

IN SEARCH OF THE IMPOSSIBLE FIVE



For many people, visiting game reserves is all about seeing the Big Five. But what about those animals you have almost zero chance of seeing? Justin Fox drew up a list of South Africa's most elusive animals and set off to find the Cape mountain leopard, aardvark, pangolin, naturally occurring white lion and riverine rabbit.





1 THE NOT-SPOTTED CAPE LEOPARD

Quinton Martins is mad.

And not in some superficial, mildly nutty way. Rather, it's a deep and abiding insanity. His madness started nine years ago when he became obsessed with the idea

of finding the near-mythical Cape mountain leopard. Most people know they exist – their tracks are occasionally spotted in the mountains and a farmer shoots one now and then to much public consternation – but no-one ever sees them. As such, they only half exist, occupying a place at the borders of public mythology.

In 2003, Quinton began looking for the elusive cat in the Cederberg mountains. He would go for weeks at a time and hike alone in the remoter regions searching for, and documenting, any sign of leopard. His passion grew into a masters, then doctoral, thesis. He poured all his time and money into the project. It was nine months before he glimpsed his first leopard (at 23h05 on 23 September 2004) and more than a year before he captured and collared one.

In September 2011, I joined Quinton to try and find a Cape leopard. I booked a self-catering hut on Driehoek Farm and hadn't finished unpacking when a vehicle pulled up outside. A tall figure with a floppy hat and spectacles stood on my stoep, stomping the dust off his boots. 'So, you ready to bag a leopard, then?' said Quinton, rubbing his stubby chin.

'Sure!' I said.

'Good, let's go set some traps.'

Over the coming days we set wire-and-footplate snares and checked them every few

hours. We also tried to find the leopards Quinton had collared using telemetry. One morning we received a good signal from Max, a male leopard that had wandered into our valley.

We headed up a rocky pass, switchbacking on increasingly hairy bends, into a world of jumbled sandstone and bright green fynbos. As we drove, Quinton talked about the Cape Leopard Trust, which he'd founded in 2004. He felt that leopards were being killed or relocated unnecessarily. If you eliminated a 'problem animal' other leopards simply moved in to contest for its vacant range, and this could cause even more trouble.

That's when the idea of a predator conservation trust came about. Fundraisers were held and money started coming in. The programme extended into other parts of the Cape and there are currently leopard projects running in the Boland mountains, Namaqualand and Gouritz region. Solutions to human-wildlife conflict are being sought through rigorous scientific research, empowering farmers and local communities, encouraging ecotourism and running education programmes.

We continued up the side of the mountain. All the while, the bleating transmission from Max's collar grew more intense. At the top of the pass we got out and Quinton aimed his VHF telemetry at a nearby koppie. The signal was strong. 'Okay, we're going to have to hike in after him,' he said.

We set off at a blistering pace, but the signal soon faded as the cat slipped over a ridge. The weather began to close in. The wind grew icy and Sneeuberg dissolved into white. Every now and then Quinton would pause to stare at the terrain, thinking like a cat. Which way would Max have gone? Ahead of me the half-man, half-leopard slunk into the distance. But, on that occasion, the cat got away.

On my last day, Quinton and his wife, Elizabeth, arrived to take me on a concerted hunt for Spot, a



Max triggers a camera trap in the Cederberg (note Tafelberg in the background).

female that frequented the area around Driehoek. Driving up Uilsgat Kloof, we again picked up a strong telemetry signal. As we were preparing our packs for a hike into the gorge, Elizabeth happened to glance at the cliff and remarked: 'Look there, at those black eagles. They're dive bombing something.'

'It has to be Spot!' cried Quinton, snatching his binoculars.

We watched the two great birds making their attack run. As they plummeted, each one let out an unearthly scream. 'There, on that big boulder, she's cowering,' said Quinton.

I grabbed my binoculars and trained them in the direction he was pointing. Nothing. Or perhaps a glimpse of movement? I stared intently, willing the leopard to show herself. Had I seen something? Maybe just the hint of a cat? Perhaps not.

As I drove back out of the berg that afternoon, I thought about my almost, half, maybe sighting. Did it really matter that I hadn't actually seen Spot? The fact that she was there, a wild big cat within two hours of a major city, was remarkable in itself. It was like ecological money in the bank. Just knowing Spot was there was enough.



Fredrik Dalerum



William Gatsene and Julyan Nyctzei-de-Wilde

2 THE MOBILE TERMITE MOUND

Finding an aardvark isn't quite as difficult as a Cape leopard, but it's still a considerable challenge. By contacting a number of conservation bodies and universities, I'd found out about a dynamic Swedish zoologist, Fredrik Dalerum, working in the field of terrestrial animal ecology. His research covered such animals as bat-eared foxes, aardwolves and aardvarks.

When I eventually tracked him down, Fred invited me to visit his research site on a farm just outside Kimberley in the Northern Cape. I mentioned that aardwolf had been a strong contender for the impossible Five and Fred suggested I swap it for aardvark. It wasn't a bad idea. I could go with the slightly

I was smitten. It was one of the most adorable creatures I'd ever seen. Not exactly pretty, but its quiriness was its beauty ... a bit like a bush Eeyore.



looser quest of finding an 'aard' something, whether it be wolf or vark, and see which one turned up. Or was that a cop-out?

I met up with Fred in Kimberley one summer evening and we drove out to the farm. Benfontein is set on flat, wide-open veld covered with blond grass and dotted with termitaria. It's owned by De Beers and has been made available to students for research, including work on termites and black-footed cats, another Impossible Five contender. Fred described the various projects being undertaken. For instance, one of the scientists was collecting semen samples from black-footed cats.

'How?' I asked, a parade of inappropriate images pouring through my head.

'Electro-ejaculation,' said Fred.

'Ah,' I said, nodding appreciatively.

'You know, sticking a probe up its anus to stimulate the prostrate and make the cat ejaculate.'

'Not very romantic,' I said.

'That depends,' said Fred. 'We did it to ground squirrels a few years back.'

'Fun?'

'Not as much fun as doing it to an elephant.'

'Of course,' I said.

'Any chance of seeing aardvark?' I asked, steering the conversation to my area of interest.

'Our work here is primarily on aardwolf and bat-eared foxes,' Fred explained. 'We haven't got stuck into the aardvarks yet. They're terribly elusive.'

Over the next few nights I went tracking with Fred and an MSc Student, Charmaine Theron, who was studying termite predation by animals such as aardvarks and aardwolves.

'Seen any aardvarks?' I asked her.

'Nope, but I see the damage they cause all the time. I can show you lots of termites if you like?'

'No thanks,' I said, trying not to sound ungracious.

Great, I thought, my chances weren't looking good. We saw plenty of bat-eared foxes and had some lovely aardwolf sightings, but no aardvarks. It was time to change venue.

So I drove three hours north to Tswalu, where I'd heard the chances were good. Tswalu is an enormous reserve owned by the Oppenheimer family set in a starkly beautiful Kalahari landscape of red dunes, purple mountains and undulating grasslands. I booked in for a few days of aardvark hunting in the lap of safari luxury.

I had the exclusive attention of guide Jolyon Neytzell-de-Wilde and tracker William Gatsene, both accomplished bush men. That evening we set off on our hunt. The great by-product of searching for aardvark at Tswalu was all the game sightings along the way: buffalo, gemsbok, tsessebe and paie giraffes that looked as though they'd been dipped in Jik. There were also those luxury-lodge distractions that take your breath away, such as a bush braai in the dunes – think kelims, throw cushions and hurricane lanterns under a blanket of stars.

On the second night, we struck gold. Driving down a sand track, William lifted his hand for us to halt. His spotlight beam

picked out two big bunny ears above the long grass about 40 metres to our left.

Without saying anything, Jolyon and I climbed off the vehicle. My guide carried a powerful torch with a red filter, which disturbs the animal less than a bright, white beam. He edged forward. When we were within 25 metres, Jolyon switched on his torch. The animal was out in the open and lifted its head to stare directly at us, eyes glowing red. It looked like a termite mound on legs. A hunched stance, piggy-like body, enormous ears and a ridiculously long snout like a nozzle. I was smitten. It was one of the most adorable creatures I'd ever seen. Not exactly pretty, but its quirkiness was its beauty ... a bit like a bush Eeyore. We followed for a while, but there was no way we could keep up as it trotted off with a shambling gait. Animal number two was in the bag.



Darren Pietersen

3 THE WALKING ARTICHOKE

Having struck it lucky with aardvark, I decided to set the Tswalu team my next task: finding the totally impossible pangolin.

'This is probably the best place in South Africa to find one,' said Jolyon.

'But I've seen only five in three years.'

Five is a lot more than most rangers see in a lifetime. First we needed to find tracks in daylight. For three days William searched and, on a number of occasions, found tracks but either lost them in thick grass or they disappeared down a burrow. Short of digging the creatures out, we had to wait until after dark when they emerge.

Once, we returned to a burrow just after sunset to find the animal had scarpered. William tried to track in the dark, but it was useless. On my last night, Jolyon decided to set up a concerted stakeout from late afternoon. We packed a picnic dinner and sat near the hole until late into the night, but the creature failed to emerge.

It was time for Plan B. There is an enormous hunting ranch near Upington called Kalahari Oryx where a young scientist is researching pangolins. A barefoot Darren Pietersen met me in the driveway. I was to spend the coming days with his family at their home (Darren's father is manager of the ranch).

After dinner, Darren and I set out. He had six pangolins fitted with transmitters and it should have been relatively easy to track them down. As he drove, we spoke about his masters thesis. He told me about the pioneering pangolin research done by Jonathan Swart in Mpumalanga in the 1990s. Darren was comparing the earlier findings with his own observations. Most noticeably, these 'desert' pangolins were on average a third smaller than those studied by Swart and had adapted in many ways to the drier conditions. In the Kalahari they were

also diurnal in winter, which differed from their lowveld cousins. Darren thought there were about 60 on the property, but a number had been killed by electric fences. Other than humans, these fences are the only other real threat to pangolins. When they get shocked they automatically roll into a ball for self-defence, often around the electrified wire, which repeatedly shocks them. Darren said they were experimenting with fences that allowed for pangolin traffic.

We stopped a few times on the crests of dunes to check the telemetry. When he picked up a strong signal, we continued on foot. It was cold and Darren put on an old jacket with sleeves that were shredded. I asked what had happened.

'Ag, a wildebeest got hold of it,' he said.

'With you in it?'

'Ja, at that time I was, actually.'

'Not his colour?'

'No, didn't fit him either, despite the arm alterations. So I got it back.'

We came to a burrow and Darren pointed the Yagi antenna at the ground. The pangolin was down there, just below our feet. 'Very strange,' said Darren. 'It's already ten o'clock and he hasn't emerged yet.'

We proceeded to another burrow, then another. All the pangolins were home, soundly asleep. We returned after midnight ... to find all of them still in their burrows. Darren looked perplexed. 'This doesn't normally happen. Maybe they heard you were coming.'

The next night we were back. Again the likely candidates were snug underground. I'd almost given up hope when we came to Tokman's burrow. Darren directed his torch to a clump of grass ... and there it was. Like a

prehistoric beetle, it waddled across our path, a scraping sound coming from its scales. Tokman was a mature male. He emitted a low purring, almost like an elephant's rumble. Tokman looked for all the world like a cross between a pinecone and a sausage dog. I was elated; Darren looked visibly relieved.



Tiyani Mashole and Shadrack Mkhabela

4 A VERY PALE CAT

White lions occur in a number of reserves and zoos around the world, but only four are naturally occurring. Their home is the Timbavati.

There is a recessive white gene among some of the prides in this corner of Africa that every now and then throws out a white specimen. The cubs often don't survive, as they stand out a mile and are greatly disadvantaged in the hunting stakes. At present there are three young adults and a cub in the area - all of them white as the driven snow.

I'd been told that my best chance of seeing one was Motswari, a small private game reserve in the northern section of the Timbavati. The two most promising white lions had recently been kicked out of their pride and were nomadic, ranging across vast distances, deep into Kruger National Park,

so getting my timing right was crucial. The plan was that I be on 24-hour standby and if they made a kill or looked settled at

In the Kalahari pangolins are diurnal, or active during the daytime, in winter (seen here at Tswalu Game Reserve).



© 2014 Tswalu Game Reserve

Motswari, I'd jump on a plane and fly to nearby Hoedspruit.

However, three months passed and the cats made only fleeting visits, remaining on the move. So the Motswari team suggested I come anyway and try my luck. Arriving in the hot Lowveld in the middle of summer, the veld was green and lush with pools of standing water everywhere, allowing game and predators to roam far and wide.

Over the coming days I went out for four hours every morning and evening with ranger Shadrack Mkhabela and tracker Tiyani Mashela, hunting for lion spoor. The Timbavati is a beautiful chunk of wilderness crisscrossed by sand rivers and teeming with big game. We were repeatedly distracted from our quest by excellent Big Five sightings: an elephant bull with perhaps the biggest tusks I'd ever seen, skittish white rhino, vast herds of buffalo, a female leopard enjoying an impala kill and lions galore, but unfortunately of the wrong hue. Tippex was suggested, purely for photographic purposes, but this seemed somehow unethical.

Not finding white lions was actually extremely pleasant. I didn't mind if this dragged on for weeks. A comfortable rondavel in a leafy bend of the Sohobebe River, a rocky plunge pool, delicious meals and a parade of game through an unfenced camp. As I sat at my computer, a large spotted genet snoozed on a branch above my head while an elephant snacked on the tree beside me. I half hoped the white lions would never turn up and this could sort of go on indefinitely.

But the city called, and the next mammal on my list needed to be found, so reluctantly I took a flight back to the real world and a date with animal number five.



5 A VERY RARE BUNNY

Africa's only true rabbit is actually of European origin (they emigrated 12 million years ago). As the Karoo habitat they ended up in was rocky and arid, these rabbits stuck to watercourses where they could burrow in the soft sand to make their homes. They became entirely adapted to a riverine environment.

Then disaster struck. A new wave of European settlers arrived from the north. These ones stood on two legs and didn't dig warrens. But they wanted the alluvial land for their farms and slowly forced the rabbits out, ploughing up the fertile soil and letting their livestock trample the riverine lands. Within three centuries, the new Europeans had driven the old Europeans to the brink of extinction. Today there may be as few as 250 breeding pairs left, making these critically endangered mammals one of the most threatened in Africa and thought to be the 13th most endangered on Earth.

Riverine rabbits are still occasionally spotted in isolated pockets of the Great Karoo and, more recently, in parts of the Little Karoo, but if you want to see one for yourself – and the chances are very slim – the best place to try your luck is Sanbona Wildlife Reserve. This huge wildlife reserve is one of the only places the rabbit still has a halfway decent chance of survival. I'd been told by scientists to visit the area during the new moon, which provided the best opportunity of spotting one of these shy, nocturnal animals.

I entered the reserve and drove through a mountainous landscape dotted with wild flowers, eventually drawing up

A tawny and a white lion slake their thirst at Motswari. White lions are not albinos, but rather the product of a recessive gene.



Each eye had a white ring and there was a long black stripe extending from just below the mouth almost to the ears, giving it a wide, if uncertain, smile

under the bluegums at Tilney Manor. The homestead dates back to the 1890s and is today the main lodge of Sanbona. At lunch, I met Keir Lynch, assistant wildlife manager and a man who's passionate about riverine rabbits. Keir is tall, with a fiery red beard that tapers to a point. The whole effect is somewhat piratical.

'Aargh, they're magic little animals, sleek, beautifully built: the Porsche of rabbits,' enthused Redbeard in a booming, sonorous voice, as he adjusted his eye patch and called for more grog, or is that my faulty memory?

As we tucked into fish and chips, he gave me the lowdown. This rabbit was so heavily under threat because its natural habitat of soft alluvial soils was shrinking all the time. To make matters worse, they bucked the trend of mating like ... well ... rabbits. These are slow breeders, producing only one or two kittens and only one birthing a breeding season.

That evening was to be our first hunt. It was the new moon, but even in the relative safety of darkness, a rabbit in the open is an easy target for the likes of caracal, jackal and owl and they had to be very wary.

We set off in an open Land Cruiser. I swept the bush on our left with a spotlight, Keir took the right and guide Jannie Swanepoel scanned the road ahead. We drove at tortoise pace, searching for movement or the telltale orange flash of their eyes.

After five long hours, we decided to turn for home. The vehicle nosed into a gully, our tyres splashing through a stream. Keir slowly drew the vehicle to a halt and switched off the engine. 'And here on my right, folks, we have the riverine rabbit,' he said softly.

There it sat, about 10 metres from the vehicle, a

twitching bunny caught in Jannie's spotlight. Once I was over my surprise, and the vague disappointment that it looked a bit like any bunny one has ever seen, I began to note the distinctive features. It had enormous, elongated ears, each eye had a white ring and there was a long black stripe extending from just below the mouth almost to the ears, giving it a wide, if uncertain, smile.

I glanced at my companions. Their faces were in rapture, like courtiers in the presence of royalty. 'A magnificent rabbit, hey,' whispered Keir.

The creature took a few hops, turned to look at us, and then disappeared into the shrubbery beside the road. The stars were singing in their icy firmament and all three of us had grins as wide as the rabbit's as we drove home.



I had a day left at Sanbona and took an evening game drive with Jannie. Over a sundowner drink on a koppie I noticed a white object in the long grass behind my guide.

'What's that?' I asked.

'Oh, that's just one of our white lions,' he said nonchalantly. I promptly spilled half a G&T down the front of my shirt.

Jannie explained that Sanbona had introduced white lions onto the reserve (as is the case in a number of parks around South Africa) and they were thriving. These weren't the naturally occurring cats I'd been searching for in the Timbavati, but at least I'd found a white lion. Four out of five wasn't bad, I reckoned. ■



The riverine rabbit (seen here at Sanbona) is thought to be the 13th most endangered mammal on Earth.

Travel planner

Finding the Impossible Five

Your chances of seeing a Cape leopard, other than by pure luck, are slim. Your best bet is the Cederberg. Find out more about the sterling work of Quinton Martins and the Cape Leopard Trust at www.cape-leopard.org.za.

Finding a riverine rabbit is equally difficult, but Sanbona Wildlife Reserve (details below) is a good start. For more info, or if you've seen a riverine rabbit, contact Christy Bragg at the Endangered Wildlife Trust Riverine Rabbit Programme, email christybragg@ewt.org.za.

Getting to see an aardvark is a little easier. They are spotted fairly often in Eastern and Northern Cape reserves, especially in winter. I spent time at Benfontein, one of the nine properties on the Diamond Route, a project which focuses on linking the conservation properties of De Beers, the Oppenheimer family and Ponahalo Holdings. These areas provide a safe haven for a wide variety of rare plants and animals and provide research opportunities. Email Duncan MacFadyen, manager of research, at duncan.macfadyen@eason.co.za or go to



www.diamondroute.co.za.

Tswalu (details below) is excellent in winter for aardvark and is probably your best shot for pangolins anywhere in South Africa.

Motswari (details below), or any one of the northern Timbavati game reserves, offers a relatively good chance of seeing a naturally occurring white lion.



Driehoek



Motswari Private Game Reserve



Sanbona Wildlife Reserve



Tswalu Game Reserve

Where to stay

Driehoek in the Cederberg is an historical farm surrounded by magnificent peaks and is an ideal base for hiking. There is also good mountain biking, rock art, horse riding and spa treatments. It offers self-catering facilities ranging from campsites to fully equipped chalets. Camping starts from R30 a person sharing and huts from R115 a person sharing. Tel 027-482-2828, email driehoek-cederberg@gmail.com, cederberg-accommodation.co.za.

Motswari Private Game Reserve has a family-owned, old-style bush lodge with a

friendly atmosphere: rondavels set in a picturesque river bend, a rocky plunge pool, a boma for firelight dinners and an open-sided lounge with trees poking through the thatch. The food is excellent (lots of game meats) and the wildlife viewing of a very high calibre, even from the lodge. Rates start from R2950 a person a night sharing and this includes all meals and game activities. Tel 011-463-1990, email reservations@motswari.co.za, www.motswari.co.za.

Just three hours from Cape Town, Sanbona boasts 54000 hectares of undulating

mountains and plains. Apart from hosting the Big Five (including white lions) and being one of the only conserved habitats for riverine rabbits, it's a magnificent destination for flora. There are three luxury camps, each with a distinctive atmosphere. Rates start from R4235 a person a night sharing and this includes all meals and game activities (enquire about specials). Tel 041-407-1000, email reservations@sanbona.com, www.sanbona.com.

Tswalu is South Africa's largest private game reserve, covering an area of more than

100000 hectares. The Kalahari landscapes are stunning and the wildlife viewing exceptional. Guests get their own dedicated vehicle, ranger and tracker, making for a very exclusive game experience. The main lodge, The Motse, nestles at the foot of the Korannaberg mountains, facing west across rolling grasslands. The décor and design are some of the best in Africa. Rates are from R7700 a person a night sharing and this includes all meals and game activities (enquire about promotions). Tel 053-781-9331, email res@tswalu.com, www.tswalu.com.

Accommodation price ratings: a person a night, usually B&B, sometimes full board under R250 R251 - R499 R500 - R750 R751 - R999 R1000+