

7 TIPS TO FIND & PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE IN ETOSHA (NAMIBIA)



Claudia & Wynand du Plessis
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Introduction:

1. Be knowledgeable
2. Be nosy & curious
3. Check the 'sightings book'
4. Drive at a snail's pace
5. Be present and observant
6. Prick your ears
7. Be ready to shoot (with your camera)



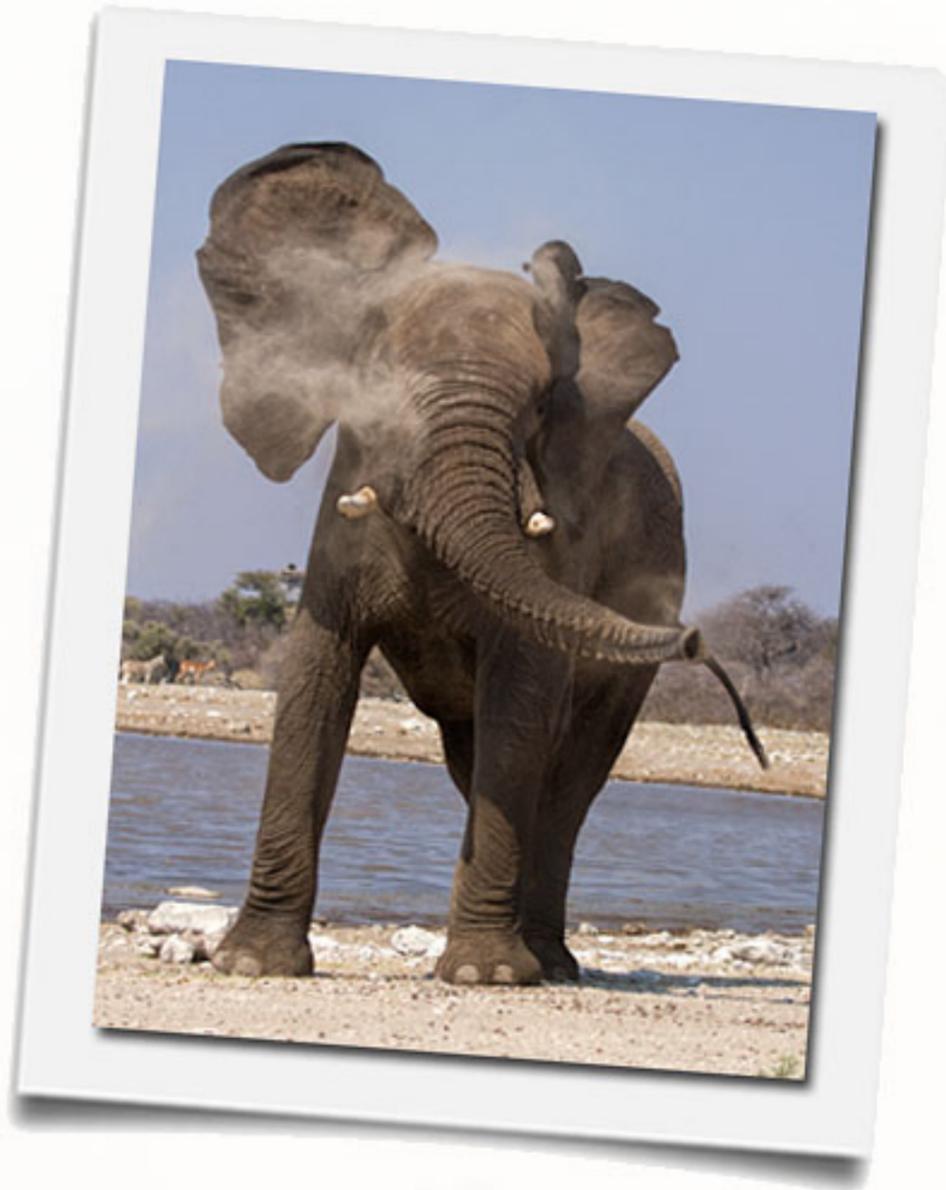
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Introduction:

Etosha is a magical place but let's be honest: the special happenings in the wilderness that we're all so keen to witness, such as a lion kill or a cheetah chasing after a springbok, are mostly not happening in front of us and our cameras just like that. For some reason the animals don't care whether we're around or not when they do their 'wild things'.



7 TIPS TO FIND & PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE IN ETOSHA



Since dragging the wildlife in front of our lens is not really a legitimate option, we've used other ways to increase our chances of experiencing special moments in the wild.

In short they can be summarized as **'prepare & be aware'**, meaning success is guaranteed with good preparation and knowledge beforehand, and keen awareness when you're out in the bush.



7 TIPS TO FIND & PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE IN ETOSHA



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Here are some of our basic but important tips in detail:

1) Be knowledgeable:

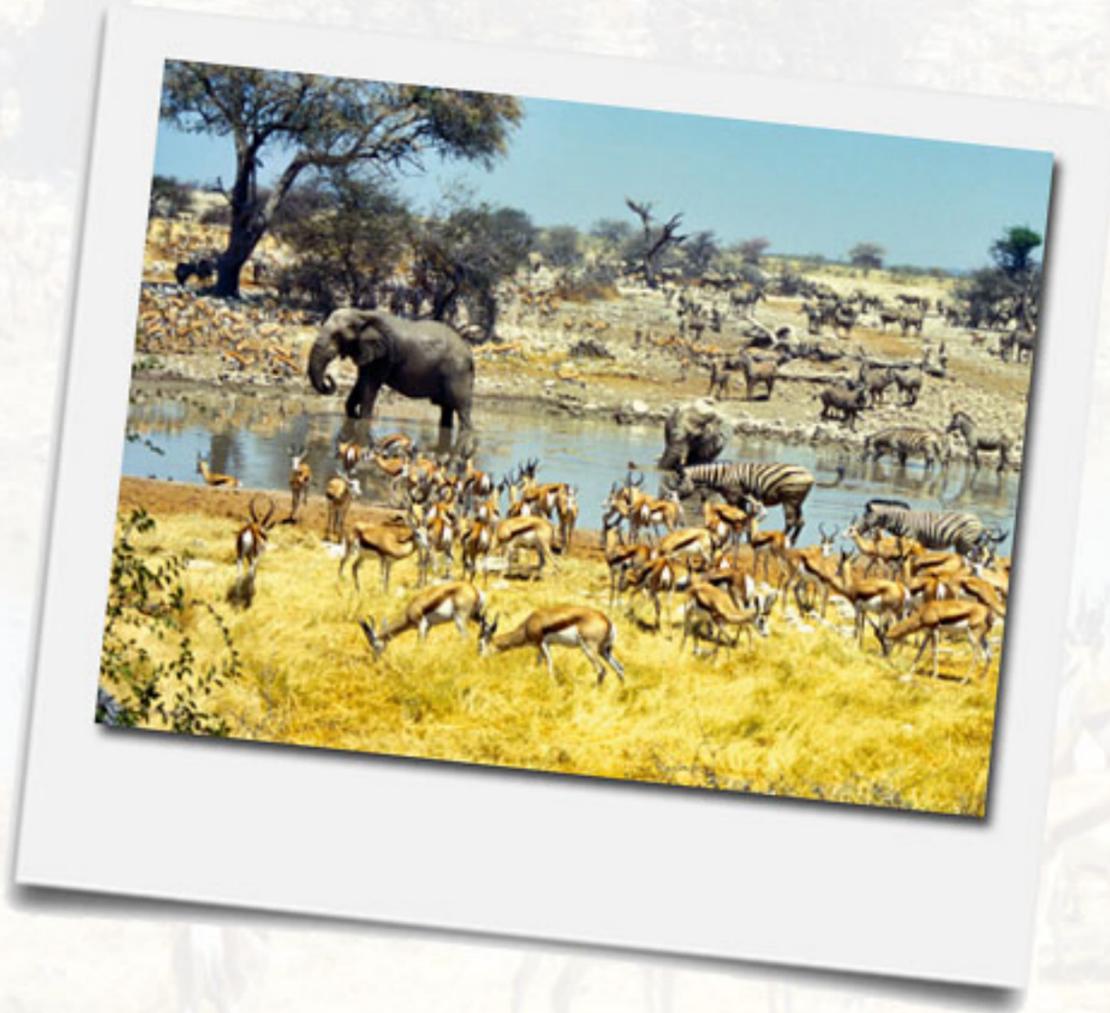
Knowing your subject is a key ingredient for success in many areas. This also applies to your safari in Etosha, where your knowledge on the seasonal rhythms of the Park, such as the drastic changes between the rainy & dry season, and on the specific behaviours of elephants, zebras and many other residents of Etosha are key to a successful wildlife experience.



7 TIPS TO FIND & PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE IN ETOSHA



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At the height of the dry season, for example, in August and September, there is much going on at the waterholes. Various animal species mix and mingle during the day and give you great opportunities to observe their drinking behaviour, social interactions and conflict between each other. In addition, predators hang out at many of these gatherings.

Therefore focusing on the most visited waterholes is a great strategy to experience and photograph special wildlife behaviour.



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On the other hand, if you are keen to see and photograph baby animals, such as zebra foals or springbok lambs, you should visit in the rainy season, around January to March, instead.

Most grazers time the birth of their offspring to coincide with the abundance of food and water in the rainy season to insure a great start of their little lives, a great strategy for the survival of their young.

Our best advise for a successful safari is to learn as much as you can about Etosha and the wildlife you will encounter before your trip, so that you know what to expect & what to look out for once you're there.



7 TIPS TO FIND & PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE IN ETOSHA



A valuable source of information and currently the only non-academic book available on the ecology of Etosha is our illustrated book **'Etosha - Rhythms of an African Wilderness'**. It contains valuable insiders' knowledge on what's going on in the Park, thus giving you a great idea of what to expect when & where and helping you to focus on what's most compelling to you.



7 TIPS TO FIND & PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE IN ETOSHA

2) Be nosy & curious:

Although being nosy is not a very popular personality trait, being curious – in a friendly manner – is a great way to hear about recent exciting animal sightings. As soon as you're booked into one of Etosha's camps use every opportunity to chat with people, e.g. your camp neighbor, the park ranger passing by or a tour guide you meet whilst standing in the cue when purchasing your cool drink at the shop.



7 TIPS TO FIND & PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE IN ETOSHA



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Most other visitors to Etosha are very willing to share their recent exciting sightings, thus giving you the exact location of a lion kill or an idea of the area where a cheetah family currently hangs out.

However, make sure the info is fresh, such as today's or at most yesterday's sighting. The unchanging nature of the wilderness is that it's always changing. Last week's observation of a lion kill is unfortunately old news, of which only some bones of the prey animal may have remained until today.



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3) Check the 'sightings book':

Besides liking to talk about their special encounters with wild animals, many friendly folks are eager to write about their exciting animal sightings in the 'Sightings Book' at the tourist offices.

We therefore recommend that you check the recent book entries just before you head out through the gate for a game drive or the night before you plan the route of your morning drive.



7 TIPS TO FIND & PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE IN ETOSHA



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When you find notes of 'fresh' predator sightings in the area head straight there before going anywhere else. Especially if a lion (leopard, hyena or cheetah) has been spotted at a kill only a few hours ago, the chances are good that you may find it still there, feeding on the carcass.



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And even if the previously sighted predator has moved on it might be the turn of the scavengers now, such as jackals, hyenas or vultures, to feast on the carcass.

Watching and photographing the scurrying & bickering between these animals might not always be pretty but are highly interesting to watch & photograph.

Ah, and don't forget to report your own special sighting with a note into the 'sightings book' as well.



7 TIPS TO FIND & PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE IN ETOSHA



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4) Drive at a snail's pace:

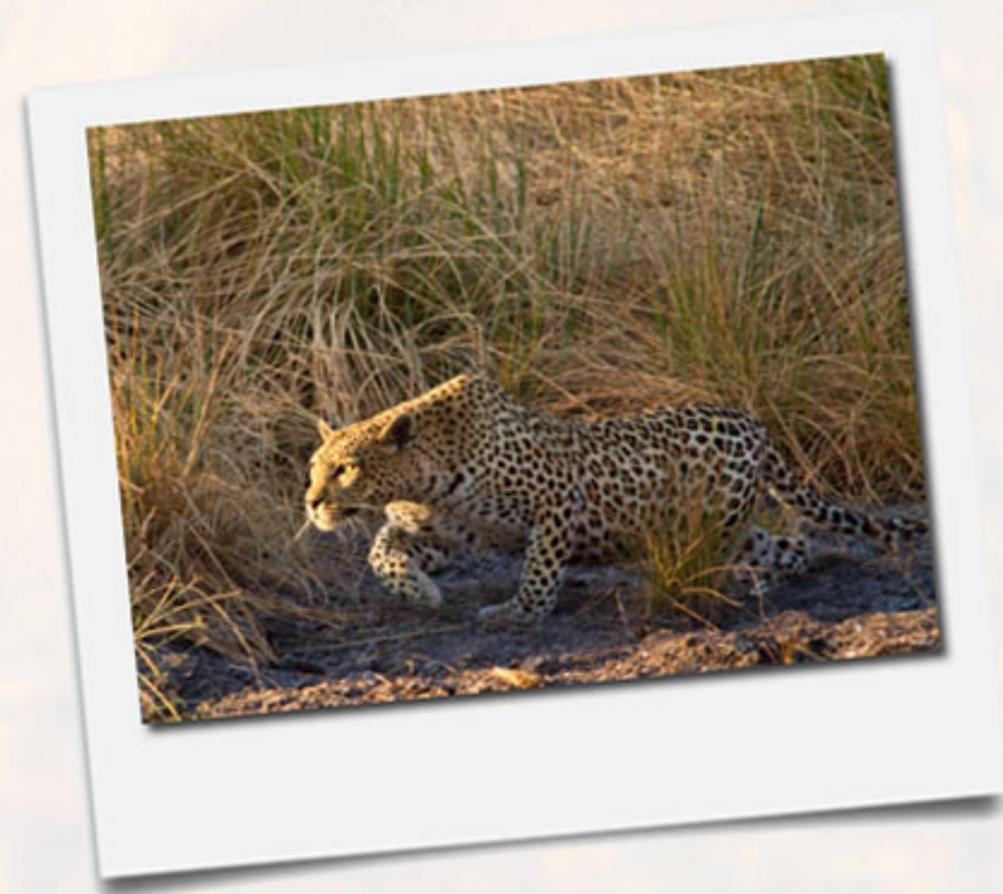
Honestly, most visitors drive past many more wild animals than they actually spot, especially predators or smaller mammals. As well as thick bush blocking the visibility in some areas, the main reason for this is 'speeding' – meaning going faster than 30 km/h.



7 TIPS TO FIND & PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE IN ETOSHA

Although Etosha's open landscape & wide roads are inviting to drive a little faster, going very slow, especially in dense vegetation, will drastically increase your chances of spotting wildlife that you would have entirely missed at a normal speed.

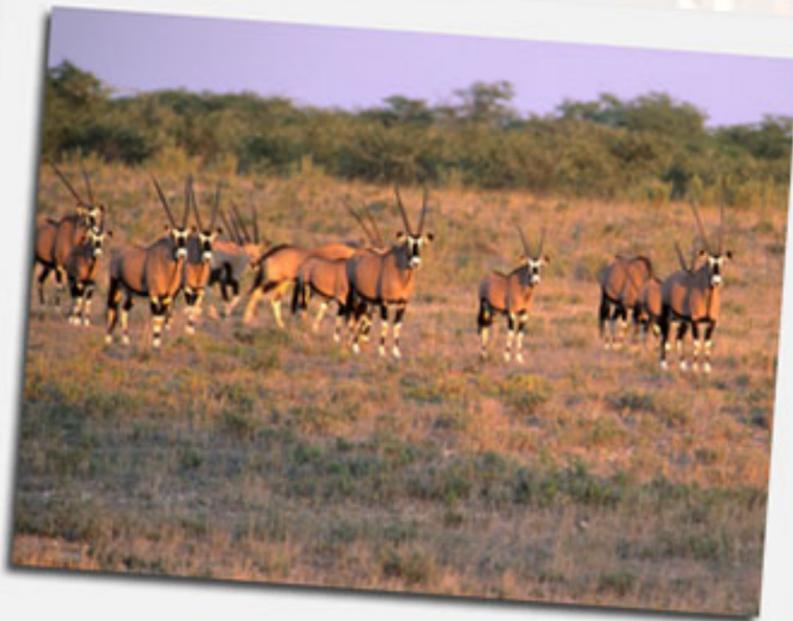
So chill out and drive reaaaaalllllyyyyyy slow.



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5) Be present & observant:

Whilst going on a game drive may give you a great opportunity to chat with your spouse about future plans it pays out to stay in the present moment & focused on where you are: namely here in Etosha, this amazing wilderness place where exciting stuff is happening right now.



For one it really does the soul good & has proven therapeutic benefits to experience the magic of the wild with all your senses. Besides that, being open to all the 'wild stuff' going on around you may have the side effect of you spotting situations that lead up to unusual & interesting wildlife encounters.

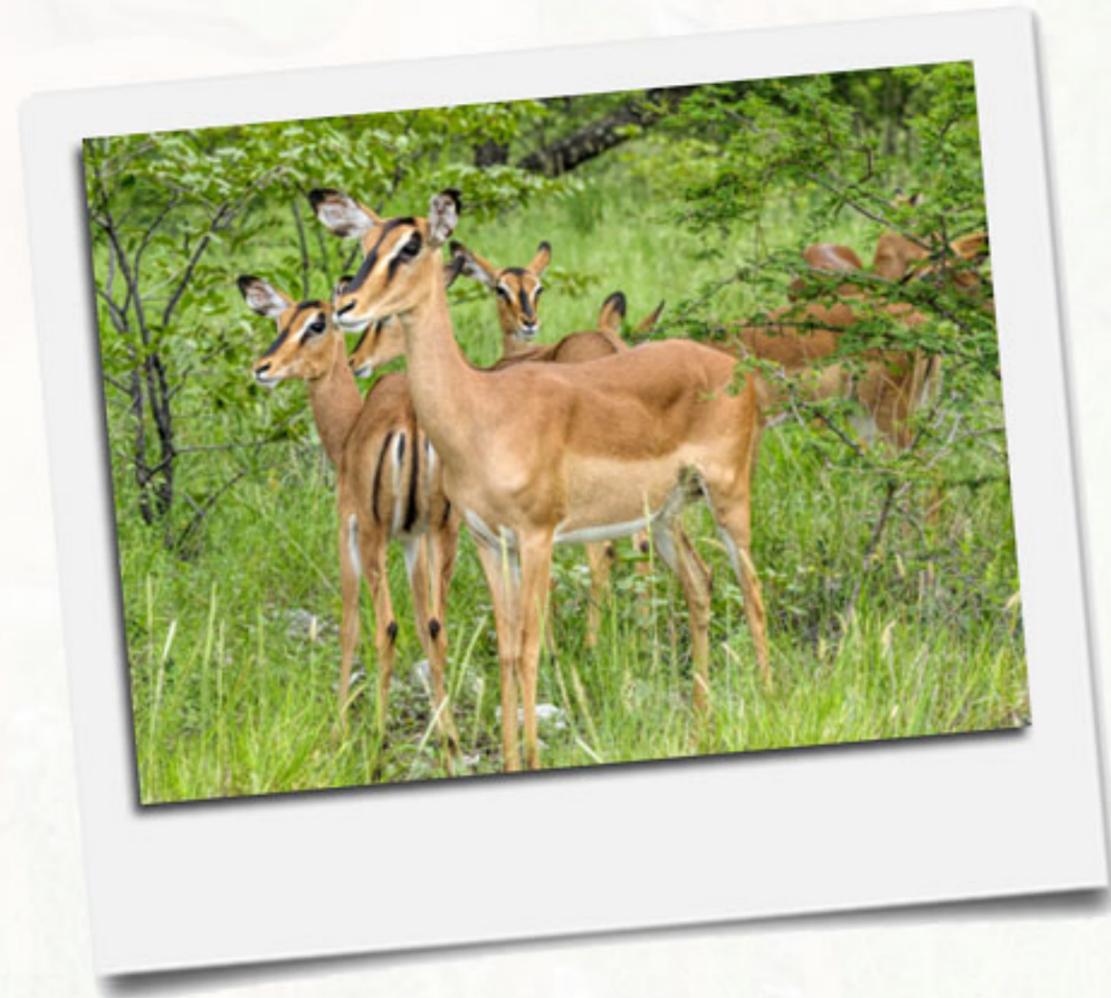


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If you for example find a herd of oryx, impala and other prey species, which are usually quite relaxed during their daily whereabouts, standing & staring in a specific direction, they may have picked up a scent that could mean potential danger to them, and probably a great predator sighting for you.



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Or you observe a large elephant bull approach a waterhole, where other bulls are drinking or bathing. When they meet they may display a greeting ritual or a short moment of conflict, so be observant & ready for the best moment to photograph.



7 TIPS TO FIND & PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE IN ETOSHA



In general, observing the wildlife & their body language and anticipating their imminent behavior is key to taking great photographs of interesting moments and interactions. Most of these don't happen out of the blue, but have certain intros leading up to these photogenic moments.

Although you may be new to the etiquette & wildlife's code of conduct in the African bush, you'll quickly learn to pick up interesting behavior if you're keen & observant.



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6) Prick your ears:

Besides the fact that it is plain wonderful to feel & smell the air of the wilderness with your car windows down, it can be quite useful to listen to the sounds of the wild as well.

Many of Etosha's wildlife, such as kudu, zebra or wildebeest, emit alarm calls, which often remind of barking sounds, when they spot a predator. Although their sole intention may be to 'tell' the predator 'Hey, I've seen you, you can't surprise me any more', the side effect of alerting other wildlife species & us can be very useful.



7 TIPS TO FIND & PHOTOGRAPH WILDLIFE IN ETOSHA



When you hear strange alarm calls, stop and try to find the animal emitting them. It will usually stand stiff, highly alert & face the predator walking past or hiding in the thicket. With these clues you may well spot the predator yourself.

Therefore restrain from the urge to blast out your favorite music and instead lower your car windows & prick your ears: you may witness the exciting stand-off between prey and predator.



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7) Be ready to shoot (with your camera):

And last but not least the most important point if you happen to be a keen photographer: be ready to press the shutter at any time. Etosha's wildlife, especially at short range, has a VERY short attention span, and may be rather shy.

Therefore, stopping your car, putting your bean-bag in the open window, placing your camera on top of it, framing your subject and shooting a few photos MUST all happen within a few precious seconds. That's all you've got, if you want to capture the flattering portrait of a zebra, before it turns around to present its backside to you or run off.



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But don't worry, if it doesn't work out in the beginning, practice makes perfect & creates master photographers ;-)

Use these basic but fundamental secrets of spotting & photographing amazing wildlife situations in Etosha and apply them yourself next time you are in the area!

NOW WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU:

Do you have any other tips on what helped you experience some special moments in Etosha? Or is there anything else you would like to know about photographing Etosha's magnificent wildlife?

Let us know by sending an email to: claudiaduplessis13@gmail.com

Wild greetings from the bush, *Claudia & Wynand du Plessis*

