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Namibian Safari

Four Honeyguiders have recently (September 2013) returned from a Namibian safari, led by Geoff Crane. Words and photos by John Croft.

The safari started in Windhoek, where a tour round the Botanical Gardens helped get us familiar with some of the commoner birds. The gardens were not the riot of colour one may be used to in other locations, but provided a great insight into the survival strategies for plants in arid environments. Walks around the dried up areas of a reservoir produced excellent views of a juvenile pale chanting goshawk feeding on a porcupine carcass (*right*), African fish eagle, black-shouldered kite, Gabar goshawk, mountain wheatear, pririt batis, red-billed quelea and many more.



The geography of Namibia is such that the safari included several long drives (300k+), but the journeys themselves, through different geologies, were interesting and the rewards at the different locations well worth it.

In the Namib-Naukluft Park we encountered what Geoff described as a 'Kalahari Ferrari' (*below*). Fortunately, Geoff's Combi van was much more comfortable! On our dawn trip to the magnificent red sand dunes at Sossusvlei, we saw a relatively rare brown hyena with cubs.



From there we moved to Walvis Bay which was awash with the pink of thousands of the greater and lesser flamingos. A tour of the salt pans produced many confiding views of waders and ducks, including

white-fronted, chestnut-banded, three-banded and Kittlitz plovers; avocets, black-winged stilts, Baird's Sandpiper, red-necked phalarope, Cape teal and many more. The nearby town of Swakopmund had a 'gem' of a display in the Kristal Galerie, which included the largest quartz crystal cluster on display in the world. Beyond Swakopmund was the Skeleton Coast with its shipwrecks and a Cape fur seal colony that took your breath away both visually and 'aromatically'.



Flamingos, chestnut-banded plover, sociable weavers' nests

It was then on to three camps around the Etosha salt pan, where the arid conditions forced wildlife to congregate around the water holes. Here there was the drama of young male elephants tussling with each other, a stand-off between a black rhino and several elephants, a cheetah with four cubs at a kill, plus nervy antelopes, zebras and giraffes approaching a water hole where there was a pride of lions. And of course there were the birds: from the enormous kori bustards and smaller Namaqua sandgrouse blending into the landscape; through the African grey, southern yellow and red-billed hornbills; the colourful crimson-breasted shrike to the LBJs such as the rattling cisticola: plus white flashes from rufous-cheeked nightjars over the floodlit waterholes.



The final segment of the safari was in the Waterberg Plateau Park. The camp itself under the cliffs of the sandstone massif had a large colony of banded mongoose (slender and small grey were also seen), kudu, warthogs and Damara dik-diks (which were delightful) and a troop of Chacma baboons (not delightful). However the real treasures were found on a game drive on the plateau itself: roan and sable antelopes, eland, red hartebeest, the common duiker (not so common), buffalo and more. The plateau provides a natural barrier that allows management and development of the herds. Throughout there were birds such as violet-eared waxbill, scaly-feathered finch, swallow-tailed bee-eater, Ruppell's parrot and flocks of rosy-faced lovebirds. All in all a memorable experience.

