



The Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park

(KTP) is an amalgamation of the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park of South Africa and the Gemsbok and Mabuasehube Parks of neighbouring Botswana, creating a massive 38 000 square kilometre reserve. It comprises miles and miles of linear sand dunes, acacia savannah, fossilised riverbeds and salt pans.

The 1999 amalgamation – the first of its kind in the region – meant that visitors could cross over into Botswana, or vice versa, without having to leave the park.

The KTP is located in the middle of the vast Kalahari Basin – a continuous sand field that covers some 2.5 million sq km and extends into much of Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, and in fact even encroaches into parts of Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Although part of the same park, the South African and Botswana areas differ, both physically and in terms of tourism ethos.

KGALAGADI TRANSFRONTIER PARK

The big dry wilderness

This is one of the largest and wildest parks in southern Africa, where the Kalahari's unique scenery, superb birding, incredible game viewing and distinct aura of desolation combine to create a truly amazing wildlife holiday experience

Text and photographs: Leon Marais



A-frame structures provide shade, but so does a large camelthorn tree! Insert: Eagle out on the hunt.



Lions have right of way in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park.

Physically the South African side, forming the western third of the park, is drier and more desert-like. Although often called a desert, the Kalahari is subject to erratic rather than permanently low rainfall. Parts of it receive more than 250mm annually and are quite well vegetated while others, particularly the southwest, receive less than 175mm. Thus the southwest is characterised by long, parallel, non-shifting red sand dunes, covered with sparse clumps of hardy grasses.

There are two fossilised riverbeds – the Auob crossing through the South African section of the park and the Nossob forming the political border between the two countries. These tend to form the centre of animal movements, especially during dry times when the artificial water holes in the riverbeds are the only water sources for hundreds of square kilometres.

The Botswana side of the park, which makes up about two-thirds of the total, is

generally wetter and characterised by tall grasses, open acacia savannah and numerous salt pans.

In terms of the differing tourism ethos, the South African side carries larger numbers of tourists and is far easier to visit. There are three main rest camps with shops, fuel, chalets and camping facilities, and the roads are accessible by normal vehicles, although the corrugations can be rough.

The recent development of "wilderness" camps allows for a more exclusive experience for those with deep pockets. There are also other adventure options such as the Nossob 4x4 Eco-trail, which links up to Botswana's awesome Gemsbok Wilderness Trail, as well as the 13km Leeudrill 4x4 Loop.

Across the way in Botswana the style is totally different and is suited to smaller numbers of self-sufficient tourists. There are no rest camps or shops. No fuel or water is available and roads require vehicles with

high clearance and 4x4 low-range capability.

Camping spots are very basic, with only A-frame shelters and "long-drop" toilets. While it is less accessible, this is where a true wilderness experience is to be found.

In terms of climate, the Kalahari has a winter dry season (April to November) and a summer wet season (December to March). Summer temperatures vary between 20 and 40°C, while in winter, when days usually remain warm, night temperatures can drop below freezing point.

While the KTP has a bird list of around 280 species, a large portion are nomadic, migratory and vagrant species, reflecting the harshness of the environment and the need to be adaptable and mobile in order to survive the sometimes harsh conditions. This is also reflected in the nomadic nature of the antelope.

For birders, the Kalahari is a favourite venue for two main reasons: raptors and

Below left: Good rains mean watering holes right next to the road, and good grazing. Below right: This is the life... A frosty and a room with a view.





Clockwise from top left: Secretary bird in flight; red hartebeest; moving house; inquisitive mongoose; catching the early morning sun; meerkat manor.

sociable weavers. No fewer than 28 diurnal raptor species can be seen in the park, and there are six owl species to take over the hunting duties by night. The artificial water holes are an attraction for birds, especially the seed-eaters such as doves, finches and sand grouse, which need regular access to surface water.

Raptor species such as lanner and red-necked falcons and the Gabar goshawk often hunt around these water holes, and a patient birder (if there is such a thing) can be rewarded with incredible action scenes

when the flocks erupt into chaos as a hungry lanner screams down from above.

At the top end of the scale there are eagles such as the mighty martial eagle, tawny eagle, bateleur, and brown and black-chested snake eagles. Smaller raptors include the diminutive pygmy falcon, often seen in the vicinity of the giant weaver nests found in many of the larger camel thorn trees (*Acacia erioloba*). The nests are always a hive of activity as the weavers come and go, and often provide homes for other species such as barn owls and spotted eagle owls.

These food larders also attract predators, and an observant visitor may well spot an orange-gold Cape cobra trying to steal a fledgling from a nest-hole. Red-crested and northern black korhaan, Ludwig's and kori bustards and secretary birds are some of the bigger birds that can be seen wandering the dunes and fossil riverbeds, as can the largest of them all, the common ostrich.

Other notable birds include finch-larks, buntings, larks, pipits, rollers, canaries, waxbills, hornbills and hoopoes, to mention but a few.

On the mammal side, the park is home to predators such as lion, leopard, cheetah, brown hyena, spotted hyena (uncommon), aardwolf, honey badger, caracal, African wildcat and the tiny black-footed cat.

The original Gemsbok Park was estab-

lished to protect the herds of nomadic antelope that wander much of southwestern Botswana. When rains have fallen and grass growth is good, the riverbeds, pans and other flat areas can be crowded with gemsbok, springbok, red hartebeest and blue wildebeest.

At other times of the year, or during drier-than-normal times, the park can seem deserted, with most of the prominent antelope having long since disappeared into the vastness of the Kalahari in search of water and grazing.

You may also see giraffe (uncommon), ground squirrel, steenbok, whistling rats, aardvark, porcupine, springhares, snakes, tortoises and the masses of barking geckos that give the early evening such character through their territorial clicking.

All in all, the KTP offers a unique birding experience that's augmented by the Kalahari's awesome scenery, wildlife and remoteness.

A black-maned lion roaring from atop a red sand dune, a herd of face-painted gemsbok crowded together to look like a medieval spear-bearing army, a flock of ostriches running across the bed of a fossilised river... these are some of the sights and sounds that await the intrepid birder and wildlife enthusiast in the great Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. ●

TRAVEL PLANNER

For more information, look at South African National Parks' website, www.sanparks.org.

For the Nossob 4x4 Eco-Trail, book at the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park: 054 561-2000; Fax 054 561 2005, and for the Gemsbok Wilderness Trail contact the Botswana Parks and Reserve Reservations PO Box 131, Gaborone, Botswana: +267 318 0774; Fax +267 318 0775, or dwnpbots@global.bw.