

Nkombi Volunteer Programme



Winter is always our busiest time of year and we have had an enthusiastic group of students and career breakers who embraced the experience of working alongside the management and research teams during this exciting season on Mankwe Wildlife Reserve.

Dissertation ideas

June saw the arrival of Hilary, an Exeter MSc student who was with us for 10 weeks to study changes in territorial behaviour of Red Hartebeest after burning the grassland dominating their territory. Using ethograms, vegetation quadrats, direct mammal counts and midden plotting the project followed the changes in vegetation, grazing ungulate usage and Red Hartebeest behaviour after a burn to provide interesting results for Hilary who graduates later this year.

Veld Fires

All the control burns are carried out during winter when the temperature is cool and the grass is dry in preparation for the summer rains that stimulate grass re-growth on the burn-sites. Our volunteers all gained hands on experience in burning both firebreaks and block burn's, learning how to factor in wind direction, habitat type and control a fire to limit the chances of the fire becoming wild.

Unfortunately not all farmers are so concerned with controlling fires and on a number of occasions the Nkombi team stood on standby with wild fires approaching the perimeter of the farm. On one evening a fire managed to jump a tar road and alighted grass underneath our fence line but we were there to extinguish the flames. Everyone learnt the importance of burning firebreaks when Africa's grassland is at its most vulnerable.



Game Capture

Winter is also the time when we live capture and translocate excess game from the reserve. Being in the middle of a drought we captured over 250 large mammals, which is higher than average to prevent overgrazing and increased competition of resources until the summer rains bless us at the end of the year. Nkombi Volunteers got the opportunity to work with Sean and Emma from 'Vet Safari' running curtains in the boma, injecting tranquilisers into Tsessebe, Blesbok and Impala, separating wildebeest herds in the crush and holding Blesbok outside the boma whilst the animals already on the trucks were arranged to enable the Blesbok to travel later that day.



Wind direction is also an important factor in game capture and if it blows out of the boma the animals will smell the danger and not enter to be captured. There were a number of occasions where this happened so instead Sean and Emma gave the Nkombi Volunteers a lesson on darting live animals and let everyone have a go at firing a dart gun at a target. It is certainly not as easy as they make it look on TV!



Research

The research element at Nkombi camp was just as exciting. Our 3 nights of nocturnal work went ahead as usual despite the cold night air and volunteers were lucky enough to have a close and prolonged sighting of a serval as well as a first ever sighting of white tailed mongoose on the reserve. We also spotted black-backed Jackals, African wildcat, springhares and caught a caracal on a camera trap and leopard in our sand traps, which are both set in conjunction with our nocturnal research.



The Nkombi Volunteers were also fortunate enough to be invited to be involved in a new bait marking pilot study in Pilanesberg National Park for the Earthwatch 'Project Phiri'. It involved baiting areas of the big 5 park with coloured digestible beads mixed with raw meat to attract Brown Hyaena's in the hope that individuals in different areas will eat the beads that can later be detected in their dung whilst doing latrine surveys. Information from such a study can give ecologists involved in the project an idea of territories and home ranges for the brown hyaena's in the Pilanesberg National Park.



Some rather close encounters with white rhino were the talk of the camp after white rhino monitoring. One of our cows was on heat during July, which allowed our volunteers to experience some interesting and sometimes hair-raising rhino behaviour.

New Bushbaby research

Our enthusiastic group of Nkombi Volunteers also drove us to begin a new research project into the lesser bushbaby. This nocturnal primate is a frequent visitor to our sundowner dinners on the Kopjie, a rocky outcrop overlooking the reserve and the Pilanesberg mountain range. Becoming the topic of conversation as the sun was setting we were all intrigued to learn more about the resident bushbabies. With the aim of eventually trapping and collaring some individuals, we started looking into ways this could be achieved and started a pilot study looking at bait preferences to attract them to an area. We made sand trapping tables, which hung from trees and baited a central container with banana, apple and honey. We also placed camera traps in different tree species and heights and baited them with banana, honey and peanut butter. After a fortnight we started to get results on the sand trapping tables seeing bushbaby prints and bait disturbance. We are now looking into available resources to trap and collar these arboreal primates so we can learn more about their behaviour.



Porcupine rehabilitation

Driving the fence line one morning we came across a porcupine caught in a snare. After removing jumpers to use as padding we managed to restrain the porcupine to prevent the snare cutting deeper into the already large wound around her chest and back. Luckily enough for the porcupine the game capture team were still on the reserve and arrived with a medi-kit soon after a frantic phone call to them. After a long sedation and roadside surgery we prepared a hut at Nkombi camp and brought her here to rehabilitate. After a week of care she gave birth to a stillborn – nature's way of increasing her chances of survival, but endeavoured to get herself better. She became easy to re-catch and sedate to clean her wounds and after a month we have just released Hilly back into the wild. We named her after our volunteer who spent so much time rehabilitating the porcupine between completing her MSc dissertation. We hope that Hilly will continue to survive in the wild and find a new mate on the reserve.



We make it a point to educate volunteers on anti-poaching and get them involved in patrols. Local trackers teach them how to identify signs of poaching on the reserve and how to pull down snares set from the previous night. Anti-poaching patrols involve long walks often in vain but the story of Hilly will increase awareness of the poaching problems that still curse African reserves and their wildlife and will hopefully encourage our volunteers to help tackle the problem.



Survival

It is not just the management and research that volunteers gain experience in during their time at Nkombi. We endeavour to show volunteers other sides of African life, the food, the language, the attitudes, local places and survival. Seeing a porcupine recover from a near fatal wound, watching our resident hornbill check out favourable tree holes for his nesting partner and watching 5 male lions feeding off a hippo in Pilanesberg shows volunteers the cruelty, beauty and strength of Africa. Our volunteers decided that they would like to experience survival without the modern luxuries of today...



We organized for David, the son of a sangoma (witch doctor) and tracker on the reserve to take our volunteers out for the afternoon. He has an extensive knowledge of edible plants and their medicinal uses and was kind enough to share this with the Nkombi team who shortly realized that survival in winter would be extremely hard and involve a lot of skill and local knowledge. We then went up to the Kopjie where we made shelters in teams and made a campfire, we told tales under the African big night sky and slept to the sounds of Jackals calling, Reedbuck whistling and the occasional snore!

Thank you

The last 3 months at Nkombi have been exciting, unexpected and rewarding. We have been lucky enough to have been given money from our July volunteers to buy an Nkombi camera trap – THANK YOU. We have been inspired to start new research and develop the survival aspect of the programme. Most of all though, we feel the experiences and knowledge gained from all the individuals who have shared this season with us have been inspired to change their careers, lives and aspirations to live what they dream!

For an information pack on how you can gain experience in wildlife and conservation management and undertake a variety of research projects, which can be used for dissertation projects, please contact Row and Pete at:

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