



On Foot with Shangani Trails!!

Newsletter August 2013

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A wary stare!! Photo Andy Levermore.

Update on The Makuleke Concession, Northern Kruger National Park.

The past seven months since the devastating floods in January of this year has seen the Concession recover remarkably well with plains game such as Kudu, Zebra and Eland increasing in marked numbers, while the elephant and buffalo herds have returned in full force.

Parts of the Concession have changed irrevocably, particularly along the Luvuvhu River, however grassland areas and tree/shrub canopies have benefitted greatly from the increased water table levels. We have seen an increase in some invasive alien plant species but time will tell as to the extent of their impact on the areas affected.

Notwithstanding the floods, the Concession still retains its beauty in its diversity and we are indeed privileged to be able to walk in this Southern African Eden.

Of Elephant Bulls and those in Musth

Running an EcoQuest Course out of the EcoTraining Camp, Back-up rifle Marianne Canon and I, along with the Levermore family, set off on a crisp and clear early morning in the vehicle with our destination being the Nwambe Pan for a walk into this beautiful game rich area.

However, we were destined to be a tad late getting onto the ground, as we saw signs of a great deal of fresh elephant activity on Middle Road as we neared the Mangeba Windmill. Undoubtedly, after the rain and cloud of the previous day; the bright, sunny morning had brought all the big game out of hiding in the thick vegetation away from the adverse elements.

We turned the corner to be confronted by a fallen Knob Thorn across the road with the culprit who felled it still feeding off it!!



The Elephant Bull feeding off the fallen Knob Thorn. The weeping temporal glands giving us an indication of the problems to come are clearly seen. Photo Andrew Levermore

We stopped quite close to the Elephant Bull and initially he paid us little attention as he continued to demolish the Knob Thorn. Then taking a good look at him, it became obvious to Marianne and myself

that he was in musth, the unmistakable leaking temple glands, dribbling urine and wet back legs giving clear indication of his high testosterone levels.

On cue, he turned and advanced towards us standing tall, head up ears out, sending us a clear message to back off and with little coaxing I reversed giving him the space he wanted. He then turned his attention to a tree stump at just the right height for a good stomach and leg scratch, excellent to see.



The Bull has a good scratch on the tree stump. His wet back legs are clearly visible as a sign of him being in Musth.

Photo Andrew Levermore

A young lala palm was the next target and he proceeded to methodically tear it apart, carefully using his feet to anchor the fronds then one tusk to slit them and then chewing the succulent white ends. Another innocent knob thorn then incurred his wrath and a few cracks of branches were an indication he may push that one down as well!!

Without a further glance at us, he then moved behind the fallen tree across the road and proceeded to feed off another shrub but for now, he was going nowhere. By moving behind the tree he had, however, given us some space and, as there was no way we were going to investigate ways around the tree with the bull still in the vicinity, we decided to take the left turn and head to the Limpopo River, which the Levermores were yet to see.

The devastation from the floods was plain to see with the river now much wider than before and numerous large Ana trees that had lined the banks were no longer there, having been washed away in the torrents of the flood.



The Limpopo River, wide and sandy after the floods. Zimbabwe in the background on the far bank.

Photo Andrew Levermore

Leaving the river, we drove back to where the bull had been feeding and noticed he was now further down the road near the next intersection with Mangeba Road. This allowed me to exit the vehicle and assess our chances of getting around the fallen tree. The left hand side was totally inaccessible and the right cluttered with lala palm shrubs and the tree too large to move by hand, not great choices!

A chance remark by Marianne solved the problem, why not push it back with the vehicle, why not indeed? With a bit of manoeuvring the task was soon done and the road clear, now we just needed to find out where the bull was! As we inched forward we saw him to our right but off the road, with a burst of speed we got around him with no problem and little fuss from the bull.

The bull was appropriately immediately christened “Musthy”.

Soon after resuming our journey, we came across a herd of buffalo on our left, the big bulls, as usual, being very inquisitive as to who was disturbing them so early in the morning. A little further on, two Black

Backed Jackals came into view and it was obvious that they were very interested in something near a Baobab Tree on our right. They were very wary and skirted around a great deal moving at their efficient trot gait back and forth. Eventually a rustle from the bushes near the Baobab revealed a large warthog scurrying away, too large a prey for the slightly built Jackals!



One of the Black Backed Jackals, the look of intent revealed breakfast on the mind but it wasn't to be!!

Photo Andrew Levermore.

Just then a radio call came in from a vehicle from The Outpost saying there were six Elephant Bulls on Luvuvhu East, mobile towards the Nwambe access road. Bearing in mind their location, it was likely that they were heading to the area in which we were going to walk, so we had a good chance of picking them up on the ground.

We eventually parked the vehicle near Reedbuck Vlei, a large expanse of shallow water which is a great draw card for waterbirds and all forms of game. We made our way westwards with the intention of hitting the eastern tip of Nwambe Pan then moving on to walk the southern bank and into the Fever Tree forest. Not far from the pan,

Marianne stopped to look through her binoculars and picked up the shape of Elephant through the foliage of the fever trees on the southern side of the pan.

Nearing the pan, we had lost sight of the elephant and, accordingly, I motioned for Marianne to stay with the group while I went forward up the bank to check out the situation.

Again it was Marianne who picked them up moving across our front with more and more becoming visible as they walked silently away from us. As we were in a good position with the sun behind us and little or no wind, I picked out and made for a fever tree with good shade much closer and side on to the bulls.

We moved with them and had a great sighting from good safe positions but with their continued movement away from us, I decided not to chase them and turned the group back towards the Pan.



The Elephant Bulls on the southern side of Nwambe Pan. Photo Andrew Levermore.

We located the resident hippos and also a herd of buffalo watering on the southern bank but quite some way off from us. We tried to get closer in a good position but time was against us and reluctantly left the buffalo, looping back towards the vehicle.

It had been an excellent morning for the Group with the elephant seen on foot an added bonus. The drive back to the camp was quiet until we got to the Mangeba Floodplain when we saw a big breeding herd of elephant dust bathing in the late morning sun. A truly great sighting with “Musthy” also being seen within the herd, looking for a cow in oestrus no doubt. He seemed a great deal calmer than he had been earlier in the morning!!

A Brush with Hippo- Nwambe Pan

On the Limpopo Trail operating out of The Outpost, I was enjoying the company of Mickey Selzer, Mary Morrison and their son Nate all from Philadelphia in the USA. We had been walking the area around Nwambe Pan and had already enjoyed a good encounter with an elephant breeding herd and on reaching Nwambe Pan itself, we saw Grey Herons, Black Winged Stilts and a Great Egret all patrolling the shallows of the pan in search of food. The grey heron in particular gave us a wonderful example of its ability to stand frozen in strike mode waiting for the right moment to pounce on its unsuspecting prey as it swam past the stationery bird.

We moved further westward skirting some thick needle bush and looped back to the pan where the vegetation became a lot thinner. Our intention was to take a break on the bank before heading back to the vehicle. This was, however, interrupted by two resident hippos being sighted in the water, with only their eyes and nostrils visible as we made our way to the bank and started to take off packs.

The big territorial hippo bull had other ideas as he began to make repeated forays through the water towards us, emitting loud grunts

leaving us in no doubt that he was highly irritated with our presence. This unusual behaviour was indeed a sight to behold as he frequently breached out of the water, making large splashes, wide mouthed dominance displays and grunting repeatedly.



The Hippo Bull breaches out the water at Nwambe Pan, my line of safety, the tree shadow, can be clearly seen. Photo courtesy Mickey Selzer.

Although we were in a safe position on the bank, the second hippo, likely to be a young bull, was taking the big bull's lead and started to behave equally as aggressively. I had identified the edge of a shadow of a tree on the water as my marker that if either bull reached that, it was time to move. The next rush forward brought both within my imaginary boundary and accordingly I requested the group to make ready to leave. With defiant grunts still being heard behind, we turned northwards back towards the vehicle away from a couple of hippo who had obviously gotten out of bed on the wrong side of this beautiful morning, but also having left us in no doubt as to why we consider the hippo to be one of the most dangerous animals in the African Bush. A great sighting for all of us, including a rather bemused Guide!!

Our Trails

We have enjoyed a wonderful Walking Trail season thus far with close encounters being experienced with Elephant, Buffalo and Rhino. Leopard have been scarce on foot but good sightings from the vehicles have been numerous. Lion have been frequently heard, tracks and kills been found but sightings have been frustratingly rare.

Our walks, no matter where in the Concession, have always been in the company of numerous plains game while the birdlife as always has been phenomenal. With the heavy rains in the early months of the year the pans and natural springs have remained at high levels and should see us through to the commencement of the new rains in December. The abundant water has allowed good sightings of water birds with all species of storks and herons being frequently seen.

The Limpopo Trail- The Outpost



Yours truly, Mary, Nate and Mickey from Philadelphia USA- Last photo before heading home- Photo courtesy of Mickey Selzer

The Outpost has really gone out of its way this year to provide excellent service to the guests from Shangani Trails. The walks have been excellent and the wide smiles on our return to the lodge have as always indeed been very welcome. Thanks so much Guys!!



The Pafuri Walking Trail

What great Trails we have enjoyed on the Pafuri Walking Trail this season!! As a result of the old Luvuvhu West site being buried under a few metres of silt after the floods in January 2013, a new site was established near the Pafuri Bridge on the Luvuvhu River.

The new position has seen great game viewing from the camp itself with nightly grunt-filled visits from a male territorial leopard, elephant breeding herds passing by as well as elephant bulls trying their utmost to get to the Ana Tree fruit pods on the ground within the camp!! We have also had visits from an old Dagga Boy, christened “Rupert”, with many nightly dinners being warily enjoyed with the old buffalo munching contentedly nearby on the green grass surrounding the camp.



An Elephant Breeding Herd moves around the periphery of the new Trails Camp. A great sighting!

We are looking forward to the remainder of the Pafuri Walking Trail Season which has been extended by an extra 2 Trails into early November due to the high demand for places.

Join us on Foot with Shangani Trails in the Makuleke Concession, Northern Kruger National Park.

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