



FROM
THE FIELD...

In Search of Wild Canaries in southern Africa

by Tony Bucci, San Pedro, CA

Part 3

[Editor's Note: In parts 1 and 2, Bucci traveled with some friends through Botswana and Zimbabwe to Victoria Falls thence to Chobe National Park and Kubu Island. Part three opens with the small group entering the Central Kalahari Game Reserve where we pick up the story. Bucci is a traveller interested in all birds but specifically looking for the many species of wild canaries that inhabit Africa. It is a fun and interesting adventure story with a focus on birds.]

The Kalahari and the Deserts of Namibia

The night was freezing. But in the morning when the sun came up, it was back to tank top and shorts. Before noon we reached the gates of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, paid the fees and entered. There was no road, only

car tracks. We traveled on the sandy tracks lined with dry spiny bush. Reaching Deception Valley late in the afternoon, we set up camp on the site made famous by Mark and Delia Owens' 1974-81 Brown Hyena study – the study described thoroughly in their book, *Cry of the Kalahari*. I would highly recommend reading the book if you love adventure and nature.

I had a very restless night. About 4:00 A.M. a lion roared in the back of my tent. Scared to death, I froze and prayed for the first time in Africa. I could hear footsteps slowly fading away in the stillness of the night. Then I heard another roar, this time more distant. Relieved that the lion went away, I waited for daybreak. I very carefully unzipped the tent and peeked out to make sure it was safe. Don't laugh. I'd like to see you in my place! I made a fire, warmed some

water, and gently woke up the French "royalty." (I didn't use the whistle.)

The sun came up, and flocks of Scaly-feathered Finches *Sporopipes squamifrons* descended into the trees around us. At first I thought they were some species of wild canaries. Looking through my field guide, the markings



Travels at the southern tip of Africa

of the female Lemon-breasted Canary *Serinus citrinipectus* looked very much like the Scaly-feathered Finch. The birds made my day.

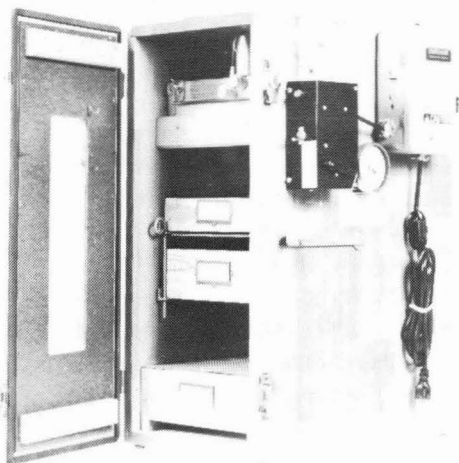
While sipping my morning coffee and eating my toast, a large bird landed next to me. It was a Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill *Tockus leucomelas*. He was looking at me, so I threw a piece of toast to him, and he ate it next to me. When I gave him a larger piece, he flew away with it.

After breakfast we left camp to explore the area. We observed many mammals, including oryx, kudu, and thousands of springboks. In the evening, further south in the Kalahari Reserve, we set up camp. At sunset, several Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris* flew up in the tree above my tent. There they settled for the evening. For obvious reasons, I decided to move my tent away from the tree.

For supper we had creamed chicken with onions and rice. Leave it to the French to cook up a tasty meal. Sitting around the fire, while eating our delicious chicken, suddenly our big pot of chicken began moving. A jackal *Canis adustus* had grabbed the handle and started pulling on it. A gentle thump on his head with a wooden spoon terminated his desire for adventure.

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That night while in my tent, I was in my sleeping bag and wrapped in a heavy blanket. My tent was very small, and I had to position myself from corner to corner. With my feet in the corner against the tent, I felt something—like somebody was squeezing my foot. Suddenly, I realized it must be an animal. I yelled and scared it away. It was the jackal who smelled my feet, thought it was chicken, and took a bite. The next morning, the group didn't believe me, but the ripped tent and teeth holes convinced them. The animal's teeth didn't reach my skin. The heavy blanket had protected my feet. Needless to say, I had a very restless night, being apprehensive the jackal would come back. To top it off, early in the morning, I heard a lion roar in the distance. Can you imagine if the lion had grabbed my foot? No thanks! I came to the conclusion that it wasn't very safe sleeping in a tent. Unfortunately, I had no choice.

I got up at daybreak just in time to see the guineafowl leaving the trees, gliding to the ground and emitting loud squawking sounds. These are very large birds that resemble large chickens. When the sun came up, many small birds went up into the trees. The most obvious of the birds I spotted was the Crimson-breasted Shrike *Laniarius atrococcineus*. The whole underside from tail to beak is scarlet red. The head, back and tail are pitch black. One feather in the wing is white. Here are other birds seen in the area:

- Black-chested Prinia *Prinia subflava*,
- Cape Sparrow *Paser melanurus*,
- Kalahari Robin *Erythropgyia paena* (this one had a beautiful song),
- Scaly-feathered Finch *Sporopipes squamifrons*,
- Violet-eared Waxbill *Uraeginthus granatinous*,
- White-browed Robin *Erythropgyia paena*.

We stayed at this campsite for two days. I heard the Kalahari Robin singing all day long. In the afternoon we went exploring the area. Again we saw many mammals. One of the highlights was the sighting of a Spotted Eagle Owl *Bubo africanus*. The owl was on the ground and stood still while we slowly cruised by him. (I hope I have identified the owl properly.)

We returned to the campgrounds for

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our last night in the Kalahari Desert. The next day we traveled south to reach Xade, the exit control station of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. The station was a nice change. There were many large trees and water. Flocks of Red-headed Finches *Amadina erythrocephala* flew from tree to tree. Also, there were flocks of Yellow Canaries *Serinus flaviventris*. This explains the scarcity of birds in the Kalahari Desert during the dry season. They migrate to where there is water and food. I'd like

to return to southern Africa during the wet season of November through March to see many of the birds that I missed.

After a short stay in Xade, we drove west all day through the very dry and sandy territory of the Kalahari Desert. In the late afternoon we reached the town of Ghanzi. We were now very close to the Namibia border. There, we camped in the back yard of a motel that had very nice grassy grounds and a high wall all around. The showers

had hot water. We ate supper in a restaurant that was part of the same complex, and the food was delicious. That night I slept in my little tent with no fear of being eaten by a lion. Boy, did I sleep! !

Into Namibia

The next day we fueled our land cruisers and headed for the city of Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. After a short drive, we crossed the border, checking out and in through government officials of both countries. The roads were now wide and paved. Often we had to stop and give the right of way to herds of cattle. Native cowboys on horses herded the cattle, reminiscent of the old western movies. We passed by many carts drawn by two donkeys. The natives driving them always waved at us in a friendly way. The scenery reminded me of the Arizona desert: flat sandy expanses with high hills in the far distance.

Late in the afternoon, we reached those hills, where the city of Windhoek is located. As we entered Windhoek through a winding road in between the rolling hills, beautiful houses lined the sides of the hills on both sides of the road. People of German origin inhabit the city of Windhoek. We arrived at the center of the city that occupies about 10 square blocks. Large, very modern buildings line the four-lane streets, giving the impression of being back home.

We drove to the house where Christophe, Babeth, and Mary Lu live. After unloading all the equipment, they drove me to a bed and breakfast inn where I would stay for three days. I was greeted by a third generation African-born German who spoke perfect English, German and Afrikaans. I had no doubt what to do, since he gave me very concise rules to follow, spoken very loudly in English with German accent. I felt very safe in this place, fenced with 10-foot walls all around. On top of the wall there was two feet of coiled barbedwire, and on top of the barbedwire there was a two-string electric fence which interfered with my radio reception as it clicked on and off. My room was cozy with a shower. What a luxury it was after 17 days of camping! The garden had a

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small aviary with a mixed collection of birds, mostly Peach-faced Lovebirds *Agapornis Roseicollis*.

While relaxing and enjoying the garden, a small flock of birds flew in. At first the birds appeared to be Australian Cockatiels. They were gray, with a long tail and a crest. I could not believe they would be in Africa. But after they came down to drink from a birdbath, it became obvious that they were White-backed Mousebirds *Colius colius*. It was fun observing them at a close range. They had very short legs and walked very fast, giving the illusion of a mouse.

In the afternoon I went into downtown Windhoek. Many stores offered beautiful regional crafts and hardwood carvings. There were many street vendors selling their arts and crafts. And yes, I found a pet store. It was a typical pet store with many birds for sale: canaries, parakeets, finches, and parrots. A Military Macaw and a Blue and Gold were \$1,200.00 (American dollars) each. Canaries were for sale at \$15.00, and Gouldian Finches at \$20.00. No native birds were available.

The Deserts of Namibia

After three days in Windhoek enjoying the niceties of civilization, we left again to visit the deserts of Namibia. The first morning we traveled north on a paved road through several towns: Okahandja, Otjiwarongo, Ontio, and Khorixas. Then, a dusty dirt road took us to the edges of the Damaraland Desert. That night we camped next to some huge boulders called Adam and Eve in an area reminiscent of our Southern California's low desert.

The next day we drove in a direction to find a dry river called the Huab. Mind you, we were no longer on the road. We were following car tracks hoping that the previous car went in the right direction.

According to readings from my GPS receiver, we traveled in an easterly direction. The next day, we reached the dry river, Huab, and continued to travel eastward along the river. At one point we were forced to cross the river. It was a touch and go situation. At this point, only the driver was in the car, and the rest of us were pushing in order to make it across. I was very apprehen-

sive, but we did make it across. Now we were heading in a northerly direction, and in the late afternoon we reached an area of sand dunes where we camped for two days. A GPS reading gave me 20 degrees 39 minutes South, and 13 degrees 56 minutes East. It was now the 21st of June 1998.

In the morning, we left camp to explore the area. We climbed to a higher elevation where we found an abandoned windmill still pumping water into an open reservoir. There was a huge tree next to it where we parked in the shade to have our lunch. Someone yelled, "Tony, there are birds up in the tree." I could not believe my eyes. In this godforsaken place, dry, with no vegetation whatsoever, to see birds was incredible. They were Peach-faced Lovebirds. After looking up the bird in my field guide, I learned that Namibia is its general habitat. Evidently, the water was what attracted them to this place. I attempted to take some still pictures of them, but did not succeed. I did take some video of them though.


We traveled for the next several days


through the deserts of Namibia, but I never saw the birds again. During our remaining days, we traveled north to reach a dry river, the Hoanib. Once we reached the Hoanib, we drove east to reach our last campground. The location of our last camp was at 19 degrees 13 minutes South, and 13 degrees 23 minutes East. In the Hoanib River we saw many elephants and giraffes. I was warned not to approach the elephants too close when taking pictures. They are very dangerous, especially in this area. We also observed very deep holes in the riverbed dug by elephants to find water.

We left our last campsite on the 26th of June, and was I glad! We drove to Sesfontain, then on a dirt road to Kamanjab, and continued on to Windhoek on a paved road. I was glad to be back in a walled, barbed-wired motel in Windhoek!

Heading For Home


The next day I flew to Johannesburg, South Africa, then on to New York and Los Angeles.

Do I regret taking the trip? No. Would I go to Africa again? Yes! 



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