



On Foot with Shangani Trails!!

Newsletter January 2015

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A great sighting! Crowned Eagle, Makuleke Concession, November 2014. Photo: Linda Vink, Holland.



Into 2015!!

The rains have come to Makuleke with over 200mm falling in one night in late December and running an EcoTraining Navigation Course in early January, we were walking in knee high grass where only a few days previously there had been only dry dirt and dust! It always amazes me how quickly the bush responds to the first rains. The pans are largely full, the Limpopo River is once more flowing very strongly and Reedbuck Vlei is again attracting its volume of water birds as the wetland fills up. We will, in all likelihood, now need one more good set of rains to set us up nicely for the remainder of the year.

As usual in January, the Concession is largely devoid of Elephant as we wait with some anticipation for their return in late February from their annual sojourn to the south of Kruger. The Buffalo, however, remain in large numbers with the high grass levels and thicker bush making every walk an interesting one to say the least!! Lion have made an early appearance in the Makuleke with fresh tracks being found in and around the Limpopo Floodplain on Middle Road. It once again promises to be a bumper year on the Concession.

Can't wait!!

Instructing with EcoTraining's Safari Guide's Course- November 2014

With our light lunch a thing of the past, the Group, armed with notebooks and the all-important sundowner cooler box, made their way to the car park to embus on the vehicle for the afternoon activity. The objective of the afternoon being to walk the Hlangaluwe Pan area, revising details of the features of the trees and tracks that we had already covered thus far on the course and to introduce new examples as we came across them, while also obviously looking to enjoy a beautiful area of the Concession! Little did we realise that the planned revision would ultimately take a back seat on this walk!!

Driving down Middle Road the floodplains of the Limpopo River were indeed alive with plains game and birds. Buffalo, Kudu and Zebra were in abundance while Impala lambs were becoming more visible after joining the herds and forming their protective nurseries.



Young Impala on Middle Road, Makuleke Concession

Photo: Gert Letterman, Germany

Birdlife, at this time of the year, is indeed abundant in the Concession with the majority of the avian migrants already having arrived for the summer.

The characteristic shrill cry of the Woodlands Kingfisher reverberated over the growl of the diesel engine to confirm his own arrival while Violet Backed Starlings and European Bee Eaters kept us company as we headed for the Hlangaluwe Pan.

Reaching our jump-off point, we parked next to a fallen young Baobab, conducted the usual safety brief, then walked northwards over the small crest to link up with the paths that would ultimately lead us to the Pan. We stopped to review the characteristics of the Acacia Knob Thorn and the Apple Leaf trees on our way to the small ridge that overlooks Palm Vlei just to the west of Hlangaluwe Pan. The view from this vantage point is always inspiring with the Fever Tree forest to the left and the Hlangaluwe kopje to the right on the far bank of the pan. All appeared quiet as we made our way eastwards past the large Baobabs to come in behind the ridge overlooking the pan.

We stopped to identify some tracks on the way but while doing so Tahina, my back-up guide for the walk, indicated an Elephant Bull emerging from the Fever Tree Forest into Palm Vlei, the area that we had just been viewing from the ridge. As the Group gathered together to watch, the Bull made his way slowly out of the forest and into the Lala Palm thickets.



The Group ponders the identity of the Track while Tahina can just be seen in the background monitoring the Bull in the Floodplain. Photo: Gert Letterman, Germany

Bearing in mind the time of day, the Bull was undoubtedly heading to the pan to drink, presenting us with a great opportunity for a wonderful encounter.

Tahina and I quickly moved the Group to the top of the ridge overlooking the pan which had a commanding view of the area. Leaving Tahina with the Group, I descended to the raised bank of the pan looking for the best possible position and while doing so, observed a second Bull emerge from the Fever Trees!

Indeed, by the time I had found a suitable site and signalled for the Group to join me, I counted 5 Elephant now making their way towards us and the pan across Palm Vlei.

With the Elephants appearing in no hurry to get to the water at this stage, I took the opportunity to quietly brief the Group on keeping movement and noise to a

minimum as, if the Elephants came down to drink where I thought they would, it was likely that they would be no more than 30 metres from us across the water! I requested everybody to sit down at the edge of the elevated bank taking up comfortable positions, flashes of cameras off and to be patient as things developed.



The Group seated on the bank waiting for the Bulls to reach the water. Photo: Gert Letterman, Germany

Finally the first Bull slowly made his down through the plains grassland to the water opposite us, very close, the Group were very quiet!!



The first Bull makes his way slowly across the floodplain! Photo: Hans-Jürgen Keck, Germany

With further Elephant emerging from the Fever Trees to our left, very soon we had three Bulls at the water's edge dipping their trunks into the water! Cameras then whirred and clicked seemingly so loud in the silence of the late afternoon that I thought the noise would disturb the Bulls! The faces of the Group were indeed a picture watching in some amazement as the Elephants sucked up the water into their trunks then hosed it into their mouths!



The Bulls commence to drink, an amazing sight, so close! Photo: Hans-Jürgen Keck, Germany

A big Bull then joined the trio at the water, jostling his way in between them as to show his dominance before he too commenced drinking. In no time at all we had all eight Elephant drinking in front of us, so close you could hear the breaths being taken by the animals between slurps of water!

Two of the Bulls then decided to have a test of strength and played out a mock



battle, forehead to forehead, trunks wrapped around heads and tusks rasping together as they engaged and pushed against each other!

The two Bulls face off against each other!

Photo: Hans-Jürgen Keck

We were indeed very privileged to be able to witness this very important daily ritual of watering at such close, but safe, quarters. The problem was that more and more Elephant were now seen to be emerging from the Fever Trees including cows and calves! A breeding herd!

By this time, we had spent a good 20 minutes with the Elephants at the pan and with the sun now threatening the horizon and the new arrivals beckoning, it was definitely time not to overstay our welcome! I managed to send a silent message to the Group to pay attention, then signalling Tahina at the far end to slowly rise and back out down a path away from the bank. As she managed to do so without disturbing the Elephant at the water, I signalled for the next person to do the same and to join her, repeating the process one by one to minimize movement and noise.



Kurt, on the right, makes his way out of the sighting, with me following close behind, the Bulls being left undisturbed in the background. Photo: Gert Letterman

The extraction went off without a hitch and as the last out, I glanced back to ensure that the Elephant were still comfortably engaged at the water's edge noticing that their numbers were increasing all the time in the fading light! Definitely the right decision to leave!! Reforming silently, I led the Group back up the ridge to our original entry point and then over the crest, where everybody quietly but animatedly exchanged individual experiences!

With so many Elephant now in the area, but not in view behind the ridge, I wanted to ensure our path back to the vehicle was clear and as such needed to see the status of the herd. Heading west until reaching the edge of the ridge, I took the Group up to the crest once more for a final view with the advantage of height. Palm Vlei was indeed alive with Elephant, most were still heading down to the water but some were drifting towards us threatening our route to the vehicle. I gave the Group a limited time on this sighting before deciding to take a direct route back to the road then following that back to the vehicle to avoid any encounter in the thick Mopane trees between the pan and the road.

An amazing afternoon spent in a beautiful area, it was indeed a real privilege to have been part of such a great sighting.

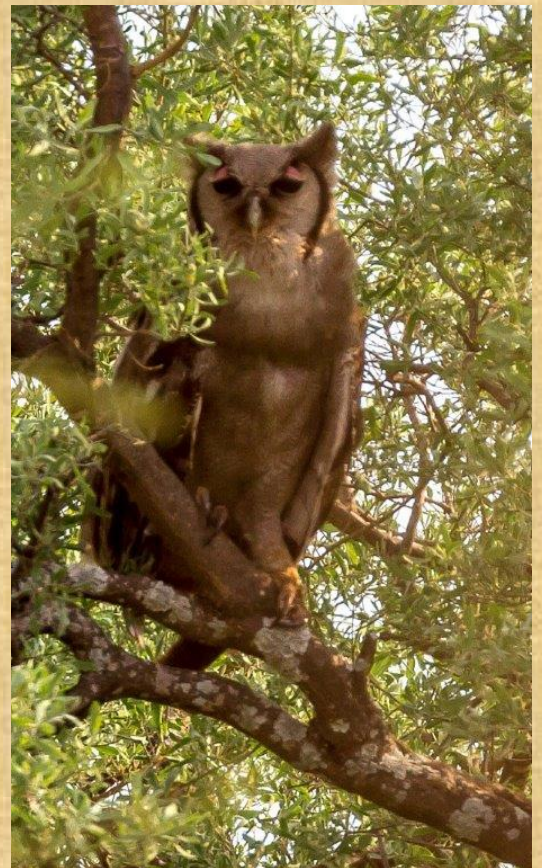
Some Unusual Encounters!!

With a Swedish Group out of the new Luvuvhu River Lodge in November last year, a morning walk into Nwambe Pan allowed us a great sighting of a Verreaux Eagle Owl in a Small Leafed Mustard Bush just north of the Pan. We had heard the Owl calling just as we left the vehicle and ventured to find it, drawn by the constant chatter of the Yellow-Bill Hornbills around the Owl's perch.

We sighted him ducking and diving from the mobbing birds but staying long enough for some quality photographs to be taken. A great sighting of this very large and powerful Owl.

Right: The Verreaux Eagle Owl perched in the Mustard Bush, note the characteristic pink eyelids while its lethal talons are also clearly visible. Photo: Mikael Johansson, London, UK

Below: The Owl launches itself out of the tree and away to a less exposed daytime roost.



***Photo: Erland
Fengved-Stefansson,
Solgarden, Sweden***

After a few hundred metres further on the same walk, I looked to my left to commence my usual regulatory scan of the bush ahead when I saw a Honey Badger not 30 metres away, closing on us very quickly. I gestured for the Group to join me urgently up front as he busily hustled his way towards our position. We were fortunate indeed to witness this usually nocturnal and rare animal at such close quarters, in the open and seemingly oblivious to our presence! Eventually he stopped, head high, sniffed, looked in our direction and then dismissed us as irrelevant to his mission at that moment, proceeding onward with his nose firmly pressed to the ground!! Very special!



The Honey Badger finally becomes aware of us, amazing sighting! Photo: Mikael Johansson, London UK

With Hein Myers leading the walk on the Thursday morning, we were in the Fever Tree forest just west of Hlangaluwe Pan with one of our objectives being to see the Racket Tail Roller, a beautiful but rare and much sought after bird in South Africa. This internationally protected wetland area being the only breeding site in the country with the Racket Tail becoming more widespread as one ventures north into Zimbabwe. We duly sighted, not one, but three of these special birds virtually at the end of our walk out of the forest, good fortune indeed!!



*Always the centre of great interest, the Racket Tail Roller.
Photo: Chanon Weiss, Cape Town, South Africa.*

With the New Year now in full swing and the Trails' enquiries coming in for the 2015 Trails Season, we have no doubt that the Concession will provide us with the quality sightings and experiences that we have enjoyed in recent years!!



Just one of the great encounters that the Makuleke offers!!Photo: Gert Letterman, Germany.

We trust that you will have a wonderful 2015 and hope very much you will indeed be able to join us:

ON FOOT with SHANGANI TRAILS!!!!

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All the best

Rhodes Bezuidenhout

