



FROM  
THE FIELD...

## In Search of Wild Canaries in southern Africa

by Tony Bucci, San Pedro, CA

### Part 2

[Editor's Note: In part 1, Bucci met some friends in Johannesburg, South Africa, and began a trek through Botswana and Zimbabwe to Victoria Falls and the Zambesi River. Bucci is a traveler interested in all birds but specifically looking for the numerous wild canaries that inhabit Africa. This Part 2 starts at Victoria Falls and heads for Chobe National Park then on to Kubu Island in the middle of a great salt desert. Various birds and animals abound. It is an interesting adventure story with a focus on birds.]

### Botswana's Chobe National Park and Kubu Island

In the town of Victoria Falls, Pier and Lorence joined our group. They had just arrived from France. That day we made provisions for our next trek. I purchased a heavy blanket which would be necessary as we headed further south where the nights got colder and colder. Before leaving, I made a phone call home and learned that my recently married daughter Lisa was expecting a baby, and all was well.

We left Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, and headed for Botswana. After crossing the border and several miles into Botswana, we reached Chobe National Park. At the gate we paid a stiff fee to enter the park. The main road into the park runs next to the Chobe River. We were at the north end of Botswana where the Chobe River is the border. On the other side of the Chobe River was the country of Namibia.

We stopped many times to let groups of elephants cross the road. We also observed many hippopotamus frolicking in the river. This really looked like Africa. Next we encountered a herd of buffalo. We had to back up to make room for their leisured crossing of the road I was warned not to leave the land

cruiser to take pictures; the buffalo could be very aggressive. In the afternoon, we reached the Serondela campgrounds where I pitched my tent making sure I was not on a possible animal path. Here, elephants, lions, jackals, etc. might visit us. I removed my boots and socks and crawled into my very small tent to find my sandals. Coming out, I noticed that one of my socks was missing. Then I noticed that up in a tree, a baboon was sniffing my sock. It didn't take long before he threw the sock back at me. I didn't blame him – I didn't like the way it smelled either!

The campgrounds were next to the river. With my binoculars, I went to look around the edge of the river. Many birds were up in the trees and I spotted a Pied Kingfisher and an African Fish Eagle. This impressive bird looks like our American Eagle. Down along the riverbank, I spotted a Gray Heron, a Reed Cormorant, a Wood Sandpiper, and a Black-winged stilt.

In the evening we had a good supper of peas and sausage. One thing I must admit, the French are good cooks. The night for me was long and cold, and also scary. I heard elephants yelling, and baboons were running and fighting. My little tent was just a "make believe" shelter but I was not about to come out to freeze and face a baboon or elephant and who knows what else.

I got up early to make a fire. After the water was hot, I would gently wake up the "kids." One morning I blew a whistle. I was told that they would shoot me if I did that again!

The day was breaking, and the birds began to tweet. One bird was actually singing, and the song was very familiar to me so I rushed to get my binoculars. Looking toward where the

song came from, I spotted the bird, and to my surprise it was a Yellow-eyed Canary *Serinus mozambicus*. He made my day!

There are many canary subspecies, and this is one of them. Its song is not the same as a domesticated canary, but similar. In the past I kept and bred *Serinus mozambicus*. Below is a list of the canary subspecies of *Serinus serinus* that are all indigenous to Africa:

*Serinus alario* • *Serinus albogularis*  
• *Serinus ankoberensis* • *Serinus atrogularis* • *Serinus buchani* • *Serinus burtoni* • *Serinus canicollis* • *Serinus capistratus* • *Serinus citrinipectus* • *Serinus donaldsoni* • *Serinus dorsostriatus* • *Serinus flavigula* • *Serinus flaviiventris* • *Serinus gularis* • *Serinus koliensis* • *Serinus leucopterus* • *Serinus manelli* • *Serinus mennelli* • *Serinus nigriceps* • *Serinus scotops* • *Serinus striolatus* • *Serinus sulphuratus* • *Serinus symonsi* • *Serinus totta* • *Serinus tristriatus* • *Serinus xantolae-ma* • *Serinus mozambicus*



Travels at the southern tip of Africa

*Serinus canarius* is the canary we all know as the pet yellow canary, although it is not totally yellow in its native habitat, the Canary Islands.

The same day, we left Chobe National Park and headed south toward the town of Nata. The road for miles is straight as an arrow. On both sides of the road the vegetation is dry low thorny bush. In the late afternoon we pulled off the main road and set up camp. There were no animals here. The night got very cold. At 2:00 A.M. it



was 30°F (-1°C) in my tent. My extra blanket came in handy. The next morning, the 9th of June, during my chores of making a fire and waiting for the iced water to get hot, I remembered I had my GPS (Global Positioning Systems) receiver with me. I took a satellite reading of 19 degrees 56 minutes South, and 26 degrees 9 minutes East. (You may wish to look on a map to see where I was.) After our standard breakfast (delicious bread baked the previous evening, toasted and smothered with strawberry marmalade, plus coffee – which was my choice), we moved on to Nata. There we made fuel, and I managed to send a letter to my daughter, Lisa, and her husband, congratulating them on their baby in progress. Back on the road we headed west to the town of Gweta. There we turned and headed south.

Our destination was Kubu Island, which was located in the middle of a dry lake. This was the Makgadikgadi Pans region. Botswana's great salt "pans," Sua and Ntwetwe, collectively comprise the Makgadikgadi Pans. We were no longer on a road; we were simply following some old car tracks hoping that we were going in the right direction. Somewhere in the middle of the dry lake called Ntwetwe Pan, the four-wheel drive land cruiser ahead of us got stuck. I was in the vehicle following them. They immediately warned us, by radio, not to proceed.

The dry lake has a hard salt crust, but under the crust it is wet. These dry lakes, for as far as you can see,

become shallow lakes during the wet season. Millions of flamingos, pelicans, ducks, geese, and other water birds come to build their nests along the shoreline, feeding on the algae and tiny crustaceans which have lain dormant in the salt awaiting the rains.

We worked all day in the scorching heat to free our land cruiser. Believe me, it was a scary day being stuck in the middle of nowhere. It was just like being in the middle of the ocean, except, as far as you can see there is nothing but white dry salt. Thanks to the ability and skill of our leader Christophe ("Chief"), we managed to survive the ordeal.

After driving to the edge of the dry lake, we set up camp and crashed for the night. I got up at daybreak. The air was very cold, 30°F (-1°C), and in the distance I could see a flock of ostriches. I attempted to approach them at a reasonable distance to take a picture, but had no luck. They ran away too fast, and the rear end of an ostrich at 300 yards away doesn't make a good picture.

We proceeded, this time along the edge of the dry lake. Finally, we arrived at the alien-looking Kubu Island with its ghostly baobab trees and surrounding sea of salt. The island, an ancient scrap of rock thrust up from beneath the salt, rises perhaps 20 meters above the flats. I don't think that very many tourists reach this place. Two lonely Pied Crows stood on top of the huge rocks, looking at us as we drove around the island looking

for a camping location.

Kubu Island was bizarre. It gave me the feeling of being on an alien planet. We spent two days there, taking pictures, sunbathing, and relaxing. It was a peaceful place, except a hot wind came up in the late afternoon. I felt safe. There were no animals in sight, except the two crows that kept us company at a distance and approached our camp looking for scraps when opportunity favored.

At Kubu Island, Babeth suggested that I take a bath – provided that I use only one gallon of water. For me, Babeth was the human ingredient of the safari: always concerned for others, good-natured, and smiling. I accepted the offer, took one gallon of water in a small wash basin, went behind a huge rock, and washed my hair, my body, and some underwear. I felt great, clean again.

The only water we had was in the six 5-gallon cans we carried on our land cruisers. Conservation was a must. Interestingly, after our meals the group drank a lot of wine – I don't think it was part of the conservation program. In the evenings, it got very cold. As we sat around the fire, a shovel of hot coals placed under our chairs would keep our bodies warm. We would also pass around a bucket full of hot water to soak our feet. You had clean water if you were the first in line. Don't laugh – it felt good, especially if you didn't wash your feet in five days.

On the second day in the morning, we left Kubu Island in a southerly direction. After driving several hours we came to the town of Letlhakane. There we made provisions to last us for several days. At the gas station we had the opportunity to take a shower. With no other choice, a cold shower felt good. From there we headed further south to reach the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. That night we camped outside the reserve. With our new food supply, that evening we had barbecue steaks and spaghetti. The steaks were three inches thick and one foot in diameter. The French ate them very rare, practically raw but I insisted on "well done," and they made fun of me. The meal gave me enough cholesterol for five years to come. ➤

PART THREE WILL APPEAR IN THE NEXT ISSUE.



*Stuck in the salt in the bleak dry lake Ntwetwe salt pan. Under the crust, the salt is wet.*