THE
KGALAGADI
TRANSFRONTIER PARK

KGALAGADI: A Nature Photographer’s Paradise
by Mario Fazekas

The Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park is the ideal destination for photographers who enjoy wide-open spaces and true wilderness, the freedom to come and go as they please, and also enjoy their comforts.

The Park is the favorite destination for many nature photographers for a variety of reasons, including:

• **Uniqueness** - The Kgalagadi is unique in that it comprises an endless sea of red sand dunes and provides photographers with exceptional opportunities for photographing landscapes, birds, macros and wildlife. The lack of thick vegetation ensures that photographers have very little clutter in their photos and the red sand dunes provide a most unusual backdrop.

• **Location and History** - The Park is situated in the Kalahari Desert in the Northern Cape province of South Africa and is bordered in the west by Namibia and by Botswana to the east.

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The Kalahari Gemsbok National Park was proclaimed in 1931 and merged with the Gemsbok National Park in Botswana to form Africa’s first Transfrontier Park.

- **Size** - The South African side is 10,000 square kilometers with 26,000 square kilometers in Botswana producing a huge park of 36,000 square kilometers. The South African side of the park gets over 120,000 visitors each year and this is the ideal self-drive destination for photo safaris.

- **Known for** - Birds of Prey, wilderness camps, over fifty waterholes along the tourist roads plus at the camps, fantastic shows of wildflowers, such as the devil’s claw in summer, and excellent photographic opportunities of mammals and magnificent landscapes, especially in summer when the thunderstorms produce amazing red and purple cloud formations.

- **Roads** - The roads leading to the park from Johannesburg and Cape Town are all tarmac, but the roads in the park are dirt roads. You do not need a 4x4 unless you are going into Botswana or staying at Bitterpan or Gharagab wilderness camps. There are about 500 kilometers of tourist dirt roads inside the park, excluding the 4x4 roads. The park is situated 350 km from Upington in the Northern Cape and about 900 km from Johannesburg. You can either fly to Upington and then hire a car, or drive as the roads are in good condition.

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• *Activities and Facilities* - You can go on morning or sunset drives, morning walks, 4x4 trails, self-drive safaris and there are lectures and slide shows at Twee Rivieren camp. There are just four game viewing roads - two long river roads that follow the dry Nossob and Auob riverbeds and two short dune roads that connect the two long roads. There are also picnic sites, shops at the three main camps and swimming pools at the three main camps plus Kalahari Tented Camp. Nossob and Mata Mata camps have hides in camp where you can watch animals drinking by day or night. All the camps, with the exception of Twee Rivieren, have their own waterhole where animals can be viewed day and night. Only Twee Rivieren, being the biggest camp, has a restaurant.

• *Accommodation* - There are three main camps (of which only Twee Rivieren and Mata Mata have air conditioning), one up-market lodge (IXaus Lodge) and six wilderness camps, all with fully equipped kitchens and en-suite bathrooms in the chalets and cabins. There are camping sites at the three main camps. ‘Twee Rivieren’ is Dutch for ‘Two Rivers’ and, as the name implies, the camp is situated at the confluence of the dry Nossob and Auob rivers.

The park's remoteness and true wilderness feel has an enchantment that draws us back year after year. As photographers we want to stay in areas of the park that produce good

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game viewing, in accommodation that is comfortable with adequate space to set up two or three tripods, and that offers privacy and solitude - the Kgalagadi wilderness camps provide all of this hence we stay only at the wilderness camps.

All these camps are unfenced, which makes them so appealing for people who want to get really close to nature and not have to photograph over or through high fences like in most of the Kruger Park and Pilanesberg camps.

There are tourism assistants on duty at all times and, in order to retain the serenity and exclusiveness of the wilderness camps, a maximum of eight people are allowed at each camp - two people in each of the four cabins. (The only exception is Kalahari Tented Camp as it has 15 tents).

All accommodation units at the Wilderness Camps have en-suite bathrooms, gas fridges and geysers, while solar panels provide electricity for lights. All the units have cooking utensils, cutlery, ceiling fans, bedding and towels, and are serviced daily.

The following details some features of the different camps, and recommendations for travelling photographers, based on our experiences at these sites:

1. Kieliekrankie - This is the highest camp, situated on one of the tallest dunes overlooking a private waterhole. The four dune cabins are spacious with number four being the most private as it is on the end.

The views by day are magnificent; you can see for miles. We have had regular
sightings of brown hyena, gemsbok, black-backed jackal, honey badgers, cape cobras, secretary birds and falcons. At night we have seen leopard, caracal, African wildcat, steenbok, porcupines, scorpions and owls. When there is a storm, the sight is spectacular with the sky changing color and lightning bolts lighting up the sky!

The waterhole is about 120 meters away so you will need at least a 400mm lens to photograph animals drinking. However, the resident leopard does walk between the cabins to and from the waterhole!

2. Urikaruus - This camp is built on stilts in the dry Auob riverbed and the four riverside cabins are connected by elevated walkways. The bedrooms and toilets are upstairs while the kitchens, dining rooms and decks are downstairs.

The views are not as impressive as at Krielkrankie or Gharagab camps but we have seen huge herds of springbok, wildebeest and Tsesbe walking past the cabins. We have seen lions, brown hyena, giraffe and cheetah at the private waterhole by day and even at night.

For wildlife photography this camp is great - especially if you don't have a long lens as the waterhole is just 50 meters from the cabins.

3. Gharagab - The camp is located in the far north of the park and the four log cabins are built on top of a dune providing superb views of the surrounding dunes and woodlands. In addition, there is a viewing deck behind the cabins that provides a 360-degree view of the area.

The private waterhole is about 70 meters from the cabins and we have seen lions drinking here most mornings and evenings. The opportunities to photograph sunrise, sunsets and lightning storms are excellent here. The road leading to the camp is 1-way and you need a 4X4 vehicle.

4. Kalahari Tented Camp - This camp is the largest of the wilderness camps as it has 15 en-suite desert tents made of sandbags and canvas.

The spacious tents are situated on a high sand dune overlooking a private waterhole in the dry Auob riverbed. This is the only

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wilderness camp that has a swimming pool
and where children under 12 are allowed.

This camp and Urikaruus are the only
two camps where we see giraffe. In addition
we have seen lions and large herds of
wildebeest and springbok. The waterhole
is about 120 meters away and the middle
tents (numbers 6 to 10) are the closest to
the waterhole. A 600mm f4 lens comes in
very handy at this camp!

5. Grootkolk - This camp, like Bitterpan, has
a communal cooking area so is best suited
for small groups of friends. Each desert cabin,
however, does have its own braai (BBQ) should
you want your privacy. We found the units to
be a bit cramped.

The waterhole is about 70 meters from the
cabins and is not easy to view if the grass is
long. Also, the desert cabins are not raised so it
is difficult to see the waterhole even when the
grass is short! We have seen lions and leopards
in the area.

6. Bitterpan - The camp is situated in the
dunes and is built on stilts with wooden
walkways linking the reed cabins. Bitterpan
is ideal for small groups of friends as there is
a communal braai (BBQ) and campfire area.
The units are very close together and you
need to exit your cabin to get to the 'en-suite'
bathroom, so if you enjoy privacy this camp
may not be for you.

Behind the cabins, there is a six meter-high
lookout tower providing great views over the

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pan, waterhole and dunes. The road leading to the camp is a 1-way route and you must have a 4X4 to drive this road.

Wildlife Photography

Well, every year that we have been to the park we have witnessed a cheetah kill! Two of the kills happened right outside our cabin at Uinkaruus wilderness camp while the others were in the Nossob, Auob or lower dune roads.

In addition you will get to see the ‘Kings of the Kalahari’ - the famed black-maned Kalahari lions, gemsbok, leopards, meerkats, bat-eared foxes, Cape cobras, brown hyenas, and many other superb photo subjects that you will be able to photograph without worrying about thick bush getting in the way or spoiling your backgrounds!

Bird Photography

Even though the Kgalagadi offers a wide range of birds (over 280 bird species have been recorded) it is most well known for its birds of prey.

There are three main birding environments in the park; the dune roads, the Nossob and Auob riverbeds, and the three main camps. Most bird species are found throughout the park but some tend to be more common in one of these three environments.

Check the trees in the three main camps for owls and other bush-veld species. Most of our raptor sightings have been at the waterholes along the Auob and Nossob river roads.
Even if you are staying at one of the wilderness camps you should also be rewarded with good bird sightings, depending on which camp you are at. We have photographed Secretary Birds, Martial Eagles, Lanner Falcons, Pale Chanting Goshawks, Sand grouse and Owls from our dune cabins at the wilderness camps. The goshawks and falcons chase and catch Namaqua Doves and Sand grouse every day, providing us with a lot of ‘birds-in-flight’ practice!

Macro Photography

In most months you will find scorpions to photograph. In summer they are easier to find than in other seasons. In addition there are preying mantis, moths, armored ground crickets, geckos and a host of other insects that you can find by walking around Twee Rivieren, Mata Mata and Nossob camps.

If you are staying in the wilderness camps you are not allowed to walk around the camps as they are unfenced. Don’t fret, because many insects will come and pay you a visit at your dune cabin.

Landscape Photography

The park has the most unusual scenery - you have the contrasts between the blue African sky, deep red sand dunes, carpets of yellow and purple wild-flowers, white calcrite cliffs and the green camel thorn trees and shrubs.

The Auob and Nossob roads provide good opportunities but so do the wilderness

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camps, because they are mostly situated on top of high sand dunes. Our favorites are Kieliekrankie, Kalahari Tented Camp and Gharagab camps because of their height and panoramic views. Urikaruus, Bitterpan and Grootkolk camps are not situated as high but can also provide nice scenic photographs - you just need to be a bit more creative.

Twee Rivieren, Mata Mata and Nossob could also provide landscape opportunities but just watch out for telephone poles and other distractions that may make their way into your compositions.

The Kgalagadi is also one of the best parks to photograph star trails and star-points due to it being so far away from civilization; therefore far away from light and air pollution. Upington is the closest city, which is 300 kilometers away!

About Mario Fazekas
Mario is a wildlife photographer living in South Africa. He has been photographing African wildlife for over 15 years. Living just a 9-hour drive from the Kalahari he visits the park at least once a year. Both he and his wife have won photographic contests and have had their images published. For more information on the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park please visit his website at www.kruger-2-kalahari.com. You can also visit or contact Mario through his Facebook page!

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