



JUNE 2016

NEWSLETTER

I had an informal meeting with Dave Dell from Friends of Hwange, and Pam Birch and Pete Kendall from Wildlife and Environmental Society of Zimbabwe (WEZ) at Main Camp where we discussed joint operations within Hwange National Park, and the issues affecting all of us, which was great as we all need to cooperate and pull together. We were fortunate to have the the Main Camp Area Manager Midwell Kapesa join us in the evening so we could have a good informal chat to him.

I spent a couple of days at Makololo (thanks to Ron Goatley of Wilderness Safaris) and then on to Main Camp. I was impressed with the water situation all round. The Wilderness concession had very good water, with pans overflowing, and the water in the Kennedys and Makwa was very good. I have never seen Nyamandhlovu so full. The roads in the Main Camp area have been graded and are much improved, we encountered patrols in the back area of Mbiza and the tourist office area is spruced up - great to see that despite all the difficulties faced by Parks that the area has been recovered - well done to Area Manager Kapesa!

Patrick Williamson, an Australian volunteer who has been helping on mapping for the last three months has done a great job and has produced maps of Robins, Zambezi and

Kazuma. These maps will be available off the Parks web site and will also be available in A4 print at entry points. We have also produced maps with a numbered grid pattern for recording game sightings in the various parks.



Above : Patrick Williamson with Hilary Madiri (Ecologist, Matetsi), Edmore Ngosi (Area Manager, ZNP) and Wildlife Officer Nyathi from Kazuma, with the new maps.

Bhejane Trust is now involved in the operation of 28 borehole pumps servicing 25 waterholes on the Parks estates, between Zambezi, Kazuma Pan, Robins and Sinamatella. This is made up of 26 solar units, 1 windmill and one ZESA (mains power) and represents a saving of 14,000 litres of diesel per month had we still been reliant on the old Lister engines!!

Please spare a thought for our Parks rangers and staff. With the current economic difficulties being experienced in Zimbabwe, the Parks staff are bearing the brunt of it - they are well behind on payment of salaries, patrol rations are in short supply, there is limited diesel for operations, plus endless problems. It still amazes me that knowing the situation these guys are in, you are still met with a smile and a courteous greeting.

This shows the resilient character of the Zimbabweans, and lets hope their situation can be resolved as soon as possible. It is very apparent though that there is an urgent need to restructure the Parks Authority to be leaner going into the future.

ZAMBEZI NATIONAL PARK

The maps of the Zambezi National Park have been completed by Patrick Williamson and we will soon have some A4 print outs available at gates. There are maps with a grid format for game sightings, which can be handed back at the gates after a drive, so we can start collating information on our wildlife population and their movements and trends with the help of all!

An interesting record this month from John Brebner was of a Bat Hawk nesting in the Chamabonda.

Some good news is that there is progress on two more game viewing hides to be put into the Chamabonda - one at Thomson Pan and one at Timots Pan. This is a joint effort between John Kiggen of Kiggen Builders, and Ian Gloss on behalf of Ian Thomson. We have developed a nice plan for the hides, and hope to start construction this coming month.

I have enclosed some photo's showing how Thomson Pan has evolved over a short period of time

THE EVOLUTION OF THOMSON PAN

March 2014



June 2016

by Trevor Lane

June 2014



June 2016



The annual mowing program has started in the Chamabonda Vlei, and we will be doing some controlled burning of a couple of blocks in the coming month. This will ensure the vigour of the vlei and provide a green bite for the animals.

KAZUMA PAN

There were big fires in the Panda Masuie Forest Area in June which threatened the Kazuma Pan, but they were brought under control and did not enter the Park.

On a trip to Kazuma this month, I was pleased to see the Kazuma Corner Pan was full to overflowing. However, Roan Pan is struggling and we will keep adjusting the pump, though I think we will need to re-drill this hole in the future.

Wildlife Officer Nyathi has graded about half the roads before running out of diesel - a fine effort under the circumstances.

The maps for Kazuma Pan are now complete and hopefully will soon be available on the Parks website. Otherwise I am happy to send it to whoever may require.

SINAMATELLA

Report from Stephen Long

Game water.

Not everything went to plan in June (does it ever?) but we ended the month with more pumps running than there were at the end of May - and with reasonable water in most of the pans.

Mashambo, which was dry in May and restarted at the end of that month after being 'down' for a long time, was full by the end of June and we saw many species using it during the month including the eponymous "Mashambo" or Wild Dogs.

At Inyantue vlei, we were able to install a new pump and controller on the existing solar panels. The wiring for this job was complicated but we had help from our latest group of "Field Assistants". All went well to start with.....



Eventually we had a maze of wires connected up and we turned on the pump expecting a strong flow of water. The trickle that came out had a bad effect on morale.....



There was only one thing to do, stop for lunch and a cup of tea, and with morale restored by one of Sue's usual great lunches, we set to and located the problem (a bad connection at one of the many plugs) and the pump ran well. Unfortunately, Thor's Pan had dried completely in the time it took to obtain a new pump so most of the water simply sank into the mud for the first week or so. The level is rising now but fewer animals than expected are using the pan. I have no doubt that will soon change.

We also had problems at the other Inyantue pump, at the dam. Nick and Tshuma went out and lowered the pump further into the borehole. They left it running normally but within a day it had stopped. A severe diesel shortage kept us from getting there to locate the problem until several days later. When we eventually got to Inyantue, we found buffalo, kudu, impala, warthogs, baboons and a lone jackal, all trying to get a drink from the only water remaining - basically damp mud. It wasn't easy to find what was wrong with the pump - there were as many (if not more) theories and plans than people. In fact we never really discovered the exact cause of the problem but we solved it by replacing the low water probe and left the water pumping well into the trough.

Finally on the subject of game water, we have made a start on installing the wind pump (ex Shapi) at Sinamatella flood plain. We had intended simply to go ahead and build the wind pump but then we began to have doubts about the possible yield of the borehole. Mr Mafa, who knows more about Sinamatella's game water than anyone else still here, was confident at first, then began to waver so we decided to install a diesel pump and run a test to check the yield. That turned out to be much easier suggested than done and it took us two days right at the end of the month before we started the engine and saw water running. It was too late in the day to test properly but our initial result was around 1200 litres per hour of very dirty water. We will test further before we build the wind pump. That will be a job for July.

Wildlife.

On the 20th we carried out a 24 hour count at Masuma. At 484, elephant numbers were high but not especially so compared with recent counts - which is good news from a game water point of view. Impala numbers were also well within the limits of what we might think of as manageable and there were plenty of other species also which is what makes Masuma so great for visitors. As well as elephant and impala, we saw hippo, kudu, waterbuck, warthog, zebra, buffalo, baboons, vervet monkey, crocodiles, lion, black-backed jackal, spotted hyena and over thirty-five bird species using the dam. The hippo looked in very good condition but we noticed them on several occasions eating elephant dung, which we have often seen before and always assumed to be a sign that the grass is running out. To my (non-grazer) eyes, the grass still looked pretty good so maybe they just like the taste?

The usual winter herd of buffalo that is seen around Sinamatella and Mandavu has already grown to at least 800 animals and we have seen them many times, far away down on the flood plain.....



closer



even closer.....



Of course the lions are never very far behind but even though we have heard them almost daily, we've very rarely seen them.



This year's vulture survey has got off to a slow start. Many of the nests are extremely hard to see as there are still a lot of leaves on the trees but those nests we have found all seem to have a parent sitting on an egg and so far, as in 2014 and 2015, all are White-backed.....

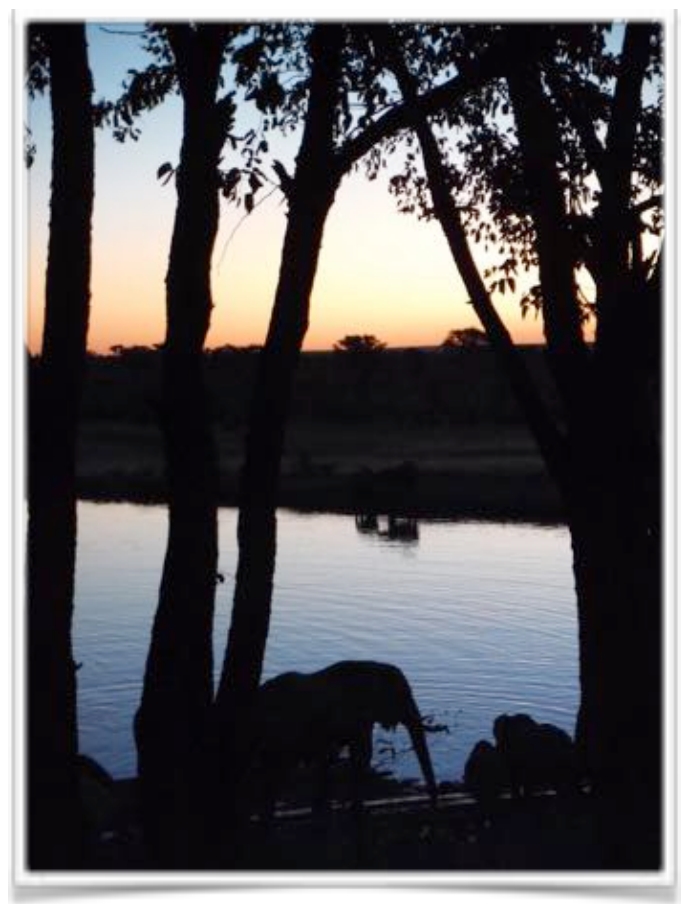
Miscellaneous.

Last month I wrote that tourists had become one of the rarest sights in the Park. That remained true for most of June but right at the end of the month I'm pleased to say South African visitors started to arrive. On one occasion I arrived at Masuma to find the car park looking like a Toyota rally, with shiny Cruisers and Hiluxes everywhere. Three of the Toyota drivers were standing studying the lone Land Rover that was parked alongside all those Toyotas. I don't understand Afrikaans so I'm not certain what they were saying but I imagine they were laying bets as to which panel would fall off first or how many drips of oil they could count in a minute. Luckily I was driving our Hilux that day. Less luckily we had to push-start it and it left a nasty oily stain on the ground as we pulled away....

With tourists arriving at last I suppose it was inevitable that the water system at Sinamatella would go wrong. We have had a good water supply for some months but in the last week of June the booster pump, which is essential and for which there is no spare, seized up. Up to month end, ZNWA had been unable to fix it or supply a spare and we were all reliant on water collected in containers at the borehole and carried up to camp by car. We find it inconvenient but I imagine some of the visitors, who are paying a lot to visit Sinamatella, would use stronger words.

This is the time of year for road grading and preparation of fire-guards. Sinamatella usually grades and strip-burns from the Deka river to Mbala Lodge then along the railway to Inyantue and from there right down to Shumba. It is a mammoth task, made much easier this year by Makomo who have very kindly graded from Mbala to Inyantue dam. The Parks tractor and tow-grader was used to grade from Mbala towards the Deka and the Shumba road from Inyantue through Tshompani remains to be done.

For some time, the transport problems that used to plague us have been solved but in June we went right back to the old difficulties. Two of the Parks vehicles were transferred to other stations, one broke down and the other is not really suited to work on our bad roads. That left Bhejane to shoulder most of the transport burden on top of our game water work. With water running out in the rivers at this time of year, rangers are increasingly reliant on water brought to them in containers which makes for a huge logistics problem. In addition there were several unusual incidents in June such as elephant poaching outside the Park in the communal land and an elephant that was hit by a train which all required extra transport so our vehicles and drivers have been busy. Keeping all three of the vehicles running and finding fuel to put in them is a constant headache.



I don't like to end on a down-beat note but luckily Sue has included a couple of her signature sunset photos in the folder she's given me for illustrating this newsletter so let's end with a couple of them . Times like these make it all worthwhile.....

ROBINS

Robins Report By Stephen Long

We were unable to visit all the new solar pumps at Robins Camp as much as we would have liked due to a shortage of diesel at Sinamatella. Nick managed to make one trip down to check on several of the pumps and we also did a little work at Bumbumutsa.

The pumps Nick visited were at Deteema, Dolilo, Big Toms and Little Toms. Up to now the only one of these that has a water meter is Deteema (we plan to install meters at all pumps soon); there the flow rate had been a very pleasing 38000 litres per day over the past forty days. The dam level has dropped quite a bit but the 'hybrid' solar/diesel pump is pushing more water into it per day than the old diesel did, at a greatly reduced cost in diesel so we are happy with

progress so far. A new pipeline to the dam, reducing friction loss and increasing the flow would make the situation better still.

At Dolilo Nick found the trough outlet blocked and water being wasted as it poured over the edges and was absorbed by the dry soil. This is a common problem and there's no obvious way of stopping it but it is at least very easy to remove the blockage and get the water running in the right direction again. Given time, Dolilo promises to be an interesting place and I hope to get there and see it for myself in July.

Big Toms was the star of the show when the solar pumps were first installed and it is still looking superb with a very good supply of water in the pan. Little Toms however was disappointing at installation and sadly is still the same. The borehole yield is too low and the pan absorbs most of the little water it receives so there is not much standing water for animals to use. It will improve eventually.

Bumbumutsa is far from Robins so is rarely visited by Robins rangers and we thought it was important to protect the pipes at the well-heads from our friends the elephants as a broken pipe might otherwise remain undetected for some time. We went there with our Field Assistants, who had proved so helpful at Inyantue (see Sinamatella report) and covered the well-heads with brick-work. None of us would claim to be a craftsman bricklayer so the finished work was not up to the finest standard but it will be quite good enough to hide the vulnerable pipes. Bumbumutsa is a very difficult place to photograph – being so open it is hard to get a sense of scale. The pan is quite small but surrounded by a lot of flooded grassland



Perhaps this panorama, taken by Nick, gives a better idea of the area....



We hope a generator will be installed soon to make the two pumps hybrid and help to keep such a large, shallow water surface filled throughout the dry season. Up to now there are surprisingly few animals using it but I'm sure they will come in the next month or two

POACHING

Has generally been a quiet month, with incidents of meat poaching being recorded. Two persons were convicted of poaching three impala in the Sinamatella area (the received suspended sentences plus community service) and two further poachers for snaring a sable bull in the Matetsi area.

A very well done to Parks staff in the lower Zambezi Valley who managed to shoot dead a Zambian poacher, and wound (suspected fatally) his companion, who still managed to escape back to Zambia. The deceased was a notorious poacher, well known to our Parks, who has finally had his comeuppance.

With the economic conditions prevailing in Zimbabwe, we are bracing for a big upsurge in poaching, as depression sets in. We anticipate more poisonings, as well as the normal snaring.

COMMENT

Are we over-protecting our Parks from fire??

For many years, there has been a policy within Parks of whenever a fire is spotted to rush out and extinguish it. This is fine, provided there is a sensible controlled burning program to cover these areas, otherwise they will suffer from over-protection. In my opinion, over-protection from fire is just as bad as

under-protection, and can be very damaging. One of the problems of over-protecting from fires, especially in vleis, is the grass gets very rank and moribund, with a detritus build up - this can lead to a devastating hot fire when it finally ignites (as was seen with the fynbos fires in Cape Town). Regular fires are essential to the health of a Kalahari forest - fires have been happening for thousands of years and shaped the ecosystem as it is (eg Mukwa seeds need fire to germinate as proof of the long relationship of fire in the forests evolution).

While in the Main Camp area, I was on an early morning game drive down a long vlei - one would expect to see sable or zebra out on the vlei but we saw nothing. The vlei grass was a greyish colour and was totally moribund - looking at the grass bases it was grey in colour. This vlei desperately needs a burn to freshen it up - preferably a controlled cold burn, done in sections. I also drove around the Main Camp area up to Nyamandhlovu and was struck by the lack of animals - the area used to be full of wildebeest, zebra, sable and the like. Again the area looked moribund and requires a careful patchwork burning program to restore vigour.

I have been reading a book "Veld Management - Principles and Practice" by Frits van Outstshoorn, and he has a section on fire, and its use as a management tool. His research work bears out and supports my observations and theories. To quote some parts of his book:

"Although it is true that fire can be detrimental to the ecology, it is also true that many ecosystems are maintained by fire. Fire has been part of grassland, savanna and fynbos ecology for ages"

"It is also believed that fire has been used by humans (anthropogenic fires) for at least 40,000 years"

'Anthropogenic fires most likely increased the extent of grassland and savanna in the medium to high rainfall regions of Africa'

"in the absence of fire, perennial grasses tend to collect old leaf material, called moribund, over time. The moribund obstructs sunlight, thereby preventing photosynthesis, resulting in suffocation, loss of vigour or even death of grass plants"

A research program run by the University of KwaZulu-Natal for over 60 years found the long term protection of grassland from burning or mowing decreases grass species richness by 55-66%

All this re-emphasises the importance of fire (Note I am talking in relation to the Kalahari woodland system) to restore vigour to the vleis and the forest. They can be cold or hot fires depending on what is desired to be achieved - grass regeneration or to push back encroaching trees or shrubs. The over protection of the forests in Hwange is already having a profound effect on some of the species which used to be common, but are now in decline. When one sees the big fires in Zambia, they are part of an ecological system many thousands of years old, and it would be disastrous to stop them.

GRATEFUL THANKS

A grateful thanks to those who have supported us and who continue to support us. This month, we have had support from:

Patrick Williamson, a volunteer from Australia, who has produced a series of maps in electronic format over the last three months. A great effort and much appreciated.

The Conservation and Wildlife Fund, plus the Elephant Group, for donated boreholes for Robins

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

Mark Unwin and the Clarkson Jersey Charitable Trust

RAM Petroleum

Read Petroleum

Patrick Jacquemin – for continued, invaluable support. Patrick has now again come to the fore with rangers rations funding, water point maintenance funds, and vehicle maintenance costs. Thanks Patrick - much appreciated.

Bud and Guy Cockcroft – donation of a solar unit in memory of their beloved Jane (RIP)

Chris Lampard – continuing invaluable support in the field

Piet and Anthea Erasmus - for their generous donation towards water in the Chamabonda

Makomo Mine – donation of diesel

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

Michel Buenerd and Le Pic Vert for four donated solar pump units for Sinamatella, and the newly installed hybrid solar unit at Deteema

Thor Thorsson– an intrepid traveller

John Nixon of Harare for donation

Dave Carson and Camp Hwange for helping fund our Sinamatella Rhino Monitoring Unit and game water supplies.

The Director General of Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, Edson Chidzia, for his support

The Area Managers and staff of Zambezi, Kazuma, Sinamatella and Robins, for all their support and assistance.

To all those who support and assist in many varied ways – thanks and appreciated. My apologies if I have inadvertently left anyone out!!!

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

DONATIONS

Bhejane Trust relies on donations to continue it's operations, which includes our daily operating costs, as well as specific projects. However, at the moment our financial concerns are related to our operating costs - these have grown as we take on more and more, especially in the running of game waterpoints and the expansion into the Robins area.

DONATE

Donate to help us save our wildlife heritage - any donations would be gratefully accepted . Donations can be through our “PayNow” button on our website “bhejanetrust.org” or direct to our bank account: (please note that Zimbabwe is experiencing a financial crisis again but volunteer organisations and NGO's will not be penalised with any donations made - the monies will be attributed to the relevant account in full))

Bank details :

Bhejane Trust,
FBC Bank,
Galleria Building, Parkway Victoria Falls
Zimbabwe
Branch Code : 8512
Swift Code : FBCPZWHA
Account No : 6145093780178

Bhejane Trust office address:

231 Sopers Crescent,
P.O.Box 210
Victoria Falls
Zimbabwe

CONTACT DETAILS

Trevor Lane -
Stephen Long -

trevor@bhejanetrust.org
stephen@bhejanetrust.org

+263 777 057 024

