

African WILDLIFE & ENVIRONMENT

ISSUE 66 (2017)

Shifting estuaries
at 'Plett'

There is a
mamba
in my house!

THE MAGAZINE OF THE WILDLIFE AND
ENVIRONMENT SOCIETY OF SOUTH AFRICA



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Published by:



Consulting Editor
John Ledger

Production Manager
John Wesson
jwesson@wessanorth.co.za

Design & Layout
Marlene McKay

editor@wessa.co.za
Tel +27 31 201 3126
www.wessa.org.za



Cover photo: Woodland Kingfishers © John Wesson

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grabbed the snake just down from the head, with my tongs. I try to do this slowly too, to try and not panic the mamba. I pulled it gently towards me, it wasn't struggling. Then I grabbed the head with my hand, and it exploded into action! It started trying to pull out of my grip, all while wrapping its body around me in aid of doing so. But I had a good grip on it. I pulled it out, and quickly unwrapped the body using my other arm. You don't want that body wrapped around you, especially if that head slips out of your grip. The old couple were mortified at the size of this beast! The local policeman, who was also called to help, was equally shocked. I placed it into this tiny box, and released the head in a split second. Job done!

Please note

All the mambas I catch go back to the wild (I do not sell any snakes). Unlike the other snakes I catch and release though, I microchip Black Mambas. I use the same sort of microchip that's used on dogs and cats, and so this gives the mamba its own ID number. If re-captured, we can see how far that mamba has moved from its release site, and how much it has grown. I'm also taking DNA samples for scientific research. We measure, weigh and sex each mamba. The average length of the mambas we catch is 2,2m-2,6m. They are always released in the closest conservation area as to where they were caught. Remember, we need them to return to the bush, to continue their job in nature!



Treading very softly and hunched over we moved slowly forward acutely aware of the wind direction as we approached the big elephant bull who had pushed over a Knobthorn tree and was feeding on the exposed roots. Breaking off meter long sections he crunched them with his flat molars as he rolled the sections through his mouth and discarded them like chewed up sections of sugar cane. The musky, acrid smell of the elephant bull that was heavily in musth and with us approaching downwind made the air feel thick and was causing us to gag as we got nearer.

Nick Evans

KwaZulu-Natal Amphibian and Reptile Conservation
www.kznamphibianreptileconservation.com

Game ranger stories: ELEPHANTS, RHINOS AND OTHER BIG CREATURES

Bryan Havemann



This bull had a VHF collar on, and with Ross English we had triangulated his position and walked in to see what he was feeding on. Dr Anthony Hall-Martin had given us strict instructions that we needed to get a good visual of this elephant as he wanted to know when he would be coming into musth. This is when their testosterone levels rise and they link up with breeding herds to vie with the other bulls in the area for a chance to mate with the cows that are coming into oestrous.

By this stage the bleeping from the receiver was so loud due the close proximity of the elephant that we



Photograph: John Wesson

switched it off. As we rounded a thick stand of Tamboti trees below a small rocky outcrop, the magnificent bull sprang into view and we saw that his temporal glands were streaming and his human leg-sized penis was hanging out dribbling urine. This was the confirmation that we needed that he was definitely in musth and that he must be looking for a breeding herd while in this state. Little did we know we were about to find out just how close his girlfriends were...

While we watched the large elephant bull there was suddenly a shrill trumpet from an elephant downwind of our position. There was an elephant breeding herd that had scented us and were milling round with their trunks held high, trying to find the source of the scent. The elephant bull had spun round and was now standing with his head held high looking down his trunk and staring in our direction. We felt very vulnerable with a testosterone filled, six ton elephant bull with his collar hanging like some rapper necklace under his neck, staring at the stand of trees where we were hiding.

Suddenly we heard a cacophony of sound and

breaking branches as the elephant breeding herd trumpeted and came running in our direction. The big bull elephant also trumpeted and shuffled forward towards our position. Talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place, we felt like the piggy in the middle! We stayed low as the big bull skidded to a halt in front of us, showering us in dust as we crouched behind the trees. Behind the small rocky outcrop we could hear the breeding herd trumpeting and milling round trying to locate our position. The bull ran round and joined the breeding herd and they trumpeted and growled their displeasure, deciding

on how they would be turning us into human pizzas or flattening us into human pancakes. We had no intention of disrupting this bull's romantic notions with the elephant cows, so while they were milling round and discussing tactics we headed off in the opposite direction, running in a dry river bed angling away from them. Eventually when we were at a safe enough distance, we circled round to where we had left the vehicle.

Strange how that thin bit of metal that surrounds one makes one feel safe when in reality you are like sardines in a can, just

waiting to be opened up and consumed. We drove with limited bravado towards the spot where we had left the elephants and they came running over the road with the big bull in tow. It was a stark reminder that just minutes before our lives were in mortal danger and now in the safety of our vehicle we could enjoy this beautiful sight of the large irate elephant breeding herd crossing the road with many small calves underfoot. At least we could give feedback to Anthony that not only was the big bull in musth, but that he had joined a large breeding herd where he would be passing on his genes.

Many months later I was with Anthony when he darted this particular elephant to take off the old collar and fit a new one. One is always in awe of the size of such a big bull and while the elephant was under the sedation we took all of the measurements, including the tusks and extracted blood for research and dataset requirements. The conservation assistant helping Anthony that day was Ben de Klerk and Anthony's good friend Clive Walker was also present. Herman Potgieter, a world-class aviation and wildlife



photographer, was also there taking photos of the operation.

It was tragic that a decade later Herman died in an aircraft crash in Kenya, with other South Africans. Ben de Klerk also died tragically years later and Anthony bravely fought cancer for many years before he too passed away, leaving a big void in biodiversity conservation circles. It was a magnificent sight watching this massive elephant getting to his feet and moving off confidently with his new collar with us watching him strutting his stuff, until the bush swallowed him up and he disappeared as if by magic.

Weeks later I was summoned to Anthony's office, where he asked me if I would like to accompany him in the helicopter as an observer while he did the black rhino survey in the southern part of the Kruger National Park. Anthony would get the helicopter pilot to fly in low once the black rhino had been spotted, and take photographs of them. This was before the digital photographic revolution, so it was all done on a film camera capturing the images on 35 mm slide film. I was ecstatic to be invited, and it transpired that the other potential passengers had been arguing about who was going to fly with Anthony, and this was why he came straight to me and asked me to fly instead.

It was totally exhilarating flying with the doors off, and skimming across the bush landscape with our eyes peeled for any rhino sightings. The first black rhino seen was running like a steam train, and we swooped in low from behind and Anthony lent out and took photos of the animal. The raw power of this big black rhino bull running through the bush with his head held high was an incredible sight which has stayed with me forever. We were fortunate to be able to see many more black rhino that we could photograph.

Suddenly the pilot swooped down and hovered above a big white rhino bull that was totally oblivious to our presence. This bull was throwing around a six meter creosote telephone pole that had fallen down. The area was totally bare of vegetation and grass, so he must have been busy for a long time. The bull would put his long anterior horn under the pole and throw it up in the air and then charge into it as it landed, knocking it flying. We were enthralled as we watched this spectacle unfold below us. The rhino remained unperturbed and we eventually left it with its new found plaything. I was very glad that I was not that creosote pole! In later years there were many times that I saw where white rhino had uprooted creosote poles, they seemed to not like the smell at all and took strong exception to them being in their territories.

Being based in Skukuza Rest Camp for my first year, we as staff members were allowed to travel on the northern bank of the Sabie River to different fishing spots along the river. These were areas that were at strategic spots where the tourist road on the southern bank would not be close to the river,

so that you would not be visible to the normal tourists if you were fishing. I had agreed to meet my colleague at one of the spots and had left Skukuza early to take a slow drive along the river, looking for animals and doing some birding. I rounded a corner and my heart sank. The elephants had pushed what appeared to be a very large tree across the road. As I drew nearer I suddenly realised that the 'tree' was in motion. Moving slowly across the road was the biggest Southern African Rock Python I had ever seen in my life! I jumped out of the car and stood next to the snake that was still just moving in a straight line almost like it was walking, with the muscles moving the ribs forward. I made a mental note of where the head and tail was and was able to get an accurate idea of its length. The snake was 5.7 meters long and must have weighed more than a fully grown man. It was massive with the thickest part being the diameter of a medium sized man's waist.

Unfortunately, this was before cell phones, and I did not have a camera with me. I wanted to try keeping the snake there until the others joined me so that I could show them. As the tail was disappearing into the bush I grabbed it and lifted it up to my chest with both hands. What happened next caught me totally by surprise as the docile slow moving giant spun round in an instant and struck at me with such speed, that it was only the fact that I was able to parry the strike with its own tail and body that prevented me from getting a full bite. The power of the snake defied imagination and I quickly realised that trying to subdue such a big snake by myself was just asking for trouble. It had expelled a hiss that was so loud it was almost as if an inflatable boat had been punctured!

I grudgingly let it go, and now it sped off with the massive coils pushing it, formed in the typical s-shape, flattening small bushes and disappearing into the undergrowth and then into the Sabie River itself. Months later, while flying the Sabie River counting hippo, we saw what we thought was a hippo lying sunning itself on a sandbank next to the river. On closer inspection it turned out to be a monster python lying curled up. With the disturbance it uncoiled and disappeared into the water. This was not far from where I had first seen the big python, so I am convinced it was the same snake. What a privilege to experience such a magnificent reptile at the pinnacle of its life in a natural environment!

Africa is a continent of surprises and it is amazing to be able to witness such unusual or unexpected behaviour from its wildlife. One quickly learns to have the right respect for Africa's wildlife; otherwise you might end up on the menu yourself and become an unexpected part of the natural food chain.

Bryan Havemann
General Manager Timbavati Private Nature Reserve
bryan.havemann@gmail.com