



# ***On Foot with Shangani Trails In the Makuleke Concession!!***



## ***Newsletter January 2013***

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*Leopard, Luvuvhu East Makuleke Concession, Photo Rob Quayle*

## ***The Rains Finally Arrive!!***

*Having Gabe and Rikki Tyler from Nelson, British Columbia, Canada, join me for the first Hutwini Trail out of Wilderness Pafuri Camp for the 2013 Year, we arrived in Makuleke to be met with overcast skies and good signs of recent rain! The rain gods had, however, decided to remain with us over the next 5 days with over 200mm falling in the space of 48 hours. This resulted in the Limpopo and Luvuvhu rivers beginning to swell, SANPARKS closing road after waterlogged road and walking options reducing by the hour!*

*Notwithstanding their soggy impact on the Trail, the rains had finally arrived in the Northern Kruger after a particularly long dry season, filling the pans in all areas that will ultimately draw the big Elephant and Buffalo herds to the Limpopo floodplains and Fever Tree Forests while flooding the dry wetlands that will now once again attract the extraordinary variety of water birds and*



*waders that we have been used to seeing over the last three years but have been largely absent this year through the limited rains in early 2012.*



*The Luvuvhu River rages down towards Crooks Corner January 2013. Photo Rikki Tyler*



*Walking down to the Mutale Gorge, the river in full spate. January 2013 Photo Rikki Tyler*



## ***Review of 2012***

*The year produced an amazing number of quality sightings both from the vehicle and on foot. The volumes of elephant and buffalo were substantial with Luvuvhu West and the Limpopo Floodplain producing some great Trails with multiple encounters being experienced in many of the walks.*

*Walking into Luvuvhu West from Pafuri Camp, to the tented camp on the first afternoons of The Pafuri Walking Trail more often than not proved to be challenging with Elephant Breeding herds lining the river making it difficult for us to reach the camp. On more than one occasion we had to walk as far as Mangala Look-Out and then double back with the light fading fast!!*

*The Buffalo breeding herds largely hung around the Limpopo Floodplain with the areas between Hlangaluwe and Chichacha Pans proving to be particularly fruitful. One memorable 3 hour walk produced no less than 6 encounters with*



*Elephant Afternoon Mud Bath, Nwambe Pan, Makuleke Concession, Kruger National Park.*



*different buffalo herds and Dagga Boys. (The latter always allowing the adrenaline to flow rather freely!!) Leopard sightings proved to be regular occurrences particularly on Luvuvhu East and the Airstrip area while Lion continued to provide good opportunities in the Hutwini Gorge area and Mashashiti Spring.*

*The early demise of the wetlands aside, the birding in the Concession remained awesome particularly in the early spring with the return of the many Migrants from Europe and Central Africa. Vultures on an Impala carcass sighting involving interaction with Lappet Faced, White Backed, Hooded vultures and a jackal was particularly memorable on The Pafuri Walking Trail with Alister Bull and Natalia Cieslik from the USA.*

*Notwithstanding the worldwide economic woes, we have welcomed Guests from all over the world to both The Outpost Lodge and Wilderness Pafuri Camp. Your support over the last 12 months is very much appreciated and we look forward to you returning to our wonderful Makuleke Concession in the future.*

### ***Luvuvhu East Elephant Encounter***

*With my guests, Jan and Kristin Cerny from Calgary, Alberta, Canada, on the Limpopo Trail, we left The Outpost Lodge after lunch with the intention of walking in the Fever Tree Forest on Luvuvhu East. With elephant having thus far eluded us on the trip, I placed my bets on this area and it did not let me down! Baboons, Kudu and warthog kept us company as we turned off Pafuri Main onto the Pafuri Camp access road and then on to Luvuvhu East where Nyala and Impala took over the role of entertaining us. We had not gone far into the Riverine Forest when we came across a few Elephant Bulls about 200m in to our left. The larger bull ambled off into the Fever Trees but the two younger bulls walked directly towards us turning only at the last minute to pass behind us. A good first sighting for Jan and Kristin.*

*Moving further on we came across a further three bulls close to the road on our right, all had just come from the river, the dark, damp areas standing out clearly from the dusty brown of the dry skin. One bull was a bit concerned, standing tall, ears out but calmed down as he realised we were no threat. There were more elephant behind these three but we only realised how big the herd of bull elephants was when we moved further and the area opened up. We counted 17 in our immediate area with a few very large bulls indeed.*





*The large herd of Elephant Bulls moving on Luvuvhu East, Makuleke Concession. Photo Jan Cerny.*

*We moved slowly with the herd as they made their way eastwards in the Fever Tree Forest, allowing another Wilderness Pafuri Camp vehicle to go through, choosing to show some patience to see what the bulls were looking to do. In addition, elephant sightings had been scarce so we took the opportunity to savour their presence.*

*With the herd looking as they were going to cross over the road onto the northern side of the road, we switched off the engine and waited to see what would happen. Sure enough they began to cross, a really exciting moment seeing all of these huge animals so close in front of us. I realised then that we were only just short of the point on the road where we were supposed to jump-off for our walk, little chance of that happening now with all these elephants around us!*

*With the herd now split on either side of the road we stayed back to avoid being sandwiched in between the elephants but with cameras clicking away I heard Jan exclaim “he’s going to push over the tree”. Sure enough one of the bigger bulls had placed his trunk vertically up the length of the trunk of the Fever Tree and was beginning to lean forward. With a loud crack the tree gave way and fell*





*With the dust flying the Fever Tree comes down and the Bulls move in to feed!! Photo Jan Cerny*

*near to the road to our left, triggering an amazing reaction from the herd as they all converged on the fallen tree in a feeding frenzy.*

*The interaction between the bulls thereafter was astounding as the big bulls jostled their way through the youngsters, loud trumpet shrills clearly indicating that they should make way for their elders.*

*Dust and twigs flew everywhere as the tree's foliage literally disappeared before our eyes. Elephants were now converging at pace from all angles to take part in the feast with the young bulls trying to secure any morsel around the fringes more often than not incurring the physical and vocal wrath of the big bulls if they got too close.*

*While this was unfolding in front of us, we had to sit tight as the elephants were very close to the road leaving us no room to safely pass, indeed we had to back off on a number of occasions as the melee got too close and we had to give them the space they needed. Eventually, with the sun beginning to wane, a space finally appeared for us to slip through without too much disturbance to the bulls. With the adrenaline still flowing after the wonderful sighting we set off for our sundowner spot, all thoughts of the intended walk firmly filed away.*



*We had not gone far from the elephants when we looked up to a ridge close to the road and were confronted by two very large buffalo bulls standing on the slope not far from the vehicle.*

*We once again switched off the engine under constant scrutiny from the Dagga Boys, bosses and large horns very prominent on their large greying heads.*



*Dagga Boy! Makuleke Concession. Photo Dana Allen*

*With a last scornful glance from each bull, they turned and trotted over the crest of the ridge out of sight. The sundowners tasted particularly good that evening as we toasted another incredible day in Africa.*

### ***Speaking of Dagga Boys!!***

*The morning dawned overcast once again as we set off from The Outpost Lodge after a light breakfast. The morning walk was from the old Section Ranger's house into the Luvuvhu West Floodplain and the Hutwini Gorge area. The safety brief done, we moved off to be once again confronted with ample evidence of the heavy volumes of elephant and buffalo through the area.*

*Hyena tracks were also prominent near the dried up pan under the canopy of the huge Ana trees at the top of which the Trumpeter Hornbills were consistently and loudly calling with their characteristic baby-like cry.*



*Trumpeter Hornbills, Fever Tree Forest,*

*Luvuvhu East, Makuleke Concession.*

*Photo Caren Camche, New York City, USA.*



*We followed the numerous paths through this stark but beautiful area stopping to discuss the functioning and role of termites with their large mounds. Moving off from one particularly large termite mound, I scanned in front of us and caught the unmistakable shape of a tusk protruding out of an Acacia Knob Thorn. My clenched fist stopped the group as we looked to get a clear view of the big elephant bull feeding not 50m from us.*

*We were, however, in a good position with little or no wind to speak of and a convenient fallen tree for cover.*

*As Jan clicked away merrily with the cameras, I explained to Kristin the type of behaviour to look for if the bull was uncomfortable with our presence. He was, however, very chilled and was unlikely to be aware of our presence. A great sighting was had by all and as we backed out and looped away from the bull he continued to feed off the acacia with no reaction.*



*Jan takes a photo of a tentative Kristin in the Elephant Bull sighting on Luvuvhu West, Hutwini Gorge area*

*Photo Jan Cerny.*



*I was scanning the paths as we cross-grained to the west finally picking up what I was looking for, lion tracks! They were fresh, the ridges of the tracks still standing proudly with no degradation from the effects of wind and sun. The size indicated a large male, the track easily dwarfing Kristin's hand when compared next to it. My suggestion to follow the tracks was met with enthusiasm from Jan and reluctant compliance from Kristin! We followed the tracks south in the direction of the river until the vegetation became very thick and furthermore, the sounds of elephant between us and the river confirmed the decision to turn away back towards the entrance to the Hutwini Gorge.*

*On the way to the gorge we picked up another fresh set of lion tracks but this time the idea of following them was quickly dismissed by Kristin! Closer to the gorge entrance we had stopped to listen for activity ahead when we picked up a Black Backed Jackal trotting towards us. He worked his way steadily around us stopping every now and again to test our wind but allowed enough time for us to have a great view. Jan then requested a pee break and what a fortuitous request it turned out to be!!*

*I then gave a quick safety briefing on what we would do if we came across any big game in the Gorge and also explained that this area was a particularly spiritual one for me. We moved off onto one of the many wide, clear paths leading to the gorge and as we approached the entrance I picked up a large set of horns and very big boss of a buffalo bull not 20m away emerging from the Large Fever Berry trees at the entrance to the gorge.*



*The lead bull emerges from the Hutwini Gorge. Jan did well to get this photo bearing in mind the time available.*

*Photo Jan Cerny.*



*Dagga Boys! My clenched fist immediately went up and both Jan and Kirstin quickly heeded my direction to move to the right, out of the bull's line of sight. I then picked up the second bull coming out of the gorge behind the first and keeping myself between the bulls and the group, I urged Jan and Kristin further to the right behind a fallen tree behind which was a good path leading up to a rocky area as an escape route in need. I conveyed this to the group and even though it seemed like an eternity at the time, this could only have taken a matter of seconds from the time of the first sighting of the leading bull.*

*The bulls had stopped having picked up our scent, the closest one peering to his left and seeing us very close. Uncertainly he continued forward and as Jan was taking photographs, the wind must have swirled again and they suddenly galloped off towards the river away from us.*

*The adrenaline was now really flowing and Kristin just a little nervous as we entered the gorge and my very special place.*

*We had not gone 30m into the gorge when we picked up the Rhino tracks heading away from us, again very fresh indeed. The tracks of the buffalo bulls over the top of those of the Rhino were also very evident as a clear reminder of the importance of Jan's pee break, without which we would very likely have met the buffalo well into the gorge itself!! As usual, the gorge's silence was deafening with the sense of history overwhelming!*



*Jan and Kristin on top of Hutwini Gorge. Great views!*

*Photo Jan Cerny.*

*Eventually, we reached the path to take us up and out of the gorge onto the top of the ridge, a great deal of elephant and buffalo tracks being seen on the rocky ascent to confirm that members of the Big 5 were well adept to climbing as*



*well!! The view from the top was indeed well worthwhile and we were lucky enough to spot some elephant on the very far bank of the river through the binoculars!*

*After a good break soaking up the magnificent view, we made our way down the ridge on another winding path, being lucky enough to have an unusual daytime sighting of a Spotted Eagle Owl and a Dassie (rock hyrax) alarm calling the presence of the owl. A Porcupine's dung and its very clear tracks were also highlights of the descent, not to mention the fresh lion tracks which indicated the route the lions had taken earlier that morning in coming down into the floodplain.*

*Reaching the valley floor once again we turned eastwards towards the vehicle and picked out a suitable path. On the way we bumped into the Elephant Bull we had encountered on our way in earlier that morning but after a brief view, we left him alone and continued our way back to the vehicle. A great, very eventful walk for the newlyweds which certainly got the adrenaline flowing!!*

## ***New Year Wish***

*Shangani Trails wishes you a wonderful 2013 wherever you may be in the world. Once again our many thanks for all the support over the last year and in conjunction with our partners:*

### ***The Outpost Lodge***



***- The Limpopo Trail***



## ***Wilderness Adventures-Pafuri Camp***



***- The Hutwini Trail***



***- The Pafuri Walking Trail***

*we trust that you will either be back with us very soon or join us for the first time in the Makuleke Concession, Kruger National Park !!*

***To learn more about Shangani Trails and our products go to:***

***[www.shanganitrails.co.za](http://www.shanganitrails.co.za) ; e-mail [rhodes@shanganitrails.co.za](mailto:rhodes@shanganitrails.co.za) or contact Rhodes Bezuidenhout on 083 7071329.***