



Pictures sent to me by Mark Saunders of Malilangwe Trust – the translocation of Black Rhino from Malilangwe to Chiefs Island, using a Botswana airforce C130.

A great example of cross border efforts in rhino conservation, endorsed by both presidents, and is hopefully a forerunner of future cooperation in rhino conservation across national boundaries

A crate containing a rhino being offloaded from the Botswana Airforce C130

Aerial view of the rhino's new home – the Okavango Delta





A young elephant bull was shot in Mkhosana Township on the instruction of Parks. However, I would like to commend the professional approach taken by Area Manager Edmore Ngosi to a problem animal situation – he tried all possible means to prevent the death of the elephant, but in the end had no option as it was now a danger to human life. This is a refreshing change to just shooting them as we have experienced in the past. This report by Roger Parry of Victoria Falls Wildlife Trust illustrates the efforts taken to chase these elephants out of the township until an unavoidable decision was made :

“As per our discussions, here are the details of the process leading to the shooting of the young bull elephant in Mkusana night before last.

- * I was approached by the Area manager (NPWAZ) about 2 weeks ago to assist with chasing elephant out of the Mkusana suburbs as they had been causing problems with some damage to property over the previous 2 months.
- * I went out on a number of occasions (all time of the night and very early morning) and used the Mhpiripiri Boma (chilli gun) to get the elephant out of that area.
- * There were two young bulls that were causing the most problems and the times I came across them, they showed signs of aggression and attitude.
- * They did however react well to the chilli gun – running out into the bush on the 3 occasions I used it on them.
- * They did however continue to come back.
- * On Wed evening, I received a call from the area manager saying that “ We have a problem” with these two bulls. He had spent 2 hours (himself!) assessing the situation on the ground and speaking to the residence in the area affected. He had made a decision to shoot these problem animals. (note – I was not part of that decision making)

- * He was asking for assistance from the Learner PH's and could I recommend someone who could do the job properly.
- * I felt that he had done everything possible to avoid this final decision. He also faced the fact that these bulls had started knocking down homes and tuckshops to get to food and were therefore a risk to human property and life.
- * The fact that he invited private sector to assist with this difficult situation was refreshing (previous management would never have done this!!) and I therefore support him with this decision however tragic it may be.
- * It is always sad that sometimes we cannot avoid mortality as a mitigation choice in some situations – this (I believe) was one of them.
- * I wish some VF residence would realise the efforts that are being taken to protect these special animals which make VF such a unique place to live. I invite anyone who wants to join me at 2-3am on a cold winter morning and see for themselves some of the problems we are dealing with. - an example of how to handle sensitive issues for the future!

On a lighter note, there was a bit of panic and chaos on the Econet Marathon recently run in the Victoria Falls when a couple of young elephant bulls on the Big Tree loop decided to



The Honourable Minister Saviour Kasukuwere stopped by to have lunch with me when on his way to a KAZA conference in Kasane. We took the opportunity to have good open discussions on various issues pertaining to wildlife and conservation in Zimbabwe, and some of the current problems. I appreciate the effort made by the Minister to keep communications open.

Zambezi National Park

There has been some activity in the Park this month! Mark Bosch from Victoria Falls River Lodge in the Park had a local contractor come in to repair the first 4 kilometers of the river road – this section was bad, especially in the rains, and has now had gravel down on the bad sections, and is being graded – so this is a great improvement.

PTC has taken down all the old telephone lines on the Kazungula road – well done to them as these old and broken lines were a hazard to wildlife, especially giraffe.

We have received two new Grundfos solar water pumps, very generously donated by Ian Thomson from Botswana, and thanks to Ian Gloss for facilitating. With the help of Chris Lampard, we went out and changed the pumps on Timots Pan and Thomsons Pan – we replaced the old high head, low volume pumps with the new low head, high volume pumps (the water table at Thomson Pan is sitting at under 4 meters). However, we found the old pipeline at Thomson Pan from the pump to the pan was only 40mm – too small to handle the new volume of water, so we are in the process of laying a new pipeline of 63mm – this will be complete early next month.

The spring on the Chamabonda River has dried up already – it flowed all last year. This highlights the need for the proposed dam here. I have a surveyor coming down next month to advise on the proposed dam site.



We had a meeting between Edmore Ngosi (Area Manager), Hilary Madiri (ecologist) Jed Robinson (Matetsi Unit 7) and Peter Garvin (Matetsi Unit 6) and myself on a burning program for the Park and the two units. This is a joint venture between all the parties, and it was a very progressive meeting highlighting cross board cooperation between the parties and in formulating a comprehensive fire management plan for the whole area. The controlled burning program, combined with fire guard burning, was then started on Unit 6, moved through Unit 7 and finished in the Park.



Controlled burning in the Chamabonda





After the burn – it was a cold burn as can be seen from the grass stems left behind. It will green up within two weeks – will put in a picture of the change in the next newsletter!

Thus, between the controlled burning blocks (with only one block to come which we have held off on due to the bicycle ride going through the area in early July) and the firebreaks, by the end of June the protection program has been just about completed from the Botswana border to the eastern boundary of the park – this must be an all time record! The bulk was done by a combined Parks/Unit 7 burning crew, and they were a well coordinated team, led by Jed – well done. The Parks crew can now be used for essential maintenance operations in the Park while waiting for any fire outbreaks.

One problem we have faced in the ZNP is the encroachment of Mangwe (*Terminalia sericea*) onto the vleis. This encroachment is believed to be a water table factor, from declining water tables. However, help in controlling it has arrived - elephant!!



Sinamatella

Report by Stephen Long

Game water.

This month has been quiet as far as game water work is concerned. Mashambo Pan, which started to fill at the end of May, soon reached the point of overflowing down towards the Gurangwenya River. Animal numbers at the pan have built up very quickly with elephants, kudu, warthogs and impala using it.....



Elephant at Mashambo Pan.

We managed to install a new motor for the pump at Bumboosie South but it pumped for just three or four days then stopped. We are not sure what to do there next but we'll keep working at it as most of the solar infrastructure is still in perfect condition and it is very frustrating not to be able to get it running properly.

At Masuma the trough was in desperate need of repair. We filled the cracks and began to shore up the walls of the trough with rocks but we are still unable to pump as much as we would want due to a critical shortage of diesel. Our long-term sponsors, Makomo Resources, have been unable to supply us with more than a little diesel for some time now and we are struggling even to keep vehicles moving as we enter the pumping season. I have been avoiding non-essential travel so have not been out to Inyantue to see what is happening there. We will try to combine a whole lot of jobs and perhaps some patrols and get out there in the near future.

Poaching.

Patrols in the Deka Safari Area detected a number of poaching incursions in June. Two poachers were arrested and a number of domestic dogs were destroyed. I have written before that it is sometimes hard not to feel sorry for the subsistence poachers but on a follow-up to one incident we came across an elephant carcass and part of a buffalo, both showing signs that they had carried snares and suffered great pain over a long period. The poachers may not mean to inflict such suffering but they are responsible and I certainly have less sympathy for them after seeing the results of their snares....



Elephant's foot almost severed by a snare.

Buffalo leg with snare damage.

Birds

On the 16th of June we saw a line of about seventy Pelicans flying above the floodplain late in the evening. Next morning we found them perched in trees all along the Sinamatella River. I was out for most of the day deploying patrols and returned via Mandavu Dam, hoping to find the pelicans there, but they had vanished as mysteriously as they arrived. This is the second time we have seen large numbers of pelicans recently but the question as to where they come from, where they go and why they bother to overfly the Park – surely not suitable habitat – remains unanswered.



Great White Pelicans perched rather incongruously in a mopane tree

We have started our vulture nest survey for the year with some good new sightings coming in from Rangers. At the end of the month I attended the vulture awareness day organised by Birdlife Zimbabwe at Victoria Falls. I knew vultures were potentially threatened but hadn't realised quite how bad the situation is. There is little we can do here in the Park directly to help conserve vultures but I hope a thorough survey of breeding sites (and perhaps also breeding success) will provide a good baseline against which to detect any decline in numbers.

Following the vulture awareness meeting, Birdlife held their AGM in Vic Falls. I was delighted to see from a map in one of the reports given, that Sinamatella remains the best covered area of Zimbabwe on the Southern African Bird Atlas. This is all very valuable data for monitoring the state of the Park and a great credit to the rangers who submit field lists.

Miscellaneous

During the course of the month we had a number of reports of unexplained carcasses found, from close to Sinamatella to right out at the edge of the sector beyond Shumba. We collected blood, tissue or soil samples from a series of elephant carcasses around Shumba and samples also from a giraffe close to Sinamatella and a lion at Kashawe Spring. All of these samples were sent off to the Victoria Falls Wildlife Trust Laboratory and we are waiting for results. None of the animals had apparently been killed by poachers and I think the giraffe and lion will turn out to have been natural deaths but the elephants are more difficult to explain so we look forward to seeing the test results.

The transport situation remains much the same as it was in May. As a Land Rover lover I'm reluctant to report that the new Land Rover, donated to Parks last year, driven carefully and professionally maintained ever since, was off the road throughout June with unspecified major engine problems. However, to our surprise, the Parks Cruiser which left for repair in Bulawayo some time in 2014 finally re-appeared this month. It isn't perfect still but I hope it will take some of the pressure off our hard-working vehicles.

Out in the Park, we are still not seeing all that many animals but the mopane trees started to lose their leaves in June and we had an unusually good show of beautiful autumn colours. Whatever difficulties we may face from time to time, it's still a pleasure and a privilege to live here.



Autumn colours



Report by Nicholas Long

RHINO MONITORING JUNE 2015

I am back in action once again after the operation I had last month. At the beginning of the month I did not go out on patrol as I had been advised to take it easy for a little while, so I did various other jobs around the camp.

Early in the month, patrols in the Deka Safari Area caught a poacher who had been setting snares and I went out to collect him, we went with him to go and remove his snares then took him to the investigations branch in Hwange where he was fined a deposit fine for illegal entry into the park.



Mr Mzamba from one of the neighbouring villages removing his snares

On my way back from Hwange to drop off the above mentioned poacher, ironically I saw a young male lion with a snare around its neck which did not seem to be bothering him so much because he was in good condition but I am sure he must be in some pain. The sighting was reported to Hwange Lion Research as they may be able to come to try and locate the lion and remove the snare.



The snared lion I met on my way back from Hwange

At the beginning of the month I had intended to do some local patrols around the camp to see if we could find any signs of activity in the areas that have been known to have rhino in the past. Unfortunately we were so busy with other things that I only managed to do one local patrol. We went out to assist a call sign that had tracked a rhino the day before but had not managed to see it. We patrolled the area and located a fresh spoor which was tracked as a combined group effort but the sun set before we could see the rhino. Later in the month I went out on a 10 day patrol to try and locate and photograph the mother and new calf that has been reported by rangers over the past few months but we did not find any fresh activity and the pair are still unknown up to date. We are fairly sure that we have identified 4/5 rhinos now from spoor and ranger reports from their patrols, but the team has only managed to fully identify one of these animals. Hopefully as the natural water dries up we will be able to get a full picture on the identification of these animals.

I also went out with a whole load of rangers to go and collect samples for disease testing on some dead elephants reported by staff from Camp Hwange. We took some of the rangers who had been trained to collect these samples. The samples were sent to a Victoria Falls Wildlife Trust Laboratory but we have not received any results yet. There was no sign that the elephants had been killed by poachers as all had their tusks intact.



The team of rangers collecting the samples from the elephant carcasses

Poaching

Well done to Charles Brightman and the Victoria Falls Anti-Poaching Unit for arresting 2 Zambians on a Zimbabwe island, just above the Falls. They had been on the island for a while and were quite brazen until raided- they had 35kg of dried fish, plus wire snares when arrested. They admitted to bribing the ZAWA game scouts with fish when going back to Zambia.



The Zambian fish poachers caught red-handed! Below – rendering the mekoro unusable again..



In early June, there was an incident on Matetsi Unit 7 where a group of Zambian poachers shot an elephant. Quick reaction by Parks resulted in a shoot out, but no-one was hit. The Zambians dropped all their kit and fled back to Zambia. I suspect this is a new gang of poachers unfamiliar with the area, whose first foray was quickly terminated!!

In another later incident, some Zambians (possibly the same gang as above) shot an elephant on Matetsi Unit 6 and fled back to Zambia with the tusks before Parks could intercept them. A third group of Zambians had a contact with the Botswana Defence Forces in the Chobe area and fled back to Zambia through the Kazungula area – they left behind 18 tusks.

Some good news – two Zambians arrested in the Binga area in March after their group was intercepted by Parks and had an exchange of fire with the rangers, appeared before the Hwange magistrates court and were each sentenced to ten years imprisonment for the illegal possession of ivory, and six months for entry by evasion. Parks had recovered 11 tusks with a weight of 174kg after the punch up – these were from elephant shot in Hwange National Park.

Two villagers in the Dete area each found with an unregistered .303 rifle were each sentenced to two years imprisonment, of which 6 months was suspended – an effective 18 months of hard labour.

A point to note is that the use of a drone here on follow ups would have been invaluable and would probably allowed Parks to catch up to the fleeing groups of poachers. A drone would allow an interceptor team to go forward and ambush the mekoro's which the poachers call upon to ferry them over the river. It would be highly effective and we are looking into obtaining funding for one.

Well done to Parks teams on the ground, the investigation unit and a big thanks to the SAVE the African Rhino Foundation for coming through with reward money for informers leading to several arrests. As per normal we can expect zero assistance from the Zambian authorities, who appear to be heavily involved in the poaching racket!

Newsflash – 2nd July – Zambezi National Park rangers once again had a shoot out with a group of four Zambian poachers, who dropped nine tusks. More information to follow.

Comment

An alarming report passed on to me by Jeremy Anderson, from the Niassa province in Mozambique :

“Since April we have now had three different reports from informers of Tanzanian traders in Niassa looking for lion bones, skin, fat, teeth and claws. This is new and we have not recorded this in the past 12 years. We are still uncertain whether this is for traditional use or driven by Chinese demands, however given what has happened to elephants here (an estimated 8000 lost in since 2012) all the trade routes are well established. I thought I would let you know as when these threats arrive they sometimes increase in several places at once driven by demand.

Informers have reported traders asking people in the villages inside Niassa Reserve to kill lions for Mt10,000 / \$540 and have paid an advance of Mt2000. The traders are coming from north east on border with Tanzania but also from more central and western areas in Marrupa and Majune.”

Another alarming report sent to me by Jeremy Anderson – it highlights how South Africa are losing the rhino war.

“A couple of years ago, if someone was caught in Kruger with a rifle and a horn and there was a dead rhino with its horn missing he was charged and it was straightforward. No more.

I was also told this morning that Kruger have had to invest R 1 million into a trailer with forensics kit for each rhino poaching site. In most cases now, when they catch a poacher and take him to the police to be booked, there is a lawyer already waiting at the police station to defend the poacher and apply for bail. Poachers are leaving the weapons hidden in the park. The shooter comes in in a vehicle. Two vehicles are used – one to scout around to see if the coast is clear. The horn is sometimes kept in the park until a later date.

Most of the public prosecutors are no match for the lawyers being hired.”

A quick question – what has happened to Bat Eared Foxes? They used to be common in the Zambezi National Park, and were often killed on the Kazungula Road at night by vehicles. I have not seen a Bat Eared Fox here for years now. They also used to be common on the 10 Mile Loop at Main Camp and believe they are not commonly seen now. Reedbuck have also disappeared from the Chamabonda Vlei and the 10 Mile Loop (where every pan had a pair) but I think Wild Dog are primarily responsible for this.

The issue of fire and burning in the bush is a contentious one with various schools of thought. I can speak only for the Kalahari Forests of Matabeleland, where I have many long years of experience, and not for any other vegetation type, but I suspect they are all similar. The old National Parks view is that fires arrived with the advent of the white man and all fires in the forests must be extinguished immediately, whereas my attitude is that deliberate fires have been part of the natural landscape since the first San hunters used it as a hunting tool a couple of thousand years ago, adding to those fires caused by lightning strikes, etc, and that regular fires are essential for the health and well being of a forest.

To me, a good indicator that fires have been an integral part of the evolution of Kalahari forests is the Mukwa (or Kiaat) (*Pterocarpis angolensis*) where the seed needs to be burnt before it will germinate – no fire would have meant no Mukwa! Another indicator is in Forestry areas where double trace fire breaks have been burnt for many years – the double trace areas actually have noticeably better canopy forest than the surrounding protected forest. Many years ago in the Insuza Vlei over a period of a couple of years I had three blocks demarcated out in the vlei, clearly visible below the camp on the hill above. One block had not been burnt for three years, one for two years and the third had been burnt the year before – the different blocks were visibly differentiated by the colour of the grass from grey to dark brown to yellow-brown. What was very noticeable was the sable would graze in the yellow-brown grass block, would cross into the brown grass block for a couple of meters only before doing a U turn back into the y-b block, which they criss-crossed – this was a very clear indicator of the palatability of the grazing (we never saw a sable in the grey block, and the grass here would turn to powder when rubbed). This would suggest grasses over two years old are moribund and have lost their nutritional value.

I think over protection is as bad as under protection of forests. One problem of over-protection is the build up of detritus and inflammable materiel over time so that when a fire does occur, it is proves to be a very hot fire, causing immense damage (the fynbos fires in Cape Town?)

One wonders whether overprotection of the Kalahari Forests is not a factor in the decline of the sable herds very noticeable in the Hwange National Park!



The above picture illustrates the difference – the grass on the left has not been burnt for two years, and the grass on the right was burnt last year – note colour differences.

Controlled fires can also be for specific purposes – early (cold) burns are non damaging, removing detritus and give the game a good green bite for winter. A hot (October) fire can be for control of bush encroachment, but is not advisable except under exceptional circumstances. You can also put in a cold burn after the first rain shower in an area. Thus fire is an important management tool if used correctly, for the benefit of the forest and the wildlife.

The idea in the Zambezi National Park, Matetsi 6 & 7 areas, is to build up a fire map and ensure a rotational burning scheme with no area left out within a three to four year rotation. The burns are staggered to act as barriers to uncontrolled wild fires, and the use of block burning cuts down the effort needed on firebreaks! We are also especially targeting the sable with green bites which will give us a better idea of the status of their population. As a byline it also improves the game viewing for tourists – the Chamabonda area had started to green up within a week and the zebra have already moved in.

GRATEFUL THANKS

A grateful thanks to those who have supported us and who continue to support us.

This month, we have had support from:

Nicholas Duncan and the SAVE The African Rhino Foundation – a staunch supporter.

RAM Petroleum

Patrick Jacquemin – for a continued, invaluable support

Makomo Mine

Ian Thomson – more assistance forthcoming, with upgraded pumps, and financial help.

Dr Frank Zindel – of Switzerland, and Stuart and Sue Danks of Simply Africa

Michel Buenerd and Le Pic Vert for four donated solar pump units for Sinamatella

Thor Thorsson – an intrepid traveller – has made a fantastic donation going towards vehicles and waterpoints

Piet and Anthea Erasmus, from Cape Town.

Dave Carson and Camp Hwange for helping fund our Sinamatella Rhino Monitoring Unit

Chris Lampard – continuing invaluable support in the field

All those who support and assist in many varied ways – thanks and appreciated

And a big thanks to the Minister of Environment, Climate and Water and to National Parks staff for their continuing support and the spirit of co-operation!

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