



WILDERNESS

NAMIBIA WILDLIFE & ECOLOGY

Namibia is a country of astonishing contrasts, home to the oldest desert on the planet, the white salt pans of Etosha National Park, the uninhabited beaches of the Skeleton Coast and the vast wilderness of Kaokoveld. These unique landscapes are not only home to an astonishing diversity of wildlife, but also to endemic and special wildlife that are found nowhere else on Earth. There are approximately 4 000 species of plants, over 650 bird species and 80 large mammal species.



The landscape is defined by an arid, harsh climate and a long geographical history. The western part of the country has a mixture of enormous sand dunes, open plains, rugged valleys, escarpments and mountains and it is here that the oldest desert on the planet, the Namib, is found. The eastern interior is a sand-covered, more uniform landscape and contains the country's second great desert: the Kalahari, a vast and sparsely vegetated savannah that sprawls across the border into South Africa and Botswana.

The flat vastness of Namibia's deserts is relieved by a belt of broken mountains and inselbergs (the highest is the Brandberg at 2 579 m / 8 461 feet above sea level), deep dry river valleys that serve as linear oases, savannah and woodlands, and long stretches of sandy beaches along the dramatic Skeleton Coast. All this is in contrast to the rich grasslands, and subtropical woodlands of the Caprivi area in the north-east, the mopane woodlands of Etosha National Park, and the rich coastal lagoons of the Atlantic Ocean on the western coastline.

Namibia's maze of national parks, reserves and community conservancies makes up an impressive 20% of the country, providing many pristine areas for unrivalled wildlife observation. Out of the country's total mammal fauna of over 200 species – a diverse range from plains zebra to lion – at least 15 are currently regarded as endemic: the dune hairy-footed gerbil is entirely restricted to the Namib, and Hartmann's mountain zebra, Damara dik-dik, black-faced impala and the rock-loving dassie rat all have 75% or more of their population occurring solely in Namibia.

However, the most unique and eye-catching must be the assemblage of arid-adapted species or subspecies found here. These include the likes of the acclaimed 'desert elephants', suricates (meerkats), Cape and bat-eared fox, short-eared elephant-shrew, striped tree squirrel, Grant's golden mole, secretive brown hyaena, 40% of Africa's cheetah population, specialist antelope such as gemsbok and springbok, and the largest free-ranging population of black rhino on the continent.



The dryer Namibian interior harbours many range-restricted birds, several with distributions only marginally extending into neighbouring South Africa or Angola. Apart from one true endemic species – dune lark – there are close on 20 near-endemic and a multitude of other bird species that are harder to find elsewhere in the subregion, such as Burchell’s courser. Coastal wetlands like Walvis Bay Lagoon are of international importance and host many migratory shorebirds in the African summer. The Namib escarpment is where the majority of Namibia’s avian specialities are found, such as Herero chat, rockrunner, Benguela long-billed lark, violet wood-hoopoe, Damara and Monteiro’s hornbill and the enigmatic white-tailed shrike. The gravel plains adjacent to the coast are far from lifeless and careful scrutiny can produce the cryptic Gray’s lark and tractrac chat. The moist woodlands of the north-east add further avian diversity owing to the lushness of its environs.

Namibia, as a country dominated by desert, aridity and plentiful sunlight, means that conditions are perfect for reptiles. The rate of endemism and specialisation amongst its 258 recorded reptile species makes it the richest lizard fauna in Africa. In addition, the country is blessed with varied reptile genera, making it an exciting destination to observe these fascinating ancient creatures. Reptiles are found in abundance throughout the country from the Namib Desert to Etosha, the Skeleton Coast and the rocky plains of Damaraland; central and north-western Namibia are particularly rewarding. The continuous shifting sands of the Namib are the ideal hunting ground for species such as Peringuey’s adder, shovel-snouted lizard and the beautiful, almost translucent Namib dune (web-footed) gecko. The rocky landscape of Damaraland is just as bejewelled in colourful and interesting reptilian life: from the vivid Namib rock agama to the super-fast Kaokoveld sand lizard.

WILDLIFE



650 bird species



258 reptile species



200+ larger mammal species



4,000+ plant species