

GIRLS GONE

birding

RACHEL LANG LAUGHED AND LEARNT ON
A BUSH BIRDWATCHING COURSE IN THE
KRUGER'S REMOTE MAKULEKE CONCESSION

What happens when the vibrant party of birdwatchers you're with are just as colourful as the birds themselves? When the quiet, contemplative moments so necessary for taking in new information are matched by fits of laughter? The helpless, stomach-crunching kind that makes you wonder—in between thinking about comb ducks and red-backed shrikes—whether you'll have developed a six-pack by the end of the week. It was like being the naughty kid I never was at school, except that our feathered subjects were far more fascinating, and our classroom was the boundless African bushveld.

Photographs by Lauren de Vos



he week-long EcoTraining Birding in the Bush course I attended with my fellow bush-loving friend Lauren de Vos took place in the northern Kruger National Park's remote Makuleke Concession. The area could arguably be described as the Swarovski of South African birding destinations. Although the 24 000-hectare region forms only 1% of the Kruger's total surface area, it supports 90% of all bird genera recorded in the park (more than 450 species). With 34 kilometres of river frontage, with the Limpopo River and an equal stretch of the softly flowing Luvuvhu River fringed by an impressive array of habitat types, it's no wonder twitchers flock to the region, binoculars in hand, to notch up their list of 'lifers'.

Interestingly, the area also falls within a convergence zone of tropical and subtropical bird species, a cross-over that brings out new and exciting arrivals each year. This encompasses a variety of 'specials' including those of the human kind—most notably, our legendary guide, Bruce Lawson.

Bruce and his wife, Dee, have lived in EcoTraining's rustic Makuleke camp for the last eight years. "The attractive thing about where we are and what we do", he says, "is

When we entered the magical yellow-green fever tree forest, it was difficult to know where to look: the leafy riparian canopy was wild with activity.

how simple it is. We've got no electricity [the camp makes use of solar lanterns], no cellphone reception, which is absolutely fantastic, and we live in a tent. We take nothing for granted here; I can walk out of our tent to go to the kitchen, which is

only 20 metres away, and meet a big bull elephant blocking my way. Every day is an adventure."

One of the first things Bruce told us to do was take off our watches. "I want you to experience living in the moment. Let me worry about what happens while you just concentrate on getting in touch with the wilderness inside you."

Bruce's dad, Peter, is an ornithologist

floodplains, every so often bunching up around Bruce to learn from his experienced birder's eye and ear. Being able to identify bird songs is one of the most helpful and important skills for any budding avian admirer. "Ninety-nine percent of the birds I see are located through their calls," said Bruce.

A drop of sweat slid down my chin and neck. Although it was only 8 a.m., the sun

Special sights and Stories

The Makuleke Concession affords prime access to some spectacular sites of special interest, quite aside from their birdwatching opportunities. Evening game drives saw our group perched atop sun-warmed boulders, sipping sundowners, at Lanner Gorge. Named for the lanner falcon, the gorge is 11km long and forms the boundary between the Kruger National Park to the south and the Makuleke Concession to the north. A daytime hike to a lookout over the archaeological site of Thulamela (built by the same early civilisation that built the Great Zimbabwe ruins and inhabited the Mapungubwe area) was another major highlight. Legend has it that a former chief used to throw criminals and enemies to their death from the highest points of the gorge. Visits to Crook's Corner (specifically, the intersection of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique—but more broadly applicable to the Makuleke area's wild 'frontier' history) were rich with both wildlife sightings and history. Bruce is a veritable goldmine of interesting facts, interspersing bird sightings with fascinating anecdotes. Standing silently at the plaque commemorating the infamous Stephanus "Bvekenya" Barnard—another of history's dubious but undoubtedly interesting characters—in the late afternoon heat, with the whirring of cicadas as our only accompaniment, was a transporative experience.



and passed on his interest in birds to his son from a young age "through the process of osmosis".

Another of the things we were instructed to do was lock up any food, lest some hairy-tailed local would find its way into our rooms—rustic yet spacious en-suite tents. At this, however, Lauren and I were to fail miserably, and pay the consequences!

Slowly (as is the essential pace for birdwatching), we weaved our way in one-by-one formation across dry

was beaming down on us, lighting up tall wisps of cat's-tail grass and reflecting off the leaves of Northern lala palms. "Work harder, work harder," urged Cape turtle doves from a dry leadwood branch as I diligently scribbled down the name of each new species. Mosque swallows swept the air above us and Natal francolins started up their rusty engines.

When we entered the magical yellow-green fever tree forest, it was difficult to know where to look: the leafy riparian canopy was wild with activity.

"Listen! A lemon-breasted canary." There was also the distinctive cry of a trumpeter hornbill and, just then, a flash of bright blue, greeting my interest with a familiar trill—a woodland kingfisher.

I gave up trying to write down everything and tucked away my notebook in favour of being fully present and immersing myself in the arboreal assemblage of grey-headed parrots,

iridescent Meve's starlings, European bee-eaters, white-browed scrub-robins and a variety of other small passerines partaking in aerial sallies. I was enjoying myself so much, in fact, that I tumbled right over a dry branch in the path, which caused an outburst of laughter from both me and Lauren. After a few hours, we stopped to rest under big fever trees in soft filtered light, eating biltong and a



PREVIOUS SPREAD:

cursed packet of dried fruit that would play a role in the events that unfolded that night:

ABOVE:

"Rach! Listen... It's right outside our tent!" Shaken awake from Lauren's whisper, I took in a large rustling sound. Last night's elephant was back, I thought. I imagined him rustling and chewing leaves against the canvas. With this wonderful thought, I prepared to sink back into blissful oblivion. Suddenly there was a loud thud followed by clattering and clunking... what the!? The peaceful elephant of my thoughts had

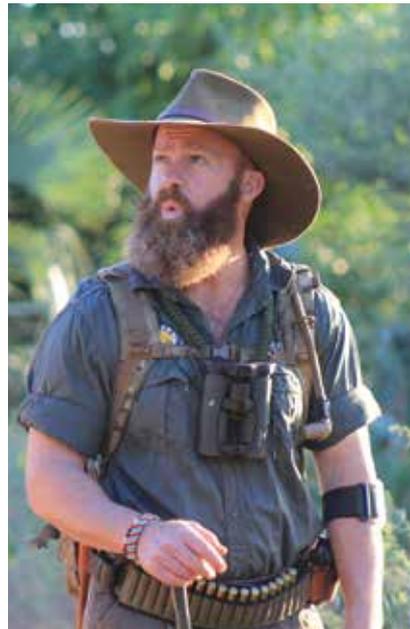
OPPOSITE:

Conservation and community

The Makuleke Concession represents a turning point in South Africa's conservation history. Historically the land of the Makuleke people, the area was cordoned off as part of the Kruger National Park in 1969 under apartheid rule and the community forcibly removed. In 1996, the Makuleke community submitted a land claim; the result is the concession as it stands today, which the community elected to devote to tourism, rather than resettlement. Daily walks in the veld with Bruce hint at the region's long human history: Shards of pottery conjure memories as recent as the 1950s and as old as the Iron Age communities that used the same land, while even older Acheulean hand axes point to nearly 1.4 million years of human habitation. The Limpopo and Luvuvhu rivers have long made this region habitable, providing fertile settling lands for people: from early human ancestors, to pastoralists, ancient trade networks and, even later, colonial miscreants bent on adventure and wealth on the infamous Ivory Trail. Today, the area remains a reminder of the intersection of humans and the environment. Anti-poaching patrols are taken seriously, with South African National Parks field rangers tasked with regulating poaching at the intersection of three countries. If anything, EcoTraining's placement here is poignant: Reconnection with wilderness will hopefully spark an interest in the larger issues at hand for those who participate. As Bruce so passionately put it to me on one game drive: "We are really only catalysts for broader change; in guiding someone to some kind of personal inspiration in wilderness, we [field guides] hopefully allow one more person to take an interest, and take action."

turned into an angry tusker crashing into our verandah! "It's inside!"

Lauren's headlamp lit up the scene of the crime: Sticky dried peaches flung about, a fallen water bottle and a crackly, emptied plastic packet told the story. My 'elephant' was none other than an intrepid,



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT:

mischievous rodent. It was these little moments of hilarity shared with good friends, scattered throughout an informative and adventurous trip, which made for such an unforgettable experience.

"We only stop for things with feathers," Bruce said, grinning. Luckily, the large buffalo herd we came upon had attracted a flock of red-billed oxpeckers while cattle egrets trailed behind old 'dagga boys' (buffalo bulls that have left the breeding herd), catching the insects stirred from the grass.

Afternoon birdwatching sessions were done from an open Land Rover, bumping over dirt roads beside Mopani veld or beside rocky koppies with baobabs in bright-green dress. If only these trees could talk, I mused, what marvellous

stories would they tell about the area's rich history, the ancestral home of the Makuleke people?

We saw a number of fantastic raptors on these drives: a long-crested eagle (the 'Elvis bird'), a juvenile martial eagle, several resident tawnies—and to our great delight, a Pel's fishing owl, silently hunkering on a fallen branch beside the Limpopo.

Although birding was our focus, the course offered so much more: a meaningful break from city life and technology, new friendships and the strengthening of old ones, and freedom to laugh and learn simultaneously. As Bruce says, "The best way to study birds is when you're having so much fun, you don't even realise you're learning!" ☺

Helpful tips

Water: There is a borehole at the camp and water is safe to drink—but if you're not used to its different taste, small bottles of still water are available to buy, although we would suggest bringing your own larger container.

Shoes: Thorns will go straight through normal sports takkies, so proper sturdy hiking boots for walks are essential.

Bird sounds: Downloading a bird-sound app (Sasol eBirds of Southern Africa, or Roberts VII Multimedia Birds of Southern Africa) on your phone is a great help.

Temperatures at the camp: Hot summers (average 40°C) and warm, dry winters (average minimum 9.3°C and average maximum 26.3°C). A protective sun lotion and hat are not to be left at home.

No electricity: The camp is unfenced, so you will need a strong torch or headlamp for walking around at night. There is a generator at the main dining area where you can charge torches or cameras during the day.

Malaria: It's a malaria area so please take precautions.

No cellphone signal: The camp's satellite phone is for emergency use only.

Binoculars: This is perhaps the most important item that you will pack; buy, borrow or beg, but make sure you have a high-quality pair of optics.

Field guides: Peruse the camp's library early on in your trip. Hidden between the field guides, you will find historical texts such as TV Bulpin's *The Ivory Trail*—a wonderful aid to immerse you in the unique history (both ecological and anthropological) that makes the Makuleke so special. In short, take your binos and bird books, but pack an unquenchable sense of curiosity and a good old-fashioned dose of adventurous spirit!

To book a course or find out more:

Tel: 013 752 2532

E-mail: enquiries@ecotraining.co.za
www.ecotraining.co.za