

TIMBILA

RHYTHMS OF THE EARTH

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Africa R15
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IT'S LIKE A NEW BEGINNING Journey through South African
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• CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF LOWER ZAMBEZI •
TWO AT THORNYBUSH GAME RESERVE



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unsung hero WALKS WITH RHINOS

He's the longest-serving member of staff at Augrabies Falls National Park and is still enjoying it 27 years on. When he's not doing anti-poaching patrols or fixing roads and fences in the park, Gert Christiaan is with the rhinos. And he knows them better than anyone

Story: Keri Harvey Photos: Les Bush

Gert's a small man. Only in stature, though. The man has guts and nerve; balls of steel, really. Gert Christiaan is the Rhino Man of Augrabies; the genial mascot of the park.

Gert deserves his Rhino Man title. If there were a Victoria Cross for bravery in the bush, Gert would have one. This is one feisty, fearless chap, but with a humility that disarms you – and rhinos, it seems.

Sure, he's been taunted and chased by wild animals with attitude and horns that would kebab you in no time, but he's never been caught. And Gert is scar-free to prove it. This gentle Nama man with wise, wakeful eyes and sun-creased face found us black rhino to photograph. Eight hours in the sun following their footprints. Then he found us two beasts, mother and calf. You don't usually see adult pairs together; black rhino are the solitary type.

liking peace and quiet and miles of space. But Gert knows their ways, he's been at it for a while and now he thinks like *Diceros bicornis* itself. So he finds the rhinos every time – even in the vastness that is Augrabies Falls National Park. Gert just won't take “no” for an answer.

He was dry with thirst when we found him, on a rock under a tree, beady eye on the “black” beasts. Gert had been there ages. He unearthed the rhinos hours before, then just had to wait for us to view his find. Sometimes he admits to a nap on a rock while waiting, when the guests take too long to arrive. On one such day he napped a bit long and the rhinos ambled off. Gert, in true form, nosed them out again, but only just in time – face saved. I guess you know your stuff after 20 years as a game ranger.

Gert started out as a gardener, back in 1971, at Augrabies National Park. It saved him from a lifetime of cotton-picking, although his cotton-picking dad taught him the tricks of the tracking trade. And it's already filtered to the next generation: Gert's son, Jan, is also a tracker at the park – Rhino Man Junior, for now. Taught by the best.

But those cotton-picking days left Gert with the limited use of one arm. He snapped his arm in "the field" and it's never been the same since. Medical attention is still not readily available in this remote corner of our country, and back in Gert's youth there was even less. "That was 1954. I had to wait a helluva long time for a doctor." Gert was eight. Instead of hanging his arm up, Gert hung it down. The blood "dried up" and the arm withered. No problem to Gert, though – it doesn't bother him. The weak arm has been forced to conform for over 40 years, even using a pick and shovel. Gert has no time for apparent disabilities. And when there's a rhino behind you, that arm had better help you run – for your life.



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"Ag, I've been chased up and down so many times I can't even count. You just have to know how to run. Run and climb trees. That's the only way. If you've got a rhino behind you, you'll see. And change direction, but like the wind. 'Cause rhinos only see to about 15 metres." Which is pretty close when there's 1 000 kg of angry horn behind you.

Like the time a rhino took away half the bush Gert was not behind. He was quivering behind the other half. That's how close she shaved past him, "and just carried on going". Gert admits: "I nearly wet my pants that day. There was just a cloud of dust and twigs." Sounds Rhino Dundee style, but I know this man speaks the truth.

Blompot was another story. A rhino with bad attitude and a taste for the chase. She zeroed in on Gert and by the time he saw what was happening, she was right there – next to him. So he used his

good arm on her back as she flew past, and heaved himself onto a rock out of harm's way. Now that's hairy. Gert says: "She just went on straight." On a mission to mutilate.

But Gert loves Shibula. She spent a sabbatical at the Lisbon Zoo, but now she's back home in Africa. Gert used to feed her when she was in her enclosure acclimatising to the park. Eventually she used to smell him out and come to the bakkie to be fed by hand, which is pretty trusting and tame for a hook-lipped browser with a touch of Latin temperament.

It's a different story with Shibula's calf, though. "That calf hates me. It charges me every other day. I have to swing my *kierie* just like I'm directing an orchestra."

Gert says that although rhinos have poor sight, they have excellent smell and hearing. "That's why the wind must blow away from you when you're on a track. If those rhinos smell you coming, you've had it. They're gone, or they just charge if they're in a bad mood." In this arid part of the country there is usually nowhere to hide,

either. You need to be on rocks high enough to be out of reach, or climb a tree to get out of the way. Trouble is, there're only thorn trees.

On one charge, a skinny thorn tree was all Gert could find. There was no way he could have climbed it. Never mind the thorns, it would have snapped for sure. His only option was to stand behind it, still as a statue, then slowly move around the tree as the rhino approached. Gert also threw his *kierie* away from the tree, so the rhino veered off from him and headed for the spot where the stick landed. Close shave again. You need nerves of titanium for this job.

But Gert loves it. "I'll never leave the park. For what? Ja, it's a quiet life, but I will never come right in the city. Here we are family. We play dominoes, laugh and cry. When a new one comes to the park,

we take them in like one of us."

Gert's wife, Fredrika, works in the shop at the park and his six kids, barring Jan, are all over the district. Gert says he's finished fathering kids now and his next thought is retirement. Born in the area, he's not keen to leave, even in his old age. In six or seven years' time he plans to retire to Kakamas nearby. Till then, he's happy where he is.

But Gert has seen tragedy too. Sixteen people have plummeted to their deaths down the Augrabies Falls – and one of Gert's beloved rhinos. He says all the people ignored signs and were where they shouldn't have been. Possibly the rhino too.

That's not the case with Gert. Augrabies Falls National Park is his home and the rhinos are his "children". Gert Christiaan is exactly where he should be. And that's for sure.

Don't you just hate those beautiful wildlife movies? They really do spoil the bush for ordinary mortals. They show amazing kill scenes. They get so close to the animals that we can see the flecks in their eyes. And then, when we get to the game reserve, we want to see this too. But this type of experience seldom comes the way of ordinary people.

Most of the time we have to be content with a lion which is no more than a spot in the distance, or a fleeting glimpse of a leopard's tail as it slips into the bush.

Well, if you want to take it out on anyone, try Kim Wolhuter. He's filmed numerous wildlife documentaries. And he's good at it. Last year, he won South Africa's top wildlife cinematography award, the South African Society of Cinematographers' Visible Spectrum Award for his work on *Beauty and the Beasts*.

The movie is a hauntingly beautiful homage to the leopards of the Mala Mala game reserve, showing aspects of leopard behaviour that had never been seen before, let alone captured on film. And the kill scenes? Well, they're spectacular.

And moving film is not his only area of expertise. This year he won the Agfa Wildlife Photographer of the Year Award, the most prestigious of the wildlife photography accolades. It was for a close-up picture of Scruff, a jackal in the pack of Etosha black-backed jackals he was filming for his latest movie, *Black Jack: High Stakes*.

Kim lives the life many people dream of, spending most of his time in the bush. He has got close enough to wild animals to almost touch them. He has been so near to the events we marvel at on screen that he has almost been a participant.

So what is he all about? And would we really want his life?

Kim is quick to point out that we see the product of a sometimes boring process. "There's a lot of sitting out there doing nothing: driving around looking for animals and following them," he says. Actual action scenes only account for between 5% and 10% of the time spent in the field. And this can be as long as 18 months. "We need to spend time with the animals to habituate them to our presence so that they react normally in all situations. That is important if you want to document their natural behaviour," he explains.

It also means that he, his wife, Annette and their two children, Lindy and Penny, get to live an extraordinary life. He shuns most modern conveniences in the camps he sets up, preferring to live a life as close to the elements as do the animals. In this way, he believes, he can better understand what the animals go through.

While filming the jackals in Etosha it was so hot and dry that even the plastic on the vehicles was shrinking! Of course, when the action does happen, it happens fast and it cannot be reshot. You only have one chance. Everything has to be set up and worked with perfect precision, first time. Says Kim: "You go from totally relaxed to a complete frenzy in seconds."

He likens filming wildlife to hunting. "You have to stalk your prey, close in on it and pounce at the right time. But with filming you have to be a lot more understanding; you have to get that much closer."

Kim comes from a family of wildlife people. His grandfather was the legendary Harry Wolhuter, the first ranger of the Kruger Park. He was appointed ranger in what was then the Sabi Reserve, by the Kruger Park's first park warden, Colonel J Stevenson-Hamilton.

