Namibia, DIY STYLE

On a trip to Namibia, Stephen Moss decided to forego joining an organised tour, and instead opted for a DIY-approach. Was that the right choice?

STEFANO POLITI MARKOVINA/ALAMY

I'd always wanted to go to Namibia, so when my employer offered me the chance to visit for a week's work, with free flights and accommodation, I was delighted.

I decided to add a few days onto the end of the trip at my own expense, and started to look at the various options. I soon realised that, because the dates were fixed, I couldn't join a fully organised birding trip. I briefly looked at doing a bespoke tour with a guide, but the costs were prohibitive. So instead, I went for the cheaper option: a self-drive, self-guided, tour, lasting six days. Namibia has good roads, and is very safe, but even so, I was delighted when two of my colleagues decided to come along for the ride.

I've birded quite a lot in southern Africa, so I was familiar with the families and many of the commoner and more widespread species. But having visited Botswana and Kwa-Zulu Natal, in the east, I knew that many of the birds here in the west would be new. Would I manage to find and identify them without a full-time guide, I wondered?

I did my homework, drawing up a list of around 75 species I thought I had a reasonable chance of seeing. We hadn't even left the airport when I ticked off the very first: a smart little Rosy-faced Lovebird, an attractive small parrot, which we would see at most locations.

No rest...

After an overnight flight, I should have taken a nap; but as always in a new country, I was too excited to sleep. Instead, I walked around the grounds of our hotel, Arebbusch Travel Lodge, on the outskirts of the capital, Windhoek. Its leafy gardens immediately produced birds: ranging from the very familiar – House Sparrows and Little Swifts – to the new, including flocks of comical-looking White-backed Mousebirds, elusive Chestnut-vented Tit-babblers, and a smart and elegant songbird. After checking my hastily-snapped photos against the field guide, this turned out to be a Marico Flycatcher, another bird I would come across almost everywhere we went.

Of course, just because I wasn't on a fully-guided tour didn't mean that I couldn't take advantage of local knowledge. So, that afternoon, I spent a productive few hours with birder Toni Hart, who runs guided tours around Windhoek. Despite the searing heat,

Windhoek skyline

White-backed Mousebird

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Marico Flycatcher

ROBERTHARDING/ALAMY

Rosy-faced Lovebird

KOMKRIT TONUSIN/ALAMY

we added roughly 50 species to my growing list, including many lifers. These included a Crimson-breasted Shrike and two Damara Red-billed Hornbills, Blue, Black-faced and Violet-eared Waxbills – tiny, colourful finches that proved impossible to photograph – elegant Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, and noisy, sociable White-browed Sparrow-weavers, whose nests have two entrances: a real one, and a false one to confuse predators, such as snakes.

Out of the city

We also visited Avis Dam, one of the best-known sites near Windhoek, where the lake held a variety of waterfowl including Red-knobbed Coots, Little Grebes, and one of my key target species, the Maccoa Duck (a darker version of its cousin the Ruddy Duck). Toni was worried that recent fires might have destroyed the surrounding habitat; but fortunately, things weren't as bad as she feared. We enjoyed watching a Rock Kestrel harassing an African Hawk-eagle that ventured too close to its nest,

Flamingos in Walvis Bay

CARLOS ANDRE SILVA ANTUNES/ALAMY

several noisy Blacksmith Lapwings and Three-banded Plovers, and Rock Hyraxes – the closest living relative of the elephant – posing on the rocks.

During the rest of our stay in Windhoek, we enjoyed the sight of Little and African Palm Swifts over the university, and paid a visit to another famous landmark, Daan Viljoen Nature Reserve, with my colleagues. It was great to watch some of them enjoying their first ever views of big game animals, including Giraffes, Mountain Zebras, Greater Kudu, Blue Wildebeest and best of all, a herd of Southern Oryx – also known as the Gemsbok, and Namibia's national animal, which appears on the country's flag.

On the road again

For the second half of our trip, the three of us did a road trip in a spacious and comfortable 4x4. The first day was a baptism of fire as we headed west, towards the coast, on a gravel road. Now I really was relying on my own field skills, and was delighted to spot, and identify, a Lappet-faced Vulture overhead; along with a rather easier species, a flock of Ostriches, shimmering in the heat-haze.

By the time we reached the coastal resort of Swakopmund, the temperature had dropped from a baking 35°C to a much cooler 15°C. Taking advantage of the more comfortable conditions, I took a stroll around the town. This is the kind of birding I really enjoy: taking my time to find and identify a host of new and unfamiliar species, again with the help of my camera.

The old-fashioned jetty – rather like an English pier – proved very fruitful, with Hartlaub's Gulls, and both Cape and Crowned Cormorants posing on the wooden structure; the latter showing off their red-and-yellow face-paint and punk-like crest.

Heading back to the hotel, I noticed some flowering palms. To my delight, they hosted a local speciality, a tiny Orange River White-eye, which I knew I wouldn't see anywhere else; and a Dusky Sunbird, along with some very smart Cape Sparrows.

With an hour or so to go before dusk, I headed north of the town to the famous saltpans, where I was greeted by a huge flock of terns (mostly Crested with a few Sandwich), Greater and Lesser Flamingos feeding in the shallows, and a fine selection of waders. These included global voyagers – Sanderling from the Arctic, and Curlew Sandpipers from Siberia – as well as local specialities including several very smart Chestnut-banded Plovers. The way birds from all corners of the world converge on coastal wetlands like this never ceases to amaze me.

Dune Lark

ANGUS LAING

Expert guide

The next day, we took another guided trip: this time a combination of birds, mammals, scenery and history – guided by Bruno Nebe, a veteran conservationist who specialises in tours of the coastal sand dunes south of the huge port at Walvis Bay. This was one of those unforgettable days, not just because of the wild creatures we saw, but thanks to Bruno's insights into Namibia's wildlife, and his deep knowledge of geography, history and politics.

The dunes were very impressive, as was the range of creatures that make their home there: Springboks, Black-backed Jackals and oryx; Ostriches and Pale Chanting Goshawks; and best of all, Namibia's most sought-after – and only truly endemic – bird, the Dune Lark. We drove around the dunes in search of this elusive species, until at last, one of our fellow-passengers spotted a pair of small birds on the other side of the coach to the one we were all looking. They were indeed Dune Larks: giving us brief but excellent views as they

Namutoni Rest Camp

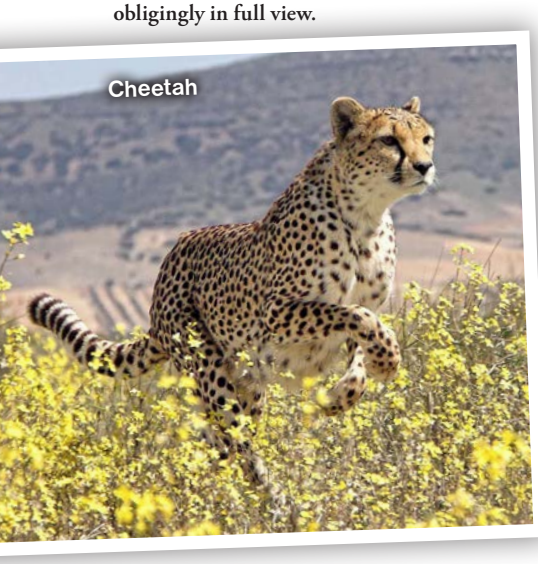
FELIX LIPOV/ALAMY

perched on the smooth sand.

After a second night in Swakopmund, we headed north, stopping off at Spitzkoppe to see the extraordinary rock formations and visit a Himba village. We didn't see some of the speciality birds, including Herero Chat, partly because my colleagues perhaps weren't as keen as me on early starts. Secretly, though, I was beginning to enjoy the more leisurely pace of this trip!

By mid-afternoon, we had reached Erongo Wild, a tented camp set in rocky scenery in the hills between Swakopmund and Etosha. Here, again, I did some solo birding – finding my first Rockrunner, a terrestrial member of the warbler family which, as its name suggests, nests in crevices in rocks; as well as a very smart White-tailed Shrike.

That evening, and the following morning, I did guided walks with Bonnie, one of the camp's birding guides, who found a good range of the local specialities, including comical-looking Monteiro's Hornbills, and, after a long search, Hartlaub's Francolins. As we enjoyed an al fresco supper after dark, a Freckled Nightjar hunted moths right in front of us, perching obligingly in full view.



Cheetah

ZOONAR GMBH/ALAMY

Our next and final destination was the legendary Etosha, where we would spend two nights, giving us a flavour of this vast wilderness and its unique wildlife. Each of the three camps we visited – Okaukuejo, Halali and Namutoni – boasts its own waterhole, a magnet for birds and mammals in this parched landscape, including my first ever sighting of Black Rhinoceros. On our evening at Okaukuejo, I heard a cacophony of bird alarm calls, and realised that something was up; eventually I saw two Pearly-spotted Owlets in a tree, being mobbed by a flurry of different songbirds.

Mammal mania

At dawn the next morning, we set off on a game drive, which as well as providing top mammals also produced close-up sightings of a Greater Kestrel feeding on a lizard right next to the vehicle; a colony of Sociable Weaver nests hanging from a tree; and the world's heaviest flying creature, the stately Kori Bustard.

By now the new birds were coming thick and fast; but larks, in particular, were proving very tricky to identify. Fortunately, my friend Adam Riley – the founder and boss of Rockjumper Tours – knows more about Southern African birds than almost anyone, so I emailed him my out-of-focus photos, which he promptly assigned to the correct species.

The route east, via Halali to Namutoni, was a real thrill: our very own self-guiding game drive, during which we came across a Cheetah resting in the shade beneath a tree, huge herds of elephants, Giraffes, Springboks and Burchell's Zebras, and another Black Rhino – this time in daylight. It felt very special knowing that these were animals we had come across ourselves, without needing the help of a guide.

Yet pride comes before a fall. On our final morning, at Namutoni Rest Camp, I noticed an active flock of slender, dark birds with red bills on the grass outside the reception. They were, I was sure, Violet Wood-hoopoes, a species I had wanted to see all trip, and my final 'lifer'. But, when I emailed my photos to Adam, he immediately identified them as the much commoner – and to be honest, very different-looking! – Red-billed Buffalo-weaver.

Even so, by the end of our whistle-stop trip, I had managed to see a wide selection of species, of which 43 birds and a dozen mammals were new for me. Not nearly as many as I might have tallied on an organised tour, but nevertheless very satisfying – especially as I had (mostly!) identified them myself.

Would I do it again? Yes, especially if, as in this case, the option of a fully-guided tour wasn't possible. But it also made me appreciate the ability of my expert local guides, without whom I wouldn't have seen so many birds, and wouldn't have enjoyed the trip so much! BW

More info

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