



# *On Foot with Shangani Trails!!*

## *Newsletter April 2013*

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EcoTraining*
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### *Of Secret Valleys and Elephants*

*I was delighted to receive a call from EcoTraining, the leading Nature Guide Training Company in Southern Africa, asking me to assist as an Instructor at their Mashatu Camp in Botswana. The Tuli Block is indeed a very different area in which to walk and had been on my bucket list for some time.*

*On this EcoQuest course, Alan McSmith and I were hosts to third year Natural History undergraduate students from the University of South Wales in the United Kingdom along with two of their Professors while we also welcomed Volker, Andrea, Kristina, Bettina and Ernst from Germany and Holland.*



*Typical Mashatu Landscape of Acacia/Apple Leaf vegetation and Sandstone Kopjes. (Leeukop in the background)*

*With the course kicking off with regular on foot Elephant Breeding Herd sightings, we expectantly set off on an afternoon walk to the Secret Valley area to the east of the camp. Not really knowing what to expect of the area, apart from that there was a marsh there, we parked the vehicle and after completing the usual safety briefing we swung to the east using the ridge on our left and the river to our right as a guide to the entrance to the valley, some 2kms away.*

*We had hardly gone 20m when I heard the clicking fingers of Jon Jon, my back-up, drawing my attention to Elephants emerging from the riverine Large Fever Berry forest to our right. With the breeding herd closing fast but the wind in our favour, I led the group up the side of the ridge in attempt to gain some height advantage and the benefit of the afternoon sun behind us. However, while still about halfway up the ridge, the leading elephants put trunks and heads up and immediately headed off back into the forest at some pace. With everything to our advantage we could only surmise that the wind had swirled somewhat carrying our scent to the leading cows.*

*Continuing on our way we were eventually able to climb the ridge and crest the summit where we were greeted by a truly magnificent sight of a valley surrounded by steep sandstone sides and a beautiful lake occupying the valley floor.*



*The Secret Valley and the shallow lake on the valley floor, looking East from where we crested the ridge.*

*We savoured the sight for a while then began making our way down into the valley. On the way some Zebra took fright at our presence galloping away up and over the valley side to the north, showing their dexterity over the rough and rocky ground.*

*The shallow lake revealed good birdlife with Fish Eagles, Black-Winged Stilts, Three Banded Plovers, Maribou, Spoon Bill and Yellow-Bill Storks being in evidence. The stout noses of crocodiles poking out of the surface of the water were also a good reminder to stay clear of the water's edge!!*

*We laid up on a rocky outcrop on the northern bank just taking in the beautiful ambiance and scenery of the area, the nature of which was totally unexpected in terms of the overall surrounding landscape we had experienced thus far into the two week course.*

*With the African sun low on the horizon, it was time to make our way back to the vehicle but we still had time to discuss some Porcupine tracks, dung and quill marks on the path leading out of the valley. Cresting the ridge I motioned for Jon Jon to wait with the group while I went down to check the corridor through which we had walked in earlier was clear, bearing in mind the elephant breeding herd we had bumped earlier.*

*I signalled Jon Jon to bring the group down and as luck would have it, as they were descending the breeding herd emerged once again from the Large Fever Berries this time heading straight for us. To our right was a false crest on the ridge with a reasonably flat top looking directly down to the path on which the elephant were approaching, an ideal spot for the sighting!!*

*Crouching down, we made our way to the lip of the crest and sat down watching the elephants approach from our lofty perch not 50m away. They ambled towards us and with the wind against us but our position secure, the herd knew we there but milled around unconcernedly eating grass with the youngsters oblivious to the adults mild interest in us.*



*Part of the Breeding Herd encountered on the descent from the Secret Valley.*

*Photo courtesy of Christopher Lawrence, University of South Wales.*

*The cameras clicked away in the fading light and all too soon the time had come to move back to the vehicle, my hand signals indicated for the group to get up slowly at a crouch with Jon Jon leading them down the false crest to the west away from the herd. I remained behind briefly to check that the herd was comfortable with our movement before re-joining the departing group.*



*In the fading light, the Breeding Herd moves below our position on the false crest. Photo courtesy of Tom Ross, University of South Wales.*

*Christopher Lawrence was trying to get one last photograph but with a defiant shake of her head, the Matriarch, now some 100m behind us, left us in little doubt that her patience had worn thin and not wanting to overstay our welcome, I urged Chris to follow the group. What an end to an amazing afternoon in a truly beautiful area, only accessible on foot!!*

### ***Of Rivers and Elephants***

*We were out and about the next afternoon this time from Camp heading north with the objective of climbing the East/West running*

*ridge and establishing the whereabouts of the ever present Elephant Breeding herds looking to water in the late afternoon. The view from the top of the ridge was awesome, taking in the marsh and the surrounding sandstone kopjes.*



*The view from East/West Ridge looking North towards the main Mashatu Reserve. The lush green of the marsh area being very visible.*

*We then walked along the ridgeline westwards stopping to examine the countryside every now and again to look for the grey bulk of the elephants from our vantage point. Soon enough we saw them to our south ambling towards the wide Matloutse River where deep pools of water were still in evidence after the January floods in these upper reaches of the Limpopo River system.*

*Taking a bearing on where we last saw the elephants and heading for a point upstream, we descended from the ridge and made our way across the floodplain. Nearing the river we slowed our pace and walked downstream to where we thought they had cut the river line. The sight that greeted was a little more than we had bargained for as there were many more elephants in the river that afternoon than we had initially seen from the ridge!!*



*Young Bulls joust in the riverbed, boys will be boys!!*

*Photo courtesy of Tom Ross University of South Wales.*

*With the afternoon sun behind us and having the advantage of shade from the Large Fever Berries and Apple Leaf*

*trees along the river, we sat on the bank and took in this wonderful spectacle, changing our viewpoint only once to get a little closer to the very large herd that must have now numbered around 50 watering in the riverbed.*



*With the sun going down, the herd begins to make its way out of the riverbed towards the southern bank, never having been aware of our presence. Photo courtesy of Tom Ross, University of South Wales.*

*With the light fading fast and the elephants now moving to the southern bank and out of the riverbed, we waited for the remnants of the herd to disappear into the dense undergrowth before leaving our position to return to camp, another memorable afternoon in Africa!!*

### ***Update on the January 2013 Makuleke Concession Floods***

*The extent of the flooding of both the Limpopo and Luvuvhu Rivers has been difficult to believe. Walking the floodplains in their aftermath and realizing the water was at least a metre over my head for at least a kilometre from the river really put everything into perspective for me.*

*Various landscapes around the Luvuvhu and Limpopo Rivers have been changed irrevocably but the Concession as a whole has recovered well, water is obviously plentiful while further late rains in March and April have ensured that the vegetation remains lush ensuring good food levels for both grazers and browsers into the winter and early summer seasons.*



*Two Photos of the Luvuvhu River Floodplain on left looking to the Hutwini Cliffs and then turning to the right looking towards the Twin Baobabs/Mangala area. The sand deposits stretch all the way back to the river which is below the ridges on the horizon in the right hand picture. This area was, undoubtedly, one of the hardest hit.*

*The Elephant and Buffalo breeding herds are back in numbers while good sightings of Lion and Leopard have been enjoyed of late. The*

*latter being very pleasing as many leopard had their territories along the Luvuvhu River.*

*General game is plentiful although numbers of Warthog and Nyala around the river floodplains took a heavy knock from the floodwaters. Unfortunately the Pafuri Camp Wilderness Lodge also felt the wrath of nature and was literally cut in half by the raging Luvuvhu River. The lodge is, unfortunately, likely to be out of action until at least the 2014 season.*

## ***Our Trails- Come and walk in the Makuleke!!***

***The Pafuri Walking Trail in association with.....***



- *4 day, 3 night Trails*
- *Max 8 Guests, Min 2 Guests*
- *Rustic tented accommodation with ensuite toilets*
- *Outside bucket showers*
- *No electricity, no cell phones*
- *3 full meals a day, prepared and served on-site*
- *Morning 4 hour walks and short afternoon walk/drives*

***The Wilderness Skills Course in association with....***



- *5 day, 4 Night Backpacking Wilderness Trail*
- *Learn key bush skills with top Trails Guides*
- *Eat and sleep with Mother Nature at her best*
- *Carry your own provisions and equipment (no tents)*
- *No watches, no cell phones, just sunrises and sunsets*
- *Find your soul again, sitting around the fire taking your turn to stand guard at night while others sleep*
- *Maximum 8, Minimum 4 Trailists*
  - *Must be fit enough to carry own Backpack and walk for extended periods.*

*The Limpopo Trail in association with.....*

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- *Superb accommodation, 3 full meals a day, sundowner drinks, swimming pool*
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*Contact us now:*

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