

The absent rhino

When you work for an organisation called Save the Rhino, inevitably the first question people ask when you return from a programme visit is: 'Did you see any rhinos?' I spent last Christmas looking after the Bonhams' dogs in the Chyulus Hills and whilst there I was lucky enough to spend some time with the Game scouts' rhino unit. The rhinos at Chyulus are incredibly elusive, so it was no surprise that I returned home having only seen spoor. As I boarded a plane to Zimbabwe to spend a fortnight working with Dambari Wildlife Trust, my hopes were much higher...

Cath Lawson | Office and Communications Manager

Based 25km from Bulawayo, Dambari Wildlife Trust (DWT) is staffed by Verity, Director; Nicky, Senior Researcher, and Adele, Logistics Manager. Previously, DWT has supported rhino ops in the surrounding national parks and we've assisted DWT by fundraising for these activities. Rhino ops are currently on hold until the implications of the Zimbabwe National Strategy Meeting are determined (which you can read more about on pages 16-17) but there was still lots to be done.

Funding for conservation projects is hard. Funding for staff salaries, office rent and all the other really dull stuff (that is absolutely necessary for an organisation to function) is near-impossible. So that was the focus of my time with DWT: identifying and researching ways of sourcing unrestricted funds (money that can be spent on the boring, vital stuff). I also gave the DWT team a crash course in writing fundraising proposals and, as it's my job to look after SRI's social media presence, in Facebook and Twitter (I have no doubt that @DambariWildlife will be Twitterati in no time at all!).

I was also lucky enough to spend some time helping Nicky launch a camera-trap

study of the rhinos in Matopos National Park (MNP). This study will help identify individuals and observe behaviour, and ultimately be used to assess rhino distribution and density. The great advantage of this study, which has been financed by SAVE Australia, is that it means that fortnightly, when the memory cards and batteries in the cameras need to be changed, DWT will

be able to provide logistical support to the rhino-monitoring team working in MNP.

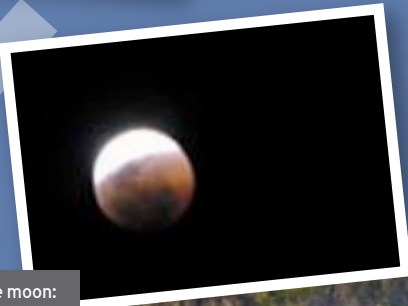
But it isn't all about rhinos; DWT also undertakes some truly fantastic work supporting fledgling Zimbabwean conservationists. Each year DWT provides a 10-month placement for three Zimbabwean undergraduate students studying wildlife conservation courses at local universities. The students are provided with accommodation and basic food as well as a small stipend and during the placement they gain experience in all aspects of DWT's work, whilst also conducting their own research project. DWT's current undergraduate cohort attended the talk I gave at an evening hosted by Wildlife & Environment Zimbabwe. It was wonderful to see how committed they are and that's thanks, in no small part, to the hard work of the DWT team.

So, did I see any rhino? Sadly not. Despite Verity's valiant efforts to seek them out, the rhinos were well and truly absent. That's not to say they're gone, just that they were hiding. The camera traps we'd so meticulously positioned subsequently caught pictures of both black and white. So they weren't camera-shy, just Cath-shy.

What I did see: a country that's fighting to get back on its feet; a team of three wonderfully welcoming individuals, working tirelessly and under incredibly difficult conditions; a community committed to the survival of its rhinos and wildlife more generally; a stunning African sky as the lunar eclipse occurred; and a cat that would bring a smile to the saddest of faces. Rhinos would have been great but, as it happens, everything else was a pretty amazing sight.

Thanks

I'm so very grateful to all at DWT (Verity, Nicky, Adele, Toto, Thandi and Toffee) for looking after me and making me feel so welcome during my time in Zimbabwe. Thanks also to WEZ for inviting me to speak.



Once in a blue moon: rhino spoor is easier to find than rhinos



Camera traps provide proof that Matopos' rhinos are alive and well