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WildlifeCampus offers complementary course content to keep your knowledge sharp!

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Plus other services offered by Wild Dreams Hospitality to help boost your career.

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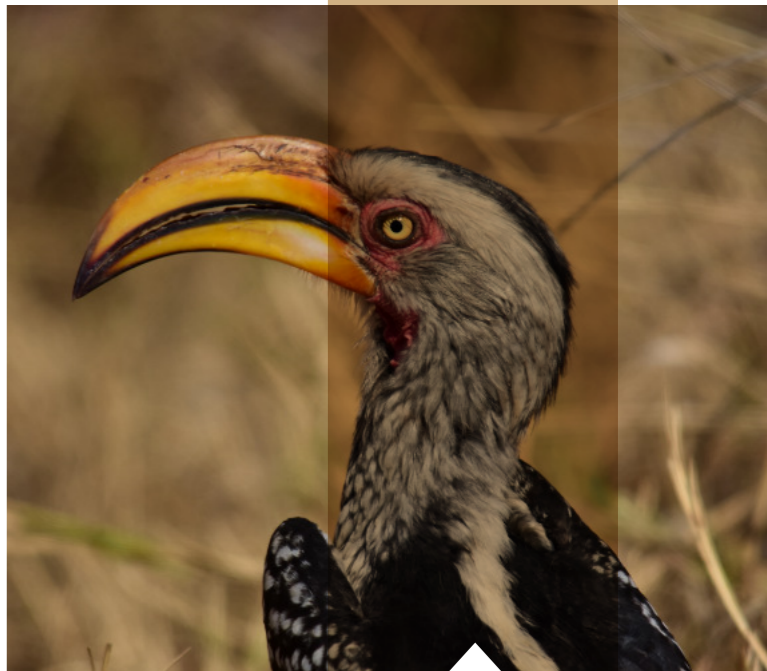
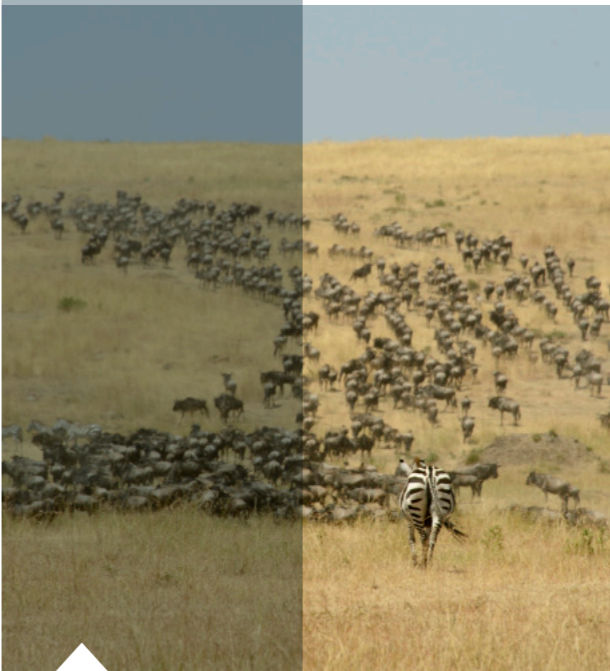
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Perseverance pays off

David Batzofin shows us that perseverance pays off.

Even if it takes 21 years to complete an online course!

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The show must go on!

The origin story of WildlifeCampus

01

By co-founder of
WildlifeCampus and
Anchor CEO

Peter Armitage



Missed the previous parts of this story? [Click here](#) to open the WildlifeCampus magazine where this exciting journey starts.

Setting out on the second day, our task was to drop the tripod, get all our mooring together and tied up on the ocean floor. The cement base, at over 200 kg, proved to be a rebellious piece of equipment. The lift bag we ordered for this job was nowhere to be found and we had to have another one made overnight.

Three dives later (to wash the sweat of the brow), we finally got the base down and in place. With the chain links on the spot and all ready for the last stage we could all breath a sigh of relief and enjoy the playful display of two whales nearby.

Day three of the installation started on a positive note with a lake-like ocean surface, great visibility and sunny skies. The last stage called only for the tripod legs, camera and buoy to be placed into position.

After the legs were installed, the buoy placed on the water and the buoy line (buoy chain rather) attached to the mooring on the ocean floor, we detected a technical problem with the receiver/transmitter box.

We had to transport the buoy back to the shore to solve the problem, which was luckily only a small one.



It did set us back a day and we had to wait for first light the following day to finish off.

At last we did it. Day four was definitely a very happy day for us. The camera went in among a congregation of unfazed ragged-tooth sharks.

All that was left was to once again haul the buoy overboard and to hear the reassuring sound of the transmitter inside.

We came across challenges, saw numerous sharks and had our frustrations, but the sense of achievement and triumph overruled it all. This was definitely the most exciting and challenging installation so far and we had a tremendous time doing it.

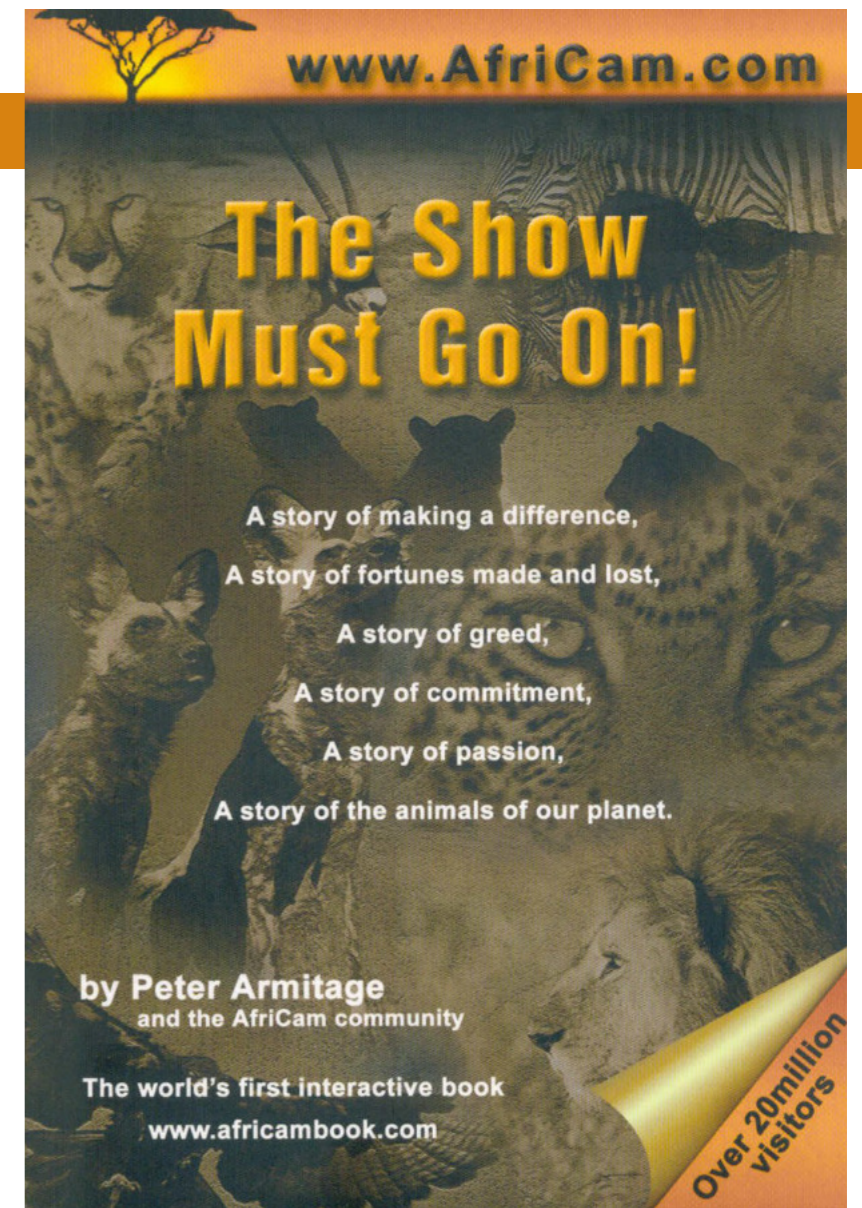
“Journal 2 – overcoming problems”

A Blue Wilderness Perspective:

Amid much fanfare and expectation of a Natal Sharks victory in the Currie Cup Rugby Union final on Saturday, the intrepid and untiring team at AfriCam dispatched their technician to Umkomaas from their HQ in Johannesburg. I even offered him a ticket to the game, which this diligent fellow turned down.

As much as the Natal Shark's fortunes were on the wane the AfriCam fortunes were heading back to operational. The Shark Cam equipment had been battered by the worst frontal system this winter. Winds in excess of 70kph and rough seas were the order of the week in which the camera at Cathedral went on the fritz - little wonder!

The demand for Shark Cam had far exceeded expectations and the outage was closely followed by those keen to have the cam up and running again.



“The Show Must Go On by Peter Armitage and the AfriCam community.”

Huge technical issues have faced the AfriCam team from the outset and it is obviously no surprise that a camera of this nature has never been done before.

In the days following the outage the team were hard at work to get the system up and live to the world. By Sunday evening Alex had isolated the faulty cable and battery problems. With the keen advice and help of Len Fish we were looking at being operational by late Tuesday. With meticulous attention to detail Alex had the bubble gum and Bostik out and was hard at work.

Len took care of the charging of the batteries at his factory and monitored them constantly to assist us in detecting any further possible battery problems. After the umpteenth trip to Durban we were heading to a final countdown. A whirlwind three days was about to take us from the workbench, much speculation and a live power feed into the sea - with none of the regular amenities of Eskom power and telephone lines.



Tuesday afternoon at 16:00 Alex declared the system operational and with less than an hour daylight left a decision was taken to install - even a 34 kph North Easter and growling surf could not keep him back.

After a hectic surf launch, Roger Dengler secured the guideline with surface buoy markers to assist us in positioning the boat and to make the installation of the system easier. He reported a 5kph south-easterly current and about 15 m visibility. The visibility was better than expected but the current was a major concern.

Amid our concerns and Alex's unwavering work ethic the dive went smoothly with Steve Yelding, Alex and myself heading to the sea bed outside of Cathedral with the anchor cable, camera and umbilical. Once the cable is attached the rest is easy but with such a strong current the risk of the buoy pulling you away from the attachment point on the bottom is very real. With failing light the issue becomes all the more significant.

On arriving at the bottom we headed straight for the base and began furiously attaching the cable. Totally unaware of the interest that we had created among the wrasse fraternity, who were eagerly looking for titbits stirred up by the sand we had kicked up. With the base secured - a great relief - the rest as they say is “history”. Steve brought both battery packs down while Alex and myself busied ourselves with setting up the camera. Once set we met at the guideline and headed to the surface in almost total darkness. Steve pointed out that there were two sharks in constant attendance - a fact which passed both Alex and myself by. The trip back seemed almost smooth amid the euphoria of a job well done - in difficult circumstance, I may add.

Total dive time: 25 min
Max depth: 27 m

Wednesday morning had us out there to check the installation and do the “photo-thing”. Basically, we wanted to do some setup shots for the website of myself and Alex

tweaking the camera etc. By 08:30 we were in the water and the 15m visibility of the previous day was now around 30m and the current was really flying. Our photography guy was lost in the current and we were left to our own devices. Two sharks were in Cathedral and as the images will attest they seemed quite curious about the camera and were constantly buzzing around the area in which we were working. I suppose they were just inspecting the new furniture!

On inspection of the website and cam pictures before we launched we did see the potential for the frame burning out as it faced into the light that was coming through the hole in the top of Cathedral. Try as we may in the strong currents, the battle with lift bags and the weight of the installation was too much, and we were unable too move the installation to a more light-friendly location. So it was back to the beach to rustle up a bigger dive team back to Cathedral.

Total dive time: 23 minutes
Max depth: 27m

By Wednesday evening the system was working okay but we were not happy with the angle. With the total dive time 18 minutes at 27 meters on the final dive of the day we had to wait till the next morning for the final modification.

Thursday morning’s dive went well, we moved the camera to a more central location hoping to solve the overexposure problem, time will tell...

One of the major problems currently facing the images happens to be the super heating of the buoy during the hot sunny days that we have been having. This causes interference in the picture that you receive - to this end Alex applied himself and came up with an ingenious, if only temporary idea, of draping the buoy in a wet towel. Hope it works and keep viewing.

“Journal 3 – thanks to Mark”

Alex Will writes:

After our initial installation, we thought we had it all worked out. We fixed up a couple of technical problems, and had our buoy.

Anthony, a member of the installation team, went down to Aliwal Shoal a day before to move the mooring and bring the top part of the tripod stand back up to the surface. The rest of us arrived at night, just in time for Alex to do the final modifications to the buoy. Early Wednesday morning, Graham and Andre arrived with our camera and the rest of the equipment. After a couple of hours of finishing off and making all the equipment waterproof (or so we thought), the guys left for their first launch.

At 12h30 Graham Wallington emerged from the depths just in time to be interviewed live on the radio, while at the same time, we went live on the internet worldwide. Not that the operation was at all “plug and play”, since 5-metre swells had already caused quite a bit of manoeuvring. Two dives in the morning were required to install the equipment and camera, and another one in the afternoon, to clean up the equipment and ensure everything was environmentally friendly before we left the scene. That was all it took to get it all in place and working.

But then night time came, and the lights went on, or did they? Well, not exactly. We decided to handle this problem in the only way we know ... brainstorming about it over pizza and some beers. In the morning we rushed to the East Coast Access Provider to investigate our current situation. Apart from a power failure during the night in the building, there was still a problem with the lights.

Out to sea again as soon as possible - with power problems already on the horizon. The crew went out to change batteries but, as Murphy would have it, just as they arrived, the camera shut down for good. We then lost all communication during the morning and the whole system had to be hauled out of the water to be checked out. In 5-metre swells (yeah, still, with a howling wind) it was not the easiest operation.

Back at Mark and Michelle's house we managed to get to the source of our problems. A tiny spot, where the silicon hadn't fully dried, had leaked and corroded a wire. The wire was replaced in no time, some fresh silicon put on and this time Michelle's hair dryer was used to make sure it was completely dry.

Meanwhile, with time (and dry land) on our side, we fiddled

around until we found the problem of the lights. Luckily it was not a huge problem and we fixed it in no time. Early Friday morning, Anthony, Alex and Andre went out for what we sincerely hope will be the last time, to place the camera where it belonged - under the sea! Lights (yes!), camera, sharks (plenty) and action. The world's first LIVE UNDERWATER WEBCAM had been achieved and captured its first sharks.

After a few phone calls on Saturday morning to establish the full extent of the damage to the system, I set about obtaining the necessary equipment to fix it. By midday on Monday, I was headed for the airport with a selection of tackle - including a new set of underwater plugs, courtesy of ISD Developments headman, Andre Slade. On arrival at the Natal coast, I met up with Mark and Michelle Addison of Blue Wilderness - to find out that the buoy had also been damaged by a head-on boat attack. Happily, Emile Tirzenthall rapidly carried out the repairs.

At 8:00 pm on Monday evening, Mark and I headed for Beady Eye in Pinetown where the rest of the system awaited our attention. With the assistance of Beady Eye's owner, Len Fish, a true miracle worker of note, the three of us worked through until 2:00 am Tuesday morning. By that evening, the system was ready for re-installation, so we planned an early morning dive for the following day.

We launched at 6:30 am Wednesday morning in near-perfect conditions, skippered by James Taylor of the Whaler Dive Centre and assisted once again by Steve Yielding and Travis Holzthausen, the dive went well with a 38-minute bottom time at 27 metres. For a few days, the system ran glitch-free, but the following Monday evening, whilst on a recon in the Serengeti, I received a phone call from Mark in Umkomaas to say that a water alarm had appeared in the picture. This meant that the camera housing had begun to slowly fill up with water!

Due to my being in Tanzania, with the next flight out the following Wednesday, there was no time for me to get to Umkomaas, so the entire problem was dumped completely in the hands of Mark Addison and Len Fish. Attacking the challenge head-on, they stripped the camera housing and replaced the defective cable gland. In fact, these 2 guys worked like Trojans over the next few days, till the small hours of the morning to get this camera back online. Thanks to Len Fish of Beady Eye and Mark Addison of Blue Wilderness without whose dedicated help we would not be watching sharks right now!



Wild dogs

widely misunderstood creatures

By WildlifeCampus student

Amy Holt

African wild dogs are widely misunderstood creatures, often killed because of their ferocious nature. But if you look beyond this, you'll see they have strong family bonds, care for pack members who are sick or weak, and allow the young to feed first. At the heart of African wild dogs is a rich and complex social life, where the pack is everything.

Today, there are approximately 6600 African wild dogs left in the wild. This makes them one of Africa's most endangered carnivores. By increasing wild spaces, we can increase pack numbers. Habitat fragmentation is a major problem across our planet. Human settlements and infrastructure continues to encroach on wild spaces. This leads to larger areas of habitat being split into separate, smaller areas that lack connectivity. Whilst this affects all species, it is especially detrimental to African wild dogs who require very large areas to support themselves. Further, they require an extensive territory, so they can be genetically diverse. To avoid inbreeding, same-sex dispersal groups will break away from their natal pack and join with another pack. Unique among large carnivores, male wild dogs usually remain in the natal pack while, the sexually mature females disperse. Males typically outnumber the females in a ratio of 3:1. Dispersal groups can travel hundreds of kilometres which aids genetic diversity. However, habitat fragmentation causes a restriction of movement meaning wild dogs can no longer partake in natural dispersals.

During the early 1990s, the only viable wild dog population within South Africa was located in Kruger National Park. The wild dog metapopulation management system in South Africa was created to increase the population size and distribution range of African wild dogs throughout the country. By transferring and relocating individuals between reserves, it mimics natural dispersal. Furthermore, wildlife corridors help to lessen the effects of habitat fragmentation. In 2011, Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe agreed to preserve a network of wildlife corridors, connecting existing national parks, game reserves and other protected areas.

02



The Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area spans roughly 520,000 square kilometres. To put that into perspective it is larger than Germany and Austria combined. This is a key conservation area for African wild dogs, where an estimated one quarter of the population is found.

Habitat fragmentation increases human-wild dog conflict. Misconceptions about African wild dogs by local communities and farmers lead to direct ill treatment. Wild dogs occasionally attack domestic livestock if the opportunity arises but, they prefer wild prey. Community engagement and education is important to address negative misconceptions. Also, efficient enclosures for livestock reduces farmers killing wild dogs.

African wild dogs use a hunting method known as exhaustive predation. They will hunt a herd of antelope, such as impala, until one becomes separated. As the name suggests, this impala is chased into exhaustion and then collapses. Eventually, the prey dies from shock and blood loss. African wild dogs can run at speeds of 60 kilometres per hour and maintain this speed over three to four kilometres. With slim bodies and strong legs, they are built for stamina. The bones of the lower front legs are fused together to keep them from twisting while running. Unlike most dogs which have five toes on each foot, African wild dogs are missing the dewclaw. Four toes on the front paws increases speed and stride length for wild dogs. Highly co-operative hunting behaviour coupled with high stamina leads to an impressive hunting success rate of about 80%. This means African wild dogs help maintain a healthy ecosystem by removing sick and weak individuals. San hunters of Botswana see the African wild dog as the ultimate hunter. They would smear the wild dog's blood on the soles of their feet, and believed that by doing so their own hunts would be successful.



Once the chased prey collapses out of exhaustion, the wild dogs start feeding immediately. They begin biting and tearing chunks of meat off the animal while it is still alive. The carnassial or shearing teeth (paired upper and lower teeth) pass by each other to slice the meat. These teeth allow prey to be consumed quicker. Thus, they can avoid predators, such as lions and hyenas. Lions prey on wild dogs, especially the pups. While, hyenas will steal their kills. Increased habitat fragmentation leads to the territories of lions, hyenas and African wild dogs overlapping more.

Following a hunt, they regurgitate the meat for the pups. Unlike other pack animals, wild dogs feed their young first so they can mature quickly. Also, they are one of the few species that will look after their sick and weak. This is because, their survival is dependent on the pack.

The social structure of African wild dogs is a dominance hierarchy with one alpha female, one alpha male and subordinates. The dominant pair are usually the only pair that remain monogamous for life. Alphas seem to be chosen for their leadership qualities rather than by physical stature. Research in Zimbabwe found handicapped dogs as alphas (one alpha had no tail and another only had three legs). Individuals can vote on group decisions through sneezing. If a subordinate dog initiates a hunt, ten sneezes are needed. While, if a dominant member of the pack creates a hunt, only three sneezes are needed.

African wild dogs are also known as painted dogs which, refers to the animal's irregular, mottled coat. The coat patterns are unique to each individual and are used to recognise each other. They are also recognisable for their bushy, white-tipped tails and large, rounded ears. The white

tip on the tail may serve as a 'follow-me' sign in tall grass. While, the oversized ears help to pick up long-distance calls from pack members. The most common vocal call is 'hooo-hooo' used to relocate pack members if they get scattered. This sound can carry up to four kilometres. A high-pitched, bird-like twittering is used before, during and after hunting, and when feeding.

Other threats to African wild dogs include accidental road collisions due to more roads cutting through dense wildfire areas. Human encroachment increases the chance of infectious diseases (e.g., rabies and canine distemper) spreading from domestic animals to wild dogs. This can wipe out entire wild dog packs. Further, African wild dogs are particularly vulnerable to snares because, they cover huge distances each day and consequently encounter more snares.

African wild dogs have lost approximately 93% of their historic range, with viable populations found in only eight countries (Botswana, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe). These magnificent creatures undoubtedly deserve to thrive rather than being on the verge of extinction. Indeed, it is a privilege to see a wild dog pack in the wild.

If you do not appreciate African wild dogs, it is simply because you do not understand them well enough.

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African rock art

Fragile images

Makubeng Plateau, Limpopo



By



Rock art is found in at least 21 African countries, with some of the best known in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia. Over the years we have visited many sites, most created by the San (Bushman), others by the Khoekhoen, and various Bantu groups, and some unknown. Many consist of panels of paintings but there are a great number of sites with rock engravings (petroglyphs).



Sand River, Limpopo

Most people flock to the well known art panels in the Drakensberg of South Africa, the friezes in the Western Cape's Cedarberg and Winterhoek mountains, and magnificent many are, or to see the White Lady in the Brandberg massif of Namibia but we prefer to seek out those little known or those that remain undocumented, or more especially the unusual. In some cases we believe undocumented means greater security, some will say we are selfish but let it be so. So many rock art sites have been damaged, or ruined forever, by those that plaster them with graffiti, or spray water, or cool drink, on them to make them stand out for a better photograph. Much artwork, sometimes thousands of years old, has been ruined in this way.

Within a short distance of our upper Karoo home, on a ridgeline of dolerite boulders, there are petroglyphs (carvings by picking or scraping rock surfaces) of Elephant, Lioness and Ostrich, and of more recent origin a man on horseback. In fact the dolerite boulders and hills of the Karoo, with their black oxidation, are an art gallery that largely remains undocumented, with a few exceptions. We have visited this ridge several times, gazing across the vast Karoo plains and wondering what those long-ago nomadic San watched for here. They knew where the natural fountains were, where the huntable game would pass. In southern Africa one of the finest arrays of petroglyphs lies at Twyfelfontein in Namibia but even these are surpassed by the



Twyfelfontein, Namibia

art of the Sahara Desert, mainly associated with the mountain massifs of Algeria, Libya and Chad. These are a testament to the time when the Sahara was better watered, green and lush, with herds of Elephant, Giraffe, Hippopotamus and prides of Lion.

It is not our intention here to give a tour of well-known rock art sites but we will visit some of the least known, but we apologize, we will not give you directions to them. Not that we expect you to desecrate these sites but others may follow you and not treat these galleries with the same respect. Also, the fact that many sites are on private land would mean we would break trust with the landowners. Access to some of these sites was led by our late friend Eddie Eastwood, an unsung hero of hidden rock art sites in what is now Limpopo Province. We learned a lot from Eddie while we together produced [a video which you can watch on our YouTube channel](#).

Interpretations of some of this art is straight forward, scenes depicting hunts, individual species, human activities, but others are more complex and may incorporate shamanic beliefs, some have been open to multiple translations, or understanding. The oldest rock art in the region was discovered in a rock shelter in Namibia and dated to some 26,000 years before present. Some of the oldest cave wall paintings have been dated to at least 3,600 years before present but rock art was still being produced when Europeans started settling along the southern African coastline. Some paintings depict ox wagons and obvious Europeans on horseback.

Some sites have literally hundreds of images, some only a handful, or even a single painting or engraving. When we were living on a farm on the Western Escarpment of South Africa, a farmer told us about a San rock art site he had known as a child under a very low overhang. We were able to locate it but it had largely filled up with windblown sand, yet by crawling in on our backs we could still make out the

pigments used in the paintings but the outlines were lost, perhaps as a result of sand abrasion.

Humans and huntable game are featured most in the rock art, especially Eland, Kudu, Giraffe, Elephant, Rhinoceroses, Hippopotamus, Baboons and smaller antelope. Then domestic stock also appears at a number of sites, especially cattle and goats. Invertebrates were rarely painted but at one site there are very good depictions of locusts, and fish, logical as this was within a short walk of the Limpopo River.

Being interested in tracking we found one large vertical frieze of engraved tracks, with the help of Eddie Eastwood, in the foothills of the eastern Soutpansberg. There were dozens of clear tracks, ranging from Giraffe, Eland and Kudu, to Hippopotamus, Elephant and what we concluded were probably tracks of a Pangolin. Why did somebody go to such a lot of trouble to make such accurate engravings of tracks, when these species were all moving around this landscape. Was it perhaps to teach young boys what tracks looked like, or did the artist have a fascination for the beauty of tracks? Sadly, despite the isolated location of this fascinating frieze, local boys have defaced parts of the site with the names of their favourite football teams and players!



Kakadu NP, Northern Territory, Australia; similarities are telling

Research on rock art relies on theoretical and culturally informed interpretations, supported by rigorous argument. The ancient art traditions of the San, and others, had ceased by the early 20th century and today none of the artists' descendents can elucidate on the meanings of much of this artwork. Rock art researchers have been trying to interpret rock art for well over 100 years. But over time and changing ideas these interpretations become an ever changing conundrum. It has been said that the art "is a truly artistic expression of the ideas which most deeply moved the Bushman mind."



Pictograph, Great Karoo

March Wildlife Diary

By



As Pliny the Elder stated, there is always something new out of Africa - *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi*. Each month sees a repetition of the events in the same month of the previous year, the year before that and often for many tens of thousands of years back into the unrecorded past. Not perhaps new in the sense that Pliny meant it, but each month plays host to events both well-known and not so well known.

- During March, on the eastern short grass plains of the Serengeti ecosystem, the last of the season's White-bearded Wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*) calves are being dropped. Remaining surface water is rapidly drying up and the grass crop dwindling on the rich

All San people tell of a primeval time when animals were people but following a creation event, they were differentiated. But these first people were stupid, lacking customs and manners, but a second creation event resulted in real people. Many stories explained the coming about of fire, how the planets and stars came about and much more. Many of these depictions appear in the art. It has been hypothesized that shamanic hallucinations may have prompted the first production of art. But we are sure that in at least some cases art was art for arts' sake.



Part of the great White-bearded Wildebeest migration in the Serengeti

volcanic soil. The trampling of millions of hoofs has churned the soil and, when the wind blows, clouds of dust blur the horizon. The herds start moving towards the west.

- In the Sahara the strong winds known as the *samum* or *khamsin* are starting to blow, raising great sandstorms. Dust from these wind storms drifts to other continents, including settling over the Amazon Basin in South America.
- Also in this month Slender-snouted Crocodile (*Crocodylus cataphractus*) females are busying themselves with the construction of their nest mounds, at least in Ivory Coast, the only country in which they have been studied. Their nest mounds are constructed from piles of rotting vegetation which provide just the right temperature for the eggs to incubate.



Slender-snouted Crocodile

- The small population of the Nubian Ibex (*Capra nubiana*) in the Red Sea Hills sees the nannies dropping their first lambs of the year.
- The Waldrapp, or Northern Bald Ibis (*Geronticus eremita*), is mating in its last Moroccan strongholds, and the first eggs are being laid. An endangered species threatened by hunting, changing land use and disturbance at its breeding cliffs, this ibis has seen massive declines throughout its limited range. In 2019 it was estimated that there were 700 individuals in Morocco.
- Little Owls (*Athene noctua*) in Libya are laying their eggs in March but elsewhere in their North African range apparently lay a month or two later. The Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*) is also busying itself with the business of breeding in northern Africa.

- At the southern point of the continent, the threatened Cape Vulture (*Gyps coprotheres*) is preparing nest platforms on cliff ledges. Traditional nesting cliffs are hives of activity, with birds bringing in nesting material, copulating and squabbling. The first eggs will be laid next month.
- This is also the month when many Palearctic migrants start to make their way back to their northern breeding grounds. The great gatherings of waders are getting restless. The principal wintering sites, such as Banc d'Arguin in Mauritania, Walvis Bay in Namibia and Langebaan on South Africa's west coast, are gradually deserted by these northern avian hordes.

- Some land-based bird species also begin to trek to the northern breeding grounds, Eurasian Cuckoos (*Cuculus canorus*), European White Storks (*Ciconia ciconia*) and numerous others head off to the European and Asian spring. Great Black-headed Gulls (*Larus ichthyaetus*) leave the East African and Red Sea coastlines and aim for the breeding grounds that lie in a belt that runs from southern Russia to Mongolia. Vast gatherings of Lesser Kestrels (*Falco naumanni*), Western Red-footed Falcons (*F. vespertinus*) and Amur Falcons (*F. amurensis*) are also on the move. By early April all will have gone.

- In the sand dunes of the Namib Desert the prickly Nara melon (*Acanthosicyos horridus*) will have ripened by the month's end. With its great trunk-like roots penetrating deep into the sand and calcrete, and despite its tangled stems being protected by a host of thorns, the plant's fruits are eaten by Gemsbok (*Oryx gazella*), Black-backed Jackals (*Canis mesomelas*) and many others. The fruits not only provide nourishment, but also moisture in this desert land.

- In the arid areas of the south-west such as Namaqualand, it is in this month that the March Flower (*Brunsvigia bosmaniae*) starts to bloom. In a good season thousands of multi-flowered heads appear and produce one of Africa's great floral displays.



March Lilies, are now in full blossom



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06



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To enquire about these sessions & to get a quote email her on

hayley@wilddreams.co.za and don't forget to check out the Wild Dreams website which is full of helpful information for job seekers.

Perseverance pays off

Normally 21 years of age is seen as the age of maturity. There is a ceremony when this specific milestone is attained and if memory serves me correctly, a key to the proverbial door is handed to the birthday person, signifying coming of age and that, at least in theory, one is seen to be responsible.

So how do I end a journey that has taken me 21 years to complete? With a celebration? With a sigh? With a Facebook comment or an article in a magazine?

By David Batzofin



I suppose the easiest way is to share this journey with a group of like-minded people and let you decide if I should see this as an ending or a beginning...

Like all good stories, this one begins with “A long time ago”...just after the dinosaurs had left the planet...well perhaps just a few millennia later, I met Todd Kaplan who worked in an office not too far from where I was presenting an online radio show.



David is an award-winning blogger whose work can be found at www.travelandthings.co.za

We got chatting about what it was that he did, my love of all things nature and how badly I wanted to be a game ranger (which is how field guides were referred to back in the day). The year was 2002 and little did I know what actually lay in store for me.

Todd had mentioned that WildlifeCampus offered a Game Ranging (Field Guiding) course which should take me about a year to complete.

I was duly assigned a login name and a password and I thought that this was going to be the proverbial ‘piece of cake’ to complete. I could not have been more wrong if I tried!

There are 12 modules, each containing between 2 to 20 components. All of which have to be passed to get the final certificate. And the pass mark was + 60%, so the work had to be understood before attempting to write the supplied tests.

I did try to write a test or two without looking at the actual module, but given the way in which the questions are worded I soon crashed and burned by using THAT technique. I believed that I could complete one module a month, which would see me graduate at the end of 12 months. But I quickly got bored and it was at this point I realised that distance/online learning is not my strong suit as I have no discipline when it comes to sitting down and doing the prescribed work that I had set myself.

One year dragged into two, then into 10. 10 became 15 and I had only completed 1 module and 2 components. Given my ‘hit-and-miss’ attitude to the course, I had also failed several modules, which caused my confidence to waver.

Over the years, Todd and I kept in contact. We had discussed the possibility of me writing a course for WildlifeCampus. The idea was accepted in principle, but I decided it would not translate well to the online learning platform.

So back to the course for me? Oh, no...I decided to tackle another course, Game Lodge Management. “How long should it take to complete?” I asked Todd. “Knowing you, probably about 10 years”! I confounded us both when I completed it in 4 months AND graduated with distinctions.

Then the COVID lockdown occurred, and as that progressed, I thought THAT would allow me to complete the course. But my enthusiasm was short-lived. I completed one more module before putting it on a back burner ... again.

At the end of 2022, I realised that 2023 would be the 21st anniversary of my starting the course and what better way to celebrate that journey than to FINISH the course.



Seeing that I will turn 70 later this year, I decided that the completion would be my gift to myself.

So, I locked myself in my home office, turned off all the distractions, and sat down to study and write the various tests. Being online the marking is instantaneous, which gave me the impetus to work through each module and pass them all!

As I write this, I have just received my certificate and, just like that, the course is done and dusted.

I am now considering whether to do another course or not. Do I want to graduate from another course at age 91? I DON'T THINK SO...

What I have come to realise is that perseverance does pay off in the long run. And I am glad that I finally get to hang the certificate proudly on my office wall.

This article and my dedication to completion is a tribute to Todd Kaplan, who died before he could see me finally graduate.

“This is for you, Todd”.

Photography competition



Photography competition winner March

Lanner landing - Steph Vermeulen - South Africa

Juvenile Lanner falcon landing after an unsuccessful hunt at Viertiende Boorgat, Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, December 2022.

Submit your entry and stand a chance to see your picture featured on the backpage of our magazine.

Send your picture with relevant story, location and credits to info@wildlifecampus.com

If your picture gets chosen you win 1 month of WildlifeCampus subscription. During this month you will be able to access ALL WildlifeCampus online courses! (T's and C's apply)