



On Foot with Shangani Trails!!

Newsletter March 2015

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Juvenile Bateleur Eagle, Makuleke Concession February 2015

Typical Teenager!!

Photo: Shangani Trails



My Dream Encounter Becomes Reality- November 2014

Considering the early hour of the first wake-up call, the majority of the Group were up and about well in time for the light breakfast and the all-important cup of coffee!! With the sun already making large inroads into its day and the Makuleke November temperatures starting to make their presence felt, it was time for the walking party to depart with the intention being to drive west along the Luvuvhu River into the Hutwini area, park and walk across the Luvuvhu River floodplain through the magnificent Hutwini Gorge, then up onto the ridge viewpoint overlooking the entire Luvuvhu River valley.

And what a walk it turned out to be.....!!

Having safely negotiated a large breeding herd of buffalo on Luvuvhu West close to our proposed jump-off point, we disembarked from the vehicle, got our gear together and conducted the first walk safety brief of the week.



Part of the Buffalo Breeding Herd on Luvuvhu West on the way to our drop-off point. Photo: Erland Fengved-Stefansson, Sweden

Now fully versed in all things remotely concerned with walking in single file, listening to your guide, hand signals and not running in the bush, we set off across the floodplain linking up with the wide game paths at the base of the imposing sandstone Hutwini Ridge. Stopping occasionally to discuss some tracks, we finally neared the entrance to the Hutwini Gorge, a very special and spiritual place which provides the highway link between the northern bushveld regions of the Concession and access to the Luvuvhu River with its abundant water resources in the south.

The Gorge's imposing high vertical walls dominated the view ahead and either side of us, the silence broken only by the sharp, unsettling, barked alarm call of a Baboon and the rustle of dried leaves underneath our boots. The well-trodden paths clearly showed elephant and buffalo tracks but not fresh, their edges smoothed by the breeze and colour darkened by the sun. These tracks being but the latest of the countless Elephant, Buffalo, Rhino and many other animals

over the millennia to have used this gorge to access the floodplain and river waters beyond.

As we neared the rocky path to exit the gorge and double back to the look-out points on the top of the ridge, we picked up a Porcupine quill and quietly discussed the prickly protection methods employed by Africa's largest Rodent. A flat open grass plain dotted with ancient Baobab trees, still bereft of leaves but showing the white globes of their flowers, greeted us as we crested the top of the gorge's left hand wall, the only shade being provided by the full umbrella canopy of the Shepards' Trees scattered around the plain. Taking advantage of one such canopy's shady patch, we had paused for a breather to discuss the attributes of the Shepard's Tree when a shrill trumpet sounded from our rear to the north. Hein Myers, my Back-Up Guide for the walk, quickly back tracked to locate the source of the unmistakable sound of an Elephant Breeding herd.

Disappearing around the corner from whence we had come, he soon returned quietly signalling to us to join him. He indicated the enormous Elephant breeding herd to our north, the grey shapes very clear in the morning sunlight, feeding on the leafless Mopane Trees in the mid-distance below our position.



The Elephant Breeding Herd as we first saw them in the Mopane veld north of our elevated position on top of Hutwini Ridge. Photo: Erland Fengved-Stefansson, Sweden

My first instinct was to gain more height not only for safety purposes but also for the good vantage point it would offer to view this magnificent herd. We found a good open rock ledge with comfortable positions, settling down to enjoy the sighting of the Elephant below who were at this time still a good five hundred or so metres from us on the gentle slopes of the ridges opposite .



The breeding herd gathering just before starting to enter the Gorge. They were quite a sight in the open Mopane Veld. Photo: Erland Fengved-Stefansson, Sweden.

We soon realised how large the herd actually was, at least a hundred plus strong stretching back over some distance with the forerunners very close to the northern entrance of the same gorge out of which we had just emerged. A breathtaking sighting for the Guides, yet alone the Group!! To the Guides it was clear that the elephant were gathering to traverse the Gorge to the river to water after a night of feeding in the Mopane rich northern areas of the Concession. This could indeed be a sighting that even we, as guides, had yet to experience, a huge breeding herd going through the gorge, with us being able to view them from above.

A nudge from Hein then drew my attention to our right, his pointed arm directing my gaze to a very large pair of horns about 30 metres to our right and down. Buffalo! Only Hein and I could see the single Dagga Boy staring at us quizzically as they are oft to do, as the rest of the Group were seated enjoying the Elephant sighting unfolding below us. I asked everyone to stand so that they too could become aware of the potential danger of the Buffalo whereupon he turned away and down from us, posing no further threat. What next!!

We could hear the high pitched vocalisation of the senior cows in the herd and watched as some large bulls, which had no doubt been shadowing the herd, began to move towards the entrance to the gorge. If we were to have the sighting Hein and I had in mind, it was time to go and reach the viewpoint at the southern- most corner of the gorge directly above the point we ourselves, not long before, had originally entered the gorge from the floodplain below.

Luckily we encountered no further sign of the Buffalo Bull and proceeded to the edge of the cliff face and the look-out. Leaving the Group momentarily in that safe position, Hein and I then scouted for the best positions. I found one looking

directly back up the gorge with the elephant already starting to come through. I quickly called the Group in, trusting Hein to find a better position further to the corner. By now the heat was becoming quite intense and I took the opportunity to redistribute water from our packs. We were quite exposed where we sat, even with the wind and height in our favour with the herd below us appearing to have stopped at the point we had climbed out of the gorge, milling around uncertainly, perhaps even picking up our lingering scent? With the heat taking its toll and the view not the best, I decided to pull the Group back to the original viewpoint which had some shade but not a great view. Hein, in the interim, had found access to the perfect viewing spot right on the corner of the gorge's southern entrance, just where we wanted to be. We quickly led the Group back and through to the position with Bjorn and Inge electing to stay back with me in some shade but still with a great view.



The Breeding Herd moves through the Gorge! The young calves always protected!
Photo: Erland Fengved-Stefansson, Sweden

The Elephant were now stretched out over the length of the gorge below us vocalising loudly with shrilled trumpets and the amazing vocal cord “rumble”, the forward elements no doubt communicating with those still to enter and those already in the confines of the gorge. Dust billowed from below as the Elephant hurried their way to the exit, above which the Group were now firmly

entrenched with unimpeded views of a hundred plus Elephant of all ages and sizes emerging from the Hutwini Gorge below them.

Once through, the Elephant started to gather in the shade of the large Nyala Berry trees to await the arrival of the bulk of the herd, only moving towards the river as more and more made their way out of the gorge. Hein and I swapped positions with me going forward to the corner and he staying back with Bjorn and Inge.



The Elephant continue to move through to the southern exit of the Gorge. Vocalization amongst the senior Cows was sometimes deafening during the short journey. Photo: Erland Fengved-Stefansson, Sweden

I sat with Agneta watching Erland and Martin taking photo after photo with Anne Marie just staring in some amazement at the scene unfolding below us. The trumpeting from the cows was intense and frenzied, particularly as those in front were now headed to the river and the water!!



After some time, I switched with Hein again asking him to bring the Group on the corner back to us when the herd had finally moved through. With the remnants of the backmarkers now milling under the Nyala Berry trees, I was surprised to see Buffalo emerging from the Gorge as well.

Once through the Gorge, these elephants rested in the shade before moving on to the River.

Photo: Erland Fengved-Stefansson, Sweden

Hein confirmed on his arrival back with us that a fairly large herd of Buffalo had been hot on the heels of the rear elements of the Elephant!! Amazing!

We watched as the vocalizing continued but quieter now as the Elephant started to reach the river, then Hein pointed to our right and there was another single cow and calf making their way down the path that we were to follow to make our descent from the top of the ridge. It was indeed interesting to see them come from a totally different direction and alone, separated from the main herd.

Temperatures were now extreme and it was definitely time to make our way back to the vehicle. I once again distributed water from my reserve bottles for everyone, before slowly making our way down the rocky paths of the ridge and across the floodplain to the vehicle in some searing heat, arriving tired and hot but extremely satisfied with what we had been privileged to witness. Coffee and rusks were enjoyed in the shade of the large Apple Leaf Trees around the vehicle before we set off once more for the Lodge and brunch!! The Elephant were not, however, finished with us yet! I had warned the Group before setting off on our return journey that it was likely we would bump the same herd on the road, and so we did..!



The big herd reaches the water of the Luvuvhu River, there are over 30 Elephant in this picture alone!

Photo: Anders Johansson, London UK

To our left and right were Elephant under just about every tree with shade that was available. The young calves were flat on their sides resting after what had

no doubt been an epic trek for them across the Concession in the heat of the late morning, now watered and thirst quenched it was time for them to sleep!

The mothers now contented to stand over them protectively while their small offspring were in such a vulnerable position. It was a very fitting way to end the sighting of this unusually large herd seeing them safe and resting after such a frenzied scramble through the gorge and across the floodplain.

This was indeed an encounter that I personally had been dreaming of for many years and it was a privilege to have shared it with a Group who appreciated its uniqueness in a truly spectacular setting!!

Into the 2015 Trails Season!!

The Pafuri Walking Trail unfenced tented camp has enjoyed a new season facelift with new tents, new kitchen equipment and a new Trails Guide, Andrew Dankwerts. Welcome Andrew, I look forward to many hours on foot with you. The Camp's location remains unchanged on a bend in the Luvuvhu River, not far from the Pafuri Bridge and right in the middle of an Elephant, Buffalo and general Game highway!! Many an afternoon has been spent in and around Camp enjoying the Big 5 activity around us. At night we continue to be entertained by the guttural grunts of the territorial leopards, the wistful calling of the Wood Owls, the shrieks of the Thick Tailed Bushbabies while, as always,



the Spotted Hyenas will call well into the night and early morning!

Elephant Bull on the Luvuvhu River. The Trails Camp is just right of the Bull.

Photo: Chanon Weiss, Cape Town RSA

For the more adventurous, the Backpacking Wilderness Skills Trail continues to prove popular. If carrying your life on your back for 3-5 days is your thing, then traversing the Makuleke Concession, sleeping under the stars and getting as close to nature as one can get, is a must experience for you!!

For those, however, who enjoy the walks but prefer a little comfort and luxury on your return, then the Limpopo Trail offers you a 5 Star lodge experience comparable to any other in Southern Africa!



Into the Fever Tree Forest. An amazing walk! Photo: Chanon Weiss, Cape Town RSA

No matter your choice of Trail, the common denominator remains The Makuleke Concession, a magnificent 24 000 hectare Big 5 wilderness area that offers a bio-diversity like no other in the Kruger National Park. I am indeed privileged to be able to invite you to join us.....

On Foot.... with Shangani Trails in the upcoming 2015 Trails Season.

Don't hesitate to contact us at: 083 7071329 or....

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