

KGALAGADI NATIONAL PARK

MAGICAL DESERT

An expedition to South Africa's
remote and untouched
Transfrontier area



A spectacular sunset
welcomes us at Nossob camp.
On the title page, a
courting/mating pair of
African lion *Panthera leo*.



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*S*andwiched in a bone-dry, wind-swept corner between Namibia, South Africa and Botswana, lies hidden and forgotten by most a magical corner of wilderness for serious safaris devoted to wildlife photography. Here, Botswana and South Africa have joined forces to protect the wildlife on opposite sides of their border, forming the world's first Transfrontier Park: the Kgalagadi. The protected area consists of about 38,000km² of the Kalahari and was previously split between South Africa's Kalahari Gemsbok National Park and Botswana's Gemsbok National Park. Being away from most


major routes and not really easily reached, the Park gets relatively few visitors, making it ideal for dedicated game-viewers. Springbok, blue wildebeest, gemsbok, red hartebeest and eland abound, while suricates, leopards, and black-maned lions are commonly observed. This is also one of South Africa's best areas for cheetah, which thrive by hunting in its fossil river valleys and the surrounding Kalahari dunes. The Kgalagadi is also a haven for birders, especially those interested in birds of prey. To sum it up, this is an exceptionally interesting and remote area - with an equally interesting story

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*A typical
encounter in the
Kgalagadi with a
mature African lion
Panthera leo
black-maned male.*



 *Dueling Gemsbok*
Oryx gazella.

 *Brown hyena*
Parahyena
brunnea.



*African Wild cat
Felis chaus with
freshly caught
Fawn-coloured Lark.*



behind its coming into being. It all started a long time ago, when the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park in South Africa was established on 31 July 1931 - mainly to protect the migrating game, especially the gemsbok, from poaching. In 1948 an informal verbal agreement was made between the then Bechuanaland Protectorate and the Union of South Africa to set up a conservation area in the contiguous areas of the two lands. In June 1992 representatives from the South African National Parks Board Board (now SANParks) and the Department of Wildlife and National Parks of Botswana set up a joint management committee to manage the area as a single ecological unit. A management plan was drafted, reviewed, and approved in 1997. The parties agreed to cooperate in tourism and share equally in park entrance fees. On 7 April 1999, Botswana and South Africa signed a historic bilateral agreement whereby both countries

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African lioness
Panthera leo
with her very
young cubs.

undertook to manage their adjacent National Parks, the Gemsbok National Park in Botswana and the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park in South Africa as a single ecological unit. The boundary between the two parks had no physical barriers, although it is also the international border between the two countries. This allowed for the free movement of animals. On 12 May 2000, President Festus Mogae of Botswana and President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa formally launched Southern Africa's first peace park, the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. Today the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park is a huge, largely unpopulated, remote, relatively little-visited and truly spectacular wildlife preserve and conservation area in southern Africa. Moreover, it is also possible to enter Namibia from a border entry point in the Western Kgalagadi. The total area of the park is 38,000 square kilometres (15,000 sq mi). Approximately three-quarters of the park lies in Botswana and one-quarter in South Africa. Kgalagadi means "place of thirst" in the local language, and with good reason - the place is basically a sandy dustbowl with very little or no water.

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The flag species of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier National Park - Gemsbok or South African Oryx Oryx gazella.





Left, the huge Verreaux's eagle-owl *Bubo lacteus* is one of the Kgalagadi's most imposing birds of prey; right top, Green Wood hoopoe *Phoeniculus purpureus*; right bottom, Crimson-breasted Shrike *Laniarius atrococcineus*.



A large Lappet-faced vulture *Torgos tracheliotos* taking off.



Tawny eagle *Aquila rapax* feeding on a mongoose carcass.



AN EXTREME ENVIRONMENT

The Park is located largely within the southern Kalahari Desert. The terrain consists of red sand dunes, sparse low shrubby vegetation, occasional trees, and the dry riverbeds of the Nossob and Auob Rivers, where most of the wildlife sightings take place. The rivers are said to flow only about once per century. However, water flows underground and provides life for grass and camelthorn trees growing in the river beds. The rivers may flow briefly after large thunderstorms. Several artificial wells dug and maintained by the Park authorities provide well-camouflaged, strategically-placed permanent waterholes to attract - and often sustain in dry times - the local wildlife.

SPECTACULAR ENCOUNTERS

Despite its barren and forbidding environment, the Park has abundant, varied wildlife. It is home to large mammalian predators such as lions, cheetahs, African leopards, and hyenas. Migratory herds of large herbivores such as blue wildebeest, springbok, eland, and red hartebeest also live and move seasonally within

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A quarter
of wrestling Giraffe
Giraffa
camelopardalis.





Swallow-tailed bee-eater *Merops hirundineus* with wasp (left) and bee (right) prey. These are quite a common sight along the dry riverbeds of the Kgalagadi.



■ A rare sight - a Cape porcupine *Hystrix africae australis* in daytime. Usually strictly nocturnal, this is Africa's largest rodent.





Far left, immature Martial eagle *Polemaetus bellicosus*; left, immature Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk *Melierax canorus*. The Kgalagadi offers exceptional sightings of raptors.



Another unique sighting - a Bat-eared fox *Otocyon megalotis* female suckling its newborn cubs at the entrance of its den.



■ Top left, Lanner falcon *Falco biarmicus*;
 top right, Cape glossy starling *Lamprotornis nitens*.
 Bottom left, Spotted Thick-knee *Burhinus capensis* on
 its nest with egg; bottom
 right, Lilac-breasted roller *Coracias caudatus*.

Cheetah Acinonyx jubatus
- the Kgalagadi is an excellent location to observe this endangered species.



A small mouse with grey and white fur is perched on a thin, light-colored branch of a plant. The mouse is facing left and appears to be feeding on the plant. The background is a dense thicket of similar branches and small yellow flowers, creating a warm, golden-brown atmosphere. The mouse's tail is long and thin, extending downwards from its body.

■ African striped mouse
or Four-striped Grass
Mouse *Rhabdomys*
pumilio feeding.



■ Top left, Violet-eared Waxbill *Uraeginthus granatina*; top right, Fawn-coloured Lark *Calendulauda africanoides*. Bottom left, Acacia Pied Barbet *Tricholaema leucomelas*; bottom right, Fork-tailed drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis*.



■ Subadult African leopard *Panthera pardus* resting in a tree.



Immature Spotted
Eagle owl *Bubo*
africanus.



the Park, providing sustenance for the numerous predators. More than 200 species of bird can be found in the Kgalagadi, including vultures and raptors such as eagles, buzzards, and Secretary birds. Since 2005, the protected area is considered a Lion Conservation Unit and a lion stronghold in Southern Africa.

A DESERT CLIMATE

The weather in the Kalahari can reach extremes. January is midsummer in southern Africa and the daytime temperatures are often in excess of 40 °C (104 °F). Winter nights can be quite cold with temperatures below freezing. Extreme temperatures of -11 °C (12 °F) and up to 45 °C (113 °F) have been recorded. Precipitation is sparse in this desert area.

ACCOMODATION IN THE K GALAGADI

Originally, the SA National Parks Board ran only three tourist camps in the area. These were designed for self-driving visitors, with simple self-catering accommodation dotted around village-like compounds, which include a shop, a small fuel station, a pool and sometimes even a restaurant. These are where we were based during our visit, and we can safely recommend them. Of these restcamps, Twee Rivieren is the largest and most developed, and the only one with a restaurant. Other facilities include a well-stocked shop and a family-size

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■ A trio of Cape ground squirrels *Xerus inauris*.





■ *Left, African lion Panthera leo female; right, an alert Meerkat or Suricate Suricata suricatta on the watch for predators.*





■ A herd of beautiful Kgalagadi springbok *Antidorcas marsupialis* in the Nossob riverbed.



Left, Swallow-
tailed bee-eater
Merops
hirundineus;
right, African lion
Panthera leo
young male.



Namaqua sandgrouse
Pterocles namaqua.





■ Top, a flight of Namaqua sandgrouse *Pterocles namaqua*.
Bottom left, Caracal *Caracal caracal*;
bottom right, Black-backed jackal *Canis mesomelas*.




swimming pool. It's usually the first stop within Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, near the southern entrance. Further north, Nossob Rest camp is fairly basic, with several self-catering chalets – although most visitor camp here. It also has cooking facilities and a small shop, and its central location provides one of the best spot to enjoy the Park's untouched wilderness. If we had to choose one site alone where to stay in the Kgalagadi, Nossob would be it. Set in Kgalagadi's southwest, Mata Mata Rest Camp is quite simple, but a great place for adventurous small families. Its self-catering chalets are ideally situated to explore the whole of the Park. More recently, six "wilderness camps" have been built in scenic locations deep in the Park. Small, remote and unfenced, these are very different in character to the restcamps; they feel more isolated and closer to the wildlife. Most take

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■ Cape fox
Vulpes chama.





 Dueling Gemsbok
Oryx gazella.



Left, ■
Springbok
*Antidorcas
marsupialis*
male; right, adult
Southern Pale
Chanting
Goshawk
*Melierax
canorus*,
a commonly
observed
denizen of the
Kgalagadi.





■ A lone black-maned African lion *Panthera leo* male on the prowl.

eight people when full. All require you to bring your own water, fuel and food – though cooking utensils, crockery and cutlery are provided – and all the accommodation is en-suite. For safety, each has a single armed game scout in residence. These are recommended to the most adventurous visitors who do not mind a little lack of comfort.

DARK CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON

However, in an unexpected, very disappointing and potentially devastating twist in the history of the Kgalagadi, in September 2014 the government of Botswana quietly sold the rights to frack for shale gas in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. It granted prospecting licences for 29,291 square kilometres (2,929,100 ha), 34,435 square kilometres (3,443,500 ha) and 23,980 square kilometres (2,398,000 ha) – more than half of the Botswanan part of the Park – to a United Kingdom-listed company called "Nodding Donkey". The sale was not reported at the time, and in November 2015, the company changed its name to "Karoo Energy". This does not bode well for the future of the Park. ●

■ Mating African lion *Panthera leo*.



■ Left, Secretary bird *Sagittarius serpentarius*; center, the endangered Ludwig's bustard *Neotis ludwigii*; right, African Ostrich *Struthio camelus*.





■ Top, three resting African lion *Panthera leo* males; bottom, a rarely observed and very shy Cape fox *Vulpes chama* peeking at us from its burrow.





Two African White-backed vultures *Gyps africanus* and a Lappet-faced vulture or Nubian vulture *Torgos tracheliotos* pausing at a waterhole.

■ Left, Cheetah
Acinonyx jubatus;
center and right,
Gemsbok or South
African oryx
Oryx gazella.





■ *Brown hyena*
Parahyaena
brunnea.
This is one of the
most interesting
species of the
Kgalagadi, being
quite uncommon
elsewhere.



■ Swallow-tailed
bee-eater
*Merops
hirundineus* with
a freshly-caught
moth. These are
quite common
near Nossob.



*A pride of African lion
Panthera leo on the walk.*



African lion
Panthera leo.



Left, Tawny eagle *Aquila rapax*;
right, immature Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk *Melierax canorus argentior*.





Left,
Bateleur eagle
Terathopius
ecaudatus;
right,
Martial eagle
Polemaetus
bellicosus.





Ostrich Struthio camelus
family with newly
hatched chicks.



■ *Left, Spotted Eagle-owl *Bubo africanus*, a large and common denizen of the shrubbery along the dry riverbeds of Nossob; right, Cape ground squirrel *Xerus inauris*.*



Dueling Gemsbok or South African oryx
Oryx gazella -
a great photo
opportunity and a
highlight of the
observations in the
Kgalagadi.





A sequence showing an African wildcat *Felis lybica* stalking and catching an unlucky Lark.



■ The hunt was a success - African wildcat *Felis lybica* with freshly caught Lark prey.





Left, Pearl-
spotted Owlet
*Glaucidium
perlatum*; right,
snarling African
lion *Panthera leo*.





Left, Ostrich ■
Struthio camelus male
with very young chick;
right, an unusual image
of a Gemsbok
or South African oryx
Oryx gazella with a
rival's broken horn
sticking from its flank.





■ Typical landscape of the Kgalagadi in the vicinity of Nossob camp.

■ Top, yellow
mongoose *Cynictis
penicillata* taking a
sand bath; bottom,
playful African lion
Panthera leo cubs.





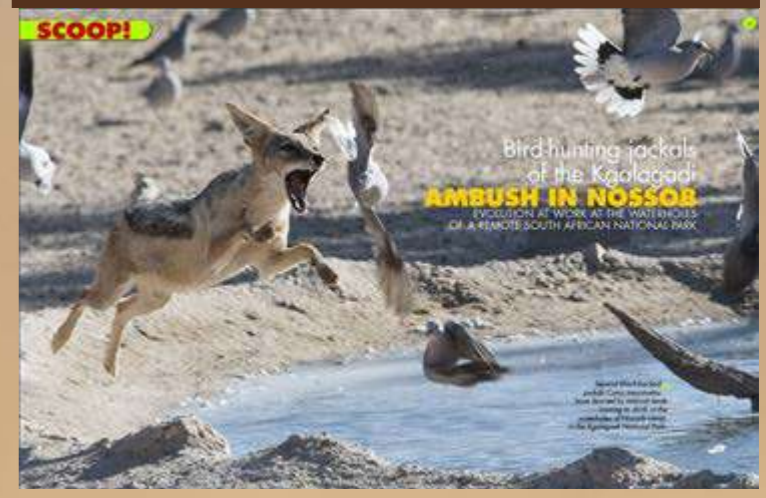
Wide open dry riverbeds constitute the Kgalagadi's salient landscape feature.



Top, Bat-eared fox *Otocyon megalotis*; bottom, two black-maned African lion *Panthera leo* males.



A line-up of African Collared doves *Streptopelia roseogrisea* perching on a branch above a waterhole. This is where they get hunted by Black-backed jackals - see our article on issue 31 of Anima Mundi -Adventures in Wildlife Photography.



■ Mating pair
of African lion
Panthera leo.

