

At last: Botswana and the Caprivi, April 2025

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Part Three: The Panhandle and home

Day 12, Tuesday 15 April

Having passed through the Muhembe border post, we were back in Botswana, following the A35 past Shakawe. Here we made a brief detour to see the new suspension bridge which links the left and right banks of the Okavango River at the northern end of the “[Panhandle](#)”,

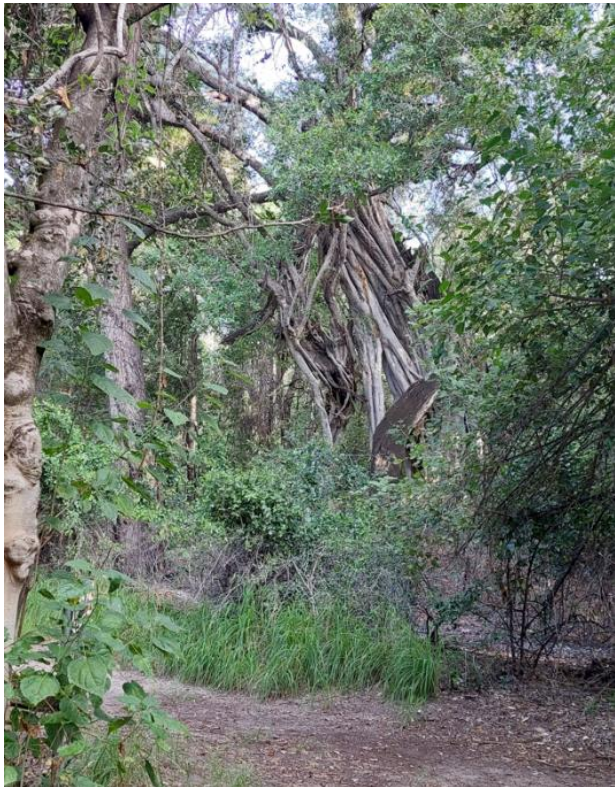


Okavango River Bridge, Botswana, Image: IABSE, <https://www.iabse.org/page-18523>



through which rainfall runoff from the Angolan highlands flows into the vast inland Okavango Delta. About 10 km further south we turned off to [Drotsky's Cabins](#), well-known to visiting birders. Here lovely, roomy chalets with picture windows are set on stilts on spacious lawns that lead down to the banks of the River.

In the grounds I was greeted by some familiar bush birds, including Grey Go-away Birds, Black-collared Barbets and Grey Hornbills.



Where is Pel's Fishing Owl? .

vines. One is supposed to be visible in the above picture, but I can no longer find it here.

More excitement was to follow soon after we had settled in, as we set out on a walk around the camping area to see the resident Pel's Fishing Owls. Large as they are, these ginger-coloured owls are not easy to spot when sitting in a tall, leafy tree with tangled



Fortunately I did get to see it nicely (not a lifer, as I had seen it years ago at Pafuri), while the photographers eagerly photographed it.



Pel's Fishing Owl © Kobus Venter

After the excitement we gathered for liquid refreshments at the pub overlooking the river, where we were treated to views of an African Marsh Harrier flying over, while the reeds were alive with Brown-throated and Holub's Golden Weavers. Some of us saw the Greater Swamp Warbler in the reeds, but I had to wait for the next day to see that lifer.

Day 13, Wednesday 16 April

Most of this day was spent on the water. Because the boats had no canopies, we had been warned to put on long-sleeved shirts, hats and long trousers and to apply sunscreen. Much as South Africans, heedless of prior warnings, tend to arrive at European airports in winter wearing T-shirts, shorts and flip-flops, some members of our group ignored the advice and paid the penalty. Ignoring the Mourning Collared Doves in the grounds, we walked down to the jetty to embark at 07:00 on our morning cruise, gently cruising up the river along its banks and into side channels, until we could see the Okavango River Bridge in the distance.



An African Fish eagle surveyed the river, overlooking everything. Under overhanging vegetation e spotted a Hamerkop perched on its enormous nest.



We passed the nest holes of breeding colonies of White-fronted Bee-eaters.



These bee-eaters were everywhere over the river and tended to steal the show, along with smaller numbers of the equally pretty Little Bee-eaters.

Little Bee-eaters

However, we also looking for LBJs. In addition to the familiar Little Rush Warbler and Lesser Swamp Warbler, among the reed beds we were looking for some Okavango specials: the [Chirping Cisticola](#), Luapula Cisticola, and the Greater Swamp Warbler. These took some effort. Our pilot, Otto, expertly nudged our boat into the reeds looking for these.

The last of the trio I was able to tick was the [Greater Swamp Warbler](#), which is a denizen of papyrus swamps.





For a librarian and student of the Bible, the word [papyrus](#) holds special meaning, since the ancient Egyptians created their “paper” from the pith of papyrus reeds, and our earliest copies of many parts of the New Testament are found on *papyri*, now treasured rarities [scattered in research libraries](#) such as the Austrian National Library and the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

Papyrus: we peered into this to find the Greater Swamp Warbler

Wire-tailed Swallows flitted overhead. We cruised passed a colony of Cattle Egrets, a Goliath Heron, White-browed and Coppery-tailed Coucals, Allen’s Gallinule, Pygmy Geese, Little Bittern, Black Crake, African Jacana. For the latter, large stretches of floating vegetation provided ideal habitat.



The water was so clear that we could see the long stalks to which the water lilies were attached well below the water. After a five hours cruise we returned for a lunchtime break. On the way to lunch, I was happy to see a large flock of Hartlaub’s Babblers.

Later in the afternoon we had another three hours on the river, this town exploring downstream,



often hugging the banks to scan the riparian vegetation. As the hours passed, the light became softer and the river more photogenic.



Wire-tailed Swallows and White-fronted Bee-eaters perched obligingly for the photographers. An African Harrier-hawk (*Gymnogene*) was spotted perched picturesquely on a dead tree, a bit too far for my camera, and Palm Swifts, and Half-collared Kingfishers were added to the day's long list. A very special day – for me maybe *the* highlight of the tour – was rounded off by an excellent supper. Drotsky's is an essential stopover for keen birders.

Day 14, Thursday 17 April

After breakfast we took the road (A35) south to Sehitwe. The road is badly potholed and its edges are eroded, so much so that in parts traffic proceeds on dirt tracks alongside the narrow remnant of tarred road. In addition, vehicles have to cope with cattle, goats, donkeys and further south even horses wandering across the road, while large trucks thunder by in the middle of what is left of the road. Here and there we saw signs of work in process to rehabilitate the road, or at least to start on the work. The state of some of the roads on which we travelled is strange, as Botswana has a higher per capita GDP than South Africa and has a reputation for relative financial discipline. We stopped occasionally to identify birds. At one spot there were a lot of Meyer's Parrots by the roadside, otherwise we saw mainly hornbills, starlings and doves.

By 13:00 we reached Sehitwe, where we turned north-eastwards on the A3 towards [Maun](#). After a long drive we drove into Maun on a long, congested main street, with shopping centres, garages and office buildings interspersed higgledy-piggledy among residential compounds and formal and semiformal dwellings. Articles in travel magazines in which the early days of this town were evoked by old-timers had in my mind imbued Maun with a romantic aura. Clearly, Maun had grown up, but not gracefully.

We stopped in the town for fuel and some shopping. Ironically, on the advice of fellow members of our group, I found myself visiting a branch of Woolworths to buy a lightweight warm jacket. I had not anticipated that it might get cold. In the next days I was very glad of it, as the weather changed to more overcast skies and colder nights. We continued through the town to the Island Safari Lodge. There was no island, however. The lodge, somewhat more basic than Drotsky's, is beautifully situated on the bank of a river which had dried up to a few muddy pools. Water from the Okavango had not yet reached Maun. However, the birding was quite good. Here I heard again that evocative night-time call of the bushveld, the African Scops Owl.



River frontage of Island Safari Lodge

DAY 15, Friday 18 April



The restaurant, lounge and bar complex of the Island Safari Lodge



Photo © Gerhardus Malherbe

A morning walk in the surrounding bush proved productive. We ticked Meves's Starling and Swamp Boubou, as well as many other birds familiar to me from many years in the old Transvaal, including Golden-tailed and Bearded Woodpecker, Green Pigeon, Black-backed Puffback, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Terrestrial Brownbul, White-browed Scrub Robin, and Woodland Kingfisher.

Another walk in the afternoon yielded a Great Spotted Cuckoo, hotly pursued by a pair of Meves's Starlings, and also my last lifer of the tour: **African Barred Owlet**.

African Barred Owlet

Day 16: Saturday 19 April

We now headed homeward on the A3, towards the Khama Rhino sanctuary near Serowe, approximately 530 km away. At Matopi we turned south towards Rakops on the A14, following the [Boteti River](#), which nowadays is often dry. It was clear that seasonal water had not reached it. We stopped from time to time to identify raptors: an African Hawk Eagle, Yellow-billed Kite, Pale Chanting Goshawk. We briefly crossed the dry river at Khumaga, ticking a Gabar Goshawk and an unwelcome Common Myna. Further along the road, we added Tawny Eagle and Brown Snake Eagle to the day's list of raptors. In flat, generally featureless countryside White-browed Sparrow-weavers signalled that we were entering dryer Kalahari country.



After a brief shopping stop near Orapa, we reached the Khama Rhino Sanctuary in the late afternoon, with just enough light for a quick game drive to see some rhinos, but muddy tracks and failing light discouraged further exploration. Accommodation was basic, and the supper at the restaurant was indifferent, but the wine was inexpensive and we made a good meal of it before turning in.

Day 17: Sunday 20 April

Leaving the Sanctuary, we spotted a [Crimson-breasted Shrike](#) (or Boubou) in the bush, always a beautiful bird to see. We now headed east to Serowe and joined the A1. At a pitstop near Mahalapye we saw both Zitting and Desert Cisticola. We continued southwards on a long and uneventful drive to the South African border at Ramatlabama, then stopped at a shopping mall in Mahikeng. Again I was amazed at how the town had grown since we lived

there in the early 1980s. I recognized the national stadium, but as we drove through the western outskirts of the town, I could not locate the university where I had worked. We continued to Vaalboskraal, where we had stopped two weeks earlier. A brief walk yielded Pririt Batis, Acacia Pied Barbet, Yellow Canary and another Crimson-breasted Shrike, before an excellent braai.

Day 18: Monday 21 April

In the morning before our departure more bush birds were ticked including Neddicky, Long-billed Crombec, and Chestnut-vented Warbler (Tit-babbler). We rejoined the N18 and drove to Vryburg, nowadays a somewhat dilapidated town, which however has a large, well-frequented shopping centre. Further south we passed the old Tierkloof Seminary, and Taung. In the Vaal-Hartz Scheme we stopped at an olive and pecan processing factory selling a variety of products in spacious premises. There are clean toilets and there is coffee, but none were to be had today because there was no water. Otherwise, this would be a good spot to stop, about 110 km north of Kimberley. The N18 here is quite narrow and carries quite heavy traffic. We crossed the Vaal River at Warrenton. The river was flowing fast, but I was make photograph it as my phone camera was up to its usual tricks.

At Warrenton we rejoined the N12 and proceeded through Kimberley's potholed streets to the [Mokala National Park](#). We entered the park at its eastern entrance near Lilydale and had a slow and rewarding drive through its quite diverse landscapes towards Mosu Lodge. This is one of my favourite national parks, relatively small, not crowded, and offering an excellent variety of landscapes and animal life, albeit not all members of the Big Five. Driving through the park we ticked Sociable Weaver, Plain-backed Pipit, Black-chested Snake Eagle, Wattled Starling, Banded Martin, Sickle-winged Chat, Northern



Black and Red-chested Korhaan, Greater Kestrel, Short-toed Rock Thrush, and a score of other birds. We made it to Mosu just before the gate closed. Reception staff were not helpful. It had started raining, and finding our allocated accommodation was challenging. In awkward conditions, Gita was again able to put together an excellent meal for us.

Day 19

We left Mokala before breakfast and negotiated a muddy and slippery road to the Mosu gate. We had another long drive (c. 440 km) ahead of us. As we headed back to the N12, stunningly beautiful cloudscapes presaged cool, rainy weather for our last day. A young Tawny Eagle was looking a bit bedraggled.



Leaving Mokala: clouds through rain-spattered windows

We again crossed the Orange River at Hopetown. The big flow of water from the rain-soaked country upstream had not yet reached here. As we continued south on the N12, it became darker and darker, and clouds gathered ahead of us. We had to stop somewhere along the road for our breakfast and pitstop. Would the rain wait until then? But Japie knows the Karoo, so he turned off onto a local road and we had our last breakfast stop of the tour, cold but dry, along a muddy road, somewhere near Strydenburg.

A somewhat bedraggled Tawny Eagle





Last breakfast stop
of the tour

We were now on the final stretch to Beaufort West, under dark clouds. There were puddles everywhere and farms dams were full. As usual there were too many roadside Pied Crows. But in hilly country, as we approached Three Sisters, we were privileged to spot a Rock Kestrel and a Verreaux's Eagle. At 13:45 we arrived in Beaufort West. We said our goodbyes to new friends and everyone set off homeward, well pleased with a wonderful tour.

The total list of species was just over 320. Of course not everyone was able to see them all. I ended up with a species list of 303, including 16 lifers, taking my southern African life list to 767 species. I would not have seen one half of those lifers if it were not for expertise and identification skills of Japie and Gita and the help of my travelling companions.

A few days ago it was reported that finality has been reached on harmonising all the various international bird checklists in a single one called [AviList](#), which recognizes 11,131 species in 252 families. The total was arrived at after agreement on a number of "splits" (species split into two or more) and "lumps" (two or more species grouped into one). The pendulum seems to have swung back from splitting to lumping. My Southern African life list is affected by five lumps. That takes me back to 762,

You win some and you lose some! But while looking for those lifers we have great times, meet wonderful people, and never cease to marvel at the work of our Creator. For that, I'm always grateful.