



APPETITE FOR ADVENTURE

With ever more people wanting to explore the bush on foot, field guide training has become hugely popular. *Wild* joins a course near Pafuri in Kruger's far north. **By Albie Venter**

“We try to remove all unnecessary barriers between our students and the wilderness.”

Walking among large animals is a huge drawcard for both guides and guests. Being able to get within a reasonable distance from an elephant herd and viewing them without disturbance on foot is a great rush. Intense training is involved to make a potentially problematic situation seem effortless. The Field Guides Association of South Africa (FGASA) stipulates that students wanting to qualify as a trail guide back-up need a minimum of 50 hours on foot in dangerous game territory, while lead trail guides have to rack up at least 300 hours.

On the day I arrived on my field-guide course I was expertly led past a few dozen buffalo, through a wonderful riparian landscape of ana trees and isolated baobabs, their clawing branches gloved in dense deep green, mid-summer foliage. Leading the walk was a young woman by the name of Kelsey Cleland, from the United States, who had started her training only a few weeks before.

As with all learning activities, the initial curve is steep, yet within a few weeks students are taking their own walks. Except for obvious features such as terrain

and wind direction, numerous aspects need to be checked by a guide prior to approaching a sighting on foot. Not to mention seeing the animal before anyone else in the first place. The social make-up of the herd, even the mood of individual animals are all subtle clues that need to be observed and evaluated by a trail guide before deciding whether an approach is possible. These things cannot be taught in a classroom nor by someone without a vast reservoir of personal experience. To get young and old comfortable around Africa's giants, each encounter is used as a learning opportunity until it becomes second nature.

Each instructor has years, often decades, of experience. Take Bruce and Dee Lawson who head up EcoTraining at Makuleke, the contractual park in the north of Kruger. With more than 12 500 hours logged leading walking safaris alone, Bruce is one of South Africa's most experienced wildlife guides. Walking is a way of life for him. Totally attuned to nature, he misses nothing and effortlessly points out green-capped eremomelas in the tree canopy or a Böhm's spinetail in flight. And if a 10 cm bird in flight cannot ▶

THE LIE OF THE LAND

Pafuri is the furthest flung, northernmost corner of the Kruger National Park, wedged between the Luvuvhu and Limpopo rivers and tapering to the point in the east where South Africa meets Zimbabwe and Mozambique at a place called Crooks' Corner. The area got its name from an era when traders, hunters, poachers, gun runners and other shady characters made this spot their home. A strategic spot, as anyone running from the law could jump the border and evade whichever country's authorities came knocking. The most famous of these, Bvekenya Barnard, was immortalised in TV Bulpin's *The Ivory Trail*. Even Kipling added flair to the region by coining the much-quoted "great grey-green greasy Limpopo" of "The Elephant's Child" in his *Just So Stories*.

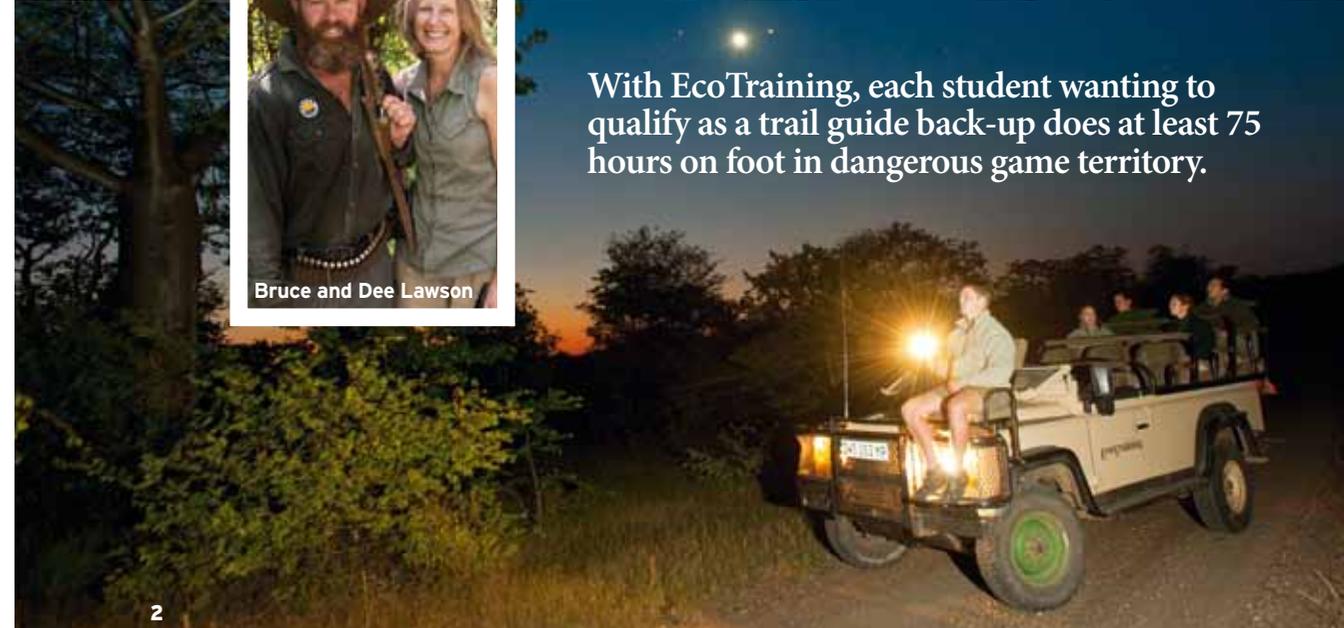
Pafuri is well-known as a birding hot spot. The who's who of the birding world make Pafuri their home, whether permanently or during the summer months when hundreds of migrants arrive for the season. Think Pel's fishing-owl, eastern nicator, grey-headed parrots, racket-tailed and broad-billed rollers, black-throated wattle-eye, three-banded courser, pennant-winged nightjar. A host of courses are aimed at birders of all levels. A lesser-known fact is that the area is the most bio-diverse section of the entire Kruger. More species of plants are compacted here than in any other part of the park. Why? The more plants, both biomass and species, the more primary consumers as well as secondary consumers occur.

1 Guides-in-training learn the correct approach for viewing buffalo on foot. 2 Students take part in an evening game drive, another opportunity to learn about the bush. 3 Days start well before sunrise and include daily walks and game drives.



Bruce and Dee Lawson

With EcoTraining, each student wanting to qualify as a trail guide back-up does at least 75 hours on foot in dangerous game territory.



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elude him, much less so a six-ton elephant, of which there are large herds at Pafuri. The Limpopo floodplain is also home to buffalo, enormous baobabs and Ramsar wetlands with rare and sought-after birds. Plus there is the freedom to access hidden spots on foot.

In 1998, the Makuleke people, who were forcibly removed from the area in 1969, successfully lodged the first land claim within the Kruger National Park, sending shivers of fear through many as the future of this beloved park seemed to hang in the balance. Those initial fears were soon put to rest though when the claimants, who now own the section between the Luvuvhu and Limpopo rivers known as the Makuleke Contract Park, approached some of Africa's leading ecotourism companies and granted them concession rights while SANParks continued to manage the ecosystem. One of the companies was EcoTraining, Africa's first dedicated field-guide training provider.

The Wilderness Trails Guide course gives guides an opportunity to gain more

hours on foot in dangerous game areas. Five nights are spent in the Makuleke wilderness, with nothing more than whatever they can fit into their backpack and a healthy appetite for adventure. Should participants have a 'trail guide' back-up qualification, the guide can act as official back-up, thereby gaining trail experience. The good news is that this course is not limited to aspirant guides, but is available to anyone willing to do a nightwatch shift in lion territory.

On my last night, as the moonlight carved mottled shadows on the mesh window of my tent, I listened to the call of an African wood owl and the distant boom of a lone lion. My mind wandered to something Anton Lategan, owner of EcoTraining, had said me: "We try to remove all unnecessary, glamorous barriers between our students and the wilderness." I hope that when the students finish their course and start their careers in the tourism industry, they will share the magic they were privy to with their guests. It is an unpolished privilege to be so immersed in pure wilderness. 🐾

IS IT FOR YOU?

The Makuleke Contract Park is where EcoTraining hosts a variety of courses aimed at both aspirant guides who want to make nature guiding a career and anyone else with a keen interest in nature. You don't have to sit through all the detailed lectures, rigorous exams and stressful practical assessments that are necessary for today's professional field guide. You can join a practical course where you will be introduced to all the wonders of nature in one of South Africa's most remarkable wildernesses, without the stress of exams.

The EcoQuest course of either one or two weeks, for example, is aimed at people with a keen interest in wildlife and the ecology surrounding it. If you want to learn only about big game, this course is not for you. If, however, you want to learn about mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, insects, fish, the plants they feed on, the soils in which these plants grow as well as the rocks which give rise to the soils, then this is the course for you. Even the stars that pierce the Lowveld night will become old friends when your instructor picks a way through the sprinkled expanse, identifying and explaining the constellations. No night in the wilderness will ever be the same again.

Rates Seven-day EcoQuest course R7 200 for South Africans, 14-day course R15 600. If you've got plenty of time, there's a 28-day option. For birding enthusiasts, there is a seven-day Birding in the Bush course (R6 900). Training as a FGASA-certified field guide takes 55 days, while a year-long course prepares students to work as trail guides. Contact 013-752-2532 or www.ecotraining.co.za

1 A Swainson's francolin poses on a branch. Trainee guides must be able to identify birds by their calls and on sight. 2 A lion kill is a dream sighting and a chance for participants to learn about animal behaviour. 3 Trails in the Makuleke Contract Park meander through a landscape fringed with lala palms. 4 The art of interpreting tracks is developed through practice. 5 The sundowner stop is a lesson in hosting. 6 Students stay in comfortable safari tents.

