

A NAMIBIAN SAFARI
29th April to 14th May 2018
John Watmough

Four of us: Alan and Marion Brown, David Kirkbright and myself, flew into Windhoek's airport via Johannesburg, where we were met by our organisers Roy Earle and Janice Round, as well as Vaida Burbaite who had travelled from Vilnius via Schiphol. Our objective was primarily to see Lithops in habitat, though we pretended to be ordinary tourists now and again. For instance, we photographed each other grinning under the sign “Tropic of Capricorn” just south of Rehoboth.



Dramatis Personae: Janice Round, David Kirkbright,
Marion Brown, Alan Brown, Vaida Burbaite, Roy Earle.

We took a couple of days out to look at wild animals in the Etosha National Park. This is an area the size of Wales in the north of Namibia dedicated to wildlife conservation. We saw giraffes, wildebeest, zebra, and of course elephants, but not big cats. Roy revealed himself to be a serious ornithologist, and with his guidance the trip would have been a wonderful experience even if we had gone just to see the birds.



David and Bristles.

Vaida had been initially wary when she found out she was the only young person on the trip. However, she soon asserted herself as a young woman should, and her subtle sense of humour was revealed when she accused Roy of planting the Lithops just ahead of our visit. Of course Roy knew where the Lithops were: Namibia is his native land and his chief interest is the study and conservation of these plants. Vaida with her young eyes was our champion Lithops spotter. Finding the plants is by no means easy. Fortunately the eastern half of the country had recently experienced rain and the Lithops were plump and often in flower. In the west it had not rained. Our trip to Lüderitz to see *Lithops optica rubra* was abortive. As it happened, it rained there for the first time in seven years just after we came home, and a few days later the plants had popped up above ground level and had started to come into flower.



Cormorants at Luderitz

On day 8 we reverted to tourist mode to see the Welwitschias in the Namib-Naukluft Park. There the biggest Welwitschia in the world has a fence around it and a viewing platform. In the old days people like us used to photograph each other sitting on top of the plant.



The Biggest Welwitschia in the world

Most nights we stayed in “Guest Farms” or “Lodges”. Because of the aridity of the land, the farmers (at least the ones we met) resorted to a variety of expedients to eke a living out of a patch of ground sometimes big enough to build Greater London on. One method that benefited us was taking in paying guests to see their wild plants and animals. Alas, one farmer, the custodian of a Cole-numbered locality near Bethanie, had discovered some Germans on his property with a shopping bag full of Lithops, and now he keeps visitors out with a shotgun.

Also near Bethanie is the site of *Lithops schwantesii* v. *urikosensis* where Roy has indeed been replanting them. Bethanie is the nearest town (about 50 km) to the epicentre of Lithops studies, the Alte Kalköfen (Old Lime Kiln) Lodge. This is where the magnificent Cole Lithoparium is situated. It contains some of the Cole collections and other Lithops bequeathed by the late Tok Schoeman, plus experimental breeding programmes. Fancy cultivars and the new giant *pseudotruncatella* can be seen too. Unfortunately thieves have even penetrated this sanctuary. The proprietors, Frikkie and Hilde Mouton, have sought to interest other farmers, who are now keeping a close eye on their land. In this way more than a hundred new sites have been identified since the Coles. One of these that we visited was identified to the Moutons by the son of a roadscraper, that is, a man who operates the heavy plant that keeps the unmetalled roads in good order.



Alte Kalköfen - inside the Cole Lithoparium

I was delighted to be able to visit the Fish River Canyon, which is said to be the second biggest canyon in the world. The 13 kilometres leading to the Fish River Lodge are rugged indeed, not made any easier by four-by-fours arrogating precedence by virtue of superior traction. The management do not like visitors to go unchaperoned to the site of *Lithops schwantesii* v. *schwantesii* “Grey form” among the piles of klipspringer droppings. (Note to growers: do not spare the fertiliser.) Perhaps they do not want the plants stolen, or perhaps they do not want visitors falling into the ravine.

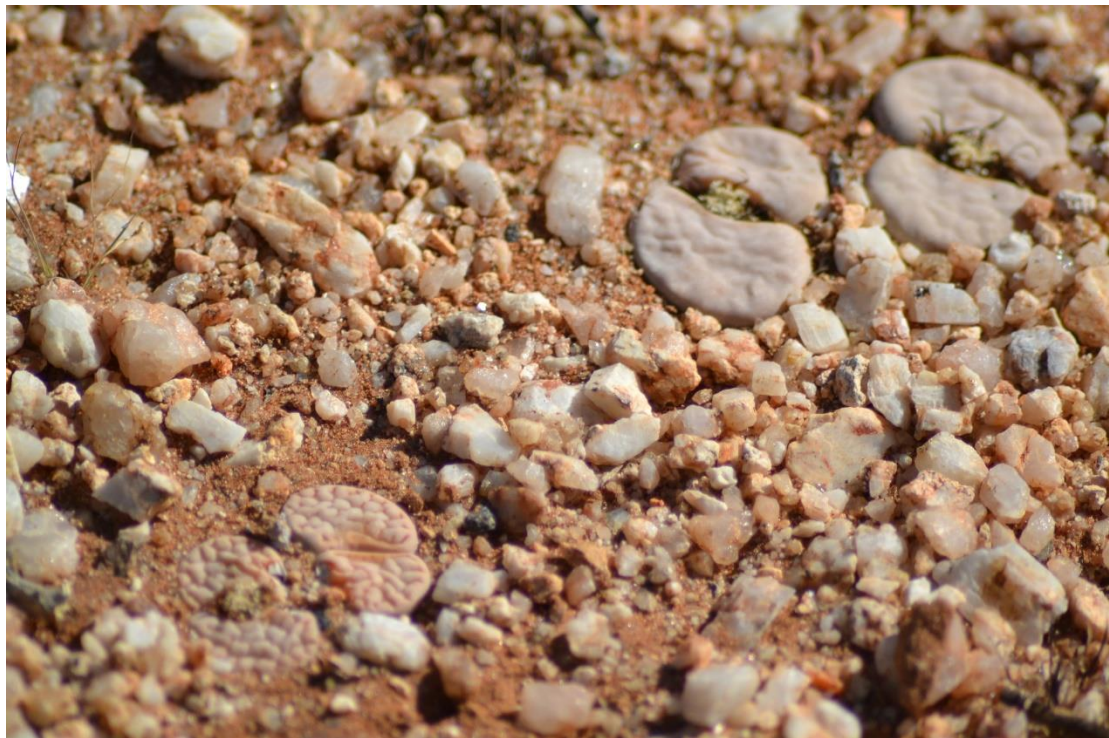


Fish River Canyon



Klipspringer dung

On our last day of exploration we found ourselves outside Karasburg at the type locality of *Euphorbia rudis*, where the ground was covered with *Pelargonium odoratissimum* almost overwhelming with its sweet fragrance. At another site near the town we found both the immaculate and the reticulate forms of *Lithops julii* growing together.



Immaculate and Reticulate forms of *Lithops julii* growing together

There followed an epic drive, refuelling at Keetmanshoop, through dusk and dark to Mariental, surely qualifying Roy for competing in Le Mans. We screeched to a stop at our hotel only to find that they were not expecting us, even though they had acknowledged our booking by e-mail. They did manage to find us rooms but all the eateries were shut, except the nearby Wimpy Bar, because it was a Sunday. So we celebrated our last night in Namibia with coffee and rooibos, and in Roy's case a luminous green confection, instead of Pinotage.

Overall we visited by my count twenty-five Lithops sites, with plants seen at twenty-four of them. We saw lots of other succulents, wild animals, beautiful birds and some amazing landscapes; enjoyed delightful hospitality, Janice's cheese and ham, cheese, ham or neither sandwiches in remote places, and Roy's almost bad language-free driving over no fewer than 5,500 kilometres. It was the most wonderful fortnight.



A Presidential potful