

APPRENTICE FIELD GUIDE AT 71

CLARE WILSON SHARES HER JOURNEY IN THE BUSH WITH ECOTRAINING

Images: Scott Ramsay



At the age of 71, Clare Wilson enrolled in an EcoTraining Career Course, packed her bags and headed north for the bush.

Although she had been inspired by the EcoTraining Guides on WildEarth, Wilson had never dreamt of becoming an Apprentice Field Guide herself.

Her journey to and in the bush had been far from a holiday with five-star frills. Her recent years had been spent at home, caring for her beloved husband Rory through his Alzheimers journey. Halfway through this, she went through a cancer, mastectomy, chemotherapy, and radiation journey herself.

“Searching for solace after the death of my husband four months earlier, I trusted in the bush. In our fifty year marriage we’d always gone to the bush to top up and I now really needed topping up. It was the longest, least expensive (compared to being a guest in a lodge) and closest to-the-ground way of being in the wilderness that I could find. Fifty-five days, living in tents and alongside others who also loved the



bush sounded like just the right thing for me to do,” said Wilson.

Wilson was encouraged to find course organisers were not at all phased that she had a below knee amputation, requiring only that she could undertake the daily 2 - 3 km trail walks, a distance which she knew was easily within her capabilities.

The course left no time for lying around. “Awake at 05h30, coffee at 06h00 and in the vehicle for a drive or else on foot for a trail by 06h30, then back for breakfast at 10h30 with tight deadlines after that for lectures, study workbooks to be filled out, and out again for afternoon drive or walk, supper, some night time studying for the next day’s test on today’s content lecture, then to bed to build up for another long day the next day,” said Wilson.

As the days passed, her sense of adventure grew stronger and with that, she became more confident. She recalls the wonderful moments in nature that reawakened her senses and sense of self.

“Walking through fever tree forests, sleeping out under the stars, climbing the incredible Lanner and Mutali Gorges in Makuleke, walking past grazing buffalo, tea breaks next to hippo ponds and sundowners on the sands of the Limpopo River, all in the company of very special people, both fellow students

and instructors. I came through it all knowing that while I’m a 71-year-old, one-legged, one-boobed and widowed Apprentice Field Guide. I’ll be okay,” said Wilson.

For Wilson, this seems to only be the start of a new journey into a new version of life. She’s looking forward to adding to what she learnt of the Savannah Biome, by now deliberately focusing on what she can learn about the Fynbos and Renosterveld Biomes closer to home in Cape Town.

She sees herself following up with further EcoTraining add-on courses and has just completed their Online Birding Enthusiast Course.

Wilson is living proof that no matter what life throws at you, you can always pick yourself up and move forward.

“Although I’d spent a lifetime of being in the bush before this, it astounds me how little I knew about how the whole lot fits together. The geology and the climate affects which plants will grow and this affects which animals will survive. Then there are the issues of conservation and human habitation, let alone the phenomenon of the night sky. After so many decades under it, even with all the camping I have done in my life, I knew close to nothing beyond the four pointers. I still know relatively so little. This course brought



it all together under one umbrella. It was awesome! I’ve made a start now and am so looking forward to learning more. I’ll be watching and learning” said Wilson.

As a newly qualified Apprentice Field Guide, Wilson is looking forward to getting back into the bush as often as possible.

“I’m watching out for how I can fulfil the FGASA requirements for practice and at the same time plan little adventures, perhaps with others like myself who find themselves on the other side of a life they knew and loved and now having to find new ways of getting into the bush,” said Wilson.

Inspired by Clare Wilson’s journey?

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