Central and Northern Namibia

19th December 2014 to 7th January 2015

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This report outlines a birding trip to central and northern Namibia over the Christmas and New Year period 2014 – 2015. Sites visited included several around Windhoek (Avis Dam, Dan Viljoen), Walvis Bay (lagoon and salt pans, plus other nearby wetland sites and Rooibank), Spitzkoppe, Erongo mountains, Waterberg, Caprivi Strip (Shamvura, Popa Falls, Mahongo Game Reserve, Rundu area) and, of course, Etosha National Park. Namibia is a fantastic, easy and accessible country with a good infrastructure, infinite open space and sensational birds and wildlife; having been on quite a few African safaris down the years, this was one of the best.

**Timing** Late December – early January is not a bad time to visit to Namibia. Apparently the heat is much fiercer earlier in spring (October), which must mean it is pretty damn hot; despite living in the UAE we found Caprivi and, especially, Etosha decidedly warm for a few hours in the afternoon but the mornings and late evenings were very pleasant. Most afternoons in the north the cloud bubbled up nicely and it was clearly thinking of raining a lot; although it never actually did the cloud and grey skies certainly took the edge of the heat. There seemed to have been a bit of rain a while before we arrived so the hills around Windhoek were fresh and green and the pans and flashes in Etosha certainly had a fair selection of water (and water birds). This meant that plenty of birds were singing and, moreover, we had a decent selection of Palearctic migrants at most sites we visited, although our failure to luck onto termite hatches possibly knocked on the head any chance of slimline Eurasian falcons or big numbers of *Aquila* eagles. Although we had no rain anywhere, the rains had started further north in Angola so the Okavango river at Shamvura was rising rapidly; apparently this made finding waterbirds a little harder there. We expected things to be busy over the Christmas and New Year period so tried to book most accommodation a few months ahead; in reality this wasn’t the case and everywhere we stayed was pretty quiet.
Getting around You will be spending quite a lot of hours in the vehicle in Namibia, so it is worth spending some time on getting it right. The classic way is to rent a car with a roof tent; we got about six quotes from various Windhoek firms, all offering basic but pretty well-maintained 4WDs under modified open-back small pick-ups, complete with roof tent and a fairly thorough selection of camping gear, including a fridge. All quotes were within about 10% of each other. In the end we went with Camping Car Hire (email carhire@africaonline.com.na) who are based on the edge of Windhoek; their price includes transfer to and from the airport and to and from a Windhoek hotel to their offices. They did pretty much everything they said but the pre-departure briefing was pretty a little rushed; it is important to pay attention to everything to avoid mishaps, like not securing the fridge properly on gravel roads and then putting stress on the dodgy plug. Camping is a great way to get round Namibia; there are loads of wonderful places to stay and even in summer the evening temperatures were very comfortable.

Accommodation We used campsites, unless specified otherwise below. All (apart from Sarasunga River Lodge where we just turned up on a whim) were booked several months in advance (October) as we feared things would be pretty busy over the holiday period. In fact, most places (bar Etosha) were fairly quiet and a few were virtually empty; rocking up would have been no problem at all.

1. **Windhoek** (three nights; first two and last) at Roof of Africa Hotel (124-126 Nelson Mandela Avenue Windhoek, 9000, Namibia) reserved via [www.Booking.com](http://www.Booking.com). Nice friendly place with good restaurant and a few birds in the dry streamed across the road and in the suburban gardens nearby; Avis dam is a steady 45 min walk away.

2. **Dan Viljoen** – private game reserve (one night; c30 mins from downtown Windhoek); booked by emailing reservations@sunkarros.com. Quiet and very well-maintained campsite and good birding around the dam and on a short circular game drive.

3. **Walvis Bay: Lagoon Chalets and Caravan Park** in basic room (three nights; c4-5 hrs from Dan Viljoen – not counting time getting to and spent at Spitzkoppe). Bookable from [http://www.safarinow.com/go/lagoonchaletsandcaravanparkwalvisbay](http://www.safarinow.com/go/lagoonchaletsandcaravanparkwalvisbay). They have camping facilities here but the basic rooms are barely more expensive and, given that the Namibian coast is pretty grey, cool and breezy overnight until mid-morning when the mist gets burnt off by the sun, this was a good place not to camp. The site is 500m from tens of thousands of waders and flamingoes on the lagoon edge and near the southern edge of town.

4. **Erongo Wilderness Lodge** (one night; c4 hrs from Walvis Bay again discounting Spitzkoppe). Booked via [www.Booking.com](http://www.Booking.com) or email directly info@erongowilderness-namibia.com. Ultra-luxurious and way up-market by our standards but worth it for a night; setting was amazing and we had Christmas dinner with a Caracal drinking at the pool below the restaurant. Birding close to the lodge next morning was superb as well.

5. **Waterberg National Park** (two nights; c3 hrs from Erongo via Kalfield Dinosaur footprints site). NWR campsite with a nice setting and the pool and restaurant a short walk uphill. Good birding around the campsite and road up and game drives onto the plateau are daily and easy to arrange.

6. **Shamvura Camp, Caprivi Strip** (two nights, c7 hrs from Waterberg, but including shortish stops in Grootfontein and Roy’s Camp). Shamvura has brilliant, secluded camping spots and great facilities, even stretching to a provided fridge and kitchenette. There was good birding on site, and, especially, on the floodplain which was a short hop to the east. It is also easy to do guided birding boat trips on the Okavango with proprietor Mark Paxton. Shamvura can be booked via [www.madbookings.com](http://www.madbookings.com) (see below) or email shamvura@iway.na.

7. **Popa Falls, Caprivi Strip** (four nights; less than 1.5 hrs from Shamvura). Well-appointed and recently upgraded NWR site with decent birding on site and great daytrippers by the falls hosted by the resident gang of Rock Pratincoles. Very convenient for Mahongo Game Reserve.

8. **Sarasunga River Lodge, Caprivi Strip** (one night; c 2.5 hrs from Popa not counting many woodland birding stops). Right on the Okavango, just a little east of Rundu and a few km only from the sewage pools and adjacent grassy floodplain (which was quite dry when we were there). Has lots of camping facilities but we had a comfy chalet.
Etosha National Park (four nights – Namutoni, Halali [2 nights] and finally Okaukuejo; c 6.5 hrs from Sarasunga but that includes shopping (again) in Grootfontein and 50 mins at Hoba Meteorite). All sites here are NWR-managed and have excellent settings and facilities.

5, 7 and 9 are all administered by Namibian Wildlife Resorts and were all booked directly via email: [www.madbookings.com](http://www.madbookings.com); see also website: [www.mozambique-travelservice.com](http://www.mozambique-travelservice.com) and email [sales7@madbookings.com](mailto:sales7@madbookings.com). All were very decent campsites with nice pitches, good toilet blocks with warm water and showers on site and, not far away, shops (variably stocked), bars and swimming pools. The birding varied from damn good to sensational pretty much right from the tent, whilst the three rest camps in Etosha all had waterholes that provided outstanding nocturnal game viewing and birding in the mornings. Shamvura is a private site but was also booked in the same manner.

**Food** Easy, as pretty much everywhere had decent restaurants and all the campsites had braai pits; a decent gas cooker and utensils came with the car. Most big (by Namibian standards) towns had a decent supermarket and we fuelled up for a few days at a time in Windhoek, Walvis and Grootfontein (twice) whilst passing through. Most places seemed to be open all day most days, although the shelves were going a bit bare on Christmas Eve in Walvis Bay.

**Other things to bring** The weather was very sunny and (sometimes very) hot, but, save for in the far north, never too oppressive. Waterproofs and umbrellas were dead weight but proper boots were useful for hacking about in the bush. A scope added a lot to enjoyment in lots of places and was essential at Walvis Bay, on the Caprivi strip and at Mahongo where you will be scanning the floodplain a lot. The car rental company provided a decent selection of maps and information leaflets; these, a navigation app on the phone and, of course, the incomparable *South African Birdfinder* made it fairly easy to get around; there aren’t too many junctions or sharp turns. I took a few trip reports as well, of the usual varying quality but certainly worth a mention is [http://www.bongariliitto.fi/files/6734/Namibia_February_2009_Hottola_P.pdf](http://www.bongariliitto.fi/files/6734/Namibia_February_2009_Hottola_P.pdf); this proved particularly useful for data and information for many sites in the immediate Walvis Bay area and other points nearby.
Sites and Key species Precise access details are not given below except in a few cases as, despite being about eight years old at the time of use, the South African Birdfinder still does such a damn good job – and is a delight to use. As a general rule, most species that proved common and widespread (and, for example, are generally so across much of bushveld Africa) are not mentioned below.

**Palearctic migrants** For the northern birder, these are one of the great pleasures of birding sub-Saharan Africa in the boreal winter. Whilst Namibia is a bit far south, west and arid for some species, Palearctic migrants are still pretty conspicuous members of the avifauna in season. Species like freshwater waders are present just about on any suitable patch, Willow Warblers and Spotted Flycatchers are at low densities everywhere, shrikes at amazing densities in certain places (e.g. Red-backed at Mahongo; Lesser Grey at Etosha and on random roadside strips in the middle of nowhere near Erongo) and groups of European Bee-eaters and Barn Swallows fill the skies at times. This is in addition to the throngs of waders and terns wintering at Walvis Bay, a site comparable to the Wash, Donana or, I guess, Banc’Arguin in scale. Specific highlights are noted below in the relevant accounts.

**1 Avis Dam** This is a decent morning walk (c50 mins) or a short taxi ride from the Roof of Africa hotel and a good place to have an introduction to Namibian birding. The dam is on the south east side of Windhoek, a little north of the main road to the airport but accessed via the suburbs by turning north off Sam Nujoma drive (several routes; see any street map). The dam itself was very low during my visits but there was great bush birding in the dry hills just behind, on the shady slopes around the damn itself and, to a lesser extent, on the gravel track between the gate and the suburbs of Windhoek. This is definitely a place to get to early; it is very popular with local dog walkers. In all, I managed some 70 species in this area and around the hotel during a casual day and an hour early next morning.

- **Species**: did not include Rockrunner (but they are surely here if you know where to look and know the song) but instead included the likes of Gabar Goshawk, Rosy-faced Lovebirds (seen at the dog-walking compound at the start of the access track), Kittlitz’s Plover (not seen elsewhere), plenty of swifts including White-rumped and a few Bradfield’s (but these were even easier over the streets near the hotel and up the hill behind early morning and late evening), Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, White-throated and Greater Striped Swallows, Mountain Wheatear, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler (noisy and obvious, including right by the hotel), Pprit Batis (in a valley well behind the dam), Crimson-breasted Shrike (access track), Dusky Sunbird and Black-faced Waxbill.

- A quick walk up the hill into suburbia behind the hotel the next morning (take any road going uphill) yielded Lesser Honeyguide, African Paradise-Flycatcher, up to three Diderik Cuckoos and plenty of Bradfield’s Swifts, including birds attending nesting holes under house eaves.

- The first Palearctic migrants were immediately apparent around the dam as well, included Booted Eagle, Steppe Buzzard, my first of many European Bee-eaters and what had to be European Honey-Buzzard flying low right overhead (I pended the ID at the time as views were brief and I thought this species is rare in Namibia but then saw a number of others more definitively further north). A final speculative visit on the last evening of the trip once we got back to Windhoek on 7th January resulted in the finding of a Red-throated Pipit on the muddy shore of the dam; this initially representing just another handy Palearctic being for me but, it transpired, a seriously major event for Southern African birders because this happened to be only the second Namibian record and the first ever twitchable in Southern Africa. Apparently it made a lot of long-distance twitchers very happy over the next few weeks.
2 Dan Viljoen Game Park  This private game reserve, in rolling hills c20 km west of Windhoek is a good place to try out all your newly rented camping gear (to check it actually does what the company said it would do close to help if needed) and also find some quality birds and mammals with little effort. We had one afternoon and the following morning here, which was about right. Early morning birding in the scrubby and rocky slopes around the dam (again, very little water when I was there) was excellent and the game drive loop, despite doing it in the afternoon rather than early morning, produced a few other bits and pieces too. Almost everything we saw here (68 species) was seen well elsewhere too, but it was still a good starting point.

- **Species**: included Little Bittern, several African Hawk-Eagles (including a juvenile hunting Guineafowl), Red-billed Spurfowl (abundant and blatant), Diderik Cuckoo, Common Scimitar-bill, Carp’s Tit (on the dam), Groundscraper Thrush (unmissable and very tame in the campground), Short-toed Rock-Thrush (two, near the dam), Mountain Wheatear, African Reed-Warbler (easy to hear), Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, Pririt Batis, Shaft-tailed Whydah (plenty!), Red-headed Finch and Violet-eared Waxbill.

- We saw some nice animals on the game drive including Mountain Zebra and Giraffe very close indeed, but the grassy lawns by the dam at dusk and every early next morning were much better. Mammals grazing here included groups of Gemsbok and Red Hartebeest, and a fine gang of Banded Mongoose.

3 Walvis Bay area  This is a fantastic place, full of shorebirds most of which are easy to access and view. Tidal times are important as the bay is massive; we were lucky to get a high tide both just before dawn and again at 1700 so had two cracks each day. The birding is great anywhere along the promenade south of the town centre, with a particularly good roost on the mudbanks close to the road to the junction for the Lagoon Chalets & Caravan Park. Being at the end of the flyway, wader diversity was actually quite low (18 species) but numbers of many of those, plus Cape Cormorants, Great White Pelicans, Black-necked Grebes and terns were overwhelming. Passerines were very hard to come by, but the wetland sanctuary (aptly named New Bird Paradise reserve) just inland added plenty of ducks for variety in a fantastic red dune setting.

Evenings were cool and breezy, with cooling grey skies and good cloud lasting quite a lot of the morning on the coast before the sun burnt through fully by midday. The accommodation was able to offer advice and make bookings on tours (Pelican point boat trip and seal kayaking); bookings for the Welwitschia drive were made at some obscure government office north of the main promenade area; I don’t recall exactly how we got there but look for dozens of burly fishermen jostling for permits and once we found the place it was easy enough.

A. **Lagoon and saltworks** Birding and scanning all along here was really good; stop anywhere you see flocks. And this will mean lots of stops... By driving south and then turning west just before the massive saltworks factory you can follow the main track (easy, smoothly graded) along the bunds and through the lagoon edges all the way to the Paaltjies road and then get to within c300m of the sea before hitting heavy, serious sand. Birds were very close and obliging close to the road especially in the early morning before the fishing traffic started disturbing things. Key species along here were Greater and Lesser
Flamingoes and Black-necked Grebes in hordes beyond computation, Cape Teal, at least 3000 Pied Avocet, masses of White-fronted and Chestnut-banded Plovers, at least 20 Marsh Sandpipers amongst hundreds of Common Greenshank and thousands of Curlew Sandpipers and Bar-tailed Godwits. Particularly interesting species (from a local perspective) included a single Knot and, favouring the salt pans on the right a km or so before the turn-off for the sand track to Pelican Point, at least 43 Red-necked Phalaropes, very much a Walvis Bay specialty in African terms. This spot was also the best site for Damara Tern (15 seen here very closely feeding close to the road and resting small islets; also seen distantly from the east side of the lagoon).

B. **New Bird Paradise Reserve** This site is not mentioned in the *South African Birdfinder* but is easy to find: get to the obvious big roundabout on the east side of town, where the C14 road to the airport to branches out eastwards. Only 1-2 km from here, on the right, you will see a small centre (maybe a Portacabin) with a fence and sign. It is not obvious (but there is no other habitation here) and, adjacent roadside lagoons were virtually bone-dry, very saline and totally empty of birds (but are presumably full sometimes). We parked here and then yomped inland over the dunes for maybe 500m, following where I’d seen some flying flamingoes and pelicans seemingly settling. We had to walk a bit and track up and down a few dunes but eventually got to a massive shallow pool with lots of fringing vegetation and full of birds. This had the best selection of ducks we found in Namibia (six species) including Maccoa Duck, South African Shelduck and Southern Pochard. Other species included impressive numbers of Great White Pelicans and flamingoes, African Swamphen, a few freshwater waders and African Reed Warbler. All of this was in the midday heat and in only an hours exploration; there is probably a lot more to find here.

C. **Pelican Point and Paaltjies beach**
The bird-rich former spot can be distantly scanned from the Walvis bay promenade and we also did an afternoon boat cruise (complete with ravenous fur seals and pelicans) to there from the promenade. This was pretty touristy and ok if you like oysters but probably not worth doing compared to what we tried the next morning: kayaking with the fur seals; this lasted a couple of hours and we also had some time to stroll around and look about a bit. Waders (bar Sanderling) were much less numerous here compared to the softer mud of the inner bay but wintering terns (mainly Common and Sandwich) were present in their thousands and this was easily the best spot to get good views of African Black Oystercatchers. Annoyingly we missed Heaviside’s Dolphin from either boat or kayak, but did see Bottlenosed and quite a few Black-backed Jackals (a garden mammal in Walvis Bay!) Bar Cape Cormorants, true seabirds were disappointingly few and far between although a short morning scan off the beach at Paaltjies produced singles of White-chinned Petrel, Cape Gannet and Arctic Skua.
D. **Rooibanks (Kuiseb River)** This lonely site, a fast 45 min drive from Walvis Bay is accessed from the C14 east of town and then turning south onto a gravel road. It is well worth visiting for the epic dune scenery but also for **Dune Lark**, certainly one of the great southern African larks (which is actually quite saying something). I got here at dawn and by stomping into the vegetated dune hollows of the sand river a little south and west of the church, managed to find a pair within about 45 mins. Views were fantastic, with birds singing and feeding very closely. They were actually almost as easy to see on a return at 1300 later that day, despite the blazing sun. Other birds were sparse but included **Black-chested Prinia**, lot of **Dusky Sunbird** and two **Pale Chanting Goshawks**.

E. **Welwitschia Flats, desert moonscape and Goanikontes oasis** (inland from Swapokmund) We had a half hour on the pier at Swapokmund before heading inland to spend the late afternoon and evening on the Welwitschia flats in the Namib-Nakluft National Park. This is a minor trek inland from Swakopmund (full details on map when you get your permit) but actually a terrific thing to do, even though birds were almost non-existent (there may be a few larks or korhaans if you try this early morning). Roads, whilst graded, are pretty good so it doesn’t take too long to cover the kms. We started seeing **Welwitschia** a few km north of the Swapok river canyon and, a few km on, found ourselves on a plain with hundreds of these ancient plants dotted all over the place. The skies were enormous and the scenery pretty good as well, bar the odd sign for the Uranium mines. We returned to Goanikontes oasis for a late picnic dinner; this is very green and lush but we were there a bit late for much bird action.

4 **Spitzkoppe** This massive granite inselberg and associated outliers is visible to the north from the main B2 highway as you race westwards towards Swapokmund. It is about 2 hrs in all from Walvis Bay, including c18km on gravel between the tarred B2 and Spitzkoppe. This is a brilliant place and it would have been great to stay overnight here (camping sites looked amazing, scattered over acres and nestled amongst the enormous rocks). On a whim we (luckily) opted to spend the afternoon here en-route to Walvis Bay from Dan Viljoen and then, liking it so much (and still Herero Chat-deficient), got up early and spent a morning here on the return leg en-route to Erongo three days later. This proved a good plan as we got our bearings and had a tour of the ancient rock artwork first time round, then concentrated on some important birds on the second lap.

- The key **species** here is, of course, **Herero Chat**; we were told by a ranger the place to look was at the west end, amongst the camping plots 9-11 were the **Bird View Point** sign give it away. A late afternoon search yielded **White-tailed Shrikes**, **Layard’s Tit-Babbler** and **Carp’s Tit**, plus four **Ruppell’s Korhaans** in the grassland to the north near the snake rock painting. Early morning three days later initially drew a blank but by 0900 we had found a pair of **Herero Chats** very close to the sign and were able to get sensational views at very close range for ages. Other highlights then included **Augur Buzzard**, **Rosy-faced Lovebird** (common around the main entrance office), **Monteiro’s Hornbill** tame and easy plus **Bokmakerie**, **White-throated Canary** and a handful of **Lark-like Buntings**.

- A lucky tip found in some trip report I had handy indicated that the road west and a little north (?) of the **Bird View Point** sign (just keep going along the main track at the base of the kopjie; don’t return towards the office) was worth a look. This proved the case; within a few km of leaving Spitzkoppe behind, a speculative stop by likely looking small rocky wadi on the right soon produced two sensational **Benguela Long-billed Larks**, obvious even at the unlikely hour of 1100. The normally infallible **South African Birdfinder** makes no mention of this species here, with most people getting it much further north.
Other species here or a little further on included Karoo Chat and Chat Flycatcher, both seen very well. The plains round here look suitable for other larks, korhaans and coursers, but we had more luck on the access road, especially where the D3716 left the D1918. Here groups of Stark’s Lark and singing Sabota Larks were pretty obvious; we also had Peregrine at dusk, plus, at midday on the second visit, a very nice roadside Ruppell’s Korhaan.

5 Erongo Mountains Here we bit the bullet and stayed at the wonderfully appointed Erongo Wilderness Lodge; it is probably possible to stay not too far away in Omararu and go birding along the access road in the morning but the birding was sensational just by walking from the hotel, and included a nature walk next morning (which, with only one taker for a 6am kick-off the day on Boxing day soon became a birder’s walk). This produced almost 50 species, including a few monsters:

- **Species:** Verraux’s Eagle (pair and juvenile) were obvious over the lodge in the afternoon; Hartlab’s Spurfowl is much rarer than Red-billed but groups were still seen well several times early morning, Monteiro’s Hornbill and Carp’s Tit were both commoner than anywhere else I visited in Namibia, Rock Runner appeared at last (common on voice; two glimpsed and another pair seen very well), two White-tailed Shrikes were in a busy mixed flock and, with some inside knowledge of the guide, Barred Wren-Warbler (two or three) was seen very nicely indeed. Passerines such as starlings, sparrows and buntings were abundant in general whilst breakfast was a delight with a riot of Rosy-faced Lovebirds, weavers and Pale-
winged Starlings on the feeder by the verandah alongside Rock Hyrax and Dassie Rats and some crazily coloured Rock Agamas.

- The small pool below the restaurant was quiet – save for doves - during the daylight hours but attracted several Freckled Nightjars at 2000 and again at 0545 the next morning plus, for a magical five minutes, a stunning view of Caracal in to drink at about 2130. Happy Christmas!

6 Waterberg National Park We spent two nights at this NWR resort on the south side of the Waterberg plateau. This was enough time for plenty of early morning birding around the campsite and along the road up the hill to the chalets and, next morning, on the rocky cliff trail above the chalets. We also fitted in an afternoon game drive on the flat but densely vegetated plateau itself. This was bizarrely poor for birding with just few Lilac-breasted Rollers and African Hawk-Eagles to show, but White and Black Rhinos and Cape Buffalo were seen amazingly closely.

- **Species:** 60 species in all was a reasonable score, on foot and in fairly dry woodland nearly all the time. A pair of Verraux’s Eagles were obvious along the ridge, both from the campsite below and from eyelevel on the cliff trail. A European Honey-Buzzard appeared for photos one morning and the track up the hill a little below and near the swimming pool produced several Ruppell’s Parrots each day, and Burnt-necked Eremomela once.

- Other species, mostly in and around the campsite, included the first Pied Cuckoos of the trip (four in all, and many more were to come), Rosy-faced Lovebirds, Pearl-spotted Owlet seen easily, masses of Alpine and Bradfield’s Swifts over the cliffs, Purple Roller, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Lesser Striped Swallow, Groundscraper Thrush (verges near the entrance), Icterine Warbler (two singing) and Crimson-breasted Shrike (up to four on the road uphill). The only Woodhoopoes seen were definitely Green; a family party were in the campsite each morning. There wasn’t a sniff of Violet and, in fact, I failed to find this species anywhere, including in central and western Etosha.
Nightbirding around the campsite produced African Scops-Owl and Freckled Nightjar both calling faintly, plus a Barn Owl trapped in the toilet block!

As well as the rhinos on the plateau, another mammal highlight was stunning views of a family party of Black Mongoose on the road between the swimming pool and the chalets in the early morning.

7 Roy’s Camp We stopped here to break up the journey between Waterberg and Shamvura with a nice cold drink. It looked a friendly, great place to stay, and we did plan to on return leg en route to Etosha, only at the last minute deciding to stop over in Rundu instead. Half an hour, even in the middle of the day was enough to easily find Black-faced Babblers, fully audible and viewable from the bar.

8 Caprivi Strip along the B8 We visited a number of sites on the western half of this geopolitical anomaly, linking arid Namibia with tropical south-central Africa. You hit the Okavango valley proper at Rundu, but we visited that on the return, starting at Shamvura, 100km further east. Here, compared to Roy's Camp and Waterberg, it immediately felt much more humid and tropical with a totally different suite of species immediately apparent.

A. Shamvura, Caprivi Strip This is an obvious place for birders to stay as the proprietors, Mark Paxton is a very knowledgeable local birder. The camp is brilliantly situated, with a lush garden overlooking the Okavango and Angola a short hop away. A large floodplain lies just west of the camp and can be viewed from the hill a short walk from the camp. A short drive and a pair of flip-flops or sandals allows you to get right into the middle of the floodplain, which is well worth doing.

Notables were many; we racked up some 95 species in less than two full days without going more than a few km from the garden. First and foremost was Slaty Egret with three in the floodplain a little distant (and two seen in flight next morning from the boat). Also on the floodplain or from the boat were Rufous-bellied Heron (five), three sightings of African Pygmy-Goose, Allen’s Gallinule (juveniles seen from the hill), Lesser Jacana very close on the river, lots of Collared Pratincoles (nesting), Long-toed Lapwing (few), Cuppery-tailed Coucal (loads), Southern Brown-throated Weaver and both cisticola specialties, i.e. Luapula and Chirping both seen several times. Other goodies included European Honey-Buzzard and Bataleur drifting over from Angola, Ayre’s Hawk-Eagle, Swainson’s Spurfowl, Black and Pied Cuckoos abundant and obvious, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater (only along the river edges; clear difference in habitat preference from the virtually ubiquitous Europeans) Hartlaub’s Babbler very tame and easy to see and Magpie-Shrike (fields by the floodplain). Holub’s Golden Weaver, Grosbeak Weaver and Swamp Boubou were common around the garden and an African Wood-Owl appeared right above our tent. Additions to the migrant list included Sedge Warbler (common on floodplain) and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters along the river. Southern Carmine Bee-eaters were not present along the river (as they had finished breeding) but family groups were easy to find along the road back towards the highway.

B. Caprivi Strip woodlands along B8 and Rundu radio tower (20 km south of Rundu) The straggly, dry broad-leaved woodland lining the B8 has been hammered by slash-and-burn agriculture in quite a few places but it is still fairly easy to access reasonable patches from the many pull-ins and picnic tables. We dabbled in this between Shamvura and Divundu en route to Popa Falls and again on the way back to Rundu a few days later. This is one area where some inside local knowledge would be really useful; numerous stops and short walks failed to give even the faintest whiff of Rufous-bellied Tit or Racquet-tailed Roller let alone Souza’s Shrike and the likes of stumbling into these must be slim. Species here are more typical of eastern and south-central African woodland so there is a big turnover compared to formerly if you have been birding hard further south and west. Species included Fawn-coloured Lark, Kurrichane Thrush, Pale Flycatcher, Chinspot Batis, Crimson-breasted Shrike, White Helmet-Shrike, Southern Black Tit, Amethyst Sunbird and loads of Golden-breasted...
Bunting. A chance encounter with a close flock of Black-faced Babbler was a bonus and we logged another European Honey-Buzzard.

A similar patch of habitat just north of Mahongo Game Reserve produced Meyer’s Parrot and flocks of Greater Blue-eared and Burchell’s Starling amongst other species.

The habitat around the Rundu radio tower area, as described in the South African Birdfinder has now been very degraded, although an early morning walk here did produce Eurasian Hobby, Striped Kingfisher, Cardinal Woodpecker, Groundscraper Thrush and Tinkling Cisticola.

C. **Rundu Sewage Works** This place is easily reached by turning off the B8 into Rundu, following the main drag north and then turning right, to follow a wide but bumpy track. After a few km or so there is an access track leading down to the Sarasunga River Lodge and, only a km or two further on, a much narrower track leading north, just after some fairly deep pools visible from the main track. These pools were pretty good and it was possible to splash about on the floodplain just behind them, where, despite the general lack of rain, a few overgrown, muddy pools were worth scanning for skulky crakes. Birding was prolific here over several hours prior to dusk, although the hoped for Lesser Moorhen, Dwarf Bittern and co didn’t appear. Species included ten new for the trip, despite two full days in Mahongo by this point. Highlights included Rufous-bellied Heron, Southern Pochard, over 100 Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Ayres’s Hawk-Eagle and African Marsh Harrier, a brief but good view of African Rail, at least two Greater Painted-Snipe, loads of Sedge Warbler, Magpie-Shrikes and three species of bee-eaters lined up on the wires together. Birding could well have been ok round the Sarasunga River Lodge too, but we never really had the chance to give that a decent crack.

**8 Popa Falls** This tidy camp is a great place to stay in its own right, and, further, offers easy access to Mahongo just down the road. The camp is small and easy to cover in an hour or two before breakfast. We found Brown Firefinch very easily several times, including right by the bar at the falls on the first night. Other species seen included Black-shouldered Kite, two European Honey-Buzzards low over, African Goshawk displaying, an unexpected fly-through from 20 Pied Avocet, Meyer’s Parrot, Great Kingfisher, Hartlaub’s Babbler (very easy), Terrestrial Brownbul, Yellow-bellied Greenbul and White-browed Robin-chat (skulky but present on the track behind the restaurant) and Holub’s Golden Weaver (near the restaurant). Spotted Eagle-Owl called faintly at night. We also had Magpie-Shrike on the road nearby and don’t miss sundowners on the falls, with echelons of Rock Pratincoles whipping around every evening.

**9 Mahongo Game Reserve** Wow! Where to start? This locality gets a rave right-up in the South African Birdfinder and rightly so; it is a really fantastic site. Birding is prolific in the floodplain marshes and patchy, open woodland alongside; in all we racked up some 145 species between here and nearby Popa. The reserve is exceptionally rich but very small and you are allowed out of your vehicle anywhere (at your own risk). We spent a lot of time over two days on the loop alongside the floodplain, where a lot of the game was concentrated as well as the birds, but also diverted each late afternoon to the waterhole that is 10km east off the main track at the northern end of the reserve, and where families of elephants came to drink.

- **Species** included: Slaty Egret (at least one, in the first pools on the floodplain loop), sixteen species of raptor, including juvenile Martial Eagle, Lappet-faced Vultures, African Cuckoo-Hawk and two sightings of African Hobby, Wattled Crane (at least two pairs), Lesser Jacana (distant), Long-toed Lapwing, Levaillant’s Cuckoo (at least four; check those Pied!), Broad-billed Roller, Southern Carmine Bee-eater (everywhere), Bradfield’s Hornbill (just three; pair seen well early morning near the start of the floodplain loop), Rufous-naped Lark, Banded Martin, Chirping and Luapula Cisticolas (both calling from the
floodplain at the picnic spot; much better looked for at Shamvura), **Marico Flycatcher**, **loads of Red-backed Shrikes** (20+ daily), **Swamp Boubou** and **Crimson-breasted Shrike** (both noisy and common), the distinctive and common **Meve’s Starling**, **Red-headed Weaver** (nesting at the entrance gate) and **Brown Firefinch** (at the picnic site).

- Mammals were almost as prolific, with ungulates particularly well represented. As well as **Elephants** drinking at less than 50m on two afternoons, particularly notable were good numbers of **Cape Buffalo** and **Red Lechwe** (latter very tame) in the floodplain whilst, inland along the track to the elephant waterhole, we had great views of both **Roan** and **Sable**.

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**10 Etosha National Park** And finally, leaving the best to last, Etosha. Four nights here was just enough time to comfortably get across the park from the eastern **Von Lindquist gate / Namutoni camp** to **Okaukuejo camp** and **Anderson gate** in the west, although another day or so wouldn’t have gone amiss. Being lucky enough to have visited some of the very best game parks in Africa, including Kruger, Kalahari-Gemsbok, the Mara, Ruaha and Murchison, Etosha had a lot to live up to, which it certainly did; this place is straight out of the top drawer as a wilderness and wildlife spectacle. In the absence of serious rain, mammals were still at high densities around favoured waterholes and generally easy to the see in the open terrain, whilst 140 species of birds seemed like a pretty good haul. An aspect in which Etosha was way beyond any of the above listed sites were the floodlit waterholes at each camp; these provided outstanding game viewing (with dozens of seated tourists in awed silence for hours!) each evening. This particularly applies at **Halali** and **Okaukuejo** camps; that at **Namutoni** was not quite in the same league (at least during our visit) but produced a few significant birds.

Notable species included scattered across the park included **Kori Bustard** and **Northern Black Korhaan** (both common, latter especially so near **Okaukuejo** and at **Twee Palms**), **Secretary-bird**, **Pale Chanting-Goshawk**, at least twelve **Lanner Falcons** (nearly...
all juveniles; presumably recently dispersed), over 20 Lesser Grey Shrikes daily, Spike-heeled Lark and Desert Cisticola (in the driest bits) with European Bee-eaters and Sabota Larks just abundant. As for mammals, they were everywhere – and in densities comparable to the Kenyan Mara at times. Outstanding!

- **Namatoni camp**: the camp waterhole produced White Rhino and Spotted Hyena at night and then both Lesser Moorhen and African Crane at dawn next day, soon followed by a pair of Red-headed Falcons; a return trip during lunch yielded a male Montagu’s Harrier taking a pasting from a Lanner amongst a blizzard of other raptors later in the heat of the day. In the camp itself Icterine Warbler was singing and the famous Banded Mongoose troop had to be seen to be believed.

Game-driving in and around Fisher’s Pan in the afternoon and next morning gave great views of (the same three) Cheetahs both times amongst lots of close herbivores, and, at Tsucmor waterhole, hundreds of Burchell’s Sandgrouse arrived just as we did (at c0900) with Woolly-necked and Marabou Stork too. A Double-banded Courser was seen well in the evening, along with Eastern Paradise-Whydahs.

Just a small part of Fisher’s Pan was wet (at the western end) yet this proved was well worth investing time at with hundreds of Lesser and Greater Flamingoes, plenty of waders and ducks, a second African Crane and, Quailfinches and Scaly-feathered Finch all seen.

Driving to Halali from Namatoni (75km; 4 hrs) taking in most the waterholes en-route produced giraffes everywhere we found water, plus Kalahari Scrub-Robin and Whalberg’s Eagle. The best stop was at Goas, producing Spotted Hyena and Pallid Harrier simultaneously with loads of waterbirds (including South African Shelduck and Painted-Snipe) then Red-crested Korhaan and Temminck’s Courser nearby.

- **Halali camp**: We had two nights at this fine place, which combines great birding with a terrific mammal-viewing. The waterhole adjacent to the camp had up to 20 elephants and five Black Rhinos attempting to co-exist for over two hours until 2300 around a pool that could not have been more than 30m or so across; Double-banded and Namaqua Sandgrouse and Rufous-cheeked Nightjars were present by the ton. Owls were pretty active with African Scops, Barn, Spotted Eagle Owls and Pearl-spotted Owlet all seen and /or heard.

Daytime birding next morning (and the next as well...) was a little quiet overall and failed to produce Violet Wood-hoopoe but Bare-faced Babblers were easy around the chalets (favourite perches: car mirrors) and good looks at Damara Red-billed Hornbills, Groundscraper Thrush and Southern White-crowned Shrike were also achieved. The water hole produced dozens of kudu, zebra and impala and hundreds of doves down to drink – and running the risk of getting nabbed by a submerged terrapin. This happened three times, although on each occasion one of two Marabou, waiting patiently with a clear strategy, grabbed the unfortunate dove and attached terrapin, shook the latter off and then finished the dove in one fell swoop!

Game-driving around Halali (am) got us back to Goas and the out to the Etosha Lookout via Nuamses and then, on a second stint pm along the Etosha pan edge to beyond Sueda. Four waterholes here in fairly close proximity produced the goods. Rietfontein, a natural spring in stony plains, was particularly superb and even wet enough for our only Etosha African Fish-Eagle. Other birds seen over the day included Temminck’s Courser, African Harrier-Hawk and Hawk-eagles, the localized and important Blue Cranes (nesting at Salvador and Charitraub), the first Greater Kestrels (more further west next day) and a stack of Chestnut-banded Plovers at Sueda, right on the edge of utter emptiness. The highlight of the lot, however, was a mid-morning stop at Nuamses which was hosting what can only be described as an orgy of elephants with over 50 passing through in almost an hour of wallowing, mud-spraying, trumpeting: the works!

We did an NWR-organised night drive from Halali which took us back out to Rietfontein, which worked out very well with a big haul of mammals and a serious lightning show. The former included seven Black and two White Rhinos and Leopard down to drink for 10 mins and then running like blazes as the night’s second Spotted Hyena lollowed up.

Driving from Halali to Okaukuejo (4hrs) was along the south edge of the pan and took in some of the same waterholes as the afternoon before. It was hot and slow at times, although Red-breasted Swallow and Tawny Eagle were handy additions and we finally caught up with Lions – eight – under a big roadside tree near Kapuphedi. Nebrownii had Etosha’s (Africa’s?) biggest Elephant finishing off a mud-bath and a White Rhino asleep nearby.
Okaukuejo: This was easily the biggest and most populated of the three Etosha rest camps we tried but still very good, with plenty of shade and quite green. Bird species seen in and around included African Hoopoe, Eurasian Golden Oriole and many Sociable Weavers whilst the usual nocturnal session at the waterhole yielded great views of Giraffes and Gemsbok and up to eight Rhinos. Double-banded Sandgrouse and Rufous-cheeked Nightjar were abundant here too, replaced by masses of Shaft-tailed Whydah and Red-headed Finches next morning. The locally famous Verraux’s Eagle-Owls still inhabit the tree on the left of the waterhole edge.

The game drive north from Okaukuejo to Okandeka is well worth doing as the terrain along the west side of Etosha pan is, even by local standards, particularly arid, empty and much less vegetated than further east. Some greener patches close to Okandeka attracted many hundreds of game animals, plus two Lions sitting prominently and photogenically on a ridge. The birds here had a rather different flavor, with masses of larks (mainly irritating sparrow-larks and Red-capped) but also Pink-billed and probably Clapper. Capped Wheatear and Southern Ant-eating Chat also featured prominently along with a couple of Tyrannid-like Chat Flycatchers and three Double-banded Coursers, one with a chick, were roundly cursed as the search for Burchell’s Courser became ever more desperate. A Ludwig’s Bustard near the end was the main reward instead whilst the next morning, on a short loop from Okaukuejo to Nebrownii via Gemsblotvae, ten Caspian Plovers brought a reasonable cheer, approximately doubling my world total for them. The displaying Northern Black Korhaans in this area were sensational and Spotted Eagle-Owl, found in a low roadside tree, finally gave a very good view.

And that was pretty much it. Five hours gets you back to Windhoek from the Anderson gate and it was virtually all over, bar the paperwork. And the Red-throated Pipit...