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Spring 2022

ISSUE 57

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In this issue

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ADVERTORIAL

6 Peace & pampering

CONSERVATION

- 10 Klaserie K9 Unit gets its own high performance vehicle
- 14 Mandleve: The story of a true survivor
- 18 Training firefighters in Klaserie
- 20 Canine first aid
- 21 KPNR K9 Unit news
- 53 Keeping count

PHOTOGRAPHY

- 22 Capturing the elusive
- 26 Karolina Noree



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"The joy of a safari is never knowing what you're going to see"

BIRDING

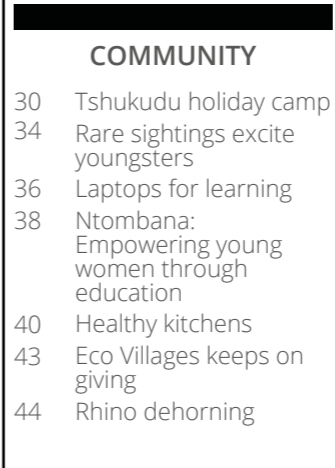
49 Klaas's Cuckoo: A musical world of birds

MAMMAL ID

59 Honey badger

RESEARCH

60 The multi-prey diet of endangered Southern Ground-hornbills



© APNR Ground-hornbill Project

COMMUNITY

- 30 Tshukudu holiday camp
- 34 Rare sightings excite youngsters
- 36 Laptops for learning
- 38 Ntombana: Empowering young women through education
- 40 Healthy kitchens
- 43 Eco Villages keeps on giving
- 44 Rhino dehorning



© Emily Whiting

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49 Klaas's Cuckoo: A musical world of birds

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59 Honey badger

RESEARCH

60 The multi-prey diet of endangered Southern Ground-hornbills



© APNR Ground-hornbill Project

"Ground-hornbills hunt and consume whatever they can overpower"

SIGHTINGS

- 62 Majestic river pride
- 64 Watch the Rubik's cube

- 66 The cub house
- 68 Leopards of Klaserie Drift
- 72 A glimpse through the wilderness window
- 76 What's the magic word?



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INCREDIBLE PEOPLE

- 46 Tribute to a fallen hero
- 79 Anna Mussi conservation hero



"When great trees fall, rocks on distant hills shudder"



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launched a project that's close to our hearts: Ntombana. *Ntombana* is a Shangaan term of endearment for a girl much loved by everyone. The Eco Children team chose this name because we believe all girls deserve to be loved and appreciated for who they are in their communities. The project aims to educate girls on menstrual cycles and break down the stigma that exists around this perfectly natural occurrence.

As a working mom of two wild, wonderful, curious daughters, equality and women empowerment issues are very close to my heart. I believe we must eradicate gender bias as it is undermining our social fabric and devalues all of us. It is not just a human right issue; it is a tremendous waste of the world's human potential.

As we remember the strong women of South Africa in this issue, I leave you with my favourite quote by authors Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo: "Every girl must dream bigger, aim higher, fight harder, and when in doubt remember you are right." We will continue uplifting the women in our communities and hope you join us in celebrating the strong women in our lives all year round.

Colle

CEO Eco Children

In South Africa, August is Women's Month. This is the month we celebrate the bravery of about 20,000 women who marched to the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956, the strength and resilience of all women, and their contribution to society and to our country. Unfortunately, National Women's Day also has to draw attention to the many challenges that women in Africa still face. Challenges such as domestic violence, discrimination and harassment in the workplace, equal pay, a lack of education, period poverty, and more.

At Eco Children we actively promote women empowerment and continue to invest in and promote a range of projects to support the women in our community. In this vein, we recently



KLASERIE CHRONICLE

Readers' Queries

The Klaserie Chronicle is published tri-annually by Eco Children and distributed to KPNR members, as well as Eco Children donors, partners, advertisers and the broader Hoedspruit community. For any contributions or queries please email publication@ecochildren.co.za or corne@ecochildren.co.za. We look forward to hearing from you!

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Thank You

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Meet the team



Sub-editor:
Catharina Robbertze

Catharina hail from Cape Town and has an Honours degree in Journalism. She is our dog-loving, adventure-seeking, no-nonsense wordsmith. Her positive, can-do attitude gets things done quickly.



Sub-editor:
Lizanda Lucas

Lizanda lives in Cape Town, but is originally from the Eastern Cape. She is partial to elephants and warthogs and passionate about photography, literature, and nature. Her methodical, yet curious, manner resonates aptly in this role.



Copywriter and research:
Chloë Cooper

Chloë is originally from Cape Town and has a degree in Organisational Psychology. She is our very own social media guru and copywriter extraordinaire. She is a nature dweller, travel lover, and all-around beautiful soul.



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Cecilia is originally from Pretoria and has a degree in Visual Communication. This talented designer has a keen eye for all things beautiful and sees the details no-one else does to produce a beautiful publication. She is in pursuit of perfection.

PEACE & PAMPERING

FOR ECO CHILDREN SUPPORTERS

Words and sighting photos Bradley Timms

In the spring of 2021, Eco Children launched a competition – sponsored by Simbavati Safari Lodges – to reward Eco Children supporters for their financial contributions and to raise funds for the organisation. Regular donors were entered automatically, while others could donate R500 once-off to qualify for the lucky draw and stand a chance to win three nights at a Simbavati lodge in the Associated Private Nature Reserves.

Brad Timms, a long-time Eco Children supporter and past volunteer, was a worthy winner and travelled all the way from Australia to claim his prize. This is his report on the experience.

“No way!” I thought, as I heard Ntsako Manyike, an Eco Children team member, call out my name in October 2021 on Facebook, as she plucked a piece of paper from a hat. As a regular donor*, I was automatically entered into their competition and was fortunate to win the prize of three nights at one of the Simbavati Safari Lodges.

Almost a year later, a friend and I finally arrived in Hoedspruit to redeem the prize.

Simbavati has seven lodges in the Greater Kruger area and we were lucky enough to stay at the stunning Hilltop Lodge in Timbavati Private Nature Reserve, a 90-minute drive from Hoedspruit. As the name suggests, the lodge sits on a rise with 360° panoramic views of the Lowveld, and there's not a single sign of humanity. With just eight rooms, there are a maximum of 16 guests attended by 25 staff.

On arrival, we were greeted by Bongki and Caroline with their welcoming smiles and refreshing hand towels. We

sat in an open-air pavilion as Bongki gave us a briefing, including crucial information that the lodge is unfenced and therefore open to the myriad wildlife of the Greater Kruger. While we were free to come and go to our room during the day, at night we would need to be escorted in case of close encounters with the wildlife. On one occasion, we saw a hyena skulking through the main part of the lodge...

Designed to have a light footprint, the lodge was built so it can be removed without leaving a lasting impact on the land. Each of the eight tented suites sits on raised platforms connected by wooden walkways to the main lodge. Our luxurious and spacious tent, Weeping Willow, was about 50 metres from the main lodge (and the closest guest room); it had a huge day bed and uninterrupted views across the dam and of the distant Drakensberg escarpment.

As we'd arrived late in the afternoon, we missed the game drive, but it gave us the opportunity to settle in, soak up the peace, and enjoy a sunset from the day bed. I made





the most of the huge tub in the bathroom (in a separate, but adjoining tent), watching the fading light and listening to the hippos frolicking in the dam. Instant relaxation.

On that first night, in the early hours of the morning, we heard the unmistakable roars of a male lion in the distance. At 05:30, we got our wake-up call and made our way to the lodge for coffee before meeting our aptly named guide, Knowledge, and tracker, Happy. An intense and vivid-orange sunrise greeted us as we huddled in the vehicle in the brisk morning air, ready to head deeper into the bush.

I've been on many game drives over the years but without a doubt, these were the most incredible sightings I've experienced. In our four game drives, we saw all of the Big Five plus a large pack of wild dogs (with 19 puppies!) and very close encounters with hyena. With just four guests in the vehicle, the experience was intimate and personal and we were able to ask many questions and get to know the guides and our fellow guests.

For me, a highlight of our stay was seeing a leopard with a kill (an impala) in a tree. I had not seen a leopard up until that point, and it was a fantastic sighting, perfectly lit in the early morning light. For my friend, a highlight was being able to switch off from his busy life and experience the stillness and beauty of the bush. Oh, and the food – he really, really enjoyed the delicious and plentiful food!

“I've been on many game drives over the years, but without a doubt, these were the most incredible sightings I've experienced.”

My thanks to Simbavati Safari Lodges for supporting Eco Children with the prize, and to Eco Children for all of the amazing and important work you undertake in the area.

*I make a monthly donation to Eco Children – regular and ongoing gifts mean they can have a predictable and reliable source of income, and for me it means I can give a larger donation but spread out across the year. ■

SIMBAVATI
LODGE COLLECTION

KLASERIE K9 UNIT GETS ITS OWN HIGH PERFORMANCE VEHICLE

thanks to Kateka Safari & Wellness Lodge

Words Chloë Cooper | Photos Emily Whiting

On Tuesday, 5 July, the Klaserie K9 Unit elevated its impact and efficiency through the addition of a brand new “dog-mobile” with a high performance vehicle generously donated by Kateka Safari & Wellness Lodge.

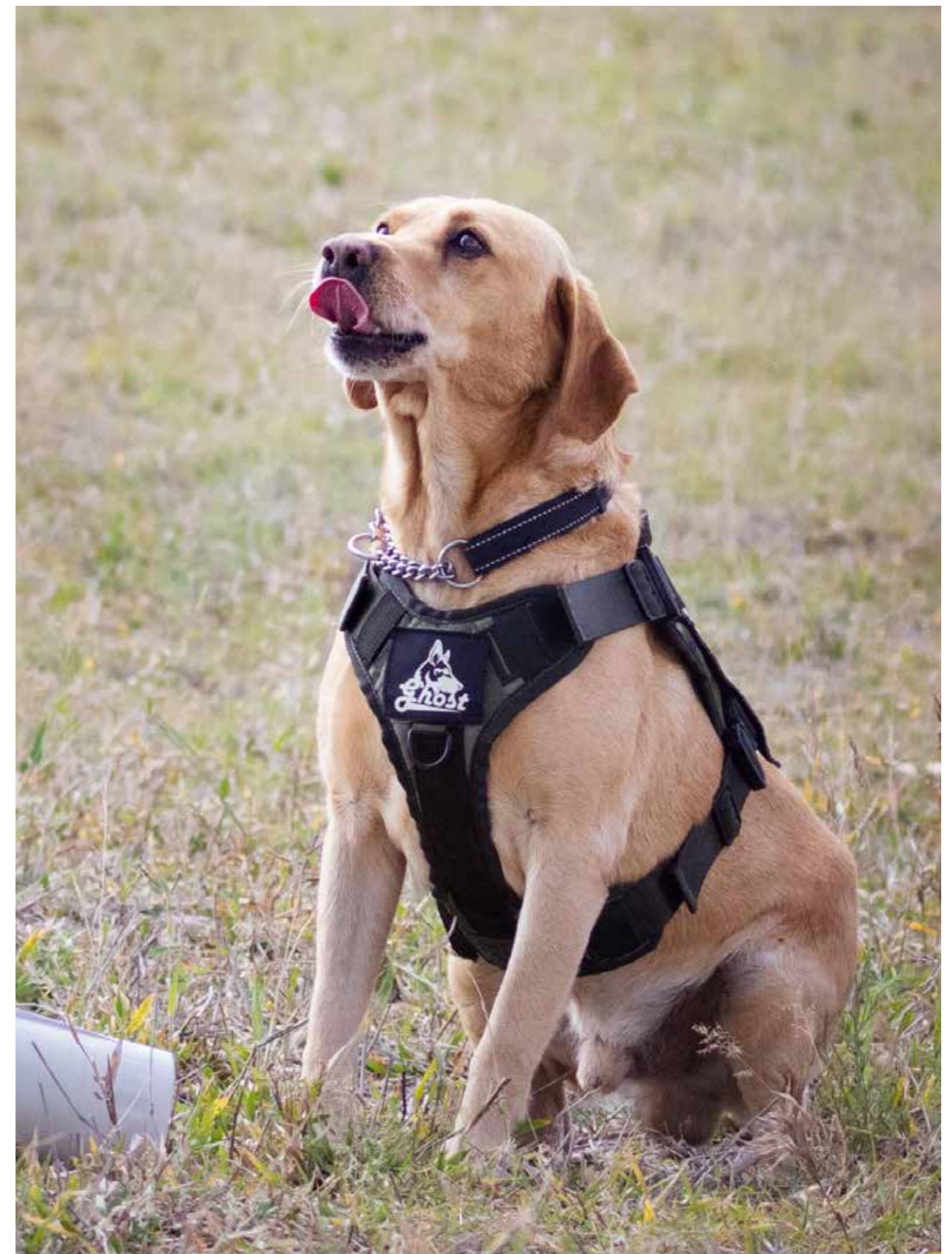
This vehicle, a Toyota Hilux Raider 2.4 GD6 4x4, is custom-fitted with a rugged terrain suspension and all-round body panel and underbelly protection, plus a replacement bumper carrying a recovery winch and LED spotlights. The steel load bay framework was custom designed and fabricated to cater specifically for the dogs and their handlers.

It's not only a valuable physical asset to the reserve's counter-poaching pool of resources; it recognises the status and critical importance of our K9 Unit – both dogs and handlers – and gives them the independence and freedom they need to operate as efficiently and effectively as possible, decreasing the reserve's response time to

incursions and potential threats.

Kennel Master of the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (KPNR) K9 Unit, Marian Viljoen, explained: “In the past, we've sacrificed crucial time and resources managing the deployment needs of both our field rangers and our K9 Unit. The handlers and dogs have unique needs and requirements to operate effectively, and giving them their own vehicle means they can respond to calls efficiently and independently, saving time and elevating the effectiveness of the reserve's counter-poaching efforts as a whole.”

The K9 Unit has contributed enormous value to the counter-poaching operations in KPNR, reducing incursions and facilitating successful follow-ups on tracks and suspicious activity. The dogs' unique ability to use their noses and track specific human and animal scents in an overstimulating environment like the bush speaks volumes of their capability and the difference they make



to our success. Reserve Warden Colin Rowles arrived at the historic location under a large leadwood tree along the banks of the Klaserie River to deliver the brand-new vehicle, where the unsuspecting K9 Unit was waiting to perform a detection demonstration to special guests. Once the branded vehicle pulled up and the surprise was revealed, emotion filled the air as Colin handed over the keys with a touching speech to the K9 handlers, thanking them for their hard work, dedication, and invaluable contribution to conservation.

KPNR Chairperson Deon Huysamer emphasised just what this donation represents: "Today, 430 days have

passed without a rhino being poached in the Klaserie. The first was in 2013, the worst year was 2017, and now, utilising the combined approach to deter and mitigate poaching, we have surpassed our initial goal of going one year without an incident. This is without doubt thanks to the generosity and support of members of our community, like the team from Kateka."







The Klaserie continues to apply a multifaceted approach in its counter-poaching efforts: Regular dehorning of rhinos; heightened security including patrolled fence lines; field rangers; aerial patrol; a K9 Unit; and community engagement through Eco Children, all of which help contribute to the secure futures of people living alongside the Kruger National Park.

"Collaboration is what it is all about. Coming together for our shared love of nature and our commitment to sustainable conservation initiatives – that is both the work and the reward," concluded KPNR Exco, Derek Macaskill. ■



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Mandleve:

THE STORY OF A TRUE SURVIVOR

Words and photos Colin Rowles



Mandleve, as he's fondly referred to due to a split in his ear, is a mature, battle tank of a white rhino bull, who regimentally defends his territory in the southwest of the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (KPNR). The piece of Africa that he's claimed – the boundaries of which he marks regularly by defecating in his well-established middens linked by well-trodden paths – extends across the reserve's boundary and into the neighboring reserve.

During a mass dehorning event carried out reserve-wide in 2019, and during which all rhinos located were dehorned, Mandleve was on the neighboring reserve and evaded the dehorning teams. Carrying two massively impressive horns, he was at risk of being targeted by poachers. On several occasions, attempts were made to locate him to remove his horns, but each time he'd crossed the reserve boundary and so couldn't be located.

On one fateful night in December 2020, during an intense thunderstorm, three rhino poachers crept up and shot him at close range with a heavy caliber hunting rifle. Their approach was muffled by the rolling thunder, and the flashes of lightning created dancing shadows that hid those of the poachers themselves.

The bullet tore through his thick skin and the heavy muscles on his shoulder, broke a rib bone, and punctured the top of his lungs, becoming lodged in the ribs and flesh on the opposite side of his chest. The shot would have been fatal, with a quick death for any other animal, but not for Mandleve. In excruciating agony, he dropped his head, and with blood streaming from his nose due to his burning lung injury, he trundled off blindly, weaving his way amongst the dancing shadows. The poachers tried to pursue him, but

lost their nerve when they realised that Mandleve was no ordinary rhino.

At dawn the following day, as the sun slowly rose in the east sending its warm rays out over the quenched earth, a lone Spurfowl fluffed up its wet feathers in a spray of tiny water droplets and arching its neck skywards it called out, announcing the arrival of the new day. An early morning game drive from a local lodge came upon Mandleve and reported his circumstances to me.

With the assistance of a local wildlife vet and an experienced ground team, Mandleve was darted from a helicopter. Under anesthetic, his gunshot wound was assessed. The prognosis wasn't good. With each deep breath that he took, dark, aerated blood flowed out from his shoulder wound. It was soon realised that the bullet had not passed through his body but remained lodged somewhere in his chest. The gunshot wound was flushed and cleaned with an antiseptic solution

“Three rhino poachers crept up and shot him at close range with a heavy caliber hunting rifle”

and a large dose of antibiotics, and an anti-inflammatory was administered. The wound opening was plugged with a wad of cotton wool soaked in good old traditional Stockholm tar. Not much else could be done. I took the decision to dehorn him before the anesthetic reversal agent was administered. We watched with great sadness as he stumbled to his feet. And with heavy hearts, we let him be.

Miraculously, in mid-January, approximately one month after he'd been shot, he was still alive. Once again, with the assistance of a team of professionals, we darted him to assess his condition and rate of recovery. We cleaned his wound and administered further veterinary treatment. The gunshot wound on his shoulder was healing well, but questions about his damaged and compromised lungs provided no answers. His breathing was laborious and accompanied by gurgling sounds from fluid which had accumulated in his lungs. Once again, preceded by a prayer, he was revived from a deep sleep and he stumbled back onto his feet. Again we let him be, with an uncertainty as to what lay ahead.

Time passed and all seemed to be going well with Mandleve: His gunshot wound had healed and was no longer visible on his shoulder. He was regularly seen by lodge staff and guests and reported to be coping well.

It was 15 months after his second treatment when I started receiving distressing news about Mandleve's situation. It was reported that fluid was running from his nostrils and that he'd developed a regular cough to clear fluid from his labouring lungs. He seemed to also have difficulty walking for any distance, stopping regularly to catch his breath.

For the third time, with the consent of our provincial authorities, we set out to locate and dart Mandleve. From the air, I could see that he'd lost condition. His shoulders were angular, his spine protruded high above his flanks, and his ribs were showing. He didn't seem to have his usual spring in his step.

Given his condition, the vet prepared a lower-than-usual dose of the immobilising agent. He was darted and when he went down, I wondered



if we'd get him back up again. He was breathing heavily. Copious amounts of whitish-yellow, septicemic-like fluid was running out of his nose, a clear indication that all wasn't well with him and that he was in all likelihood dealing with a lung infection. The vet and his technician rallied around, keeping an eye on Mandleve's vital signs while administering respiratory stimulants, oxygen, and thereafter antibiotics, vitamins, and a range of other cocktails to help him through the cold winter months that lay ahead. I took the opportunity to re-cut his horn while I could, as it had grown out considerably.

The antidote administered, he lay still, and a minute or so later flicked his ears and started breathing deeply, each labored breath a gurgling sound. As the antidote countered the effects of the immobilising agent, he stretched out his front legs, raising his heavy chest and massive head off the ground. With his hindquarters swaying gently, he shuffled his rear legs beneath his heavy body, and for some time struggled to muster sufficient energy to raise his huge

body off the ground.

Expressions of apprehension were replaced with deep concern on the faces of the team that had nursed him. After what seemed an eternity, he staggered to his feet (to sighs of relief and subdued chatter from the team) and stood motionless, the only sound his heavy breathing and the chirp of Red-billed Oxpeckers that had swooped in and perched on a dead tree nearby. A few minutes passed, and then Mandleve trundled off.

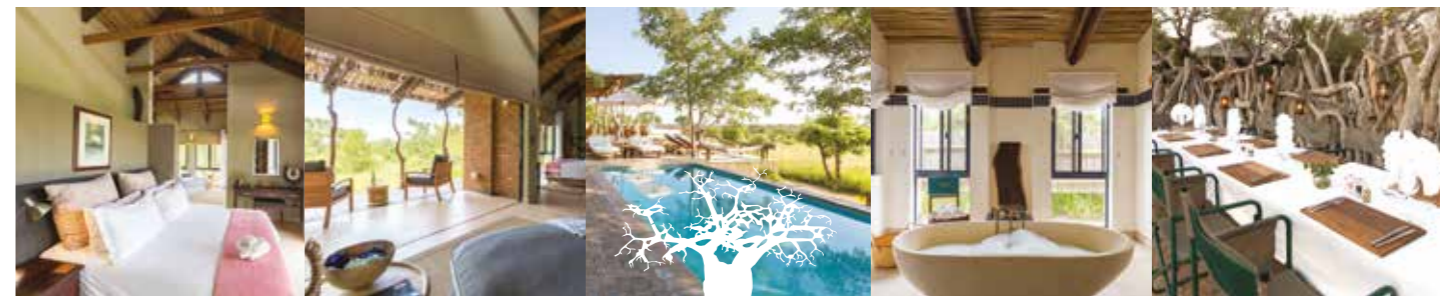
Uncertainty exists as to whether Mandleve will ever fully recover from the gunshot wound he sustained on that fateful night a few days before Christmas in December 2020. We hope that the veterinary intervention he received in June, 18 months after he was shot, will carry him forward and progress him on his road to recovery. He's certainly a fighter and we'll continue to monitor his progress and afford him whatever it takes to ensure his survival.

Update from the Editor:

Shortly after Colin submitted this article for publication, Mandleve's lifeless body was found on a property in Klaserie. Reserve management temporarily closed the devastating site to audiences as they investigated what had ultimately led to the death of this legendary rhino bull. Colin subsequently reported that Mandleve did indeed finally succumb to his injuries after surviving with them for 18 months. His body was left to become part of the Earth once again and hundreds of endangered vultures swooped in to clean the flesh from his bones, performing their crucial role in nature.

Ed's note: The rhino poachers who'd attempted to take Mandleve's life, and horns, were arrested as they attempted to leave the reserve on the night of the shooting.

If you'd like to contribute towards the Klaserie Endangered Species Protection Fund, please contact Colin on 083 290 1059 for more details. ■



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Training

FIREFIGHTERS IN KLASERIE

Words and photos Colin Rowles



During the late winter of 2021, and with the onset of spring and the first electric storms of the season, the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (KPNR) experienced several fires after large trees were struck directly by lightning bolts and set the surrounding veld alight.

These lightning-induced fires occur primarily at night after preceding days of hot, northerly winds, leading

to storm buildup at this time of the year. With the herbaceous biomass having improved greatly during the past number of years, these fires spread quickly and are fanned by strong, southerly winds in the evenings. Several accidental fires were also responded to by both the reserve's staff and volunteer staff assembled from several members' and commercial camps. These recent fire experiences prompted the proposal for a training initiative to better equip the staff of the reserve, both

from headquarters and the member camps, to fight veld fires safely and effectively. Training is also a legislative requirement, and untrained personnel may not be called to assist with the fighting of any veld fire.

After contacting Kishugu – an accredited training institution that offers fire fighter training – an invitation was circulated to the reserve membership with an opportunity to have their staff trained.

On 4 May, 55 enthusiastic staff members arrived at the reserve's headquarters for the three-day training course. The group was made up of 30 KPNR employees and 25 landowner staff.

During the first day, the training focused primarily on theoretical aspects of firefighting and, most importantly, fire safety. Day two consisted of practical demonstrations and the use of basic firefighting tools and equipment. Discipline was strictly enforced, with great emphasis placed on this aspect as the instructors repeatedly reminded students of the importance of looking after their fire beaters – tools which could ultimately save their own lives.

A simulated fire line was set out on the ground and the course attendees were divided into teams, each member equipped with a fire beater and each team with one 20-litre pump action knapsack sprayer. On the command and call of the instructor, the teams rhythmically and in unison progressed along the fire line, chanting as they pounded the imaginary fire with their beaters.

The last day saw the course wrap up with tests and administration. Thereafter, the students departed to their respective workplaces armed with new and valuable skills that would serve them well in the fire seasons to come. ■



Canine FIRST AID

Words and photos Marian Viljoen



The dogs in the KPNR K9 Unit are not only valuable assets of the reserve, they are close to all our hearts, and their wellbeing is a top priority. Just the thought of losing one of them to injury or trauma is devastating, and so the prevention of any injury is the KPNR K9 Unit's first and fundamental priority.

While we strive to keep our dogs safe and free from injury at all times, it's unfortunately not always possible to keep them from harm, especially when deployed in the reserve among potentially dangerous animals, harsh conditions, and sometimes life-threatening situations.

Being prepared and able to assess emergency situations, act fast, and apply valuable knowledge on canine first aid techniques could be life-saving for our K9s.

Our location in the nature reserve puts us out of immediate reach of veterinary services, and it could be dangerously time-consuming and even more traumatic for an injured animal to be transported over rough terrain to receive veterinarian treatment crucial for their survival. First aid is not a substitute for veterinary care; rather, it's aimed at stabilising an animal until a vet can provide treatment.

During the first week of August, the KPNR K9 Unit had the opportunity to attend a canine first aid course, presented by State Veterinarian Dr Helena Rampf and Dr Alexandra Graham, Compulsory Community Service Veterinarian for Bushbuckridge East and Orpen areas.

Establishing risk factors and stabilising a dog with major or life-threatening injuries, heat exhaustion,

excessive bleeding, wounds, or fractures are key before rushing to the nearest veterinarian for proper treatment and care.

More complex techniques were also demonstrated, including the Heimlich Maneuvre in the case of choking, and CPR for resuscitation of a dog.

Hopefully we'll never find ourselves in dire situations trying to save our furry colleagues' lives, but should an incident arise, we're now confident to use these effective first aid techniques to stabilise an injured or traumatised dog until we can get it treated by a veterinarian.

A big thank-you to Drs Rampf and Graham for their time and effort in sharing these valuable tools and life-saving techniques with our K9 handler team! ■

KPNR K9 UNIT NEWS

Words and photos Marian Viljoen



In recent assessments, KPNR K9 Unit performs to international standards

Dogs' natural detection and tracking abilities crucially contribute towards the success in the fight against rhino poaching and other wildlife crime worldwide. These innate qualities can't be replaced by any machine or man. The Klaserie's K9 Unit gives this vital support to the security team in and around the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (KPNR). To maintain the peak performance of the dogs is hard work and it's supported by a dedication from their handlers on a daily basis. Hours of conditioning training is needed to keep these dogs fit and in top performance condition.

Assessments done by professional K9 training institutions on a six-monthly basis form an important part of their work and deployment in the reserve.

Assessments done by K9 law enforcement from Johannesburg always fills KPNR's K9 Unit dogs and their handlers with excitement in anticipation of performing to the best of their abilities.

Mr Gideon Treurnich, an assessor from K9 law enforcement, recently visited the reserve to perform assessments of KPNR's K9 Pack Units (dogs and handlers) according to international standards.

Both the Protected Species Detection and Tracking pack units performed well above the required pass rates, receiving 80% for handlers and 90% for dogs. Well done team!

We thank you for your hard work and dedication. And we're very proud of you all.

KPNR K9 kennels complete and sponsored by the MJA Wildlife Fund

After many months of careful planning, design, and hard work, the KPNR K9 Unit dogs finally moved into their beautiful, new kennels.

Designed according to specifications and with the dogs' well-being and safety in mind, KPNR's K9 Unit's new kennels provide shelter against all natural elements, and keep our dogs safe from predators and other critters.

Once again, a big thank you to our generous sponsor from the USA, the MJA Wildlife Fund, who made all this possible!

KPNR K9 Unit donate igloos for Hoedspruit Animal Outreach (HALO)

Care and maintenance forms the basis of any dog's survival and level of performance, and their well-being is a 24/7 responsibility. The welfare of a dog is not limited to physical well-being – mental well-being is also important. This is a reason why KPNR's K9 Unit's daily routine is a success and everyone who cares about the wellness of a dog will know that what you give is what you receive, and much more.

In the spirit of celebrating the new kennels, KPNR's K9 Unit found an alternate home for the old dog igloos that originally housed our working dogs. These igloos were donated as a token of appreciation and in support of the amazing work done by Hoedspruit Animal Outreach (HALO).

An institution that cares deeply about the well-being of dogs and other animals, HALO promotes the physical and emotional well-being of domestic animals in the rural communities that surround Hoedspruit, educating and mentoring owners on complete animal care.

These igloos, now at the new outreach centre, will provide much-needed shelter for the dogs in HALO's care. ■

Capturing the **ELUSIVE**

Words and photos Samuel Cox



Without a doubt, the leopard is at the top of a safari wish-list. Most people are aware of just how elusive they can be and will settle for far-off sightings of rosettes in the bush, or just a tail hanging from the branches. But to see one up close and be able to appreciate the beauty of this truly stunning cat – well, that's a highlight of anyone's trip into the bush.

While leopards are more active at night – and your chances of a sighting dramatically increase after dark – it's a bit of a thorn in the side for photographers. We, at the end of the day, want the best images possible and sightings at night mean we need to wrestle with slow shutter speeds and high ISO numbers. And that's before you get any quick movement, in which case you can forget about it. A spotlight is no substitute for the sun after all, and even professionals can find it a trick-task.

I know many photography clients who've yet to capture a good photograph of, or even see, a leopard. So, what's the trick? Location. Location. Location. A sprinkle of luck, a dash of perseverance... and camera knowledge!

It's important to do a bit of research. Knowing what regions have good leopard densities, which reserves are renowned for sightings, and which lodges offer ethical and authentic experiences – these are key. You can spend untold thousands for a safari experience, but if you're in the wrong environment for a particular species, you're out of luck! Do your research and work with people who know the industry and you'll easily avoid disappointment. Leopards may be fairly spread out across southern and eastern Africa, but they have preferred habitats: The best course of action is to place yourself in those habitats.



Time of year is also worth noting. Sure, leopards and all big cats are active and present all year round – but in the height of summer with dense and vibrant foliage, stifling heat, and unpredictable rain, it can become a real challenge. Winters offer cooler temperatures but muted colours, if you're a birder, migratory birds have been and gone. It's not only important to know what you're wanting, but also what you're capable of handling; not all can handle Africa at its hottest, or even at its coldest.

Next up is of course luck! The joy of a safari is never knowing what you're going to see, what's round the next corner, or what's behind that tree. Go into the bush with open arms and an open heart, embrace what you do see, and don't fixate on what you don't see. Nature is full of beauty, and I often find those who are more open-minded get so much more out of their safari experience than those who are check-listing species.



This leads us to perseverance. It took me quite some time to spot my first leopard, and as a non-resident of Africa, it took years of travelling to finally see one. Some will get lucky and see one on their first game drive, but for others it will take longer. It's not a competition, we're all on the same journey of discovering and appreciating wildlife, but we might be at different chapters. Don't become dismayed. Don't let disappointment seep in, and don't let the early mornings deter you from getting out of bed and back into the bush. If there's one thing I can guarantee from experience, the drives you skip are the ones where the magic happens! If you want it, you sometimes need to work for it – and in these instances, the payoff is all the greater.

If you're a photographer, make sure you know your equipment. Practice beforehand. Make sure you give yourself the best possible chances of getting a picture. There are also times when the sun is dipping, and the leopard is on the move, weaving in and out of bushes and tall grass. The vehicle is bopping up and down as your guide tries to keep a visual and it's a challenge to keep your eyes locked on it, let alone gaining focus through your viewfinder. Quality of sightings vastly differ, but you want to make sure you get the most out of whatever is given to you, because you simply don't know if there will be another one. There's nothing worse than being under pressure to get a photo when you don't know your camera, or you're uncertain of what settings to use. You want to make sure that when the magic happens, you know how to capture it – so make sure to practice and study your equipment beforehand. And for the love of all that's holy, remember to format memory cards and recharge batteries!

Whether it's a leopard, elephant, cheetah, or a migratory bird – knowledge is key. Knowing the best locations, time of year, and your camera settings, and showing dedication and perseverance are core fundamentals for doing the best you can. It also goes without saying that the longer you spend out in the field, the more your chances increase. Don't go on safari for just one or two nights – make it three, four, or five nights. Embrace living in a completely different environment, take in as much as you can. There are no guarantees, and the best thing anyone can do to avoid feeling frustrated about missing out on something is to do the research and prepare yourself as much as possible – you've done what you can, the rest is down to nature and what she decides to give you. Embrace that. ■



Karolina Noree

LEADING THE WAY FOR WOMEN IN WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

Words Emily Whiting | Photos Karolina Noree



Karolina Noree, a talented female photographer and one of the latest making a name for herself in the industry, hails all the way from Sweden. It was during her two years working as an assistant manager at Last Word Kitara in the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve that she grew her childhood love of photography into a flourishing career. With her remarkable success, Karolina has been featured on The Wild Eye podcast, The Photographer's Mindset, and in Getaway magazine – to name a few – and this year she hosted a photographic safari in Tanzania. Now based in Hazyview, she recently launched her own safari company, Wildest Kruger Safaris, alongside boyfriend Craig Reid. We chatted to Karolina about her impressive career, her love of photography, and her views on women in wildlife photography.



Q: HOW DID YOU FIND MOVING FROM SWEDEN TO SOUTH AFRICA?

A: It's been difficult at times; being away from family and adjusting to new cultures and customs is not always easy, but it has also been the best thing I've ever done. I love South Africa, and moving here changed my life in so many ways. I'm forever grateful!

Q: DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE MEMORY OF YOUR TIME IN THE KLASERIE?

A: There's so many to choose from, but one that comes to mind is from lockdown when we stayed at the lodge to maintain its upkeep while there were no guests. One afternoon, we took the staff out for a game drive – something we're not normally able to do when there are guests at the lodge. It was wonderful and we had a fantastic time, being lucky enough to even have an amazing sighting of a leopard.

Q: HOW DID YOUR INTEREST IN PHOTOGRAPHY START?

A: I've always enjoyed photography and often organised photoshoots with my friends when I was younger. I loved playing around with my dad's camera whenever I was allowed to borrow it. But it really kickstarted when I first came to South Africa and saw all the incredible wildlife for the first time; that's when I truly fell in love with capturing that beauty.

Q: AT WHAT POINT DID YOU DECIDE TO MAKE IT A CAREER?

A: It's hard to say, but I spent a lot of time investing in my photography skills during lockdown, since we had a lot of free time on our hands. Slowly but surely, I realised I might be able to do it full time.





Q: DO YOU THINK PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEOGRAPHY HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN WILDLIFE CONSERVATION?

A: Absolutely! I strongly believe in the importance of photography and videography in conservation. For one, to be able to get the word out about conservation issues and show the world how incredible nature and these animals really are. But mostly, I believe photography helps create a connection to animals and a will to protect and care for them by those who otherwise might not even have been aware some of these animals even existed.

Q: ARE THERE ANY FEMALE WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHERS OR CONSERVATIONISTS THAT HAVE INSPIRED YOU?

A: Yes, plenty! Off the top of my head, there's Brooke Bartleson (@brookelittlebear), Dani Connor (@daniconnorwild), and Charly Savely (@charlysavely).

Q: CAN YOU GIVE US 3 QUICK TIPS FOR AN ASPIRING PHOTOGRAPHER OR VIDEOGRAPHER?

A: 1. Learn everything you can about your camera – for example, how shutter speed, ISO, and aperture work together and how they can help you achieve what you want with your photos.

2. Practice as often as you can – photograph all different kinds of subjects, from birds to squirrels to people to pets. You won't become a good photographer if you only focus on photographing the Big Five.

3. Find other photographers that inspire you and try figure out exactly what it makes their photos good – is it the light, the colours, or composition? When you've pinpointed exactly what it is you like about a photo, you can then try to apply it to your own photography.

Q: WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEOGRAPHY SEEM TO BE A FAIRLY MALE-DOMINATED INDUSTRY RIGHT NOW. WOULD YOU AGREE WITH THAT STATEMENT AND, IF SO, WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS?

A: Unfortunately yes, I think it is. It's difficult to say why though. Personally, I think it's because women don't get encouraged the same way men are when they're starting out. I've often felt I'm not taken seriously as a woman pursuing wildlife photography as a career.

Q: WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNG WOMEN LOOKING TO START A CAREER IN WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY?

A: Simply to just keep going. Keep doing what makes you happy, and you don't have to explain yourself to anyone. At the end of the day, the most important person that needs to believe in you is yourself.

TIME FOR SOME QUICK-FIRE QUESTIONS!

Q: PHOTOGRAPHY OR VIDEOGRAPHY?

A: Photography

Q: FAVOURITE ANIMAL?

A: Kudu

Q: MORNING OR EVENING SAFARI?

A: Morning

Q: WHAT'S YOUR SUNDOWNER DRINK?

A: Savanna Dry

Q: WHERE NEXT ON YOUR TRAVEL WISH LIST?

A: Namibia

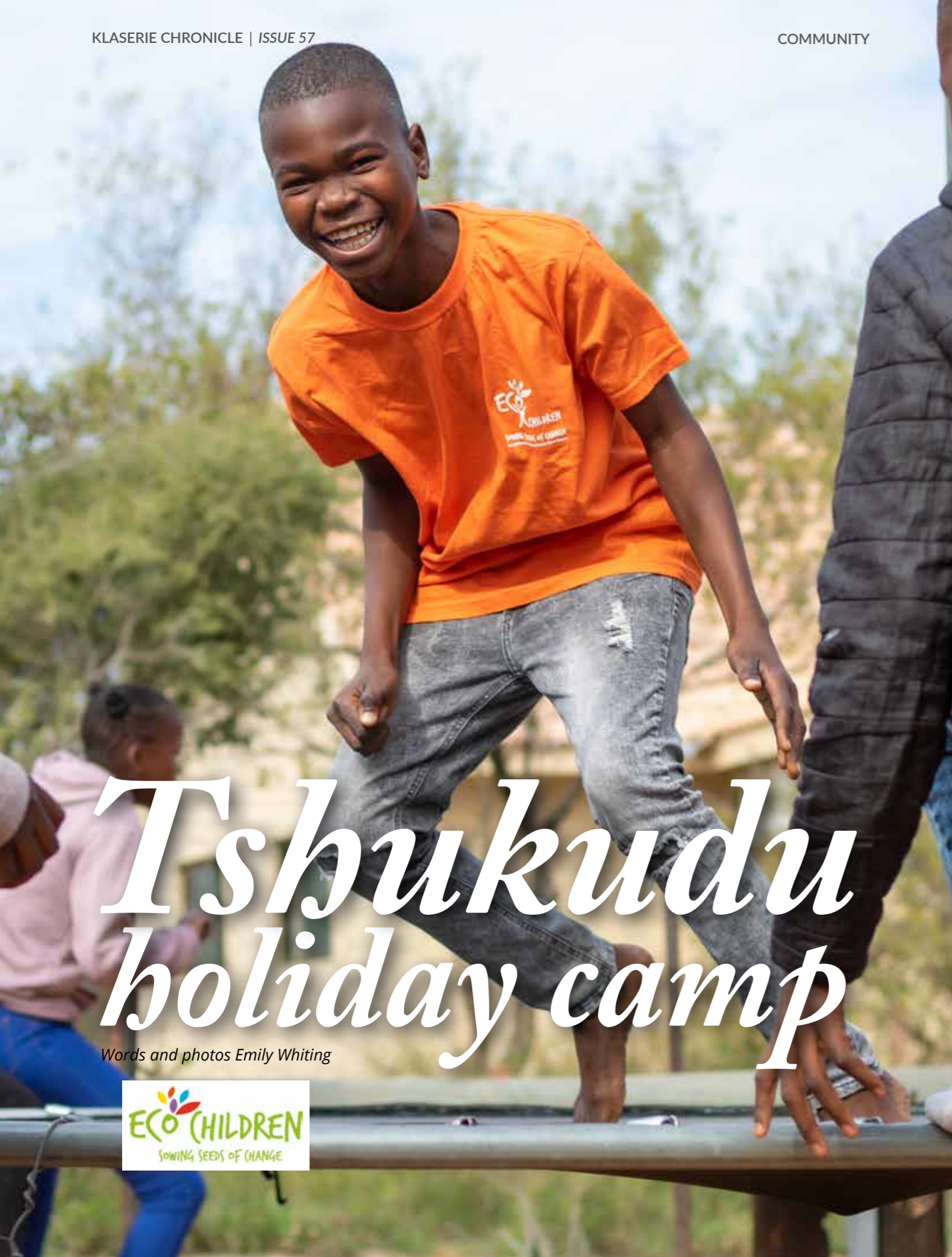
Q: IF YOU COULD SPEND AN HOUR WITH ONE FAMOUS PERSON (DEAD OR ALIVE), WHO WOULD IT BE?

A: Avicii (Tim Bergling)

LASTLY, TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR NEW PODCAST.

My boyfriend and I have just started a podcast called Wildest Kruger Stories where we talk about everything from conservation, wildlife, and photography to what it's like living in the bush. Of course, there's also some funny stories from our time working at lodges around the Greater Kruger!

You can follow Karolina on Instagram: @karolinanoreewild. ■



Tshukudu holiday camp

Words and photos Emily Whiting



One after the other, the students stepped off the coach with their overnight bags in hand, excitement evident in their eyes. For most, it was their first time staying away from home and, as they were shown to their respective dorms, animated whispers and squeals of delight filled the air. After a two-year interval due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Eco Children team were elated to finally take the top 56 students across our seven partner schools on the much-awaited annual holiday camp at Tshukudu Bush Lodge.

A short orientation was followed by lunch and an introductory lecture on conservation by the passionate guiding team. Well-versed in school trips, they added fun, interactive activities – from trapping volunteers in a bush snare to touching a few shavings of rhino horn leftover from their highly effective dehorning project. Seeing for themselves the fibres of keratin that make up a horn – the same as in our own hair and nails – left a long-lasting impression on everyone present.

That afternoon, the students climbed aboard three custom-made game vehicles for the first of several game drives in this Big-5 private reserve. Each drive was different, with fantastic sightings of elephant, rhino, buffalo, hippo, giraffe, zebra, and even two adorable baby cheetah! However, without a doubt, the highlight of the trip was locating the three resident lions. Huge smiles quickly replaced the initial gasps of awe as the enormous felines came into view just metres from the vehicle. Although some of the students had been fortunate to visit the Kruger National Park previously on a day trip with Eco Children, this was their first time seeing a lion so close – and without a window for protection! It was an unforgettable moment that will certainly be remembered for many years to come by staff and students alike. A little later, and finally back at camp, dinner and games around the fire made for a perfect ending to our first day at the lodge.

The following day, as the staff gathered to announce the early morning wake-up call, they were met with cheers from the already-awake students, all desperate to be allowed out of bed for the next adventure. Swiftly dressed and with everyone's belly warmed by a cup of tea, each learner was once again split into one of three groups – this time for a bush walk. From learning about trees to identifying tracks and dung and even playing the obligatory "poo spitting game", the guides took us on an entertaining and informative stroll through the reserve. Towards the end, two groups even managed to spot a relaxed white rhino bull standing out in the open. Unperturbed by our presence on foot, the students marvelled in the moment, experiencing the true magic of these iconic animals first hand.

Between more bush activities, educational lectures, games of "Tshukudu ball", and African drumming sessions around the fire, one of the biggest treats for the students was the playground – complete with mini-zipline and trampoline, and, of course, the swimming pool. Like endless wells of energy, every waking second of free time seemed to be spent splashing, jumping, and whooping for joy in the water. For children that have rarely, if ever, been swimming in their entire lives, this was an extra special

treat not to be missed – even if it was the middle of winter.

Far too quickly, our three days at Tshukudu came to an end. Bags packed and rooms checked, despite a sadness it was over, there was a real sense of joy amongst the entire cohort at having experienced something so far removed from their everyday lives. Every single student came together and behaved impeccably for the entire duration, and we could not be more proud of them.

Furthermore, we are grateful to Tshukudu Bush Lodge for hosting us and to COMETA for sponsoring this incredible trip. Having meaningful experiences with wildlife such as this are a vital part of fostering a love and connection to nature that inspires young people like these to want to help protect it in the future. In an area where 91 percent of grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning, it is immensely valuable and motivating to be able to reward these students for their hard work and achievements in school. Already, we have heard other students are studying harder than ever to secure their place on next year's trip! For now, though, it's back to business, albeit with a bigger smile than usual on all of our faces. ■



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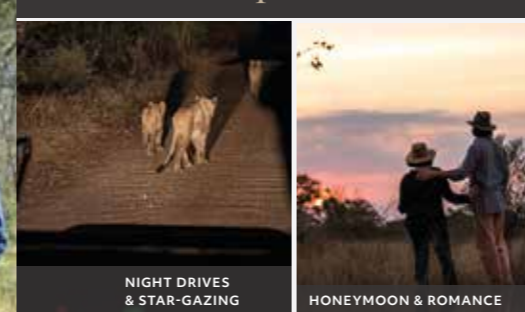


Simbavati Waterside

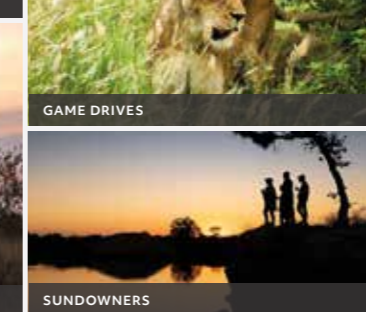
Flanking a large dam in the southern Klaserie Private Nature Reserve, this private luxury lodge offers the perfect getaway for every type of traveller. The carefully considered lodge structure affords both privacy for partners as well as family-friendly spaces.



Our Experiences



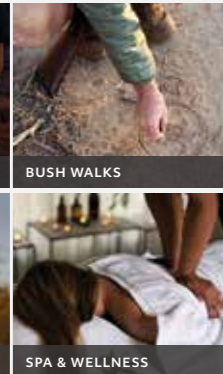
NIGHT DRIVES & STAR-GAZING



HONEYMOON & ROMANCE



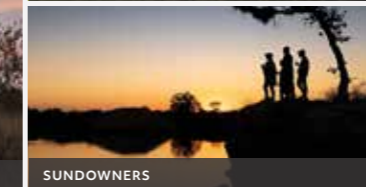
GAME DRIVES



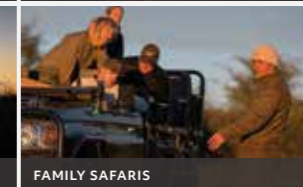
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IS OUR PROMISE



Eco Children hosted its seventh Kruger National Park (KNP) excursion this winter, as eight girls from Kgwaditiba Primary School visited the park as a reward for their hard work this year.

The KNP excursions serve as an incentive for learners to work hard and participate in Eco Children ecology lessons. It also allows them the opportunity to visit this special facility in person – something most people in their communities never get to do. Corné Havenga, CEO of Eco Children, elaborates: “This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for learners at our schools, as most communities living next to the KNP do not have the means to

visit the park. Visits like these have a big impact on these young peoples’ minds. This first-hand experience helps establish a passion and a love for wildlife from a young age and promotes conservation from the ground up.”

The day started off relatively quiet for the girls, but news of a pride of lions nearby was cause for great excitement. Unfortunately, despite signs of the lions, no-one could spot the elusive cats and the day’s activities pressed on. The girls enjoyed educational activities, like calculating the height of an elephant based on the size of their tracks, before heading to Satara for a delicious lunch.

During lunch, the teachers got word from a local guide that there was a very special sighting just down the road from Satara. Everyone jumped in the bus, ready to investigate. After a 10-minute drive down the S100, the girls finally spotted Casper, the famous white lion. This is an incredibly unique and special sighting as it’s speculated there are currently less than five white lions in the entire Kruger. The girls’ luck was not over yet. On the way to the gate, three inquisitive Southern Ground-hornbills, two adults and one juvenile, moved close to the car, giving the girls another incredible opportunity to witness a rare sighting. It is estimated there are only 1,500 Southern Ground-hornbills remaining in South Africa due to their slow reproductive rate and shrinking habitats.

One of the girls on the trip, Mmakgotso Mohlala, commented: “My favourite part of the trip was getting to see Casper, as it was my first time seeing a white lion. I thought there were only brown lions, so it was exciting to see something rare and different.” ■

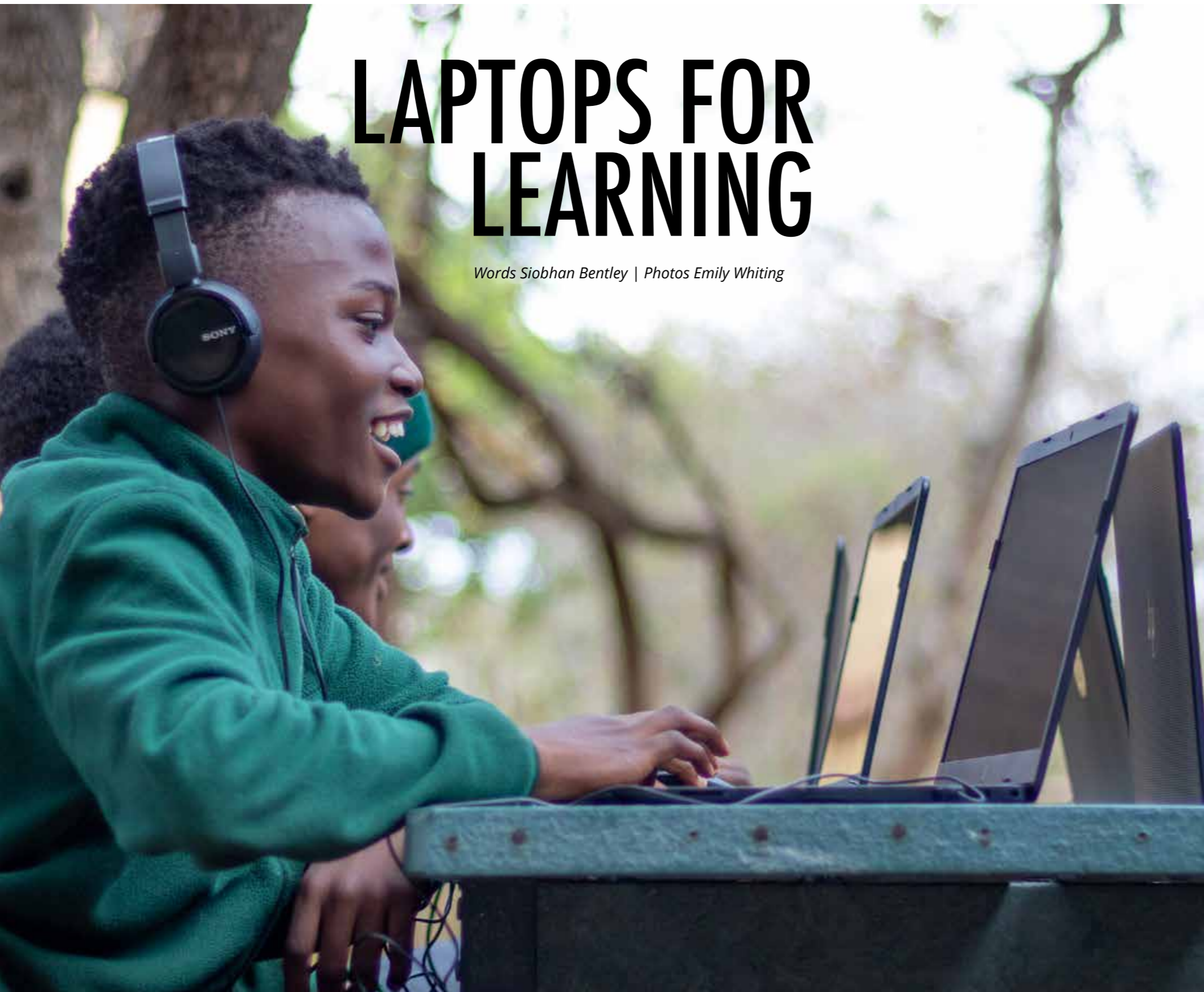


Rare sightings **EXCITE** **YOUNGSTERS**

Words and photos Siobhan Bentley

LAPTOPS FOR LEARNING

Words Siobhan Bentley | Photos Emily Whiting



Five junior Eco Children bursary learners, based at Southern Cross Schools, received their very own laptops earlier this year to help them on their educational journey.

With times rapidly changing and technology becoming increasingly important, Eco Children identified a need to supply their bursary students with laptops for two reasons. Firstly, to help them become computer literate, and secondly, to allow them to improve their education through researching various topics.

The importance of having access to laptops and other technologies became especially noticeable during the Covid-19 pandemic, when online learning was a necessity. Learners without access to online learning portals – like these five junior bursary learners – struggled to keep up with their homework and studies.

Eco Children's bursary learners work hard in school and have proved their dedication to their studies time and again. For this reason, they were ready to receive their own laptops. Eco Children CEO, Corné Havenga, commented, "We're delighted that these five learners will no longer be held back due to a lack of access to technology, and that they'll be able to continue their studies without any interruptions."

When handing over the laptops, Eco Children presented a lesson on how to use various applications such as Microsoft Office and explained the responsibility that comes with owning a laptop. "It's important for learners to feel they are being entrusted with valuable pieces of equipment and for them to take responsibility for its care. These are valuable life lessons and help them appreciate the value of items such as laptops and cell phones," Havenga said.

Absolutely thrilled with their new laptops, the bursary learners immediately got stuck into learning programmes and new computer skills.

Havenga explained the donation would not have been possible without the support of their partner, COMETA. "We'd like to thank COMETA for allowing us to further improve our bursary learners' education. We're excited to continue working with this amazing organisation in the future," she concluded. ■





Ntombana:

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH EDUCATION

Words Siobhan Bentley | Photos Emily Whiting

In celebration of Women's Month in August, Eco Children launched another important project: the women's empowerment programme, Ntombana. The project aims to educate girls on menstrual cycles and break down the stigma that exists around this perfectly natural occurrence.

Many girls don't go to school during their period for a multitude of reasons. These range from embarrassment and fear, to the sad reality that many of them simply cannot afford sanitary towels. On average, if a girl doesn't go to school for one week every month, she'll end up missing up to three months of school. It's hard to catch up the work covered during this absence, and it can become increasingly challenging for a young

girl to keep up with her studies. This can easily be overwhelming, leading to a loss of motivation and, ultimately, the possibility of dropping out of school.

Girls deserve to be loved

Ntombana is a Shangaan term of endearment for a girl that is much loved by everyone. Eco Children felt this name suited the project because every girl deserves to be loved and appreciated for who they are in their communities.

According to Corné Havenga, Eco Children CEO, the organisation believes that to improve the livelihood of local communities and create

a brighter future for these students, empowering young women and giving them options to stay in school is a crucial step. Ntombana was born from this belief.

Eco Children were delighted to welcome back Kwetsimana Mathebula, a tertiary bursary student studying law in Pretoria. She generously gave time from her extremely busy schedule to travel to Hoedspruit, facilitate the project, and help give back to the community where she is from.

On the day

The Ntombana project starts with a discussion with grade 7 learners, both boys and girls, about their perception of menstruation and puberty, followed by a question-answer session. "It's very important that the students feel comfortable with the topic of menstruation and begin to understand that it's nothing to be ashamed of but, rather, something that makes women unique and strong," said Havenga.

A short video with messages from women stating how they feel about their menstruation is played before the discussion. An introduction by past-bursary student Cassandra Mnisi followed, where she encouraged the children to be open and feel empowered by the discussions. In allowing boys and girls to hear from these women and understand the menstrual cycle is natural, the unknown surrounding the topic starts to break down.

To facilitate the discussions, several games are played. These include a simple 'yes or no' game where learners indicate their answers with a green or red card. They are then asked why they chose their answer, allowing for various myths to be corrected. Learners were also asked to write down, anonymously, any questions they had on the topic. The facilitators could then answer what could be seen as potentially embarrassing questions and assist in putting the learners' minds at ease.

Girls only

The boys were then asked to leave the room, giving the girls an exclusive opportunity to discuss any fears or concerns they may have about their menstruation cycle. At the end of the discussion, each girl was gifted with a colourful bag containing six reusable sanitary pads, a bar of soap, and a booklet with information on menstrual cycles and puberty.

Havenga said, "It's vital that learners are given the opportunity to be fully informed about puberty. These young girls need to stay in school and understand they are strong and capable of achieving anything they put their minds to. A period should not get in the way of them reaching their full potential."



"We'd like to thank COMETA for supporting the launch of this incredible project. Thanks to them, we have been able to distribute 250 reusable sanitary pads and information booklets, giving each young girl the opportunity to a brighter future. I could not think of a more powerful and impactful way to celebrate Women's Month," Havenga said. ■



Healthy kitchens

MAKE HEALTHY LUNCHES

Words Siobhan Bentley | Photos Emily Whiting



Tshokolo Primary School recently became the ninth Eco Children-adopted school to receive a brand-new kitchen. It was completed this winter and staff have already served their first, nutritious lunch from this well-equipped, safe, and hygienic facility.

When Eco Children adopts a school, the first phase of their whole school development initiative is to establish an Eco Village - consisting of an Eco Garden that produces fresh vegetables and an Eco Classroom, where ecology-based lessons are taught. Once an adopted school has shown they are committed to the initiative, the second phase kicks in and Eco Children starts improving existing infrastructure - starting with the kitchen.

All schools adopted by Eco Children are part of the country's national feeding scheme and many learners only receive one meal per day - at the school. For this reason, it's important these meals are supplemented with fresh vegetables (that come from the school's Eco Garden) and prepared in a safe and hygienic facility.

The original kitchen at Tshokolo Primary was not in a condition where the staff could cook a nutritious meal in a healthy environment. Food used to be cooked in traditional pots over a wood-burning fire in a small, enclosed room. This was not only bad for the environment due to the constant need for firewood, but also damaging to the kitchen staff's health because of smoke-inhalation.

The school's new kitchen is big, bright, and airy and fitted with all the necessary equipment to ensure staff can work in a healthy and safe environment and prepare nutritious meals for learners. It's equipped with three gas-burners (removing the need for firewood) and has plenty of storage facilities and counter space where food can be prepared hygienically.

"Without the continued support of the Jell Foundation and their dedication to help us build new kitchens in our partner schools, we would not be able to support our schools in the holistic way we aspire to. We would like to thank the Jell Foundation for helping us build another beautiful kitchen," stated Corné Havenga, CEO of Eco Children. ■





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Eco Village keeps on GIVING!

Words and photos by Emily Whiting

It's been a bumper harvest in the last few weeks at Eco Children's partner schools! Having switched to a new rotation system that allows crops to be planted and harvested continually, the learners worked together to adapt their methods and make it a huge success. Every day, they have different jobs to do: preparing the soil for new seedlings, removing weeds, watering, and harvesting. This not only keeps it fun and interesting, but also teaches them vital skills in sustainability and food production, as well as the reward that comes from hard work.

Thanks to this dedication from both the learners and environmental educators – as well as the project's sponsors, The Legacy Experience Foundation – the kitchen staff have been delighted to add fresh beetroots, onions, spinach, tomatoes, chillies, and cabbages to the menu of late, benefitting all students from grade R through to grade seven.

In the last few weeks alone, the teams have successfully harvested:

- 250 beetroots
- 625 onions
- 916 bundles of spinach
- 280 tomatoes
- 48 chillies
- 84 cabbages

What makes this project so important? Across South Africa, 90% of learners in rural areas make use of the school feeding scheme on a daily basis, with many relying on it for their main or even only meal. Unfortunately, these already tight budgets can often only stretch to the basics such as pap, soup, and beans, with fresh vegetables in short supply.



This is where the Eco Gardens come in, ensuring every child gets a plate full of nutritious vegetables every single day. With full bellies and healthy bodies, the learners have improved attendance at school and are more able to engage in lessons, maximising their learning potential.

By meeting the learners' basic needs, it also helps Eco Children deliver their ecology and conservation curriculum more successfully. As an initiative that was originally started by the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve, conservation remains at the heart of Eco Children's mission.

"I love Eco Children because I enjoy helping in the Eco Garden and the environmental educators support us through school. I also really enjoy learning and writing about ecology." ~ Lebogang Mdhlovu, grade 7 learner at Makwetše Primary School. ■

THE LEGACY EXPERIENCE Foundation





RHINO. *dehorning*

Words and photos by Emily Whiting

Dust filled the air in a plume of red and orange as the helicopter landed in the early morning light. Bubbles of excitement rippled through the gathering of onlookers, patiently waiting for the dehorning operation to begin. As part of Women's Month, seven top female learners from Mapalane Primary School joined the combined teams of Rhino Revolution and Eco Children for this provocative and emotional day with one of Africa's most iconic endangered species – the white rhino.

After a briefing, the teams climbed aboard the waiting vehicles whilst the vet joined Jana Meyer – a renowned local conservation pilot – in the helicopter. It wasn't long before a suitable white rhino was located and the helicopter moved in, allowing the vet to deliver a dart with astounding, pinpoint accuracy. Like a well-oiled machine, the ground crew of assembled specialists converged on the animal, ensuring he went down in a safe and comfortable manner.

Just minutes later, the rhino was stable and the scene was clear for the learners and volunteers to

approach. Tentative at first, the girls stood back with a mixture of awe and concern on their faces. Although a unique privilege to get up-close with these beautiful animals, it is also incredibly poignant and jarring to see them so vulnerable. However, with a little encouragement, the girls' courage and curiosity grew.

One-by-one, they placed their hands on the rhino's enormous body, sensing his deep breaths undulating beneath the coarse exterior; a paradox of immense strength and precarious fragility. Simply getting to touch them up close was an intimate

and powerful moment that clearly left an impression on these girls much greater than any book or lesson ever could.

Once the horn was trimmed, the vet showed it to the group for a better look. The compressed, hair-like strands of keratin were obvious to see – a reminder that these magnificent animals are slaughtered for something as inane as the substance that makes our own hair and nails. Barely 20 minutes after starting, the medical team had finished tending to the rhino and collecting data and were ready to reverse the sedative. Everyone promptly headed back to the vehicles and, moments later, the young rhino bull was back on his feet and swaggering off into the bush beyond.

Over the course of the morning, the joint efforts of all involved resulted in a staggering five rhino successfully dehorned. With each new animal, the vet engaged one of the learners – from helping to apply medicine at the injection site to spraying its back as a mark to the aerial team that this rhino had already been trimmed. Despite the negative connotations of having to inflict this albeit painless procedure on an innocent animal, there was a general feeling of positivity and excitement throughout the day.

For the Eco Children learners, it brought to life the classroom lessons about conservation and, for many, was their first time ever seeing a rhino in the flesh. With a small team of incredible women at the helm – from the pilot and medical team to the organisers at Rhino Revolution and Eco Children, it was a wonderful occasion to celebrate women in conservation whilst contributing to the war on poaching and inspiring the next generation of wildlife warriors. ■



Tribute to a fallen hero **ANTON MZIMBA**

Words Chloë Cooper | Photos Global Conservation Corps

A fallen hero is one who has sacrificed the ultimate – his or her life – in the service of others.

On 26 July, just days before World Ranger Day, a beloved and revered wildlife guardian was taken from our Greater Kruger community and the conservation world at large. Anton Mzimba – Head of Ranger Services at the Timbavati Private Nature Reserve – was a giant, likened to the tallest and most steadfast of trees, and a recognised warrior in the fight against poaching. His life was taken in retaliation for his vigilance and dedication at the helm of one of southern Africa's most successful field ranger units combating rhino poaching.

Anton's death came as a violent shock to his family, his friends, and his colleagues – rangers who work on the front line and behind the scenes who have been reminded yet again of the constant risk facing their own lives. The Thin Green Line Foundation assessed that globally, around 150 field rangers die in the line of duty every year, clearly stating just how prevalent the war on wildlife crime

is and acting as a stark reminder of the protection and support field rangers require across the continent.

Anton's was a life lived with purpose, led by a belief in what is right, not only for his own calling, but for the greater good and for the secure future of wildlife. His sense of responsibility matched the pride he had in his role as a protector and a defender of the wildlife that make our planet what

"A fallen hero is one who has sacrificed the ultimate – his or her life – in the service of others."

it is. He boldly faced the risks, believing strongly in using his own story and his own voice to share the brutal reality of rhino poaching, and upholding his duty to fight it.

As we begin picking up the pieces left in the wake of his passing, we share

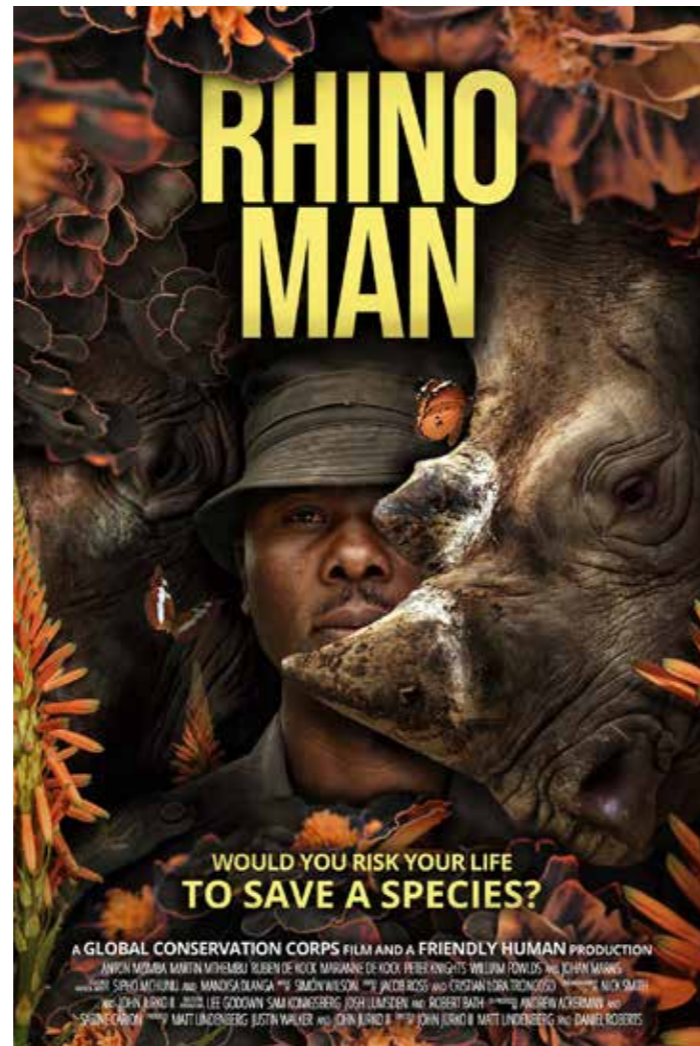
the weight of this tragedy with our colleagues across the Greater Kruger, and our heartfelt condolences go out to those recovering from this untimely loss. It is with a renewed sense of awareness, determination, and belief that we continue to support the work of field rangers everywhere.



In remembrance of Anton Mzimba, who was considered a great tree:

*When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.
When great trees fall
in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses
eroded beyond fear.
When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly.
Our eyes, briefly,
see with
a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines,
gnaws on kind words
unsaid,
promised walks
never taken.
Great souls die and
our reality, bound to
them, takes leave of us.
Our souls,
dependent upon their
nurture,
now shrink, wizened.
Our minds, formed
and informed by their
radiance, fall away.
We are not so much maddened
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of
dark, cold
caves.
And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.*

— Maya Angelou

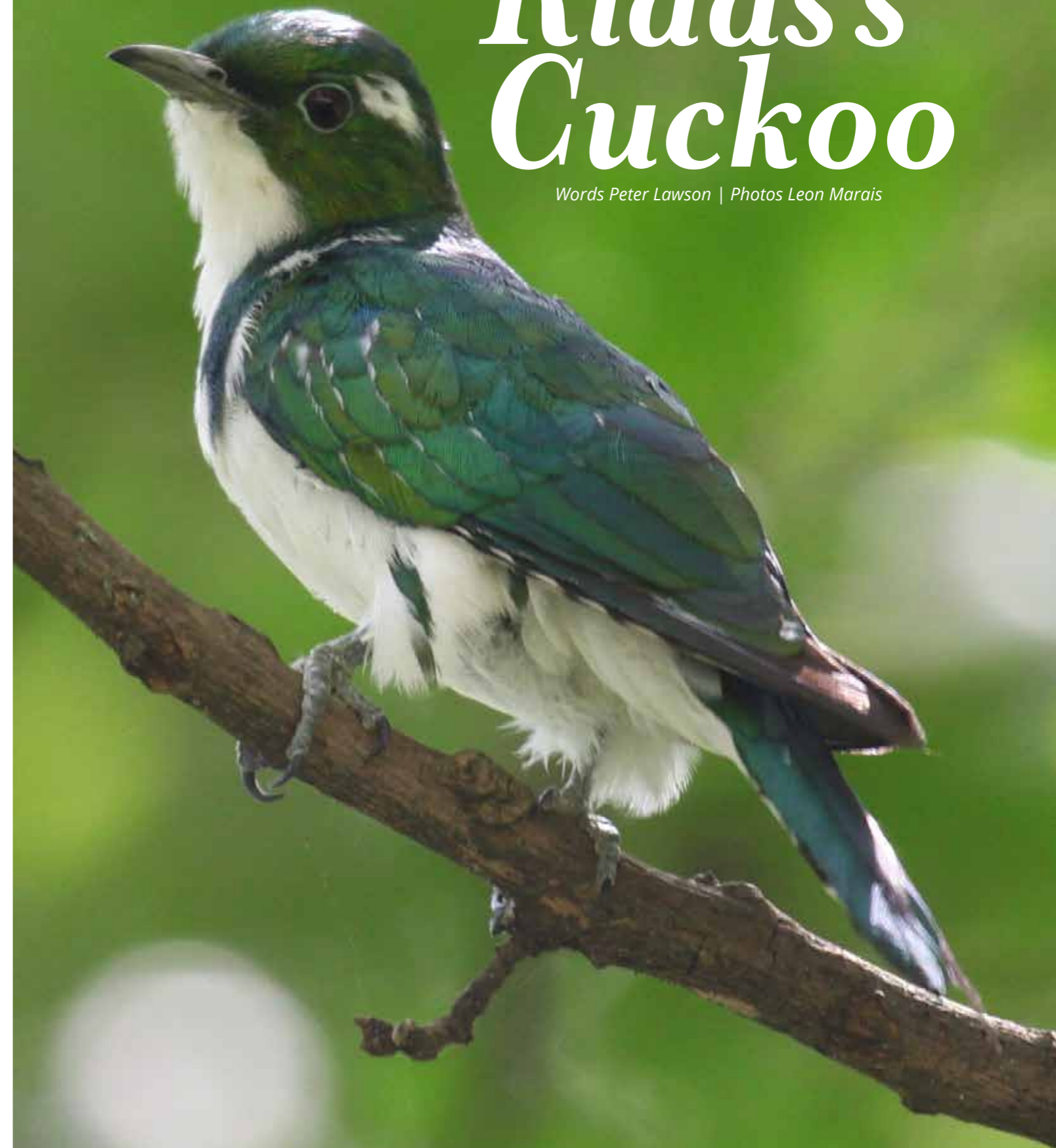


The Global Conservation Corps, Southern African Wildlife College, Timbavati Private Nature Reserve, and Elephants Alive have established an education trust in Anton's name to provide for the educational needs of his children, and for future scholars committed to conservation careers. If you would like to contribute to Anton's legacy and help support his family, please visit www.antonmzimba.com to make a donation. ■



Klaas's Cuckoo

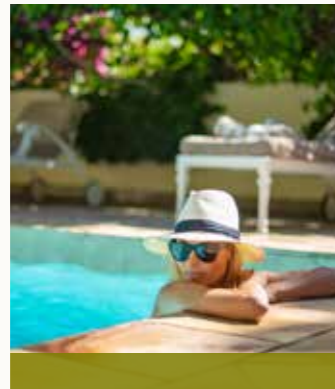
Words Peter Lawson | Photos Leon Marais



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This delightful little cuckoo closely resembles the more common Diederik Cuckoo, but the male has only a single white ear patch and no red eye or eye-ring. It's a fairly common resident, but does have possible movements which are little understood. It's also easily overlooked in the non-breeding season when it's not calling. And it's the only cuckoo of many species that is not a full migrant and is sometimes encountered in winter, unlike other cuckoo species.

The bird was first discovered and named by French naturalist explorer, Francois Le Vaillant, in 1784, and named after his loyal Khoi servant and companion, Klaas. This came about when Klaas sadly lost his wife in an accident and missed her so much that he went about calling her, "Meitjie, Meitjie!" This is the Afrikaans name of the bird due to the call of the male, which is a distinctive, loud and plaintive, two-note mei-tjie. I just love this heartrending story.

The Klaas's Cuckoo habitat is a variety of woodland areas, including gardens, and is thus frequently encountered in residential localities in the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve

(KPNR). Cuckoos are parasitic when breeding, and Klaas's Cuckoo chooses small host species such as sunbirds, batises, apalises, and crombecs to deposit a single egg in each of a number of nests.

Food consists mainly of hairy caterpillars and it's uncanny to watch them feeding without being stung. Other insects are also eaten and this cuckoo often frequents fruit crops to feed on invading insects, including stink bugs, which is astounding. Sadly though, they are affected by crop spraying, particularly on macadamia crops in the Lowveld.

When calling, the Klaas's Cuckoo is always perched and usually frequents the same call site. Only males call, and this is when breeding takes place. Add this colourful, small cuckoo to your KPNR bird list and become familiar with the distinctive, loud call and track it down to the call site. This is an easy way to locate them, although their green plumage blends in with leafy trees and they can be difficult to spot at times! ■

Recently, five private reserves that form the Associated Private Nature Reserves (APNR) in South Africa – a vital part of the Greater Kruger ecosystem – provided Africa Geographic with the data from their 2021 population censuses. We sifted through this APNR census information to highlight the fascinating ebb and flow of nature and how reserve managers balance this against anthropogenic stressors to preserve the integrity of the ecosystem.

A WORD ON COUNTING

Counting wild animals is an enormous and costly exercise that requires adaptive techniques for each species be balanced against the economic and logistical realities of each reserve. The APNR alone is roughly the size of Mauritius. The vast majority of the counts are conducted by air, with counters, spotters, and data recorders spending days hanging out of a helicopter or plane. These are highly skilled individuals capable of not only spotting the animals, but also often able to provide a breakdown of the demographics (males, females, and juveniles) of every animal seen. The counts are conducted towards the end of the dry season when vegetation cover is minimal and the animals are more visible.

Larger animals like elephants and buffalo are generally easier to count (and fewer in number than, say, impala), so population estimates tend to be more accurate. Large herds (like breeding herds of buffalo) can be photographed, and these high-resolution images used to count individuals. Though all animals spotted from the air are recorded in each census, common sense plays a role in interpretation. For example, a sighting of only one lion in Thornybush's 2021 aerial count doesn't mean there is only one lion on the reserve.

Furthermore, though predators are often spotted from the air, aerial counts don't provide accurate population estimates, particularly for cryptic animals like leopards and some smaller carnivore

species. As a result, some reserves use camera traps and sightings information, and conduct call-ups for their predator census. A call-up count involves placing bait and playing the sound of a prey species in distress over a speaker. The sound generally attracts the lions, spotted hyenas, and the occasional leopard and smaller carnivore. Wild dogs (painted wolves) and cheetahs are less likely to respond, even during the day, and alternative methods have to be implemented if a population estimate is required. These predators also have large home ranges and regularly move in and out of reserves.

Predator populations are fluid and dynamic, fluctuating depending on a variety of circumstances, including both inter- and intraspecific competition.

TRENDS AND THE 2016 DROUGHT IN GREATER KRUGER

The idea of a "stable" population is somewhat misleading, as there is no such thing in nature and, in reality, long-term wildlife populations fluctuate, ideally within a sustainable range. This range is determined by the carrying capacity of the reserve, dictated by geography, climate, and flora of the landscape. Even when a once-off disaster (a disease outbreak or drought) causes a more dramatic decline in numbers, the species concerned often recover, provided their previous numbers were sufficiently robust.

The ebb and flow is evident throughout the data from all five reserves, especially concerning buffalo numbers during and after the 2015/16 drought. Though the number of buffalo dropped substantially during the drought period, it's important to note this is largely accounted for by the movement of buffalo herds to more favourable habitats to the east (in the Kruger National Park). Trends such as these emphasise the importance of large connected habitats. The 2016 drought was the first one experienced since the removal of fences between the APNR and



KEEPING Count

Words by Africa Geographic | Photos Colin & Rebecca Rowles

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the Kruger National Park. This, in turn, allowed for greater ecological resilience in the face of extreme conditions.

Even as rainfall levels increased in later years, the return of the buffalo and the recovery of other ungulate numbers were by no means instantaneous, and lag effects were to be expected. What's more, knock-on effects were experienced in other, less obvious ways. For example, deprived of buffalo, resident lions would have been forced to rely more heavily on other species for sustenance. There is also a seasonal change in prey species selection, with more wildebeest killed by lions during the wet season and weakened buffalo targeted during the dry season.

ELEPHANT

Entire APNR Elephant numbers in the APNR have gradually increased since 2004, when the population stood at around 1,038. The population peaked in 2018 (3,297). In 2021, the total count from all five reserves was 3,144 elephants.

Balule Balule has seen the most significant increase (86%) in elephants utilising the property over the past four years. 1,053 elephants were counted in 2021, representing the highest population (and density) of the five reserves. The demographics of the elephants entering Balule has also changed gradually since the reserve opened to the rest of the APNR in 2004. Initially, young males dominated, but today, breeding herds and calves are firmly in the majority.

Klaserie 718 elephants were counted in 2021, increasing 62% since 2017.

Timbavati 875 elephants were counted in 2021, compared to the 465 in 2017 (a nearly two-fold increase).

Thornybush When Thornybush dropped its fences in 2018, the number of elephants in the reserve shot up from just over 50 individuals to 349. The population peaked at 770 before decreasing to 368 again in 2021. This fluctuation could be explained by the after-effects of the drought and the return of good rains in subsequent



years. The dense, nutritious habitats that dominate much of Thornybush were more attractive to elephants until the flora in other regions recovered, resulting in some of the herds dispersing.

Umbabat 130 elephants were counted in 2021. However, Umbabat elephant counts have varied considerably over the past four years, possibly explained by its relatively smaller size and close proximity to the Kruger National Park.

BUFFALO

Entire APNR During (and almost exclusively due to) the 2015/16 drought, the APNR buffalo population dropped from 7,291 to 2,251 in just two years. However, numbers have been slowly increasing with a couple of years' worth of good rains, and the 2021 count stands at 3,725. Individual counts from the various APNR reserves are highly variable due to the nature of buffalo herds and the "snapshot" of the count. A breeding herd of over 500 may decide to leave the property the day before a count or arrive a day after. This is one area where an overall trend is more revealing.

PREDATORS: LION AND SPOTTED HYENA

Balule Balule has experienced substantial growth in its lion population over the last decade. However, the verified numbers from the 2020 and 2021 censuses indicate a stabilisation and a minor decline, from 137 to 124 individuals. Curiously, Balule's lion population has been nearly double that of neighbouring Klaserie



and Timbavati in recent years. This could be partly explained by high prey biomass, but of particular interest is the high proportion of mature and young males in Balule compared to "normally" observed demographics. The managers theorise it may be due to the reserve's geographical location: Young dispersal males may be pushed continually further west until they reach Balule, which marks the western boundary of this section of the Kruger ecosystem, where they can go no further without breaking out of the protection of the reserve. However, this leaves unanswered questions about Klaserie as the immediate neighbour to the east (see below).

Typically, high lion densities are associated with lower spotted hyena numbers, but this is not the case in Balule. 96 individual spotted hyenas were identified during the 2021 predator census, suggesting that spotted hyena densities in Balule are roughly on par with the surrounding reserves.

Klaserie Klaserie's call-up predator census in 2021 yielded a count of just 18 lions, compared to around 40 and 50 in 2020 and 2019, respectively. Naturally, this does not represent the reserve's total lion population, but it's a significant drop from previous years and the call-up counts of 2021 were dominated by spotted hyena responses (80%). 141 spotted hyenas were counted in the 2021 census, compared to just under 80 the previous year. Lions and spotted hyenas are in direct competition and a rise in hyena numbers could account for lower-than-expected lion populations.

Timbavati According to the reserve ecologists, Timbavati has a population of between 55-60 lions, which is in line with the long-term trend of the reserve.

Thornybush The current resident lion population on Thornybush numbers 26 individuals. Reserve authorities



estimate between 25 and 30 spotted hyenas. Umbabat The lion population was estimated at around 12 to 16 individuals, belonging to between two and three prides. The hyena numbers are believed to be approximately 50 to 60 and reports suggest that the population is growing.

LEOPARDS

Entire APNR Leopards are notoriously difficult animals to count and those that do respond to call-ups are not representative of the total population. Klaserie and Umbabat anecdotally report healthy populations of leopards. The most robust data comes from Balule and Timbavati.

Balule The Balule predator census combined call-up results with sightings data and camera trap images. The identification of individuals helped in this process, and Balule confidently estimates the number of leopards at around 76.

Timbavati Timbavati has been conducting surveys of their leopard population since 2013 (except for 2020 due to Covid). In conjunction with the South African Leopard Monitoring Project (a cooperative effort between the NGO Panthera, SANBI, and other partners), camera trap surveys have provided reliable, long-term trends for the reserve. The reserve leopard monitoring reports note a significant drop in leopard densities in 2019. While the 2021 data records a slight increase, there has still been a concerning decline of 50% between 2018 to

2021. It's important to note that this decline refers to leopard densities, measured in the number of leopards per 100km². Interestingly, the number of adult males and females has remained consistent between 2019 to 2021, but the number of young males appears to have decreased. The report offers a couple of suggested explanations for this, including lion movements, but emphasises the importance of long-term trend monitoring to inform management practices.

WILD DOG

Entire APNR Wild dogs utilise enormous home ranges except when packs are denning, before the pups can keep up. A pack counted on Balule one day could easily turn up on a neighbouring property the next. As such, precision counting is near impossible. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence suggests that the APNR wild dog population is healthy and possibly even growing.

Balule 22 wild dogs were recorded in Balule: three packs of five and one pack of seven individuals. Klaserie Reserve authorities report that wild dog populations have flourished in here in recent years, possibly due to water abundance, favouring impala population growth. The single largest pack size recorded on the reserve was 50 individuals!

Thornybush At the time of writing, two packs regularly use Thornybush. One pack of six individuals is currently denning on the reserve.



Umbabat Wild dog sightings are regularly reported in Umbabat, with pack sizes varying from eight to 30 individuals.

GIRAFFE

Entire APNR Giraffe numbers in the APNR peaked at 1,127 in 2018 and have since remained stable when all five reserves are considered as a unit.

BLUE WILDEBEEST, KUDU, IMPALA, WATERBUCK, AND WARTHOG

Entire APNR Balule has recorded a significant decline in blue wildebeest (-57%), kudu (-44%), impala (-37%), waterbuck (-54%), and warthog (-63%) from 2018 until 2021. Population peaks and troughs have probably occurred naturally for millennia (especially before and after a drought). However, it's interesting that the same trend is not entirely mirrored in the counts from other APNR members. Where declines in the other reserves occurred over the same period, as was the case for impala, kudu, and wildebeest numbers, the drop in populations was not nearly as substantial. The only comparable drop was seen in warthog numbers in Klaserie, which also decreased 61% (from 236 to 91) between 2018 and 2021. Waterbuck numbers increased in Klaserie and Thornybush, and kudu numbers nearly doubled in Umbabat.

Determining an exact explanation for this trend is just one example of the challenges that face those managing

these wild spaces. Was it caused by increasing vegetation thickness making counting challenging? Could it be attributed to Balule's comparatively high lion, hyena, and elephant densities? Is it just part of a natural cycle, or is there another, unseen explanation?

OTHER NOTEWORTHY POINTS

Balule's census indicates a concerning drop in crocodiles, down from over 120 in some years to just 30 individuals. The authors of the census report suggest that this warrants further investigation. In addition, comparing counts in the Kruger National Park would be interesting, as the Olifants River flows west through Balule and into the Kruger. It may be a counting artefact, but could also indicate a problem with the health of the river ecosystem.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Counting animals comes with challenges (and strained eyes), but analysing the data is a far more cerebral and long-term exercise. Wildlife counts are vital to understanding any wilderness and significantly impact management decisions. Accurate population estimates and trends aid short- and long-term decisions (like waterholes or hunting quotes, for example) and identify potential problems while there is still a chance to remedy them. An overarching perspective is often invaluable in the case of connected ecosystems – be it the APNR, the Kruger ecosystem, conservancies in East Africa, or Transfrontier conservation areas. ■

Honey Badger

Words Peter Lawson | Photos Leon Marais



A feisty, small mammal known as *ratel* in Afrikaans, the honey badger is a stocky chap, strong, fearless, and ferocious. It occurs singly, though is sometimes seen in pairs; is widespread in various habitats, but scarce and not often encountered. It's both diurnal and nocturnal, with most sightings at night.

The honey badger's diet is omnivorous and consists mainly of insects, scorpions, reptiles, and small mammals, plus berries when available. It has been known to attack and kill very large pythons and also feeds on a variety of snakes – including venomous ones – and appears to be immune to both snake and scorpion venom.

In some areas, honey badgers enter rest camps and raid rubbish bins. Be careful when trying to stop them, as they are not at all scared of humans and will attack in defence!

On one occasion, whilst overnighing at Orpen in the Kruger National Park, I was woken up by a noise coming from the patio of my chalet. I got out of bed and as I looked through the glass sliding door, I saw two honey badgers had managed to open the outside refrigerator and were pulling out its contents. I reacted by quickly sliding open the door and shouting. One badger was completely inside the refrigerator and responded with a growl, while the other came rushing straight at me! I managed to rapidly retreat back inside and slammed the sliding door, but the little chap still tried to attack my bare feet through the glass door. Needless to say, after this I thought it best to leave them be, and watched as they consumed my food they had grabbed out the fridge!

They have powerful claws and most of their prey is dug rapidly out of the ground. They are nomadic and cover about 10km per day in search of food. They sleep and breed in hollows in the ground and when needs be, will dig their own den nearly every day. Old aardvark holes or rock crevices are also used. They breed in these hollows as well and litters of two are born in summer.

Honey badgers are fond of honey from bees and can climb trees in order to raid a hive. Bee stings don't bother them at all. Their name is derived from this habit. It's believed that bee hives are on occasions located by Greater Honeyguide birds who will lead a honey badger to the hive. This is a wonder of nature I so enjoy.

Do your best to add this delightful small mammal to your Klaserie mammal list. They can be located throughout the reserve, but less likely in forested areas. ■



THE MULTI-PREY DIET

of endangered Southern Ground-hornbills

Words Carrie Hickman | Photos APNR Ground-hornbill Project

Southern Ground-hornbills are faunivorous birds, which means their diet consists of both vertebrate and invertebrate prey, they possess competent digestive adaptations, and have distinct traits designed for pursuing and catching prey.

If you have ever witnessed ground-hornbills foraging, you'll notice their eyes methodically scanning the ground as they walk through the bush, taking an occasional glance up into any trees and bushes they pass by. Their ability to spot incredibly camouflaged chameleons in a branch high above is astounding, and we've seen how a peaceful foraging scene can quickly turn into a fluster of activity, with the birds flying up into a tree to grab their prey, and

this often followed by other squabbling group members trying to steal the kill.

Ground-hornbills hunt and consume whatever they can overpower, from insects to reptiles and even small mammals and other birds. When it comes to catching prey, they have incredibly large and powerful beaks used for digging and stabbing. They can, however, be very dexterous and gentle with this large beak, especially when it comes to allopreening and consuming little mites and ticks from other group members' bodies.

They have 15 cervical vertebrae – compared to other hornbills with 14 – giving them the power and strength

to carry large prey loads, collecting more and more as they forage over long periods of time. Their generalist diet enables them to be successful and adaptable in varying environmental conditions. Additionally, like other hornbills, they obtain the water they need entirely from their diet and so do not need to drink water; this is a great adaptation to living in semi-arid environments where water can be scarce.

When it comes to feeding offspring, more is always better! Since they are cooperative breeders, all group members contribute to raising a single nestling, but the contributions vary between individuals. We have been able to record prey items being provisioned to nestlings from many hours of camera trap footage and have found that adults provision the most, sub adults less, and juveniles from previous years, hardly at all (they often steal food from the nest when no one's looking!). It's likely that it takes a lot of skill and years of practice to become an adept hunter, so juveniles will still rely on adults for food for a couple of years.

When the nestling is small, group members will mainly provision small invertebrates which will be easier for the chick to consume, but we have also noticed a lot of very large and juicy solifuges being provisioned at this time. If larger prey is brought, then the female will thrash the prey around until it breaks apart, as Southern Ground-hornbills don't possess a hooked beak like raptors do to tear prey apart. As the chick grows rapidly, larger prey items are brought to the nest. Large snakes, such as puff adders, seem to be a firm favourite, though we have also witnessed other bird species and even genets being provisioned. The nestling will swallow these items whole, often taking a few minutes until it is completely gulped down. The adult's ability to multi-prey-load means they can reduce the number of times they need to provision, bringing multiple prey items in one trip to the nest, rather than several. This reduces their energy expenditure during this demanding time and reduces the chances of predators finding the nest.

Every organism has its unique niche, allowing it to exist in its environment, creating a



balanced ecosystem. The more we discover about the biology and behaviour of ground-hornbills, the more fascinated we become, and it allows us to answer fundamental questions contributing towards the conservation of this declining species. ■

MAJESTIC *River Pride*

Words Verena van Rooyen | Photos Stefan Breuer



Courage, strength, majesty, and power. These are a few words that describe one of Africa's most recognisable animals. Spending up to 20 hours of the day sleeping or resting, lions are the laziest of the big cats, but don't let that fool you...

Lions don't have many sweat glands and that's why they need to rest often to conserve their energy during the heat of the day. Lions are found lying on their backs with their feet up, or taking a snooze in the shade while the African sun is baking. While lazing around, they are very affectionate towards one another, rubbing heads,

grooming, and purring. And since it's cooler at night, lions are usually most active during night-time.

Commonly referred to as "the king of the jungle", they are truly a symbol of kingly power.

The Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (KPNR) has always enjoyed an abundance of lion sightings. But lately, we've been spoiled with the most magnificent sightings of our infamous River Pride. As we head into deep-winter, the mornings are chilly and this means it's that time of year at Makumu Private Game Lodge when we get out the hot



water bottles, blankets, and gloves and a sip on a nice warm tea, coffee, or hot chocolate. The bush's luscious summer green is slowly fading to rustier, brown-and-yellow winter colour.

Game drives have exceeded expectations while the bush has thinned out and we've seen lots of prominent animal pathways starting to form.

Guests have been receiving quite a welcome. On arrival at Makumu, a couple of guests stumbled on a heated fight between male and female lions around a large giraffe carcass, which appeared to have died naturally. After a while, the males claimed the giraffe, and the females were left standing at a distance waiting for their opportunity to feed.

Klaserie lion sightings have been interesting this winter. We've seen the formation of a small breakaway group from the larger River Pride – about five individuals, of which one is a female with three new cubs. We've also noted another female lactating while the larger group of the pride have been more active to the east.



Some of our encounters with these majestic animals have brought tears, smiles, and utter fulfilment to our guests. Another outstanding moment was being serenaded by the River Pride as they started calling for each other... It's fair to say you don't hear a lion roar, you feel it. We were so close that we felt the vibrations tremor through our bodies. Believe me, if it's your first time experiencing it – like most guests on this drive – and you're within a couple of metres of the pride, you're left in jaw-dropping awe! ■

Watch the Rubik's cube DON'T SOLVE IT

Words and photos Casey De Menezes



Every avid safari-goer and bush lover knows that no two game drives are the same. Depending on the reserve, the weather, the time of day, the season, the direction you are headed, the mood of the animals, and on how nice you've been to the "safari gods", every aspect combines to set a unique scene for each drive. It's like a Rubik's cube made up of bush-related factors. Even two vehicles going out at the same time, on the same day, will have two different experiences.

"I want to see a herd of 500 buffalo ...a lion hunting one of them ... with the sunrise in the back" was a request made by a guest to our guide. While that request is taller than a giraffe, it made me sad because this guest missed the entire point of this experience.

The best part of spending time in the bush is finding yourself at a completely unique intersection of place, space, and time; it's where you are in that specific intersection that makes every game drive so different and interesting. And my time in the Klaserie in June was just that.

Especially for a person like me – with lots of anxiety and a need to have control – the bush is my favourite getaway. As a person seated in that game vehicle, there is no controlling. No influence. No planning. The bush compels you to be a voyeur, a stark contrast to the lives we live and curate in this busy, modern world. Out there,



I'm forced to sit with the privilege of relaxing, simply going along for the ride, and to lean into the unknown and the unpredictability of nature.

If we hadn't spent time following a lion's tracks, we wouldn't have found ourselves at the exact place, at the exact time a gorgeous male leopard exited the foliage and walked across the road just in front of us. If we hadn't stopped to admire the chameleon sitting on a branch next to the road, then we would not have crossed paths with a genet a few minutes later.

It was my first time in the Klaserie, and it was certainly not going to be my last. It's wilder than other reserves. Untouched, intimidating, it's also quieter, and it made me remember what a safari experience should be about: An absolute privilege to be almost engulfed by the unpredictability of nature.

I know that the next time I visit, my "safari Rubik's cube" will be a lot different to my previous one, and that makes me even more excited to return. For the guest who wanted to see the buffalo herd and the lion at sunrise, I hope their Rubik's cube never aligns in a way that gives them exactly what they want. My hope is that everyone can simply watch the sides turn, to merely accept that the intersection at which they find themselves could never be curated, and to realize that is the entire point. ■

A pair of leopard cubs was first seen on 18 April this year when they were very tiny – estimated to be about two months old. They've been spotted a few times since then, but only fleetingly, and each time it was a relief to know they were still alive and doing well. Their mother kept moving them, as mother leopards do, which made it hard for us to keep track.

Then, on the afternoon of 8 August, we arrived at our hide and having just driven through a breeding herd of elephants, our adrenaline levels were high. We saw two ears, then a head pop up from inside the hide. A leopard! There was much excitement.

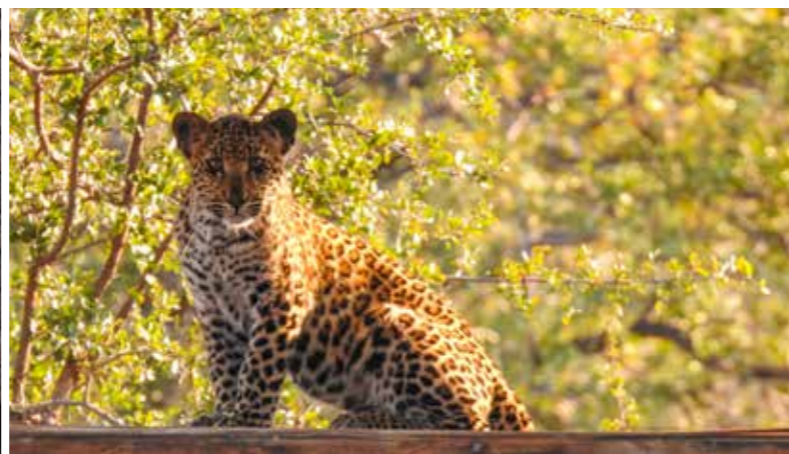
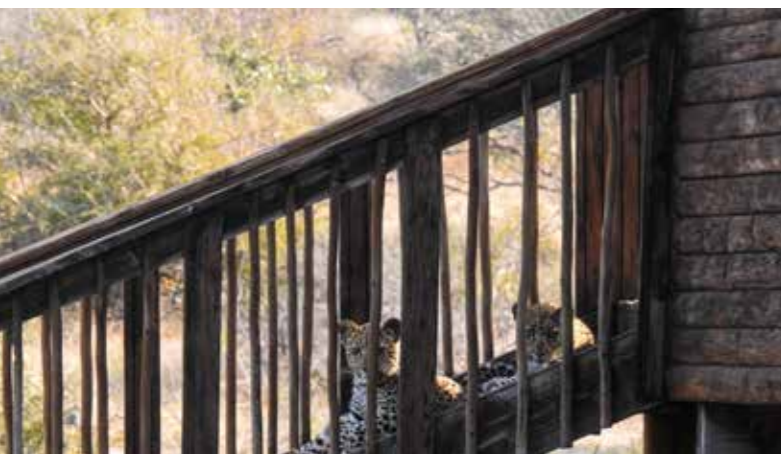
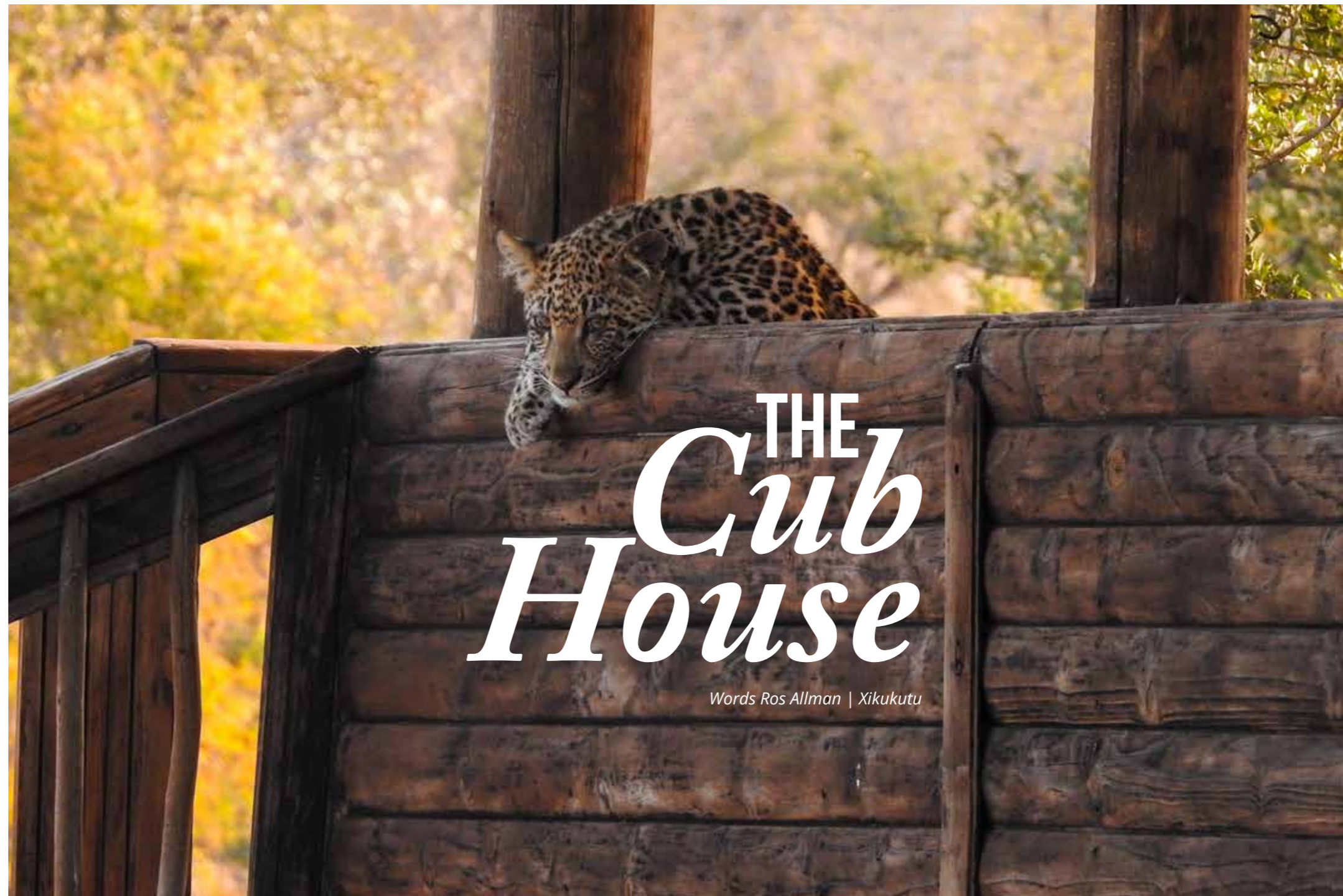
This was not the first leopard we'd seen in the hide; the last one had run down the stairs, disappearing into the bush just as we pulled up. We didn't want to risk the same thing happening, so we moved onto the dam wall – some distance from the hide – for a better vantage. We expected the leopard to make its escape, but to our amazement it just eyed us curiously. We then realised it was one of the cubs. We watched it for a while, and then, to our added delight, another head lifted on the stairs... the second cub!

The two siblings gave us an incredible show, romping and playing together, jumping onto and off the ledge of the hide. They walked around the wooden edge of the structure, practicing their balancing and climbing skills. We could also hear them chasing each other inside – the structure forming the perfect jungle gym. They found a piece of wood to chew on and fight over. On a few occasions, they looked towards the hide's roof and we wondered if they might have spotted a snake, or if they were trying to ascertain a climb up there.

They seemed to get bored after a while and began leaning over the front of the hide, as if looking for their mom – and hopefully dinner! We were largely ignored; there was too much fun to be had and this was where mom had told them to stay after all. It was an ideal hiding place. And it made us all aware how important it is to first check that the hide is empty before rushing up.

We eventually left them in peace, but went back the following day only to find the hide empty. The evidence of their presence was everywhere though: chewed-up wood, the ledge with some tooth marks, and there were lots of scratches covering the ledge surface.

This will be a talking point for many future visits and around the campfire for years to come. I felt humbled and privileged to have witnessed this incredible sighting: an eyewitness account of their cub-lives. ■



LEOPARDS OF KLASERIE DRIFT

Words and photos Emily Whiting

Over the last four years, I've had the luxury of getting to know many of the different leopards that call our part of the Klaserie home. Whilst some have moved on to pastures new, others have stayed and thrived along our stunning section of the Klaserie River, even raising the next generation of fabulous felines right on our doorstep. Following their stories and learning about each individual character is one of my greatest passions as a guide. So, without further ado, I'd like to share a little about some of the incredible leopards currently at Klaserie Drift.



Manzi

Already a mature female when I arrived in the Klaserie, Manzi is estimated to be at least eight years old. Her territory has moved over the years, from the Klaserie Drift bridge and island area, to the section of river in the north of our traverse. Named after the water (in isiZulu) that she loves to patrol, this female is the epitome of calm and strength. Well-habituated to the vehicles, on one particular occasion I was enthralled to watch her stalk out in the open, but using my game viewer to hide behind and conceal her from her intended prey.

Not long after my arrival she had a litter of two cubs who, despite surviving their first few months, unfortunately failed to make it through their first tumultuous year. Undeterred, Manzi had another litter a year later. Of the three, only one brave female survived – Xivindzi. Fast forward to today and this incredible mother is raising two healthy cubs – a male and a female, almost a year old and thriving under mom's now experienced care. Unofficially dubbed the “queen of the Klaserie”, this regal feline makes life at the top look effortless.



Xivindzi

Eldest daughter of Manzi, Xivindzi's name means 'brave' or 'courageous' (in Xitsonga). As the only cub to survive in a litter of three, this female not only defied the odds, but grew into the most charismatic and charming of all the Klaserie cats. At peace with our game viewers even as a cub, she has an innate curiosity, coupled with her mother's calmness, that makes her completely beguiling to watch. Now roughly two-and-a-half, Xivindzi has been fully independent for almost a year and currently likes to roam the area adjacent to Manzi's core territory – a typical behaviour for young females. She has been recently spotted with her father on many occasions, leading us to believe she was attempting to court him (not uncommon, although not ideal!) Luckily, she shouldn't be ready to conceive for some time yet.

“She [Xivindzi] has been recently spotted with her father on many occasions, leading us to believe she was attempting to court him”

Saseka

Born in the local area just over six years ago, Saseka (meaning 'pretty' in Xitsonga) captured my heart on my very first day. Then, a mere two years old, she was already well accustomed to vehicles and barely flinched as a fellow guide and I approached her, perched with an impala kill in a marula tree. Casually, she jumped down and made a pass of our vehicle, just metres away, before sauntering off into the bush – I was smitten.

Since that day, Saseka has grown into the most beautiful leopard, suiting her name perfectly. Her territory has migrated from a local dam she frequented as a young female and now centres around a dense scrub section in the south east of our traverse, though she is also known for her tendency to range far beyond her normal bounds. She has learnt from many mistakes – losing kills to hyena and lion, and even being chased by wild dogs – and on

two separate occasions she sustained severe leg injuries, leaving her limping for some time.

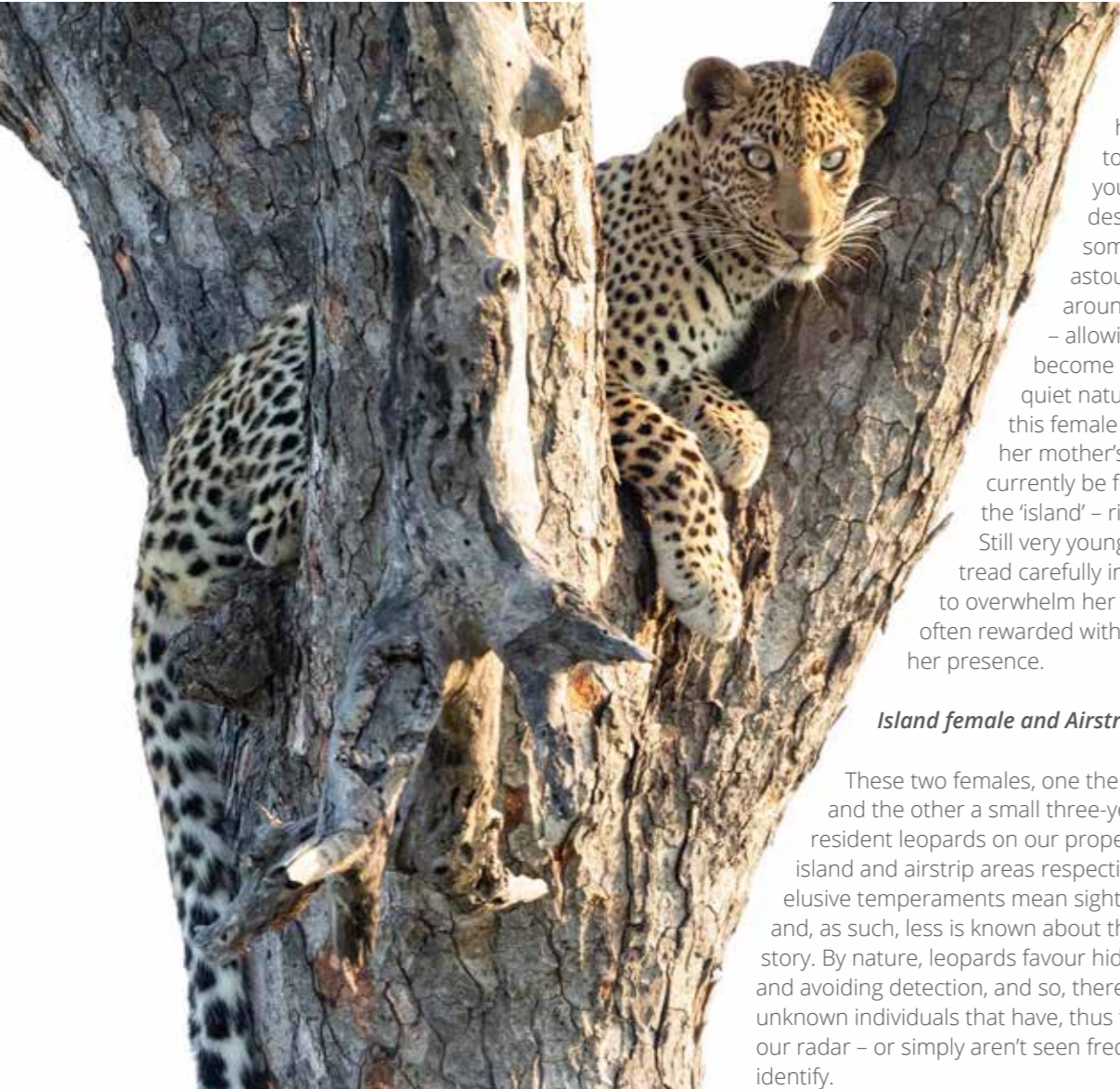
Two and half years ago, I was overjoyed to discover Saseka with two tiny, highly anticipated cubs. A first-time mom, she gifted us a brief moment of bliss before leading her charges away into the bush. Sadly, to add further to this female's hardship, the cubs were never seen again. However, time and again we have marvelled at her amazing ability to recover from every setback and so we wait expectantly for her next foray into motherhood. If there was one word to describe this captivating female, it is resilience.

Marieps

Newly independent daughter of the island female, Marieps is close to 18 months old and an enchanting individual. Owing to her mother's ardent shyness, there were few opportunities to habituate Marieps to our vehicles as a young cub. However, despite this, she has somehow shown an astounding confidence around the game viewers – allowing us to slowly become acquainted with her quiet nature. Just like Xivindzi, this female has stayed close to her mother's territory and can currently be found most often on the 'island' – right by Misava Camp. Still very young, we continue to tread carefully in sightings so as not to overwhelm her – something which is often rewarded with special moments in her presence.

Island female and Airstrip female

These two females, one the mother of Marieps and the other a small three-year-old, are both resident leopards on our property, covering the island and airstrip areas respectively. However, their elusive temperaments mean sightings can be fleeting and, as such, less is known about their characters and story. By nature, leopards favour hiding in the shadows and avoiding detection, and so, there remain many unknown individuals that have, thus far, snuck under our radar – or simply aren't seen frequently enough to identify.



© Nick Smith

Pale Male

The indomitable Pale Male. This magnificent male – named after his pale colour – has been the undisputed king of leopards as far back as local residents and guides can remember, putting him at possibly 12 years of age or more. Likely the father to all of the cubs (and even some of the adults) in the area, the Pale Male has sired a dynasty that will live on for many generations to come.

As cool as a cucumber yet stacked with attitude, sightings of him are always thrilling. We have seen other large males literally quiver and run in his powerful wake (you may notice the lack of other males in this list) and many a guide has accidentally called him in as a lioness on the radio! This boy is truly a legend without measure.



For me, this just adds to the mystery and marvel of these incredible cats – and makes me feel ever more grateful that we are blessed with some truly awesome leopards here in the Klaserie. ■



A Glimpse Through the WILDERNESS WINDOW

Words and photos Geena Wegner

The predawn chorus at Senalala Safari Lodge generally consists of the howling of spotted hyenas, the booming call of Southern Ground-hornbills, and the distant rumbling of a lion's roar. This beautiful lodge looks out on the N'tsiri riverbed, with elephant breeding herds often frequenting the waterhole, a resident pair of African scops owls roosting in the trees, and a large-

spotted genet that ambles by every now and again.

Senalala – as a part of the Klaserie – is in a unique wilderness area in the largest open system in South Africa. It is a window that gives us a glimpse into the extraordinary lives of the wild animals that call this place home.

On a particularly cold morning game drive, my guests and I happened to stumble upon the River Pride sauntering towards a big sodic site where they then lay down. After a few minutes of deep slumber, the whole pride's attention was drawn to faint impala audio. They were out of view within seconds. We followed the lions – now at full sprint – through a dense block of shrubs, avoiding enormous elephant diggings on the way. We heard the thunderous growls around the impala carcass before we saw it. Our eyes were locked in on a game of tug-o-war: one impala ram between 17 lions.

While we sat astonished by what we were witnessing, a fellow guide pulled into the sighting. "Geena, there's an *ingwe* behind your *mova*." Initially, I thought that I misheard the message. *There's a leopard behind my vehicle?* I glanced behind the game viewer and there, sky-high in a knobthorn tree, was a leopardess. Her kill had likely been stolen. She'd climbed out of reach of the lions and waited patiently until she could make a safe escape, which she did.





The big animals never fail to leave a lasting impression, but the small things can be just as exciting. Recently, our guests got to see a "kill" at the lodge. A non-venomous, spotted bush snake caught a Southern foam-nest tree frog. This snake species uses constriction to kill its prey. We sat mesmerised for about an hour, watching nature unfold as it often does, though usually unseen by humans.

Over the last few months, I have watched elephant cows chase a pack of painted wolves; been awestruck by the powerful Vuyela coalition of lions; experienced battles between spotted hyenas and painted wolves around kills; watched lions climb a tree; spotted an elusive Lesser Moorhen; been captivated by the newly introduced lion cubs of both dominant prides; marvelled at the magical view of the Milky Way; and seen my first wild cheetah which is (quite fittingly) the current emblem of the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (KPNR).

You often only get a brief glance through the window, but sometimes, if you look long enough, you'll get more than just a glimpse. You'll get a gateway that takes you right into this remarkable remnant of true wilderness that captures the hearts and minds of people around the world. ■



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a Place of Peace

What's the MAGIC WORD?

Words and photos Ryan Johnston

“Pangolin!” The magic word we all want to hear on the radio, but very seldom – if ever – do. Luckily for myself and a family of Klaserie members in the north of the reserve, the special call came through one afternoon.

I've been working in the Lowveld as a guide since 2006 and only moved to the Klaserie in November last year. As the newbie, I had a lot of questions for fellow guides and members. One of the very first was, “How often do you see pangolin?”. The reality is that a lot of people have never seen one, and even the luckiest have only seen one, or perhaps two, in their lives. So, I count myself very fortunate to say I have seen 11!

In early March (while I was on leave, of course) guides in the north found a young pangolin while following a leopard. I was devastated – perhaps the only chance I'd have to ever see a pangolin in the Klaserie, and I was away. But it did give me a glimmer of hope for the future.



On 22 June, the landowner's family arrived all the way from America and this was their first afternoon drive. We headed out nice and early, hugging the river, having a great start as buffalo bulls, a herd of elephants, and fantastic general game all showed nicely for us. It wasn't long, though, for our tracker to spot some good female leopard tracks, and the two of us got off the vehicle to have a closer look. As we often do, we got caught up in the tracks and followed the spoor down a game trail and into one of the vegetation blocks. After 10 minutes, I returned to the vehicle to update our guests on the leopard tracks, and glancing at my phone to check for any news, I saw I had seven missed calls followed by a voice message from a guide at a neighbouring lodge. As I pushed play, the magic word rang out: “Pangolin!”

We were only a couple of kilometres from where the pangolin had been found. The guide who spotted it was on his way back from Hoedspruit and this very rarely seen, scaly anteater happened to cross the road in front of him. We got there in time to find the animal with one of the other guides and his guests. Naturally, we don't get out of the vehicle to observe just any animal, but this was incredibly special, and so we escorted our guests off the vehicle in small groups so they could get a closer look.

As soon as I saw the pangolin, I was amazed at its sheer size! I'd only seen an individual this size once before. And if I had to guess, I'd say that this was a large female and potentially even the mother of the young pangolin seen months prior (as we were in the same area). Though this is merely speculation, it's a nice thought knowing they could be breeding successfully in the area.

A lot of the scales on this pangolin were chipped, broken, or had puncture marks through them, revealing it likely had encounters with predators in the past. It offered the perfect example to explain how the scales are an incredible defence against the likes of lion, leopard, and hyena. We spent time with the pangolin, and it wasn't disturbed by us at all. It simply continued to sniff the ground and never rolled up or showed any signs of stress. We eventually let it be as the sun set, giving the pangolin a chance to carry on its nocturnal foraging.

I won't ever forget my first pangolin in the Klaserie and now my 12th sighting in total, though I am hoping I won't have to wait too many years before I get to see number 13. ■

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In June, Anna was tragically killed in a road accident in Hoedspruit. Her shocking and untimely death has left everyone devastated; she was such an integral part of the local wildlife community. Despite only being 32, she had made a huge impact in so many people's lives locally, nationally, and internationally. Her courageous spirit, sense of justice, and her unlimited ability to give of herself will live on in her legacy.

Anna Mussi was nominated as a Conservation Hero for this issue of the Klaserie Chronicle. When we spoke to her about her work, it was clear she was living her dream and was totally dedicated and committed to helping to save Africa's rhino.

It is an honour to publish this article in memory of Anna, and to share some of her last words and thoughts. We send our sincere condolences to her family, colleagues, and tribe of friends. May she rest in peace.

Anna arrived in Hoedspruit in 2010 to work with African Dream Horse Safaris. She then spent four years at Provet Wildlife Services, assisting the wildlife vets, before joining Rhino Revolution in 2019 as manager.



© Wild Shots Outreach

Q: WHERE DID YOU GROW UP AND HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS A CHILD?

AM: I was born in the UK and grew up outside Birmingham. I had a huge passion for horses and wildlife, and I spent as much time outdoors as possible, come rain or shine! I always had a desire, as a child, to visit Africa (for giraffe!) which came from hours of flicking through my mother's photo albums from her time in Malawi.

Q: WHAT BROUGHT YOU ACROSS THE POND TO SUNNY SA?

AM: I decided to take a gap year after college, travelling South Africa before returning to university. Hoedspruit was the first place I visited during my trip 12 years ago – and I never left!

Q: WHAT CONVINCED YOU THAT CONSERVATION, ANTI-POACHING, AND WILDLIFE REHABILITATION WAS THE WAY FORWARD FOR YOU?

AM: Over the years, I've had the privilege of working alongside the most dedicated and passionate individuals in conservation. Hearing stories around the fire from rangers working tirelessly to protect Africa's iconic species and being involved on the ground with incredible veterinarians and experts created a deep love for wildlife that is fuelled by admiration of all those in the field. Every day that I wake up to a vivid African sunrise, experience the humbling sensation of sharing soil with a rhino on foot, or fall asleep to the laugh of hyena, I'm convinced this is where I am meant to be!

Q: CONSIDERING HOW CLOSE YOU GET TO WILD ANIMALS THROUGH YOUR WORK, WHAT IS A MEMORY OR A MOMENT THAT STANDS OUT AS THE MOST INCREDIBLE/FRIGHTENING/TOUCHING?

AM: One harrowing memory from my time at ProVet Wildlife Services is the rescue of a rhino calf that had been orphaned due to poaching. The devastating scene of finding her with her mother, who had been brutally killed for her horn. Words cannot explain the torrent of emotions I felt: anger, grief, frustration, and guilt. The crucifying sound of the calf crying for her dead mother – her face barely recognisable – desperately nudging and nuzzling her, to silent reply.

The tiny calf was taken to Rhino Revolution and, after years of preparation and care, was eventually rehabilitated and successfully released into the wild along with four other orphans. But nothing will erase that memory or the intense feelings that stirred within me on that fateful day. This was a turning point during my time here in Africa, when I knew my calling was not only to support those working to prevent poaching, but to give a second chance to those orphans left behind.

Q: TELL US ABOUT THE MOUNTED ANTI-POACHING PATROL AND THE HORSES YOU WORK WITH ON THIS?

AM: Rhino Revolution's mounted patrol unit consists of six wonderful thoroughbreds. They are retired racehorses, given a new career in the bush: monitoring fences, watching over black and white rhino populations, and conducting

presence patrols on Khaya Ndlovu and Thornybush nature reserves.

Beat Patrol, Winter's Night, Splendid Tambur, Fancy Sum Love, Eternal Words, and One Last Trick have proven how horses are able to successfully navigate silently and quickly through areas of the bush inaccessible to vehicles, and they've also shown how silent patrols enable us to monitor various species without interference or disturbance.

Q: WHAT ANIMALS HAVE YOU CARED FOR IN THE ORPHANAGE?

AM: The orphanage was built for both black and white rhino, and has boma facilities and camps for all stages of rehabilitation and rewilding. There was "The Lucky 5" – a crash of five orphaned, white rhino that bonded and were rewilded together – and three black rhino, which were part of a reintroduction programme, that have all been released from the facility over the years. Two more orphaned white rhino calves were also rehabilitated here and are now in their next stage of rewilding.





A unique research study led by the University of Pretoria assessed The Lucky 5's rewilding – monitoring body condition, behaviour, dietary health, and stress levels to conclude a successful reintroduction to the wild.

Due to a high influx of pangolin being confiscated from poachers, the facility has also had Temminck's ground pangolin treated and rehabilitated by Rhino Revolution vet nurses and staff. We are actively involved in registering release sites and working to collect as much information as we can on these enigmatic mammals.

Q: RHINO REVOLUTION WORKS ON A 3-STEP APPROACH TO ANTI-POACHING. CAN YOU DESCRIBE WHAT THAT IS?

AM: The first step of the focus is on rescuing and rehabilitating orphaned or confiscated animals in our orphanage facility. Second is our support of anti-poaching activity through rhino dehorning,

the K9 Unit, and our mounted horse patrol. Our third focus is on community education, which includes nature excursions and lessons five days a week in schools located near the Kruger National Park. We are very proud to be working with Eco Children, providing the children with opportunities to attend dehorning and visit the Kruger on educational day trips.

A small, but dedicated, team focuses less on rehabilitation and short-term solutions and more on sustainably releasing animals back into the wild, with long-term goals of repopulating and increasing rhino numbers.

Q: WHAT IS A CONSERVATION SUCCESS STORY, HUMAN-OR WILDLIFE-RELATED, THAT STANDS OUT IN YOUR CAREER?

AM: A significant moment during my time in conservation was the birth of a white rhino calf to one of the released orphans and member of The Lucky 5 crash. Masingita, whose

mother was killed by poachers in 2015, was successfully released back into the wild by Rhino Revolution in 2017, and she has now had her own baby in the wild, sired by a wild rhino bull. We think this may be a first in South Africa!

Masingita means 'miracle' in Xitsonga, and her new baby has been named Lesedi, meaning 'light' (in isiSesotho). May this light shine bright and give us all hope for the future of Africa's iconic rhino. With the catastrophic decline in numbers due to poaching, every rhino counts – and this precious, new calf contributes valuable genetic diversity.

Anna, thank you for all that you made happen for Africa's wildlife and people – may your light continue to shine bright. In memory of Anna and to continue her legacy, Rhino Revolution have created a memorial fund: For Anna, For Rhinos at www.givengain.com/cc/for-anna-for-rhino/ ■

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