

Namibia – 2014 (August)

Submitted by Jim Moulton Vermont, USA

Background

My wife Julie and our friend visiting us from the States, Diane Goodman flew Air Namibia from Lusaka, Zambia – where we serve as US Peace Corps volunteers – to Windhoek, Namibia. The bird numbers are generally lower in Namibia's winter though I was able to tally 172 species on the trip. If you're after more than "just birds," August is the heart of the dry season and game viewing tends to be better as animals congregate at the evaporating watering holes. The skies are big and blue while the temperatures are extremely comfortable. It was a great time for us to experience more of sub-Saharan Africa. I've been quite happy with the book I have, Sinclair and Ryan's 2nd edition of [Birds of Africa South of the Sahara](#) and I'm glad to have had it in tow.

We picked up a rental car reserved online for our self-drive along the well-worn route to Sossusvlei, Swakopmund/Walvis Bay and Etosha National Park. There are a few paved major highways in Namibia, but the ones that do exist are in good condition. Otherwise, you're on gravel tracks that are in decent shape, but demand the driver's full attention. A car can swim and fishtail on the many corrugated sections. It's very (!) dusty driving this time of year and you might want to pay a little extra for the windscreen/tire insurance. Broken windows and flat tires are not uncommon.

Diary



After ticking off **Speckled Pigeon** and **White-backed Mousebird** in Windhoek and a comfortable night at the highly-recommended [Chameleon Backpackers](#), we set out for a beautiful drive through the Naukluft Mountains to the Namib Desert and the dunes of Sossusvlei, southwest of the capital. Along the way, we found **Red-billed and Swainson's Spurfowl**, **Augur Buzzard**, **Greater Kestrel**, **Ludwig's and Rueppell's Bustard**, **Northern Black Korhaan**, **Kalahari Scrub-Robin**, **Eastern Clapper Lark**,

Chat Flycatcher, Pririt Batis, Red-shouldered Glossy Starling, Orange River White-eye, Mountain Wheatear, Scaly Weaver and Grey-backed Sparrowlark. It became clear early that we'd be seeing lots of **Pale Chanting Goshawks, Common Ostrich** and **African Red-eyed Bulbuls** on route.



Additionally, the sometimes monstrous colonial nests of **Sociable Weavers** appear on power poles and trees strong enough to support the growing weight. They are always under construction. At a mountain pond, we encountered **Great White Pelican, Egyptian Goose, Cape Teal, South African Shelduck, Cape Shoveler** and **Black-winged Stilt**. Looked high and higher for a **Damara Rockjumper** without success.



We loved the modern campsites at Sossusvlei, but you should reserve well in advance. The area is very popular while accommodations are few near the gate to Namib-Naukluft Park.



Over our two day at the campsite, we had easy looks at **Karoo Long-billed Lark, Cape Crow, Cape Glossy and Pale-winged Starlings** and **Cape Sparrow**. Just inside the gate to the dunes lies a pricey lodge and stands of trees where we found **Acacia Pied Barbet, Chestnut-vented Tit-Babbler, Black-chested Prinia, Rufous-vented Warbler, Marico Flycatcher, Dusky Sunbird, Great Sparrow, Southern Masked Weaver** and **Yellow and White-throated Canary**. And while I don't typically plan trips based on endemism, I do study and look for the unique. No different in Sossusvlei with **Dune Lark** close by. I found one eating ants on Elem Dune not far from the entrance gate. Elem is one of the few dunes along the park road with substantial scrub to support this species and the lark obliged within 10 minutes of my walk up.



We also chose to spend a night at a wonderful lodge in the mountains, [Barchan Dunes](#). It is located in the foothills northeast of Solitaire on the road to Spreetshoogte Pass. It is a beautiful place and a very comfortable accommodation. In this area we located **Lesser Kestrel, African Pygmy Falcon, Spotted Owl, Rosy-faced Lovebird, Stark's and Spike-heeled Lark, Rock Martin, Red-headed Finch, Cape and Lark-like Bunting** and my favorite of Namibia, the **Bokmakierie** that showed brilliantly in the glow of sunrise. Still forever looking for **Black Eagle** and **Gray's Lark**.



After our all-too-short stay at Barchan Dunes, we doubled back toward Solitaire to grab the C14 to Walvis Bay and its awesome birding opportunities. Swakopmund is the more touristy coastal town about 30km north of Walvis Bay. The latter has a lagoon and bird wintering area, which is an international Ramsar site. The lagoon and neighboring wetlands are regarded by many as the most important coastal wetland habitat in southern Africa and the area is home to many species including **Greater and Lesser Flamingos** living and feeding there by the thousands. We spent a couple lazy days here near the lagoon enjoying the peace and bird spectacle. I ticked off **Cape and Crowned Cormorant, African Black Oystercatcher, Kittlitz's, White-fronted and Chestnut-banded Plover, Pied Avocet, Kelp and Hartlaub Gull** and **Swift and Caspian Tern**. I recommend taking a drive around the lagoon southwest of town toward and past the salt works. We got close up views of many of

these species, of flamingo pirouette feeding behavior and found a lone **DamaraTern** for our efforts.



After leaving Walvis and a brief visit to “Swak” for a wonderful brunch, we took the B2 northeast to Karibib, picked up the C33 to Otjiwarono, then north on C38 to Etosha. We booked in advance though late and had to “settle” for accommodation outside the national park. No matter as we were very happy with our stay at [Etosha Village](#) with its super comfortable tented sites and delicious buffets. The birding there and in the park was terrific. Oh, and we saw elephants, zebras, lions, giraffes, rhino, grazers and more. **Kori Bustard, Northern Black Korhaan, Blacksmith and Crowned Lapwings** and **Secretarybird** were easy to spot. No less exciting for the newcomer were **Red-billed Duck, Egyptian and Lappet-faced Vulture, Bateleur, Martial and Tawny Eagle, Lanner Falcon, Harlequin Quail, Namaqua Dove and Sandgrouse, African Scops-Owl, Spotted Thick-knee, Double-banded Courser, Carp’s Tit, Bare-cheeked Babbler, Southern Ant-eating Chat, Capped Wheatear, Rufous-eared Warbler, and Barred Wren-Warbler. Grey-backed Sparrowlark and lark**

species were numerous including **Rufous-naped, Fawn-colored, Sabota, Dusky, Spike-heeled, and Red-capped Lark.**



We spent three glorious days and nights at Etosha and all the accolades we heard beforehand were appropriate. We had planned a last overnight on our return trip to Windhoek; a jewel in the mountains near Otjiwarongo; [Okonjima Lodge](#). On our way there, we found **Crimson-breasted and White-crowned Shrike, Monteiro's Hornbill and Rufous-crowned Roller**. Okonjima itself sits on a large wild cat reserve where conservation/rehabilitation projects are established called AfriCat. The lounging cheetahs we happened upon were nearly as fun as my first **Damara Rockjumper** – finally encountered on our last day on the road. It sang from a tree on a rocky slope to announce itself to me. Very kind. While it was satisfying to eventually experience this species, the stay was memorable for other lifers that materialized such as **Red-crested Bustard, Rueppell's Parrot, Cape Penduline-Tit, Short-toed Rock-**

Thrush, Groundscraper Thrush, White-tailed Shrike, Burchell's Glossy Starling and **Violet-eared Waxbill**. And while there is a **Cape Vulture** restoration project nearby, I was not lucky enough to see any from the tiny colony that holds on for survival in the cliffs.



To me, there is little more gratifying than setting out to find a particular (sub)species and locating it, promptly. It happens...occasionally. I had an eye out for **Damara Red-billed Hornbill** while departing Okonjima and fortune smiled as one flew to a tree next to the road and posed for us. We had plenty of time to distinguish its darker eye and white cheeks from those traits of the Southern Red-billed. I don't think everyone recognizes the Damara as a distinct species, so it will not go into my count of life birds, but this particular hornbill was a very satisfying find, nonetheless.

Traveling Namibia was a wonderful overall experience with a comfortable pace, modest expense, a solid tourist infrastructure and excellent birding. Yes, I'd do it again...and again.