to the overwhelming spray conditions.

After a quick freshen-up, or in some cases a more leisurely one, at Nkozi Guest Lodge, which is about as close to the perfect stay as one can have in Victoria Falls, modern, functional accommodation, charming staff, good food, and, for me as a German, very important, excellent coffee, we headed out in the late afternoon towards the Lookout Café.

From here, we had stunning views over the Batoka Gorge and observed many loud, chattering Black Swift shooting through the air above us. Deep down in the gorge, we could make out a few Red-throated Rock Martin. In the far distance, George suddenly picked up Trumpeter Hornbill. At first they were far off, but then, as if on cue, they flew across the gorge.

Everybody got very excited, and I immediately said, "Let's go and look at them." We made our way towards the Zipline, and what followed were the most magnificent views of two females and one

male, not only sitting fully exposed but also calling loudly, their trumpeting echoing through the gorge. It was an absolutely fascinating and unforgettable sight.

This truly was an exceptional ending to a brilliant safari with wonderful people.

I left Victoria Falls early the following morning, while the rest of the group were transferred to the airport for their respective flights home. Everyone arrived safely, and I think we can confidently mark this journey as very successful and very enjoyable, even though it had a rather rough start.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. Voigt". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "A" and a stylized "V".