



**WISHING EVERYONE A HAPPY AND
PROSPEROUS NEW YEAR!!**

The rains finally arrived in mid December, after a long, hot dry spell of building up and then dissipating. They have been widespread and revived the wilting bush! We had 21 days of overcast weather and on/off rain through to the end of the year, recording 163mm (6,5inches) in the Falls, though sections of the Park have been hit with heavy storms, and are well above this mark!

Zambezi National Park

The good rain has brought on the grass growth in the Chamabonda, and the buffalo herds have moved in – there are at least three herds totaling over 800 buffalo. The pans are filling up beautifully and having a saturated base already, the water is now topping them up.

Thomsons Pan



No 1



CHAMABONDA WATER RECORDS

Month Dec , 2014

Waterpoint	Vol pumped	No Days	Daily Vol	Notes
Timots	466,000	30	15533	Low output – system problem
No 1	567,000	30	18900	semi blocked borehole
Thomsons	810,000	30	27000	
No 3	664,000	30	22133	

The amount of water pumped this month is down on last month, due to the overcast weather – this is more than offset by the rain. We have a system problem with Timots panels, but have not had a clear day to go and check the panels and outputs!

The new gravel road works have had a through test with the heavy storms, and generally are ok, but there are a couple of places where more work needs to be done to consolidate the laid down base and improve drainage, which can only happen when it dries out a bit. We have used some of our gravel stockpile to patch other sections of the road.

The Zambezi River drive has been hit with some flash floods, and we wait to see what the road is like once it dries up!



The road by the entrance gate – Zambezi Drive!!



A big thanks to Dan Jones and his team that went in and undertook some very necessary maintenance and repairs at No 3 and then repaired the broken down pump house at Thomsons. This has now been roofed, walls repaired, bagwashed with cement and can be used as a patrol/maintenance base – it is central to all the pumps.

Note this old pump house was no longer in use – drilled a new hole adjacent to it and installed a solar unit.

The renovated old pump house at Thomsons.



Poaching

A quiet month with little to report. There is one record of a well known Zambian shooting in the Park near Sansimba, but nothing was found on follow up.

However, once the rains start is when the Zambian elephant poachers cross the river and move inland, so vigilance is required. The elimination by Parks of some of their top poachers last year might have curbed their enthusiasm though!

The Area Manager, Zambezi, advised me over this festive period, there have been widespread deployments of patrols, so a big thanks to those dedicated Parks staff, out in the rain, protecting our wildlife!

Sinamatella

Report by Stephen Long

Water

December rainfall was excellent. The average for the last five years was just fifty-seven mm but this year we received two hundred and twenty one. For the first week or so there was no sign that this was going to happen and passing Masuma on the 9th I counted thirty-two elephants, four buffalo, three warthogs and many baboons drinking at the dam – far more typical of a dry spell than the rains. That evening however, the rain started and within a few days the Park was transformed. The view from the hill changed dramatically, as it does every year of course, but it is always surprising enough to be worth a photo...



With good rain falling we could relax a little over game water pumps but we did have some breakdowns to contend with including a rod sheared off at the Masuma pump and the engine stand collapsing at Shumba. We have received offers of help from WEZ and Patrick Jacquemin for some work on the game-water infrastructure during the next few months so we hope we will be able to start the next pumping season with a lot of potential problems already solved

News wasn't so good on water at the camp. ZNWA were still unable to repair the equipment for which they are responsible and the pump which Parks installed as a temporary measure itself broke down. For a week or so we were relying on a small petrol-powered pump on loan from Bhejane but it was not really big enough and the water supply was erratic. After numerous other plans and breakdowns the system was running (but by no means perfect) at the end of the month with the Parks pump back in action. ZNWA did send in a very competent electrician at one stage but in most other ways they are simply unable to cope and most of the water supply equipment on their side of things has in fact been supplied and installed by either Parks or Bhejane and it is very hard to see a way forward that involves ZNWA in any way.

Wildlife.

As always once the rain arrives, the large mammals were difficult to find. Tourists were more common than anything except perhaps impala and as usual, some of them were convinced that the poor game-viewing is due to poaching rather than being quite normal. At Christmas a large group of wild dogs with pups spent a few hours close to the exit gate where many visitors were able to see them and on one or two days elephants appeared on the flood plain in the evening to feed on the new grass so it wasn't all bad news.

Things were better for the birders. Plenty of migrants arrived with the rain and on the day after the first heavy fall we counted eighty-five marabou, ten white, two saddlebill and two woolly-necked storks catching frogs in the flooded grass on the flood plain. After a few appearances last year, Common Mynah turned up in a number of places. We recorded them at Sinamatella, Masuma and Shumba whilst rangers reported them at Lukosi and Mbala.

Last month I reported that we had collected samples from a dead elephant at Masuma, suspecting anthrax as the cause of death. We got results back from Dr Foggin at the laboratory in Victoria Falls and, as with the lion that died in November, they were negative. Nonetheless, as a precaution, rangers did their best to burn the carcass and the onset of the rains should mean few animals visiting the area for the next few months. We will have to see what happens next dry season.

Rhino sightings were good again in December. As usual, the animals were more mobile once the rains arrived and rangers made reports of visuals and rhino sign from a number of places, quite far apart. Unfortunately our experience is that sightings are few and far between once there is good water and browse throughout the area so we have started an exercise to map our patrol coverage and rhino sightings. We hope this will help us to focus our monitoring teams on the most likely and the most neglected places.

We often see Giant and Rough-scaled plated lizards at Sinamatella but this month we found an unusual Giant with a forked tail resting on a rock close to the house.....



Miscellaneous

On the 2nd of the month there was an isolated outbreak of fire near Masuma. There had been no lightning that day though there was light rain with thunder and lightning the previous day so we assume a tree had been struck and fell down, setting fire to the grass a day later. Rangers were deployed to the area in case the fire had actually been started by poachers but they found no signs.

Zambezi National Park received a new vehicle and kindly passed on their old double-cab Nissan to Sinamatella. Sadly it broke down after just a couple of days but we were able to revive it with an electric fuel pump that I originally bought for the Canter and it has been running ever since. It does not have 4-wheel drive so it is not suitable for deployments but it does solve the problem of transport for banking and shopping in Hwange.

Hwange Game Count

The Wildlife and Environment Zimbabwe (WEZ) have released the data from their 2014 annual game count of Hwange National Park, conducted by 316 volunteers in 95 teams. Well done to all involved! These counts have been conducted since 1972, and give some interesting population trends.

Some trends noticed :

- a) Elephant – a steady but noticeable increase over the years. There are some dips in the years of counting but these could be the result of the culling activities conducted in the early 80's (which reduced the population by over 22,000 animals over several years, but also served to scatter the remaining population) or simple widespread population distributions from good water supplies still remaining out in the bush after a good rainy season. In Ted Davison's report in 1930, he estimates elephant as “no more than 1000”. A 1973 report puts the population at 10,500. The latest aerial count just conducted suggests a population of about 58,000 elephant in Matabeleland North, of which the bulk would be in Hwange. This still leaves a discrepancy with the 22,343 counted on the 2014 waterhole count, but the high mobility of the animals to all corners of the Park (this year had good natural surface water throughout the year), plus that they do not need to drink everyday, could account for the differing figure. I would guess the elephant population in the Park is somewhere in the region of 30,000 and 50,000, fluctuating during the seasons.
- b) Buffalo – increasing to stable - over the years have increased and spread. Whereas they originally were only found in the Robins area, they are now well established all over the Park. In the seventies there were no buffalo at all in Ngamo/Sikumi Forests, but now there are large herds occurring in these areas. Ted Davison's 1930 report puts buffalo at “ no more than 100” (although Deka was excluded from the park at this time) The 1973 count puts buffalo at approx 10,000. However, the WEZ game count only came up with 3655 this year, with an even spread throughout the Park – I suspect this is a case of some of the big herds traversing outside the Park boundaries into Botswana, Matetsi , Deka and Ngamo areas, but it still does not fully explain the huge discrepancy in numbers.
- c) Sable – decreasing – the increase in buffalo is to the detriment of the sable population, a trend noticed in several wildlife areas. Ted Davison states in 1930 that “eland are the most numerous animal in the Park, followed by sable. The sable occur in all parts of the reserve, often seen in herds as many as 100”. The 1973 stats gives the population at approximately 1800. The 2014 game count has come up with a figure of 213! Although sable do not need to drink daily, this still shows a dramatic drop in the population. This is mirrored in adjoining Ngamo Forest where in the

seventies we estimated the sable at about 1200 animals, and it now seems doubtful if there are 150 left.

d) Roan Antelope – stable - seem to have fared better than sable, with a healthy population in the Robins area. Davison puts them as occurring in most parts of the Reserve, while the 1973 count puts them at about 600. The WEZ count was an encouraging 266.

e) Eland – decreasing - the most numerous animal in 1930, occurring in “very large herds” “over 200 not being uncommon”, according to Davison. The 1973 count gives a figure of approx. 1600, while the WEZ count only records 86!! In the 70’s and early 80’s we had herds several hundred strong in Ngamo and Gwaai Forest, but these are now herds of the past!

d) Wildebeest – decreasing – a strange history, with Davison recording that no wildebeest were present in the reserve before 1935, but that big migrations came through from Botswana during the drought years, leaving behind populations that settled at Ngamo, Kennedy and Main camp. In 1973 the population is recorded at approx. 1800. However, this population has declined, with only 410 being recorded in the 2014 count. This is a very visible decline to those who remember the large wildebeest populations a few years ago, where they are scarcely seen now!

Other species which seem to have declined over the years, from personal observations, seem to be Bat-eared Foxes, Reedbuck (in the Main Camp area), Ostrich, and of course, the rhino....

Mike Chase, from Elephants Without Borders, working in the Okavango Delta area, has found a similar situation there to what we have in Hwange - a big increase in elephant, buffalo and hippo, and a dramatic decline in the populations of sable, wildebeest, zebra etc. These declines have been big and noticeable – up to 75% decrease in numbers in some species.

One could consider this is all natural cycles, but these days the ravages of rinderpest, anthrax etc have been controlled and no longer affect wild populations. Culling of excess populations of elephant and buffalo in this day and age is obviously no longer an option. How can we protect our population diversity?

Zimbabwe Elephant Populations

The first aerial survey in many years of Zimbabwe’s elephant population has just been completed – the first survey in many a long year! This survey was funded through The Paul Allen Foundation – the co-founder of Microsoft has funded an aerial survey

throughout the length and breadth of Africa, through the Botswana based Elephants Without Borders, and it has produced some very dismal results to the north of here.

The results in Zimbabwe were much as I had expected – some good and some disastrous stats. The good news is that it appears that the elephant population in Matabeleland North has grown by about 10% since the last survey in 2001, from about 50,000 to 56,000 elephants (this is from an estimated 20,000 in 1979), while Gona re Zhou has shot up by 134%, to over 11,000 elephants (I suspect with the protection offered under the Frankfurt Zoological program here, there as been an influx of “refugees”) – ironically, both these areas do not need more elephants!!

The bad news has confirmed what we have known for a while. The Sebungwe area has lost 75% of it's elephant – over 12,000 elephant have been poached over the last few years, and the slaughter is still going on. There are only about 3,500 elephants remaining in previous strongholds of Chizarira, Chirisa, Chete and Matusadona – this level of poaching we have known about for a long time and put out several warnings, but no action has been taken. And the Zambezi Valley has lost over 8000 elephant over the last few years (though some might be in Zambia)!

Thus, Zimbabwe has, according to the survey, had over 20,000 elephant poached over the last few years, and this poor record will surely be the death knell of any hope of lifting the US ivory embargo. Zimbabwe is bordering on being classified with an unsavory reputation on wildlife conservation, joining many of the countries to the north of here. It is also to me noticeable that the areas which have good survival rates ie Hwange, Upper Zambezi and Gona Re Zhou are the areas where photographic operators and wildlife volunteer organisations are strongly entrenched and working with Parks, while the major population deficits have happened in the hunting safari areas such as Chirisa and Chete – maybe the hunters should look at what has occurred where they have allowed their livelihood to be destroyed from under them, and then they complain there is not enough hunting, the ivory bans, etc.! There are some very good hunting operators who have worked well with Parks and communities and done wonders for wildlife conservation, but it seems others have been content to reap on the short term, with little effort to save the concession areas on which they are reliant. Parks are also at fault for putting out quotas way in excess of viable levels, for purely monetary reasons – most of these quotas are still in place and add to the damage. Maybe the Parks lease tenure system needs to be urgently reviewed with long term leases issued including a strong management program with blocks and controls in place, where the recovery and conservation of the wildlife would be the principle concern. Short term hunting leases are of no benefit to anyone!!

What is very apparent is that the situation is alarming, and deteriorating. Urgent action needs to be taken, which will involve possibly some radical thinking and planning on behalf of Parks, where they need to combine with the private sector to come up with a revival plan now, before it is too late!! All the assistance and expertise is available to help Parks recover these areas, but it needs Parks to come forward with the initiative.

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

Barbara Ball and Clidder Mining

RAM Petroleum

Redan Petroleum

Patrick Jacquemin

Makomo Mine

Ian Thomson – offer of further assistance

Dan Jones – repairing the building at Thomsons

Drew Fleming - donation

Dr Frank Zindel – of Switzerland.

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

NOTE

Mike Bromwich has produced a very comprehensive book on the history of National Parks – Rhodesia and Zimbabwe- from 1928 to 1990. A must for anyone interested in the history of our Parks. Anyone interested in the book can go into his website “www.bromwich.uk.com” where you can preview and order a copy.

Congratulations to Mike for a lot of hard work to record a vital part of our history and the history of wildlife conservation in Zimbabwe.

