



*Diary of a Magical Elephant Encounter on the Pafuri Walking Trail, Makuleke Concession, Northern Kruger National Park, South Africa on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2014.*

*30<sup>th</sup> June 2014 - Morning Walk, Nwambe Pan – Rhodes Bezuidenhout*

The day dawned bright but cold with few not opting to wrap the given blankets around themselves as our Fathers-and-Sons trail group, Clive Thompson and I drove off from our camp on a bend in the Luvuvhu River into the rising sun. We tracked east onto Rhino Boma Road, our intention being a walk into Nwambe Pan.



**One of the Giraffe on Rhino Boma Road. So good to see they have stayed on the Concession. Photo: Paul Dennison**

The drive out to our jump-off point was spiced up by the sighting of two Giraffe initially off to our right as we drove down Rhino Boma. We stopped the vehicle to view them, with one crossing almost immediately to our left and the other taking a little more time, allowing us a good sighting as he meandered across the road to our front.

They did not oblige us with a full sighting of both but just to see these two, probably the only ones on the Concession, was enough to widen the grins of everyone.

Arriving at our jump-off point at the base of a big Baobab, the decision to remove fleeces was indeed a difficult one as the crisp morning air was still biting! The safety brief over and done with, we set off in a southerly direction to the distant Nwambe Pan. However, we had hardly gone a hundred metres when we walked into a Hyena moving from our left to right only some 30 metres from us. We stopped, as did the Hyena in the middle of the path we were following! Clive and I managed to get everybody up front to see this beautiful animal continuing to stare at us with some intent and curiosity!



**The Hyena on the path just as we set off. He was unfazed with our presence. *Photo:* Paul Dennison**

The Hyena then moved off to our right heading towards the Rhino Boma pans area to the west. A great sighting in the early morning and what a way to start the walk!

With the grunts of Hippo clearly audible from Nwambe Pan in the distance, we moved through an area with three magnificent Baobabs very close together and then onto an elevated position, an old settlement area where we often find bits of pottery and tools.

Using this high ground, we could overlook the Nwambe Pan, including much of the area to the west, where we indeed picked up the first Elephant Bull feeding in the distance. Looking closer to the pan, Clive pointed out another Elephant Bull very close to the northern bank and without further ado we set off to see if



**The old Nyalaberry Tree. The area is so beautiful in the early morning light. Photo: Paul Dennison**

we could get close to have a good look at him. However, the Bull continued to move west away from us and reaching the drainage line leading into the pan, we stopped under a Nyalaberry Tree with some good shade, allowing us to view the Bull from afar. As we did so, other Bulls started to appear also in the west but still some way off, feeding off tufts of grass and dust bathing.

In the short term, the Elephant were going nowhere and with time moving on, we decided to make for the pan and see if we could find the hippo that we had heard grunting earlier in the walk. As we neared the northern bank, I scanned the path ahead to ascertain recent animal usage and suddenly saw what we, as



**Large and distinctive! Photo: Paul Dennison**

guides, had been looking for since the start of the year: Lion tracks! Fresh, and lots of them, three sets by the look of things! I hissed a warning to gain Clive's attention and then asked the group to identify the tracks. The size was a dead give-away and we discussed the differences between leopard, hyena and lion tracks so that everyone was in the picture.

Clive and I agreed it might be a good idea to follow them to ascertain direction and absolute numbers.

The tracks were heading west along the northern bank of the pan and we followed them across the drainage line to the south, heading towards the Luvuvhu River. While we followed, we were very conscious of the Elephant Bulls, now five in number, who were slowly but surely edging their way towards the pan.

The lion tracks were clearly visible along a set path until we reached a very grassy area without any soil patches, where all the tracks simply evaporated. Even a wide 360 degree search produced nothing except distant thickets; the grass had hidden all – very frustrating!

We made our way back towards the pan and the hippos, again keeping a wary eye on the Elephant which were now much closer off to our left and approaching nearer all the time. The hippos were in the shallows with only their backs and top of their heads visible. As we neared the southern bank of the pan, they suddenly roused themselves and, as one, raced for the safety of the deeper water with a resounding surge of waves – quite a sight!



**The Hippo surge from the shallows to the safety of the deeper water. *Photo: Paul Dennison***

As the group watched the hippos' antics, I fell back to see where the Elephant were and, indeed, there was the first Bull ambling towards us but luckily on the other side of the inlet of water on the western side of the pan, not 20 metres wide. I brought this development to Clive's attention and we quickly got the Group together instructing them to sit down quietly with minimal movement and noise to watch as the big Bull came into view and stopped at the water's edge on the other side of the inlet. As he commenced drinking, several more Bulls came into view, one of whom I had now recognized as "Dave", a very big, old and wise Bull who frequently has young bulls accompanying him on his ramblings around the Concession. He has a limp left ear and only one tusk which, apart from his sheer size, makes him easily recognizable. The Elephant appeared comfortable with our presence and our group was very disciplined despite these mighty animals being a mere twenty metres away!!



The Bulls were totally at ease with our presence on the opposite bank of the inlet. Big “Dave” on the extreme left, his limp ear and one tusk very visible. *Photo: Paul Dennison*

Then, however, one of the young Bulls then thought he might prefer our side of the inlet and started to make his way around the edge of the bank towards us.

As lead guide, Clive stood up and quietly spoke to him. He stopped, stood tall, ears out and trunk up. Clive again spoke to him and, with a shake of his head, he reluctantly stopped his advance and began to drink again just where he was.



I then looked beyond the three Bulls who were now fully engrossed in satisfying their thirst and saw a further two emerge making their way down to join the existing three. I mouthed the word “five!!” to Clive as, firstly, a young bull joined in and then an older much larger Bull muscled his way in, elbowing the three young bulls away from the water, exerting his authority but suddenly stopping short at the sight of “Dave” who was undoubtedly the elder statesman commanding respect of all! The behaviour was fascinating to all of us watching!

We watched the Bulls in silence and some awe for a good ten minutes or so, one enjoying a good throat scratch on a convenient Ana Tree stump next to the water. With the big Bulls dominating the good spots, two more of the young Bulls again tried to come around to our side of the inlet.



**Clive and Cameron: the front-line! Photo: Paul Dennison**

With three Elephant now posing a threat, I quickly moved side-by-side with Clive, who again spoke to both Bulls in the same calm voice, with the same reaction and result! What an experience for the Boys, the Fathers and the Guides alike!!

The boys’ faces were a picture to see, totally mesmerised by what they were witnessing and hearing: a parade of giants at (very) close quarters; the dominant Bulls subtly but determinedly muscling for prime spots; the sounds of water being sucked into their trunks, then squirted into their mouths; a bit of feeding on the side. They were very much aware of our presence, but entirely unconcerned. Definitely not the reaction we would have encountered had a

Breeding Herd of Elephant wandered down instead! This sort of unaffected behaviour between Elephants performing their daily routine is seldom witnessed at such close quarters while on foot.



Three Bulls try to come across to our side of the inlet. Clive and I now side-by-side. *Photo: Paul Dennison*

We watched the Bulls finally satisfy their thirst and then, in single file, begin silently moving around the bank, the second big Bull now in the lead, “Dave” still drinking and bringing up the rear. In order to ensure they did not harbour any thoughts of coming too close towards us, both Clive and I took up positions to the left of the group, between them and the Elephants. The big Bull in front kept his eye on us as he made his way into the undergrowth but with little fuss, as did the others.

“Dave”, unconcerned as usual, stopped to feed off the Acacias still within sight and only about 30 metres away from us, reaching up with his trunk to pull down tasty morsels from the upper branches.



**Janovin Scholtz and new-found friend Dave *Photo: Paul Dennison***

It was time for us to leave as well and allow, the Bulls to feed with no disturbance from us, they had already richly indulged us by accepting our presence at what is an important time of the day for them. We moved off away from the Bulls, hugging the southern bank as much as possible until we were well clear of their last position. An amazing sighting that will undoubtedly stay indelibly imprinted in all our memories.

The remainder of the walk went off very quietly. We made our way steadily back to the vehicle as the temperature started to climb and thoughts of lunch came to mind!



**Troy & Gary Fisher and friends. *Photo: Paul Dennison***



Above – Keenan and friends. Below – Elephants ahead, Elephants to the left! *Photos: Tim Droge*





**On the move**



**The pin marks the spot ...**

***Guides: Clive Thompson & Rhodes Bezuidenhout***  
***Trail participants: Paul and Cameron Dennison, Tim & Keenan Droge, Gary and Troy Fisher, Gert-Jan and Janovin Scholtz***

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