

guiding lights

Zimbabwe's national parks are some of the finest in Africa, offering visitors a spectacular sense of wilderness. It's fairly obvious that the country's precarious political condition is casting a pall over the future of these sanctuaries, but what are conditions actually like for those dedicated souls who work in the heart of it all? **Scott Ramsay** spent some time with three knowledgeable and experienced wildlife guides to gain an insight into their daily existence. ▶

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT RAMSAY



The bull elephant wanted one thing only, and that was the acacia pods in Stretch Ferreira's hands. The seven-tonne behemoth was striding purposefully towards us across the floodplain in Mana Pools National Park. 'Okay, guys, let's get a bit more disciplined,' Ferreira whispered to our five-strong group of trekkers. 'Stay close to me, okay?'

Elephants move deceptively quickly and within seconds the bull was just a few metres from us. The late afternoon sunlight gleamed like honey on its dark hide. To people in a car, the largest land mammal can appear intimidating; to those on foot and within touching distance, a wild bull elephant has a god-like aura. In a show of submissiveness, we all knelt down in front of 'Slotman' – named for the notch in his ear – and Ferreira placed the acacia pods on the dusty earth in front of him.

The bull came even closer, looming over us, and no-one dared move as he deftly picked up the pods with his trunk. A rustling in the trees signalled the arrival of a younger bull, a teenager with plenty of attitude. Ferreira stood up and strode firmly towards the troublemaker. 'Hey you!' he shouted, 'Go away, get lost now!' It seemed

to work. The youngster stopped, appeared flummoxed, then turned and walked away. 'You have to be careful of those young bulls,' Ferreira explained. 'The old guys like Slotman know me and I know them. I wouldn't approach a bull I didn't know.'

For close on three decades Ferreira has developed a close bond with the older Mana Pools bull elephants, many of which spend most of their lives on the floodplain, nourished by its rich vegetation. Despite his calm demeanour in their presence, though, 'The Old Man of the Valley' (the name he's called by some of the local community) admits the need for caution. 'I'm always very careful,' he confesses. 'These are wild, wild animals, and just like people, they can have a bad day.'

His knowledge of the animals, the Zambezi River and the terrain he has been trekking through for the past 25 years is perhaps unrivalled in these parts. 'I never fail to be stunned by the experience. It's always special,' he confides. His view is shared by the thousands of tourists who have visited Mana Pools. They too are awed by the sense of wilderness and by being able to walk freely among the abundant elephants, buffaloes, hippos and other species.



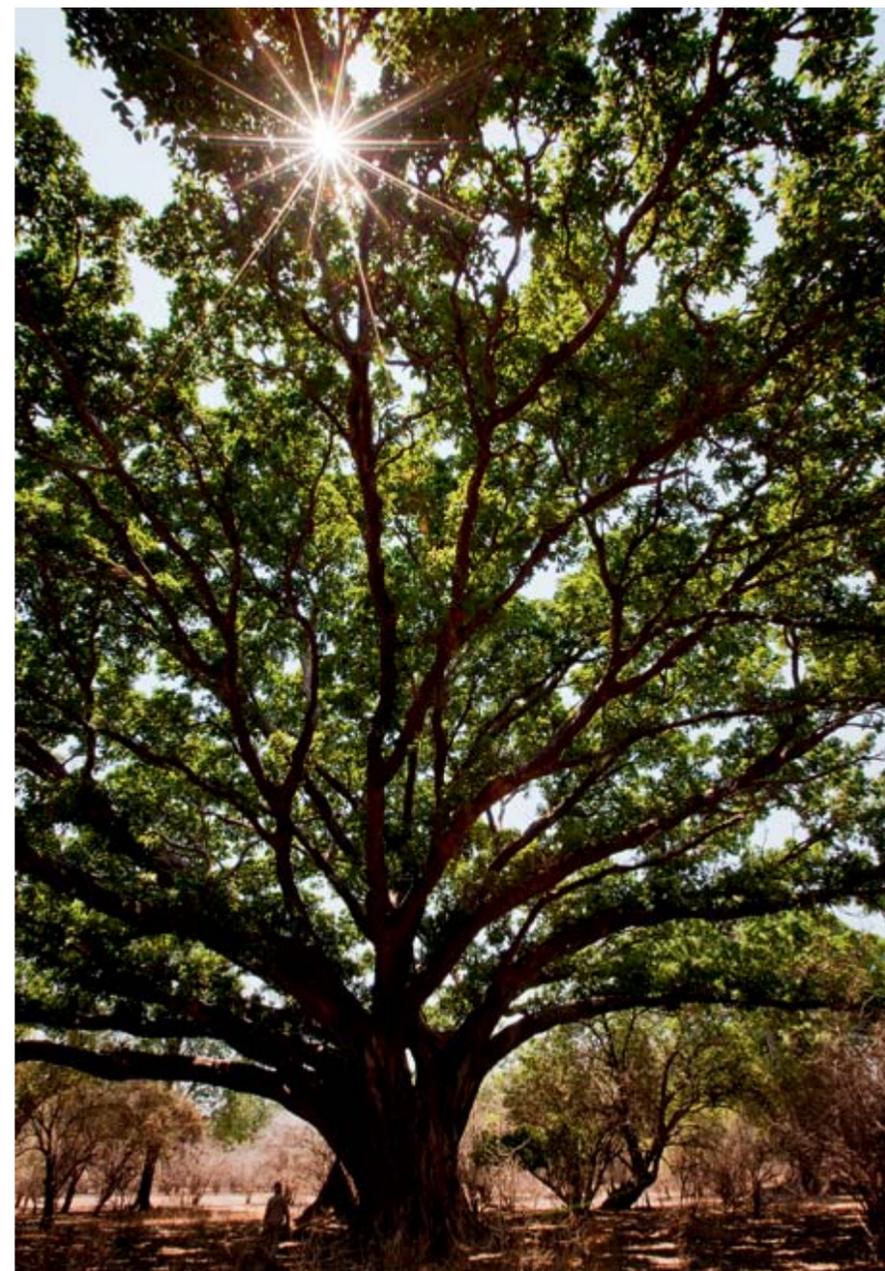
Zimbabwe's other protected areas have an equally strong grip on the people who live in and around them, and on those who have visited them. But they face some real challenges. Located in a nation wracked with political capriciousness, the sanctuaries are struggling. Ferreira has witnessed a lot of change. 'The parks aren't subsidised by the government any more,' he told me as we drove back to his camp on the banks of the Zambezi River. 'They have to be self-sufficient, but how are the rangers expected to run them with no money?'

During Zimbabwe's decade-long economic crisis and the collapse of the country's tourism industry, rangers have often been unable to patrol effectively because of shortages of fuel, vehicles, radios and other equipment, and maintenance staff have been hamstrung by a lack of essential materials. Today, the only income available to conservation efforts is from the tourists who come to Mana Pools to walk with guides like Ferreira, and from several conservation NGOs that are prepared to put up with Zimbabwe's politics.

The Zambezi Society is one such NGO, having supplied fuel and equipment to Mana Pools since the troubles began. According to Dick Pitman, who has been involved with the society since its foundation in 1982, there are still insufficient tools to manage the pristine 2 100-square-kilometre park, which forms the core area of a World Heritage Site. But, he adds, 'The past year has seen a marked improvement due to the – albeit cautious – return of tourists, and the adoption of the US dollar as legal tender.'

Parks authority lodges have been refurbished, campsite ablutions repaired and roads and signage improved. Radio and other communications systems are being upgraded and anti-poaching patrols are regularly deployed. 'There's still some way to go,' Pitman says, 'but if the present trend continues, the emphasis will shift from coping with day-to-day problems to planning for the future needs of biodiversity protection and a revitalised tourism industry.'

For the moment, guests still need to be self-sufficient to enjoy Mana Pools' superb wilderness. For those who prefer their visit to involve less hands-on camping, concessions such as Ferreira's Goliath Camp provide the solution. This unfenced, tented site on the banks of the Zambezi River, sheltered by two huge mahogany trees,



offers visitors luxury accommodation and unhindered views of the river, the Zambian escarpment and the animals that roam freely.

We arrived at the camp late in the afternoon. To escape the heat, a guide paddled us out to a shallow sandbank in the middle of the river, where we swam under a sky of expanding cumulonimbus clouds and kept an eye out for crocs and stray hippos. As the sun set, the escarpment glowed behind the eddying river and conversation eventually turned away from the country's problems. ▶

ABOVE Mana Pools National Park covers 2 000 square kilometres of Lower Zambezi riverfront. Here, trees such as the wild fig provide a shady canopy.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE A white-fronted bee-eater

OPPOSITE, BELOW Ignoring its enthralled audience, including guide Stretch Ferreira (in peaked cap), the bull elephant 'Slotman' enjoys a mini feast of acacia pods.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Guide Steve Edwards takes guests on an evening game drive in Matusadona National Park.



ZIMBABWE GUIDES

In western Zimbabwe, Hwange National Park has troubles of its own, and few people are more aware of them than Leon Varley. The 58-year-old guide has spent 20-plus years in Hwange and Chizarira national parks, several thousand days of them walking tens of thousands of kilometres.

As our group drove towards the northern part of the 14 600-square kilometre park, we came across a new open-cast coal mine, with graders and prefabricated housing. The mining town of Hwange has always been associated with coal,

but, according to Varley, the activity has never come so close to the protected zones. Around us, the woodland had been levelled and cleared, leaving a cavity the size of several rugby fields.

Varley was visibly perturbed. 'This mine shouldn't be developed here,' he said, 'but some government people are not committed to conservation, and if the decision came down to money or wildlife ... well, they would probably choose the money.' The coal deposits extend into the sanctuary. 'Who knows what will happen?' Varley mused.



THE GUIDES

Stretch Ferreira, Goliath Camp, Mana Pools National Park www.goliathsafaris.com

Leon Varley, Walk Africa, Hwange and Chizarira national parks www.walkafrica.com

Steve Edwards, Musango Safari Camp, Matusadona National Park www.musangosafaricamp.com

LEFT The patient observer. Leon Varley has been guiding walking tours in Hwange and Chizarira national parks for two decades. Visitors, once deterred by Zimbabwe's volcanic political situation, are dribbling back. It's a mixed blessing, says Varley. 'When times were bad, I had the whole area to myself. Now he must share its treasures, such as this African buffalo (ABOVE).

We entered the park itself and the bush swallowed up our concerns of mining and madmen. We drove to Varley's isolated camp on a bank overlooking the dry Lukosi River. It's a simple set-up with tents, beds and bucket showers. On the riverbank, an elephant was digging in search of underground water; we could hear its stomach gurgling and rumbling. That night, several more of the beasts wandered past our tent, their eyes aglow in the moonlight.

For several days, we got up early and walked for a few hours, then returned for lunch and to escape the heat before heading out again late in the afternoon. But we saw little wildlife. 'The game is skittish,' Varley told us, 'because the park

authorities have just dehorned most of the rhinos.' The area here is one of a number of rhino Intensive Protection Zones (IPZ) in the country. However, the authorities were unable to halt the tide of poaching in the other zones, so they decided to move most of the rhinos to Hwange, where a dedicated task force could monitor, protect and dehorn the animals. The project left the wildlife wary of humans.

'Rhinos are probably my favourite animals,' Varley claimed. 'Also, they're as thick as they come, so I feel an affinity with them...' he chuckled.

Varley's fellow guide Obert Sibanda picked up a fresh rhino track and we zig-zagged through the bush for several

hours. Little was moving in the heat, and voices were kept low. He whispered, 'The rhino's very near here; you can see it's been trying to lie down ... you can see from the spoor.'

Sibanda pointed to a dark shape lying beneath a scraggly mopane tree. The sleeping black rhino sported a huge horn. 'It must be one of the few that escaped the dehorning project,' Varley said. We approached the animal, crossing a small donga, but some oxpeckers noticed us creeping up to their host and called an alarm. Within seconds the rhino was on its feet, snorting and indignant. It made brief eye contact with us, and then turned and ran away through the woodland. ▶



Back at the camp that evening, around the fire, Varley reminisced about the days when he worked throughout the year with an average of five guests every day. These days, he's happy if he can get work for 120 days in the year, with an average of two guests per day. Like Pitman, he commented on the slow return of visitors to Hwange. 'One advantage of the so-called bad times was that I had the whole area to myself. Now all these blasted tourists are coming back!' he joked.

The subject turned to the pressures of running wildlife areas in a country desperate for food and money. Poaching is inevitable. 'I've picked up some 10 000 snares and bumped into poachers too many times to count,' Varley said. 'There have been a few gun battles too.'

The situation is even worse at Chizarira National Park, to the north. 'Chizarira is the biggest tragedy of all Zim's parks,' he continued. 'It's surrounded by lots of very hungry, desperate people. In 1989 there were 300 black rhinos there; by 1994 there were none.' Nevertheless, the area pulls him back time and again. His favourite walk is an 18-day trek through some of the wildest parts of the park. During that time, he says, 'I see no-one else except a poacher or two, and I cross just one road and two vehicle tracks. There can't be many places like that left. One day I want my ashes to be scattered there.'

spent my final week at Musango Safari Camp, on the shoreline of Lake Kariba near Matusadona National Park. The day before I arrived, conservationist Steve

Edwards and his team had rescued a lioness that had walked into a buffalo snare, which had tightened around the predator's chest, cutting deeply into her flesh and half suffocating her. For two weeks the cat had managed to survive by eating what her pride had caught. 'We got to this lioness just in time,' he told me.

Formerly a park warden at Matusadona, Victoria Falls and Zambezi national parks, the barrel-chested Edwards has been a senior ranger at most of Zimbabwe's other sanctuaries. The youngest-ever ranger for the country's parks authority, he worked his way from cadet to warden at the head office, where he was in charge of all transport, armoury, equipment and rhino horn and ivory stocks, and was unofficially

responsible for the national anti-poaching programme. 'Other wardens would call me and my team in to sort out poaching problems. We had some success, but my evidence started to incriminate some government staff, so they transferred me.'

In 1990, Edwards decided to leave the service. 'I was told I wasn't allowed to do any anti-poaching work in my new position as area manager for Mashonaland West,' he said. 'This was impossible, of course, and I was thrown in jail a few times and faced a fabricated murder charge.'

But he couldn't stay away from his beloved Matusadona, so he borrowed money to buy an exclusive concession to run his own small lodge on Musango Island, south-west of Tashinga, the park's

main camp. Surrounded by Lake Kariba, with views of the Zambezi escarpment on one side and an endless watery horizon on the other, the small, well-appointed lodge is undoubtedly dreamy and impressive. Edwards takes guests on boat trips to get close to wildlife on the shoreline, or game drives to explore further away.

Of course, there's the chance you'll encounter the black rhinos that – like in Hwange – roam freely here. As we headed off early one morning to see if we could find any, Edwards talked of his ongoing mission to help the park authorities battle poachers. It's the old tale of a lack of funding and equipment. 'Unless we commercialise our parks properly, Zimbabwe's wildlife is doomed,' he said.

However, unlike several other countries in Africa, Zimbabwe still has plenty of wild animals, even if conservation standards have fallen. Soon we found what we were looking for: two black rhinos, a mother and her calf. Stopping downwind of the animals, we got out of the vehicle. They began walking towards us, unaware of our presence. Thirty metres, 20 metres, 10 metres ... then they stopped. The mother raised her head, sniffing the air.

'Don't move a hair,' Edwards whispered. For several minutes, nothing

moved, then the rhinos ambled past. He chuckled. Despite its challenges, the country still offers some of Africa's finest wildlife interactions. 'As long as there is a monetary value attached to wildlife and wild areas in Zimbabwe, they will survive,' he enthused. 'But their value could also lead to their demise.'

AG

OPPOSITE, ABOVE At Mana Pools there is no shortage of hippos in the various water inlets that are fed by the nearby Zambezi River.

OPPOSITE, BELOW Steve Edwards, owner and manager of Musango Safari Camp (BELOW).

YOU CAN HELP

Zimbabwe has some of Africa's most beautiful national parks, all of which are cared for by the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (www.zimparks.org) and a number of non-profit organisations, including the following:

- **AWARE** www.awaretrust.org is a conservation trust run by veterinarians Keith Dutlow and Lisa Marabini, focusing on the welfare of Zimbabwe's wildlife and wildlife habitats.
- **Wild Horizons Wildlife Trust** www.wildhorizonstrust.org The trust's mission is to advance environmental conservation in Zimbabwe through hands-on research and community outreach programmes. It also manages a wildlife medical care facility and orphanage.
- **Wildlife & Environment Zimbabwe** www.zimwild.co.zw has been at the forefront of conservation since 1927, lobbying for the establishment of national parks and protected areas, assisting in their management and spreading knowledge about conservation and environmental issues.
- **The Zambezi Society** www.zamsoc.org is the only conservation group devoted solely to looking after the Zambezi River and its riparian areas, with a special focus on Mana Pools National Park and the surrounding areas that make up a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- **International Anti-Poaching Foundation** www.iapf.org Having left the Australian army, Damien Mander cashed in his life savings to start this anti-poaching training academy near the Victoria Falls.
- **Victoria Falls Anti-Poaching Unit** www.vfapu.org is dedicated to the preservation of the wildlife and natural habitat of the Victoria Falls area.
- **The Friends of Hwange Trust** www.friendsofhwange.org Since its inception in October 2005, the trust has been responsible for maintaining 10 waterholes in Hwange National Park.
- **Save Hwange** Funded by donations, the initiative works closely with The Friends of Hwange Trust to maintain boreholes, and also installs eco-friendly solar-powered waterpumps. Contact Mario Gomes on mgomes@yoafrica.com for more information, or visit the Save Hwange Facebook site.
- **The Tikki Hywood Trust** www.tikkihywoodtrust.org The trust tackles conservation issues throughout southern Africa, from drought and habitat loss to poaching. It also operates a rehabilitation centre for wild animals.

