

# DESTINATION COASTAL NAMIBIA — 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Feb. 2009

by Petri Hottola

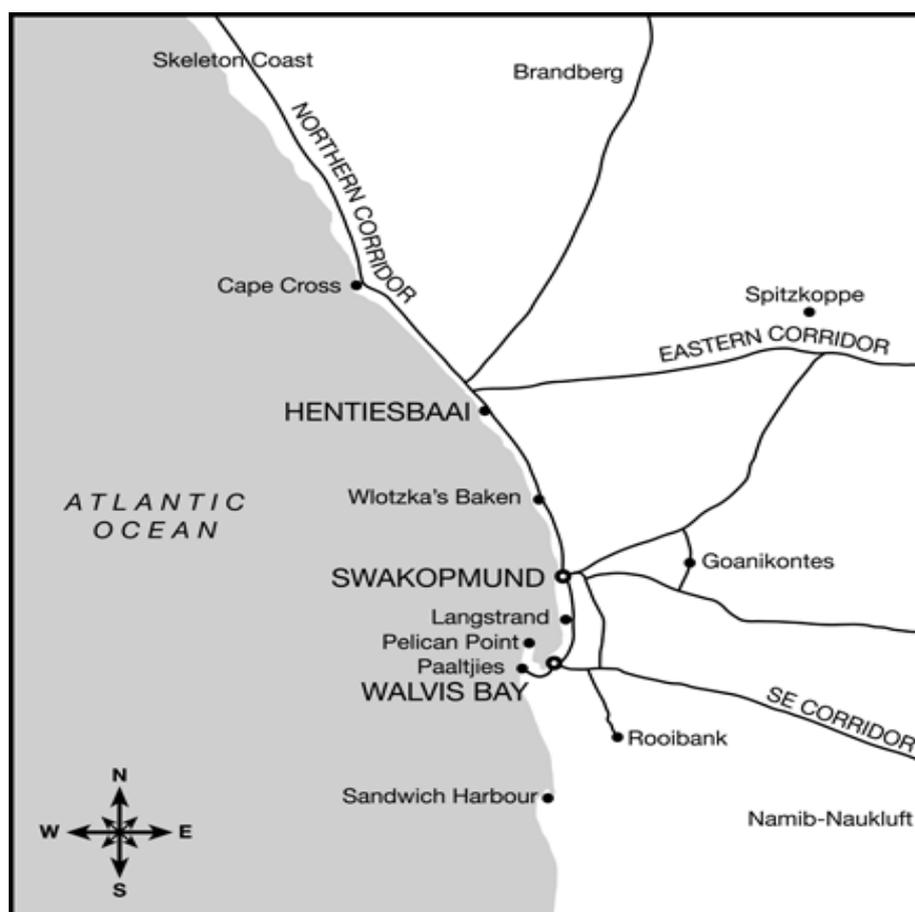
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The following text will provide some information for independent travelers planning to visit the Central Coastal Region of Namibia for birdwatching, by a fellow birder involved with a Finnish Academy funded bird tourism research project in the region, in 2006-2008. The project was a part of a larger venture, Tourism and the Regional Modernization of Namibia (<http://www.tourismuninet.org/fi/namibia/>), in cooperation with FUNTS, University of Namibia (UNAM), and local NGOs such as the Coastal Environmental Trust (CETN), Namibia Nature Foundation (NNF) and community-based tourism ventures under the umbrella of Namibia Community-Based Tourism Association (NACOBTA).

The focus is on the coastal strip between **Sandwich Bay** and **Cape Cross**, including **Walvis Bay**, **Swakopmund** (Swakop) and selected locations along the main corridors to the region (**Khorixas - Skeleton Coast Park**, **Erongo - Spitzkoppe**, and **Windhoek - Namib-Naukluft**). The list of 21 coastal sites will start by the largest bird congregation, the Walvis Bay Lagoon, and end with locations along the corridors. Most of the sites are well covered by birding travel guides and trip reports, especially South African ones, but conditions do change, and there is always room for updates (e.g. the 'New Bird Paradise' of Walvis Bay).



**Map 1.** Central Coastal Region, Namibia, with birdwatching locations.

Some details may also be useful for globetrotting listers looking for the endemic bird species of Namibia. For example, one may be interested to know that **Hartlaub's Francolins** can actually be seen in the afternoons: no need to wake up before sunrise! There are selected references to main target bird and mammal species, and a smattering of common ones, but no comprehensive species lists. Photographs have been included to provide additional information, e.g. on habitats and road conditions.

Coastal Namibia is an attractive bird tourism region with its endemic species, scenic environment and large numbers of wintering and breeding shorebirds. Namibia is relatively easy to reach from Europe, East Asia and North America. Air Namibia and South African Airways have frequent flights from major European hubs such as Frankfurt am Main, Zürich and London, the latter via Johannesburg and Cape Town. The nation is known as a safe travel destination with plenty of space for nature-lovers looking for wildlife experiences, or even solitude. Supermarkets are well stocked and great (game) meals are available at local restaurants such as Café Probst in Walvis Bay. There are also more specialized services for ecotourists. On the coast, Foto Behrens (Swakopmund) had the best prices for photography accessories, such as memory cards.

With the exception of peak season around Christmas and New Year, travel arrangements are in general easygoing. There is a plenitude of accommodation available, and most of birdwatching sites can be reached by a sedan (rented or taxi; having a 4x4 provides even more freedom). Reservation of accommodation is, however, complicated from overseas, because several Internet operators (or their employees) have proved to be unreliable (e.g. Afrizim and Elena Travel Services). It is therefore wise to prefer the smaller, family run operations with direct email contact, or rent rooms on site. Outside the peak season, accommodation is best reserved after arrival, by calling the various enterprises. The contact details are available in travel guidebooks. Local SIMs and phone cards can be purchase at supermarkets and petrol stations.



**Fig. 1.** The self-catering extension of Ngandu at Sea, Walvis Bay.

Personally, I have stayed at Ngandu at Sea (**Fig. 1**; NAD 300/night; [heart@mweb.com.na](mailto:heart@mweb.com.na)) in Walvis Bay, and recommend it. They also have self-catering units in a separate building, with flexible rates for single dwellers. At the moment, it is best to avoid the abysmally run Walvis Bay Resorts accommodations (Esplanade Park Cottages, Dolphin Park and Long Beach Resort). They are, however, planned to be privatized, and the standards will hopefully rise in the future. There is plenty of good quality accommodation in Swakopmund, as well. Personally, I would avoid Langstrand for social and ecological reasons. In Windhoek, I would recommend Etambi (NAD 350) in the direction of Pionierspark, a secure, comfortable place with a great location next to a small residential shopping centre.

For car rental, nothing beats Asco Car Hire in Windhoek (<http://www.ascocarhire.com/info@ascocarhire.com>). They have a wide range of well-maintained vehicles and provide reliable service. Unfortunately, car rental is quite expensive in Namibia. For reasons, refer to **Fig. 70** at the end of this report. It is best to share, if possible, or drive in from South Africa. Not all the Namibian companies can be relied on; scams do occur, especially with the so called 'best deals'. One of my colleagues almost ended in jail, after refusing to buy a replacement vehicle after his rental car had an engine breakdown. It was a swindle; the engine had had no oil at the time of the rental!



**Fig. 2.** A line of Nissan Hardbody 4x4s waits for customers at Asco Car Hire, with camping equipment.

'Winter', 'spring' and 'summer' refer to southern hemisphere seasons. NAD = Namibian dollar, equivalent of South African rand (ZAR). Bird taxonomy follows the latest edition of the Sasol field guidebook for Southern Africa. Photographs are by the author, who holds the copyrights. Several tourism businesses may be mentioned, or even advertised in the report, but there are no vested interests. The author is simply supporting enterprises with good, birder-friendly services, based on personal experience.

## 1. WALVIS BAY LAGOON AND SALT WORKS

Being the most important wintering site for Palaearctic shorebirds and intra-African migrants in Southern Africa, the Walvis Bay Lagoon is also one of the best known wetlands of the continent. It has been declared a Ramsar site for wetland protection in 1995, but many threats continue to exist, as the conservation status lacks formal recognition by the Namibian government. There is neither proper management nor special services for birdwatching. Much of the original lagoon area has been developed by Walvis Bay Salt Works, and numerous birds forage also on the adjacent salt pans. In summer, more than 200 000 birds are present, including at least eight species of terns and tens of thousands of flamingos. The most numerous shorebird species is **Curlew Sandpiper**.

You never know what may turn out in an extensive site such as this. In 2007, a **Pectoral Sandpiper**, one or two **Redshanks**, two **Terek Sandpipers**, more than 20 **Red-necked Phalaropes** and odd creatures such as an albinistic **Curlew Sandpiper** (**Fig. 6**) adorned the lagoon and the salt pans. Earlier rarities have included **Wilson's Phalaropes**, **Broadbilled Sandpipers**, **Lesser** and **Greater Sand-Plovers**, among others. Many South Africans, Zimbabweans and Botswanans visit the place to add the **Red-necked Phalarope** on their Southern Africa list, at the only reliable site for the species in the region.

A visit to Walvis Bay Lagoon often starts by the Esplanade (**Fig. 3**; S end of town), the main tourism attraction and the pride of the town. It is a beautiful, park-like area with green lawns, palms and several parking lots right by the lagoon, from where birds can easily be observed. Unfortunately, no bird-guides are available, at the moment. There are many up-market holiday homes around, and an assortment of hotels and guesthouses at a short walking distance, including the above-mentioned Ngandu at Sea.



**Fig. 3.** The Esplanade on an overcast summer day, with foraging shorebirds and flamingos. In the background, the Raft Restaurant serves as a landmark, next to the Pelican Bay Hotel.

At the western end of the Esplanade, there is the Mola Mola (= the scientific name of Ocean Sunfish), number one nature tourism operator on the coast, with daily dolphin cruises and 4x4 trips to Sandwich Harbor (more information follows). They have agreed to start keeping a birder logbook at the office, or at the adjacent coffee shop, to provide a way to exchange information between visiting and resident birders. In late 2008 the logbook was not yet there, but it hopefully appears sooner or later.

Close by, there is some space between the Pelican Bay Hotel and the Walvis Bay Yacht Club, from where good scope views of the other side of lagoon (difficult to access) can be obtained, early in the morning. The area around the Raft Restaurant used to be great for close views (and photography) of some of the uncommon species, such as **Red Knots**, but shorebirds have recently been forced out by a surf-gliding establishment, the Free Air Guesthouse. The Pelican Bay Hotel has also introduced jetboats to the area, fortunately not beyond the Raft. Surf-gliders do, however, frequently wander all the way into the inner lagoon, well past Esplanade Park Cottages, and may prevent birdwatching at the Lagoon, as the birds move on to the other side. At the moment, surf-gliding is the number one source of stress for birds wintering and breeding at the Walvis Bay Lagoon, and has already managed to decrease the site's appeal for ecotourism.

As one continues along the Esplanade, there is plenty to see especially at low tide. **Bar-tailed Godwits** and **Damara Terns**, for example, favor the banks on the east side of the lagoon. Passing the Esplanade Park Cottages, one enters more open, less developed space, with sand dunes entering from the east and threatening to silt the Ramsar site up. In the 1980s, a pipeline (remains are still visible) used to water the sand on the edge, keeping silting on a more tolerable level. There are many **Greater** and **Lesser Flamingos**, the latter in winter, **Little Egrets** and shorebirds on the extensive tidal flats.



**Fig. 4. Greater Flamingos**, filtering their food in the salty waters of Walvis Bay Lagoon.

Several kilometers later, there is a four-way crossing in front of the Walvis Bay Salt Works entrance. The right hand road (signposted) goes to Paaltjies, through extensive pans with oftentimes large flocks of birds. In the very beginning, the dry low tide flats on the right side, at the southern end of the Lagoon, are one of the favorite spots for **Chestnut-banded Plovers**. More than 4000 have been recorded at low tide, also in 2007, the total population being around 10 000. In 2008, the numbers were significantly lower. The Walvis Bay Lagoon undoubtedly is the best site in the world for this attractive species.

Further on, one encounters a side track and a closed gate on the right side of a left-hand curve (**Fig. 5**). The narrow but drivable track follows embankments between salt pans for a couple of kilometers, through good birding habitat, and ends at a pumping station, oyster farm and a bird-hide, with many thousands of birds (some of which can be seen from the Yacht Club, with a scope). This is the favorite spot for **Black Oystercatchers**, otherwise relatively uncommon on the Central Coastal Region, and at least for some years, a lone **Eurasian Oystercatcher**. It is a long walk to the end of the narrow road, and the track can be entered by car only with a special permit from the Salt Works, reserved for CETN (e.g. for bird counts; see below) and selected Walvis Bay tour operators. Individual tourists, do not bother to try! There are several good reasons to keep the gate locked and the birds rather enjoy the peaceful conditions.



**Fig. 5.** The gate of the pumping station track (permit required); Keith Wearne opens the lock in 2007.

On the main road, the next stretch after the gated side track has many **Kelp Gulls**, and huge rafts of **Black-necked Grebes** (up to 10 000) on the right, until one reaches another pumping station, and a narrow bridge across a channel. From there on, shorebird numbers do increase, and birds are often close to the road. This is one of the best sections of the general area, and there often is more than enough to observe. The next few hundred meters on the left and right are the favorite spot of **Red-necked Phalaropes** in Walvis Bay. Towards Paaltjies (toilets and a parking lot by the sea), one has

the best chance to see **White-winged Terns**, and once again thousands of **Chestnut-banded Plovers**, on both sides of the road (along the last pans, at low tide). **Damara Terns** are present, too. Please, park your car carefully and do not obstruct traffic on the way to Paaltjies.



**Fig 6.** An albinistic? (pink bill & legs) of flavistic **Curlew Sandpiper** at Walvis Bay Lagoon, in February 2007 (a poor quality digiscoped image).

There are more birds deeper in the Salt Works area, but this is private property and one should not enter. Just before Paaltjies, a well-used 4x4 track goes south, allowing views to ponds further away, if you are ready to risk driving in sand (at high tide, water seeps in under the surface). Another 4x4 track turns right, towards Pelican Point (more below). Any time of the day is good for birdwatching, the birds moving around according to tidal changes. Visibility is best early in the morning and late in the afternoon. **Black-backed Jackals** are frequently seen by the Lagoon (20 pairs breed there), and **Brown Hyenas** also used to occur, until somebody killed them.

Twice a year, CETN organizes a two-day bird count at the Lagoon and the adjacent salt pans (**Figs. 7-11**). The occasion is sponsored by Namibia Breweries, with cold drinks for the counters. In case you are visiting the coast in July-August or January-February, please consider joining one of the teams. Volunteers are most welcome. This is a great way to meet the local birders, get up-to-date information, and experience the site, with access to places normally closed to outsiders. The timing of the counts can be checked by contacting CETN at [cetn@iafrica.com.na](mailto:cetn@iafrica.com.na) (Tel. 064 205057). CETN also has its Internet home page at <http://www.nnf.org.na/CETN/>, with bird count information.



**Fig. 7.** Walvis Bay Lagoon July 2007 bird count: a team of birders leave 'Keith's hide', at the end of the pumping station track.



**Fig 8.** Some participants of the July 2008 count, enjoying the sponsor's drinks.



**Fig. 9.** Adding up the numbers after a successful count.



**Fig. 10.** The shorebird counts traditionally end with a Sunday afternoon feast.



**Fig. 11.** The extensive menu may include some rather strange combinations: koeksusters and droëwors. No need to fear fat, salt or sugar deficiency in Namibia!

## 2. PAALTJIES

Paaltjies is the easiest to reach seabird observation site on the Swakopmund – Walvis Bay coast. There is a parking lot at the end of the 15 km road passing through Walvis Bay Lagoon and salt pans, signposted to Paaltjies both in town and at the Salt Works crossing. From the parking lot, it is a hundred meter walk to the seashore, from where a variety of seabirds may be observed. Do not try to drive in, as there are spots of deep, soft sand. **Cape Gannets**, **White-chinned Petrels** and **Sooty Shearwaters** are present year around. **Cory's Shearwaters** are regular and both **Pomarine** and **Arctic Skuas** are commonly seen in summer. **Giant-Petrels** and **Storm-Petrels** are more occasional, **Subantarctic Skua** being a winter visitor. There is always a chance for less regular species, such as a **Brown Booby** or a **Long-tailed Skua**.

In season, baleen whales such as **Humpbacks** may be observed at Paaltjies, and at the close by Pelican Point. **Heaviside's Dolphins** are seen year around, and if one gets really lucky, one may see **Orcas**, as I did in winter 1998. Other rarities have included, among others, **Pygmy Right Whale**, **Cuvier's Beaked Whale** and **Pygmy Killer Whale**. Many **Cape Fur Seals** pass the site on their way to the Pelican Point, where they have a small colony. Not infrequently, the seals pass quite close, swimming through the surf. Be sure to bring your lens cloth, as optics will receive a fair share of the mist-like surf floating through the air!



**Fig. 12.** The shoreline at Paaltjies, a fisherman's paradise, with Kelp Gulls.

### 3. PELICAN POINT

As already mentioned, the Pelican Point at the end of a long, sandy peninsula towards Walvis Bay (**Map 1**) is a good place for whale and seal observations. **Black-backed Jackals** are relatively tame and easy to observe there. More importantly, the tip of the peninsula, beyond an abandoned lighthouse and a port traffic control base, has all the seabirds of Paaltjies, and more, with closer views. Now and then, **White-chinned Petrels** and **Cape Gannets** even fly across the Point, on their way between the bay of Walvis Bay and more open seas. **Crowned Cormorants** frequently roost south of the pier, on the bay side. There is a good variety of gulls, terns and shorebirds, thousands of **Sanderlings** making quite a show in flight, when present.

This is a relatively safe spot to practice driving soft sand (4x4 required), as help is not far away. As soon as you reach the start of the track at Paaltjies, reduce the tire pressure (normally, 2.2 kilopascals or similar) to 1.3-1.1 kilopascals to minimize your chances of getting stuck. Proceed steadily, with no stops unless on adequately firm ground. If stuck, go down to 0.8 before attempting to get off. Afterwards, the tires can easily be inflated at any of the several service stations in Walvis Bay. Do not go too close to the shore, especially on the bay side. Venturing too far from the main track involves a risk of losing one's car to high tide. In any case, it is always safer to park the car higher up, and walk to the shoreline. The distances are short at the Pelican Point.

For the first half of the access route the track is not that bad and may appear suitable for a 2x2. Later on, one will discover more and more sand, and is guaranteed to get seriously stuck without a 4x4. It is a good idea to follow the main track to the lighthouse, the landmark of Pelican Point (**Fig. 14**) and continue beyond it (to the right), to a small pier and railway tracks, where it is safe to park. This is where tour operators transport their sea-kayaking groups.



**Fig. 13.** The abandoned Pelican Point lighthouse and port traffic control base. Beware of deep sand in front of the buildings. It is best to follow a right hand track to the pier instead of parking the car where I did. The buildings would make a rather nice bird/whale observatory and a research station.



**Fig. 14.** For Pelican Point, you need a proper 4x4. A SUV is not going to make it. At this point, the sand is not yet deep but deep enough for regular cars.

**NOTE 1:** According to CETN, the tip of the Pelican Point will probably be closed for vehicles in the near future, in order to protect the seals and birdlife. The site is currently visited by too many cars and some of the visitors have been harassing the animals.

**NOTE 2:** Please, be careful when driving on sandy tracks. Plovers and their flightless chicks prefer the shelter of the tire tracks (to maintain higher body temperature, away from wind) and may need time to get off when one approaches them. Chicks flattened by car tires are no joy to anybody.

#### 4. SANDWICH HARBOR

At Paaltjies, and on the left at the Salt Works crossing, 4x4 tracks go south, about 45 sandy kilometers to Sandwich Harbor, across and beyond the extensive Kuiseb River Delta. The extensive Ramsar site may be an attractive and birdy place to visit, but it is not really essential for a visiting birder, because there hardly are any extra species to be seen. Moreover, visiting Sandwich Harbor is not a piece of cake. In fact, it is not advisable at all to go there by oneself, even if one had the best 4x4 available and knew how to drive on dunes. The 4x4 access to Sandwich Harbor is a treacherous one because it follows the coast so closely (**Fig. 15**). One needs to be able to judge the variable tidal conditions and to negotiate the ever changing route. Even experienced locals lose vehicles to the sea annually, being trapped by the high tide.

Consequently, visiting Sandwich Harbor requires a guide and/or an expensive organized trip, which allows one but a short mid-day stop at the edge of the wetland, for a hefty price of NAD 925 per person (2008). Overnight camping is forbidden. In July 2008, I was told that we would have about an hour at the wetland. In practice, picking up some additional customers at Pelican Point reduced this to mere 20 minutes, the approaching high tide forcing us to retreat as long as this was still safe. In the short time, it was possible to have a fleeting look on a chain of small ponds (silting up, with breeding **Great Crested Grebes**) along the approach track and a small lagoon at the end of the road (**Fig. 16**), in the latter case with a telescope. A winter **Greater Striped Swallow** was a nice find. Later on and further south, bird counts by Mark Boorman and others revealed impressive numbers of shorebirds and a lone **Black-tailed Godwit**.

The Sandwich Harbor trip is actually more about the Namib Desert than the wetland. On the way back to Walvis Bay, a picnic lunch is had on top of one of the coastal dunes, in a scenic location (**Fig. 18**). Afterwards, dune racing activities will test your ability to hold the oysters down as the 4x4s make their way up and down the rolling landscape, with great desert sceneries. Towards the Kuiseb River Delta, the route will go through a number of **Dune Lark** territories. The guides/drivers know the birds and may be able to spot one for you. Alternatively, keep your eyes open in the short time available, and suggest stopping 'for photography'. Personally, I saw a group of three passing by, in-between some high dunes. A lone **Ostrich** was seen there, as well.

Mola Mola is the operator to contact, if you desire to do the trip. They carry more than 2500 customers down to Sandwich Harbor per year, with a very high success rate. Francois is your man for bird and mammal watching, and a superb driver, too. More information can be found at <http://www.mola-namibia.com/tours/sh.htm> Another recommended option is Turnstone.



**Fig. 15.** On the way to Sandwich Harbor, coastal dunes meet the sea, making access a risky business. This is how the track looks at low tide!



**Fig. 16.** Sandwich Harbor; the road ends well before the main lagoon (far in the horizon).



**Fig. 17.** High dunes and narrow waterways make Sandwich Harbor a photogenic place.



**Fig. 18.** A champagne and oysters lunch on top of a dune, Namib Desert. The sea is right on the left, 100 m steep downhill.



**Fig. 19.** Going down another dune; frightening for some, great fun for others...

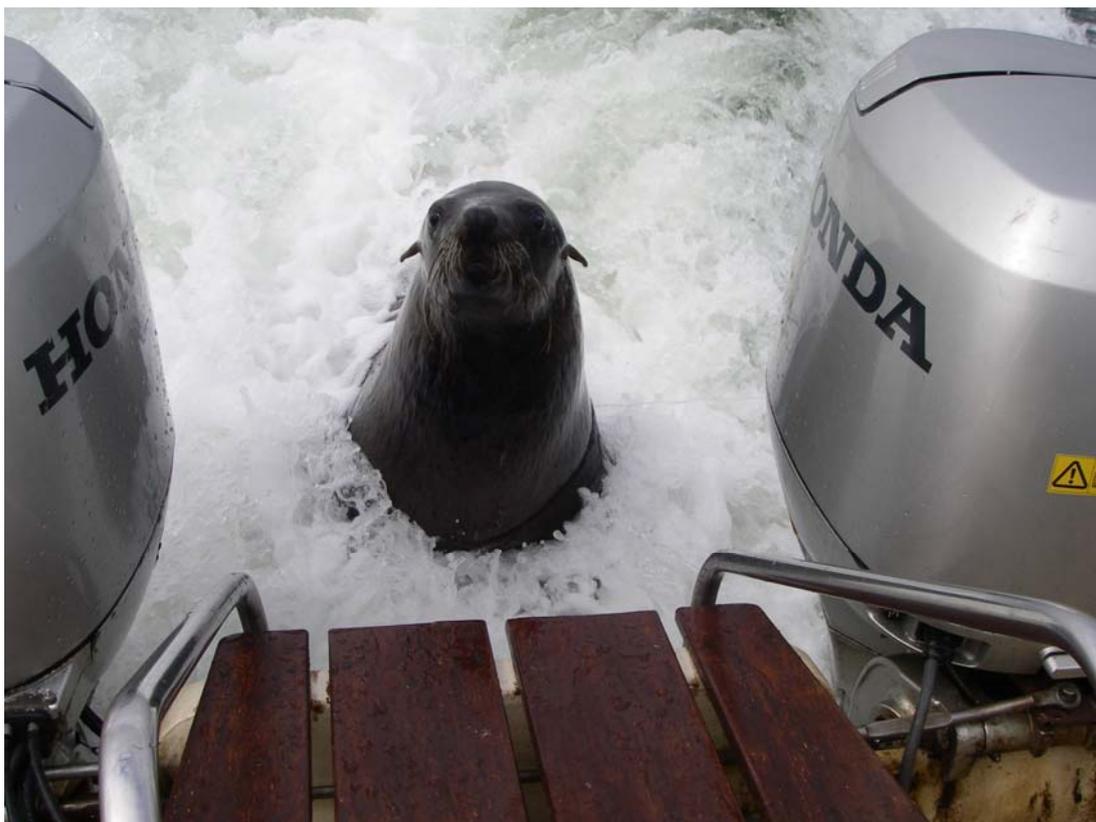
## 5. THE BAY OF WALVIS BAY

The 'bay of whales' itself provides a daily chance to experience the ocean by attending one of the 3,5 hour 'dolphin cruises' arranged for visitors. Over 100 000 customers use this option annually, Mola Mola and Levo Tours being the main operators. It is not only about dolphins (**Bottle-nosed** and/or **Heaviside's**) — birds are encountered, as well. One is not likely, however, to see anything one could not see from the shore. **Pomarine** and **Arctic Skuas** may give close views in summer, and there may be the occasional storm-petrel (**Wilson's** or **European**). In 2008, two unidentified storm-petrels frequented the cruises, apparently for weeks.

The skiboats leave from the Walvis Bay harbor area; Mola Mola from the Yacht Club, Levo Tours from the commercial harbor. They both have guarded parking for customer cars. The program goes as follows, with some variations: 1) Meeting habituated **White Pelicans** by the harbor, the harbor being in itself an interesting sight, 2) observing oyster farms and oyster farming, 3) the boat is visited by a **Cape Fur Seal**, 4) observing the seal colony and lighthouse at Pelican Point, 5) meeting dolphins and playing with them, several boats acting together, 6) viewing the Russian operated fishing fleet, parked off Walvis Bay to avoid paying harbor fees, 7) observing the Bird Rock guano platform (cf. below), and being informed on guano production, 8) field snack with fresh oysters and champagne, and 9) returning to the harbor. The cruise is well worth the money (NAD 380 per person in 2007) if you have time for it. Occasionally, Mola Mola arranges deep sea birding trips on a charter basis. Check the situation at [enquiry@mola-namibia.com](mailto:enquiry@mola-namibia.com)



**Fig. 20.** Habituated pelicans meet the cruise boat, allowing good opportunity for photography.



**Fig. 21.** Cape Fur Seal, hungry for fishy handouts and ready to enter the boat.



**Fig. 22.** Hugging the seal; so far, no bitten customers, claim the operators...



**Fig. 23.** Playing with a pod of Bottle-nosed Dolphins, off Walvis Bay.

## 6. 'OLD BIRD PARADISE'

Well portrayed in maps, guidebooks, tourism brochures, and birding websites (see <http://www.sabirding.co.za/birdspot/100608.asp>), the old 'bird paradise' (or 'bird sanctuary') of Walvis Bay is located on the eastern side of the town, SE of Diaz Circle (the traffic circle at the entrance of the town). The access is on the right (second track) after you leave the circle towards Namib-Naukluft, opposite of a weighbridge station. The track forks soon after beginning, the left fork ending in a tight and sandy spot between barren ponds, and the right fork continuing down to the smelly remains of what once was a great place for birdwatching. Contrary to the above-mentioned information sources, the site has been practically deserted for more than a decade. The municipality sewage works do not channel their outfall there anymore. The reedbeds have been sprayed with toxic chemicals, to get rid of mosquitoes which entered the town, bothering the people.

The site used to be a series of reed-fringed shallow pools with abundant birdlife and an observation platform. After the above-mentioned developments, most species did leave, including **Great Crested Grebes**, **Little Bitterns** and **Black-crowned Night-Herons**. Only the hardiest species survived. Today, there are quite a few **Common Moorhen** around, with one white (leucistic) individual, some **Purple Swamphen**, and an assortment of shorebirds, egrets, **Common Waxbills** and **African Reed Warblers**. The conditions are likely to change, as the sewage works continues to develop the area. On the whole, it is a place worth a brief check up, but do not expect anything exciting. Instead, make sure to visit the 'New Bird Paradise'.



**Fig. 24.** The sad remains of the Old Bird Paradise, once teeming with birds.

## 7. 'NEW BIRD PARADISE'

Only one third of the treated water from Walvis Bay sewage works can be recycled, and the rest of the outfall must be channeled somewhere. As the old location proved to be problematic, the industrious people of Walvis Bay Sewage Works lead the waters further on, about 2 km east of the 'Old Bird Paradise', where a beautiful series of small lakes have appeared in a secluded spot between dunes. Few people know about the location and there is no access road. One needs a 4x4, or could walk (soft sand) to the site, after finding out the correct route and being granted a permit to enter the restricted access site. Fortunately, authorities have agreed to support such visits, welcoming bird tourists. Go to the Sewage Works office (on the 13<sup>th</sup> Street, on the way to city landfill, east of Union/16<sup>th</sup> Street, second building on the left, after a small cemetery) and ask for Andre Burger, who will provide the permit and directions to the site. Andre and Annamari Burger also have accommodation available for rent, close to the Walvis Bay Lagoon, at Ana's Inn self-catering units (cell phone +9264 81 1279164 or +9264 81 1220813).

At the New Bird Paradise, one may expect to see many of the species of the Lagoon, including flamingos. Specialities include breeding **Hottentot Teals**, **Red-billed Ducks**, **Southern Pochards** and **African Shelducks**. **Lesser Flamingos** appear to be present year-around. Rarities probably turn out regularly, the water and vegetation acting as a magnet in the desert environment. In summer 2007, a lone **African Spoonbill** was observed there. One may expect many of the other former residents of 'Old Bird Paradise' to return as the site matures. There are plans to introduce fish to control mosquito larvae, and to create food for birdlife. A proper access road is planned to be built from highway C14 (Trans-Namib), as soon as funding becomes available, and Walvis Bay will gain another great nature tourism attraction, to replace the 'paradise lost'. An alternative 4x4 access was already established there in 2008. Contact CETN for latest developments.



**Fig. 25.** One of the birdy lakes of the 'New Bird Paradise', Keith Wearne on the foreground.



**Fig. 26.** Walking on top of dunes, one may access a number of shallow pools.



**Fig. 27.** Stupid tourists (such as me) and bottomless muddy spots are like iron and magnets, and provide the locals plenty of chances to show their skills and hospitality. Underneath, the sand was mixed with treated sewage... **NOTE:** This was off road, the track itself is quite safe.

## 8. ROOIBANK

Driving few kilometers east at the Diaz Circle, towards Namib-Naukluft, one encounters a signposted junction with dirt road (D1983) to the right. The D1983 runs to southeast, through gravel plains, down to the settlement of Rooibank, meeting the dry but vegetated Kuiseb River and the scenic wall of the red dunes of Namib desert (= Rooibank). The riverbed is quite wide, with a plenitude of miniature dunes, trees, bushes and clumps of grass, and widens even more towards the sea, at the delta. This is the preferred habitat of **Dune Lark**, a true endemic of Namibia, another good site being Sossusvlei, at the heart of the Namib Desert (e.g. the first vegetated dune after Sesriem).

By a lonely chapel, just before entering Rooibank (few buildings), D1983 forks first to the left, and then to the right. Both routes are driveable with a 2x2. The first fork follows the Kuiseb river for few kilometers, before entering the Namib-Naukluft Park (permit required) and continues towards a UNAM field research station at Gobabeb (another permit required). It is possible to leave the road, park by the river and enter the **Dune Lark** habitat by walking. Try to find a place between the Topnaar houses dotted along the river course to not disturb the locals.

The second fork to the right is probably the best option, with more undisturbed habitat and easier access to the riverbed. **Springboks** are often seen there. Park anywhere and walk 100 meters to the river. In 2008, the route was somewhat uncomfortable for the first two km (washboard surface).



**Fig. 28. Dune Lark** habitat at Rooibank: the red dunes of the Namib loom in the background.



**Fig. 29. Springboks** survive also in the more arid parts of the Namib Desert.

Most people do eventually see the larks, but this may take some time, especially during the hot mid-day hours. I have also spotted them with a scope, without entering the Kuiseb riverbed. Continuing on the track, one will pass an abandoned building (left), and a windmill donated by the Danish Development Agency (DANIDA). The latter was also abandoned after some vital parts were stolen, soon after the erection of this silent monument of 'cooperation in sustainable development'. In there, one may turn right and return to D1983 junction across a sandy plain (4x4 recommended).

## 9. BIRD ROCK

The large artificial guano platform, few km N of Walvis Bay, is well portrayed in maps and guidebooks, and is also signposted along the road to Swakopmund. Unless guano is collected, there usually are thousands of **Cape Cormorants** on the platform, with a few breeding **White Pelicans**, **Little Egrets** and **Grey Herons**. **Crowned Cormorants** breed there, but may be difficult to spot, especially without a telescope. More interesting than the birds on the platform itself are the shorebirds of the surrounding coastal stretch. According to CETN surveys, the shoreline between Swakopmund and Bird Rock has had 450 birds per kilometer, the highest figure in Southern Africa. The beach of Bird Rock may hold tens of thousands of roosting **Common Terns** in summer (max 50 000 in 2006, together with **Swift** and **Sandwich Terns**), and it provides one of the chances to see the disappearing **Red Knot** in Walvis Bay. **African Black Oystercatchers** are also occasionally seen on the rocks by the shoreline.



**Fig. 30.** The Bird Rock guano platform, north of Walvis Bay.

Unfortunately, a much used (in December-January; one car per minute) 4x4 track has recently been established on the shore between Langstrand and Walvis Bay, disturbing the birds away and in general destroying the shoreline. The track is also a convenient by-pass for drunk drivers who want skip a police checkpoint along the main road, but nobody seems to care. Another 4x4 and quad track goes further up, right through the most important roosting site for terns. In the breeding grounds in

Europe, the EU spends millions to save the vulnerable **Common Tern**, a Birds Directive priority species, but in wintering grounds, the terns are treated as if they were dirt!

## 10. COASTAL FLATS

The coastal flats between Walvis Bay and Swakopmund are extremely barren, even though very beautiful towards the Swakop River estuary. Therefore, there is not much to see except breeding **Damara Terns**, which have found refuge behind fenced enclosures. This is the key breeding area for the endangered species with a dangerously low world population. The fencing has been funded by Rössing Uranium, the fences being recycled trawler cables. Occasionally, demented individuals may break in and cross an enclosure with quads or 4x4. Please, document these situations and report to authorities (more information on tables by enclosures). There is a NAD 1000 reward for information leading to successful prosecution.



**Fig. 31.** One of the Damara Tern enclosures.

Seabirds patrol the coast and the coastline may be worth checking. In 1998, a **Royal Tern** was reported by two separate parties of visiting bird tourists in a bay close to the wreck of Kolmanskop, an unfortunate fishing vessel from Lüderitz, well visible by the highway as one approaches Swakopmund. The rocky parts of the shoreline have **Crowned Cormorants**, **African Black Oystercatchers** and many **Turnstones**, the first two species being easy to locate from the Dolphin Park seaside parking lot.

**NOTE:** The road between Walvis and Swakop can be dangerous, especially during the Christmas – New Year peak, because of reckless and/or drunk driving, and quads crossing the road. Be alert and adopt defensive driving tactics! The majority of drivers are responsible, but there are the odd ones with exceedingly low appreciation for their lives, not to mention the others’.



**Fig. 32.** A lone cross commemorates the many traffic deaths on the Walvis – Swakop road.



**Fig. 33.** Coastal dunes – endless inspiration for photography.

## 11. SWAKOP RIVER ESTUARY

The Swakop River Estuary can be approached by driving to the southern end of the Strand, the seaside street of Swakopmund, leaving one's car at a beach bar parking lot and walking along the beach, beyond the bar. From there, most of the site can be observed with ease. Swakopmund Tourist Info may recommend staying at the close-by cottages (on stilts) with a view to the estuary, but the view is not really adequate for birdwatching purposes. There are **Maccoa Ducks**, **Cape Shovelers**, **Southern Pochards** and **Purple Swamphen** by the reedbeds. A good variety of shorebirds include **Wood and Common Sandpipers**. In 1998, I saw a **Black-tailed Godwit** there.

On the opposite side, the access is closed because of breeding **Damara Terns**, a restriction unfortunately not respected by many South African 'motorhead' tourists who love to create mayhem with their 4x4s. Under the highway bridge across the river, a fence has been erected to keep quads off. Around Christmas and New Year, a large binge drinking camp has occupied the beach in the estuary, on public land in control of Walvis Bay municipality, with consequent disturbance and unsanitary conditions. During this period, visiting the site may not be as pleasant as usually, even though the campers do not harass birdwatchers. Hopefully, the camp will be history in the near future. The Friends of the Swakop River are working to save the place.



**Fig. 34.** Swakop river estuary by Christmas: highway bridge and another trespassing quad...

## 12. SWAKOPMUND JETTY

Along the Strand, next to the Tug Restaurant, stands the one and only jetty on the coast. It used to be completely ruined, but was repaired and re-opened in 2006. The tip of the jetty has, however, been closed and reserved for roosting cormorants. Consequently, there are good photography opportunities. Look for a **Crowned Cormorant** among the **Cape Cormorants**!



**Fig. 35.** The Swakopmund Jetty, with people and cormorants at the end.



**Fig. 36.** Downtown Swakopmund, full of German colonial heritage.

### 13. SWAKOPMUND SEWAGE WORKS

A small oasis of palm and reed-fringed pools, the Swakopmund sewage works house bird species not otherwise easy to observe on the coast, with occasional vagrants. The works is located on the right side of the Moses Garoeb Street, by the road to Henties Bay and Skeleton Coast. After passing Swakopmund railway station, there is a water tower on the right, the block being surrounded by (more or less) white walls. Turn right there, and immediately to the left, through a gate in the wall, and continue 50 m right to the sewage works office. Permission to bird at the works can be obtained there, if somebody is around. Otherwise, have a look on the ponds next to the building.

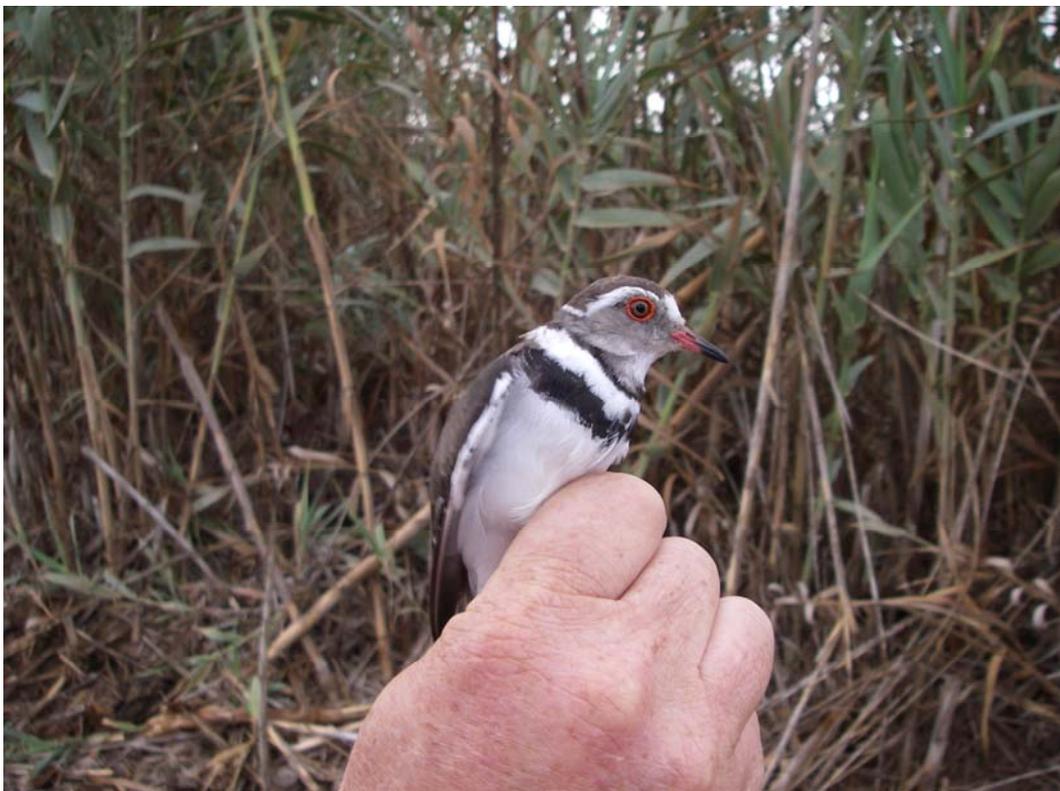
Birders are in general welcome as long as they know how to behave and do not block the roads. The main series of three deep pools is best observed from a car. Close distance views of **Cape Shovelers**, **Maccoa Ducks**, **Dabchicks**, **African Reed Warblers** and many others can be had from the mobile hide. The place is favored by Tringa shorebirds, e.g. **Wood Sandpipers**. In winter 2006-2007, Mark Boorman discovered an **American Golden Plover** on the western side of the pools, opposite the gate, in a construction lot with wet mud. Later on, we saw an astonishing party of no less than three **Pectoral Sandpipers** in the same spot. Today, this section of the works has been developed but continues to attract a variety of birds (**Fig. 40**). Conditions do change and it is best to keep one's eyes open for temporary habitats which may attract to vagrant shorebirds.



**Fig. 37.** One of the attractive Swakopmund sewage works pools, with ducks, palms and reeds.



**Fig. 38.** A moment of excitement: a **Pectoral Sandpiper** being banded by Mark Boorman. The bird has a red band on its leg, hopefully helping relocation in Europe. (The sewage works entrance gate can be seen in the background).



**Fig. 39.** A common inhabitant of the Swakopmund Sewage Works: **Three-banded Plover**.



**Fig. 40.** The new pools, even though rather sterile, attract good numbers of birds such as these **Blacksmith Plovers** and **Hartlaub's Gulls**.

#### **14. SWAKOP SALT COMPANY**

The so called Mile 4 Salt Pans can be reached by driving north from Swakopmund, along the Moses Garoeb Street, from Shoprite supermarket to railway station and past sewage works, until the tarmac and built area end on a hill, and the well-known salt road to Skeleton Coast begins. Soon afterwards, the Salt Company buildings appear on the left and a dirt road heads towards them. Drive past the gated buildings (no access), and continue straight (four way crossing) to the northern side of the large pans with guano platforms, until you see the Seabird Guano building (**Fig. 41**). A storehouse has been necessary to contain the tonnes of guano produced by **Cape Cormorants** amassing on the extensive platforms in the middle of the fenced area. The 'fragrant' aroma of guano may usually be enjoyed when visiting the site.

Next to the storehouse, a small bay with some vegetation, channels and embankments form the favorite spot of a variety of birds. It is a great place to watch birds, with a good chance for rare species, and dozens of **Damara Terns** (in season). In summer 2006-2007 the rare ones included: a lone **African Spoonbill**, several **Common Redshanks**, two **American Golden Plovers** and a **Lesser Crested Tern**. Further on, as soon as you have passed the storehouse and see the sea, turn left and drive towards the end of an outflow pipeline by the seashore. In there, it is possible to cross a narrow channel, another favorite place for **Redshanks**, and continue to the seashore side of the salt pans. Be sure to check the end of the pipeline; **Crowned Cormorants** are regularly seen standing there. The species occurs in low numbers in the Central Coastal Region, being more common in the south, around Lüderitz. **Lesser Flamingos** are numerous at Swakop Salt Company pans in summer, when they are normally not present at the Walvis Bay Lagoon. Breeding has been attempted.



**Fig. 41.** Seabird Guano storehouse: a landmark by the salt pans.

Crossing the channel and driving down to the pans, one soon arrives in a special spot (**Fig. 42**) favored by roosting cormorants (sometimes **Bank**) terns, gulls and many shorebirds. **Black-necked Grebes** dot the open waters, together with **Cape Teals**. In 2007, there was a **Black-headed Gull** there, not to mention an **Elegant Tern**, a long-distance vagrant and the first one for Namibia! **Red-necked Phalaropes** prefer this section of the works, as well.

Once again, observations are best made from one's car, with great views and least disturbance to the roosting birds. From there on, it is possible to drive around the pans, back to the salt road, but there are some rough spots on the way, not suitable for 2x2. Alternatively, one may return and check the best sites once again. The shore north of the out-flow pipeline often has a **Eurasian Curlew** or two. Many birds move around in the general area and repeated visits are required to see all the target species.

**NOTE1:** There is no access to the fenced Swakop Salt Company operation area, unless in the company of a permit holder (Mark Boorman in Swakopmund; report rare species at 064 402765). Also the roads surrounding the core area are on private land, belonging to the company. Birdwatchers are welcome to drive on them, but please respect your hosts, birds and other visitors, as well.

**NOTE2:** It is best not to venture beyond the established tracks by the shoreline. Sand is deceptive there. I myself had the great pleasure to pull a Namibian couple with a Ford Bantam out of sand in January 2007, a rather exquisite treat for a tourist and an embarrassing moment for the locals, proud of their sand driving skills.



**Fig. 42.** Roosting terns, gulls and cormorants at the seaside Swakop Salt Company pans.



**Fig. 43.** One of the Pipeline Road side tracks, with **Gray's Lark** habitat.

## 15. PIPELINE ROAD

Soon after the Swakop Salt Company turnoff, a small dirt road veers right off the salt road on the way to north (e.g. Cape Cross), following an underground pipeline. The Pipeline Road continues straight on, all the way to D1918 between Henties Bay and Spitzkoppe. It is surrounded by gravel plains, the preferred habitat of **Gray's Lark**. In fact, this is one of the best sites to see this nearly endemic species. Continue far enough, until reaching the flat, undisturbed gravel plains, and the larks should soon appear, with their melodious flight calls. There are several side tracks to the low hills in the west (**Fig. 43**), which can be also explored for the larks, and **White Beetles**. A 2x2 was sufficient there in 2008.

## 16. RÖSSMUND GOLF COURSE

Perhaps not an essential site, but nevertheless an interesting oasis of extensive greens in a barren desert, thereby bound to attract, sooner or later, a major vagrant, as I predicted in 2007. Local birdwatchers seldom visit the golf course, which increases one's chances of discovering something by oneself. In fact, I saw an **African Crake** there in 2008, right behind the golf course buildings (**Fig. 45**). Birders are welcome, as long as they stay out of the way of golfers and report at the office. The access road is signposted on the south side of the Okahandja – Swakopmund highway (B2), 8 km before Swakopmund. At the end of the tarmac access road (1 km), take the right fork, turn left and park in front of the main building, the office being in the eastern end of the complex. The golf course is a good place to observe and photograph habituated **Springboks**, as well.



**Fig. 44.** The greens of Rössmund Golf Course, an oasis in desert. Watch out for golf balls!



**Fig. 45.** An **African Crake**, a vagrant in the region, present at Rössmund in July 2008 (a ‘free-hand’ digiscoped photo).

## 17. GOANIKONTES

28 km east of Swakopmund, D1991 skirts off (to south) B2. In the beginning, **Rüppell’s Korhaans** are often seen. Later on, one may expect to discover parties of **Gray’s Larks** and **Ostriches**. Eventually, less than ten kilometers from the highway, the dirt road descends down to Swakop River canyon, at a place called Goanikontes. This is a popular picnic spot with shady trees and variety of birds, including some species relatively uncommon on the coast, such as **Orange River White-eye**, **Acacia Pied Barbet**, and **Cape Penduline-Tit**. **Dusky Sunbirds** are particularly common there. If you see the pretty stone building of **Fig. 47**, you have reached the correct place.

After crossing the canyon, one enters the Namib-Naukluft Park. According to some sources, and signs along the road, a permit is required. According to the majority of sources, including some park staff, one may drive through to C28 to return to Swakopmund. All road maps I have seen categorize the D1991 as a no-permit thoroughfare, even though the southern section goes across the national park, being called Welwitschia Drive. One should, however, not enter the Welwitschia Flats, signposted to the left (east) after crossing the Swakop River canyon. This direction definitely requires a permit and chances to be fined are high. Permits to Namib-Naukluft are readily available in Swakop, at Swakopmund tourist info and Namibia Wildlife Resorts office in the center (NAD40 for access and NAD10 for car in July 2008).



**Fig. 46.** Goanikontes: shady picnic site on the dry Swakop riverbed.



**Fig. 47.** A small gem of architectural heritage adorns the oasis.

## 18. KHAN AND SWAKOP RIVER CONFLUENCE

On the east of Goanikontes, in the Swakop River canyon, the river(bed)s of Khan and Swakop meet in an impressive labyrinth of rock formations. The general area is best viewed from the ridge at the beginning of the Welwitchia Flats road, uphill south and left from Goanikontes (permit required). This is the haunt of the elusive **Cape Eagle Owl**, a rather rare bird in Namibia. The access can be discovered along the D1991. Before descending to the Swakop River Canyon, gravel tracks leave the main road to the left. Follow the main ones and you will probably end in the right area. It is best to go in before sunset, to avoid getting lost. Do not hold your breath for seeing the owl. I considered myself exceptionally lucky to hear a few distant calls at sunset (4<sup>th</sup> July 2008), the time of the day many owls declare their territorial ownership, also off the breeding season. It was a very peaceful location, the movements of **Greater Kudus** around me breaking the silence, under the mighty Milky Way. Be prepared for thick fog, if returning across the desert towards Walvis Bay.



**Fig. 48.** The Khan and Swakop River confluence; an immense labyrinth of eroded stone.

## 19. WELWITSCHIA FLATS

The road to Welwitschia Flats is an interesting drive at the northern end of the Namib-Naukluft Park, with little birdlife but fascinating welwitschia plants (*Welwitschia mirabilis*), insects and impressive sceneries. Leaving the well-managed D1991 at the above-mentioned uphill crossing, one enters another badly corrugated, washboard track. In 2008, the road was actually so bad that driving off road was preferred by most drivers. Roadside mining operations, prospecting for uranium, also cast an ominous shadow over the area, and the rest of Namib-Naukluft Park.

Towards Welwitschia Flats, welwitschias begin to dot the barren landscape. At the end of the drive, a matron of all welwitschias is guarded by a surrounding fence, and the adjacent picnic table provides a rather welcome shade. She is estimated to be 1 500 years old, but does look younger than her age, and attracts colorful **Welwitschia Beetles** to visit her flowers. Birdlife is rather meager, with **Ostriches**, korhaans and larks. All in all, this is another site not essential for a birder but nevertheless an interesting site to visit during the mid-day hours, when birdwatching tends to be unproductive.



**Fig. 49.** The matron of Welwitschias: more than 1 500 years old, but still in a youthful shape.

## 20. CAPE CROSS

The peninsula of Cape Cross is located between Henties Bay and the Skeleton Coast Park, 119 km north of Swakopmund along the salt road. The road is good, but may be slippery in places (signposted), especially during the rare occasions of rain, and there are surprisingly many cars sharing it with one, especially during the peak angling season, when thousands of mostly South African fishermen arrive on the coast. They keep their impressive fishing rods erect on the front bumper, the cars looking like giant cockroaches as they speed past you. Check your rear mirror frequently to avoid contact with overtaking vehicles!

The Cape Cross peninsula is well known for its large **Cape Fur Seal** colony, protected in a special reserve as a tourist sight, with an annual slaughter of up to 80 000 seal puppies occurring during low season. In case you prefer to support the skinning of the baby seals, already suffering from the recent shortage of fish in the Benguela Current, be sure to buy a pair of souvenir seal skin shoes, which are for sale along the coast, also at Cape Cross. Death by natural causes is also common among seal puppies, jackals doing the sanitary work. A few tourists trespass the colony 'to get closer photos' (**Fig. 53**), creating panic among the seals, the puppies congregating at water's edge in utter panic (they

cannot swim), and some of them already dead after being flattened by the heavy adults, which float in the safety of the sea. There are many carcasses around.



**Fig. 50.** Down the road to Skeleton Coast; another fishermen vehicle with its four 'antennae'.

Foul smell and a plenitude of flies complete the picture, and the flies will rest on you when you scope the sea. This may sound a bit unappealing. Cape Cross is, however, the best site on the Namibian coast for seabird observations, rivaled only by the foggy and windy Diaz Point on the Lüderitz Peninsula. The opening hours are 9 AM to 5 PM. Do not believe the sign indicating that the gate will open at 10 AM (subject to change). This is not very birder-friendly, as the best hours would be right after sunrise, between 7 AM to 9 AM, but the situation can not really be helped as long as the site remains understaffed. There is an entrance fee, NAD 40 per person + NAD 10 per car (2008), tolerable for a visiting bird tourist.

After registering, one may continue on the access road, reaching the Diaz Cross (replica) and parking lot after 1+ km. On the seaside edge of the lot, in front of a low stone wall and a recently constructed boardwalk which separate humans from the seals, is an observation point with a shelter. Walk there and sit down on one of the benches, putting your scope in shade, away from wind. The place may be a bit unsanitary, as it apparently is never cleaned, but the shelter has good views to the sea at an ideal height for spotting even the smallest seabirds, such as storm-petrels. The ocean is relatively deep, and birds do often pass at close distance, many of them also being attracted by the seals and the scraps of fish they leave in the water. With today's powerful telescopes, the majority of passing petrels and shearwaters can be identified in clear weather.



**Fig. 51.** Cape Cross seal colony: South Korean visitors observing the seals.



**Fig. 52.** Two of the many **Cape Fur Seals**; a mother nursing its baby.



**Fig. 53.** Trespassing occurs on a daily basis. Fortunately, the majority of the visitors realize the need to stay within the boardwalk, from where best views may be obtained.

**Cape Gannet**, **White-chinned Petrel** and **Sooty Shearwater** are guaranteed at Cape Cross, as well as **Arctic** and **Pomarine Skuas** (in summer). **Cory's Shearwaters** are sometimes numerous, but may also be totally absent. **Long-tailed Skuas** are rare but present; two were seen during seven periods of experimental seawatch in December 2006 – July 2007. **Wilson's** and **European Storm-Petrels** are regular, sometimes very close to the shore. In summer 2006 – 2007, other species recorded once or twice included both **Giant-Petrel** species, a **Manx Shearwater** and a **Great-winged Petrel**. The best bird I have seen at Cape Cross was a lone **Spectacled Petrel** (split from **White-chinned Petrel**, breeding on Tristan da Cunha), observed foraging close to the shore in 1998, on my first visit to Cape Cross. Many discoveries are waiting to be made, with a very meager hours, to say the very least, of seabird observations on the coast.

Several **Black-backed Jackals** breed around the seal colony, **Brown Hyena** being a rare twilight sight. In case you are desperate to see the latter species, ask if the guides at the nearby Cape Cross Lodge are willing to arrange it for you (for a price). They have some good spots on the nearby mountains. Personally, I have failed with my eight attempts on this fascinating scavenger. **Springbok** are commonly seen along the access road. From the observation point, **Heaviside's Dolphins** are frequently spotted by patient seabird observers. In season, baleen whales are around, as well.

South of the Cape Cross Peninsula, a seven kilometer long Cape Cross Lagoon is an important wintering and breeding site for a good variety and numbers of birds. Unfortunately, due to its sensitive commercial operations (guano production etc.) the site is closed from the general public. Only with a special permission, one may go there. The sands and mudflats are treacherous around the Lagoon, and it is therefore probably best that individual exploration has been discouraged!



**Fig. 54.** One of the well-fed Black-backed Jackals of Cape Cross, habituated to humans.



**Fig. 55.** A Ministry of Environment and Tourism team surveys the wintering shorebirds at Cape Cross Lagoon. As usual, the head scientist may be identified by the size of his binoculars!

## 21. ORAWAB RIVER TRACKS

On afternoons, haze and boredom may take over at Cape Cross, and one is ready to have a break, before returning to the site for the last hour or two, when the visibility improves again. Unfortunately, there are no accessible bird congregations nearby, the Cape Cross Lagoon being closed from public. The coast between Henties Bay and Cape Cross is mostly high cliffs and narrow beaches. One option waits across the Cape Cross junction, on the other side of the salt road. A well used track goes inland there, through beautiful lichen fields (be sure to stay on the track). After a kilometre or so, there is a Y-fork, the left fork following the dry Orawab River, and the right one continuing up to the close-by hills. Birdlife is scarce, but larks and chats (Namibia form of **Tractrac Chat**) are around, including **Gray's**, and there are **Ludwig's Bustards** breeding on the hills. **Black-backed Jackals** and **Springbok** are usually seen by the Orawab.

The Orawab River track has some impressive, desolate landscapes. Picnicking tends to be more pleasant than by the seashore, where thousands of flies wait for a taste of your afternoon tea, eventually drowning themselves in it. A word of caution, however: do not go too far, as it is possible to get lost on the crisscrossing tracks. It is a long and dry walk to the main road if something happens with the car. Mobile phones are useless, but in the silence of the desert, the sound of the ocean carries surprisingly far inland. Further on from the coast, the habitats become quite barren, even though beautiful. Somewhere on the flats up there, I saw a lone **Cheetah**, and the footprints of a **Brown Hyaena**.



**Fig. 56.** Orawab River track; the gentle beauty of desert landscapes.

## CORRIDORS TO THE COAST:

### A. ERONGO MTS - SPITZKOPPE

The fastest route between Windhoek, the location of Hosea Kutako International Airport, and the coast is B2, the Trans-Kalahari highway, which starts from Okahandja and runs through Karibib, Usakos, Arandis and Swakopmund, before ending at Walvis Bay. This is the main access road to the coast, the other routes being slow gravel. There are good savanna habitats already between Windhoek and Okahandja, along B1, birds of prey being plentiful along the road in summer. With luck, a **Rüppell's Parrot**, **Damara Hornbills** or even a party of **Violet Wood-hoopoes** may provide a pleasant surprise by the highway. At Brakwater there is an abattoir, which regularly attracts **Marabou Storks** and **Lappet-faced Vultures**, otherwise not that easy to see away from Etosha and the Caprivi Strip. Also between Okahandja and Karibib, there are many rest areas with good birding, in the lush savanna dotted by erect termite mounds. Beware of **Warthogs** along B1-B2!



**Fig. 57.** One of the pretty and well-maintained rest areas, which can be found by the Namibian highways.

The first stake-out for a Namibia near-endemic is, however, a bit out of the way in Omaruru (C33 from Karibib is a fast tarmac road). The access road (D2315) to Erongo Wilderness Lodge, some 10 km west of Omaruru, has become known as The Place for the elusive **Hartlaub's Francolin** (and **Orange River Francolin**). There is a healthy population living on the Erongo Mountains, even though the birds are rarely seen during the day, and access to the predominantly private lands may be prevented by fencing. According to Internet information, the key thing is to be in the right spot at sunrise, when the birds come out to call on rocks for 15 minutes, before disappearing again. Therefore, one has to wake up well before sunrise, in order to be sure to not miss the critical moment.

Suspecting that Hartlaub's Francolins do also call at sunset, I visited the stake-out in a December afternoon, starting with common species such as **Damara Rockrunner**, **Southern Pied Babbler**, **Carp's Tit** and many others. After leaving the C33, I drove about 8 km along D2315, trying not to hit the roadside **Red-crested Korhaans**, until reaching a small bridge across a dry bed of a mountain stream. People used to park there and walk along the stream to the left, all the way to high boulders to reach the best observation point. At the moment, the boulders are out of bounds, as the stream has been fenced. Instead, proceed for another 100 meters and park there. On the left stands a group of tall rocks, with a name Gert Smit written on one by a visiting vandal. Walk to the rocks (20 m), find a good observation point and use your telescope.

On December 27<sup>th</sup> 2006, I was there at 7 PM. At 7.30 PM, **Hartlaub's Francolins** appeared on the boulders, calling frantically, and continued till 7.45 PM. By 8 PM, they could still be seen scurrying between the rocks, together with many **Rock Hyraxes**. Altogether, 11 adults and 1 cute little chick were seen, with at least 6 additional pairs calling nearby. During the afternoon hours, the distinctive call was heard only once, closer to the gate of the Erongo Mountain Nature Conservancy. All in all, a complete success! An evening visit provides one more freedom, for example in regard to accommodation. It is possible to rent a room at Hotel Erongoblick (tel. 064 550009) in Karibib at noon, visit the Erongo Mountains in the afternoon, wait for the francolin concert and return to Karibib, close to (next morning) **Herero Chat** stakeouts and the highway to the coast.



**Fig. 58.** Southern access road to Spitzkoppe; Rüppell's Korhaans frequent the roadsides.

Spitzkoppe, the 'Ayers Rock of Namibi'a, is a fascinating rocky outcrop on the northern side of Trans-Kalahari highway (B2), about 40 km west of Usakos, off (signposted) D1918 to Henties Bay. It is a known stake out for **Herero Chat**, a near-endemic, and a must for a visiting bird tourist. The skulking chat is, however, nothing but guaranteed, and one may need to spend several days to locate one, somewhere by the red rocks. There are driveable (2x2) sandy tracks around the Spitzkoppe reserve, inside the fenced enclosure, early morning and late afternoon being the best time for birding in this

oftentimes hot and sunny location. (An alternative site is at Karibib, along the road to Otjimbingwe (D1953), around the first hills by the road).

It is a special place to visit, with a great variety of other bird species and some mammals, including **White-tailed Shrike**, **Monteiro's Hornbill**, **Lanner** and **Peregrine Falcon**, and most of the acacia specialists. Larks abound along the access road and **Klippspringers** may be seen hopping on the rocky boulders. **Lark-like Buntings** are particularly common there, at campsites and by the main entrance water tank. The campsites within the fenced enclosure are pleasant and peaceful, with exceedingly beautiful surroundings. The community restcamp with wooden huts (**Fig. 59**) is very nice too, even though its solar powered lamps did not work in 2007. It is, however, advisable to bring your own food and water. Water is available, for a price, but tends to be scarce. Campsite has a restaurant, but does not necessarily serve your favorites, unless you prefer a donkey steak. There is a small village shop with cold drinks and snacks. Entrance is NAD 20 per person + NAD 10 for a car.



**Fig. 59.** One of the thatched huts of Spitzkoppe community restcamp, with bathroom in the front. Bring your own water, also for washing!

## **B. KHORIXAS – SKELETON COAST PARK**

There are some great birdwatching regions in the north of Namibia, notably Cunene River and the Caprivi Strip, and one route which links them to the coast goes via Khorixas and the Skeleton Coast Park. In regard to main target species, there is but one, **Benguela Long-billed Lark**, to merit driving this route, but the region itself is worth a visit or a drive-through. The Damaraland C39 (also known as D2620) from Khorixas to Skeleton Coast, via Springbokwasser Gate, is arguably one of the most beautiful country roads in Namibia.

There is also the Petrified Forest, with fossilized pieces of trees, some 23 km after Khorixas, and plenty of animals along the road. **Springbok**, **Kudu** and **Oryx** are common, the latter especially towards Springbokwasser Gate, and there is a chance for **Desert Elephants**, or even **Black Rhino**. **Mountain Ground Squirrel** is a local speciality and **Black Eagles** occur on the hills. For a birdwatcher, the real treat is, however, the recently split **Benguela Long-billed Lark**, which can be seen by the road around half-way, at one of the several suitable vegetated valleys. I would recommend driving slowly after reaching the area, preferably early in the morning, and stopping as soon as one has been spotted by the road. For the correct habitat, please check **Fig. 62**.



**Fig. 60.** Desert Elephants crossing a road, and tour operators deliberately blocking their way.



**Fig. 61.** An Oryx, a relatively common sight on the hills of Damaraland.



**Fig. 62.** Benguela Long-billed Lark breeding habitat along the scenic C39.



**Fig. 63.** Barchan dunes along the Skeleton Coast Park road.

At Springbokwasser gate (D3245) one enters the magical Skeleton Coast Park, paying a rather substantial entrance fee (NAD 80 per person + NAD 10 for car) for just driving through to Cape Cross. The land is extremely barren and spectacular. Just north of C39 (D3245)/C34 (salt road) junction, there is an interesting desert phenomenon: a group of barchan dunes, slowly marching across the highway. The plants and debris on and around these moving mounds are the home of several interesting desert insects, including the endemic **White Beetle**, not guaranteed but possible. Continuing north, you soon arrive at Torra Bay, with not much to see in regard to birds. The same can be said about most of the southern Skeleton Coast Park. It is, however, a good idea to stop at Huab Lagoon (Huab river estuary) in the southern section of the park. The estuary is a well known oasis for shorebirds, with a sizable roost of terns and an assortment of other birds. The site can be seen from the nearby C34 and there is an access road to the shoreline.

The **Benguela Long-billed Lark** being easiest to find in the morning, and the Springbokwasser gate closing at 3 PM, it is a good idea to sleep at Khorixas if you arrive from the north. Unfortunately, the assortment of accommodation in Khorixas leaves much to be desired, at the moment. Personally, I have stayed at the badly managed Khorixas Restcamp, out of town, where it is at least peaceful and the staff is nice and welcoming, even though rooms are none too pleasant. Run-down is the key word for much of the accommodation around Khorixas, up market lodges (NAD 800-1400) further away on mountains being the exception.



**Fig. 64.** Ugab River Gate 'welcomes' you to the Skeleton Coast Park.

In case one happens to have time to spare late in the afternoon, or takes the alternative route from Khorixas to Uis and Henties Bay (Hentiesbaai), the large pastures about 20 km south of the town on C35 are another good place for birdwatching. There are many larks and lark-finches there. Korhaans and coursers also love the flats. Further down the road, the plains around Brandberg have proved to be quite productive, especially during the late and early hours of the day. All in all, this is a more birdy, faster and less expensive route to the coast than the Skeleton Park road. The latter route is, however, more scenic and with less traffic, not to mention the **Benguela Long-billed Lark**.



**Fig. 65.** Brandberg – the surrounding plains hold a surprising number of birds, including the occasional **Black Harriers** (winter).

### **C. DAAN VILJOEN – NAMIB-NAUKLUFT**

C28 goes straight west from Windhoek. It is an alternative road to Swakopmund, in case you want to avoid the tarmac B2, fast but sometimes crowded by racing urban dwellers on their way to the cool beaches by the cold Benguela current. On C28, there is tarmac only for the first 10 km or so. The following 310 km will be slow gravel with Khomas Hochland passes, Welwitschia Drive (D1991) and Welwitschia Flats being located to the north of the road, before one enters Swakopmund. The best birding spot by the route is soon after beginning, close to Windhoek, and signposted on the right few kilometers after a police checkpoint. The Daan Viljoen reserve is a relatively popular picnic spot next to the capital, but seldom crowded. It has a surprising variety of bird species, any time of the day as there is water available.

The small reserve consists of two distinctive parts, a reservoir and a narrow belt of park-like woodland and rocky gorges around it, and the surrounding dry hills, which can be explored by a car. The gravel route on the hills is passable by 2x2 cars, with reservations, but 4x4 certainly helps to pass the more eroded spots. On my most recent visit in February 2007, one steep hill had bumps which could have easily damaged a sedan with a normal clearance. The access road is tarmac. There is the normal entrance fee (NAD 40 + NAD 10), and one needs to register both at gate and at park headquarters, before venturing further. There are shady picnic spots and toilets along the western shore of the reservoir (**Fig. 66**). The artificial lake has variable levels of water, depending on season and year.



**Fig. 66.** Daan Viljoen reserve in winter, with dry hills around the green oasis.

In regard to birdlife, Daan Viljoen has much to offer — 340 species have been recorded there. To mention but few species, **Damara Rockrunners** occur in the reserve, especially downhill beyond the restaurant (at the end of the access road). The stony hill by the restaurant parking area is a sure place for **Short-toed Rock Thrush**. **Carp's Tits**, **Chestnut Weavers**, **Black-cheeked Waxbills** and **Monteiro's Hornbills** are often seen close by. **Orange River Francolins** are supposed to occur on the higher ridges. The pond itself has a variety of ducks, crakes and warblers. **Black Eagles**, **Augur Buzzards** and even **Bateleurs** can be seen circling over the hills. Along the car track, one may encounter just about anything between a **Kori Bustard** and a **Cape Penduline-Tit**. **African Barred Warblers** inhabit the hills on the west, and may also be seen along the car track, as you descent towards the park headquarters. In February 2007, there were **Dusky Larks** in front of the entrance gate, hopping on the roadsides.

**Rock Hyraxes** are common by the gorge by the Daan Viljoen restaurant and **Dassie Rats** may be spotted next to them. **Chacma Baboons**, **Oryx**, **Kudu**, **Wildebeest** (*ssp taurinus*), Southern **Giraffes** and **Mountain Zebras** are seen along the access road and nature track, as well as **Black-backed Jackals**. **Klippspringers** prefer the more peaceful boulders. **Kudus** come to drink at the reservoir itself, descending from the out-of-bounds eastern ridge. It is a kind of open-air zoo of partly introduced mammals and a great introduction to the wildlife on Namibian highlands. After a long flight to Windhoek, a good idea might be to sleep well and do car rental and shopping on the first day, and practice one's driving by visiting Daan Viljoen in the afternoon, before hitting the road early next morning. This is also a good place to end a tour in Namibia. Alternatively, one could visit the Avis Dam reservoir at Kleine Windhoek, on the east side of the city, along the road to the international airport.



**Fig. 67.** A **Southern Giraffe**; large mammals are mostly seen in national parks and reserves.



**Fig. 68.** A Bat-Eared Fox has met its end on the Khomas Hochland road to the coast. These cute little predators are frequently seen by rural roads at night.



**Fig. 69.** At the edge of the Namib Desert.



**Fig. 70.** Another brand new 4x4 on its roof, fresh from a rental agency. Accidents such as this are common enough to keep car rental expensive in Namibia. Remember to keep your speed down on gravel roads!

Further west on the C28, one drives through the rolling hills of Khomas Hochland. It is mostly private land, and out of bounds. This is a long and slow route to the coast and one will probably need more than twice the time one would spend on B2 to Swakopmund. Slower speed has, however, its advantages in regard to wildlife spotting. Bird species are much the same as in the dry parts of Daan Viljoen. Do not, however, forget to observe the road! Many first time visitors drive too fast and turn their cars over on gravel roads (**Fig. 70**). After passing Witwatersberg, one enters the Namib-Naukluft (no permit required to drive through). There normally is not much to see along the main road, except an odd **Lapped-faced Vulture** or **Ostrichs**. It is therefore best to hurry up: the coast is waiting for you, with its spectacular birdlife!



**Fig. 71.** The Walvis Bay Lagoon with its flamingos and cool sea breeze waits for visitors from the hot and dusty interior.

