

Rhino Darting

by Nigel Overall

I was certainly in the right place at the right time I told myself as we bounced around in the back of the pick-up on our way out into the bush to meet up with the group of rhino scouts who had been tracking Tembinkodi.

Several days earlier the monitoring guards had reported that Tembinkodi's radio collar had come partly dislodged and had appeared to have caused her an open wound just above the left ear through rubbing.

It had been arranged that wild life vet Chris Foggin would stop in at the Midlands on his way to Matopos and examine Tembinkodi. However in order to do this she would first have to be tranquillised by darting, (an operation that is best done from a helicopter), and using a fixed winged light aircraft as an initial spotter plane. Carl Van Der Reit had made one of his light aircraft available but as no helicopter could be arranged the darting operation had to take place on foot by a ground crew who were to be directed in by the spotter plane from above.

Within a few minutes of meeting up with the scouts in the bush we heard the buzz of the plane above. Piloted by Chris Moore with Normal English as his spotter.

As the plane was searching for Tembinkodi Chris Foggin prepared his tranquilliser darts and Keith Pilz briefed the back up crew on how the operation was to be conducted, and reminded us of some tips and advice, like make sure you always keep a climbable tree within your sight !!

Being winter time there was less growth on the trees and the air crew had soon located Tembinkodi in the bush. By radio communication they started to guide the ground crew in through the bush to where Tembinkodi was quietly browsing on some bushes.

Once the ground crew had themselves got a visual on Tembinkodi, in order not to cause her any unnecessary disturbance, the plane gained a bit of height. The radio then fell silent as the ground crew worked themselves into a close enough position to fire a dart.

The first dart failed to take but she must have felt it because she set off at some speed further into the bush. It was by now mid afternoon and if this operation was to be successful she would have to be located again fairly swiftly as it would be getting dusk in a couple of hours.

Whilst waiting I produced some spare past copies of Sebakwe News from within my ruck sack and handed them round to the guards. They were delighted to see pictures of themselves and their friends and delighted that they could keep them to show around to the others when they got back to their camp.

Suddenly the radio came to life – the second dart had taken, the chase was now on !!



It was essential that we got to Tembinkodi as soon as possible after she had been tranquillised and without the use of a helicopter it was down to the back up ground crew to get there.

The spotter plane had kept a good visual on her as she ran further into the bush and Norman up in the plane had the task of directing both us in the vehicle and the on-foot darting crew to where she was heading.

With Astrid Huelin, (Chris Foggin's assistant vet), at the wheel we set off at great speed, violently bouncing along very rough bush tracks and then crashed our way through into the bush towards where Tembinkodi was heading. For a brief moment I thought to myself now would not be a good time to break a half shaft or get a puncture !!

Even though Tembinkodi had come to a stop wedged between two trees it was quite evident that not all the tranquilliser had been administered as she was still quite lively. Not being sure precisely how much had been administered, Chris Foggin was reluctant to give her more. He swiftly cut off the radio collar, cleaned out and inspected the wound before spraying it with some antiseptic and then instructed us each to retreat to safety up a tree before he administered the antidote.

Within a very short time we could hear Tembinkodi snorting as she crashed her way off into the bush none the worse for her ordeal, but hopefully a lot more comfortable without the radio collar rubbing any more.

Chris Foggin was satisfied that the wound was not too bad. Being winter it would not be so affected by the fly strike and now that the collar was removed it would heal fairly swiftly on its own.

To retrace our tracks back out of the bush in the pick-up we had to cut down some of the tree growth that earlier on our way in we had just crashed on through - still we were in a hurry then !!

Having returned the scouts back to their camp we made our way back to Nyangombe lodge. After Chris Foggin had repacked his vehicle for the next days onward journey down to Matopos we showered and refreshed with a cold beer and something to eat.

In the bar we were joined by Norman English who had safely landed again on the new air strip at Pitscottie Ranch. By the light of the log fire we discussed the pros and cons of the afternoons exercise.

Evening meal was taken under candle light again, not by choice but out of necessity as once again there was no electricity. In fact the power had been off for most of that day. The lack of power and bottled gas was something that had become normal in Zimbabwe these days and the staff at the Lodge had learned to live with it. They still provided us with a tasty meal followed by a scrumptious dessert.

