



On Foot with Shangani Trails!!

Newsletter December 2014

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Immature Red Billed Oxpecker, not often recognized.

Photo: Chito Ymalay Kentucky USA



Backpacking in the Makuleke

The dawn broke under clear skies to the cries of the Fish Eagles and the smell of coffee brewing as the Group readied their kit and enjoyed a last breakfast while marvelling at the beautiful Luvuvhu River bathed in the early morning sunlight.

The Group, just before we set off for the final walk through Hutwini to the Airstrip and what a walk it turned out to be!! Photo: Shangani Trails

By now the camp routine was well defined with Group members pitching in to clean up all traces of our presence before Alan McSmith, my co-Lead Guide for the Trail,



and I set off across the Luvuvhu River flood plain to the Hutwini Gorge after which we would swing east for our final pick-up at the Airstrip.

I outlined a short history and the significance of the Gorge for the Group before we entered this very spiritual gap in the large Hutwini sandstone ridge that runs east/west and then bends north towards Mashashiti, the site of a beautiful 3 tiered natural spring. As usual, I had goose bumps walking through the narrow intimidating Gorge where we were lucky enough to see some Klipspringer and Dassies while being constantly serenaded by Baboon alarm calls.



The Group moves through the Hutwini Gorge, such a spiritual place!

*Photo: Dave Coughlan
Johannesburg
RSA*

Of some concern were the very fresh Dagga Boy (old Buffalo Bull) tracks going in the same direction as ourselves but luckily they followed the wide game path out to the north west while we turned east though the Mopani and Acacia belt towards our pick-up point on the Airstrip.

We had cleared the ridge to our right, less than a kilometre from the Airstrip and our waiting pick-up when Alan and I spotted the first Elephant Bull. For once the wind was in our favour and the Bull was moving slowly towards us off to our right. We quickly moved towards him, finding the shade of an acacia to sit down and watched him approach. Alan reassured the Group to sit still and keep their nerve as it was likely that he would come close to our position. While watching him come towards us, a second Bull appeared behind him but still

some way off. The first Elephant was now very close, feeding on tufts of grass and occasionally throwing up clouds of dust as he used his trunk to shower himself with sand, all the time continuing to come forward in a very calm manner.

The Bull approaches the Group's position, the clouds of dust clearly visible!!

Photo: Dave Coughlan

Johannesburg, RSA



The tension in the Group was tangible, he was certainly no more than 5 metres from me when he stopped, focussed on us, ears out and standing tall. For what seemed an eternity he stood over us pondering his next move. Then with a swing of the trunk and a dismissive shake of the head he moved to the left away from our position. He stopped shook his head again then moved off slowly further to our left with little fuss.



And I could be sitting in a corporate office in Johannesburg!! The other Bull can be seen in the background.

Photo: Dave Coughlan, Johannesburg, RSA.

The second Bull moved further to our right and continued to do so, leaving us a good gap to take towards the airstrip. With adrenaline levels still high, we had moved off only about 100m or so further before being faced with a further two Bulls emerging from the Fever Berries to our front.



The new pair of Bulls approach, forcing us to ground again!! Photo: Dave Coughlan, Johannesburg, RSA

Then branches broke to our right and left!! More Bulls coming through towards us! We had no choice but to drop our packs again and wait it out. As we watched all this unfold around us, the nearest Bull, about 20 metres away, spied a particularly good looking morsel on an acacia that had previously been pushed over and with a crash of splintering wood, he pushed himself right through the dead branches to reach the green shoots!!

Branches again broke to our left and 3 bulls appeared very close, 10-15 metres away, feeding as they went. I quietly whispered for those of the Group nearest to me to sit as still as possible as we were closest to the new arrivals. I quickly did a count and including the initial two, we had nine Bulls around us, some in very close proximity. The hope was that they would walk through without us disturbing them but with the young bulls now very close they finally picked up our wind, one youngster panicking, moving off tail straight out and at some speed. This set the rest off and very quickly the Bulls had vanished back towards the Airstrip, allowing us a now clear passage through to our pick-up point.

An amazing experience for the Group right at the end of the Trail!!

Pafuri Walking Trail: Trails Camp Antics

The Pafuri Walking Trail Trails Camp certainly provided an ideal platform for our walks during this past year. However, on many an afternoon there was little need to actually leave camp as the big game came to us!!

Large Elephant breeding herds were frequent visitors, surrounding the camp and feeding off the many favoured Large Fever Berries after having watered in the nearby Luvuvhu River.



The breeding herds always respected the Camp boundaries and we have been privileged with their tolerance of us in the Camp.

Photo: David Lynn Durban, South Africa

The Elephant Bulls also found their way into or nearby the camp!!

Some perhaps just came to visit!!.....



Photo:

Chanan Weiss

*Cape Town,
RSA.*



Others just invited themselves!!

Mmmm..!! He is rather big! Perhaps we'll let him stay?

Photo:

Gunther Beier, Bremen, Germany

The camp has also been visited throughout the year by resident Dagga Boys who have also respected the Camp's perimeters, happily grazing on the verges. We have, however, paid them the respect they deserve and kept wary eyes on these cranky old men.

Dagga Boy on the Camp perimeter!

Photo: Shangani Trails

Looking to 2015

With December temperatures now consistently nudging into the late thirties and forties degrees Celsius, the first light rains have fallen in the Makuleke but the Concession remains in that mid-summer expectant limbo awaiting the onset of the summer rains in earnest!



We have already welcomed the drop of the new Impala lambs of the season, their nurseries growing in size on a daily basis while, as expected, the large herds of Buffalo we have been encountering in the Rhino Boma and Hutwini areas are now once again firmly ensconced in the Limpopo River flood plains taking advantage of the new flush of grass after the first rains. The shrill call of

the Woodland Kingfisher is also reverberating around the Concession, leaving us in no doubt that all the avian migrants have indeed returned for the summer!

With the imminent onset of the rains, we will also soon be saying farewell to a large portion of our Elephant population as they head south on their annual pilgrimage to where the rains have already started falling. We look forward to welcoming back these gentle Giants, who have given us so much pleasure on our Trails this year, in and around February next year!

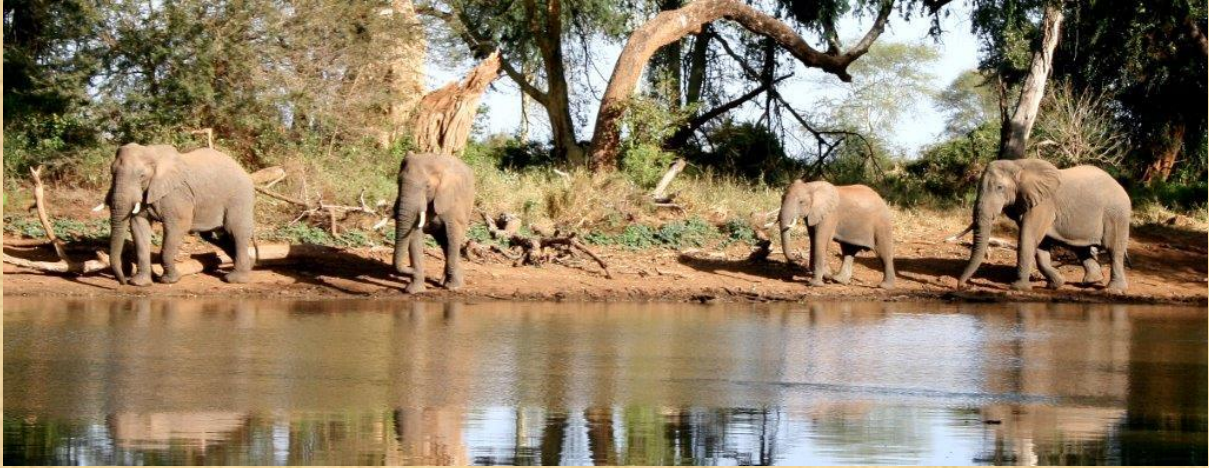


The small things count as well. Always good to see! Dwarf Mongoose, Makuleke Concession.

We have also been blessed with the return of the Pel's Fishing Owls around the Pafuri Bridge area, frequent sightings have been made of this rare and elusive Owl over the last two months and trust that the current fishing perches will remain favoured ones for the coming year.

All the usual Trails will be on offer in 2015, the Limpopo Trail out of The Outpost Lodge, the Pafuri Walking Trail from the same Trails Camp on the Luvuvhu River and the Backpacking Trail, which was the subject of this newsletter's featured walk. The Backpacking Trails have already seen a great deal of interest for next year!

Work has also started on re-building the 2013 flood ravaged Pafuri Camp, so we look forward to also using the new lodge as another base for our trails some time in 2015! Watch this space for details and updates on progress!



It hardly gets better than this on foot!! Elephant Bulls coming down to water at Nwambe Pan, Makuleke Concession. Photo: Jeremy Schreiner, Cape Town, RSA

The Makuleke Concession is poised to welcome 2015 and will no doubt provide all of us, who are indeed privileged to walk in this wild splendour, with a magical new Trails season that will no doubt bring enjoyment and wonder to all. So why not join us.....on foot with....

.....Shangani Trails!!

We wish all our Guests, past, present and future, a truly blessed Christmas and peaceful New Year!!

See you in the Makuleke in 2015!!



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