

A Traveller's Tale

KNP: Out Walking...

by Neil Preston

We arrive at Olifants Reception at 9:15 and after completing the indemnity forms, wait outside at the pickup point. It's 9:24 and we're still the only people there. I'm about to say to DB that it looks like a case of 'Africa Time', when our first game guide arrives. He introduces himself as Julius and joins us on the benches. He's a big, quietly spoken guy with a warm friendly manner.



DB asks him if he knows what we want to see on the walk. "Hippos?" he asks.

"No", DB answers.

"Crocs?"

"No".

"Lion?"

"No", says DB, "we want to see birds".

He laughs and says he doesn't know how many we will see, but he is sure we will see some birds.

We are soon joined by Julius's partner, Allan. He's a medium built guy, with the same quiet friendly manner. They have a quick chat in the local language and I get the impression that Allan is asking Julius if he would like to conduct the walk. Julius nods and tells us where we will start the walk from.



We set off for Balule with Allan driving, and DB and I the only two guests. The two guards chat quietly during the approx 8km drive to the Balule area, where the walk will begin. I find myself comparing the language to Xhosa which is spoken in the Eastern Cape but there seems to be no similarity. I cannot recognize any words at all.

We're soon at Balule and take the road which runs along the back fence of the camp. It's nice to see the camp from the animals' perspective and I photograph our caravan site from outside the fence.

From the camp it's just another minute or two along a track heading towards the river where we stop. Before we set off on foot they give us a quick briefing: walk in single file and if we need to talk, keep our voices low, follow their instructions and if they say "stop" then stop and wait. If we come across what might appear to be danger we are not to run, and should wait for their instructions. Allan leads with Julius just in front of us so he can easily communicate. He tells us to stop him at any time if we have questions.



Within minutes we are walking along the banks of the magnificent Oliphants River. I think of all the times we have parked on the bridges or at the parking spots along the river loops, and wondered what it must be like to wander along this beautiful riverine area, along the river sand and under those big trees. It's at this point that things begin to stir deep inside me. This is a different world, a world that does not need man. If man removed his restrictions and went away he would never be missed, life here would go on without him as it has for how many thousands of years. I

look up at the majestic big trees that tower above us and feel very small and insignificant. For how long have they stood there? Hundreds of years? What stories they could tell. They will probably remain for hundreds more long after my short life has expired. I make a note to ask Julius about their age.

The snort of a hippo draws my attention to the river. Allan has stopped at the waters edge to give us the opportunity to watch a group of hippos sleeping in the river. My thoughts turn to crocodiles and I ask him how he knows there is no danger from crocs there. Allan assures us that they check very carefully as they approach the water. At ease now I take in the beauty of the river. If the trees are beautiful the river is even more so. The morning sun lights the golden river sand and the fresh bright green of the reeds, and adds a shimmering sparkle to the water streaming over the smooth grey rocks. There is plenty of water and it is still flowing steadily.



We move on but stop again soon to observe the scene of a leopard kill. Julius explains that the small tufts of hair left on the ground indicate that it was an impala. He estimates it is about two weeks old.

We move on again and Julius soon picks up leopard tracks. He tells us they appear to be from the night before. His knowledge of the bushveld is impressive.

Allan shows us a porcupine's home in the base of a huge tree. There is a quill just inside the entrance confirming ownership. My question about the tree's age is answered when he tells us that this tree is about 400 years old, and that the hardwood trees are much older.



We learn of the methods different animals use to mark their territory, and we identify more tracks, how elephant dung is used to relieve headaches and ward off insects, which plants are dangerous if eaten, and which ones the animals enjoy, and so much more. A little further on we find more leopard tracks. They are fairly fresh and could be from that morning.

Even though I am aware that one has to be constantly alert to the possibility of danger, the sense of peace and the stillness continue to evoke feelings that are difficult to define. It is as though something from deep inside me is trying to connect with this place. Is it a vague attempt at a re-connection with the vast universal soul, perhaps the mind of Gaia, or memories of countless lives lived before the noise and the crowds of civilization broke that connection. Feelings akin to those aroused by beautiful music, exquisite prose, art, and the works of the great poets, well up inside me.

I am brought back to reality when Julius stops to show us an 'elephant rubbing tree. It is a solid trunk with patches of the rough bark worn smooth from the rubbing. The height of the mud left on the bark gives a good indication of huge size of some of the elephant.

All too soon we have to turn back; the time has flown, but we have learned so many interesting things, and are thankful to have been able to experience something so special.

On the drive back I chat to Allan and Julius about their lives as game guides, about overnight trails and what it's like 'out there' at night around the campfire. They speak modestly, but with enthusiasm about their work and I wish we could spend more time with them. I feel I would go anywhere in the bushveld with these men.



DB is quiet on the drive back to Olifants, but I know what she is thinking; We are both silently planning a three day overnight wilderness trail.