



**NAMIBIA CUSTOM TOUR: Northwestern specials such as
Angola Cave Chat and Herero Chat, then off the beaten track
scouting to the south**

28 JUNE - 8 JULY 2016

By Chris Lotz



Wolwedans in the NamibRand Nature Reserve south of Sossusvlei

ITINERARY

Date	Location	Overnight
28-Jun	Windhoek, Namibia's highest mountain	Uis near the Brandberg
29-Jun	North to the Angola border	Kunene River Lodge
30-Jun	Zebra Mountains	Kunene River Lodge
1-Jul	Skirting (north and east) Etosha National Park	Otjiwarongo
2-Jul	Back to Windhoek	Near Okahandja
3-Jul	To the coast	Lagoon Loge, Walvis Bay
4-Jul	Spectacular Namib drive	Wolwedans, NamibRand
5-Jul	Full day in the Namib	Wolwedans, NamibRand
6-Jul	Scenic drive to Lüderitz	Lüderitz
7-Jul	Back towards Windhoek	Mariental
8-Jul	Back to Windhoek for afternoon flight home	

Overview

Don had a short-list of species he still “needed” in Namibia, so we decided to spend five days targeting these, while making it our first priority to collect surface soil samples for his research (the main reason he found himself in Namibia). Two of the top bird species we were looking for were both highly localized chats. Arguably the most exciting of these was **Angola Cave Chat**, a charismatic, strikingly pied, robin-chat-like bird that was, until recently, thought to be a single-country Angolan endemic. Remarkably, an apparently extremely healthy population of them was discovered just south of the border in Namibia, though, just a couple of years ago! This discovery was made by Wessel Swanepoel, who was doing botanical work in the remote, rugged Zebra Mountains a couple of hours’ drive from the Kunene River Lodge (which itself is one of Namibia’s most remote lodges). The Kunene River Lodge was of course already a famous place for finding another primarily Angolan species that barely makes it across the border into Namibia, **Cinderella Waxbill** (thanks also to the lodge owner, Peter Morgan, for keeping track of the whereabouts of this otherwise very tough-to-pin-down special on a month-by-month basis). **Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush** (which occurs from the Namibia/Angola border northwards to Gabon) also very barely gets into the southern African listing region here at Kunene and is nicely easy to locate, even within the lodge grounds. **Grey Kestrel** is another major target for local listers, as there are just a few pairs along the southern banks of the Kunene River – and yet again this is the only place in our region to find this often-dipped species (although it is not uncommon from West Africa across to Uganda). Yet another target bird, although not a full species but a subspecies that might one day be split, was the plain-fronted form of **Bennett’s Woodpecker**. Don “needed” all the above-mentioned targets, along with a couple en route to the Angolan border, namely **Herero Chat**, **Benguela Long-billed Lark**, **Black-faced Babbler**, and a handful of others.



It's a bit of a mission getting here to the Zebra Mountains in extreme northwestern Namibia, but the reward is that Angola Cave Chat seems to have a fairly dense population throughout this mountain range (not to mention that the journey to these mountains will take you through some incredible scenery – a big perennial desert river lined with blue-grey palms, some other towering mountains, and so much more).



A close-up of the Angola Cave Chat habitat as the early morning sun rises

The second part of the trip, after Don flew home on completion of five days of excitingly focused target birding, was a family trip, during which I wanted to scout some areas I had not yet been to (despite the fact that I've guided many a Namibia birding tour before). We covered vast tracts of beautiful desert in a rather brief six days, encountering some excellent specials including **Dune Lark**, **Gray's Lark**, **Burchell's Courser**, and three bustard species including a few **Ludwig's Bustards**. What a fantastic "Part B" of the trip: I challenge anyone to present me with a more beautiful desert than the Namib, with its many rugged mountain ranges, the highest sand dunes in the world, and its desolate coastline full of flamingos, seals, and other wildlife.

Day 1, 28 June 2016:

Don had already been in Windhoek for a day of meetings with his university colleagues and was there to meet me at 8:30 a.m. We wasted no time and headed straight for Namibia's highest mountain, the remote Brandberg that rises straight out of the Namib plain. While it's a long drive, we did not stop often, so we arrived in time to get nicely ahead of ourselves and to find not only **Benguela Long-billed Lark** but also four **Herero Chats**, which co-operated extremely well and which we observed foraging all around us. We even had time to start the soil sampling as well as to explore the nearby dry Ugab riverbed, where we saw fresh signs of desert elephants as well as some new birds characteristic of this rather different habitat. The Brandberg area is fascinating, and you can read more about it at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brandberg_Mountain. After an excellently productive and exciting day we headed to Uis and rested well in preparation for the next day. Little did we know just how very much luck would remain on our side: we were to continue getting ahead of ourselves in a big way!



Herero Chat (photo by Martin Benadie) can be tricky to find, but not this time! This elusive species (which one has to be rather careful not to miss on any birding tour) favors small trees near rocky outcrops, from where it forages down onto the ground. It's a good bird to get familiar with, as it's very unique (in its own genus, *Namibornis*).

Day 2, 29 June 2016:

We had to do soil samples every 50 km, but good training by Don meant that the two of us were able to accomplish this work pretty fast at each stop, allowing us to actually get to the palm-lined Kunene River just as the best time for birding began, around 4 p.m. En route we found stacks of the amazingly beautiful **White-tailed Shrike**, **Short-tailed Rock Thrush**, several hornbills including the localized **Monteiro's** and **Damara Hornbills**, and various other good birds, as we traversed the remote roads that took us past the legendary haunts of desert black rhinos, going past places such as Palmwag, Sesfontein, and Opuwo. As our road eventually met up with the river a few miles west of the Kunene River Lodge we started our birding in earnest, and we surprisingly managed to clean up on all the targets we had allocated ourselves for the next couple of days, just in the space of two hours! **Grey Kestrel**, **Rufous-tailed Palm Thrush**, and the unspotted form of **Bennett's Woodpecker** were the three main ones, but we also saw the rather different-looking northwestern Namibian race of **Red-necked Spurfowl**, huge numbers of **Rosy-faced Lovebirds**, and a noisy group of **Bare-cheeked Babblers**.



Short-tailed Rock Thrush is common in Namibia (photo by Martin Benadie).



Bare-cheeked Babbler (photo by Martin Benadie) is a localized Namibia/Angola endemic.

Day 3, 30 June 2016:

We left the Kunene River Lodge at 4:30 a.m. in Peter Morgan's landrover and comfortably made it to the Zebra Mountains by sunrise. Here we enjoyed numerous sightings (some of them really close up) of the stunning **Angola Cave Chat** before consuming a leisurely breakfast at the base of the slope. We then birded our way back to the lodge for a very enjoyable lunch. The highlight was seeing perhaps 20 **Cinderella Waxbills** coming down to drink at a pool along an otherwise dry riverbed. After lunch we had the afternoon available for relaxed birding; we had no targets left, but Don enjoyed adding birds to his Angolan list as we scanned the opposite side of the Kunene River. At sunset we tried for the Bat Hawk that had been hanging around the lodge, but all we saw was various species of bats, **Square-tailed Nightjar**, and **Freckled Nightjar**.

Day 4, 1 July 2016:

We got 100% of our trip targets faster than expected (i.e. by lunch time on Day 3), so anything from now on would be bonus birds for Don. Instead of heading back southwards as was the original plan to have a second chance at Herero Chat in case missed previously, we decided to detour eastwards on the slow (because of endless villages and schools) yet paved road north of Etosha National Park. We eventually got to the eastern Etosha National Park area for our new target, **Black-faced Babbler**, which we found without problems. We spent a couple of hours in the park and saw some nice animals such as elephants and quite a good number of others. It was the wrong time of day for Burchell's Sandgrouse, and we also failed to find Red-necked Falcon, both of which would have been life-birds for Don, who had to settle for a total of seven new birds for the trip – not at all a bad number, though, especially since we were only realistically expecting five or six. After Etosha we drove to Otjiwarongo for the night.

Day 5, 2 July 2016:

We birded the always very productive Otjiwarongo sewage works, where in March John and I had seen a very rare regional vagrant, Garganey (see the 6-day Namibia trip report at

<http://birdingecotours.com/trip-reports/namibia>). There were (as always) lots of birds here, such as all three southern African teal species (this is in particular a good place for the scarce **Hottentot Teal**). Then we tried at a private guest farm for Burchell's Sandgrouse (dipping again, unfortunately) before heading to the airport to drop Don around 1 p.m. before fetching my wife, Megan, and my mom for the second (scouting) part of my trip. After the two others arrived we made it to the Rock Lodge just west of Okahandja, nicely en route to the coast from Windhoek, just before dark.

Day 6, 3 July 2017:

Driving the scenic, beautifully open, and almost deserted main paved road due westwards to the attractive German town of Swakopmund, we arrived at the coast by lunch time and treated ourselves to a magnificent buffet right at the sea. We then continued to Walvis Bay, where we were to stay at the comfortable Lagoon Loge just across from the massive Walvis Bay lagoon, which is always full of **Greater** and **Lesser Flamingos** and other shorebirds. **Gray's Larks** were all over the place and proved easier to find than usual.



An iPhone photo of some extremely close Lesser Flamingos

Day 7, 4 July 2016:

We left after breakfast to take what must be one of the most spectacular desert drives on earth. Not far out of Walvis Bay one negotiates mountain passes and canyons in the desert before eventually reaching the turnoff to Sossusvlei, the home of the world's highest sand dunes. These beautiful red dunes tower above one on either side of a wide valley, where we managed to see a couple of the rare **Burchell's Courser**.



Burchell's Courser (photo by Martin Benadie from a previous birding photo tour to Namibia)



One of the dunes along the approach road to Sossusvlei



Not far outside Walvis Bay

We then continued southwards to Dune Camp, Wolwedans, inside the NamibRand Nature Reserve.

Day 8, 5 July:

We spent a full day in Wolwedans. This is a spectacular place, and we saw **Rüppell's Korhaan**, **Ludwig's Bustard**, **Dune Lark** (one of only two of Namibia's true country endemics, although it shares numerous endemics with Angola in the north and with South Africa in the south), **Chat Flycatcher**, **Sociable Weaver** with its unbelievably huge nests, and other good Namib birds. The desert is full of life, and we also saw some good reptiles and mammals such as gemsbok, springbok and plains zebra.



The view from Dune Camp, Wolwedans







Dune Lark is quite confiding at Wolwedans (photo by Martin Benadie from a previous Namibia birding tour – see <http://birdingecotours.com/tour/birding-tour-namibia-okavango-and-victoria-falls-18-day-2017> for our most popular trip to this country).

Day 9, 6 July:

We embarked on another long but amazingly beautiful (yet again) journey to the fascinating coastal town of Lüderitz. On this drive we saw yet more distant blue mountain ranges, but the sand dunes were white instead of red as they had been up until now. We stopped in the interesting German interior desert town of Aus for lunch. This is now the area for **Barlow's Lark**, which is even more range-restricted than the similar Dune Lark.





Lüderitz – the surrounding desert is good for Cape fur seal, brown hyena, Barlow’s Lark, African Penguin, and more.



Kolmanskop ghost town

Days 10-11, 7-8 July:

We journeyed back to Windhoek for our flights home, traversing the southern parts of Namibia, which are largely flat but broken by the huge extinct volcano known as Brukkaros (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brukkaros_Mountain) and, of course, the world's second deepest canyon, the Fish River Canyon.