



On Foot with Shangani Trails!!

Newsletter May 2014

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*Pair of Tawny Eagles
Makuleke Concession, May 2014
Photo: Chito Ymalay
Kentucky, USA*



An Update on the Concession

The year started off with rain and more rain, then just for good measure more rain and lots of it!! Late February and early March saw flood warnings for the Luvuvhu River once again being issued with both the Limpopo and Luvuvhu flowing extremely strongly. Luckily the waters did not breach the banks but key roads, such as both Luvuvhu East and West, Sandpad and access roads to the Limpopo River, remained closed for some time while some traditional walking areas were inaccessible on foot right up to the middle of April.

In late March, the Rhino Boma road area from the Pafuri Main tar road east to Nwambe Pan, which was a dust bowl in December 2012 before the floods in January 2013, saw us walking in waist high grass and having to skirt extensive

marsh areas. The late rains did, however, ensure that good reserves of grass and foliage will remain available throughout the dry season while the major Pans such as Nwambe, Hlangaluwe, Chichacha and Mapimbi should have more than enough water to last through to the next rains in December later this year. The Limpopo River is still flowing strongly as I write.



Reedbuck Vlei,

Makuleke Concession

Once again full and a great attraction for water birds.

March 2014

Photo: Shangani Trails

The rains in March also resulted in delaying the Elephants' return from their annual migration to the south of Kruger but they are now back in numbers and recent encounters have been outstanding with these magnificent animals. Buffalo and Leopard encounters, some of the latter on foot, have been amazing.



The Elephant Breeding Herds are back and belligerent as ever!!

May 2014

Photo:

Chito Ymalay

Kentucky, USA

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Magical Big Five Encounters on The Pafuri Walking Trail

21st May 2014 Nwambe Pan- Evening Walk

We parked just short of Reedbuck Vlei, readied our kit and repeated the safety brief before setting off in a westerly direction through the amazing Fever Trees towards the distant Nwambe Pan. This area had never let me down in terms of its sheer beauty and also encounters with the Big Five, once again today it would not disappoint us!

The early evening sunlight behind the Fever Trees made for a spectacular backdrop as we made our way into the forest. We had not gone far when my Back-Up, James Bailey, hissed in my ear “Elephant off to the left!!” The Bull was about 150m away from us and feeding in the Fever Trees. With little or no wind and very little cover available, we would have to assess the Bull’s mood further when we closed the distance.



The Big Bull just after we first saw him when setting out from the vehicle! Photo Wim Weijmans, Utrecht, Holland

As we walked further in, we came to a marshy area that forced us to shift our approach in a wide loop to our right to look for dry firmer ground. The Bull, however, seemed quite comfortable and in no time we had managed to skirt the sticky mud and water, continuing our loop to approach the Bull with whatever sun there was, behind us.

We quietly got to within 50m with the Bull seemingly quite happy with our presence. We had a great view of this big mature Elephant, with nice long tusks and his foraging in the Fever Trees quite evident from the large amounts of green dust on his forehead! Lazily the Bull then started to turn towards us and began a slow deliberate walk in our direction. As the distance closed he showed no signs of stopping, yet he gave no indication of being stressed or annoyed by our presence, no standing tall or ears out, just quiet and calm in his movements.



The Big Bull turns towards us and starts to advance! Not, however, looking too stressed! The Fever Tree dust being clearly visible on his forehead and trunk. Photo Wim Weijmans, Utrecht, Holland

Notwithstanding this, it was time to move and give him space. I motioned to James to lead the Group out to a Fever Tree stump about 100 metres behind us, while I would bring up the rear keeping myself between the Bull and the rearmost member of the Group. We re-grouped at the stump with the Bull now a comfortable distance from us. I decided not to press him and with that we turned once more towards the Nwambe Pan. We had not gone 50 metres when James again whispered "Elephant to our left". Another Bull but quite far at over 200 metres and moving away.

As we moved to try and gain some ground, both James and I glanced to our right and saw a breeding herd of Buffalo looking quizzically at us, as they are wont to do, from about 100 metres away. The herd was silhouetted against the setting sun behind. I motioned for the Group to stop and quietly filled them in on the position. Elephant Bulls to our rear and left plus 20 or so Buffalo, that we could actually see, to our right, quite an encounter!!

With the Group already compromised with the Buffalo, James and I decided to leave them be and widen our loop to the left and see what the second Bull was doing. As we tried to sneak away from the buffalo as quietly as we could, the wind must have swirled and they caught our scent sending them galloping away in large clouds of dust along the northern bank of Nwambe Pan.

The second bull had, meanwhile, definitely shown us his rear end and was moving away further into the Fever Tree forest. With that we decided to leave him alone and head for the eastern tip of the pan for a break. With the sun sinking fast, we rounded the southern bank for a look around before heading back to the vehicle. Pearl Spotted Owls started to call, flying into the Ana Trees above us followed by numerous other birds trying to mob the small diurnal owls. We all strained our necks to see them but it was Leontien who spotted one first, so good to see them and so close up with the false eyes on the back of their necks so clear.



One of the Pearl Spotted Owls in the Ana Trees, Nwambe Pan. Photo Wim Weijmans, Utrecht, Holland

A glance across the pan revealed our original Elephant Bull coming in towards the water but appearing to move away to follow where the other bull had gone earlier. We had to skirt around some large clumps of Green Thorn to get up the bank for some higher ground and by the time we were in the clear, the bull had disappeared into the forest. With light now an issue and about a kilometre back to the vehicle, it was time to leave this wonderful setting and enjoy the sundowners that awaited us back at the vehicle.



Nwambe Pan seen from behind the fallen Ana Tree where we took our break. Photo Shangani Trails.

22 May 2014 Last Morning Walk – Hutwini Gorge/Luvuvhu Floodplain

With the early morning wake-up call and a light breakfast being things of the past, we drove the short distance to our drop-off point just below the old Section Ranger's house, holding our walk safety brief for the last time.

We headed off initially in a northern direction then swung west with the sun at our backs towards the floodplain and a small pan that was still full after the late rains in March. We stopped to survey the pan area with a small knoll of high ground on our left. As we soaked up the morning sounds and smells, there was a question from Leontien as to what she had seen in the distance at the far western tip of the pan! As we focussed our binoculars, both James and I exclaimed, "Buffalo!!" And lots of them!! A breeding herd was making their way along the southern side of the pan towards us!!

The lead elements of the herd were still about 150 metres from us and I asked the Group just to move forward and sit down so that we would lower our profile while James and I watched what the herd's intentions would be.

The front Buffalo ambled on in our direction and my feelings were they had already watered and were probably on their way to the good grazing areas around the Rhino Boma area behind us. With this in mind, I asked the Group to stand up slowly and move back to the top of the knoll at the side of which we had first spotted the herd. James and I directed the Group to comfortable positions on the high ground and we all sat down to watch the now very close lead animals of the herd pass by. By now I had counted over 50 and more were still appearing from the Large Fever Berries at the other end of the pan!



The Buffalo approach our position on the knoll, strung out along the pan! Photo Wim Weijmans, Utrecht, Holland.

I whispered to the Group to keep very still and quiet as the leading two big bulls and three cows walked past not 40 metres below our position. Suddenly the leading Bull stopped sniffed and turned his very large head looking directly towards us!! "Still and quiet as you can" I again whispered as this was now the critical moment. If this bull took fright or caught a good whiff of our wind, he would likely trigger a mass panic reaction from the rest of the herd strung out along the bank of the pan. I glanced at James who also had that concerned look as he too realized how important the next minute or so would be.

After what seemed an eternity, the Bull finally turned unconcernedly to grab a mouthful of the green grass at the edge of the well-worn game path and then continued on his way! I gave the OK for photos as James and I breathed a collective sigh of relief!!

The Buffalo continued to file past in an endless stream, some stopping to drink while one big bull lay down and had a good mud bath on the bank of the pan! Eventually, the tail end of the herd walked through and the Bull raised himself



One of the Bulls kneels down in the mud to wallow while the rest continue to file past our position on the knoll. Photo: Sheila Jones, Lancaster, England.

from the mud and followed the remnants of the herd heading towards the East.

We waited for a few minutes in silence to ensure they had all cleared the area before we got to our feet and talked excitedly about our individual thoughts during the magnificent sighting of these great beasts doing what buffalo do and not being disturbed!

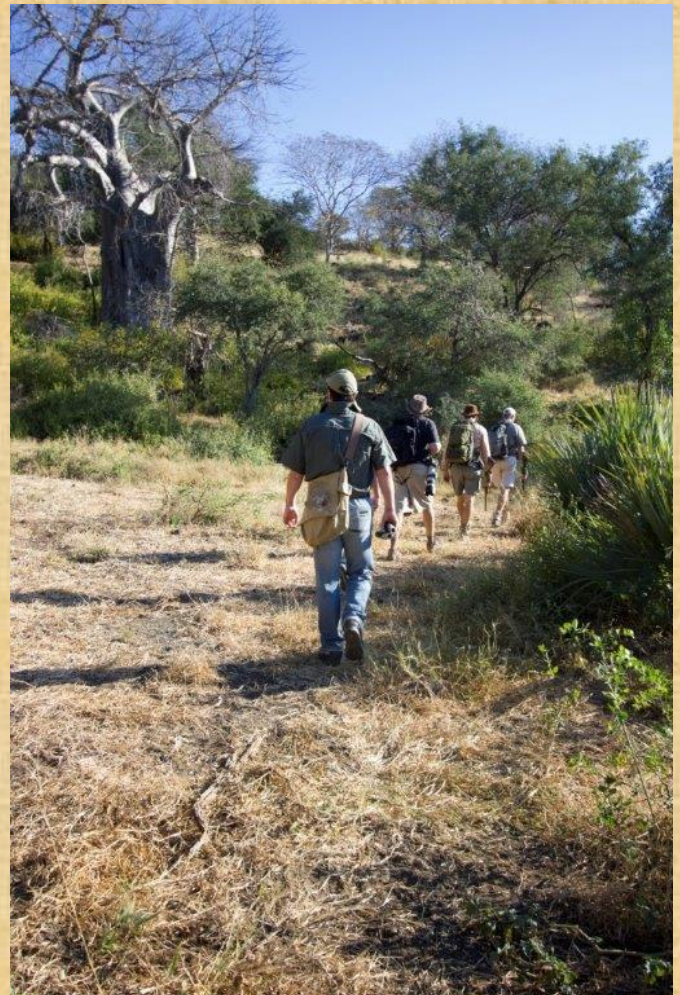
Thank you to Wim, Leontien, Brian and Sheila for being so disciplined during the sighting, without which we would not have been so privileged to witness this spectacle.

Our Trails

*Many guests, acquaintances, fellow guides and interested parties have most often made the same enquiry of me, “Do you conduct Trails anywhere else other than Makuleke?” My reply to them is simple; I ask myself the question; “If I would want to offer the **best** product available to my customer where would I send them?” With all due respect to other Reserves and Kruger National Park to the south, my answer always comes back to..... The Makuleke Concession.*

The biodiversity of landscape, fauna and flora is unique in comparison to other areas, Bob Scholes in his book “Kruger National Park, Wonders of an African Eden” said of the Concession; “If the northern part of the Kruger Park was not already a conserved area, it would be one of the prime regions of Southern Africa in which to create one.”

Shangani Trails in the Makuleke, provides not only the ever exciting prospect of encountering any of the Big 5 on foot at any time but also the opportunity to enjoy a true bush experience including the often puzzling intricacies of learning about animal tracks and sign, the beauty of an area playing host to one of South Africa’s primary Birding destinations while being able to enjoy a unique landscape the jewels of which we, as Trails Guides, are still uncovering every time we walk.



Above: Walking the Limpopo Floodplain.

Photo: Ellis Karels, Heiloo, Holland



Left: Brown Headed Parrot. Photo Chito Ymalay, Kentucky USA



Getting the shot!! Elephant drinking, Makuleke Concession. Photo: Ellis Karels, Heiloo, Holland.

Remember we offer a range of accommodation from which you can experience our trails that varies from a luxury lodge experience, the Limpopo Trail, to an unfenced tented camp, the Pafuri Walking Trail and then the adventurous Wilderness Skills Back packing Trail, sleeping out under the stars as close to Nature as you will get!!

Come and experience this magical, unspoilt Wilderness Area ...On Foot... with Shangani Trails in the Makuleke Concession, Northern Kruger National Park.

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