



## RHINO TREK SOUTH AFRICA 2012

On Monday 7 May 2012, four trained, fully kitted, burly bushmen headed on foot to explore the game reserves of South Africa. OK, so we weren't bushmen, but city dwellers with lots of wide-eyed enthusiasm and shiny new walking poles.

Jo Paulson | Former Events Manager

**A**fter a long flight, we transferred to Somkhanda Game Reserve and met with Xanthe and Kevin from Wildlands Conservation Trust and our walking guides for our welcomes and trip briefings (and beer and biltong).

We got up for breakfast on Monday morning at 6am, spent considerable time putting our gaiters on, got some water and set off! The two guides Dylan and Ivor took the lead with the rest of us following in line behind. We stayed quiet and rotated our positions so everyone got a chance to see what was up ahead.

Within 90 minutes of setting off, a beautiful white rhino and ridiculously cute calf appeared in front

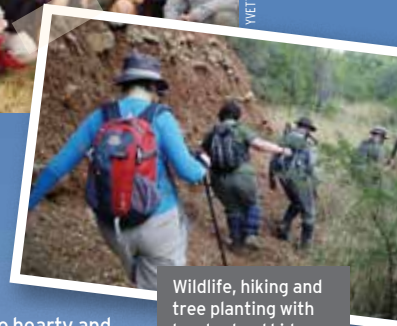
of us. We looped round in the direction they were heading and first saw a horn appearing out of the bushes, followed by a curious, big-footed, big-eared baby keen to be first into the open. The rest of the day (and indeed the trip) we came across all sorts of wildlife – tortoise, impala, zebra, wildebeest, buffalo, elephant, giraffe, praying mantis, monkeys, ostrich, crocodile, warthog and much more.

Each lunchtime, we'd stop for 90 minutes to escape the sun, finding a shady spot under a tree to rest and have some food. We'd hunt around in our daypacks to find the delicious treats provided by Wildlands – sandwiches, chocolate, nuts, crackers, biltong, fruit and sweets.

At the end of the day, when we'd walked our feet off and sweated a couple of litres, we'd stumble into camp to be



YVETTE CHAMBERLAIN



Wildlife, hiking and tree planting with local school kids made an eventful day on the trek!

greeted by a sight for sore eyes. A fire would be going with seats set out to rest our weary legs. We'd be handed a cold beer and await our turn in the surprisingly luxurious camp shower. Camp cook Patricia made hearty and tasty dinners – stews, braais, spaghetti bolognese, baked potatoes and steak.

Night-time was always interesting, as we were each assigned an hour-long shift, when we had to watch for animals and keep the fire going: a little scary for we city-dwellers as it was difficult to distinguish between a fig dropping from a tree and the leopard that was surely about to pounce. One night, Paul was convinced a hyena was in camp, to find on closer inspection that it was a camper having a nightmare!

Day three was particularly special. Dylan from Zululand Rhino Reserve joined us as we walked along the Mkhuzi river. We walked through community land, allowing us to see how people live in rural areas, while Dylan explained

### Grants

The RTSA team's fundraising was split three ways, with SRI, Wildlands Conservation Trust and Hluhluwe-Imfolozi Park each receiving £3,430. This helped cover Bantam hangar costs, a brush-cutter, chainsaw, 6 x Landcruiser tyres and an industrial drill. Colchester Zoo's Action for the Wild awarded £4,443 for 10 x digital 2-way radios and spare batteries. Safari de Peaugres gave €2,000 towards the Bantam's hangar; SRI gave £3,481 from miscellaneous donations and SRI's core funds. Finally, USFWS RTCF awarded \$23,105 for PPL renewals, microlight costs and various equipment and items for the Park. Our thanks to all these donors.





“It was an experience I will treasure forever. To see wild animals in their natural habitat and actually be amongst them on foot was amazing.”  
Paul



Dirk and Jo take to the skies on a routine patrol flight

## Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park visit

the work he does building relationships with local communities. We stopped at a school to help plant some trees with some very excited children. We saw the trees planted by the 2010 trip and were amazed at how big they had grown.

We hopped over the fence into Zululand Rhino Reserve and immediately came across a huge herd of wildebeest that smelled us and legged it. In the afternoon, we came across a bull elephant heading in our direction, so we scarpered into the long grass and went to ground to show we weren't a threat. He stopped to snack on a tree before going on his way. That was quite a thrill.

At the end of day five, we staggered into Leopard Lodge, a stunning five-star resort in Zululand Rhino Reserve. We were welcomed with a wet towel and cocktail and shown to our luxurious rooms to have our first proper shower in a week. Dinner was top-class and we were treated to Zulu dancers.



After the trek, the team transferred to Hluhluwe Game Reserve, where we were met by Section Ranger Dirk Swart. We immediately had a demonstration of the first-class piloting skills of Makhamsisa Section Ranger Lawrence Munro as he flew overhead in the Bantam plane. Dirk wanted to show us the plane in action, as Save the Rhino had put together the funding for them both to get their Private Pilot's Licenses and to cover the running costs for the plane.

We then headed off on the back of Dirk's truck with some of his rangers to explore the Reserve. Very shortly we had a demonstration of the usefulness of the Bantam. Dirk got a call through on his walkie-talkie saying a buffalo had broken out of the Reserve and was headed towards the local community. He immediately contacted Lawrence, who was still in the air, to ask him to fly over the area. Before we knew it, Lawrence had found the buffalo and was able to direct the ground team to round it up. Without the plane, it would have taken many man hours to track down the escapee, by which time it could have caused much damage within in the community.

Travelling through the Reserve, we spotted many rhinos on our way to visit some of the outposts where the rangers live. It was humbling to see their basic conditions, but fantastic to see that Save the Rhino's funding has helped them, for example, by providing solar panels

so they can charge their radios. We chatted to the field rangers and heard of their enthusiasm for protecting rhinos and willingness to face dangerous situations when required.

The rest of the team headed off the next day, but I was lucky enough to stay on with Dirk to learn more about the programme and help out where I could. Dirk showed me the computer systems used to track patrol routes and log animal sightings to ensure sufficient ground is being covered and understand rhino distribution. I also saw the programme they use to track the Bantam's flights that cover the whole of Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park.

The next day, Dirk took me for a routine patrol flight in the Bantam. We flew around the perimeter of the Park looking for breaks in the fence, any animals outside the boundary, cars that had stopped on the corridor road between the two Reserves and anything else untoward. We also flew over the wilderness area, which is difficult to patrol by foot due to the intentional lack of management tracks. Then it was back home to work on Dirk's goals for 2012-13 in time for a meeting the following day.

At the meeting, we met Dirk's boss and the other Section Ranger for Hluhluwe, as well as the anti-poaching team leader and scientific advisors. Several subjects were covered, including a plan to tackle alien plant species and ensuring rhino sightings' data is captured correctly by the rangers. A plan was put in place to coordinate teams on the ground with Bantam flights on specific days to improve the sightings of black rhinos and there was discussion on which white rhinos were most suitable for relocation to another park.

**I'd like to offer Dirk thanks for spending the time showing me how things work on the ground (and in the air!) and for all the hard work you and your team put in to protecting these amazing creatures.**