



PHOTO BY: HEINER STICKANN

KRUGER SAFARI DELUXE

An authentic passenger statement

THE AUTHOR



FELIX PATTON is a rhino ecologist, who writes and broadcasts about the species from Africa and Europe. He is a frequent contributor to SWARA.

For the intrepid adventurer, cruising along a flat tarmac'd main road in a stately SUV may not seem an ideal way to undertake a wildlife safari. In South Africa's massive Kruger National Park (KNP), it is. At around 350kms in length and 60kms on average wide, this Park is just short of 20,000 square kilometres in size – bigger than near neighbour country Swaziland and even

Israel. Put another way, you could put over a hundred Nakuru National Parks into the same area.

Given the size of the Park, several days (in this case six) are needed to get a good idea of its sixteen varying 'ecozones' and the abundant wildlife. Each ecozone has its own combination of geology, land-shape and rainfall giving rise to different patterns of vegetation and mix of animals.

Kruger, as with many other large South African wildlife parks, has an excellent road system made up of a tarmac "backbone" and well graded gravel side roads. A normal sedan car can negotiate these roads but the larger wheeled SUV allows for a higher seat position which is better for seeing the wildlife. Amazingly, many of the animals can be found in the bush on each side of the tarmac road – and sometimes even on it!

Access to the Park is through one of eight gates. The furthest north is Pafuri Gate but some 50 km to the south and west is the more widely used Punda Maria Gate where there is also a rest camp site nearby. The twelve rest camps spread throughout KNP offer similar facilities – usually luxury safari

tents or bungalow accommodation, a swimming pool, laundromat and a shop (gifts, food and drink) and at six of the camps there is also a petrol station. Visitors can self-cater or use the restaurant facilities. There is, however, little privacy as the Park caters for over a million visitors a year and the campsites are often full to capacity.

Given the vastness and diversity of the KNP, it is not surprising that there is a wide variety of wildlife that can be seen including the "big five" – rhino, elephant, buffalo, lion and leopard – and the more easily found giraffe, waterbuck, zebra, kudu, nyala and ever present impala.

The northern area, to the north of the Olifants River, is characterised by Mopane tree shrubveld and savannah which is frequented by a significant number of the over 13,000 elephants that can be found throughout the whole Park. The Luvuvhu Valley is rich in bird life where the crested guinea-fowl and Pel's fishing owl are particular attractions and around the Punda Maria campsite, the rare Sharpe's greysbok may be seen and there is the possibility of a wild dog pack.

Forty kilometres south of Punda Maria and overlooking the Sirheni Dam on a corner of the Mphongolo river, is the Sirheni Bush Camp. Bush camps offer the benefit of being in more isolated locations and accommodate only a small number of people. However they are more expensive and not always, as was this case, value for the extra money.

There were several good sightings of elephants made on the 100 km mix of main and side roads from Sirheni to Mopani Rest Camp via the Shingwedzi Rest Camp with a special group playing in the Grootvlei Dam. The Mopani Rest Camp overlooks the Pioneer Dam and a short drive up the S49 in the late afternoon resulted in a series of exceptional sightings starting with elephants at the Mooiplaas Dam and then a cheetah walking along the road right up to the car and, some 100 metres further on, a group of three sub-adult lions just alongside the road. The camp itself is one of the largest with the high point being its excellent swimming pool.

Between the northern area Mopani camp and the central area Olifants camp is a road running east from the main H1-6 road through the Lebombo Mountains to the border with Mozambique at the Giryondo Border Post. The road goes straight into the Limpopo National Park. Kruger now forms part of the Great Limpopo



PHOTOS BY: FELIX PATTON

February was not the best time to visit Kruger as much of the wildlife was difficult to see.



Elephants are easily found especially at the many dams.

Transfrontier Park - a peace park that links KNP and game parks in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, with fences removed to allow animals to freely roam in much the same way as they would have in earlier times. When completed, the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Park will extend across 35,000 square km, 58% of it South African, 24% Mozambican and 18% Zimbabwean territory.

To the south of the Olifants River, the habitat is characterised by thornveld and this is where most of the wildlife is found. The focal point is the largest rest camp in KNP, Skukuza Camp and the equally popular Lower Sabie rest camp while at the bottom south-west corner is the excellent Berg-en-Dal camp.

Given the pre-eminent rhino population of KNP, it is perhaps a little surprising at how little general information is available about it at the rest camps – apart from Berg-en-Dal, that is, which houses an excellent demonstration area including full size model of a Black rhino. It also presents a most interesting model of the skeleton

SPOTLIGHT

of a rhino and a diagram of its internal organs showing that, while a vegetarian species, it is not a ruminant. Berg-en-Dal has been christened “rhino camp” as its surrounding area is often the best place to find white and even black rhino.

The private road leading to the Biyamiti bush camp some 50 km east of Berg-en-Dal camp was flagged as one of the places to see rhino and so it was. A group of three White rhinos – a male and a female with calf – grazed their way along the roadside both in the late evening and who were entirely unfazed by the close presence of the vehicle. The group was still in the vicinity early the following morning on the drive out of the Park through the Malelane Gate and the end of an interesting if a little disappointing safari.

Between January 16th and 18th, the effect of the tropical depression Dando was felt in the Park with up to 500mm of rain being reported in some areas. Most of the main rivers flooded. At one point the Park was closed, some visitors were trapped in cars while others had to be rescued by helicopter. These were the worst rains and flooding since 2000. Although within a few days the rivers and flood waters had subsided and many roads were drying out, the floods had washed away some roads, had



PHOTOS BY: FELIX PATTON

White rhino mother and calf near to the Biyamiti Bush Camp. Over 11,000 white and 700 black rhinos live in the Park.

damaged bridges and causeways and left debris blocking others. Some campsites and picnic spots were damaged and had to be closed.

But for a chance remark during an email exchange with a native South African, the problems being experienced in the Park would have gone unnoticed as there had been no communication from the unit of SanParks through which all campsite bookings had to be made. On making contact with the unit a few days before departure, it was

clear that some accommodation was no longer available and alternatives had to be hurriedly arranged.

That SanParks left it to the visitor to find out there were problems with their bookings was both surprising and disappointing as one expected them to be highly efficient. And this disappointment was compounded by the poor information on road and bridge closures that were encountered when in the Park. Many gravel roads declared open were not reliable because they would lead nowhere as most of the low water bridges and causeways were inaccessible and it was necessary to back track.

Even in normal years, the summer months are known to be the poorest time to safari in Kruger as the vegetation is at its fullest. After the drenching, the warm sun led to greater than ever growth with 2 metre high grasses lining the roads behind which was dense leafy bush. Wildlife sightings were all but impossible and the safari overall hugely disappointing. So many visitors write glowingly of their experiences in Kruger so it would be unfair to put people off going there. Timing of this visit could not be changed so perhaps the experience will serve to highlight the need to visit at a better time of year. Suffice to say that a return visit is already being planned for September 2013 when it is hoped Kruger National Park will reveal its true wildlife experience. ●



One of the causeways damaged by flooding.

Poaching crisis in Kruger

In 1891, the government of the time acted to protect certain species, including the rhino, from being hunted with the white rhino all but extinct in South Africa. There was less than 50 remaining and mostly in the iUmfolozi Game Reserve in Natal. The last White rhino of the now Kruger National Park (KNP) was recorded in 1910 in the Pafuri area whilst the last Black rhino died in 1936.

As the populations of both White and Black rhinos increased in other parts of South Africa, it was decided to re-introduce them to KNP. Between 1961 and 1974 some 345 White rhinos were brought into the Park and between 1970 and 1990, some 90 Black rhinos were introduced into the southern area around Skukuza and Tshokwane. It is from these humble beginnings that, at the start of 2012, KNP could proudly boast over 11,000 White and 700 Black rhinos. The successful breeding of rhinos has resulted in it being Africa's chief killing ground for poachers. Between the years 2000 and 2011, there have been 1106 rhinos recorded as poached in South Africa of which 566 (51%) were in KNP. By virtue of its higher number and widespread distribution, the White rhino has borne

the brunt of the poaching with 244 of the 252 rhinos poached in KNP in 2011 being White.

Responsibility for much of the rhino killing in the Park has been placed on poachers coming across the border from Mozambique. Back in 1976, the eastern boundary of the Kruger NP with Mozambique was fenced. When the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park was officially declared in 2002, some 20 metres of the fence separating the Kruger National Park (KNP) from the Limpopo National Park (LNP) in Mozambique was ceremoniously cut down. Thereafter more of the 150km was cut down or let to go into disrepair. To try to reduce the impact of the recent incursions by poachers from Mozambique, the South African government requested assistance from the army. In early 2011, 165 troops of the South Africa National Defence Force (SANDF) were stationed in KNP to patrol the border area. This is not an easy task. The border is demarcated by the Lebombo Hills which run the full 350kms and whose tree and bush habitat provides good hiding for the incoming poachers.

To make it more difficult for the poachers to enter KNP from Mozambique, the idea of re-erecting the dividing fence was mooted. However, this would have cost between R200 million and R400 million, plus a maintenance costs of R100 million a year and without any guarantee that it would have been an effective deterrent. The alternative has been to agree to create a buffer zone by including several private Mozambique concessions that form the 220,000 hectare Greater Lebombo Conservancy to become part of a Trans Frontier Conservation Area which is fenced on its eastern side. Good management practice will make the impending poachers task of reaching, particularly south, KNP without being caught that much more difficult. It is in the southern area of the KNP where most of the rhino poaching has occurred.

In February 2012, it was announced that a further 600 troops were to be deployed along its borders to help fight gangs smuggling rhino horns. Four military companies were to be sent to the borders with Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Lesotho. The deployment includes army engineers who are conducting repairs and maintenance on the Zimbabwe-Mozambique border fence. Mozambique and Zimbabwe border KNP directly while Swaziland is just a short distance south. Effective border management is part of the government crime prevention strategy to deal with cross-border crime syndicates and curb poaching.

Whilst the use of the military in what is a domestic situation is a drastic step, many of the modern day poachers are often using combat-style methods and equipment, including night-vision telescopic rifles and even helicopters to do their killing which the normal anti-poaching units set up by the police, the parks authorities and private agencies are not equipped to deal with. Despite all the extra efforts, rhino poaching continues in KNP daily with some 149 individuals killed this year up to the end of June.



RHINO POACHING IN SOUTH AFRICA

Year	Kruger NP	All SA	% Kruger
2000	0	7	0
2001	4	6	67
2002	20	25	80
2003	14	22	64
2004	7	10	70
2005	10	13	77
2006	17	24	71
2007	10	13	77
2008	36	83	43
2009	50	122	41
2010	146	333	44
2011	252	448	56
2012 – to June	149	251	59