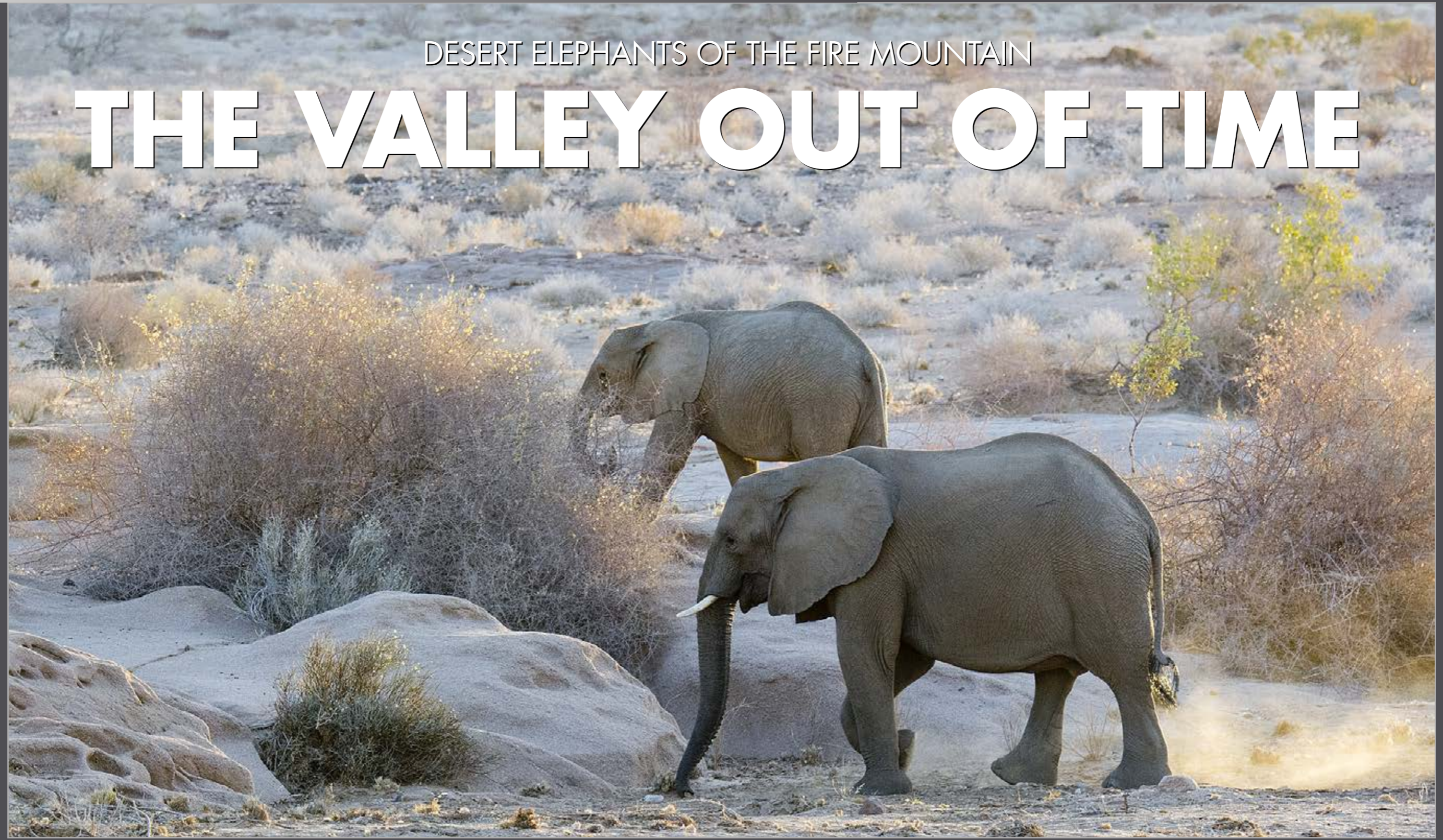


WorldWideWonders

DESERT ELEPHANTS OF THE FIRE MOUNTAIN

THE VALLEY OUT OF TIME

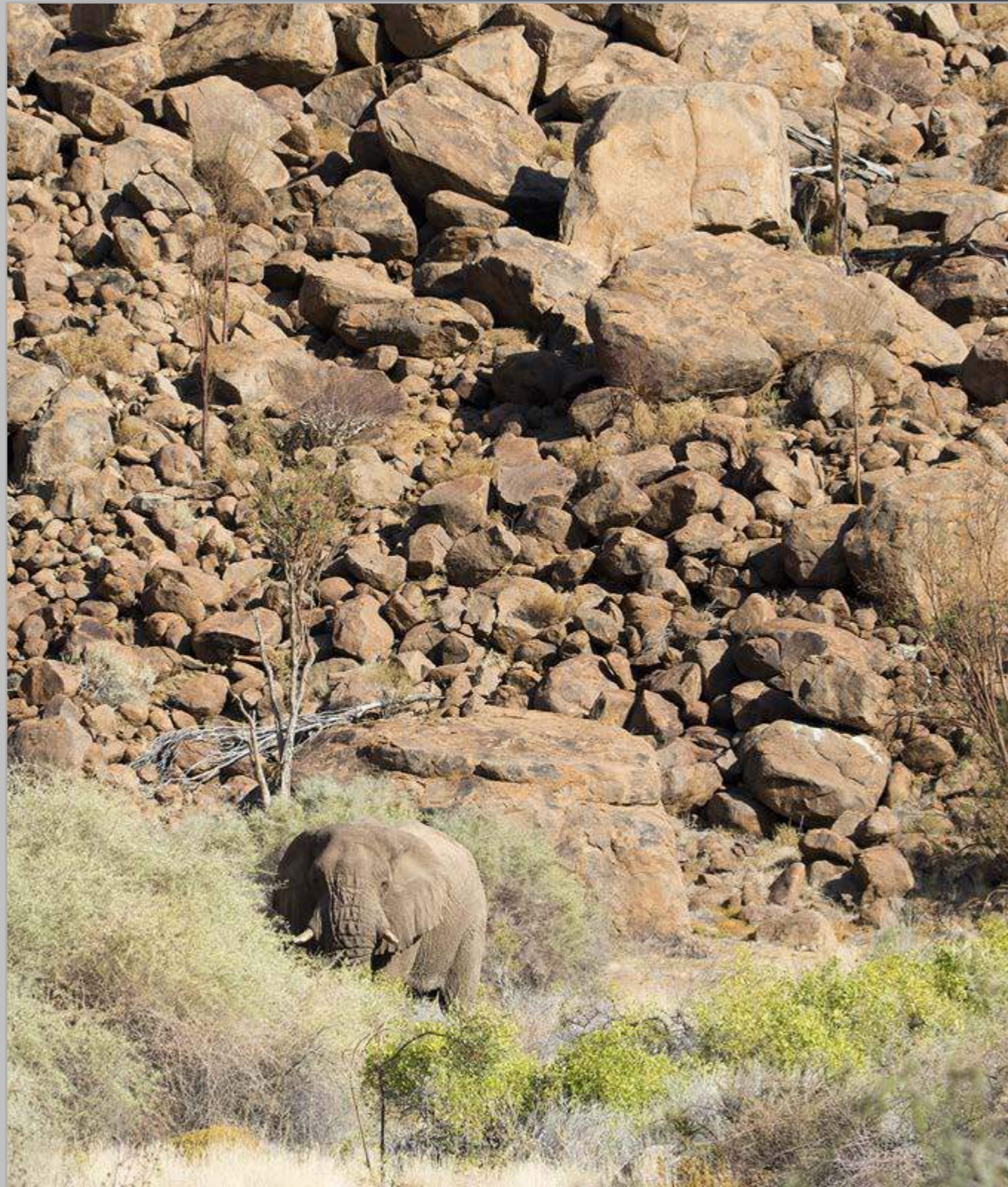


A mysterious rock painting hidden deep in a forbidding gorge is guarded by Namibia's legendary and dangerous pachyderms



Brandberg panorama

Namibia's desert elephants live in the Kunene Region, encompassing 115,154 sq/km of mostly sandy desert, rocky mountains and arid gravel plains in Namibia's northwest. As our image shows, this is a very dry and inhospitable environment - especially for large animals which need lots of water and food daily.



African elephant *Loxodonta africana*

A full-grown male (bull) elephant can weigh up to 6 tons (~6000 kg) and be 4m high at the shoulder. Females are usually a little more than half that weight.

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI

PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

The Brandberg is Namibia's highest mountain. Its name is Afrikaans, Dutch and German for "Fire Mountain", coming from its glowing red color at sunset. The Damara name, *Dâures*, means "burning mountain", while the Herero one, *Omukuruvaro*, means "mountain of the Gods". It is located in the Damaraland, in the northwestern Namib Desert, near the coast, and covers an area of approximately 650 km². With its highest point standing at 2,573 m (8,442 ft) above sea level, and located on flat gravel plains, on a clear day it can be seen from a great distance. The Brandberg is a spiritual site of great significance to the San (Bushman) tribes: its main tourist attraction is the White Lady rock painting, found with other art work under a small rock overhang in the Tsisab ravine at the foot of the mountain. The White Lady group portrays several human figures as well as oryxes, on a rock panel measuring about 5.5 m x 1.5 m. The "White Lady" is the most detailed human figure in the group, and measures about 39.5 cm x 29 cm. It is usually assumed that the painting shows some sort of ritual dance, and that the "White Lady" is in fact a shaman. The figure has white legs and arms, which may suggest that the body was painted or that it was wearing some sort of decorative attachments on the legs and arms. It holds a bow in one hand and possibly a goblet in the other. Because of the bow and the oryxes, the painting has also been interpreted as a hunting scene. The painting was probably made of ochre,

charcoal, manganese, hematite, with blood serum, egg white and casein used as binding agents. The painting has long been an archaeological dilemma, and several different hypotheses have been put forth on its origins, authorship and dating. It is now usually accepted to be a bushmen painting, dating back at least 2000 years ago. To reach the White Lady it is necessary to hike for about 40-60 minutes over rough terrain, following the ancient watercourses threading through the mountain, along the gorge of the normally dry Tsisab river. The area is uninhabited, wild and very arid; in summer, temperatures over 40 °C are routine. Despite this, the Dâures Nature Reserve is home to a diversity of wildlife (the insect taxon *Mantophasmatodea* was first discovered here in 2002, and the scorpion fauna of the Brandberg massif is probably the richest in southern Africa). The numbers of animals are obviously small because the arid environment cannot support large populations, however visitors will occasionally observe elephants, leopards, baboons, rock hyrax, snakes and even Black rhino. But above all, this area and its surroundings are a great spot to meet Namibia's fabled desert-dwelling elephants, highly adapted to surviving in an arid, barren, forbidding environment - difficult to spot among the rocky terrain, highly unpredictable and very dangerous when trekking up the gorge, they are the ancient, wise, wrinkled guardians of the mysterious White Lady of the Brandberg. ●



African elephant *Loxodonta africana*

Although not a separate species, and not much different from other savanna elephants *Loxodonta africana africana*, Namibia's desert-dwelling elephants are special nonetheless. They are of high national and international conservation priority, and have been designated as top priority for protection by the IUCN.

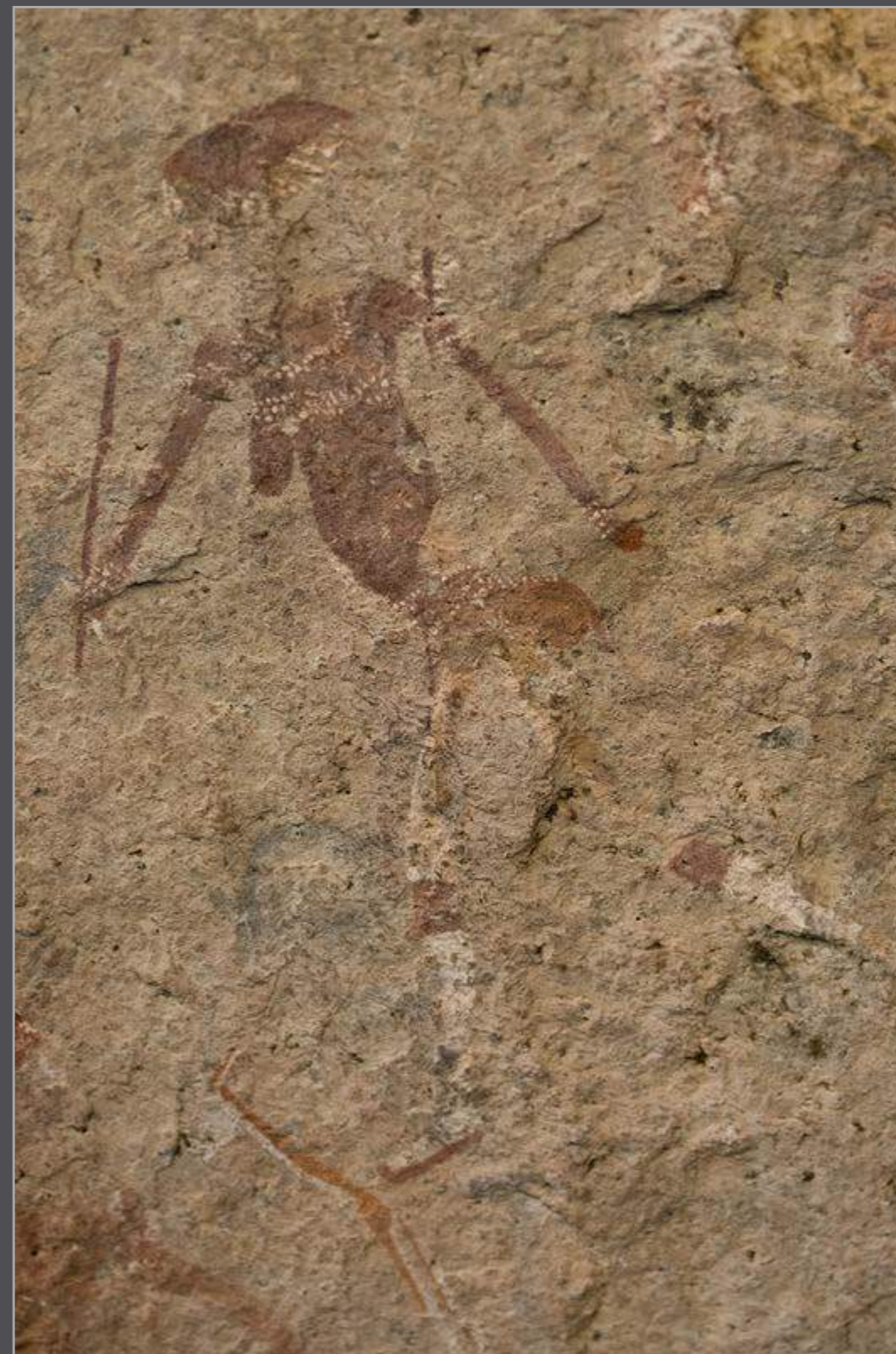


African elephant *Loxodonta africana*

Namibia's desert elephants have adapted to their dry, semi-desert environment by having a smaller body mass with proportionally longer legs and seemingly larger feet than other elephants. Their physical attributes allow them to cross miles of sand dunes to reach water.



Meerkat *Suricata suricatta*
Meerkat or suricate *Suricata suricatta*, digging out reptile eggs, Brandberg Daures National Heritage Site valley, Namibia.



The White Lady
"The White Lady of Brandberg" bushmen rock painting, Brandberg Daures National Heritage Site valley, Namibia.

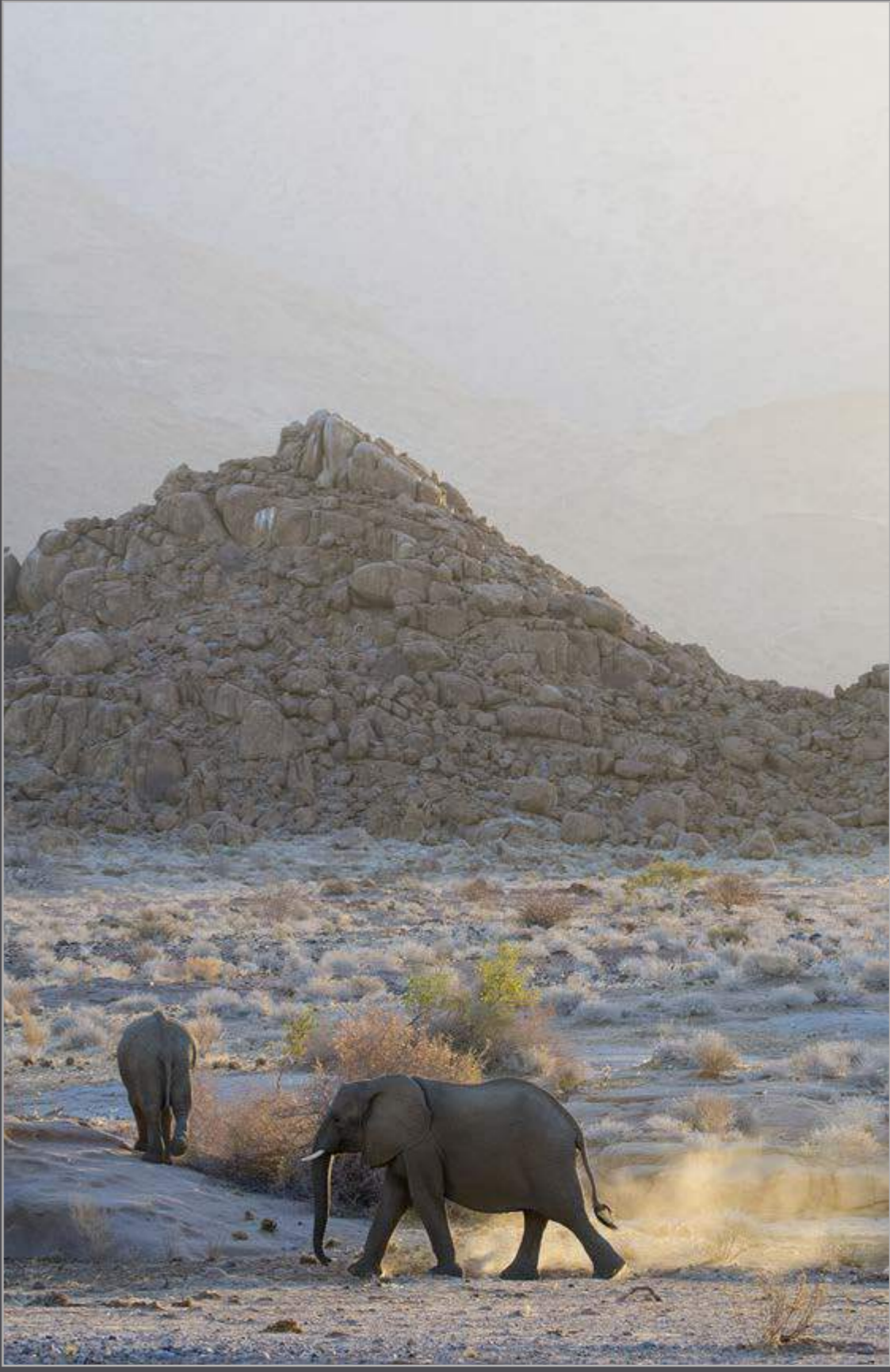


Sandstorm at sunset

The barren, forbidding wasteland at the foot of the Brandberg is often swept by dramatic sandstorms. Despite being quite uncomfortable, such storms offer wonderful opportunities to the dedicated landscape photographer.



Damara Red-billed hornbill *Tockus damarensis*
Damara Red-billed hornbill *Tockus damarensis*, Brandberg Daures National Heritage Site, Namibia



African elephant *Loxodonta africana*
See also <http://www.desertelephant.org/elephant-conservation-volunteer/desert-elephants-namibia.html>.



African elephant *Loxodonta africana*

The elephants living in the Brandberg area survive by eating moisture-laden vegetation growing in ephemeral riverbeds and with their ability to go several days without drinking water. Sometimes they must travel long distances to reach a water source. To find out more see also <http://www.desertelephantconservation.org/index.html>



Namibian Rock agama *Agama planiceps*

Namibian Rock agama *Agama planiceps*, male, Brandberg Daures National Heritage Site valley, Namibia.

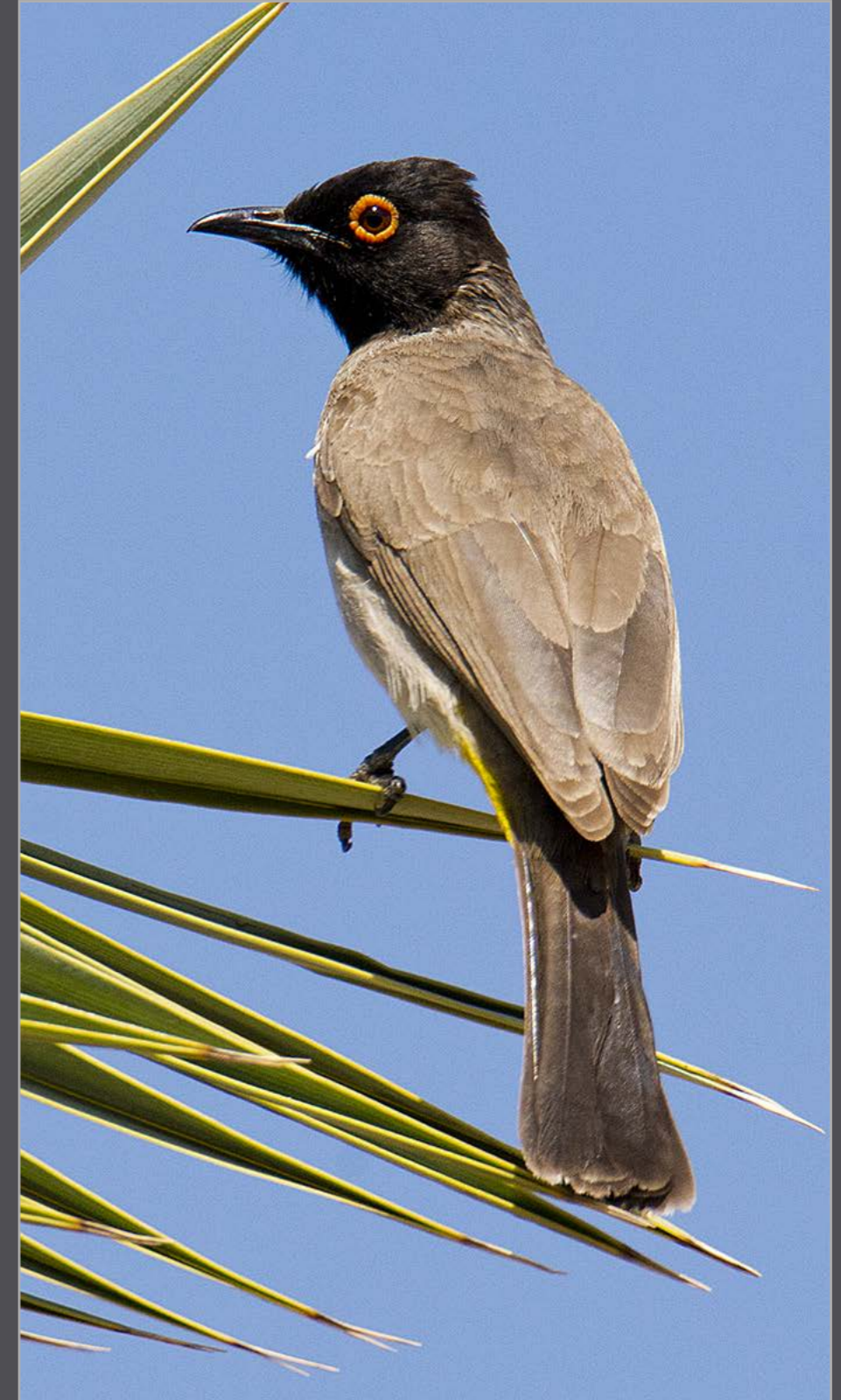
**An oasis in the desert**

Shallow, rocky gorges in the arid Kunene region offer the only possibility of finding semi-permanent water in this remote area. It is in such verdant environments that the sparse wildlife of the Namibian north-west often congregates.



Rock Hyrax *Procavia capensis*

Rock hyrax or Dassie *Procavia capensis*, Brandberg Daures National Heritage Site valley, Namibia. Interestingly, the closest living relatives to hyraxes are the modern-day elephants and sirenians.



Red-eyed Bulbul *Pycnonotus nigricans*

African red-eyed bulbul or Black-fronted bulbul *Pycnonotus nigricans*, Grootberg, Damaraland, Namibia



African elephant *Loxodonta africana*

By living in smaller than average family units of only two or three animals, Namibia's desert elephants decrease pressure on food and water resources. Researchers have noted that they destroy fewer trees than elephants living in higher rainfall areas in other parts of Africa.



Grey loerie *Corythaixoides concolor*
Grey Go-away-bird or Grey loerie *Corythaixoides concolor*, Brandberg.



Sandstorm at sunset
Driving safely on the Brandberg gravel trails requires particular care.



Namibian Rock agama *Agama planiceps*

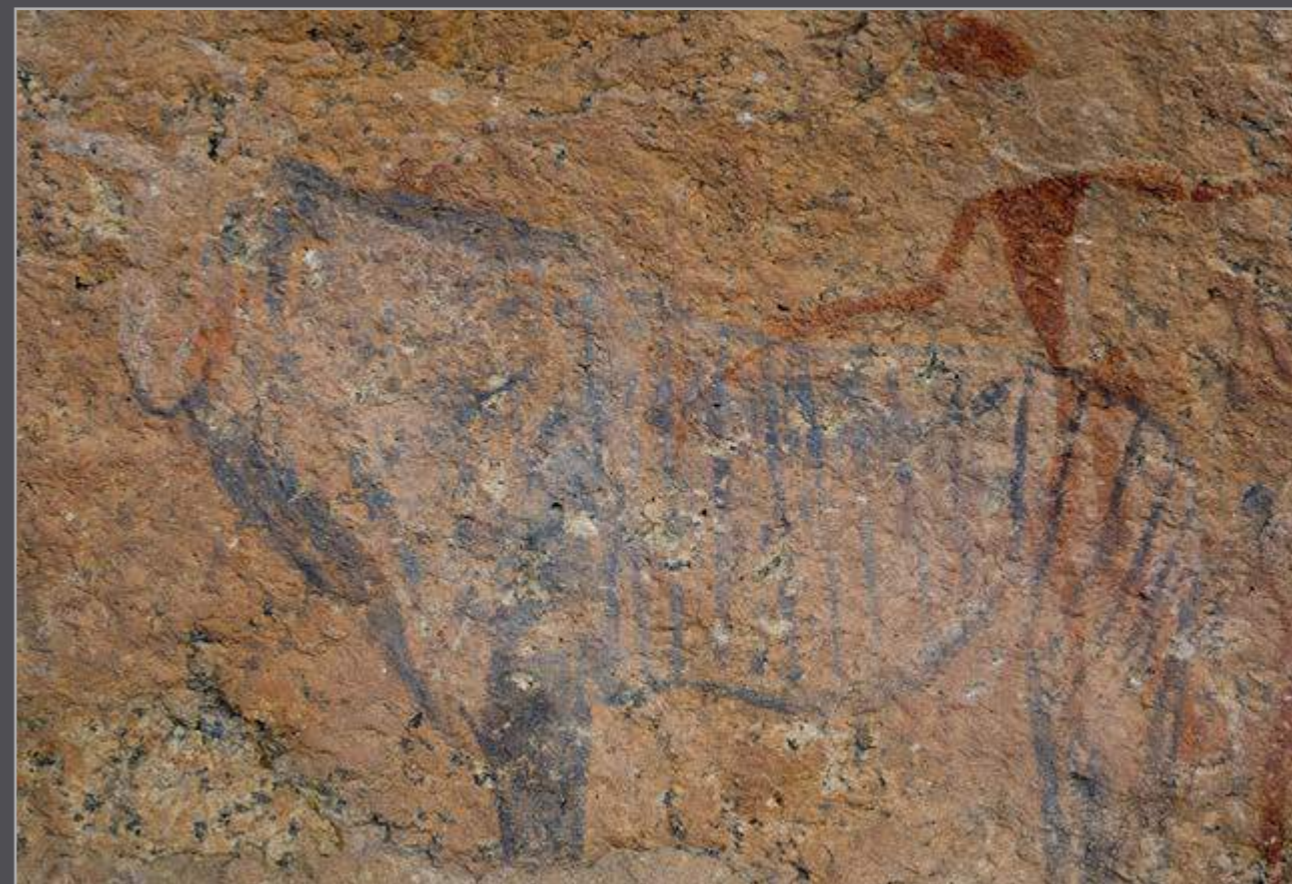
Namibian Rock agama *Agama planiceps*, female, Brandberg Daures National Heritage Site valley, Namibia.



Rock Hyrax *Procavia capensis*
 Rock hyrax or Dassie *Procavia capensis*, Brandberg Daures National Heritage Site valley, Namibia.



Oryx
 Oryx from the "The White Lady of Brandberg" bushmen rock paintings group, Brandberg Daures National Heritage Site valley, Namibia



Wildebeest
 Wildebeest from the "The White Lady of Brandberg" bushmen rock paintings group, Brandberg Daures National Heritage Site valley, Namibia



African elephant *Loxodonta africana*

Beside Namibia's, there is only one other group of desert-dwelling elephants in the world. They live in Mali, North Africa, where they were forced into their desert habitat by human population expansion. These also belong to the species *Loxodonta africana africana*.



Sandstorm at sunset

Being based at the White Lady Lodge offers the opportunity to explore the greater Brandberg area - the desert elephants are not always found easily as they move around a lot depending on the water availability situation.



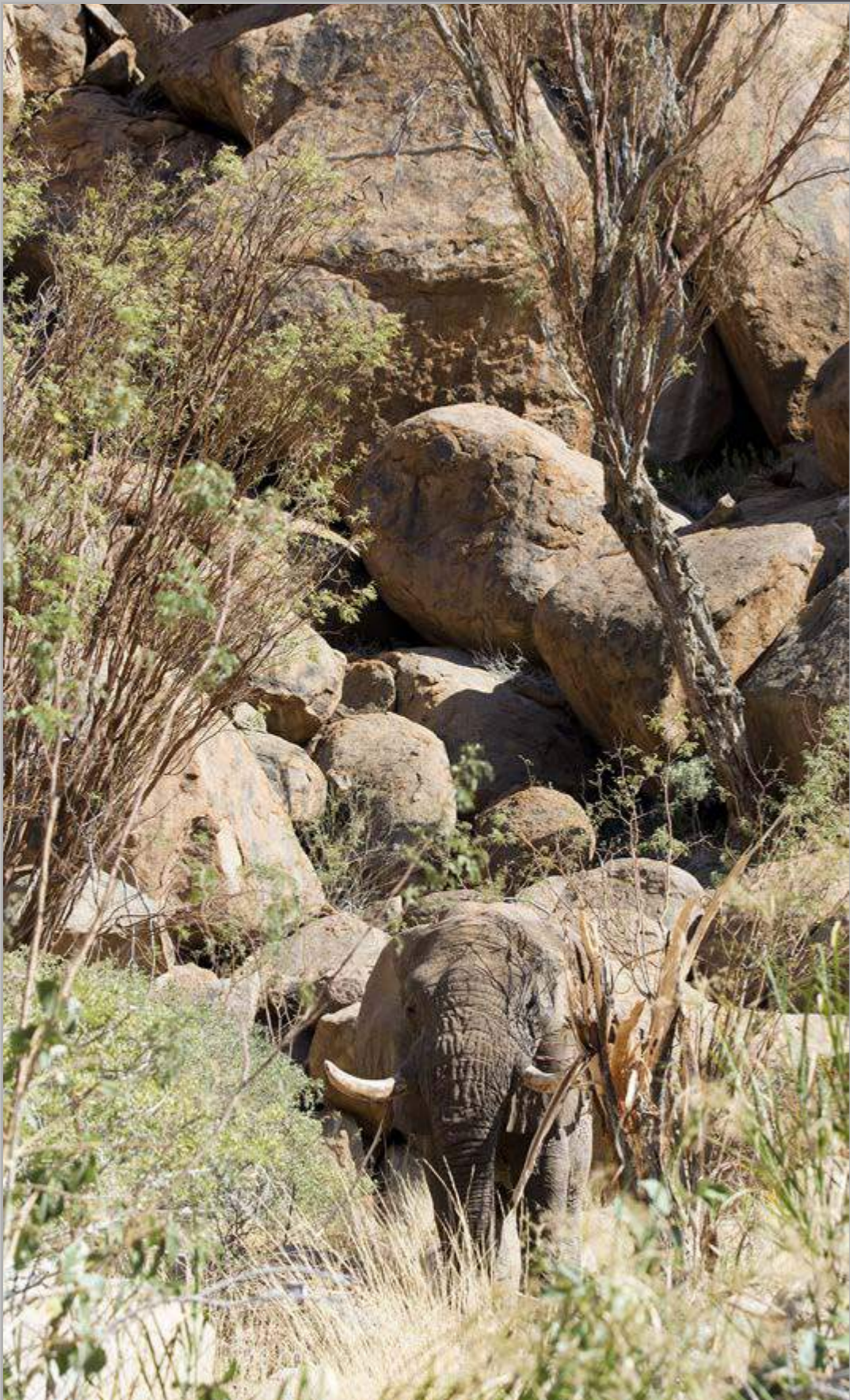
Rock Hyrax *Procavia capensis*

The rock hyrax *Procavia capensis*, also called Cape hyrax, is commonly referred to in South African English as *dassie*. It is one of the four living species of the order *Hyracoidea*, and the only living species in the genus *Procavia*. Like all hyraxes, it is a medium-sized (~4 kg) terrestrial mammal, with short ears and tail.

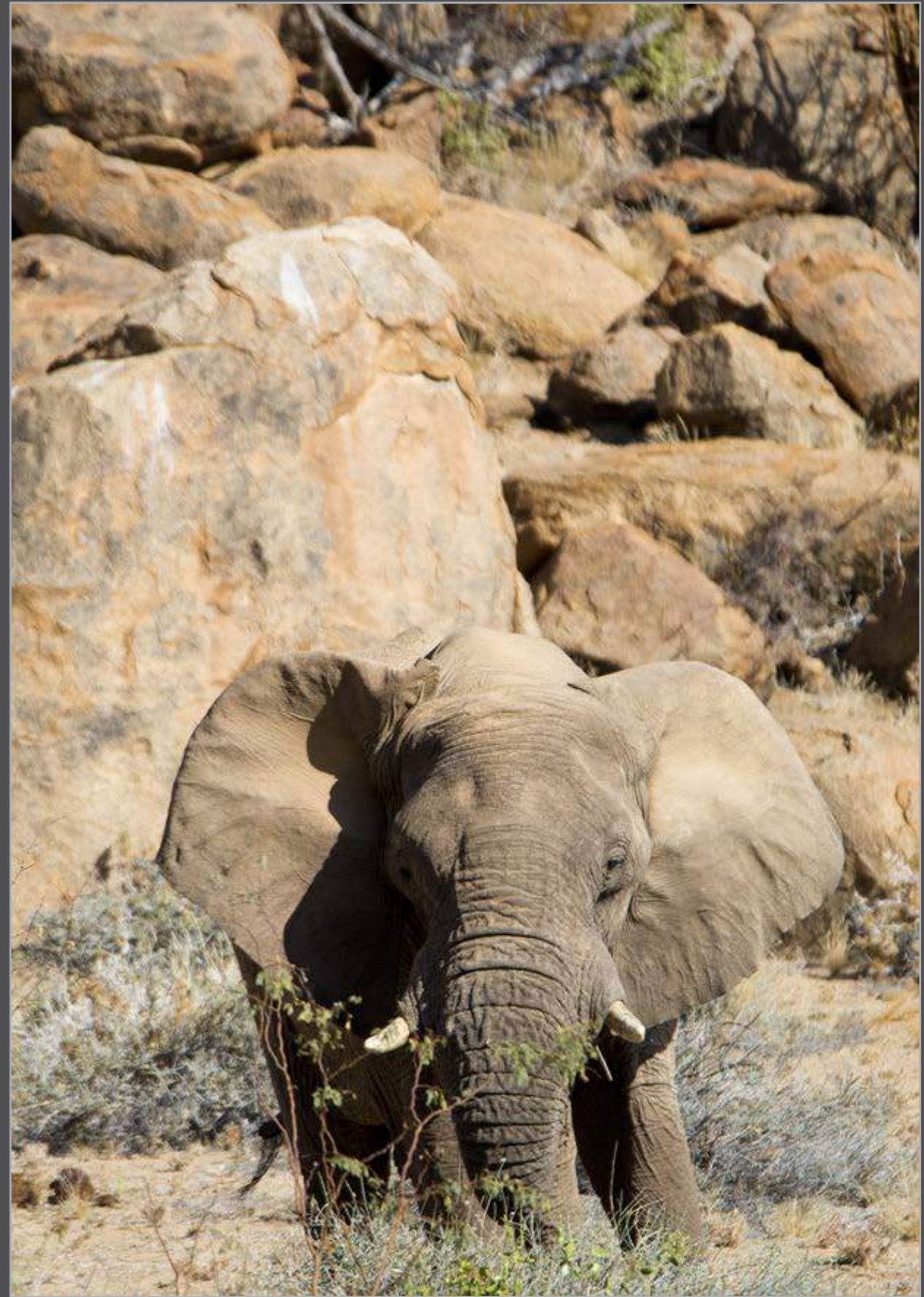


African elephant *Loxodonta africana*

Elephants enter puberty around 10 to 12 years of age, when females can become pregnant, are considered adults by age 18, and can live into their 60s. The youngsters learn all they need to know from their family members: mothers, aunts, sisters and brothers.



African elephant *Loxodonta africana*
Desert elephants are very difficult to spot in the Brandberg.



African elephant *Loxodonta africana*
Elephants are well known for their long lifespans, intelligence and memory.



African elephant *Loxodonta africana*
After a gestation of 22 months, a baby requires mother's milk for two years.



The black bane of the Rock hyrax
Verreaux's Black eagle *Aquila verreauxii*, Grootberg, Damaraland.



A lodge in the middle of nowhere
White Lady tourist lodge, Brandberg Daures National Heritage Site