



# TIMBAVATI

PRIVATE NATURE RESERVE

Newsletter August 2013

Dear Bush-lovers

I got some very good feedback on the March newsletter – thank you to those who took the time and trouble to email me.

This issue has some exciting news in it – a competition with some outstanding prizes for the best photograph and best sighting submitted by the landowners, guests, lodges, staff etc.

Thanks to Graeme Naylor, Bruce Jenkins and others for their contributions to this issue.

There's an interesting interview with the head of our field rangers – Anton Mzimba. He's a very impressive man and a good person to have on our side.

Also of interest is an interview with our version of Pravin Gordhan – Dennis Rutter, although Dennis is better looking than Pravin!

I don't think that there's an animal that comes close to the elephant for intelligence. They really are sentient beings, and I had an experience of this in April. There's also a sighting of lions and elephants by Dennis Rutter that demonstrates their intelligence. It raises the question, for me at any rate, whether we should be hunting these astonishing animals? Before you all reach for your elephant guns and take aim at me, read the articles. I'd be interested to hear what you think.

Please note that the opinions expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the TPNR, unless stated so.

Finally, thanks to my son Dan for helping me to put the newsletter together and for his inputs.

You can phone me on 079 496 9614 or email me at [avoca@netactive.co.za](mailto:avoca@netactive.co.za) - don't worry if you can't write the story yourself, I'll gladly help you.

Should you wish to comment please contact me at [avoca@netactive.co.za](mailto:avoca@netactive.co.za) or on 079 496 9614.

Cheers

Willie

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## Anton Mzimba

### *The man who would like to be a tree*

If I was a poacher on the run, the last person I'd want on my trail is Anton Mzimba. If he was fairly close behind you he'd get you, guaranteed. In fact even if he wasn't that close he'd probably get you! I spent a fascinating few hours with Anton at Chimanimani in May. It was May 1st - labour day - proof that when it comes to work or related matters, he's a fanatic with an impeccable work ethic. In case you don't know, Anton heads up the Field Rangers in the TPNR. His official designation Chief Security Officer Field Rangers. And let me tell you here are the eyes and ears (and a healthy amount of brains) of the reserve.



Anton is a contemplative man, no shooting from the hip, he gives every question I ask him a lot of thought before responding. And every answer is measured and considered and makes absolute sense. He's confident without being arrogant.

Anton joined the Timbavati way back in 1997. Before that he worked as a dagga worker in the construction industry. They were doing a job at Chimanimani when the then warden Brian Harris spotted him and offered him a job as a handyman. Well spotted Brian!

In 1998 Brian encouraged him to apply for a position as a Field Ranger. "There were 108 candidates," says Anton, "and part of the selection process was a run from Kapama to Chimanimani, I came fifth!" Anton was one of the 24 accepted.

He remembers the training and how tough it was. Out in the bush for 6 days at a time they covered big distances with little water.

Other exercises involved lugging an 85 litre water drum with two others whilst toting a 35 kg backpack. Some routines involved days without water.

In 1998 he completed a 6 week course at the Southern African Wildlife College. Under the watchful eyes of his mentors - Reuben de Kok, Brian Harris and Martin Mthembu, he did a course in bushcraft.

By 2002 he was assisting Brian as a trainer. That's when he decided to broaden his knowledge and interests. He started reading avidly about birds, reptiles, trees, ecology and other aspects of conservation.

When Scott Ronaldson took over as Warden, he confirmed Anton's potential and got him to do a Fegasa level 1 over 3 weeks. Of the 6 participants, 2 failed - Anton got 77%!

In 2007 he completed a one year course in Natural Resource Management at the SAWLC. The pass rate was 50%, Anton got 84%! He tells me, with justifiable pride, that he was up against educated people, and beat them. By now he was fully qualified.

He was offered the post of Corporal Instructor, responsible for re-training Field Rangers. This involved checking discipline, identifying talent and doing staff assessments. In 2008 he was promoted to the position of Security Officer Field Rangers.

Currently he manages the entire field force of 16 people. Basically they need to ensure that the entire reserve is secure. Often this entails going beyond the reserve's borders. Gathering intelligence.

Daily, even public holidays, they're busy checking the boundaries for intruders. Most are armed, all have 2-way radios. On the rare occasion that intruders cross into the reserve, they're invariably caught. Anton tells me that their patrol times are irregular, there's no predictability. "It's a never ending process," he tells me, "even when I take off my uniform, I'm still working!"

Tracking is a big thing. Particularly tracking humans. He can read things into spoor that you and I just wouldn't see. He can even work out the intruder's thought process from his spoor. Where he stood for a while and what he did while he was standing. He can tell whether the person was carrying anything, like a gun, by the length of the strides and the depth of the tracks. He can see whether you're walking fast or slow or running or jumping. He can tell what you did when you stopped, maybe looking for something hidden beforehand. He can tell by the length of your strides how tall you are and he knows, with amazing accuracy how old or fresh your tracks are.

And the poachers are pretty sly. Some even resort to wearing their shoes backwards to confuse the trackers. And it's when the trackers stop and rest, that's when there's invariably a wealth of information to be harvested. Straightaway he know whether they're armed. Whether any of them are wearing a ring. If any of them are smokers. Maybe they have carelessly tossed an airtime receipt away which tells him they were probably phoning out to arrange to be picked up. Maybe they have left a plastic bag which carried bread, not a Sasko bag, but a thin plastic from a local Spaza shop. Perhaps there's a tin chucked carelessly into the bush with a recognizable Spaza price written on the bottom, not labelled as in a Spar. Sometimes these clues lead them to a local Spaza owner, and often he can describe the intruders! As Anton says, "we're the eyes of the warden in many respects." And the Field Rangers serve many functions. From checking camps to participating in veld burning, professional hunts, game capturing, reporting disease outbreaks, recording the condition of game and the veld, checking the fence lines the list is endless.

The Field Rangers know the bush extremely well and they're keen observers. Anton is proud of them and rightly so. "They're good," he says, "and I love motivating them. I can safely say that they love what they're doing." Heading up the Field Rangers is a multi-faceted job. There's lots of

planning involved. He has to prepare budgets which are presented to the warden. Requirements need to be worked out including materiel - food, uniforms,ammunition. Training is a big part. Keeping of accurate records of things like overtime; checking that claims are valid. Everything is meticulously written down and re-checked.

I ask him whether he has had any close shaves. Being a naturally modest man he is reluctant to tell, but eventually I squeeze some stories out of him. He tells me he was on patrol with two other rangers on their bicycles down the fence line. They came across a buffalo lying in a pool just off the road. His one colleague threw a pebble at the buffalo to see if it was ok. As they walked on the buffalo suddenly got up and charged. To distract the animal Anton whistled and they held their bikes out to ward the buffalo off. This happened twice. They could see that the buffalo was badly wounded in one of its back legs. Each time the buffalo charged Anton whistled and they held their bikes out to form some kind of a defense. Afterwards Anton tells me they were very quiet, for quite a long time. On another occasion he went with Scott Ronaldson and Gideon Mzimba in response to a request from one of the lodges that an elephant was causing problems in the camp. Together with the lodge manager they approached the elephant which was in the process of destroying a thatched roof. Anton was holding the gun which was loaded with rubber bullets. Ronaldson clapped his hands to try and shoo the animal off. But the elephant responded by charging. It skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust a few meters from them. For what seemed like an age the elephant stood, towering over them, then slowly it backed off! Phew!

Anton thinks that the Reserve's outreach programme is excellent. "It's a good investment with the neighboring communities,"he says,"it keeps our name clean and clear."

He loves the bush," I love the quietness, I'm a Christian, the bush shows me the power of God."

He says of the Field Rangers that those who don't love the bush, and see it as just another job, don't last long. They normally resign after a short while.

Anton loves trees, " If I look at a tree, I see perseverance, humility. Trees don't run away from anything; they face storms, hail, wind, fire, wind. They're steadfast." His favorite tree is the baobab.

Anton pauses, then says, "in fact I would like to be a tree!"

For him his job is a never ending source of learning. He respects everything in the wild. And he admires elephants particularly, " they're such powerful animals, very intelligent and they think almost like humans."

Anton is married to Grace and they have three children. He is very interested in traditional dancing - called Muchongolo - as well as traditional music and Gospel.

I found him to be an incredibly impressive person

I hope he stays with us for a long, long time.

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## *A murderer in our midst*

This strange tree usually begins life as a sticky seed left on a high tree branch by an animal such as a bird, bat or monkey. The young strangler lives on the tree's surface as an epiphyte. As it grows it sends down long roots to the ground below, eventually they take root and begin to take nutrients from the soil.

Gradually the roots wrap around the host tree, widen, and slowly form a lattice-work that surrounds the host's trunk.



The fig's crown grows foliage which soon overshadows the host.

Eventually the host tree dies, leaving the fig with a hollow trunk.

Ironically, this agent of death provides an important niche and food source for many species. The hollow trunk serves as a home for many invertebrates, rodents, bats, reptiles, amphibians and birds. Many

species are also attracted to the strangler fig because of its fruit.

There are some 900 species of ficus distributed around the world.

Amazingly the reproduction of this tree is limited by a mutual evolutionary pollination relationship with the gall wasp.

The fruits, figs, grow in clusters, each fig has a tiny hole, an entrance just large enough for the female wasp, full of eggs, to enter. As she squeezes through the entrance, she loses both her wings and is unable to leave after entering. She deposits the pollen she has carried and lays her eggs in the stigma of the flowers within the fig seed. Then she dies, and the hole in the fig wall closes. After a few days the young male wasps – which develop faster than the females – hatch and chew open the eggs containing the females and mate with them. The males then chew a hole in the wall of the fig fruit and die. On the way out, the winged females are coated with pollen. The female wasps, now full of eggs, can only make one flight with their delicate wings. In that one flight, the female must not only find the right species of fig, but one in the right stage of development. If she fails, she will not have the strength to make another flight. If she happens upon the correct species with the right characteristics, she will reenact the process of her mother, ensuring another generation of wasps, and another generation of ficus.

Who says we don't live in the age of miracles?

Incidentally in South America the strangler fig is known as matapalo – “killer tree”

I have only come across one of these trees in the area I traverse in the Timbavati, it would be interesting to find out whether and where others exist, so please if you have any on your farms take a pic and send it to me.



**Ficus stuhlmannii**

## Cheetahs 1, Ratels 1

A few weeks back I was removing some nasty sekelbos branches from the track, left there by elephants, when something caught my eye about 150m ahead of me.

I got my binoculars out and saw that it was 2 very irate ratels.

Next thing an immature cheetah appeared and moved menacingly towards the two ratels. They reacted to this threat

by scurrying down the track in my direction followed by the cheetah.



After a few metres the ratels suddenly turned and rushed at the cheetah which then made off with some speed.

Then the cheetah stopped and chased the ratels... and so it went on...first the cheetah then the ratels. By now they were all much closer to me, I could hear the ratels growling and making their

characteristic churring sound.

At about 20m from me the ratels suddenly became aware of my presence and shot off into the bush, closely followed by the young cheetah.

But obviously the cheetah had called for reinforcements because

suddenly an adult female cheetah appeared and loped off after the warring parties.



**Feline caterpillars? (courtesy D Rutter)**



## The Timbavati's answer to Pravin Gordhan

One of the things I like about Dennis is that you can't see his camp when you drive past it. I hate camps which are OTT and not in sync with the bush.

But there's a lot more to Dennis than an invisible



camp.

He's certainly one of the veterans of the reserve. He bought in 1984. At first, he tells me, it was mainly as an investment but in time he realized that the real investment had nothing to do with money but rather in feeding ones soul.

In those early days there were virtually none of the big 5 around. And the veld was far more open. "There were lots of wildebeest and zebra," he tells me, "it was only after a few years that I came across signs of elephants."

Funny how things stick in one's mind, Dennis remembers one year when there was an absolute plague of veld rats, they were everywhere, and as a consequence there were lots of owls. He also remembers a plague of tiny black stink bugs and another year a plague of rose beetles!

But Dennis' real claim to fame in the game viewing dept has to be that he has seen a pangolin three times in the Timbavati! And he has also seen an

aardvark. I bet you no one else has equalled this in the reserve.

Dennis loves lions! Elephants cause too much damage particularly to big trees but lions are so majestic. The males in particular, so proud and regal.

Speaking of trees, he has a favourite, the maroela, "such a beautiful shady tree."

Surprisingly he has never eaten the fruit.

In 2004 Poon Liebenberg, who was in charge of the reserve's finances, resigned from the Exco and Dennis was co-opted on. And he's been there ever since.

He puts in lots of hours every month keeping an eagle eye on actuals vs budget with Jacques.

Dennis tells me he doesn't make arbitrary decisions; the budget is prepared by Jacques and his team. Various depts prepare their budgets which are submitted to Jacques. After that Jacques and Dennis sit together and analyse the budget. Every item is discussed from fencing to wages. The reviewed budget is then presented to the Exco by Jacques and Dennis and a debate invariably ensues. He remembers at one stage that the TPNR were not paying market related wages to the Field Staff. What was happening was that the TPNR were training Field Rangers who then migrated to the KNP – this was highlighted in an Exco debate. Now Dennis makes sure that we are abreast or ahead of our neighbours in terms of financial structures. Once Exco approve the budget the next step is that it is circulated and presented to the members at the AGM. So there is ample time for the members to react before final approval. There are a myriad of things to do – internal financial controls, assets that need to be adequately insured, guaranteeing that excess funds are profitably invested – he tells me that he

recently got Investec in to make a presentation in this regard.

Plus he just about repeats the tasks in his dealings with the Foundation of which he is a trustee. Monitoring income and expenditure, preparing budgets, seeing that monies get the best return, supplying detailed reporting to various donors like Deutsche Bank and the National Lottery. He is also vitally involved with fundraising and marketing the Foundation.

We talk a bit about life on the Exco. "People may not realize how much time Exco members, particularly the chairman, put in every month," he says, "It's hard work, but I enjoy every minute of it."

He feels there are misconceptions about the Exco, particularly accusations around the body being autocratic, which he vehemently rejects.

I question him about hunting and whether the hunting of iconic species is justifiable? He feels that the species selection process is scientific and rigidly applied and totally justified. "The Timbavati forms an important buffer zone role to the KNP," he says, "this is in line with the Government's policy on conservation, tourism and employment."

I ask him what he likes best about the Timbavati?

He responds, "I love the peace and quiet, it's like heaven to me. So natural, as God created it."



Z Hugo

## A really amazing sighting

A few months ago I came across the remains of a large animal out in the bush. It looked like either a rhino or an elephant, but it was difficult to tell as a lot of the bones were missing.

Two days later I was chugging along through the bush when I came across a herd of 15 elephants. They were moving at quite a pace, no feeding, and in a determined way. I thought they were making for a nearby dam, so I fell in behind them and followed them as they headed in the water's direction.

But just before the dam they veered off in a different direction.

And then I had this insane thought; they were going to visit the remains that I had seen two days back.

I made a wide detour around the elephants and headed off to the carcass which was about



2kms away.

When I got there I positioned myself and waited. It was about 5:30pm on a heavily overcast afternoon and eerily quiet.

After 40 minutes I thought maybe I'd read too many fairy stories and was just getting ready to move off when I heard the unmistakable rumble of an elephant.

Next thing the matriarch with her small calf appeared and moved towards the carcass - the hair stood up on the back of my neck.

Silently the whole group moved into the flattened area where the remains lay.

They gathered around and either touched or smelled the ribs and part of the backbone. They took absolutely no notice of me, I must have been 35m from them.

They stood there for just over 20 minutes, some were standing in the background while others gathered around the remains. None of them fed. Suddenly, and without a sound, the whole herd moved off.

I sat there stunned. I checked my camera, yes, there were the pictures, I hadn't been dreaming. There were the pics.

Five minutes later the elephants returned. Once again in absolute silence.

The same routine of touching and smelling the bones. This time they only stayed for about 10 minutes and the matriarch and her small calf came to investigate me. Strangely I didn't feel scared, they weren't hostile. For a minute or two they stood there checking me out and then returned to the remains.

Afterwards I sat and thought about what I had just seen. I must say I felt humbled.

The wind was not blowing from the carcass towards the elephants. They weren't investigating a scent. So they knew exactly where they were going. I have no doubt that there was some connection between the dead elephant and the herd. I have no doubt that this was visiting a fallen comrade or relative. I think it was a demonstration of how intelligent these animals are and it certainly showed, for me, that they have emotions. The way they touched those bones was so gentle.

I must say I battle to understand how anyone can shoot animals like these.



## *Intelligent babblers*

A few months ago I was sitting in my lounge at camp when four arrow marked babblers landed on the window sill and immediately crouched down. Strangely they were silent. Next thing a shikra swooped past them and landed on a pole nearby.

The babblers continued sitting crouched low until eventually the shikra moved off.

In complete silence the babblers then flew round the side of the house onto the stoep.

The shikra reappeared but the babblers hid underneath a chair and kept still. The shikra was now perched on a knobthorn and every now and then the babblers would appear to check him out and then go back under the chair. Eventually the shikra flew off.

It was a strategy that was effective and I thought pretty clever.

I remember reading about babblers in Israel – Arabian babblers – and how sophisticated their social structure is.

I think our babblers are also co-operative breeders and that the whole flock helps in the raising of the young.

Have any of you ever seen this?

# Lions vs. elephants

by Dennis Rutter

On 9th July at about 9 30 Jean and I, together with four friends, were watching and photographing a pride of 11 lions, including two white, in an open area on the Naylor farm. A herd of some twenty five elephants approached and were slowly moving in a direction which would bypass the lions by approximately 60 metres. There were a number of young, including a very small one and suddenly one or more of the adults either noticed or picked up the scent of the lions. The entire herd immediately stopped dead in their tracks and then two large cows raised their trunks to maximum height, as if to determine exactly where the threat was. The two then moved slowly towards the lions in a threatening manner, while the rest of the adults immediately herded all the young into an extremely tight group, completely surrounding them. Only when the lions moved away from the two approaching elephants did the adults protecting the young leave their posts and the herd then casually moved on as though nothing had happened. What was very noticeable was how the entire herd initially froze as one.





The cows form a protective ring around the babies



Z Hugo

## Creatures of the night

In most bird guides the call of the bronze winged courser is described as ji-ku-it! But if you've heard the call then you rapidly reach the conclusion that whoever came up with this pathetic phonetic descriptor was either over - imbibing at the time or smoking the weed.

I find bronze winged coursers fascinating birds. They have a very cross look to them and although they're supposed to be nocturnal, I reckon 80% of the birds I've seen have been during the day

I spent years of my life trying to find a bronze winged courser and it was only after I became a landowner in the TPNR that I saw one.

Now I see them fairly regularly and mainly in the winter months and early spring, not sure whether they nest in our neck of the woods?

In fact there's very little information about these birds.

Evidently nesting takes place before the rains – Sep to Oct. Eggs are laid on the ground, in a shallow scrape, 2 to 3 are laid, cream to buff in colour with big blotches of black or dark brown.

If any of you know anything about these rather strange birds please tell us.



# Win one of these fabulous prizes

*We're making it worth your while to send us your photos and sightings.*

Best sighting:

A magnificent men's or ladies Rotary watch worth R10 000 plus 1 night for 2 people at the luxurious Motswari lodge Plus an afternoon's game drive and dinner for 2 at the 5 star King's Camp!

Best photograph:

A large framed art print of the winning pic by one of South Africa's top art printmakers Andreas Kahlau plus 2 nights at the luxurious TandaTula Game Lodge for 2 people.

Wow, I think these prizes are something else.

All you have to do, in order to qualify, is to send me any of your pics of fauna and flora taken in the Timbavati that you think are special. Every time the newsletter goes out I will display the submissions.

Just before the AGM next year, 2014, the judging panel will decide on the winner who will be announced at the AGM.

The competition is open to all owners, managers, their friends and families, lodges, lodge staff, their guests, Timbavati staff and their friends and families BUT NOT TO professional photographers.

The sightings category is open to all of the above, no restrictions on who may enter – if you have pics to support your sighting that will be great. Anything that you think may be of interest to the readers.

You can enter your photos in both categories but if you enter the sightings category you need to describe what you saw. Please don't worry whether you can write well, I will edit all submissions if necessary.

There are some submissions in this edition of the newsletter, so you can gauge roughly how you might stack up in the future.

A big thank you to Graeme Naylor for donating the watches, to Bruce Jenkins for organizing the prizes donated by the lodges and to Nina Scott at TandaTula, Dave at Motswari and Warren Moore at Kings camp for putting up the Lodges' donation.

So please, let's have those entries.



# Brewing at the picnic table

by Bruce Jenkins

We were all standing around the table when my wife, Glen, spotted the leopard walking down the road near where we had stopped. He crouched down once he saw us but soon relaxed when we hopped back onto the vehicle.



# Book review

## Serengeti Story

Anthony Sinclair is a scientist who has worked in the Serengeti since 1965. Amongst other things he has recorded the movement and behaviour of a range of animals – from the aardvark to the zebra. But he has really focused on the wildebeest whose migration is central to the Serengeti's ecosystem. The book tells a fascinating story about some of his remarkable scientific discoveries. An example – to ensure the best chances for survival about 90% of the wildebeest give birth within a one month period and obviously need to conceive within a similarly short space of time. Sinclair then discovers that the wildebeests' conception period is linked to the lunar cycle; it shifts back ten days each year for three years and then leaps forward by a month.

Despite numerous problems and challenges, Sinclair remains optimistic about the reserve.

Central to the book is the question: how can man ensure that such a place continues to exist? He is rightly full of praise for Tanzania, which has dedicated 14% of its land to national parks and reserves. But this amazingly diverse ecosystem is forever on the tipping point of irreversible decay. The latest is an insane project to build a tarmac road across the north of the park, a plan that risks leading to increased poaching of animals and more human settlement and habitat loss within the park and a serious disruption to the annual mass migration.

For Sinclair the main lesson to be drawn from his years in the Serengeti is that "nothing is ever secure against human greed." The price of this sanctuary for the soul, as it is for liberty and peace, seems to eternal vigilance – by men like Anthony Sinclair and the Serengeti's wardens.



## Eat your heart out Cyril

Last year the media carried a story about the deputy-president of the ANC, Cyril Ramaphosa, who allegedly paid R20 000 000.00 for a buffalo cow with incredibly long horns.

I came across this cow with unbelievably long horns in the Timbavati, pity we couldn't have got in first with Cyril and offered it to him for R10 000 000! A real bargain I would think.



## Speckled buffalo

I find buffaloes fascinating animals. I love stopping and just watching a herd as they go about their business. If you look at them carefully, they're all different and have varied expressions – ranging from bovine and stupid to cunning and mean. From time to time I come across some that seem to have pigmentation problems. This cow, which at first I thought was speckled with mud, had speckles all over her body. There's another cow that I often see who has a very speckly face. Strangely it only seems as if the cows have this pigmentation problem. Any ideas as to what causes this?



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## Yellow-billed oxpeckers

I came across a big buffalo herd recently and was pleased to note at least 6 yellow-billed oxpeckers in attendance. Has anyone recorded this species nesting in the Timbavati? That would be exciting news!



Some pictures - thanks to Ziggi Hugo

