

# KLASERIE

Summer 2020

ISSUE 52

CHRONICLE

## Baboon BUSINESS

2,000  
COVID  
FOOD  
PARCELS

*Life lessons  
from the wild*

*Elephants vs  
Biodiversity*



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# KLASERIE CHRONICLE

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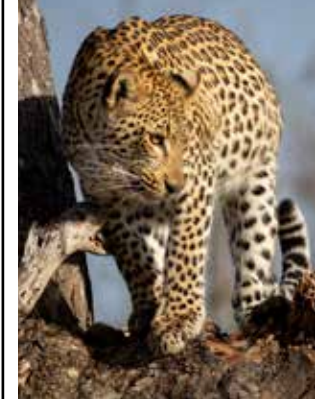
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© Voetspore

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*"To mix it up, we  
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© Leon Marais

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© Sabrina Chielens

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© Mike Kendrick

*"Over 250 viewers  
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© Sally Rinsma





# Editor's note

I was blessed to welcome my second baby girl to the world in this ill-fated year. I must admit, it was a surreal time to be pregnant and bring a new baby into this world. But still a great one.

The uncertainty that the Covid-19 pandemic brought to our daily lives, caused many anxiety- filled moments for everyone. I don't usually worry, but every now and again I found myself feeling worried and overwhelmed. Worried about survival, worried about people's livelihoods, worried about my daughters' futures, worried about my loved ones, and worried about the uncertainty of the situation.

Amidst these worries, we had to dig deep to keep finding positive vibes to ensure we stay strong as we tried to lighten the load for our communities. The lockdown has had a devastating impact on our local economy, with tourism usually the main source of income in the area. A large portion of our community has lost all income and therefore cannot provide for their families.

At Eco Children we were privileged to utilise our networks

to sow seeds of hope by rolling out food security projects in the area. We distributed over 2,000 food parcels through our Eco Villages in our communities. It was fantastic to see how many kind-hearted people supported the drive to help feed those in need.

We were also reminded how privileged we are to have access to and enjoy the reserve. The solitude and peace one can experience here has brought much relief to many members in these uncertain times and has allowed time to truly appreciate this beautiful place we get to call home. May we continue to appreciate nature and find beauty in every moment. Because, if there's one thing 2020 has taught us, it's that life is unpredictable and time is never guaranteed.

*Corne*  
CEO Eco Children

# KLASERIE CHRONICLE

## Readers' Queries

The Klaserie Chronicle is published quarterly 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](mailto:publication@ecochildren.co.za) or [corne@ecochildren.co.za](mailto:corne@ecochildren.co.za). We look forward to hearing from you!

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# Meet the team



**Sub-editor:**  
**Catharina Robbertze**  
Catharina hales 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.



**Copywriter and research:**  
**Chloë Cooper**  
Chloë is the newest member to our team and has a degree in Organisational Psychology. She is a copywriter extraordinaire, 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.

# Thank You

*Eco Children would like to thank all our sponsors, donors and supporters for your continued backing. Your contributions, however big or small are invaluable in our mission to sow seeds of change.*





# Makumu Private Game Lodge

## A Unique Perspective on Photographic Safaris

*Photos Stefan Breuer, Morné Hamlyn and TravelBrand*



**E**arlier this year, Makumu Private Game Lodge in the 60,000-hectare Klaserie Private Nature Reserve, introduced its new subterranean photographic bunker. Unique to the safari scene in the Greater Kruger region, the underground bunker offers Makumu guests the opportunity to photograph, at ground level, wildlife coming to the pan to drink or cool down. The bunker has been named iThumbela, which loosely translated from the Xitsonga language means “place to hide”.

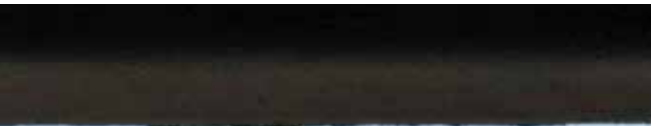
Makumu owner, Stefan Breuer, has always had a passion for photography. In 2006, he undertook an epic nine-week photographic adventure in his bright red helicopter from Hamburg, Germany to Cape Town, South Africa, alongside renowned photographer Michael Poliza. Their journey was captured in a series of 25,000 images of landscapes, people and wildlife, and showcased in a photographic journal in the form of a coffee table book, *Eyes Over Africa*.





“What I often find missing on safari is the opportunity to get very close to game in a relaxed environment, without them being aware of my presence,” says Breuer. The bunker is eco-friendly and made from a submerged, camouflaged container, so as not to disturb the surrounding fauna and flora. Being able to photograph wildlife at eye-level provides a completely new perspective to a shot.

*“The bunker is eco-friendly and made from a submerged, camouflaged container, so as not to disturb the surrounding fauna and flora.”*



Located a mere 20-minute drive from the lodge, iThumbela has a small staircase descending into the bunker. Facilities include a couch and photographic counter with bar stools, a selection of drinks, tea and coffee making facilities and photographic resource books.

iThumbela is an exciting addition to Makumu's safari portfolio, offering an experience that will particularly appeal to expert photographers looking for a completely unique angle from which to photograph game, birdlife and animal behaviour. The bunker is situated on the edge of one of the area's most active waterholes and game regularly comes to drink or bathe here. From elephant, giraffe, zebra, lion and hyena to leopard, wildebeest and a variety of bird species, this “place to hide” offers a morning or afternoon well spent.

Find out more at [www.makumu.com/photographicbunker](http://www.makumu.com/photographicbunker) or contact [reservations@makumu.com](mailto:reservations@makumu.com) or +27 (0)87 057 4512





# IN THE BEGINNING...

## *My amazing Klaserie childhood*

### PART 1

Words Debbie Harrison [née Leibnitz]

*Debbie was born a Leibnitz – daughter of Jenny and former Klaserie Warden, Erwin Leibnitz. She spent her childhood in the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (KPNR), from 1974 when she was just 6 months old. Her early experiences of life in the bush became the ingredients for a number of stories that added to her father’s book, Living on the Wild Side. For 22 years, Debbie and her sister shared the delightful experiences of having wild animals in their home and letting their imaginations run with the wind. Today, Debbie Harrison is married to her chiropractor husband, Mike, and lives in Cape Town where she owns Deep Blue Media, a sports management and television production company. We are overjoyed that we could contact Debbie and are thrilled to share a series of her Klaserie childhood stories, written from memory.*



Debbie on the potty

#### *In the beginning*

It’s funny how one’s very first childhood memories tell a story about where you were and what your environment was like. One of my earliest recollections was calling frantically for my mum to take me to my potty, which was in the corner of my room. For a kid in a normal environment, crossing the room to the little loo would not be a problem, but for me it certainly was. You see, I was too scared to go there as there was, in my childish mind, a pride of lions around it.

In itself, that little story typifies how mine and my sister Michelle’s childhood memories differ so completely from most kids’ early recollections.

There is more. Normally, family pets die of old age or are occasionally sadly killed by a car outside their suburban home. Not us. Imagine having five family dogs and one cat taken by a leopard, hyena or crocodile during the course of your childhood years.

At the time, this sort of occurrence seemed like the norm and it took a long time for me to fully appreciate the immense privilege we had of growing up in such an environment. Truth be told, I only fully realised how lucky I was once I actually got out in the working world.

Schooling was another issue. We boarded at Mariepskop Laerskool from the tender age of six, which meant that most of our friends were also farm kids with similar living circumstances. Catch-up sessions in the classroom on Mondays were hilarious as the post-weekend reports usually involved a discussion around what snakes had been seen in the garden that weekend, or what had been spotted on game drive.

We compared scratches and bruises, stubbed toes and other scars that resulted from playing soccer on the nearby air strip, or falling off a motorbike, or fishing in the local river while trying to catch muddy barbel during a family braai.

#### *Arriving in Klaserie*

My parents, Erwin and Jenny Leibnitz, moved to the KPNR from the Etosha National Park in Namibia in 1974 when my dad was appointed warden of the newly formed reserve close to the Kruger National Park. I was approximately six months old at the time and my sister, Michelle, was three.

There was virtually no infrastructure in place. Hats off to my mum who, in those early years, did not have a proper family home for the first couple of months. During this time my dad worked to complete the building of the house, which is now Colin and Janice’s family home.

We had to live somewhere, so my parents set up temporary accommodation in TCB Crookes’ camp on Dover until the house was completed. But dad had more than just a house to construct. He also built the office, a workshop, storerooms, and the staff housing – all without any proper roads, no power, no running water, no telephones, and no TV. Plus two toddlers, in a remote place with a lot of wildlife all around us. Wow!



Building of our house at HQ





Light in the dark

Gas and paraffin lamps were initially used for lighting. Later, a Lister diesel-powered generator was made available. At 5pm each afternoon, we would manually crank up the engine and then rush out of the generator room with hands over our ears to block the noise. Each night it was switched off again at 8pm sharp.

Dad would normally do the 50-metre night-time dash across the little bridge and up the hill to the engine room, which was halfway between our house and the HQ office and pull the switch that would plunge the place into darkness. But, as Michelle and I got older, a game of rock, paper, scissors determined who had to do the heart-stopping charge.



Debbie at the boma.

However, the dark corners of the Lowveld bush hid unseen terrors. Many a time we were greeted by a slithering reptile or a giant, hairy spider hiding in the engine room for warmth. Or sometimes even the dark shape of an elephant or two as they blocked our path en-route to our house to raid mom’s vegetable garden, which had no electric fence to protect it.

Wild garden

Elephants were regular visitors to our garden. Fences or no fences, they came.

Likewise, snakes were a common sight. Two specific occasions stand out for me in this regard, but first, you need to understand that I was infatuated with frogs. I loved them all: tree frogs, bullfrogs, toads; you name them, I collected them and even gave them special pet names. I wore strings of black frogs’ eggs as my beaded jewellery, draping them around my neck all day until they were totally dried out and stuck to me and I smelled to high heaven.

Of course, being a girl, I thought I looked beautiful with my black-beaded strings of “pearls” around my wrists and neck.

Then came the first snake encounter. I must have been about four. Dad was in his office, his Land Cruiser parked outside, and I was gathering ant lions in the dirt road that led to the office. A frog caught my eye as it hopped under the Cruiser. I went scrambling after it and, as I grabbed my prize, I saw the huge, gaping mouth of a boomslang as it went for the frog, which was now clenched in my little fist. Arguably the most venomous snake in the bush and I stared at each other, no more than a metre apart.



Michelle, feeding lion cubs with a friend.



Debbie with a hedgehog.

*“Arguably the most venomous snake in the bush and I stared at each other, no more than a metre apart.”*



Michelle holding a bird.

What made the snake back away, I will never know, but I still thank God for His saving grace that day. Frog still in hand, I ran into my dad’s office, apparently as white as a ghost, declaring: “Oh Daddy, Daddy my heart is beating!”

Another snake occasion involved mom. Dad had gone out for the whole day and Madala, our gardener, came to mom to tell her there was snake in the raisin bush. Because Michelle and I were still at home and in our pre-school years and prone to wandering around the fenceless garden, dad had given mom a 410 shotgun for any issues that might arise. Like venomous snakes.

One of our favourite treats was picking the sweet little berries from this particular bush close to the garage, so mom unsurprisingly feared for our safety. The snake in question was another big boomslang and mom decided it needed to be removed from the close proximity of the house. She took careful aim, blasted away and managed to kill it with one shot!

With the threat removed, mom returned to work and Michelle and I, together with Madala, undertook a solemn burial of the shredded and definitely deceased snake in the far corner of the garden.

A little while later, Madala took mom to show her a now very pock-marked Land Cruiser. Unfortunately, this was dad’s private and highly-prized vehicle that he had just finished converting into a station wagon for our family holiday trips.

It was obvious what had happened. The lethal spray from the 410 shotgun had gone straight through the raisin bush, successfully killing the deadly snake, but, shotguns being what they are, a significant amount of paint had been blasted off the car as well. It looked like a survivor from a war zone. Mom endured a long, anxious day waiting on tenterhooks for dad to return and explain what happened.

That was the first and last time that any snake lost its life at our expense. A sturdy pair of long tongs were found and Madala became the proud and brave snake catcher and relocater of the yard! ■



# AFRICA GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER *of the Year 2020*

Words Simon Espley

**W**hat a privilege it has been for us to judge some of the best images ever taken of this achingly beautiful continent we call home.

And this year was super tough – with so many outstanding images that deserve to go further than they did. On top of that, we again broke all previous records, with 37,853 submissions – a whopping 27% increase from last year!

Our judging is based on whether the image evokes an emotion, tells a story and reflects the true diversity and amazingness of Africa. Of course, it is important to

consider the technical issues, but most important for us is that the photograph breaks through the clutter of everyday life and makes you feel Africa's pulse.

I would like to thank our sponsors, who support wholeheartedly our ongoing pursuit of individuality and authenticity.

Above all, our thanks to everybody who submitted photographs for consideration. Without your impressions of life in the far-flung corners of this great continent, we would all be poorer. Please do so again in 2021, submissions open on 1 December 2020.

© Andy Howe

*These are some of the Klaserie Chronicle team's favourites, selected from the 15 winners of this year's Africa Geographic Photographer of the Year competition. Special thanks to CEO, Simon Espley, for sharing his comments on each of these winning photos.*

PHOTOGRAPHY

## SCALED STUNNER by Daniel Wakefield

The strong eye contact is an obvious attraction for this striking image, as is the sinuous symmetry of that serpentine body against the mossy bark and forested backdrop.

## HIDDEN DANGER by Jens Cullmann

Aside from the evident technical prowess of this image, the story it tells goes to the core of the essence of life in the wild. The moment was captured at the peak of an acute drought period which brought about an agonising death for many thirsty, starving animals. These periods of intense hardship are when nature is testing limits and ensuring survival for those that adapt and evolve. This is wild Africa's story: one of resilience and patience to ride out the seasonal cycles and periodic imbalances.





**MISERABLE HUDDLE** *by Samuel Cox*  
Baboons, like humans, will jump for joy when the first rains arrive. But, once the novelty has worn off, they too will huddle down miserably to wait it out. This image captures that moment perfectly.



**CAUTION** *by Kevin Dooley*  
Cuteness aside, this is a beautiful portrayal of a watchful mom and her cautious cubs so well-framed beneath her protective body as they drink.



**WALTZ OF DEATH** *by Rian van Schalkwyk*  
The grim determination by these unlikely adversaries makes for an arresting image, with the dove feathers strewn about adding to the drama. One can't help wondering what happened before and after this split-second capture – and that makes this a great image.



**FOOD PILLOW** *by Julien Regamey*  
That macabre toothy grin juxtaposed with a content lion using her food as a pillow is what Africa is all about. Nature still rules in our wild spaces, in defiance of human feelings, prejudices and packaging. Forget Disneyfication, this outstanding image tells a true story – that life in the wild is all about eating or being eaten.



# THE BUCKET *Shot*

Words and photos Samuel Cox

For every time I get asked what my favourite picture is, there's at least three other occasions when I'm asked what my ultimate dream shot would be. What photo am I after? What's at the top of my photography bucket list? My bucket shot, as some photographers have begun to refer to it as.

In response, I've always stated that what I love about wildlife photography is the unpredictability of everything – and that being in pursuit of a singular image is pretty much in direct conflict with that. How am I meant to have a clear vision of something when I know full well that to try to predict nature, or to go out with hopes and expectations, only leads to disappointment?

Having said that, photographers love a challenge and I can list hundreds of people I've come across who have a checklist of animals and birds that they'd love to photograph. Of course, I am no different. Now, whilst I don't have that particular bucket shot in my head, I know what I'd love to get and for a long time the top of that list was an up-close and detailed shot of a Malachite Kingfisher.

It's a small, dainty and beautiful bird full of vibrant blues and oranges that make them stand out very distinctly, yet they are

frustratingly difficult to find. They're often found on the water's edge but like to keep their distance and are lightning quick when in flight. They're my favourite bird but clearly that affection is completely one-sided, as it took me years just to see one from afar. This bird became my unicorn; I often joked that they don't exist, whilst others paraded their countless sightings as if they had a tracking device.

When I did finally get my first glimpse it was from quite a distance. The blue and orange stood out from a mile away, but the problem with them living near water is that they're often found on stumps and reeds in the water or on opposite banks, so I knew this would be an agonising process of baby steps; getting closer and closer over time until I got something meaningful. The picture was enough to say I had officially photographed one, but the embarrassing "it's the blue and orange smudge" was a conversation I wanted to avoid. Simply put, it wasn't good enough.



The next sighting, quite some time later, got me closer. The Kingfisher was finally on our side of the water, but still frustratingly far away. You can clearly see what it is now but that meant some hefty cropping and an overall bland and boring image. I couldn't help but laugh about what an ungrateful person I was being...



The next encounter was in a different location and we initially stopped to observe an African Jacana until I noticed the flash of blue and orange out the corner of my eye. It was facing away from us, but it periodically looked to the side for a nice side portrait. Could this be it? Again, we were closer, and these increased sightings were fantastic from a personal point of view, but in terms of what I'd been chasing for years photographically; we weren't quite there.

*“My heart was in my throat as they danced about a few metres away, fluttering gracefully from one reed to the next.”*



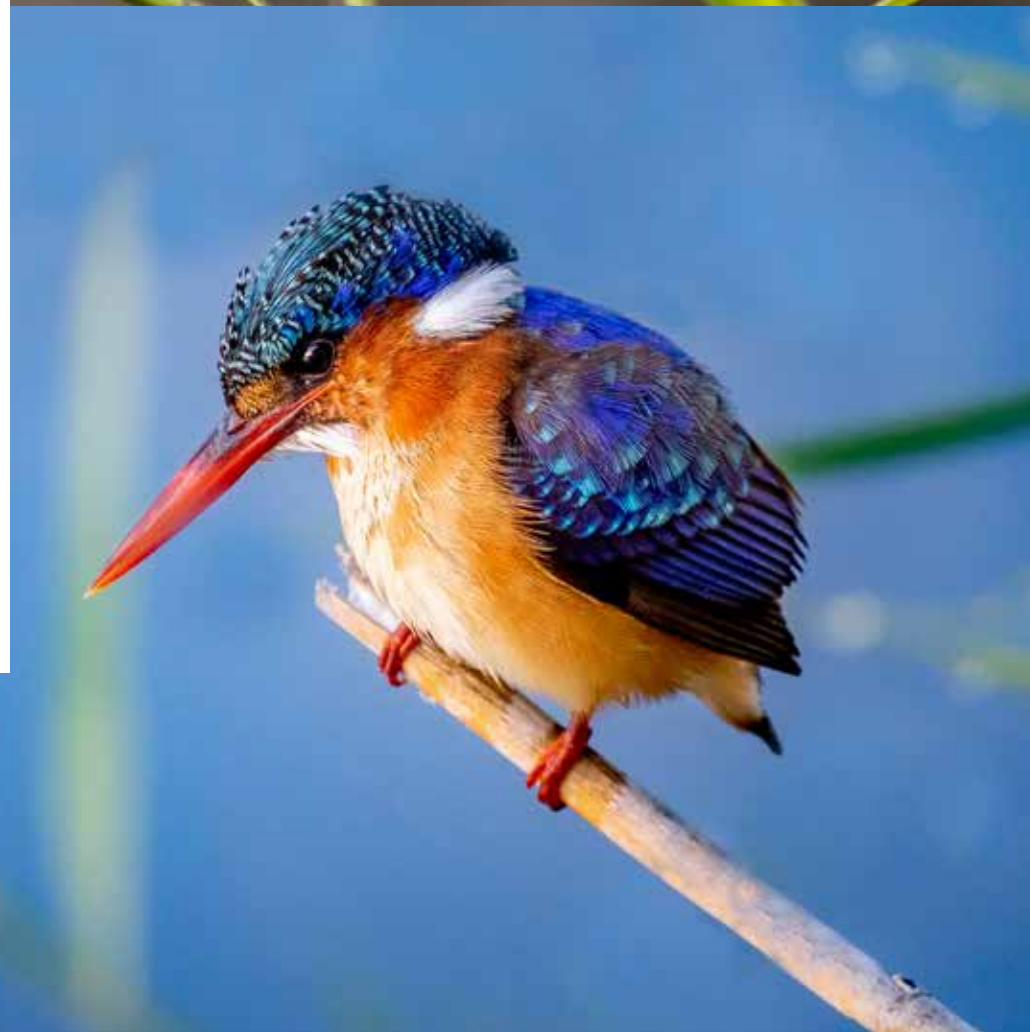
Now, to say that I approached waterholes, dams or hides overlooking water without the hope of obtaining my bucket shot would be a lie. But I didn't let it determine my attitude. I'm a firm believer in “what happens, happens” and to enjoy and capture those moments, not to simply focus on what's not happening. But, I would carefully scan reeds and branches overhanging water, often skimming over other birds, hippos and crocs, and then refocus after concluding there were no blue and orange birds present. This was exactly the story at another hide, which I visited with a friend in the early morning. We scanned the area and got settled to see what opportunities would arise.

Shortly after, I was gently called to the opposite end of the hide and I (not so gracefully) moved over to see not one, but two Malachite Kingfishers! My heart was in my throat as they danced about a few metres away, fluttering gracefully from one reed to the next. I had to remind myself that I'm a photographer and from that moment my finger never left the shutter.



Then, I literally gasped as one flew right next to the hide. Dangling on a delicate reed just a metre and a half away, it sat perfectly in the open and for just long enough to fire off a quick succession of shots. And then, as quickly as it had arrived, it went. The moment had happened. I checked the shots on the back of the camera and they looked great. I suddenly wanted nothing more than to get back to my laptop to see them on a bigger screen. There's little I can compare that satisfaction to. Upon checking the photos, I knew that this two-and-a-half-year quest had come to an end. I had the close-up and vibrant pictures I had hoped for.

It would sound very clinical of me to say that it's another box ticked as far as wildlife photography goes, but the truth is every photographer has goals and aspirations; especially in terms of subject matter. It was a test of patience, perseverance and unrelenting luck; a real testament to being in the right place at the right time, which is the cornerstone to wildlife photography. Whilst I hope my journey with these beautiful birds isn't over, I can at least sit back without that pressure hanging over me. The Malachite Kingfisher is no longer my unicorn. ■



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# THE HIGHS AND LOWS

*Words and photos  
Emily Whiting*

## of Solo Safaris

Lockdown began in earnest and, after the initial shock finally wore off, Nick Smith and I, at Klaserie Drift Safari Camps, knew we needed to do something to keep bringing the beautiful sights and sounds of the Klaserie to our guests who could sadly no longer visit us. With patchy signal and very limited camera equipment between us, we weren't able to bring an entire live safari to life, but I came up with the idea of "Safari Snippets" – a little taster of the bush compressed into just a few minutes.

As we grappled with technology, our first couple of attempts left a lot to be desired. However, we soon found our rhythm and began putting out a new virtual safari every few days. In the beginning, I loved it. I was still getting out into the bush, imparting my knowledge and passion (if only to a camera) and I was challenging myself to learn new things which is always a positive experience. One afternoon, I went for a drive alone and luck, it seems, was on my side! I located our two big male lions busy mating with a couple of females.

With no guests to talk to and no other vehicles or time constraints to worry about, I found myself completely losing track of time as I sat, enraptured by their presence. For the first time, I could observe every little nuance and behaviour without distraction. I stayed with them for at least a couple of hours, watching the night creep in until they finally decided to slink away into the darkness. Although my first passion is to share these experiences with others, being alone in that moment elevated it to something unusually special. Without a doubt, it is a memory that I will cherish.

The episodes continued with unbelievable sightings of wild dogs on the hunt and discovering a new, relaxed leopardess on our property. To mix it up, we brought in "virtual" walking safaris and had some heart-stopping yet exhilarating encounters with elephants on foot. We even discovered the most beautiful, secret opening that looks out over the Klaserie River and is now one of my favourite spots on the reserve. Although we knew we were working, it felt like the Klaserie was our own private playground and the coronavirus pandemic was something happening in another world.

As the weeks turned into months, the excitement and gleam of the snippets started to fade, and the reality of our situation began to hit home. On a regular safari, I receive constant feedback from my guests. Their questions and enthusiasm pour into me and I see every sight through their new and excited eyes. It began to feel like I had been guiding the same, mute guests for months on end. I was unable to bring in other



fascinating aspects of a safari, such as the delicious smell of coconut-scented sage or the silky-smooth feel of a rhino's rubbing post. I couldn't impart the feeling of sitting quietly under a gigantic jackalberry tree and hearing the sounds of the birds or gazing at the Milky Way knowing there's not another human for miles around. These are feelings that cannot be transmitted through a camera and are so crucial to a truly holistic safari experience; something we whole-heartedly believe in at Klaserie Drift.

The pressure of trying to constantly deliver fresh and incredible safaris without all these tools at my disposal began to affect my enjoyment and we ventured out less and less. The stress of the lodge closure and being isolated from my friends and family began to build and I reached a deafening low. It was then that Nick and I agreed we needed a break from the snippets. For an entire month I sat on some amazing footage, including a wonderful sighting of the River Pride and their cubs, until I finally lifted myself back into a better place.

Happily, things are now beginning to improve! As I write, the lodge is planning to open for South African guests and there is a glimmer of hope at the end of this long, dark tunnel. Unfortunately, despite a brief revival, the virtual safaris seem to have run their course. It is definitely an entirely different skill to guide through a screen and not one that either Nick or I are keen to replicate any time soon! Being able to see the joy on my guests' faces is what motivates me to get out of bed at 5am every morning without fail. I've learned some new skills and developed an even deeper appreciation for this remarkable paradise and the amazing people that come to share it with us. It has been a long five months and I simply cannot wait to get back to "real" safaris once more. ■



# ELEPHANTS vs BIODIVERSITY

## Insights into the Elephant Dilemma: Part 2

Words and photos Dr Ian Whyte: A summarised extract from his book, *Living the Wild Life*



While elephant poaching is currently the major threat to elephants, in the early 1990s, human-elephant conflict was considered the greatest problem facing elephant conservation at the time. Such conflict will gradually force wild animals more and more into sanctuaries set aside for them, and the problems of maintaining biodiversity in these “conservation islands” will be brought into sharper focus.

As a general rule of thumb, the smaller the “conservation island”, the greater the degree of management it will require, as some of the essential ecological processes will be missing. An example of this is that many small parks cannot accommodate the larger predators, and in the absence of the population checks which these predators impose on prey populations, man has to take over this role. But if the “island” is large enough (and the Kruger National Park is considered to be one of these) the vast majority of its component species and ecosystem processes will require little or no management at all. Throughout time, these species and processes have co-evolved to form a complex matrix of competition, interdependence and above all, survival. This is the way it should be, and it is accepted that managers should interfere with these processes only when it is considered unavoidable.



Elephant bull bark stripping a marula tree, which will kill the tree.



© Mike Kendrick



Nature is dynamic, and none of these processes are stable or static. Rainfall and temperature are the engines of ecological processes, and these are never constant. There are years when rainfall is abundant and others of drought.

Different species respond differently to the prevailing conditions, some increase during the wetter years, but some favour the dry conditions and their populations flourish during the drier parts of the cycle.

But elephants do not conform to this pattern. In today's imperfect world, Africa is no longer what it was before the advent of technological man, and the continent-wide ecological processes which used to operate can now no longer do so. The functioning of some of these processes is lost in the mists of time and can now only be speculated upon. The population cycles of elephants are one of these.

Elephants had few natural enemies in those times, and the questions pertaining to how their populations were regulated remain a matter of conjecture. It is sure, of course, that no population can continue to grow forever, as eventually they will exceed the resources upon which they are dependent. There must come a time when conditions are less favourable, and the population enters a phase of decline. Did elephant populations build up over centuries in local "events" to the point that food became limiting and then die out to a much lower level? Or did they move away when food became scarce? If so, where did they go? And what would have happened to the elephants



Elephant bull bark stripping trees after a fire.



© Neil Whyte



*Fence line contrasts showing elephant impacts in Madikwe in 2012 (left), and Pilanesberg in 2013 (right).*

already occupying the area to which they moved? Did disease play a role? Was pre-technological man really capable of limiting elephant numbers? These are all questions which nobody can answer with surety, and maybe nobody ever will.

What is known is that elephants have the intellect and physical constitution to exploit a wider range of food resources than any other animal (except man). When grass and browsing are not available, they can eat twigs and branches or use their tusks to prise bark off trees, and can push trees over to reach the leaves in the canopy or expose the roots. The latter two activities will almost invariably result in the death of the tree. Elephants are selective feeders, and it is the favoured food species that are initially affected. But as these are depleted, they are forced to switch their feeding activities to other less palatable plant species. These in turn will also be depleted as the elephant population grows.

Natural limitation of elephant numbers will only begin to occur once even these resources have been depleted and the elephants become nutritionally stressed, but by this time the environment will have been subjected to severe impacts. In this process, the question is what would have happened to the other species – both plant and animal – occupying these habitats?

And so, elephants, with their ability to drastically modify habitats, are a threat to many species within these confined reserves.

A reserve like Kruger, which is large enough to allow for minimum management of most species, is still considered by many to be too small to accommodate elephant population fluctuations without severe environmental consequences. And thus, if the objective of a national park is the maintenance of biodiversity (the long-term conservation of all its indigenous biota), then something will ultimately have to be done to limit elephant impact, probably by reduction of their numbers. ■

Family of elephants bark stripping trees.



# KLASERIE STARS IN *Voetspore*

Words Colin Rowles | Photos Supplied by  
Voetspore

I heard it approaching. It sounded like a runaway train; the singing of off-road tyres and the growl of three V8 Land Cruiser engines. They burst through Incheni gate with blinding spotlights and stopped in a cloud of dust. They'd arrived, the Voetspore team.

Johan Badenhorst alighted from his well-equipped and sticker-clad vehicle and was soon surrounded by the familiar figures that we've all come to know through the popular TV production. Greetings were exchanged and we set off in convoy for a three-day adventure through the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (KPNR).

The brief was simple: they wished to film as many animals as possible within their natural habitat and would also capture on film the natural beauty of the reserve. The history of the reserve would form the topic of discussions over the following days.

Johan, the team leader, had selected the KPNR as a location which would feature in their most recent travel documentary. The trip would take them from the Limpopo River at the northern point of the Kruger National Park, southwards along the western boundary of Kruger and then finally inland and on to Cape Town; a trip which would last three months. From prior discussions with Johan, I'd planned to lead the expedition across the Klaserie, from south to north and then back south again. I'd selected a route which would traverse through the varied habitats that the reserve offers, hopeful of exposing them to the wide diversity of animal species which inhabit the KPNR. We'd stop and set up camp wherever sunset would find us.

I'd come to know, from watching Voetspore, that the team would be happiest the further away from any tar road they could be.

With this in mind I planned their trip through the back country, through the most rugged terrain the reserve had to offer, which included some river crossings. All of course on existing tracks which crisscrossed the Klaserie.

## *The journey starts*

We commenced our journey, hugging the eastern bank of the Klaserie River as we progressed northwards, winding our way through riverine vegetation beneath magnificent jackalberry trees and through tamboti groves. Stefan Sonnekus, the team's cameraman and videographer accompanied me in my lead vehicle.

Within minutes we'd stopped a number of times to film nyala, bushbuck and kudu, all browsing species which concentrate along the river fringes during winter. It wasn't long before we were amongst the elephants. I wasn't sure how the elephants would view the row of growling Land Cruisers as we

slowly picked our way through the peacefully feeding, breeding herd. Thereafter we encountered a few buffalo bulls, some of whom raised their heads and looked down their noses at us, seemingly as if we owed them money.

Just before sunset, the team and I climbed a small rocky outcrop, which provided the ideal opportunity for me to orientate them, pointing out specific landmarks and topographical features. Soon we were back on board and rolling on to our first night's camping spot, a beautiful dam on Moscow. As we arrived, we were greeted to a spectacular sunset which was mirrored and amplified by its reflection in the water.

We'd barely stopped when Nina, Johan's daughter, got to work folding out the kitchen from the side of a vehicle and frantically setting up camp. Norbert, a team member from the Northern Cape set out the chairs while the others pitched tents and flipped up roof-top sleeping units. It wasn't long before Norbert was mixing dough for his speciality bread, and scratching coals from the fire to heat his pot to bake the dough. Camp cooking is certainly something that the Voetspore team do well, and after a scrumptious meal prepared over the fire, Streicher, Johan's son, set up a trails camera in the hope of photographing any nocturnal visitors to our camp. We said our goodnights and went off to bed.

## *Day 2*

As with the evening sunset, the dawn of the new day brought about a spectacular sunrise, as we hugged mugs of hot coffee and enjoyed home-baked rusks. Soon we were packed up and back on the trail, moving northeast and back down towards the Klaserie River. The morning was spent documenting all the amazing wildlife that we encountered as Stefan switched

*“The trip would take them from the Limpopo River at the northern point of the Kruger National Park, southwards along the western boundary of Kruger and then finally inland and on to Cape Town.”*





## CONSERVATION

between camera lenses, so dictated by the subject within his view finder.

Brunch found us on the bank of the river again and we set up under a large jackalberry tree. On a well-trodden game path nearby were some fresh leopard tracks from the previous night, crisp in the soft sand. This stimulated some discussion around leopards as Stefan and Gideon went about photographing the tracks and documenting the discussions.

After brunch, we set off along the river bank, when suddenly an impala herd burst from a thicket and a large ram leaped across the road with a young leopard hanging from its neck. The leopard lost its grip and the impala escaped, all this caught on camera by Stefan.

We crossed the flowing river and headed northeast to a large dam on Northumberland. A number of game species were coming and going from the water's edge and a

massive crocodile lay basking on an island. Johan commented that it's the largest crocodile he'd ever seen and, given his travels and the number of crocodiles that he's encountered, it must truly be a mammoth specimen.

We headed further north, through the mopane veld towards the Olifants River where we set up camp amongst a grove of apple-leaf trees. Again, we enjoyed a delicious dinner with grunting hippos providing the background sounds, and a large elephant bull browsing nearby as the day came to an end.

### Day 3

Dawn, we were woken by loud grunts, screams and growls as two hippo bulls engaged in battle and tossed themselves around in a river pool nearby. We assumed that the two had been out grazing during the night and found themselves in the same pool upon their return, and this required an establishment of the hierarchy.

We enjoyed some of Norbert's bread loaded with tasty fig jam and mugs of hot coffee before packing up camp and again heading off. The journey for the day took us progressively back to the reserve's HQ as we meandered through the autumn-coloured red bushwillow veld, scattered with large marula trees. Many filming opportunities were presented and captured by Stefan.

We arrived back at HQ around midday and Johan and his team immediately began the task of downloading and uploading images and script to their eagerly followed social media sites. Nina unpacked and repacked the kitchen vehicle while the others dusted out and cleaned vehicles and camping equipment. The night was spent camping in the HQ.

In the cold and crisp early morning which followed, goodbyes were exchanged and the three Land Cruisers rumbled out of the HQ gates and onwards towards the next leg of their incredible journey. ■

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# Running WITH THE KPNR K9s

*Words and photo Marian Viljoen*



A fitter dog has better detection skills, and that's exactly what we need in the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve's (KPNR) K9 unit. A dog's heavy panting negatively affects its sense of smell, so its fitness directly impacts the success of a working dog on a human scent tracking or substance detection operation. Likewise, our K9 handlers need to maintain a high level of fitness to keep up with the dogs and ensure the successful functioning of the K9 unit.

The KPNR K9 handlers diligently follow a strict exercise and fitness regime to keep themselves and their furry counterparts fit and healthy. Every afternoon at 5pm, the atmosphere around the KPNR Headquarters is filled with excitement as the dogs and their handlers prepare for their daily running drills. The team hits the dirt and

both four-legged and two-legged athletes cover many kilometres every day.

Such hardworking feet need hardworking shoes, and on 21 August all of our K9 handlers were presented with a brand-new pair of running shoes, courtesy of Pierre Smit from Heidelberg, Gauteng. A generous sponsorship for which we are extremely grateful, and one which will help our dedicated dog handlers keep up with their strenuous fitness routine.

On behalf of the KPNR K9 unit, we would like to thank Pierre for this contribution, which is significantly aiding the anti-poaching work of the reserve. We are so grateful for your support in the conservation of all species and biodiversity in the KPNR. ■



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# BIRD MIGRATION: *Where do they* *GO?*

*Words Elly Gearing*

**B**irds have been making thousand-kilometre journeys for millennia, but scientists are still puzzling over their unique ability to navigate the globe on a scale that is simply bewildering for such small creatures. Some species will even return to the exact same nest site year after year.

Besides their propensity for annual travel, there is very little that makes a migratory species different to their stay-at-home counterparts, yet migration has clearly become a very successful strategy for survival.

***Why do birds migrate?***

Less than 10% of South Africa's bird species actually opt to make some sort of annual migration. If you live somewhere that has an abundant source of food year-round, like rain forests, there is very little reason to leave. On the other hand, if you live in a habitat that changes drastically between seasons, it may be best to go somewhere else when food is scarce in winter.

Self-powered and weighing less than a grapefruit, the Amur Falcon is just one species that takes on the marathon journey to South Africa every single year – a round trip of about 22,000km. Beginning in their breeding grounds in eastern Asia, the falcons continue en masse across the Indian Ocean and down the east coast of Africa.

Birds usually migrate to follow the fruitful, summer season and take full advantage of the months in which food is easier to come by. Most species will also take this opportunity to breed, with the abundance of insect food often allowing them to produce more offspring on average than their stay-at-home relatives.

*European Roller © Geoff Downs*

***Where do they go?***

Different bird species will embark on migrations that vary greatly in length, but almost all will attempt to take the most direct – and often dangerous – route. This helps them save energy but may also expose them to some treacherous conditions along the way, like storms or predators.

There are several broad patterns of migration in African birds, the most common being Palearctic and intra-African migration. The former are those who travel to Europe, Asia, northern Africa and the northern and central parts of the Arabian Peninsula, while the latter travel shorter distances throughout the African continent.

Some examples of Palearctic migrants that we see in the Klaserie

Private Nature Reserve are the White Stork, which breed in Europe and Asia, and Lesser Kestrels, which breed in central Asia. Examples of intra-African migrants are the Diederik Cuckoo, which travels to and from the Arabian Peninsula, the Woodland Kingfisher, which winters as far north as Sudan, and the Wahlberg's Eagle, which also winters in Nigeria and Sudan.

***How do they find their way?***

Interestingly, migratory behaviour appears to be passed down from parent to offspring and is ingrained into the genetics of the species. Most newly fledged youngsters will accompany flocks of adults on their first migration and thereby learn where to go.

Others, however, depart later than their parents and are genetically “pre-programmed” to know which direction to fly, slowly expanding this area as they become more familiar. That’s right: something inside these birds tells them on a certain date that they need to fly in a certain direction for a certain length of time. Amazing!

One of those “somethings” is known as a circannual clock which, combined with changes in day length and climate, triggers the birds to prepare for their perilous journey. The exact moment of departure is usually based on the size of the gathering flock, wind speed and the time of day. When the conditions are right, it's time to fly!





Rather than sticking to a fixed path, young birds will often make some exploratory detours along the way and are able to do so while sticking to their programmed general direction. Birds can orientate themselves (not the same as navigation) using several different compasses, including the sun, stars, and the earth's magnetic field.

In doing so, these virgin migrants will arrive in the general vicinity of their non-breeding grounds and will then scratch around for a suitable place to spend the winter. On this maiden voyage, they will also memorise various spatial aspects of the route, including topographical, celestial, meteorological and magnetic cues that they perceive along the way.

In creating this complex mental map of waypoints on their journey, birds are able to travel thousands of kilometres to the exact nest site that they used the year prior. At Klaserie Sands, we enjoy the annual return of a mated pair of pale-morph Wahlberg's Eagles who arrive in the summer months to breed.



Wahlberg's Eagle. © Elly Gearing

**How is climate change affecting bird migration?**

As the climate changes, species' migratory patterns are continuously evolving and the main factor driving these changes is temperature. Given that most of these birds are migrating to breed and access plentiful food supplies, timing is absolutely critical – arriving too early or too late to their destinations could cause them to miss out on vital resources.

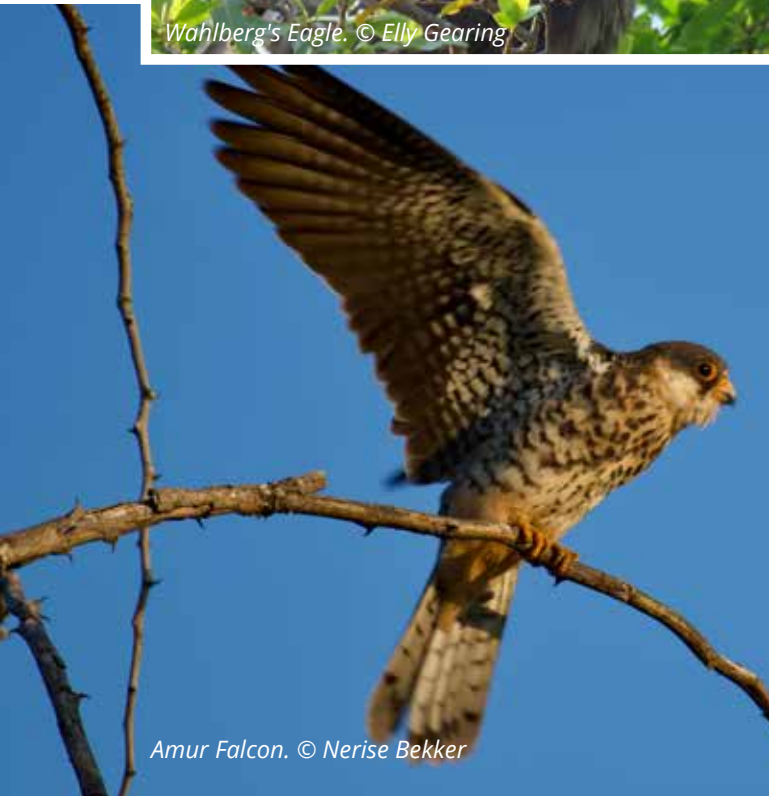
Many birds make stopovers on their journeys in order to refuel and will often time these pitstops with certain prey events. For example, the aforementioned Amur Falcons make a stop in Nagaland to feast on trillions of termites as they seasonally erupt from their underground colonies. As climatic conditions change, these termites may begin emerging sooner than usual and missing this event means the falcons will not have enough fuel to make it safely across the Indian Ocean.

Migratory birds are critically important for ecosystems to function properly because of the way they eat insects and distribute seeds around the landscape. Despite their migrations starting earlier, many are struggling to keep pace with the rate of climate change. In tracking these birds, scientists hope to uncover more secrets about their remarkable resilience in the face of a changing climate. ■



Woodland Kingfisher. © Elly Gearing

Elly is an Aussie in Africa, a passionate safari guide and a member of the all-star team at Klaserie Sands River Camp. She was the featured female field guide in our Women's Month issue in August 2019 and regularly contributes entertaining, thought-provoking articles and awesome photographs to our publication.



Amur Falcon. © Nerise Bekker

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# DARK CHANTING GOSHAWK:

## *Shy and good-looking*

Words Peter Lawson | Photos Leon Marais

The Dark Chanting Goshawk *Melierax metabates* is a medium-sized raptor, which does not occur much further south than the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (KPNR). Both male and female are look-alike birds with dark grey overall plumage, finely barred grey and white rump, belly and thighs. Its long legs, base of bill and cere are all bright orange/red.

It's a good-looking bird, especially when seen perched in a tall tree in an upright position, which is its usual stance. It is not always conspicuous though, as the woodland it frequents makes it difficult to see from a distance. They resemble the more common Gabar Goshawk, but are much larger, have longer legs and entirely different habits.

The scientific name *Melierax* is derived from the Greek words melos, 'song', and hierax, 'hawk', referring to the melodious chanting calls described below. The species name *metabates* means 'changed' in Latin. This is due to the slightly different Pale Chanting Goshawk, which is not in the KPNR.

Dark Chanting Goshawks are relatively scarce in the KPNR but are resident in well-wooded areas with tall trees and they occur in pairs. The name comes from its lovely flute-like call "wheee-o, whew, whew," which is mainly uttered at dawn and when birds are about to breed. They then build a stick nest in a fork of the main stem of a tall tree, usually covered with spider web and lined with animal dung, hair, seed pods and other debris. Not the neatest of nests, but it is used for successive years. The nest is built by both the male and female.



One or two white eggs are laid, mainly during September or October, and only the female incubates. Usually only a single chick is reared. Mom is very shy when on the nest and will vacate the moment an approach is made. Thus, if you are fortunate to locate an active nest, be conservation-minded and keep your distance.

Food consists of small mammals, birds, snakes, lizards and large insects. Mammal prey includes dwarf mongooses, squirrels and mice. Birds taken as prey are usually small to medium size, but they have been known to take birds as large as Helmeted Guineafowl. Prey is hunted from a perch and not in flight, which is how most goshawks hunt. They will remain upright and very still for long periods while scanning the ground below for prey and then glide down to catch it. They will also feed on carrion when the opportunity presents itself. They show clever tactics when hunting sometimes, as they will use 'beaters' such as honey badgers or Ground Hornbills. When hunting this way, they perch nearby and dart in to catch the small animals or birds which the 'beaters' have missed.

This is a really good bird to add to your KPNR bird list so keep an eye out for it on your game drives and enjoy watching it. ■

*“If you are fortunate to locate an active nest, be conservation-minded and keep your distance.”*



# Chacma Baboon: FASCINATING FAMILY VIEWING

Words Peter Lawson |  
Photos Leon Marais

There is just one species of baboon in southern Africa: *Papio cynocephalus ursinus*. Although some references talk about a different subspecies in the Pafuri area of Kruger National Park and further north, these are more yellowish in colour and are placed with the subspecies *Papio cynocephalus griseipes*. Baboons occur throughout the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (KPNR) in all habitats and the ones in this area are dark in colour.

Humans have a love-hate relationship with baboons, but what few people understand or believe is that we are the cause of bad baboon behaviour. Feeding them or leaving food where they can find it is the main cause of their criminal attitude and behaviour. Baboon troops that do not have human contact are wonderful to observe as they go about their normal daily routine. I personally enjoy them and can watch them for hours. They are highly intelligent and can be very expressive with interesting behaviour.

Baboons live together in troops which vary in number from a few individuals to as many as 100 and more. In the KPNR, troops usually have a maximum of about 30 individuals. Savannah and riverine areas are the habitat preference in the reserve, but they can be found marginally on open grassland and other vegetation as well.

Baboons are strictly diurnal; in fact, they are scared of the dark – like us humans they have colour vision and have difficulty seeing in the dark. They sleep together in tall trees or on high cliffs when available and make a racket if disturbed. As soon as it gets light in the early morning, they descend to warm themselves in sunlight and at these times they take to grooming each other while the young ones have a great time playing games, which is lovely to watch. When food is available nearby, they stay within a kilometre or two of their sleeping sites. Usually they have several sleeping sites within their home range and use them in rotation. They are mainly ground-dwellers and forage for fallen fruit, berries, seeds, leaves, grasses,

roots, bulbs and also certain flowers. They are omnivorous though and not entirely vegetarian, and also eat insects, scorpions, lizards, birds' eggs and nestlings. They often overturn rocks when searching for insects, scorpions, centipedes and other invertebrates.

There are cheek pouches on the inside of a baboon's long mouth and these can hold as much food as their stomachs do. This allows them to stuff their mouths full when food is readily available. We think they are greedy when we watch them feeding but this is not so. By taking in as much food as possible they can evacuate the feeding area when danger approaches and can then chew and swallow the food at a later time when out of harm's way. They are also known on occasions to catch and kill hares and newborn lambs of antelope such as impala and bushbuck, but this is not regular.

In areas close to human farm lands, they can be very destructive crop raiders. Sadly, they commonly develop begging traits when they are fed by tourists in Kruger National Park and adjacent private reserves. Water is essential on a daily basis and in times of severe drought they will dig for underground water in dry riverbeds. This is an important role they play in nature as the pits they dig can later be accessed by antelope and other animals.

When foraging, baboons are particularly alert to the danger of predation. They have very good eyesight and hearing and, when danger threatens, the dominant males surround the group and give loud alarm barks. They often associate with other animals such as impala and banded mongooses as this gives additional alertness to danger. Predators are mainly leopards and crocodiles, but eagles also prey on young baboons. With a number of powerful dominant males guarding a troop, it is not often that predation takes place.





They breed at all times of the year: females have a gestation period of about six months and do not breed again for about 18 months after giving birth to a single baby. Newborn babies are carried about by the mother, clinging to her belly fur. Older offspring usually ride on the mother's back and often use the upright portion of her tail as a back rest. This is fascinating to see.

Many people think that there is only a single dominant large male in a troop, but this is not correct. They do not have a harem system, although there is a strict order with young males. Dominance and aggression erupt if young males try their luck. When mating takes place the most dominant male has first choice. Dominance is visually displayed by a show of impressively large canine teeth. The lifespan of a healthy wild baboon is about 20 years, but they have been known to live as long as 30 years.

When out and about in the KPNR and you come across a troop of baboons behaving naturally, stop and watch them for a while. They can be fascinating, and I just love them. ■



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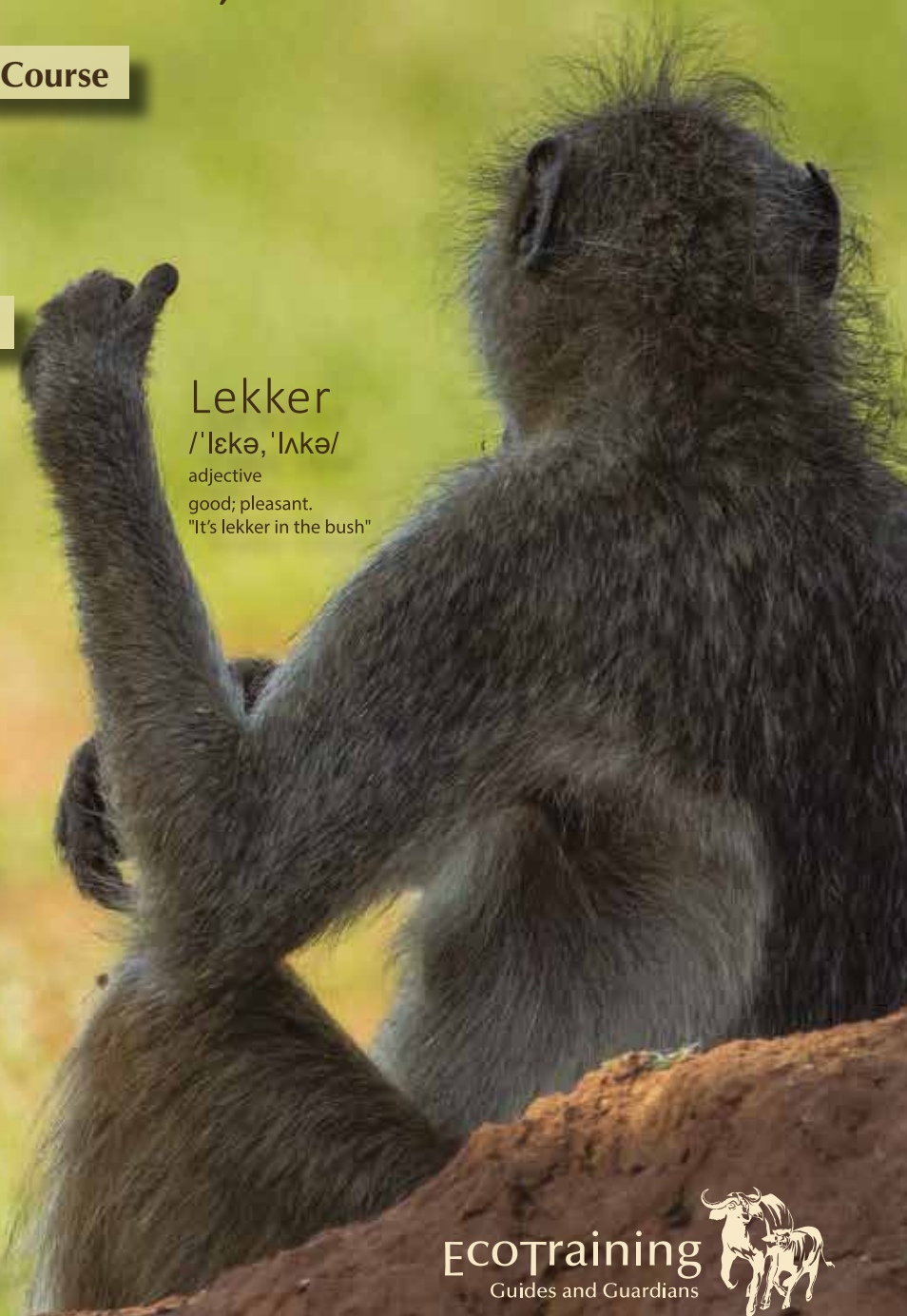
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# Virtual elephant collaring: A WORLD FIRST

Words Michelle Henley | Photos Mike Kendrick

Elephants Alive knows the drill when it comes to collaring elephants. With trusted vets like Drs Joel Alves and Ben Muller, as well as legendary pilots like Gerry McDonald, we operate like a well-oiled machine. This comes with the experience of having collared 185 elephants throughout South Africa and Mozambique since 1998.

The data produced is invaluable. We obtain landscape insights into where there should be corridors to link protected areas, how elephants avoid conflict by becoming nocturnal, how they forge friendships and wander together as males explore new areas, how they react to boundaries (both fences and virtual political international boundaries), how often they encounter water and other resources, how reproductive cycles drive set patterns and how they plan crop-raids.

The list is endless, but importantly the technology has advanced to include immobility alarms, speed alarms and proximity to building alarms. This enables us to know

when an elephant is in danger, so the collars are also providing a measure of protection, which is critical as we are dealing with the remaining 3% of the continental population of elephants compared to a 100 years ago!

It is already a surreal experience to zoom in on Google Earth in the mornings and watch all our active collars update and crawl across the landscape like a pot of boiling spaghetti. Each elephant with its own colour and fascinating timeline of movement stretched behind it, telling the story of the decisions it takes in its everyday life.

Recently we upped the stakes of any virtual experience. Blue Sky Society Trust kindly started a fundraising campaign to help us raise the required funds to pay for the collars and the operational expenses. After booking virtual seats, over 250 viewers were glued to the action from their homes, watching the live broadcast by Painted Dog TV. Viewers got to see interviews with the team on site, with all the real-life action happening in the background. Gerry's helicopter blades were beating while

he acrobatically kept everybody spellbound. Dust was settling while blood samples and body measurements were being taken. All the while, Vusi Mathe and Mike Kendrick from Wild Shots Outreach were capturing still photographs of the experience.

With us on the ground, the virtual participants got to hear an elephant snoring, see somebody touch the silky tusks, and marvel at the landscape of warm, grainy skin covered in hairs. Although you could not feel the cool veins in the ears pulsing the blood through the warm body or smell the carrot-like breath of the sleeping giant, we believe that together with our trusted partners we have opened a new window into an unforgettable experience. Covid makes you creative, necessity leads to invention.

We would like to thank Blue Sky Society Trust for all your incredible support. Brent Leo Smit from Painted Dog TV for the broadcast, Wild Shots Outreach for the lovely images, and the wardens of Klaserie and Timbavati Nature Reserve for permits and security. We value each bit of incredible experience brought to the table by Dr Joel Alves, Gerry McDonald and the Elephants Alive team. Nothing can happen without the funds. To the Tangle Wood Foundation and Richy (Foshan) Industries and Investments Co, Ltd., thank you for drawing a crowd and investing in the collars. Thank you to each and every viewer for your donation or seat ticket which helped us reach our target. We are so glad we could share this visceral experience with you and hope for more to come. ■

For more information on the organisations involved, visit the following websites:

- [Elephantsalive.org](http://Elephantsalive.org)
- [Facebook.com/BlueSkySociety](https://Facebook.com/BlueSkySociety)
- [Painteddog.tv](http://Painteddog.tv)
- [Wildshotsoutreach.org](http://Wildshotsoutreach.org)
- [Tanglewood.org.nz](http://Tanglewood.org.nz)
- [Richygroup.en.alibaba.com](http://Richygroup.en.alibaba.com)







# ONWARDS AND UPWARDS

*for the APNR Ground-hornbill Project*

Words Carrie Hickman

© Kevin McDonald

**S**outhern Ground-hornbills are Birdlife South Africa's Bird of the Year 2020! We love seeing these birds shine in the spotlight, especially during such an unusual year, which has been hard on us all.

While "Bird of the Year" might just seem like a title, it serves as much more than that. It brings people's attention to birds that many may not know and brings to light the uniqueness of certain species and the work being done to conserve them, reinforcing people's curiosities in nature.

From our point of view, it has helped gather a great deal of interest in the work we do both inside and outside the Associated Private Nature Reserves (APNR). It adds to all of the interesting things we have been up to this year so far and the things that are yet to come, despite all the difficulties our project has endured.

First and foremost, we have formed two exciting new partnerships with Wild in Africa and Wild Wonderful World. Wild in Africa is an authentic jewellery line designed by wildlife photographer Shannon Wild and produces beautiful beaded bracelets representing a handful of

different conservation projects around the globe. We are so pleased that our project is the inspiration behind one of her newest bracelet designs, which naturally is made with black and red stones – the colours of our Thunderbird! Along with our partners at Mabula, our project receives a generous donation from Wild in Africa every time one of these bracelets are purchased. The funds from 50% of the sales will culminate in an amazing, much-needed contribution that will improve our efforts in researching and conserving the Ground-hornbill.

In another collaboration, Wild Wonderful World has offered to source funding for specific equipment that is vital to our project, such as nests and camera traps. These items are invaluable to our work and make an enormous difference to the success of our project. Wild Wonderful World supports a variety of wildlife conservation projects and we are so grateful to be on the receiving end of their generosity, especially with the fast-approaching breeding season just around the corner.

The Ground-hornbills in the Lowveld usually start breeding any time from September and we are preparing as best we can. We have already acquired five new nests, which are going

to replace the older wooden designs. We hope these newer versions will not only withstand the birds' destructive beaks, but will provide a cooler microclimate for the precious nestlings within them. Studies on other bird species have shown that environmental conditions during the early stages of nestlings' lives, have lasting effects on their overall fitness.

Another ongoing project of the past few months has been to build and populate our project's first and long overdue website. Once it is complete, you will have the chance to get to know the birds more intimately, submit your sightings of Ground-hornbills in the APNR, and keep track of our research and conservation developments.

Onwards and upwards from 2020!



© Kevin McDonald





# GARDEN OF *Greens*

Words Chloë Cooper | Photos Sabrina Chielens

Right on the northernmost border of the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (KPNR), hugging the banks of the Olifants River, Ralph Mathebula tends to an organic vegetable garden that produces a seasonal harvest all year round. For the last 17 years, he and his wife Gloria, his father Amos, stepmother Agnus, and their neighbour Claudia, have grown and eaten the rainbow right on their doorstep. Before Ralph, his father grew vegetables in the same patch, albeit on a much smaller scale, which produced nourishment for the handful of resident staff on Mr van der Schyff's family farm on Zeekoiegat.

Ralph and his siblings were all born on the KPNR, just like their father before them. In 1960, at just 22 years old, Amos arrived at Zeekoiegat to work as a camp guard, and this is where he spent the next 60 years raising his family. He long ago passed the baton to Ralph who now has a 21-year-old son of his own. After his schooling in Phalaborwa, Ralph was self-employed as a jack of all trades, mastering the crafts of welding, painting, brickwork, tiling, and construction. He brought his skillset back to Zeekoiegat in 2003 when he returned to Mr van der Schyff's farm and took on the duties his aging father fulfilled.

Amos' 5x4-metre vegetable patch also received some rejuvenating input from Ralph's school-taught agricultural



knowledge, and soon it was well on its way to being something of a showpiece! Today, the nurtured garden is a 70x20-metre irrigated organic zone, protected from the Klaserie's wandering grazers by an electric fence. Its neatly ploughed and planted rows of produce are thriving with sprouting greenery. The full area accounts for a host of fruit trees in the ground, including litchi, mango, avocado, banana, orange, naartjie, grapefruit and lemon.

The sprawling grounds of the van der Schyff property are shaded by lovely, big trees, even at the end of winter; the Olifants River providing year-round water to the deep roots underground. On our arrival, it was clear that the nyalas feel very at home, roaming between the family rooms and Ralph's veggie garden, which has pride of place in front of his house. I asked him whether the animals ever pose a threat to his garden, and he assured me they get their fair share of the off-cuts and don't bother him for anything more!

Ralph's house is one of three similar structures overlooking the onions and carrots and spinach (and sweet potatoes, tomatoes, morogo, beetroot, cabbages, lemons, spring onions, pumpkins, avocados, mielies, mangoes, and bananas – if we're making a list). Each is built on a foundation of textured stone and is

painted bright turquoise. The grass is green all year round thanks to the irrigation system pumping water from the river, and the lush vegetable crops complete a beautiful picture of home.

As we walked between the neatly patchworked crops, we talked about how all five residents tend to their own section of the garden, but they freely trade different vegetables with one another. Having the garden right in front of their homes means there are always eyes on the lookout for monkeys – the garden's nemesis – but even the naughty vervets are a reason to laugh for Ralph. His smile was unfaltering as he talked us through the progress of the garden. The monkeys, he says, are too clever and have come to learn how to dodge the electric pulses of their fence. He watches them wait for the pause between the “clicks” before darting through the wires and grabbing whatever they can.

Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday the garden gets watered and Ralph makes compost using veggie peels and buffalo dung. They rotate certain crops to suit the seasons, while others are farmed all year round. Onions are Ralph's favourite because they go into everything – most deliciously when cooked with plenty of spinach – and things like tomatoes that provide such a good yield are



harvested, cooked, and frozen so that nothing goes to waste.

Ralph reckons more people in KPNR could benefit from growing their own vegetables on site. With some monkey-proofing and a bit of TLC, all four seasons can be catered for without spending a cent on fresh produce at the shop. Subsistence farming is one of the most sustainable ways of living and eating healthily, and we're convinced it's the reason 82-year old Amos Mathebula is still as strong as an ox!

Thank you to Mr van der Schyff for inviting us to come and see this wonderful garden for ourselves, and a big thanks to Ralph for giving us the grand tour. ■



# THE FIGHT *for rhinos*

Words Chloë Cooper

© Warren Ngobeni

Gathering at one of the highest points in the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve, just as the sun rose and a pleasant breeze promised us that we wouldn't get too hot too early on in the day, we waited in anticipation for Bruce McDonald's voice on the radio. From his position in the cockpit of the Savannah aircraft, he was scanning the crackly winter bushveld flecked with cream-coloured acacia blooms, searching for the meandering grey figures of rhino. Minutes before, Bruce had greeted the ground team – a convoy of Land Cruisers – with a good-humoured “buzz”, soaring just above our heads and giving us the gees we needed at that early hour. Under his wings, the words ANTI-POACHING faced us earthlings – a statement of his duty in the sky.

It was my first opportunity to accompany a team of pilots, vets, reserve managers, and photographers on a rhino dehorning operation. The crew at Eco Children was invited by Rhino Revolution to ride along and witness just what goes into a day in the field of modern-day

rhino conservation. I felt honoured to have a place on the back of the bakkie, standing shoulder to shoulder with Sifiso – a newly qualified field ranger, Tshegofatso and Patrick – facilitators at two schools in the Eco Children programme, and Sabrina – our project coordinator and photographer. The occasion was a first for all of us.

As we waited for Bruce to locate the first animal, warden Colin Rowles explained why dehorning is our best shot at deterring poaching, alongside increased security in protected areas. He invited our questions, introduced each role player and told us that every rhino would part with a tissue sample, a blood sample, a couple of tail hairs, and of course its precious armour. Dr Peter Rogers gave us a tour of his veterinary toolbox and explained each step in the medical process. We felt the weight of the dart gun and imagined the technique required to accurately land a dart in a moving target, from a moving machine.

Suddenly it was time to move and our Cruiser convoy set off at speed. Light

heartedness dispersed quickly and was replaced by determination and focus. Aiming for the area beneath Jana Meyer's hovering helicopter, the ground team made a beeline through the bush, navigating the clearings quickly, and I thought about how difficult this must be in the thick of summer. When we came to a stop, the vehicles carrying the veterinary team emptied first. They rushed over to the unmoving, leathery bulk of our first patient – to my disbelief, it was a critically endangered black rhino. I can't remember the last time I saw one in the wild.

Within seconds, the well-oiled process of gathering vital data and monitoring the wellbeing of the sedated rhino began. We were beckoned over quickly. Peter's voice was firm: “We need people please, we need strong people to help move this rhino. Bring the water please, let's cool this animal down.” The rhino was given oxygen, his eyes were covered, and his ears muffled. Klaserie's ecologist, Riaan Kruger, started to clear the bush that was obstructing the area around the horn, and Mpumalanga state veterinarian,



© Godfrey Mlambo





Dr Helena Rampf administered an antibiotic where the dart had punctured the rhino's skin. She kept one eye on her watch constantly. I stepped forward to wash cool water over the animal's body and I felt black rhino skin under my fingers – a texture I will never forget.

We had been told the sound of the chainsaw would be alarming, and when Riaan started it up, an uneasy sensation tightened in my chest. In what reality would one ever take a roaring chainsaw to a live animal? After a couple of breathless minutes, it still didn't feel OK. An uncomfortable knot twisted in my stomach and I felt flushed with emotion. We had been warned that this wouldn't be easy to see, and I realised then what an enormously difficult task this is and what weight every member of this team must carry around with them as they systematically dehorn every rhino they find.

After the chainsaw came the angle grinder, and after that, a layer of protective oil to finish the job. Rousing me from of the fog of my thoughts, Anna Mussi from Rhino Revolution handed me the pot of oil and asked me if I wanted to paint the freshly sawn base of the horn. I sank next to the rhino's face, kneeling in the white keratin dust that had settled around him after his dehorning, and coated the smooth surface that remained. He gave a big, breathy exhale just as my brush completed its final stroke and we were all urged



into action: "We've got to get moving. Everyone, get onto a vehicle and, drivers, start moving out."

Wild Shots Outreach photographers, who were documenting the day's events, snapped their final photos of one of Africa's most endangered animals and quickly boarded the Cruiser. Jana moved to start up the helicopter and the fleet of four-wheelers manoeuvred around each other in a series of three-point turns until we were all facing the exit and could put pedal to the metal. There was no sticking around to watch this animal wake up. His dark and moody reputation precedes him, and if he had any recollection of what we'd just put him through, he'd certainly have a bone to pick with us.

That morning, we dehorned six rhino. One was heavily pregnant, and one had a calf. There were incredibly fulfilling and deeply gratifying moments during a day that was flooded with sadness. The shuddering grind of the chainsaw did not get any less brutal, but my gratitude soared for the people who were sweating through khaki jumpsuits to make sure we left those rhinos safer than when we found them.

Colin called it at midday when the temperature reached 30 degrees and any animals we darted would be compromised in the heat. Our convoy returned to HQ, all passengers' eyebrows were coated in dust and our teeth crunched on sandy particles. We all joked that our bush tans would wash off in a much-needed shower and, as the adrenalin of the day started to wear off, the 4am start began catching up with me.

This incredibly tiring and emotionally demanding process is repeated regularly by the capable people whose responsibility it is to protect our rhinos. I feel so much more than privileged to have been able to ride along and watch from the side lines while history took place in front of my eyes. If one day we live on this Earth without the millennia-old rhinoceros, I'll remember that they didn't go without one hell of a fight. But my hopes are high thanks to the organisations that make this happen, and there is no doubt in my mind that everything possible is being done to try and save a species. ■







# From Holiday Workshops to FIELD RANGER GRADUATION

Words Chloë Cooper | Photos Matt Lindenberg

Surprise Sifiso Lukhele first attended an Eco Children Holiday Workshop as a school-goer in 2009. He recalls being captivated by the natural world he discovered in the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve (KPNR) and quickly developing a passion for it. Learning about pollution, endangered species, and the issues that threaten our natural resources, he became determined to play a role in conservation.

Fast forward a decade later, and not only is Sifiso a trainer at Eco Chlidren where he teaches environmental education to the younger generation, but he has achieved his dream of becoming a field ranger and joining the ranks of those qualified to work on the front line of anti-poaching.

On 28 August, Sifiso graduated from the gruelling Armed Field Ranger training course at the Southern African Wildlife College (SAWC). He was one of 15 finalists selected for the Global Conservation Corps' (GCC) Future Ranger scholarship programme. Out of 600 initial applicants, Sifiso was one of 125 to get a face-to-face interview, and

then became one of only 36 men and women chosen for the physical challenge of field ranger selection. Ultimately, he shone as one of the brightest, fittest, and toughest members of the group and became one of just 15 candidates awarded with a scholarship to enrol in the 6-week training course at the SAWC.

By the end of the training programme, Sifiso's instructors described his participation as dedicated and focused. Matt Lindenberg, founder and director of GCC, said Sifiso had a positive approach to his training and was always willing to get stuck in and help wherever needed. A report to be proud of!

When Matt established GCC over five years ago, it was in honour of a personal mentor and legendary field ranger trainer at the SAWC, Martin Mthembu, who sadly passed away in 2014. GCC was modelled on Martin's belief that local youths need to be involved with the conservation of wildlife, and so it is GCC's mission to help bridge the gap between communities and wildlife.



The Future Rangers initiative was established with this in mind, and over three years, has grown to reach over 4,000 children in eight different local schools each week. Through it, children are given the opportunity to learn and participate in conservation activities, identifying passion and strengthening skills, all contributing to the ultimate goal of finding jobs in the environmental sector. "Jobs in conservation have to be driven by passion. Without that, there is less chance of a field ranger saying no to corruption or being able to face threats to their families when syndicates enter the area. There needs to be passion. This intense and driving desire needs to be instilled, but also tracked and nurtured over time," said Matt.

There is no doubt that Sifiso is equipped with this feeling of conviction. His



recollections of holiday workshops in the KPNR brim with heartfelt emotion for wildlife, trees, and the landscape that is etched into his mind. He describes the value in being silent in nature, and while this is a concept many nature lovers can relate to, most young people from Sifiso's community do not have the privilege of experiencing it first-hand. "I was born into a poor family and lost my mother while I was still at school. I am however very grateful that I had the holiday workshops to help me through a difficult time and give me opportunities to learn about the environment. It taught me that even though there are challenges in life, if you focus on what you want, you can achieve your goal," he said.

The Future Rangers Programme is helping to give more children from rural communities living alongside the Kruger National Park access to education and skills development through incredible institutions like the SAWC. Furthermore, GCC is working to incorporate the benefit of technology into its programmes and is currently piloting an app alongside the SAWC and Africa Foundation.

Matt explains: "The app is like a mini LinkedIn for kids. It will track and evaluate individual students' participation in conservation activities and build a portfolio of evidence, which will one day be used to motivate for a job. Our other big goal for the app is to be able to assist many conservation education NPOs to monitor and assess the effectiveness of their programmes and to record and observe change over time."

Collaborating with like-minded organisations to access the youth in the Kruger Park buffer zone communities is integral to effecting change in the conservation landscape. "We want to be able to create opportunities for whatever the conservation sector needs most, such as guiding, hospitality, reserve management, etc. We support the focus on local ownership of these reserves and would like to see a transfer of equity to more local people," said Matt.

Sifiso is now equipped to perform in the job he has dreamed about since he was a boy; protecting wildlife and conserving biodiversity. It was his early experiences in nature and environmental education that inspired his passion, indicating the power that opportunity carries. Congratulations to Sifiso, whose determination and hard work earned him the scholarship to train at the SAWC and graduate with flying colours!

Thank you to GCC, the SAWC, Our Horn is not Medicine Campaign donors, Frontier Collective, and Wild Shots Outreach who funded the 15 scholarships for Sifiso's graduating class. ■



# 2,000

## food parcels and counting

Words Catharina Robbertze | Photos Sabrina Chielens



Over 2,000 food parcels have been distributed to vulnerable families in the Bushbuckridge, Acornhoek area since the national lockdown kicked in in March of this year, thanks to the support and hard work of local suppliers, farmers, and volunteers.

Eco Children works with seven primary schools in the area, all of which form part of the government's national feeding scheme. When lockdown kicked in and schools closed, the national feeding scheme also ground to a halt, meaning all of the children in these schools lost a meal a day. "We know that, for many of these children, the meal they receive at school is the only meal they receive all day. With the national feeding scheme not operational, thousands of children would have been stranded at home without any food and we couldn't let that happen," says Corné Havenga, CEO of Eco Children.





Eco Children sprang to work to raise funds and sent out a call for help to their supporters and the Hoedspruit community. "The response was overwhelming," says Havenga, "we received donations from individuals, companies, other non-profit organisations, and more. Local farms donated fresh produce and rangers all over the world raised money for the cause. We have been able to hand out 100-140 food parcels every week to families in need since March and we are incredibly thankful to everyone who has supported us in this drive!"



"The lockdown has had a devastating effect on our local economy, with local tourism being the main source of income for a large portion of our community. Thousands of people have lost all income and, while they were struggling to make ends meet before lockdown, they are now unable to put food on the table for their families. The food parcel distribution programme has helped alleviate the immediate danger of starvation in the area and has also boosted local suppliers' cashflow during these tough times," she added.

All handouts took place with strict social distancing measures in place and fresh vegetables from Eco Children Eco Villages at local schools were used to supplement the dry food parcels. The feedback from recipients of the food parcels were overwhelming, with families and school principals sending messages of thanks to Eco Children and those who donated to the drive. One such message read: "From the bottom of our hearts and souls we want to appreciate the gesture of good will for such a big hand. We really are grateful for thinking about our needy children and their households. Words are not enough to say we thank you and your wonderful team. Be blessed going forward." ■



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*“When the national school feeding scheme ground to a halt due to the national lockdown, the vegetables grown in the gardens were redirected to Eco Children’s food distribution programme...”*

Since the Covid-19 lockdown kicked in, the Eco Children Eco Villages have been quiet but not dormant. While there haven't been any learners at school to maintain them, Eco Children staff and volunteers who live in the community have taken the reigns and made sure these gardens keep producing essential fresh vegetables.

Never before has the value of these Eco Villages been more apparent. When the national school feeding scheme ground to a halt due to the national lockdown, the vegetables grown in the gardens were redirected to Eco Children's food distribution programme for vulnerable families in the area. Corné Havenga, CEO of Eco Children, explained that the fresh produce has been essential in supplementing the food parcels handed out to families who are unable to put food on the table due to the devastating effect lockdown has had on the local economy.

“The fresh produce grown in our Eco Villages has been a crucial part of our food distribution programme. We have handed out thousands of dry food parcels to those in need and being able to supplement these with fresh vegetables grown in our gardens, have made us incredibly proud,” she said.

43,000 seedlings were planted in late winter and, as these vegetables are close to being harvested, the sustainability of this project has become apparent. “Those families that have lost all income have seen the advantages of having a vegetable garden in the past few months. The food security that comes with this is invaluable and we hope to see more vegetable gardens making an appearance in our communities in the near future,” said Havenga.

“We are grateful that we have the opportunity to contribute to food security in our communities and thankful to The Legacy Experience Foundation for coming on board in this endeavour. Their support has been invaluable this year, as our focus moved temporarily from school feeding schemes to food distribution. With buy-in from supporters such as these, as well as local volunteers, we will continue to plant, grow and harvest fresh veggies in our gardens and use this produce to improve the quality of life in our communities,” she concluded. ■



# Growing your own

Words Catharina Robbertze | Photos Sabrina Chielens

THE LEGACY EXPERIENCE **ECO CHILDREN**  
SOWING SEEDS OF CHANGE





# OPPORTUNITIES *await*

Words Catharina Robbertze | Photos Sabrina Chielens

Another three local youngsters will be joining the Eco Children bursary team at Southern Cross Schools (SCS) next year. Vusi Chiloane, Emmanuel Theko and Appreciate Magabe are three of 51 primary school learners who applied for an Eco Children bursary. Their hard work and perseverance paid off and they were selected to receive full bursaries to attend the IEB preparatory school in Hoedspruit.

The learners will kick off the academic year at SCS in 2021. The application process was rigorous, with strict academic and financial criteria in place. Learners had to complete creative assignments, psychometric tests and personal interviews in order to be selected.

According to Corné Havenga, CEO of Eco Children, it was a tough selection process because they had to make sure the bursaries were awarded to the right learners. “The three applicants who were selected stood out because of their positive attitudes and perseverance. Most of our bursary learners come from tough personal circumstances and have overcome great challenges already in their short lives. Vusi, Emmanuel and Appreciate are no different,” she said. “They remained positive throughout, always giving their best. We could identify clear potential in each and every one of them and we believe, with the right support, they can reach great things.”

Havenga continued: “2020 has been a tough year for all of us and we are thankful that we could make the year slightly better for these three learners. Our bursary programme follows a holistic approach, providing learners not only with financial support, but also continued mentorship and guidance from the school and our own staff members to ensure they are happy and performing at their best.”

“We look forward to starting the new year with these three bright young things under our wing and can’t wait to see them develop into young adults with promising futures,” she concluded. ■



Eco Children is always looking for opportunities to expand their bursary programme and give more children the opportunity to reach their full potential. If you would like to get involved or would like to support the project, please contact [corne@ecochildren.co.za](mailto:corne@ecochildren.co.za).

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# Literacy FOR LIFE

Words Catharina Robbertze | Photos Sabrina Chielens

Two new libraries have been completed at schools in the Bushbuckridge area as the local non-profit organisation, Eco Children continues to work towards improving literacy in South Africa's rural communities.

Despite the challenges faced during 2020, Eco Children has continued with important work that is allowed while lockdown regulations are in place and construction of the libraries at Kgwaditiba and Mapalane Primary Schools will be completed in November of this year. Said Corné Havenga, the organisation's CEO: "These are the sixth

and seventh libraries we have built at our adopted schools, as we continue to bring books to the children in the area and help improve their reading skills."

She continued: "The most recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) report showed that 78% of South African grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning. This is a devastating statistic and something that we take extremely seriously at Eco Children. We believe every child has the right to read and broaden their horizons through books, that is why we have built seven libraries already and have prioritised building two more, even during the Covid-19 pandemic."

In the seven libraries that Eco Children have constructed, they have also established successful literacy programmes at the schools and have distributed thousands of age-appropriate

books. The libraries at the schools have become safe havens for many children and a fundamental shift has been seen in learners' perception of reading and books.

"We are incredibly proud of our libraries and literacy programme and believe we are making a tangible difference to the quality of education that children are receiving at their schools," said Havenga. "While we have achieved great success so far, one of our greatest challenges has been filling the shelves with books for our children. We have received wonderful support from all over the world, even getting a shipping container full of books from the USA thanks to an inspiring young man called Zach Hoexter, but we still need thousands of books to fill new shelves. We would like to put out a call to everyone who has old children's books that are not being used any more or who would like to contribute to this cause to get in touch and find out how they can become involved," she said.

Havenga concluded: "Eco Children has committed to improving literacy in the area and as we continue to collect books to fill the shelves of our existing libraries, we are already planning more in the future. We know we are making an impact with this campaign and we call on everyone to support this drive and help us make a real difference to the future of the children in our schools with books." ■

If you would like to contribute to improving literacy in South Africa and donate books to Eco Children's literacy programme, please get in touch at [corne@ecochildren.co.za](mailto:corne@ecochildren.co.za) to find out how you can get involved.





# A school uniform for CHRISTMAS

Words Catharina Robbertze | Photos Sabrina Chielens

**T**ry to remember the best Christmas gift you received as a child. Maybe it was your favourite children's book, a model car, a doll, or a Playstation. Chances are, it wasn't a school uniform.

However, for 120 children in the Bushbuckridge, Acornhoek area, their Christmas became a little bit better when they each received a Kit-a-Kid voucher to purchase a new school uniform for the 2021 school year.

Kit-a-Kid is one of Eco Children's long-standing projects and, since its establishment in 2009, more than 4,000 learners have received a new school uniform thanks to this initiative. "A school uniform holds the potential of changing a child's life," says

Corné Havenga, CEO of Eco Children. "This simple gesture helps children take pride in their appearance and has a direct impact in the quality of work they deliver. It may not seem like much, but we have seen how this pride reflects in our learners' work and how a little boost like this has an incredibly positive effect on them," she said.

"We are very thankful to the Thornybush Lodge and Anderson Consulting in the USA who supported this initiative and helped us reach 4,792 school uniforms, but also to every person who donated R350. Your contribution has made a tangible difference to a child's life and has made it easier for that child to focus on their schoolwork and take one small step away from poverty," said Havenga.

Every R350 donated to this cause, provides a child with a full school uniform consisting of shoes, a shirt, shorts or a skirt, and a jersey. For most of these children, this is their first time they own a new set of clothing. If you would still like to donate, you can do so at [givengain.com/c/ecochildren/](http://givengain.com/c/ecochildren/) or contact [corne@ecochildren.co.za](mailto:corne@ecochildren.co.za) for more information. ■



Eco Children would like to thank PEP Stores Acornhoek who has been a part of this initiative since 2009. Without your support, we would not be able to continue with this project.

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# A joyous end to a tough year

Words Catharina Robbertze | Photos Sabrina Chielens

**W**ith Christmas just around the corner, it was again time to hand out Santa Shoeboxes to children in the Bushbuckridge, Acornhoek area.

In November, the Eco Children team packed their van to the brim with Santa Shoeboxes and drove from school to school to make more than 600 children's Christmas just a little more joyful. 2020 numbers were lower due to the challenges that came with the Covid-19 pandemic, but this didn't diminish the excitement on hand-out day one bit.

Every Santa Shoebox is pledged by a volunteer for a specific child and packed with basics such as a toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, an outfit of clothing, as well as school supplies and a toy. Corné Havenga, CEO of Eco Children says the content of these boxes may seem basic but for the children who receive them, they mean the world. "I have seen time and again how much happiness a Santa Shoebox brings to a child. Most of the children who receive a Santa Shoebox have never received a Christmas

gift in their life and have never had a new set of clothing before. The joy on their faces is what keeps us motivated to do our work and it's always a highlight to end a year on a high note like this," she said.

Eco Children has been in charge of Santa Shoebox collection and distribution in the Hoedspruit area for almost a decade and have handed out tens of thousands of boxes to children in the area. "We hope to continue with the Santa Shoebox initiative for many years to come and spread a little joy in the area. Not only to the children receiving a box but also to the people who pledge and pack a box because giving is, after all, better than receiving," Havenga said. ■



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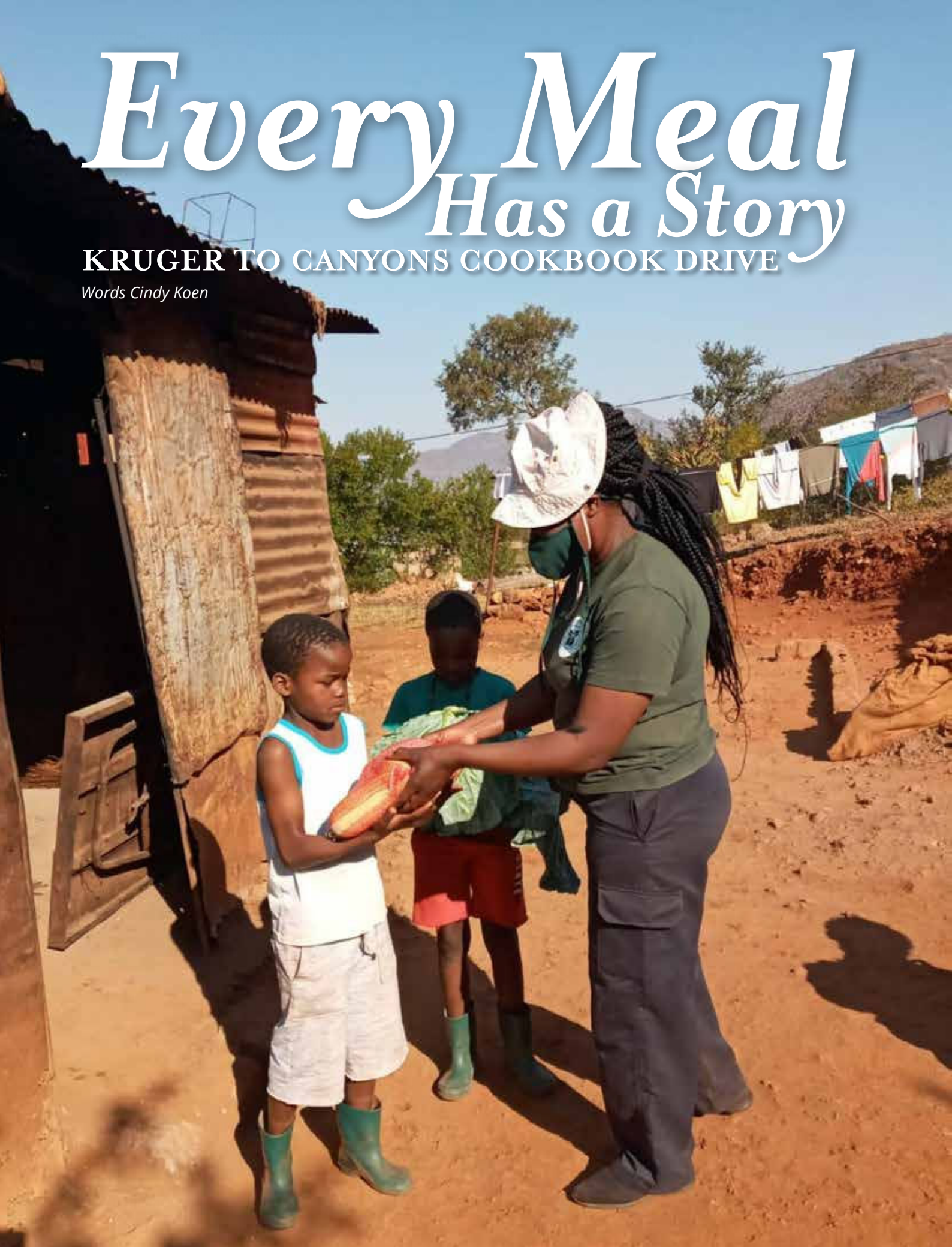




# Every Meal Has a Story

## KRUGER TO CANYONS COOKBOOK DRIVE

Words Cindy Koen



To help relieve economic distress in underprivileged communities during the Covid-19 lockdown, the Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Region (K2C BR) launched a unique cookbook drive that has thus far been able to distribute food parcels to over 1,500 vulnerable local families. The ongoing initiative has tied family favourite recipes with individual stories that go behind these meals and developed an e-book that is raising funds to feed hungry people in local communities.

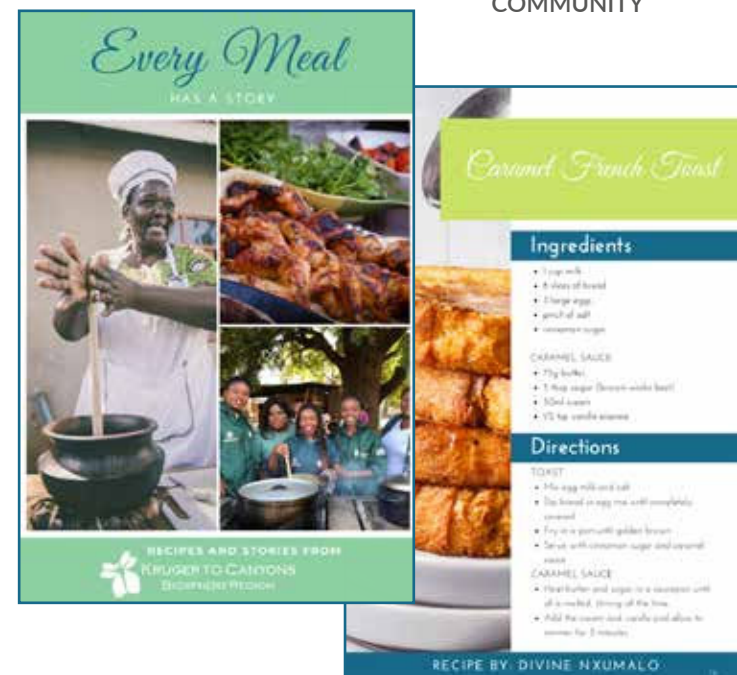
The K2C BR non-profit company was established to act as the vehicle for coordinating the implementation of biosphere activities. Among other things, the strategic objectives include enhancing the conservation of biodiversity and cultural heritage, maintaining ecosystem services and fostering the sustainable and equitable use of natural resources through the implementation of projects.

One of the K2C BR's projects is the from the Region for the Region (frFR) project, funded by the Government of Flanders. It focuses on linking small local businesses to the market, therefore stimulating and growing the local economy. However, the outbreak of Covid-19 put a temporary delay on the launch of the pilot project and small businesses suffered the most. They lost out on the opportunity of market access, financial revenue, and access to business mentoring. The frFR team could not sit back and allow this to happen. We knew that we were all in this together and we could not sit back and look at our people struggle.

Thus, the Every Meal Has a Story recipe e-book was born. K2C BR launched a fundraising campaign, named Every Meal Has a Story – Make Your Story Count, with the intention of raising money to feed the vulnerable people in our local communities. And so, together, we created a digital recipe book with a twist. The recipe book consists of a range of favourite traditional recipes along with stories from our region; thus, Every Meal Has a Story.

Ultimately, for every copy of the book sold at R100, we have enough money to feed a family for a week. Taking it one step further, we ensure that all the items bought for the food parcels are sourced from local small-holder farmers, essentially meaning two families benefit from each book we sell.

Up until now, the donations received have funded 1.5 tons of assorted fresh produce, that has been distributed to families in need. With the support of our partners, we have managed to distribute food parcels to over 1,500 families so far. We would like to thank each and every person who has contributed towards this fundraiser already and for making their stories count! ■



Anyone who would like to purchase one of our books is welcome to contact the team at [frfr@kruger2canyons.org](mailto:frfr@kruger2canyons.org).



KRUGER TO CANYONS  
BIOSPHERE REGION



# An unexpected GUEST

Words and photos Morné Hamlyn

It's hard to imagine we were without guests for months after the worldwide lockdown due to Covid-19 at Makumu Private Game Lodge, but like many other reserve-dwellers, we found ourselves in a very unique situation. Our location in the Klaserie Private Nature Reserve gave us a super opportunity to experience and live in nature without the rush that "safari" has become for so many. We were able to go and explore at our own pace and it gave us proper insight into how undisturbed nature has coped during this pandemic. In other ways, it showed us that humans were the only vulnerable ones.

During this quiet period, we maintained the wellbeing of our empty lodge by tending to gardens, cleaning, and fixing. It was on one of our routine checks that Ruan and I noticed something odd on the patch of gravel in front of the rangers' storeroom. On closer inspection, we determined that it was bits of rumen (stomach contents) from an antelope, but we could not find any other evidence on the hard gravel. We thought that a hyena may have been the culprit, as the local clan often kills impalas close to the lodge and drag bits of carcass around the area.

We left it at that and proceeded to the lodge gardens to turn on the sprinklers before heading back to the office. We had little further thought about what evidence we had seen and had no idea that we were being watched the whole time we were moving between the garden and the villas!

Around noon, Ruan went to switch off the sprinkler system. We had planned to go out on a bit of a game drive, which was one of the amazing privileges of spending lockdown at Makumu. Nature does not stand still, and our management team got to enjoy great opportunities of being out in the bush, which is a rarity for many. Before we could get going, Ruan called us on the radio to tell us there was a leopard at Ndebele Villa's pathway!



My wife, Melissa, and I quickly gathered the kids, grabbed cameras, and jumped into a game viewer to meet Ruan and see our first guest in months. As we approached, we could see the remains of an impala carcass hanging in the tree (which was not there earlier) close to the Ndebele Villa. Ruan said the leopard had growled and run off towards the pathway. We positioned the vehicle close to the tree and had a careful look in the long grass under the walkway to see where our guest was hiding. The flick of a tail gave away his hiding spot and we found him resting in the shade of the walkway. He was very wary and kept looking around to see where Ruan had gone. Looking back, we realised we must have walked close by him earlier in the day and that might have encouraged him to drag the kill up into the tree. ■

SIGHTINGS



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# WHERE GIANTS ROAM

*Words and photo Rebecca Rowles*

**C**ruising through the winter bushveld, a cool breeze in your hair, the touch of warm sun reflected in the golden colours of the grass, the leaves and the soil. Keeping a sharp eye for signs of hide or tail, your safari has just begun, what wonders await you in the bush?

Through the dappled light of the trees, shapes emerge. Large dark creatures, elephants! Peaceful, as they wander through the terrain that is their home. Mothers with their young growing families accompanied by eager bulls trailing behind. The silence with which they move, ghosts in the brush, a low rumble, the flap of an ear, accompanied by the odd soft crack of a twig, the only indication of their presence.

Making their way across the landscape, dwarfing all but the tallest of trees. Foraging as they move, picking delicately at the very juiciest of green leaves. Occasionally showing the true nature of their strength, a loud crack breaks the quiet and a particularly tall tree begins to topple. The younger members of the herd eagerly gather around this fallen tree, ready to pick off the delicacies which would otherwise be far out of their reach.

Quickening their pace as the scent of water reaches their senses. The day has been warm, more so than usual. They have travelled over great distances in their search for food, coming eventually to satisfy their thirst in the

late afternoon sun. The young bulls cannot contain their excitement; they rush ahead of the herd, barely pausing as they reach the water's edge, rushing instead into the cool depths. Washing away the dust of the day, they drink deeply of the water.

Thirsts quenched, the games begin; for young elephants rival even puppies in their enthusiasm for the game. Splashing about, diving beneath the surface until all that remains is a glimpse of trunk or ear. Their excitement is contagious; the sound of their happy squeals and trumpeting attracts yet more herds of elephant. Soon the banks of the watering hole are soaked in waves that rival in size the roughest of coastal beaches.

The gathering of elephants is a sight to behold, a glimpse into the secret lives of these sometimes misunderstood creatures. At a silent word from the herd matriarch, the youngsters reluctantly start to trudge out of the water. But no swimming session is complete without an accompanying dust bath. Golden sand flies thicken the air creating vivid stripes against the darkened hides.

The last rays of fading sunlight catch in the dust, creating a world of wonder, in hues bright and intense as the sunset itself. This is Africa. This is a land of stark beauty. Take a deep breath, smell the dust of the earth, let the stress that has plagued you escape. You are free now. You are where the giants roam.



# HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

Words Warren Howson & Orla McEvoy | Photos Warren Howson

Many of us have found ourselves in unusually difficult and atypical situations over the past couple of months. Finding novel ways to seek solace, connecting with our surroundings and Mother Nature has never been as important as it is today. The smallest of moments can often be what true living is all about.

The wonder of life comes in so many forms; a tenacious fledgling finding its space, the scent of a new blossom filling the air or that loyal and loving glance from a canine friend.

In the modern, fast-paced world that we have been living, even based in a biodiversity hotspot, the words of international poet, Oscar Wilde, ring truer than ever: “To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist that is all”. This phrase serves as a reminder of appreciation and particularly for the smaller things in life, the things that really matter.

I personally found myself overseas, without the ability to return to the bush for the last five months due to international lockdowns. I feel fortunate to have experienced the beauty of nature and family in the most unexpected ways during this time. A reminder that even in



*“If you truly love nature,  
you will find beauty  
everywhere.”*

the most cosmopolitan cities, nature and vitality is all around us and peace and love are shared. With a quote from a troubled past giving sanity to today, I find that Van Gogh’s words speak louder than ever: “If you truly love nature, you will find beauty everywhere.”

After a successful repatriation, I have now finished up my official quarantine at a government facility in Johannesburg, and I am back on home turf, thankfully safe and well. Feeling as though this has been the longest time I have ever been away from the remarkable Klaserie, I have returned with an even stronger appreciation for family – home and away, for friends – human and animal, and for the magnificent beauty of the Kruger National Park, full of wonder and life.

Like many of us, I have yearned to walk the Klaserie wilderness again, smell the Lowveld soils, experience the rumbles of the true greats deep within and share this passion and love with you once again. As can often happen during more trying days, I hope that for you too, this time has allowed you to absorb the blessings in your life, and the remarkable people and animals that we are lucky to have around us. ■





# Bursting with Pride

*Words and photos Emily Whiting*

There's a baby boom in town at Klaserie Drift! After an unsettled period in 2018 due to a lack of dominant males, the arrival of two large male lions has brought stability and calm to the lionesses of the River Pride. Now named Hosi and Socha by the guides in the area, these rugged, regal males have slowly but surely proven their strength and ability to hold such a prime territory along the bountiful Klaserie River. After six months of patrolling and fighting off intruders, their trust was ultimately earned, and one after another, the females began coming into oestrus in the second half of 2019.

Although not brothers by blood, these unrelated males have formed a deep and loving bond which is clear to see in their

affectionate greetings. While such a coalition is not the norm, it is certainly not rare, as lone males have a very poor chance of survival, let alone being able to claim a territory and reproduce. Typically, males in any coalition will respect each other's mating rights and only attempt to intervene on a female if his partner loses interest, which is why you will see a male constantly guarding the current recipient of his affections. Our boys are no different and both laid claim to different females at a time. However, we can never be positive of paternity as a female will often mate with more than one male, if given the chance, to ensure the entire coalition is invested in her cubs.

In September 2019, the first little bundles of joy arrived. Five tiny cubs, born to two mothers, became the highlight and most sought after sighting for almost every guide and guest. Now just reaching their first-year milestone, we are proud as punch to report that four of the original five are still flourishing. This is all the more amazing when you consider the average mortality rate for lion cubs is thought to be as high as 50% in their first year. These precious bundles face multiple threats from other predators, especially hyena and other male lions, as well as the risk of starvation. We are confident our pride's success so far is the result of the strong, experienced leadership of the River Pride females as well as the almost ceaseless, supportive presence of Hosi and Socha.

With the first cubs continuing to thrive, two more females succumbed to the males' charms and in late February and July of this year, six more tiny lion cubs appeared. Happily, all are still doing well. Furthermore, the original core lionesses that made up the River Pride have swelled from five to eight individuals and we have witnessed even more mating sessions of late, leaving us quietly hopeful of yet more additions in the near future!

With so many little legs now attempting to keep up, the pride seems to have settled along the stretch of river that encompasses Misava Safari Camp, resulting in many incredible sightings for our guides. Most evenings and mornings, the air is filled with the deep, rib-rumbling roar of these immense cats laying claim to their pride lands. Healthy and secure in their territory for the time being, it is a joy to watch this ever-growing family bloom and prosper. We have been truly blessed with many unbelievable sightings over these last months; a small reason to smile in such a difficult time for the industry. With the full pride now a mind-blowing 20-strong, it seems nothing can stop these phenomenal felines in their tracks. ■





# LIFE LESSONS

## *from animals*

Words Corlia Steyn | Photos supplied by Senalala Safari Lodge

During the past couple of months in lockdown in the Klaserie, we counted our blessings for our location, which allowed us to be surrounded by plenty of space and fresh air while others were quarantined in apartment buildings and cities.

We went for quiet game drives by ourselves, spending time with animals as we encountered them. It was during these precious moments in the bush that I wondered what we could learn from the wildlife around us and if we were to apply these animal traits to our daily lives, perhaps we would grow into better human beings.

As Donald Hicks once said: “Those who teach the most about humanity, aren’t always human.”

### *Life lessons from the giraffe*

Giraffes walk tall, and so can we. Each of us benefits from some sort of advantage, meaning we should focus on the things we are good at rather than focusing on what we lack. Giraffes have a higher point of view, perhaps from this we can learn not to always look at a situation right in front of us, but to change our perspective and see the bigger picture.

### *Life lessons from the hyena*

We can all do with more laughter in life. Not only is it fun to share a good laugh, but it improves our overall health and is a powerful tonic for stress relief.



### *Life lessons from the zebra*

Every zebra has its very own stripe pattern, just like every human has their own fingerprint. No two are alike. Be unique, be yourself! Because there is no one else like you. We only have one life and we should live it being true to ourselves.



### *Life lessons from the hippo*

Hippos teach us that we do not need to go it alone. We should surround ourselves with friends and loved ones, just like hippos do in their pods. Those who support us through the ups and downs are worth sharing life with.



### *Life lessons from the rhino*

Being offended these days is a competitive sport and everyone wants to play. A rhino could teach us to have thicker skin. Being offended not only torments our emotions, it compromises our happiness. We should try to be less offended by what people do or say, especially about things that we cannot change.



### *Life lessons from the butterfly*

Butterflies go through a metamorphosis, and in so doing, they teach us that it is not possible to go from an egg to a butterfly without the stages in between. When someone is successful, we sometimes see only the success, not the challenges that have been overcome to get there. Every stage of life should be seen as a vehicle for our transformation. Today a caterpillar, tomorrow a butterfly!





**Life lesson from the eagle** ➤

Eagles fly at high altitudes; they do not fly with sparrows or other small birds. Stay away from sparrows and ravens, those that bring us down. Eagles fly with eagles. Keep good company. When we spend time with positive people, we are more likely to adopt empowering beliefs and see life as happening for us instead of to us.



◀ **Life lessons from the leopard**

A leopard's ability to be patient and composed during a hunt is impressive. We can all try to be more patient in the difficult situations we face in life and, importantly, with ourselves. Being patient is not just about waiting, it is about our attitude when we wait. Things have a way of working themselves out at the right time.



**Life lessons from the elephant** ➤

Elephants often take time out for enjoyment, especially at waterholes where even the adults splash around in the water. These great, big mammals truly remind us that it is often the small things that count the most and we should enjoy them whenever we can.

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# Beauty

## IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Words and photos Gijs & Sally Rinsma | Bateleur's Nest

*“The adult females at the den also became much more relaxed in our presence and, after many months, we were able to distinguish between the different mothers.”*

Shortly after we arrived at Bateleur's Nest five years ago, we discovered a hyena den close to the road along one of our game drive routes. To our delight, there were a few hyena cubs hanging around. They were cautious, and quickly scampered back into the den when they noticed us, but over time, we learned if we kept our distance, they felt safe enough to emerge and play. As the days went by, the cubs became more and more confident; we were even given the opportunity to see them feed from their mother. The cubs became so relaxed that, to our surprise, they even began to venture out towards our game vehicle.

The adult females at the den also became much more relaxed in our presence and, after many months, we were able to distinguish between the different mothers by looking at the tears and notches in their ears and the slight differences in their colouring. It was fascinating to watch their interactions, so we were disappointed when, one day, we went to the den and found that the hyenas had disappeared.

At first, we were worried, but we soon discovered that they had moved to a new den only about 50 metres away. After doing a little research, we realised that it is normal for hyenas to move dens every couple of months because their den sites become soiled and unhygienic.

Not long after finding the second den, we noticed that another female was due to give birth. We kept a close eye on her and, after a few weeks, were treated to the sight of brand-new cubs at the den. These hyenas were remarkably confident, and we got to watch them closely once again. It is truly heart-warming to see the care that the mothers have for their young – a far cry from the devilish way hyenas are portrayed in *The Lion King*!

Initially we got to know two breeding females and in August 2017 we discovered a third. After many weeks spent watching her, we got to know her young cub, whom we called “Hesitant Hans” because he was very nervous.





Eventually, we could easily recognise all the females and could notice different individuals' behaviours. On one particular evening, we were observing a den when we heard the sounds of a wild dog kill. The females raced off and a little later a young eight-month old cub was allowed to join at the kill. It was interesting to note that the dominant female, whom we had named Hannah, protected her young cubs and they got preferential feeding opportunities. In April last year, Hannah gave birth to two cubs, of which one survived – a typical scenario among hyenas.

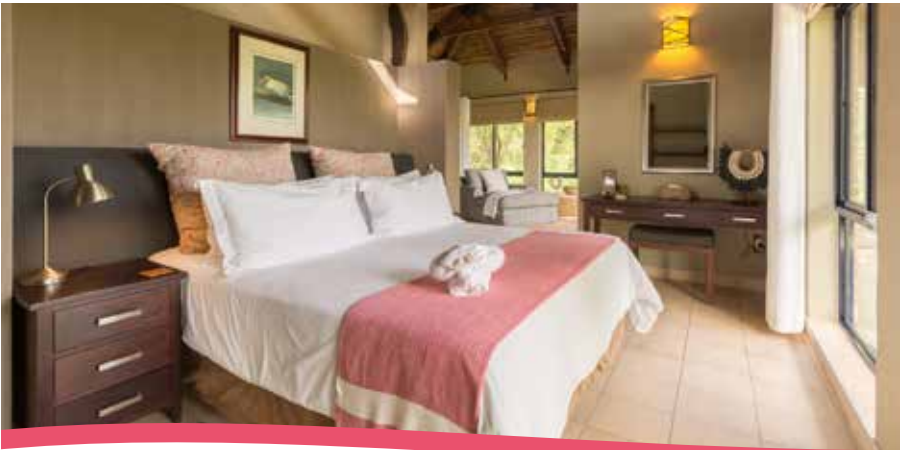
For about a year, no new cubs were born, and we noticed that two of our recognised breeding females had vanished. There were also more injured hyenas around than usual, which might have been as a result of increased lion activity or the aggression we witnessed between "our" hyenas and hyenas from another clan.

We were thrilled to discover Hannah denning again in April this year, and a few months later during the nationwide lockdown, we spotted one of the female hyenas with a snare around her neck. What we didn't realise at the time was that it was Hannah.



Riaan Kruger, Klaserie's resident ecologist, set up a lure for her and played a very loud recording of a dying buffalo. The pack of hyenas arrived in no time, including Hannah. She was successfully darted, the snare was removed, and we are pleased to say she made a full recovery. We lost sight of her for a while and only saw her again in early August with her two new cubs. Both are thriving and displaying the trademark confidence of hyenas that we have come to know and admire.

It has been a privilege to witness the lives of our resident hyenas. They are fascinating animals and a living example of the phrase, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. ■



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