

LAWRENCE NKOSIKHONA NENE

uMkhuze Game Reserve is a 40,000-hectare reserve within the iSimangaliso Wetland Park; a UNESCO World Heritage Site in northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. While 40,000 hectares may seem like a huge area, uMkhuze is much smaller compared to many other South African parks, sometimes even referred to as the 'postage stamp' reserve! It is home to an enormous number of species, including black and white rhinos. We recently spoke to **Section Ranger Lawrence Nkosikhona Nene** to find out what a day is like at uMkhuze Game Reserve.

What is a day like for you at uMkhuze?

Since I began working at uMkhuze eight years ago, my day has changed a lot, but now, as the Mshopi Section Ranger, my first duty is to check in with my teams at 06:00. In these calls we share plans for our daily patrols and decide on logistics, including equipment deliveries and any specific issues throughout the day. After this I spend my time working with the team to keep our wildlife safe, monitoring our equipment around the Reserve, like our fence-line cameras. If an incident takes place, we react instantly: we cannot afford to waste any time. Sometimes people attempt to come into the Reserve at night: we're always ready, no matter what.

What's the wildlife like at uMkhuze?

uMkhuze is a 'Big Five' Reserve, which means that we have lion, leopard, buffalo, elephant and rhino. But there are many other species, including large herds of impala, giraffe, hyena, kudu, wildebeest and nyala, and cheetah and wild dogs. That's not mentioning any of our bird species! uMkhuze has a huge bird population: at the last count there were 420 different species.

Do you see rhinos every day?

Unfortunately, I don't see rhinos every day, but our rhino monitors do. They go out each morning to look for both black and white rhinos. This helps us to know each rhinos' location and health, and monitor our rhino population.

uMkhuze is relatively small compared to other places, such as Kruger National Park. Does this bring different challenges to your work?

At the moment our team deals with around two incursions into the Reserve each day, sometimes up to four or five. On patrol, rangers come across snares, people hunting with dogs, vulture poisoning, rhino poaching and illegal logging. Other parks like Kruger are much bigger than uMkhuze, but I think that we're all facing these challenges. It's tough doing this work, so our main priority is ensuring we have enough capacity and resource to respond to every incident, so that wildlife and this habitat remain protected.

What inspired you to become a Section Ranger?

I'm passionate about wildlife and I wanted to do something to help endangered species.

Each day I get to do something to achieve this. I love seeing the populations of endangered species increase, and know that if that species lives at uMkhuze, we're doing our part to help.

How has Covid-19 affected uMkhuze?

In March, when lockdown began in South Africa, many of our staff were on leave and weren't able to return to work for almost a month because of the restrictions. This meant it was very hard for others as they had to stay at work, with no break, for much longer than usual. Thankfully they were able to come back, but as tourism stopped, we have lost a significant amount of income, and this is our biggest challenge from Covid-19.

What's the hardest thing about your job?

I want to ensure that my team are doing their best and feel valued for doing so. We often don't have enough funds for more resources and I find this part of my job the most challenging. When we have a shortage of staff, it impacts all of our law enforcement operations and how we deal with anti-poaching patrols, so it's important to me that my team is happy.

What are your aims for the future?

I want to keep learning and build my career. I would love to be a Conservation Manager, supporting every effort to protect wildlife across the Reserve.

DAVE ROBERTSON

