



YEAR IN THE WILD
With Scott Ramsay

Kruger's wild north

As part of his year-long expedition to 31 of SA's nature reserves, photojournalist Scott Ramsay spent five weeks exploring the Kruger National Park. While the south proves popular with most visitors, it was the underrated north that captured his heart



Elephant charge! The elephants in the far north of the Kruger Park are more irascible than those in the south; the herds of Pafuri are able to move across the Limpopo River into Zimbabwe, where hunting still takes place, making them extra wary of humans.

Judging by the number of tourists who flock to the southern regions of the Kruger National Park, one could be forgiven for thinking that the north must be less interesting. But to me, the north of park seems wilder and more rewarding.

Because the north is more remote and there are fewer camps, there are far fewer tourists. It's not impossible to drive for hours without seeing another car.

The mopane trees stand out for their beauty, and there are also the impressive leadwood, jackalberry, nyala, fig and Natal mahogany trees along the Letaba, Shingwedzi

and Luvuvhu rivers. The floodplains and gorges of the Pafuri region in the far north are very different to anything else, and make this the most attractive part of the whole park. When it comes to animals, the vast mopane veld does tend to reduce grazing opportunities, so there are few large herds of zebra or impala. But there's plenty of everything else, including elephants, buffalo and predators, while birders are rewarded with special sightings that aren't possible in the south.

Letaba Camp is one of my favourites. It's always easy to spot elephants drinking in

the river. Massive sycamore fig trees provide ample shade for the bungalows.

At the camp's Elephant Hall museum, you can see the actual tusks of some of Kruger's biggest elephant bulls, including the Magnificent Seven that wandered the park from the 1930s to the 1980s. One bull, Shawu, still holds the record for the Kruger's longest tusk – a truly impressive 3,17m, weighing 52kg. Shawu's tusks are also the sixth longest of all African elephants.

The elevated Mopani Camp overlooks the Pioneer Dam, which is filled with crocodiles and hippos, and a wide array of water birds.

Look out for the Mooiplaas buffalo herd, numbering more than 1000, as well as numerous elephants and waterbuck which come to drink at the dam. Be sure to go on a night drive with guide Amos Gazide. There are several hyena dens in the road culverts, and one evening we saw some pups waiting patiently on the roadside for the alpha female.

Tourist numbers dwindle further as you venture north to Shingwedzi Camp. The quaint old chalets date back to the days of James Stevenson-Hamilton and Harry Wolhuter, who devoted their lives to establishing the fledgling national park in the early 1900s. In the north there's a definite sense of history which is lacking in the south.

Field guides Bishop Shilowa and Abel Maluleke at Shingwedzi are among the best I've encountered, and their knowledge of birds is superb. A walk with these experts is highly recommended.

On a guided morning drive we saw five lionesses with cubs walking down the road towards us. As the sun rose in the cold morning, we watched the lionesses stalking a lone male buffalo, but they didn't make the kill. The sighting was special because we were one of only two cars watching the lions -- something that would have been most unusual in the south, where traffic jams around sightings are common in the holiday months.

The most northerly camp is Punda Maria and, like Shingwedzi, it oozes history. The traditional chalets retain their original design, although the interiors have been modernised. The hilly scenery is spectacular, and baobab trees are increasingly common.

Again we were treated to a spectacular predator sighting. Field guide Thomas Mathebula took me out on a sunset drive and on our way back to camp we came across a female leopard stalking a male impala that was lying in the tall grass on the roadside.

Patiently, the leopard crept closer and closer, and after about 20 minutes, made its move in the blink of an eye. The leopard must have covered 10m in a split second, and the impala had no chance.

We watched the leopard eat part of the impala before disappearing, probably to fetch her cubs to finish the meal. We were the only people to witness the spectacle.

From Punda Maria, the park stretches another 50km north to the Pafuri region, on the borders of Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

After five weeks exploring SA's most famous park, I ended my trip at the private Wilderness Safaris Pafuri Camp, which is the only one in the area.

For me, the stretch between the Luvuvhu and Limpopo rivers is the Kruger's best kept secret. The flood plains are covered in acacia and fever tree forests through which plentiful wildlife wanders, including herds of buffalo, impala and zebra, while nyala and kudu browse in the thickets.

Lions, leopards and spotted hyenas can be seen and heard, but it's the bird life that makes Pafuri special. Because of the two rivers, the



diverse topography and Pafuri's location at the northern-most point of SA, it is one of the best places for birding in southern Africa.

As guide Brian Kelly mentioned, you will find rare species such as Pel's fishing owl, Bohm's spinetail, the mottled spinetail, the racket-tailed roller, grey-headed parrot, black-throated wattle eye, lemon-breasted canary and Dickinson's kestrel.

The floodplains and the pans of Pafuri have international accreditation as Ramsar sites, meaning that their conservation is of critical importance in a global context.

The unfenced, 20-room luxury Pafuri Camp is located on the northern banks of the Luvuvhu River, in the deep shade of evergreen trees. Elephants, impala, kudu, nyala, buffalo and sometimes lion come to drink from the river in front of camp.

Simply being at Pafuri is a wildlife experience. You can sit on your couch at your chalet, or at the pool, and watch everything come to you. It's almost intoxicating.

The land between the Limpopo and Luvuvhu rivers is owned by the Makuleke tribal community, so visitors are contributing directly to the conservation of this 24 000ha region, which is managed by SANParks on behalf of the community.

Every morning and afternoon, guests are taken on a guided drive or walk. Wilderness Safaris have exclusive rights to the concession so you won't encounter other tourists. The armed guides are allowed to get out of the Land Rovers and take guests walking wherever they choose.

During my stay, we encountered both leopard and lion on foot. We also watched a large herd of elephants rumbling through the fever tree forest, saw the gorgeous bush shrike, and went looking for Pel's fishing owls after dark.

Pafuri is believed to have the highest density of these large orange phantoms,



Top: SANParks guides Eric Maluleke and Thomas Mathebula explain to two guests the history of the archaeological site of Thulamela, just south of the Luvuvhu River. Middle, top: Entering Mopani Camp – one of the newest, and prettiest, in Kruger. Middle, bottom: The SANParks picnic site in Pafuri is unfenced, and nyala wander among the visitors. Birders should chat to ranger Frank Mabaso, an expert birder who has worked in the area for several years.



Top Hippos crash into the Luvuvhu River, which flows past the privately-run Pafuri Camp. Above: Visitors to Pafuri Camp are taken on night drives, when leopards are sometimes seen up close. Right: Martial eagle takes off; the north of the park is well-known for its abundant bird life.

which perch on branches over the river and swoop down to pluck barbel or bream from the water. Pafuri Camp also offers a multi-day trail, where guests sleep in safari tents at a location away from the main camp.

Every day, Brian leads guests on morning and afternoon walks. It's a superb way to experience this beautiful region.

Spending time at Pafuri was a fitting way to end my five weeks in the Kruger Park. While the south of the park may be convenient and popular with the masses, the north is more rewarding for adventurous travellers.

Lebombo Eco-Trail

The 500km, five-day, four-night Lebombo Eco-Trail is a guided 4x4 trail that explores the length of the Kruger Park, from Crocodile Bridge in the south to Pafuri in the far north. The venture, which is more an overland exploration than a 4x4 trail, follows the eastern boundary of the park, along the Lebombo mountains on the border with Mozambique. This gives visitors an opportunity to experience a part of the park that is rarely seen by regular tourists. A ranger in his own vehicle accompanies guests for the duration of the trail, offering bush interpretation that covers geology, biology and botany, as well as historical and cultural information. Clients are required to drive their own vehicles, cater for themselves and carry their own equipment, down to firewood and water. Guests even have to carry out their own rubbish until it can be disposed of at one of the camps. A maximum of four people per vehicle is allowed.

To book, phone 012 428 9111 or e-mail hestner.vandenberg@sanparks.org.

DON'T MISS KRUGER'S WILD NORTH

Nyalaland Wilderness Trail

The wilderness trails in Kruger give walkers an opportunity to explore the park's wilderness areas, where no other tourists are allowed.

Visitors sleep at the dedicated Nyalaland wilderness camp, and are guided by trails rangers Christopher Mutathi and David Nemukula on day walks into the surrounding area. This trail explores the area near the Luvuvhu River. Huge baobab trees, plentiful bird life and large herds of elephant are often seen; and lions sometimes make an appearance in camp, which has only a low fence. To book, tel 012 428 9111 or e-mail reservations@sanparks.org.

Thulamela

This fascinating and beautiful archaeological site is in the Pafuri region. Visitors can go on a guided tour from Punda Maria camp.

In 1983, ranger Philip Nel came across some fallen stone walls on a hilltop near the Luvuvhu River. Archaeologists started excavating in 1991 and found evidence that the area was inhabited by several hundred people from around 1200 AD. Thulamela was



Main picture and below: Early morning coffee and rusks at Wilderness Safaris' Pafuri Camp, which is set under huge jackalberry and mahogany trees, while diners are served under the stars in a boma.



Right: Some of the biggest elephant tusks in southern Africa are on display at Letaba's Elephant Hall, which gives an excellent history of the conservation of these awe-inspiring animals.

similar to places like Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe, which were the first examples of formalised settlements in southern Africa. These ancestors of the modern-day Shona and Venda people traded ivory and gold for glass beads from India and Chinese porcelain, both of which have been found at Thulamela.

To book a tour to Thulamela, contact Punda Maria camp on 013 735 6873.

Shipandani overnight hide

During the day, this little hide on the Tsendze River near Pioneer Dam is a good wildlife viewing spot, and it can also be booked for an overnight stay. Only basic mattresses are supplied, so remember to take sleeping bags and pillows. It makes for a wild experience! Book through Mopani Camp, tel 013 735 6535.

Who to contact

For Wilderness Safaris' Pafuri Camp, tel 011 807 1800 or go to www.pafuri.com. Cost is R1 795 per person per night, including meals and activities. For camps and wilderness trails in the north of Kruger, tel 012 428 9111, e-mail reservations@sanparks.org or www.sanparks.org.



Year in the Wild

Year in the Wild is a journey to 31 of SA's nature reserves, including all the national parks. I am travelling for a year to photograph and document the country's last remaining wild places, in a bid to raise awareness for their continued protection.

For blogs, photos and updates, which are uploaded via Evosat, go to www.yearinthewild.com and www.facebook.com/yearinthewild.

One of my sponsors is Total, who have had a long association with the Kruger Park. Total helped to fund the building of Olifants Camp in 1960 and in many other projects. These included the relocation of white rhinos from the Umfolozi Game Park to Kruger in 1961, the relocation of hippos to the Addo reserve in 1961, the relocation of eight elephants from Kruger to Hluhluwe in 1983, the establishment of Mopani Camp and the Elephant Hall at Letaba.

More recently, Total funded the "Keep Kruger Clean" campaign, which started in 1996 and continues to keep the country's largest national park free of litter.

