

# NATURETREK

Just Cats # 2

\* South Africa \*

20<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> October 2009

Trip Report



Above: Salayexe and cubs.

## Tour Summary

### Tour Participants:

Martin and Kathleen Farrell  
Ivor and Serena Harrison  
Phillip and Julia Wort  
Linda Fitch  
Irene Gulch  
Bridget Stenning

Specialist Tour Leaders: Leon Marais and Jason Stewart

### Ground Operators:

Lawson's Birding and Wildlife Tours  
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Photo Acknowledgments: Leon Marais

Temperature Range: 15 °C – 38 °C

Total Number of Cat Sightings: 25 cat sightings and 1 Wild Dog sighting

Total Number of Mammal Species Seen: 36

Trip Report Compiled By: Leon Marais on behalf of Naturetrek

## Trip Breakdown

### Day 1: Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> October 2009 ~ Blyde River Canyon

Route: Johannesburg to Blyde River Canyon via Dullstroom  
Weather: cool to start, clearing later in the day  
Temperature range: 15 – 25 °C

### Day 2: Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> October 2009 ~ Skukuza, Kruger Park

Route: Blyde River Canyon to Skukuza via the Panorama Route  
Weather: clear and hot.  
Temperature range: 17 – 33 °C

### Day 3: Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009 ~ Skukuza, Kruger Park

Route: Drives in the Skukuza area.  
Weather: cool and cloudy  
Temperature range: 15 – 24 °C

### Day 4: Friday 9<sup>th</sup> October 2009 ~ Satara, Kruger Park

Route: Skukuza to Satara  
Weather: partly cloudy and warm  
Temperature range: 16 – 30 °C

### Day 5: Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2009 ~ Satara, Kruger Park

Route: Drives in the Satara region  
Weather: clear and hot  
Temperature range: 15 – 35 °C

Day 6: Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> October 2009 ~ Galago Camp, Sabi Sands

Route: Satara to Sabi Sands

Weather: clear and extremely hot

Temperature range: 17 – 38 °C

Day 7: Monday 12<sup>th</sup> October 2009 ~ Galago Camp, Sabi Sands

Route: drives in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve (SSGR)

Weather: cloudy and cool

Temperature range: 14 – 24 °C

Day 8: Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> October 2009 ~ Nkorho Bush Camp, Sabi Sands

Route: drives in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve (SSGR)

Weather: cloudy and cool, clearing later

Temperature range: 15 – 29 °C

Day 9: Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> October 2009 ~ Nkorho Camp, Sabi Sands

Route: drives in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve (SSGR)

Weather: cloudy and cool to start, clearing later

Temperature range: 15 – 30 °C

Day 10: Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2009 ~ Departure

Route: SSGR to Johannesburg

Weather: cloudy and cool, with rain

Temperature range: 15 – 23 °C

## TRIP REPORT

Day 1: 20<sup>th</sup> October 2009 – Blyde River Canyon.

We started off nice and early from the airport, and under somewhat cool and cloudy conditions headed eastwards on the motorway, turning off at Belfast and entering the Mpumalanga Highlands. Our lunch stop at Dullstroom was postponed and we pushed on to Harry's Pancakes in Graskop, where we had our meal before heading on to the resort on the edge of the Blyde River Canyon. The clouds had disappeared by this time and after checking in we headed out on a short walk up to the resort's upper view site, where we had fantastic views of the Three Rondavels and the rest of the lower end of the canyon, with the setting sun casting a copper light onto the iron oxide stained cliffs. We then headed back down to our rooms and a little later had dinner in the restaurant before and early night.

Day 2: 21<sup>st</sup> October 2009 – Skukuza Rest Camp, KNP.

Under a clear sky we met for a cup of coffee at six o'clock in the morning and then headed out on a morning walk, with all tour participants present and enthusiastic. It was a beautiful morning, the clear sky promising a hot day to come, with many great birds seen. We had an early breakfast and were on our way just after nine o'clock. We stopped at three of the main features of the Panorama Route (The Three Rondavels, Lisbon Falls and Wonder View) and then descended the escarpment via Kown's Pass, stopping off at Perry's Bridge in Hazyview for an early lunch before entering the Kruger National Park. With temperatures approaching the mid-thirties we checked in at Phabeni Gate and then took the rest of the afternoon to get to camp, deviating to follow up on some reports of Lions at a water hole known as Delaport's Windmill. We found two lionesses and a male lion lying in the bed of a dry stream, but the view wasn't great so we merely noted them for the list before heading on to try our luck along the Sabie River. No cats were forthcoming, though we did have great views of a herd of Elephants feeding along the southern bank. With the sun setting we headed on to Skukuza, where we checked in to our chalets and then met later for an outdoor barbeque meal. At dinner it was evident that the group was not that keen on tedious notes and lists, so it was decided to forgo the daily log call in favour of a final trip report detailing the cat sightings and game viewing in general. While waiting

for dinner a Thick-tailed Bushbaby appeared in the trees above us, giving us great views and photographic opportunities.

Cat Count: 1 lion sighting; 3 individuals (two females and one male).

Day 3: 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2009 – Skukuza Rest Camp, KNP.

We met up at a quarter past five in the morning for a quick cup before we headed out on our first morning game drive. We took the Sabie River Road, heading down towards Lower Sabie Rest Camp and back again. This proved to be one of the few drives without any cats seen, though of course that didn't mean that there was nothing to see, and we returned for breakfast at nine thirty. After the meal there was time for a good rest and in the early afternoon we headed out on a shorter drive before the sunset drive with the National Park guide. We followed up on reports of some lions at a waterhole known as Renosterkoppies, and there found two lionesses and two male lions. They got up and moved around a bit, but for the most part were fairly lazy, even to the point of completely ignoring a curious warthog who ran right up to them.

After some good views of one of the males we headed on, and at Delaport's Windmill struck gold with a female Leopard (right), first spotted climbing down from a small pile of boulders. We followed her as she moved parallel with the road, and had great views as she climbed up onto a boulder for a brief moment before heading on down to the river bed. We then lost sight of her, but drove around to the waterhole and were soon rewarded with a second view of her as she climbed up out of the riverbed and came across to drink out in the open before moving off. Altogether a superb view and a great start to our cat quest, and an experience that left everyone absolutely elated. We returned to camp and there was then time to get ready for the sunset drive, which produced a lioness and cub, though unfortunately the cub was injured and in a state of distress, so it was not really an enjoyable sighting for the group. Such is the nature of the wild however, with death and hardship being just part of the cycle of life on the African savannah.



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Cat Count: 2 lion sightings; 6 individuals (two females and two males / 1 female and cub).  
1 leopard sighting; 1 individual.

Day 4: 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2009: Satara Rest Camp, KNP.

Our morning safari took us past Watergat, Transport Dam and Delaport's Windmill. We spotted one lion near the windmill, though the view wasn't great and we headed on, and then came across one male lion and two lionesses at Delaport's Windmill. We had reasonable views, though the gathering of vehicles spoiled it a bit, and after getting as good a view as possible headed on back to camp for an early breakfast. We then headed north to Satara Rest Camp, and had some great cat viewing on the way. We started with a male Leopard spotted lying in the shade along the northern bank of the Sabie River, followed by what appeared to be a young female Leopard hunting some unseen quarry after our break at Tshokwane Picnic Site, followed by a pride of 10 Lions lying up in the shade along the Nwaswitsonto River, and finally a big Lioness lying right next to the road a little further on. Near the camp we came across some vehicles and spotted an Impala carcass lying under a tree down in a gully. With no cats visible (we assumed correctly that a Leopard had killed the Impala) we headed on to camp to check in and later in the afternoon came back to the scene of the kill and were rewarded with great views of a female Leopard and 8 – 12 month old cub feeding on the carcass. Not a bad day indeed, with seven cat sightings totalling 19 individuals! Also seen on the way was a herd of Sable Antelope, a majestic antelope species that is relatively rare in the Kruger Park.

Later on we returned to camp just before gate closing time, and then met up for another great outdoor barbeque dinner before heading to bed.

Cat Count: 4 Lion sightings; 15 individuals.

3 Leopard sightings; 4 individuals.

Day 5: 24<sup>th</sup> October 2009: Satara Rest Camp, KNP.

The day dawned clear and still, promising to turn into a real scorcher later on. Once again we headed out on a morning drive, this time heading north and west to the Timbavati Picnic Site and back. With good views of both Lion and Leopard under our belts we were on the lookout for Cheetah, and not far from the picnic site spotted three individuals walking off into the bush. They were quite far away, so it wasn't a close-up sighting, but nevertheless it gave some of the group their very first views of Cheetah in the wild. Further on we came across a single Lioness stalking Impala. She was right next to the road, and gave a short chase after an Impala (even using one of our vehicles for cover at one point) before disappearing in a stand of tall grass. Further on we came across two lionesses near a large waterhole, but the views were not great so we headed back to camp for breakfast. Once again there was a long rest period and then we headed out on a short afternoon drive to follow up on some reports of Wild Dogs north of the camp. We didn't find any dogs, but had some good general game viewing before returning to camp to get ready for the sunset drive. This produced two sightings of African Wild Cat, giving us four out of six possible cat species. African Civet was another highlight on the drive, and the group returned to a fine dinner of barbecued fillet steak.



Cat Count: 1 Cheetah sighting; 3 individuals.  
2 Lion sightings; 3 individuals.  
2 African Wild Cat sightings; 2 individuals.

Day 6: 25<sup>th</sup> October 2009: Nkorho Bush Camp, SSGR.

Our last morning safari in the Kruger took us down to the Sweni Waterhole and back via the Muzandeni picnic site. At Sweni we came across two Spotted Hyena cooling off in the water, though they kept looking in a westerly direction as if interested in something. Heading on westwards from the waterhole we spotted a large male lion on the run, heading parallel with the road and the Sweni River. Suddenly he came to a stop in the shade of a large iLala Palm thicket, and flopped down to rest, as if the exertion of running had been enough exercise for him for one morning. No other cats were forthcoming and we headed back to camp for an early breakfast followed by departure. Not too far from Orpen Gate we came across a female Cheetah and three 4 – 5 month old cubs, with a freshly caught Impala ewe. It was an extremely hot day and the exertion of the hunt had left her in need of recovery, so they hadn't yet begun to feed. Unfortunately, the behaviour of the occupant of one of the other vehicles at the scene caused her to abandon the kill and they were last seen running off into the bush, and it's not known if they returned to the kill or left it to the hordes of waiting vultures. We then exited the park at Orpen Gate and an hour and half later arrived at Nkorho Bush Camp in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve. We had time to relax in the coolness of our rooms before lunch and an afternoon / evening safari, which produced among other things a huge herd of several hundred Cape Buffalo. We also caught up with a female Leopard known as Shadow (right), so called for though she doesn't actually run away from the vehicles she seems to take joy in losing the following vehicle in the thickest bush and suddenly turning and changing direction, making her a tough cat to keep up with. The group was elated with the views we did get, and this sighting made a nice starting point for over the next three days they just got better and better. We returned to dinner with a big storm brewing, though this merely cooled things down over the next three days and didn't bring any immediate relief from the extreme dryness.



Cat Count: 1 Lion sighting; 1 individual (male).  
1 Cheetah sighting; 4 individuals (female and 3 cubs of three to four months).  
1 Leopard sighting; 1 individual (female known as Shadow).

Day 7: 26<sup>th</sup> October 2009 – Nkorho Bush Camp, SSGR.

We were woken up by the camp staff at five o'clock in the morning and then met up for a quick cup of coffee before departing on our morning safari at five-thirty. The morning started off with



some Wild Dog tracks, with a pack of 8 dogs having entered our quadrant from the property to the south. We followed up for a while but didn't manage to discern their direction or movements (these animals can cover so much ground that by the time you find the tracks they could already be long gone). While we were checking the last few roads for the dogs a male leopard was found close by and we responded, getting good views of a large male Leopard moving slowly up a thickly wooded dry river course (left). The identity of this male was unknown to the guides, though he was very relaxed in the presence of the vehicles and

probably came from one of the properties to the south. We followed him up to a small dam, and had great views of him drinking water before moving on up the river course. Suddenly one of the other vehicles discovered a second male Leopard, an individual known as Mvula, lying up on a termite mound. The first male passed by within fifteen metres and neither animal became aware of the presence of the other. Being highly territorial animals it is unusual to have two adult males in such close proximity to each other, but it seems as if they just weren't aware of it. At one point the unidentified male lay down to rest on the opposite side of the river course and Mvula perked up markedly, but there was no interaction and eventually the first male moved on out of the area (though reports from other vehicles indicated that Mvula followed on in the same direction after we had left the sighting). After an exciting morning we headed back to the lodge for breakfast, after which most of the group went on the bush walk with Peter, our Nkorho guide. The afternoon drive produced no cats, though we did have an excellent sighting of Londolzi, one of the dominant White Rhino bulls in the area together with three young females. This bull is known to have quite a temper on him, especially when there are females around, so we gave him his due space. We then had a sundowner stop with a view of a small waterhole occupied by a lone Hippo, and then headed back to camp for dinner.

Cat Count: 1 Leopard sighting; 2 individuals (an unidentified adult male and an adult male known as Mvula).

Day 8: 27<sup>th</sup> October 2009 – Elephant Plains Game Lodge, SSGR.

Our morning safari started with a hunt for some lions. While getting ready the guides had heard



alarm calls of zebra and wildebeest from the clearing in front of camp and surmised that one or other of the large predators had moved through the camp area just before dawn. Our vehicle headed east to check the boundary with the Kruger National Park while the other vehicle headed west. Soon we got the call over the radio that the predators had been found by the guide in the other vehicle and we raced over to have a look. It was the Styx Pride (left), and they had caught a Zebra on the lodge's 'driveway'. There were three adult females and three youngsters there, and we had great views of them feeding on the carcass of the unfortunate zebra. The pride usually numbers eight

individuals, so two were not present (reportedly fraternising with two of the dominant males of the area somewhere to the north). The rest of the drive was a bit quiet and we returned to camp for breakfast and departure to Elephant Plains Game Lodge, our final stop on the tour.

At Elephant Plains we set out at four o'clock and not long into the drive were granted our wishes of seeing Leopard cubs: Salayexe, one of the leopardesses of the area, and her two 4 – 5 month

old cubs. She had caught a Common Duiker, which she had stashed under a thick Russet Bushwillow, and was feeding on it while the female cub rested high up in a weeping Boer Bean Tree and the male cub stalked inquisitively around the immediate area, at one point instinctively covering up the Duiker's entrails with soil and leaves to help dampen the smell and to help avoid vultures spotting the kill (the same behaviour that we'd seen in the morning with the Lions and the zebra kill). Elated with the view of the Leopardess and her cubs we headed off to a dam nearby for a sundowner stop while watching the resident pod of Hippopotami rouse themselves in preparation for a night of feeding. Just when the sun was setting and things were all calm and peaceful chaos erupted as we were suddenly surprised by the arrival of Londolozi, the big rhino bull and his three females, who were obviously on their way for a drink and were somewhat surprised by the presence of a Land Rover and 12 people in their path. No one panicked however and with a few deft instructions the group was positioned safely on the other side of the vehicle and we then climbed aboard and left the area to allow the rhino their drink in peace. A Large-Spotted Genet was seen on the way back to camp, and later in the evening we enjoyed a lovely meal around a roaring fire before going to bed in anticipation of our final full day of safaris.

Cat Count: 1 Lion sighting; 6 individuals (the Styx Pride).

1 Leopard sighting; 3 individuals (Salayexe and two cubs, one male and one female).

#### Day 9: 28<sup>th</sup> October 2009 – Elephant Plains Game Lodge, SSGR.

Once again we awoke to cool and cloudy conditions and set off at five thirty AM for our penultimate morning safari. Our cat fix for the morning comprised a wonderful encounter with iMbilo (right), a young female Leopard who we had seen on one of the 2008 Just Cats Tour as the 5 month old cub of a female called Nyaleti. We arrived at the sighting to find her under a bush consuming a Helmeted Guineafowl she had just killed, showing the opportunistic nature of leopards in consuming an extremely wide variety of prey. We watched her finish it off and then head off in a south-easterly direction. We followed her for a while, and being young she was particularly frisky, at one point suddenly bounding up onto a large termite mound, and then moving on to climb up into a Marula Tree. Both of these climbing exercises were in aid of gaining some elevation, from where she would be able to spot any potential prey or enemies such as Lion and Hyena. At one point we circled around the tree, with iMbilo sitting above us not three metres away, when she suddenly jumped down to the ground literally right next to us. She then crossed the boundary into the neighbouring reserve, and we watched her disappear into the bush after having given us an incredible experience. We then headed off to find a quiet place for a cup of coffee before heading back to the lodge for breakfast.



After breakfast some of the group headed out on a bush walk with Richard, while others took the opportunity to relax and catch up on some sleep and photograph reviewing.

For the afternoon safari we headed out eastwards, mainly to be in position in case the pack of Wild Dogs, which were reportedly on the Vuyatela Property to the north) turned south and headed into our sector. Unfortunately follow-up news over the two-way radio network was that the dogs had continued to move northwards, so after watching a trio of elephants drinking at a waterhole and having our own drinks we headed back west to catch up with a lioness known as Sandy Patch. She had been found feeding on the carcass of a female Cape Buffalo, together with her 7 month old male cub. We found her on her way to have a drink at a small waterhole nearby, and after watching mother and cub drink for a while we headed over to the kill to see the Spotted Hyenas making the most of her absence and tucking in to the remains. Soon the lions returned and the Hyenas, in possession of a large leg bone or two, moved off to make space for Sandy Patch and her cub. On the way back to camp we came across a female Lesser Bushbaby, and her tiny kitten (the best term I can come up with for a baby Bushbaby is 'kitten'), which she promptly picked up in her mouth and bounded off into the trees as we shined the

spotlight on her . We than had a final barbeque dinner at the camp before going to bed with high hopes for a good final game drive in the morning.

Cat Count: 1 Lion sighting; 2 individuals (Sandy Patch and her male cub).

1 Leopard sighting; 1 individual (Imbilo, a young female).

#### Day 10: 29<sup>th</sup> October 2009 – departure.

And what a great final game drive it was to be, with two sightings of a lifetime in one morning.

The day started cool and cloudy as we set off and soon, unbeknownst to the group, the report came over the radio that the large pack of Wild Dogs (right) had moved south and were now in our sector. The group was thus totally unprepared, as indicated by the gasps and exclamations, for the sight we beheld as we came around a corner: twenty four Wild Dogs lying in the road, chasing each other and running all over the place. The pack comprised 12 adult dogs and 12 pups



of 6 – 7 months old and they had just brought down an Impala ewe a few minutes before we arrived. The lead dogs, with blood on their muzzles, ran out of the bush to our left and the pups all ran over with much squealing to greet them and partake in the meat that they regurgitated. The adults then led them over to the kill, where the pups tucked in to the carcass while the adults lay down and got a bit of rest. This is an extremely large pack and is thought to come from the Manyeleti Game Reserve to the north, for they hadn't been seen before by the guides from our lodge. Truly an amazing sighting and thinking that things just couldn't get any better we left the sighting and headed over to see Salayexe and her two cubs (below) . We arrived at the sighting with the three cats moving along



a dry riverbed, with the cubs in a particularly playful mood, stalking their mother and each other in a game of cat and mouse, entertaining behaviour that is good practise for their life of adulthood to come. We followed them for about an hour, watching them run and play with all the energy of youth. Their games came to an end however when the trio came across a large Waterbuck bull, who certainly wasn't going to take any nonsense from such small predators. Soon the waterbuck had them all scrambling for safety up different trees, and for a long time he patrolled the area and raced over when any of them even thought about

climbing down. At some stages he was mere feet away from them, but they seemed to accept it quite calmly and there was surprisingly little hissing and snarling. Soon it was time to head back to breakfast, and what a morning it had been. Our luck held out and it was only after we got back to the lodge that the heavy sky opened up and the first rains of the season began to fall.

Cat Count: 1 Leopard sighting; 3 individuals (Salayexe and her cubs).

1 Wild Dog sighting; 24 individuals.

#### Summary:

The fourth running of the Just Cats tour once again delivered an awesome and unbeatable safari experience, with 25 sightings of a record number of 57 individual cats, including 19 on one day in the Kruger National Park, and an absolutely unbelievable encounter with a pack of 24 Wild Dogs on our last morning. Thanks to all participants for joining us on this tour and their enthusiasm and patience and lets hope that the memories will remain vivid for a long time to come.

Mammal List

COMMON NAME	20-Oct-09	21-Oct-09	22-Oct-09	23-Oct-09	24-Oct-09	25-Oct-09	26-Oct-09	27-Oct-09	28-Oct-09	29-Oct-09	Total	SCIENTIFIC NAME
1 Baboon, Chacma		X	X	X	X	X		X	X		7	<i>Papio ursinus</i>
2 Bat, Fruit (Peter's Epauletted)					X						1	<i>Epomophorus crypturus</i>
3 Buffalo		X	X	X	X	X		X	X		7	<i>Syncerus caffer</i>
4 Bushbaby, Lesser						X			X		2	<i>Galago moholi</i>
5 Bushbaby, Thick-tailed			X			X					2	<i>Otolemur crassicaudatus</i>
6 Bushbuck		X	X							X	3	<i>Tragelaphus scriptus</i>
7 Cat, African Wild					X						1	<i>Felis lybica</i>
8 Cheetah					X	X					2	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>
9 Duiker, Common		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	8	<i>Sylvicapra grimmia</i>
10 Elephant, African		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		8	<i>Loxodonta africana</i>
11 Genet, Large-spotted								X			1	<i>Genetta tigrina</i>
12 Giraffe, Southern		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	9	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis</i>
13 Hare, Scrub							X		X		2	<i>Lepus saxatilis</i>
14 Hippopotamus		X	X	X			X	X	X		6	<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>
15 Hyaena, Spotted			X	X		X	X		X		5	<i>Crocuta crocuta</i>
16 Impala		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	9	<i>Aepyceros melampus</i>
17 Jackal, Black-backed					X	X		X			3	<i>Canis mesomelas</i>
18 Klipspringer			X	X							2	<i>Oreotragus oreotragus</i>
19 Kudu, Greater		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	9	<i>Tragelaphus strepsiceros</i>
20 Leopard			X	X		X	X	X	X	X	7	<i>Panthera pardus</i>
21 Lion		X	X	X	X	X		X	X		7	<i>Panthera leo</i>
22 Mongoose, Banded		X		X							2	<i>Mungos mungo</i>
23 Mongoose, Dwarf				X					X		2	<i>Helogale parvula</i>
24 Mongoose, White-tailed							X				1	<i>Ichnuemia albicauda</i>
25 Monkey, Vervet		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	9	<i>Cercopithecus aethiops</i>
26 Nyala								X	X	X	3	<i>Tragelaphus angasii</i>
27 Reedbuck, Common							X				1	<i>Redunca arundinum</i>
28 Rhinoceros, White				X	X	X	X	X	X		6	<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>
29 Sable Antelope				X							1	<i>Hippotragus niger</i>
30 Squirrel, Tree				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	7	<i>Paraxerus cepapi</i>
31 Steenbok		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		8	<i>Raphicerus campestris</i>
32 Warthog			X	X	X	X		X	X		6	<i>Phacochoerus aethiopicus</i>
33 Waterbuck, Common			X	X	X	X			X	X	6	<i>Kobus ellipsiprymnus</i>
34 Wild Dog										X	1	<i>Lycaon pictus</i>
35 Wildebeest, Blue			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	9	<i>Connochaetes taurinus</i>
36 Zebra, Burchell's		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	9	<i>Equus burchelli</i>

