

Gonarezhou Blog



What can I say – sometimes the perks of the job are just too many to count!

I have just returned from an amazing week of dust and sunshine in Southern Zimbabwe at a beautiful game reserve called Gonarezhou. Gonarezhou means “Place of Many Elephants”, and with these words resounding in my head, it was with excitement that I went on this trip, accompanied by Steve Henley, a work colleague from STE-SA. Our goal in Gonarezhou was to spot and photograph as many elephants as possible. (Sounds like a blissfully easy job right? Who wouldn't want to spent time driving round a game reserve looking for elephants?!?) With this data, we can then see if any of the Pafuri or Kruger National Park elephants are moving through the corridor, across the Limpopo into the Gonarezhou Reserve. This information would be very important for us with our work on elephant movement and monitoring.

So it was with high hopes, that we set off EARLY in the morning, with the Timbavati sky still dark around us for the long drive to Zimbabwe. The border post was...well...full of its usual fun, which if any of you have travelled in Africa – will know that it entails countless hours of fruitless queuing in the hot sun, only to find out you're in the wrong cue, handing over money to every Tom, Dick and Harry in the hope that its an official...and well.. You get the idea ☺ but chaos, and a couple hours later and we were happily on the dusty dirt road leading to the Northern Section of the reserve where we were to spend our week.



We didn't make it to our campsite the first evening, so spent a slightly uncomfortable night, as we each claimed a car seat and pulled over at a beautiful tree off the road. First light saw us stretching, rubbing the Gonarezhou dust from our faces, making coffee...and hitting the road... The first day of many to spent searching...straining...and looking for the elusive elephants.

If “Place of Many Elephants” was intended to be a joke, well then life makes a lot more sense... As MAN were they ever hard to spot... With the bush one big emerald mopani thicket, we could really only see a couple feet into the bush... Its one of those agonising things knowing that for every few animals you see— how much are you missing? ☺ Oh for X-ray vision! Our “home” for the week was a beautiful old picnic site turned campsite called Rossi Pools, which had the most magnificent view over the river. It was without a doubt one of the most tranquil spots to watch the stars, or listen to fish eagles call. It was a good place to recover after long days in the car.





Our normal days usually involved us getting up with the dawn, and watching the day begin to stir over a cuppa coffee and rusks. Then with the heat already beginning to climb from around 7 am, we would hit the car...and spent a good part of the day traversing the roads of Gonarezhou in a search-and find mission for elephants. We spent one day travelling along the lush riverfront hoping to find elephants coming down to drink. Unfortunately it seems the elephants there are still very nervous, and shy and don't

spent much time at the river at all- coming down to drink only under cover of darkness, and heading back into thick bush before dawn, as each day we would see sign after sign of elephants but no elephants themselves.

Our days in the car would only end with the falling of night, and we often headed back with the stars glittering in the sky to accompany us, to make dinner by candle light on our gas cooker, or the fire, before tumbling exhausted and dusty into bed... Ah, and here I must pause briefly to update you on the fact that of course, Rossi Pools has no electricity or water... so basic and rustic and lovely! The down-to-earth-look clearly a "must".



One day we had the most special experience: We were driving along and checking lookout points along the riverbed, when we stuck gold. Elephants! A cow, with her 2 daughters, aged around 12 and 5 years old were standing on an island in the riverbed. Excited at having finally seen them we quickly lugged camera bags, binoculars and video camera down to the lookout point. After observing for a couple minutes we saw blood on the cow's legs and then a little grey lump at her feet... a tiny newborn calf! Enthralled we sat still and watched nature unfold, as the cow and her daughters caressed the

little infants still body... their trunks gentle and loving.

An hour or so later, with the calf still not moving we could sense distress in the air. The mother kept trying to get her calf to stand by moving it with her feet... and nothing. We couldn't tell if it was a stillborn, but a sadness told us that it might be. We left to continue our rounds but stopped in hours later to see what was happening, and it was heart rending to see that the cow was still there... trying to get her little calf to move.. to stand... The tiny trunk gave a wiggle! Our hearts leapt! It was alive... her motherly instincts, and love had not allowed her to leave her infant! But it still was too weak to stand... hours passed, the sun shifting in the sky... The daughters in the meantime had wandered across the river to feed, and then would wander back again...repeating this throughout the day as the heat became extreme. Eventually the 2 young elephants went back, caressed their mother and the tiny calf once more and then wandered off... not returning.



As the day cooled, and the sun started dipping the cow realised her daughters had gone off and you could almost sense her pain, feel her indecision... so torn between love for her new, clearly sick calf...and the idea that should she not follow and find her daughters – she might lose them too...as they were still too young to fend for themselves. With hesitant steps she headed to the river, but halfway across turned back... and then after a couple minutes with her calf, turned away again to attempt

finding her daughters... She returned to her calf's side 3 times... and then eventually with distressed rumbles calling her daughters to her, she walked off into the bush, leaving her calf a still unmoving bundle in the middle of the island.



The experience was sad, and surreal and poignant. We sat still on the warm rocks for a long time after that... not moving... just absorbing and processing what nature had allowed us to witness... ultimate humanity and compassion. It was so touching! It was with full hearts that we headed back that night to a quick dinner and bed.

Other than that we had a couple more elephant sightings, totalling about 6 the whole time that we were there. Spent my birthday sitting at Rossi Pools watching for elephants to see if anything would come down to drink. (our fuel situation had become a bit precarious... so we thought we would attempt the "wait and see" technique!!) A beautiful day of peace and quiet, but unfortunately no ellies.



The previous day at Manyanda Pan had been more productive with 2 good sightings of elephants coming down to drink. We had some camera traps set up there too... so here's hoping that they managed to capture some good ear photographs for our ID data.

With the days merging into one big day of elephants, dust, 2 minute noodles, and hot sunshine the time in Gonarezhou passed, and the last two days saw us heading around the reserve collecting our camera traps and making one last scan for elephants.

We spent our last night at Makokwani Pools, where we slept under the stars – after falling asleep to crocodile thrashing in the riverbed below and the sound of lions calling in the distance. We were rudely awakened at 3am as a hyena sniffed at us... starting us both WIDE awake as we chased it away... With sleep now far away – we decided to just make some early coffee, pack the car, and hit the road... getting a bit of a head-start on the dawn, and the day of Zim/SA borders... Back to warm showers and cold drinks! Yay!



☺ It truly was an amazing experience – Gonarezhou is a wonderful reserve that is still untouched by major tourism, and so so wild. I hope I'll have the magical opportunity to visit her lands once again...

