

The edited journal has been added to tie in with the routes and other information available. It gives a brief day by day account of our journey around the province.

#### Day 1

Great flight with Nationwide; plenty to eat and drink; slept well. Car and phone collected and out of Johannesburg. With the highway quiet and only a quick stop for droewors and cold drinks we were at Spionkop within 3½ hours. Not the greatest of accommodation but fine for one night. Staff on desk helpful and friendly, and not only told us about the reserve but directed us into Winterton for 'supplies'. Drove the reserve until just before dusk and saw plenty of animals including giraffe, wildebeest and blesbok, all with young. We stopped and chatted to a couple of fishermen on the banks for the dam. I noticed there were little frogs in the dam's high water just off one section of the bank. Returning to the hut we came across a black back jackal. Didn't sleep too well; I had forgotten how noisy the bush is after dark.

#### Day 2

An early start meant we were at Weenen before 8 am. Spent the morning driving the reserve roads before checking into our cottage. The cottage is immaculate, well decorated, and has everything you could need and is ideally located for a peaceful stay. For lunch it was over to the in-laws, a 40-minute drive from Weenen, for boerewors and steak on the braai. Back to Weenen and we get our first look at rhino. However, before we could get close we met up on the road with John Llewellyn, a friend, and officer in charge of the reserve. Over a few beers and dinner with him and his wife Natalie, we put the world to rights. Weenen was the first reserve I visited in South Africa back in 1994 and is still a very special place. In our short stay we had seen tortoises, terrapins, raptors and rhinos.

#### Day 3

Another early start, with a game drive before leaving Weenen and a short drive over to Wagendrift Dam. En route we stopped for fuel and food in Estcourt. Wagendrift dam, surrounded by hills and mountains, is very scenic but is really suited for water sports and fishing. We drove to the adjoining Moor park where there are a few species of game and would make an ideal stop-off for a break or picnic. As the temperature got hotter we headed off to our cottage- very spacious and upmarket with great views overlooking the dam. We sat and watched a variety of birds from sunbirds and swallows to crested eagles from our front garden until just after lunch when a huge storm blew in.

#### Day 4

Awake just after 5 am and sitting barefoot in the garden, by just after 6 drinking tea. Joined in the garden by a family of guinea fowls along with swallows, sugarbirds and fork-tailed drongos. The crested eagle is perched on a dead tree just beyond the garden. Called in on Mduduze at the KZN Wildlife HQ to catch up on things and confirm what's happening at some reserves that I'm not familiar with before heading on to Midmar Dam. This is by far the hottest day, easily 30o+. Midmar is our third dam this week. It's busy with a variety of boats, people fishing, swimming and sunbathing on the banks. Our chalet is OK, again with everything under one roof. There is a holiday camp atmosphere without the bar and entertainment. We do have a TV!?

#### Day 5

Today I had anticipated as being difficult in regard to the route plan. It proved however more difficult than I had imagined. After two hours driving around 'Durban' and my patience tested, I made an "executive decision' to review this section on completion of the route. I'm not comfortable with the thought of getting people lost and after visiting Kranztkloof and North Park. Were these ideal places for overseas visitors? On to Vernon Crooks approximately 1 hour south of Durban. Easy to find with a good, well-signed dirt road entrance up to the gate and camp beyond. The small camp is made up of rondavals with shared kitchen and toilets. We are the only overnight guests. A group of trumpeter hornbills are also in camp "crying like babies". Bird song is prolific from all around the camp's 'jungle' like perimeter. We had our first 'trail' here and walked for an hour and a half in hot humid conditions. A late afternoon game drive finished the day off nicely. On return to camp a group of vervet monkeys have moved in and looked disappointed that we had returned.

#### Day 6

Awoke to probably the loudest dawn chorus I have ever had. I had really enjoyed the short stay at Vernon crooks and think it a great place for 'getting away from it all'. On the dirt road leaving the reserve several groups of vervet monkeys waved their goodbyes. We made good time down the highway towards Oribi Gorge and then a few kms before the camp entrance took a detour; we may include this as the scenic way in! Our room here is a "square" darval with a fantastic view and en suite. The kitchens are communal. Using

Oribi Gorge as a base we drove out to the other 3 KZNW reserves down on the south coast and we nearly had a repeat of our 'Durban tour'. The first stop at Skyline is not on the map and is not signposted. Once we found the first the next two were easy. Mpenjati was well worth the visit, a stunning beach with crashing surf, empty other than us and a few gulls and a pied kingfisher. On completing our route we drove through the south coast resorts, very commercial. Finished the day off with two of the shorter walks back at Oribi Gorge, Baboon View and Samango Falls. We were not lucky enough to see Samango monkeys or baboons, which the walks are named after.

#### Day 7

As we are not driving today, we decided to take on a longer walk and explore the gorge. Umziki walk is a 9km round trip and took us up and along one side of the gorge with open bush on our right and the gorge to our left. The ascent and descent are steep, but we were rewarded with spectacular views. No unusual sightings but loads of birds, most of which were not in my pocket bird guide! I did recognise a crowned eagle soaring just above us. There were also other raptors, which I failed to identify. The last leg of the walk is a bit of an endurance test, all up hill on the tar road returning to camp. I was relieved, hot, tired and sweaty back at our chalet. Spent the evening round the fire under the stars. I think our chalet is the best as it is the bottom one and looks across the view into the gorge. This means we can sleep with curtains open and awake to a great view through the patio doors.

#### Day 8

Arrive at Mt Currie after a slow drive from Oribi Gorge. Single road most of way with road works and lorries. Passed 'through' the eastern Cape leaving the banana plantations of the south coast behind. More sugar cane and plenty of forestry plantations. Filled up with petrol and collected provisions in Kokstad before arriving at reserve. Met up with Pat Lowry, officer in charge, who briefed on the reserve. A summer storm of hail, rain, thunder and lightning is keeping us in our rest hut. It's a very nice room, clean, tidy with just about all self-contained. For cooking there is only a braai and microwave which in heavy rain limits your options! Only managed to walk for 20 minutes as, as quickly as the rain stopped, it renewed with a vengeance. Met up with Pat, who filled us in on the area and confirmed that there is a nesting pair of lammergeyer on the mountain and that he had seen them that morning.

#### Day 9

Still raining! The summer storm has turned to persistent rain, low cloud and mist meant any chance of a morning walk or even seeing anything from the car was gone. The road up until Sani Pass was good then turned to dirt. We logged all slip roads to relevant nature reserves and checked out road conditions where possible. Most were not great but heavy rain has not helped. More research is needed on the Drakensberg so that we can offer the best advice to travellers. Our chalet at Lotheni is fine with great views down the valley, which can only improve as the rain and low clouds disappear. This afternoon we walked to Jacobs Ladder Falls, just under 4km on a set trail. We crossed the river on a small "suspension bridge" and wound our way to the falls. We saw eland, lots of small birds and there were clear signs of otters, piles of poo full of broken crab shell, along with whole shells and claws. With the clouds lifting and a brief moment of sunshine, we walked our chalet to the campsite a 3kms round trip. On the opposite side of the valley a troop of baboons were foraging and barking. I think they knew it was going to rain again. Just before dusk a small herd, 20 or so, of eland appeared outside our chalet window grazing before moving off into the valley.

#### Day 10

Sat and watched the mist and cloud start to rise down the valley. Blue sky was even showing through. Today we walked the Emdandunwini trail, 11.5kms, about 4½ hours. Wet grass and muddy tracks, littered with footprints of animals, along with a good collection of droppings. Steep inclines, valleys and often grassland. Protea woods, which reminded me of fruit orchards back home. Dense forest, cool and dark, with lichens and air plants. The views are 'massive' and spectacular and at our highest point were rewarded with glimpses of summits and peaks on the opposite side of the valley. On our walks we have encountered eland, baboons, snakes, lizards, crabs, eagles, swallows, swifts, sunbirds, a host of unidentified birds, butterflies and beetles, not to mention wild flowers, proteas and tree ferns. Lothemi is a stunning location and our last meal around the fire, below the mountains and under the stars, was a fitting end to our short stay.

#### Day 11

Views this morning of all the surrounding peaks, our best so far. Today's venue is Kamberg in the foothills of the Drakensberg. The roads, of which the majority are dirt, go from not so good to terrible in places, and livestock on the road are an early problem leaving Lothemi. We seem to climb uphill towards our next stop, passing a few farms. Falcons, kestrels and buzzards are on just about every electricity and telephone

line we pass. We travel through the reserve and see black wildebeest by the road, then exit it before re-entering at the gate. Our cottage here is very upmarket and geared up for long stays. We are surrounded by hills and take a walk to the waterfall where there are a couple of cave rock paintings. We do not go into the main caves and rock paintings as this is only allowed with a guide. Our second walk or stroll really is down to the trout lakes. Neither of us are fishermen, but it's a pleasant place to spend an hour or two. Cormorants are perched on small islands in the lakes and red and golden bishops have nest's hanging from every reed on the lake edges. Through the evening thunder rumbles in the distant hills and lightning is all around us.

#### Day 12

A pleasant surprise to find the road between Kamberg and Giants Castle has more tar than dirt. Potholes in places slow progress down. There are also large settlements close to Giants Castle with people and livestock to look out for. Before checking in we head off on the self-guided Bergview trail. The trail takes us in the direction of the vulture hide, which is shut during summer, and again we do not get to see the elusive lammergeyer. We do see a large eagle and two buzzards (earlier in the day we stopped on the road, as a long crested eagle was perched on the telephone wires). The views on this walk are stunning, even with hazy skies. Our chalet, no. 43, is again very upmarket and comes complete with amazing views from the veranda. The double bed will be cosy! Walked again this afternoon to the main caves, missed the guided tour, which is on the hour at R25, so walked part of the Langalibalele trail and back via river walk. The noticeable difference here from the other reserves is the amount of people and the more commercial approach with large curio shop, restaurant and bar. Sat on the veranda and watched swallows and swifts, and as the light faded, bats. As darkness fell lightning lit the sky behind the 'sleeping giant'.

#### Day 13

Drizzle and cloud with a chill in the air. Sit on the veranda and over a cup of tea the clouds roll off the sleeping giant. Through the morning it warms up, but cloud lingers all the way to Injisuthi. We have travelled the long way round via Estcourt due to recommendations on road conditions. This at least means we can stock up on provisions in there. The road is OK up to Loskop, but there are plenty of pedestrians including school children, plus livestock through the settlement. The road then gets gradually worse and is probably the worst we have been on. Potholed tar becomes uneven wet dirt. The road into the reserve is tar but there are still a few potholes and watercourses to look out for. 6pm and the rain stops but all chance of walking has been abandoned for the day. Torrential rain has been falling since lunchtime so like the local baboons and guinea fowl we have sat sheltered, hoping for a break in the weather. The steep valley with woodland leading to sheer cliff faces has slowly revealed itself from our cabin viewpoint; clouds ascending streak back across, but still the rain falls. At least the cabin is big and has all needed under one roof with a large kitchen.

#### Day 14

Still raining! Since we can't really see beyond our cabin we leave early for Didima camp at Cathedral Peak. Probably the worst road on the way in to Injisuthi is now definitely the worst! - To the point of being scary. Thick, low cloud and deep ruts almost make the first leg out of camp impassable, steep valleys and a narrow bridge almost force us to stop. A herd of cattle appearing from the cloud also present a problem. They appear out of nowhere 20meters below us on a steep incline and all we can do is stop, wait, and hope we don't slide off the road. We weave along the potholed road through the settlement and onto the tar. The parallel road to Monks Cowl is an absolute luxury and pleasure. This is also a very tourist-orientated road, with a mixture of establishments lining the smooth tar. Unfortunately, with no break in the weather, we turn round at Monks Cowl gate and head up to Didima. At last the rain has eased on check in at Didima reception. This is a showpiece reserve with remarkable architecture and use of natural materials. Our chalet is a work of art in itself. It only has what most of our accommodation has had within, but the style sets it apart. Great views down the valley, and as usual in the Berg, there's baboons wandering around. Walked a section of Mike's Pass this afternoon, which provided more great views. Early evening on the balcony and we seem surrounded by red collared widow birds, pin tailed whydahs, sunbirds and swallows.

#### Day 15

Crystal clear skies for the first hour of daylight, then the cloud starts to lower. At least we have great views of Cathedral Peak, the inner and outer horns and the adjoining sheer rock faces. After a short delay, collecting my washing, it's onto Royal Natal for our last leg of the Berg. With the sun at last shining we have more good views back down the berg looking south and it's not long before we can see the mountains stretching northwards. What a contrast to Injisuthi! At Royal Natal the amphitheatre its buttresses and surrounding scenery is spectacular. From our bungalow we have yet another stunning view. I am a little confused as to the walks available here, so after some debate we head off in the car to the sentinel.

Crossed wires here also, as it's not just out of camp and round the corner. The drive is 120km through the Free State, taking nearly 2 hours, passing through the huge settlement of Qua-Qua. The last leg is a test of nerves winding up a narrow track to sentinel car park. I opted not to look down and kept my eyes fixed on the dirt road ahead. At the car park the attendant tells us we are too late to hike the last section as it's a 3 / 4 hour round trip! The views through the clouds stretch for miles and driving back we stop and look down on our Royal Natal camp. Wow! Back at the bungalow and probably the best sunset so far on the trip. The setting sun shining across the sentinel and amphitheatre is the "stuff of postcards". Sitting on the patio I could 11 types of birds all within a few metres. One big lesson learnt here is buy the guided walk book.

#### Day 16

A glorious start to the day watching the sunrise light the top of the amphitheatre from one buttress to the other. We join a few of the residents in taking photos from outside our respective bungalows (the number of bird varieties seems to have doubled overnight). By 7.45 am we have signed the 'walkers book' and head out of camp following the gorge trail. As it's our last day in the berg we are taking on our most ambitious trail to date, all 22.5km of it! A concrete path leads to a maintained footpath above the river valley, through shaded forest and down into the gorge - on the low path we pass some stunning Natal sugarbush proteas. There's plenty of water flowing, which makes crossing the river a little tricky and leaves me with a wet foot early on. There's no specific path across the running water, which means picking smooth boulders to step onto on either side and over the river. Cairns do act as markers, so at least you know you are heading in the right direction. On coming across a painted arrow going left and a chain ladder taking us vertically out of the gorge on our right, we head left. How I regret not buying the trail guidebook. Retracing our path we arrive back at the ladder and head up; a little 'hairy' but fine. Then it's still upward by means of steel pegs, wire and tree roots. A short walk and then back down into the gorge. We continue to criss-cross up the river, under the watchful eye of several baboons who I think were hoping to be entertained by us slipping and getting wet. Our journey is ended as the river almost fills the width of the gorge, blocking our progress. Above us through gathering storm clouds we can see the Tugela River tumbling down into the valley. By 2.30pm we are back in camp and both ache a little from the long trail. The biggest relief is to have missed the storm, which hits at about 3.30pm in spectacular fashion. The amphitheatre echoes the noise of thunder, our windows rattle, and lightning flashes above. A fantastic place for a storm.

#### Day 17

Awake to the familiar noise of rain dripping off the thatch. No view of the amphitheatre or any of the Berg as we head north out of the mountains. Bad weather has hampered our week in the in the mountains but on the whole it has been great. Never having spent more than a day in any mountains anywhere I have enjoyed both the stunning scenery and trails. I will make a plan to return, if only to try again at getting a sight of the elusive lammergeyer. A brief stop in Bergville for groceries and to change money is far from brief. Limited supplies at the supermarket and the process of changing cash takes an hour. Rain, then road works before our turn off to Chelmsford slow us down a little more. It may be drizzling but within 10 minutes of entering the reserve we had seen the rare oribi antelope the area is renowned for. Then perched on a tree above the road an osprey clutching a fish in its talons. Calling in at the office for information on the reserve we met Wendy, who enthusiastically passes on all needed and more. Our two bedroomed chalet overlooks the dam and whilst unloading the car a yellow mongoose and another oribi wander by. The Leokop game reserve section of Chelmsford is 1000 hectares and we spend a couple of hours driving its dirt roads. Oribi, blesbok, black wildebeest and springbok, are everywhere. This is the first time I have ever seen springbok. The reserve is unique, as it is virtually all grassland with only a handful of trees. Bird life amongst the grass is also prolific. Wendy encouraged us to take a walk at about 8pm as she had seen a family of cape foxes near our chalet. As we sat in fading light, watching bats catching termites, two small spotted cats appeared right in front of us. The smallest 'big' cats in South Africa. Yes another first for me, and a very rare site. The foxes proved elusive but it was probably asking too much.

#### Day 18

Chelmsford will go down as an unexpected surprise package and somewhere I will look to return to. Off to Ithala and back to the bush. 23km of road works negotiated in ¼ of an hour as we leave Chelmsford. We were overtaken in the road works by 2 cars, which were travelling at 120km, twice the speed limit! Dundee for provisions and fuel and I must be honest Pick'n'Pay here has everything. We then drove through Vryheid and up to Vryheid Hill Reserve, which unfortunately was not open. The last leg of today's journey was through 'Battlefield Country', Talana, Islandwana, Rorkes Drift and more. Could be a good idea for a website! Having visited Ithala on family trips with the in-laws, I'm looking forward to returning to familiar

ground and stunning scenery. As there is just 2 of us we are not in a bush camp but in the chalets at the main camp. They have all 'mod-cons' and are very modern in design and layout with little impact visually on their surrounds. The reserve itself is looking magnificent and after 20 minutes in the car we drive to a small waterhole where an enormous white rhino is wallowing and keeping cool. As he breathes with his mouth half in the water, bubbles and ripples appear. Driving the reserve, game is prolific with plenty of fowls and calves on show. 4 of the 'big 5' are here in Ithala, and with the absence of lion as well as cheetah, there's a relaxed atmosphere among the game species. Jeffrey Makwala, camp manager, spent some time with us to discuss happenings within and around the reserve. He also asked us to check out Mhlangeni Bush Camp in the eastern wilderness of the reserve, an area I had not previously visited. Stunning Jeffrey, the camp and location.

#### Day 19

Up before the sun this morning for a game drive at dawn. After a quiet start we come across 4 white rhino grazing in the early morning sun. It must be good grass as, looking around there are waterbuck, impala, blue wildebeest and zebra. After 3 hours it's back to the chalet for breakfast, shower and relax. Chris Luthuli is in the office after lunch and it's good to catch up with him face to face rather than the usual e-mail. He has become a good friend after we met on a wilderness weekend at Imfolozi. Late afternoon is spent driving the Ngubhu loop where again there is lots of plains game with white rhino. 3 vultures circle us but again I cannot positively identify. The highlight though was a pair of rare blue cranes. We also saw rhinos and what looked to be a young sick giraffe with nasty sores covering its neck.

#### Day 20

The roads, other than road works outside Pongola, were great up to Ndumo. We had been told that there would not be a lot of tar, however only the last stretch was dirt. We did miss a fuel stop at Pongola, which meant driving south of our turnoff to fill up in Mkhuze. We also drove via Pongola Nature Reserve on the Swaziland border at Golela. Driving through Jozini was 'very African' with stalls selling just about everything on the side of the road. The town was busy in general with people going about their business. From there to Ndumo there were small homesteads (kraals) and occasional goats and cattle on the road. The welcome at Ndumo Gate was the friendliest so far. Petros greeted us with a broad smile and traditional handshake. It was much the same at reception and accompanied with the detailed verbal outline to the reserve. Being picky, the only thing missing is a booklet with information on vegetation, animals and birds. Our room is great, complete with mosquito nets and wooden veranda. The kitchen and bathrooms are communal. With time here in short supply we drove the reserve visiting both hides and the Red Cliffs lookout point. 'Small world', we meet up on the first road with 'The McFie's', my in-law's farm neighbours! With the Pongola River in flood we are not seeing the reserve at its best. The reserve is very different from anything else we have so far visited, vegetation-wise. Nyala antelope are everywhere, followed in numbers by vervet monkeys. We also see white rhino, blue wildebeest, zebra, impala and giraffe. It is the bird life that is prolific here and with less water the sightings would have been greater. To mention a few, African fish eagle, yellow billed stork, African spoonbill, crested guinea fowl, Wahlberg's eagle, trumpeter hornbill, African hoopoe, Burchell's Coucal, red backed shrike and European rollers, plus many birds we could not positively identify, including several vultures on a giraffe carcass at the Vulture Restaurant. Spent the evening with David and Brenda McFie and were treated to home grown beef. We were also persuaded to get up at 5am to do the early morning walk!

#### Day 21

A fantastic and contrasting day, with soaring temperatures. Started out at 5.30am on the guided walk at Nmumo accompanying David, Peter Clark, Australian, and curator of Monarto Zoo, and Mark Bonacearso, American wildlife biologist. They were taking a break from 'bat surveying' in Kruger Park. The night before one of their colleagues had shown us a young bat she had picked up in our camp. Our guide, Anthony, was as good as any guide I have met in the Province. Every bird's call he not only knew but also could mimic and answer. We were in search of the rare and elusive Pel's fishing owl. It may have proved elusive but dozens of other birds did not. Along with two more rare sightings of bush pig and samango monkey. We also saw hippos, crossed paths with a crocodile and disturbed a large monitor lizard. A memorable mornings walk within the forest sycamore figs, fever trees and wild dark palms. A change in itinerary meant we travelled to Kosi Bay before heading back to Tembe tomorrow. We had arranged to meet Robyn in the town of Kwangwanase and she would guide us into Kosi Bay camp. The last 6km in are on sand road and really only suitable for 4 x 4s. She also arranged all permits and paperwork for our short stay. In reality, without her we ran the risk of not getting into camp at all and then being confined to our cabin. After lunch she took us out by 4 x 4 to Kosi Bay mouth where we swam and snorkelled. She supplied all needed and gave us a full rundown of the area. We saw the traditional fishing rafts and fish kraals and she explained the layout of the lake system. (Tomorrow we are meeting up again, early, and will go out in the boat around the lakes). The snorkelling was excellent, especially since it had been at least 10 years since I

last did it. Moray eels, angelfish, mullet, Picasso triggerfish, butterfly fish and blue streak cleaner wrasse were amongst the sightings. Finishing off the day on the cabin veranda there is hell of a noise on the roof, then two red squirrels appear. Also looking down on us from a tree above the braai the biggest hornbill I have ever seen.

#### Day 22

Met up with Robyn at the camp boat launch site for a trip around the lake system. After pushing the boat out we moved out at speed across the first lake. Robyn points out landmarks including the site for the turtle tours. Once across the first lake we head down the winding channel lined with reeds and pied kingfishers into the second lake. This is a 'cruise', as boats are not allowed to create a wake in the channels. The second lake has fish kraals, one being checked by its owner. Then it's off through the last channel before reaching our third and final lake. This is a good place to see hippos and we get a look at a small flock of flamingos. White crested cormorants are also perched on the kraals. The wind has picked up for our journey home, it's pleasant through the crystal clear channels, and an adventure across the 'surf' of the lakes. The 'rubber duck' boat is ideal and the inflated sides are reasonably comfortable when bouncing across the water. Running early by an hour for our arrival at Tembe, even by driving at 70kmph. Ernest Roberts, a member of the camp's team, meets us at the gate. Over tea he tells us the history of the park, surrounding area and its people. Lunch is provided in the dining area, sandwiches, fishcake and calamari. Here we meet other guests, Brian and Esther, on holiday from Johannesburg. The afternoon game drive with Philemon is wonderful. His knowledge and ability to spot both game and birds is exceptional. How he saw the tiny suni antelope was quite amazing. Brian and Esther, keen birders, were equally impressed. Can all guides mimic just about every bird? And spot them at a distance, blending in to the bush? Indigenous residents were soon spotted. A large lone bull elephant followed by a small herd including 2 youngsters. Being driven on sand roads in beautiful surroundings in the game vehicle was a real pleasure, refreshments were also included, Mozambique beer! What also made this most enjoyable was the company of Brian, Esther and Philemon. Returning just as darkness was falling, the camp was transformed by the open fire and 'torches' lighting the pathways. My room is immaculate with the corner of the bed turned and some of the side panels of the tent lowered. I enjoy a second beer by the fire before going into the dining area. A drum beats to signal ½ hour before food is served, and again, on serving. 3 courses with roast warthog as the main. After dinner, a glass of wine around the fire under the stars, Perfect. Perfect location, food and company. Guests, Frank and Tony join us for the evening along with Tom the camp manager, nephew of the King of Tongaland! Above the fireside conversation two wood owls call to each other.

#### Day 23

Awake before sunrise alone under canvas in the bush. This is a big part of being in Africa. 5.45am and a personal alarm call along with a tray of tea. 6.30am and off on an early morning drive. As per yesterday, more birds of which I have listed only a few, a lone bull elephant mud-bathing and buffalo across the swamp. A hide stop-off, lion spoor, but alas no lions, and the same with hippo. Even a stop for tea and rusks! Just after 10am we return to camp for a full breakfast. A light breakfast was also available before we set off. I cannot emphasise enough what a pleasure it has been at Tembe. The staff are fantastic, the camp wonderful, and the reserve immaculate. Our departure is marked with 2 traditional farewell songs. What an example for community tourism!! Back to reality and down to Sodwana Bay. Varying speed limits, 100km to 60km, with plenty of children on the road verges. There is a little confusion to which chalet we are in, but our third attempt is a success and we get a key. We also meet up with Mary Peters, who shares her knowledge on the coast's turtles. Unfortunately the turtle tours, which are run by a private concession, finished 2 days ago. The view from the chalet is stunning, looking across coastal forest, dunes, beach and blue sea with crashing surf. The chalet is big enough to sleep 6 with plenty of room and large veranda. We were fooled by the camp notice boards that the beach could be accessed on foot. It can't! It's a short drive out of the gate where parking is available. 4 x 4's can drive onto the beach; the only beach in South Africa where this is still allowed. We walk north along the beach in the hope of catching a glimpse of a turtle or even newly hatched turtles making their way into the ocean. No luck. The beach across the entrance is still busy just before dark with fishermen.

#### Day 24

Not sure if I awoke to rain or the noise of surf? I could hear monkeys though and on the veranda are a couple of the 'rare and timid' samango monkeys, begging for food. After a stop at the local Spar, 15 minutes out of camp, we call in at Orca Safaris. They are a private tourist information office and can advise and book all tours in the area. Much like Robyn at Kosi Bay they are filling a gap and providing much needed information. Walked for a couple of hours south down the beach. Unlike yesterday when only Sanderling gulls were on the north beach and there is no debris. Today there were crabs, including pink ghost, and lots of them on the shoreline. Smooth pebbles and selection of shells had also been

washed up along with blue bottle jellyfish. There are rocks here just offshore where as I don't think there are any off the south side. Another warm star-filled African sky, with the sound of the surf, to fall asleep to.

#### Day 25

Arrive at Mkhuzi mid-morning after a 2-hour drive from Sodwana Bay. Saw 3 beautiful long crested eagles and a Wahlberg's eagle before even entering the reserve. Before checking into our chalet we drive the longest loop road, stopping off at the Nsumo Pan. The pan has plenty of water and we sit and watch hippo splashing and grunting. There are also pelicans, great white egrets, and yellow-billed storks. Whilst driving we see giraffe, zebra and nyala, and can add another hornbill to the list, southern yellow billed. We also get close to lesser grey shrike, red backed and southern white crowned. There are also lots of European rollers. The birding highlight is a Martial Eagle perched on a dead tree alongside the car. To see as much of Mkhuzi in our short stay, we drive through the heat of the day calling in at 3 hides, Kwamalibali, Kubube, and Kumasinga. There are dozens of terrapins and at the last a lone yellow bill stork, 'fishing'. Herds of impala and a large herd of wildebeest with calves are the main usual sights. No cheetahs or wild dog as yet. In darkness outside the chalet I really feel 'in the bush'. I even witness some specialist hunting; gecko's catching just about anything that lands near them.

#### Day 26

Up before 5am and away just after. There have been regular sightings of wild dogs within 5kms of the camp so we head that way. After 2½ hours we head home. One thing I have learned in my years of travelling to game parks is don't expect anything and just enjoy what you encounter. I enjoyed just sitting, watching a baby Natal hinged tortoise crossing the road and a small flock of white helmeted shrike catching insects whilst a paradise whydah did the same from an adjacent thorn tree. Outside the chalet is a real commotion, baboons barking and impalas snorting, both running through the dust a few metres from our door. I am struggling to book a night drive, as we are the only two who want to go. Fingers crossed for tonight. Drove down to Nsumo Pan for a couple of hours and watched hippo, their mouths wide open and youngsters practicing their fighting skills. Saw several birds but could only identify black egret. Gave in to the 'Rhino-Dino' fast-food bar, made a change if nothing else!? Sat and watched black-eyed bulbul bathing in a dripping fire hydrant. Some very small birds that I couldn't identify (smaller than a sunbird with reddish brown backs joined them). No night drive! Not enough customers, even though no minimum number is stated anywhere. No 'rare sightings' on our late afternoon drive. We did get a good look at a black breasted snake eagle as it flew from its perch and alongside the car.

#### Day 27

Woke early tangled in my mosquito net. The beds here, as well as at Ndumo have them fitted. Our mission to see wild dogs here at Mkhuzi has failed. Neither elephant nor rhino, white or black. It's all down to luck as we had met people who were here last week and had seen elephant, white and black rhino. For birders Mkhuzi is excellent. Last night we saw woolly-necked stork at a hide (Kwamalibali) and this morning (Kumahlahla) grey Vernon, white-faced duck, yellow billed snort and grey plover. We also watched a barbet fly in and out of its nesting hole. Another notable sighting was a pair of red crested korhaan. Just as we were leaving the chalet a purple crested Lourie perched itself a few metres away and called for a good 10 minutes. I forgot to mention that we had also seen several tortoises this morning whilst driving, varying in size from golf balls to footballs, evenly split between Natal hinged and leopard tortoise (one of the "Small Five"! ). Drove north from the reserve and into the town of Mkhuzi. (This ties up with the drive from Ithala to Ndumo when we had a fuel stop in Mkhuzi itself). Beyond the town of Hluhluwe, False Bay is signposted quite well. We have doubled back and could have stayed in these reserves in a better order. However, in the planning stage I was not 100% certain on routes and road conditions. After checking in at reception it's then 8 - 10kms to the hatted Camp. The lakes here on the western shores are empty and a sad sight. It's hard to imagine what they would look like full. The camp here at False Bay is very rustic. It means a rethink and a trip to Hluhluwe to pick up food. This is a 'beer and meat' type of place with no braai, just an open fire. Hot water is also reliant on an open fire through a 'donkey' system. There's no sheets or pillows, but there are mosquito nets. The camp is empty other than a young male nyala standing by our hut. The noise of birds and insects fills the air and it is an extremely peaceful place. The nyala spent all afternoon with us, laying in the shade a few metres from us. Our only other daytime visitor was a fish eagle who soared over us and called. We sat around the fire from late afternoon and did have an evening visitor, a large thick tailed bushbaby who startled us with its 'screams'.

#### Day 28

I have really enjoyed our short stay at False Bay and only wish we had been a little better prepared on arrival. Blankets and firewood are essential. It is a real bush experience with bugs, butterflies and birds. Before leaving I took one last look from the viewpoint to see zebra and waterbuck below and right in front

of me was a pair of orange breasted bush shrike who seemed to be singing and dancing. From False Bay it's a short trip up to Hluhluwe Game Reserve. Outside the memorial gate are two young men: one dances, the other bangs a drum both dressed in traditional Zulu 'attire'. It's half an hour from the gate to reception and on arrival find checking in time is not until 2pm so we take off for a drive. Within 2½ hours we come across 7 white rhino, several buffalo and plenty of other game. Our chalet is a million miles from last night's accommodation and has everything on 2 floors - I like the idea of bedrooms downstairs and kitchen, diner, veranda upstairs. The 'rare and timid' samango monkey is also here. Two are grooming each other right outside the window. After a check with Mduduze at KZNW HQ to confirm our itinerary for the last week, it's off out into the reserve. Like most areas we have visited, the bird life here is prolific. Notable sights today: purple heron, green backed heron, red billed fire finch, steel blue widow finch and a close up of a fish eagle perched in a wild date palm. Good close views of white rhino and spotted hyena along with black rhino at a distance but still a great sight. The main viewing, however, this afternoon was elephant. Firstly a huge lone bull we followed, then a herd of 20+, which we watched from various sites. The herd was a real highlight and the biggest I have encountered. On leaving the herd we stopped and spoke with Gavin of Zululand-Adventures, who told us of a lion sighting. An hour later at the very point he had marked on our map, we met with yet another massive lone bull. I reversed immediately as he did not look happy. As I reached the brow of the hill he was gaining on me and right behind us was Gavin. With the elephant almost on top of us Gavin clapped his hands and shouted from his open game-viewing vehicle and the elephant's attention was immediately drawn to him and off went the elephant at speed towards Gavin. "Thank you, Gavin". It was a heart-stopping moment and without his intervention I believe we could have been in serious trouble. We met 40 minutes later and Gavin pointed out the elephant was heavily in must.

#### Day 29

Sunrise over the rolling Zululand hills looking west from Hluhluwe. Wow. A 3 hour drive to start the day and it's only 8.30am when we return to our luxurious chalet. No elephant this morning though we did meet up with Gavin again. We came across an adult and juvenile white rhino grazing next to the road, along with a small herd of wildebeest. We also went from seeing a pair of buffalo to a herd of 30+/-, to a herd of about 150+/- . Bird life is at its best first thing; coucal's sunning themselves to start the day. A secretary bird perched alongside a large falcon (?) and flocks of vultures circling above, rising on the thermals. No power in our luxury pad so we head off early down to Imfolozi calling in en route at the Vulamehlo craft stall and centenary centre. As there is no game currently in the centenary centre bomas we admire the crafts for sale in the curio rondavol where ladies from the local community are busy making, polishing and displaying their goods. After confirming our check in time at Impila Camp we drive for 3 hours and considering the heat I'm surprised we see anything. We have excellent close sightings of a large white rhino including a group of 3 males. Several giraffe appear drinking and browsing - the first we have seen up close for some time. The birding highlight is a pair of white fronted bee-eaters. "The night drive": 12 of us in a lorry driven by 'Bergy', including 8 Americans. "What do you want to see?" is the question put to the passengers. "Lion, leopards and crocodile" are among the answers. Having driven before at night, I know that whatever is seen is a bonus and not to expect anything. Firstly I can report no leopard, nor a crocodile. As dust falls we did see over 20 white rhino and dozens of buffalo; hyena also seem to crop up on a regular basis. Bergy stopped at all the 'usual' game and gave details on gestation and life expectancy. In darkness the headlights plus two spotlights held by passengers, lit up mainly red eyes. Through the dust we saw white tailed mongoose, scrub hare and had good looks at nocturnal bird life. Spotted dikkop, fiery necked nightjar and spotted eagle owl. I don't think all passengers were particularly interested in bird life! Back at the chalet, the game viewing does not stop. Warthog, zebra and impala are everywhere and spotted hyena regularly visits us.

#### Day 30

Another spectacular sunrise across the Zululand wilderness. During this morning drive there's plenty of game including more hyena 'heading home', but no cats. We do come across another huge bull elephant that I pass with extreme caution. After our morning drive it's off to Opathe Reserve. A new road is under construction and it makes the trip 'desert like', dust everywhere, slowly winding between rock's, heavy plant, people, cattle and goats. Then through Ulundi, Zululand's capital, past Buthelezi Airport and on to the reserve. We meet staff Catherine and Richard and talk about the reserve and its expansion taking in the Emakhosini valley with its wealth of Zulu history. Opathe itself is a good size, but has limited road access and during our 'flying' visit we see a large amount of game including rhino (white), giraffe and waterbuck. From the hide I also watched a pair of malachite kingfishers flying and fishing over the dam. From here we drove to the start of the Valley of the Kings and the Spirit Emakhosini. (Additional research is needed for this area and I will consult with the Wildlands Trust). The memorial itself is very impressive and I feel has a real purpose and message in its construction. It also makes a visit very worthwhile visit adding culture and heritage to our trip. If time had allowed I would have liked to visit some of the other

sites in the area. A wrong or missed turn in the network of roadworks delays our return and we are met with heavy rain followed by an electrical storm. Stopping off at Bhejane hide we sat and watched a herd 30+ buffalo wallowing occasionally joined by warthog, wildebeest, impala and zebra, a real African postcard scene. From the bush behind came the coughs, snorts and squeals, of other animals obscured from view. To finish the day off we sit and watch a young rhino on a scratching post and he doesn't miss a spot. The noise is like a barber's knife being sharpened on a leather strap. A juvenile crowned eagle sitting on the dirt road was a nice sight on the way home. Where the sun rose this morning lightning now flashes in the valley below. No rain, no thunder, just the illuminations.

#### Day 31

A cool overcast day makes driving very pleasant with all the 'usual suspects' out and about: rhino, giraffe, buffalo, etc. I pulled up and saw a group of young impala that looked to be in training. Some were butting and locking horns, even though their horns were barely showing. Others were sprinting, jumping and turning as if avoiding a predator. Then, instead of a zebra crossing, it was a baboon crossing. The young always seem to fight and tumble across. Bird sightings this morning are of an eagle with a snake, and a smaller falcon in hot pursuit. Not sure if it was a brown snake eagle or a Wahlberg's. One criticism of the park is the amount of contractors and possibly locals using the road system. At 6am this morning I was overtaken on the southern loop road by 2 vehicles travelling above 40kph with lights on full beam and creating a huge amount of noise. Looked up Jabulani at the Tourist Office, who took us out into the wilderness on a previous visit. I should plan a primitive trail for my next visit! With cool weather and overcast skies, we head off for a late morning drive and are rewarded with 2 great sights. A southern ground hornbill, which we sit and watch forage on the ground, then it flies into a tree and calls. Next came a black rhino, which we sat and watched until another vehicle scared him back into the bush. Neither of the sightings provided a good photo opportunity! The day really got better as we drove back into Hluhluwe for a change of scenery. Wild dog! Only one, but it was a rare and lucky sight. It just appeared in front of us, we followed it to the river, and sat and watched for ½ an hour. Next was a small family herd of elephant. The matriarch made it clear we must move and then a tiny elephant appeared amidst its family of mixed sized relatives. Tonight is our last night, so will we see a cat before departing mid-morning tomorrow?

#### Day 32

5.05am and I'm away, alone, out of camp. Just over a km out, an elephant has felled a tree across the road and, after a few minutes of deliberation, I decide to proceed with caution. With headlights on I very slowly manoeuvre around the tree and see huge piles of dung amongst the broken branches. I even consider turning back after the experiences earlier in the week. For the first hour's driving I barely see an animal or a bird so the first I get close to I stop and have a look. A rufous-naped lark, singing from a branch of a dead tree. Then a flappet lark, and next a pair of red billed wood hoopoes. After that a great African scene if unveiled. Herds of game: impala, wildebeest, zebra, groups of giraffe numbering 7 and 8, warthogs, a family group of 4 white rhino and then a large herd of buffalo. I also notice 15+ kites perched amongst 3 trees. ½ hour from camp, after 3 hours driving, looking down at the river, I spot what looks like a lion? I 'speed' to the viewpoint where a Landrover is already parked and look across to the far sandy bank. It's not a lion, but a large pride!! Great spotting even though I say so myself! There are at least 12, if not 15 including 4+ cubs. I can't quite believe what I am seeing. A group of impala appear unaware of the lions and a 'hunt' begins. No 'kill', just a great spectacle and privilege to watch. Even a rhino passes by the pride that seems content to lay on the sand and relax. After an hour I move on. Before checking out of camp I visit the Trails Office to say goodbye to Jabulani and report my new sighting. He's not in but I meet Alison May, whom I get talking to and tell of my sightings in the past couple of days. As there was no sighting book at Hluhluwe for the wild dog she gave me a form to fill in so our experience can be recorded. Next stop Charters Creek via Mtubatuba to buy water (if you don't like crowds, don't shop in South Africa on a Saturday!). There's no drinking water at Charters Creek and on arrival there's very little in the lake. Our large rondavel is quite nice, even though there's not much to do. That's fine, it's been a long day and it's only 2pm. The camp itself is laid out well, has a pool and communal braai along with smaller braai areas dotted around. There's even a few guests, mainly researchers up from The University of Natal. Strolling down onto the dry lakebed I can see a few pelicans. However, due to the presence of elephants, all other trails / walks are closed unless escorted with an armed ranger. Enjoyed a glass of Amarula with the University group around the pool before retiring early (ish).

#### Day 33

Another hot, dry African day, with clear blue skies. Before heading out to our next overnight stop we call in at St Lucia to map the office and campsites. St Lucia is a real tourist town, probably more so than anywhere else on our travels in the province. Riette is not in the Advantage Tours office so after a quick update, food and fuel stop its up to Cape Vidal. On my last visit here I saw a leopard! The tar road is

excellent and it takes ½ hour from the initial gate to reception. We do slow down to have a look at reed buck and red duiker. There's also plenty of vervet monkeys around. One last detour past Mission rocks and then down to the beach. It's busy with day-trippers, fishermen and 4 x 4s towing boats to launch from the beach. Landed fish are being gutted on a purpose built slab. Strolling along the beach there are plenty of small crabs and overhead hover 'raptors' I can't identify. The log cabins here are a good size with everything you need. There's a nice veranda with braai area below and just behind that the dunes. We are surrounded by pine trees and mingled in are plenty of bat boxes.

#### Day 34

St Lucia to Maphelana as the crow flies is only a few kms across the estuary mouth. However, in reality it's near on 2½ hour's drive. The road, once off the highway is a mix of tar, gravel and sand, the last 12km being pure sand, taking over 40mins. Our log cabin at Maphelana is much the same as Cape Vidal; the view, however, is far better. We look across dunes, beach and over the ocean. The lady in the office has explained the reserve's layout and given us one of the staff maps. Again, there's no official map, animal or bird list. After spending a few hours walking the pristine beach, yet another, I take a drive to the jetty to look for hippo and crocodile and then take the self-guided dune trail. Vervet monkeys, red duiker, and dozens of butterflies are also on the trail through the thick 'jungle-like' bush. The density of the bush means views are limited from the top of the trail. Weather-wise today it is one of those very hot, humid days with low cloud. The first we have had since we began our journey. This morning at Cape Vidal at low tide the rock pools had fish, crabs, mussels and oysters. Here the tide line is full of lobsters, crayfish, mussel shells, urchins and lots of seaweed. There are also, as on most beaches we have visited 1000's of crabs. A late afternoon stroll in the opposite direction along the beach. The main difference this way is that the Estuary runs parallel to the sea towards the mouth. I wish I had my binoculars, as I'm sure I can see hippo, crocodile and flamingo on the opposite bank. I keep a good distance from the estuary bank, as there are warning signs for hippo and crocs. There are quite a few birds here also: swallows, kites, gulls, none of which I can positively identify, one bird who 'walked' with me along the shoreline I think was a curlew but, again, cannot identify. Returning to the cabin there's even a red duiker on the beach.

#### Day 35

Last night shortly after dusk and set to the noise of rolling, crashing surf, bats performed aerial stunts within inches of us and firefly's darted through the darkness. My room also has its resident wildlife-geckos. One side of my bed is littered with their droppings. The heavy skies did rain last night but this morning is hot and clear. Our farewell greeting is from a family of banded mongoose, who stand by the braai and watch us load the car. One thing I forgot to mention is that there are signs for reporting a certain snake: a Gaboon adder. We leave Maphelana and head south to the N2 via Kwambonambi (we entered via Keva from the north). Once back on the highway driving is much easier by not having to avoid potholes. After coming off the highway at Enseleni we find the reserve is actually right on the road a few km further down. Ongoye proves more difficult and even referring to our 3 maps we still can't find it. I sense we should head to Umlalazi and ask for advice on the forest reserves. Our log cabin here is I the nicest we have stayed in. No sensational views but surrounded by trees, including Natal wild banana. Spent the afternoon exploring. First stop the raffia palms at the entrance to the reserve and where, if lucky, you might see the rare palm nut vulture. Then it's the mangroves, then beach and finally the forest dunes. The beach is an expanse of white sand with only 6 other people on it. The dunes aren't as impressive as previous beaches but nonetheless yet another stunning location. Good sightings today of white breasted cormorant, great white egret and kelp gull. Another gull I can't identify along with the same kite previously seen on other beaches. Back at the office there's been a meeting as illegal fishnets have been pulled from the river. The nets effectively used for poaching contain 20+kg of fish. I spoke with the local boat owner, who pulled the nets out and he said he never goes more than ankle deep into the river due to crocodiles and sharks! Day 36 As I lit the fire our last supper of the trip, vervet monkeys besieged us. At least 6 appeared in the surrounding trees and on the roof. At 5am this morning they were back swinging through the banana palms. As if 'laid on' as a nice touch, a purple crested Lourie came and perched itself on a tree next to the veranda. First stop this morning Amatikulu where I would have liked to explore, but time is against us. The camp here is closed at present; otherwise it would have been our last stop-off. Next off the highway to Harold Johnson reserve before heading down to our last reserve, Umhlanga Lagoon. An extraordinary place to finish, as it's tucked away in the commercial resort of Umhlanga at the end of a long road full of holiday flats, apartments and hotels. Beachwood Mangroves will be listed along with the other Durban reserves but only in reference terms. The journey ends where the N2 meets the N3 as we have logged the journey down from the north and south to the airport at Durban. Now I must consider conclusions and proposals along with outcomes so it's not the end, just a stage completed.