HWANGE NATIONAL PARK 6TH – 12TH JUNE 2005

A base camp was established at Giraffe Springs, 55 km west of Main Camp, during which time we recorded all animals seen in the following areas: Dom, Nyamandhlovu, Ngwenya, Balla Balla, Shapi, Guvalala, White Hills, Danga, Giraffe Springs, Broken Rifle, Roan, Shumba, Dwarf Goose and several other pans and waterholes! We also spent some time counting game at Masuma and Mandavu dams.

Details of each species seen is mentioned below giving an indication of where located and the composition of the herds. Some records concerning breeding are given and the state of water in the various dams and pans visited.

ELEPHANT

Large numbers of elephants were seen throughout the Main Camp and Sinamatella areas as follows:-

Puff adder Pan: Now completely dry – no borehole or pump.
6/6/05: 2 bull elephants (one with both tusks broken in half).

Dom Pan: Pump working very well, lots of clean water in concrete trough, pan about half full but good supply of water.
6/6/05: 31 elephants (cows and calves) – 14 very small babies in herd.
7/6/05: 19 elephants (cows and calves); 5 ad bulls; 2 ad bulls.
8/6/05: 192 elephants. Very difficult to distinguish different herds as entire area was literally covered with elephants.
9/6/05: No elephants.
10/6/05: 61 elephants (appeared in herds of 18, 21, 11 and 11).
11/6/05: 16 elephants (one herd of cows and calves including 7 tiny babies.

Total of 319 elephants seen in 6 days. Not necessarily all different animals as the same animals may have been seen on two different days.

Nyamandhlovu Pan: Pump not working on three days but pumping on other days. Lots of water in pan. Not as many elephants at Nyamandhlovu compared to Dom Pan. This is most unusual as under normal circumstances more elephants are seen at Nyamandhlovu than anywhere else in the Park. It was noticed that the very clean water being pumped into the trough at Dom Pan certainly attracted the elephants to it. We visited the pan every day and stayed a few hours each time during which time the following herds of elephants were seen:

46 (3 herds of cows and calves); 11 large bulls; 6 bulls; 4 bulls; 21 (cows and calves); 19 (cows and calves); 9 bulls; 5 bulls; 1 large bull; 2 bulls; 15 (cows and calves);
Total 139 elephants.
All of the herds of cows and calves had very young babies with them.

Guvalala Pan: Pan about ¼ full of water, pump not working on two days. Otherwise working all the time. Water quality in the pan was poor. No large herds of elephants were seen at Guvalala in spite of water being present. Over a period of 7 days the following herds of elephants were recorded:
1 bull; 7 bulls; 9 bulls; 12 cows and calves; 6 bulls; 2 bulls; small herd of 6 cows and 2 calves.
Total 45 elephants.

White Hills Pan: No borehole or pump. Pan almost dry on 6th June 2005 and completely dry on 12th. However lots of wet mud still occurred in the pan on 12th, which attracted several species of wildlife.

Elephants were one of the species that visited the drying up pan and were in fact directly responsible for trampling the mud and causing the pan to dry up a lot quicker than would normally have taken place.

In addition because of the lack of water the elephants had become extremely aggressive and at no time would they allow any other species to drink. As a result of

this behaviour many other species, such as kudu, sable, roan, etc. would have to leave the pan without drinking.

Over a period of 6 days the following elephants were seen:
6 bulls; 11 bulls; 3 bulls; 14 cows and calves; 9 bulls; 1 bull; 1 bull; 1 bull; 2 bulls; 12 cows and calves; 21 cows and calves.
A total of 81 elephants were seen.

By 12th June there was no longer any surface water in the pan and most species, including elephants, that visited the pan had to leave without drinking.

Ngwenya Pan: Completely dry, no pump and borehole. We only visited Ngwenya Pan on one occasion (11th June 2005) and 4 bull elephants were seen standing in the centre of the pan.

Balla Balla Pan: Still ¼ full of water, no borehole and pump. We visited the pan on three occasions and in spite of the fact that a good supply of water existed no elephants or any other animals were seen.

Shapi Pan: Pan completely dry. Good borehole but no pump. In order to get from Giraffe Springs to other parts of the Park we always had to pass Giraffe Springs. This pan, when full of water, is an exceptionally good place to see elephants and other species. During our 7 days in the area no elephants were seen at the pan.

Danga Pan: Completely dry, normally a very deep pan, no borehole or pump at pan. When I visited Danga in October 2004 at the very end of the dry season Danga Pan still had a considerable amount of water in it. That clearly indicated that the pan held water all through the dry season of 2004.

On our recent visit to the pan (9th June 2005) it was already completely dry indicating that it had dried up some weeks or months ago.

No elephants or other game seen.

Roan Pan: (Close to the road near Shumba). Very dry, no borehole or pump. Another very deep pan. This pan is a favourite pan for elephants and as a result of it being very deep elephants are able to swim and completely submerge when the pan is full of water. No elephants or other game seen during our visit.

Dwarf Goose Pan: Completely dry, no borehole or pump. During the rains an exceptionally beautiful pan always covered with aquatic vegetation. This shallow depression very quickly fills with water and the waterlilies and other aquatic vegetation always attracted flocks of Dwarf Geese and other waterfowl.

On 10th June 2005 when we visited the pan, which was dry, 5 elephant bulls were seen.

Shumba Pan: (Near Picnic Site). Two borehole pumps, pan ¼ full but sufficient water. The entire area between Guvalala Pan and Shumba Pan, a distance of over 55 kms, was completely dry and no water was found in any of the pans or depressions anywhere. As a result of the lack of water for such a large distance large concentrations of elephants and other wildlife occurred in the Nyamandhlovu/Dom Pan area and then again at Shumba Pan.

When we arrived at Shumba Pan at 8:30am on Thursday 9th June 2005 there were already 81 elephants at the pan. It was difficult to say for certain how many herds this represented. There were many cows and calves, some newly born babies and lots of bulls.

Between 8:30am and 10:30am another 245 elephants visited the pan. The 9th June was a very hot day with no wind and in addition to the elephants several other species visited the pan to drink.

The 245 elephants that we saw visiting the pan were made up of the following herds or single bulls:
49 cows and calves; 22 cows and calves; 9 bulls; 7 bulls; 1 bull; 1 bull; 1 bull; 14 cows and calves; 6 bulls; 32 cows and calves; 12 cows and calves; 18 cows and calves; 7 cows (no calves??); 19 cows and calves; 9 bulls and 26 cows and calves.

This represented the greatest concentration of elephants that I had seen in the Park for some time. The herds kept on coming and going and at no time over a period of two hours were there less than 35 elephants at the pan. A wonderful sight indeed.

Masuma Dam: Plenty of water, pump working. In spite of all the water not many elephants were seen. I believe most of the elephants in the area were concentrated around Shumba Pan where the quality of the water was much better. Six hippo (one baby) occurred in Masuma dam and quite a lot of mud was found in places at the edge of the pan. Only 31 elephants were seen during our visits, made up as follows: 1 bull; 2 bulls; 6 bulls; 15 cows and calves and 7 bulls.

Mandavu Dam: Large amounts of water in the dam. Only two herds of elephants were seen in the Mopane woodland below the dam wall. One herd was of 11 cows and calves and the other 9 cows and calves.

The destruction of the vegetation below the dam wall was unbelievably severe and most of the area was dry and desolate. Most trees had been severely damaged by elephants and the area looked devastated by continued destruction by elephants. Without some management of the elephants in the area there will be very little vegetation left in the near future.

Giraffe Springs: Very dry pan but very small quantities of water trickled into a concrete trough. The engine and pump were provided by Wilderness Safaris, who have a concession in the area and own Giraffe Springs camp where we stayed for the week. Throughout the day and night large bull elephants visited the pan in an effort to get water. Some of the bulls would often stand in the dry concrete troughs for hours at a time desperately trying to suck up a few drops of water. Perhaps as many as 12 to 14 bulls visited the pan and on one occasion a small herd of 11 cows and calves. However, no animal could have obtained even a small bucket full of water to drink.

As a result of the lack of water the thirsty elephants spent many hours at night in the camp and amongst the tents digging holes in the septic tanks searching for water. On three occasions one bull elephant even dug up the water pipes supplying the camp with water.

The borehole at Shapi is believed to be a very good one with lots of water but during our visit no pump and engine was present. One of the ways to solve the water problem in the area would be to fit a pump and engine to the borehole at Shapi and this would provide water for the animals in the area. If water is pumped into Shapi Pan it will be the only water between Shumba and Guvalala Pans.

Shallow Grave Pan: Very dry, good borehole, but no pump and engine. No elephants or other animals seen in the area.

Conclusion: Lots of water at Nyamandhlovu, Dom, Guvalala and Shumba Pans and in the Masuma and Mandavu Dams. Most other pans between Guvalala and Shumba were dry. Large numbers of elephants everywhere where water was present.

OTHER SPECIES

SABLE ANTELOPE
It was wonderful to see so many herds of sable in the Main Camp/Giraffe Springs area. There has definitely been a large increase in the number of this species in the area over the past 10 years and many are now seen where they were not present before. At one time the main concentration of sable existed in the Makololo/Ngamo/Ngweshla area. Now they are plentiful around Giraffe Springs and Guvalala. Groups of sable were seen as follows:

White Hills Pan: (Dry) 6th - 12th June '05
Six separate territorial bulls (often sparring at edge of the pan); herd of 18 cows and calves (9 of which were calves of the year and a 100% calving rate; 4 bulls in a bachelor herd.
Total 28 sable.

Giraffe Springs: (Dry) 6th - 12th June '05
Four single territorial bulls; herd of 14 cows and calves (6 of which were young of the year); herd of 11 cows and calves (4 calves of the year);
Total 29 sable.

Nyamandhlovu Pan: (Plenty water)
Herd of 15 cows and calves and 1 territorial male.
Total 16 animals.

Shumba Pan: (Plenty water)
Bachelor herd of 6 young bulls.

ROAN ANTELOPE
Shumba Pan: (Lots of water)
Single male; herd of 11 (2 males, 6 females and 3 young).

Giraffe Springs: (Dry)
Herd of 6 roan (all appeared to be females – no young).

White Hills Pan: (Dry)
Herd of 8 roan (6 females plus 2 young) – trying to drink and up to their knees in soft mud.

Dom Pan: (Plenty of water)
Single adult male roan drinking at pan.

WATERBUCK
The only waterbuck seen during our visit was at Masuma Dam (14 females and 2 males) and 11 at Mandavu Dam (8 females and 3 males).

WATERHOGS
Large numbers everywhere and even at the very dry pans where no water existed. For example 17 were seen at Giraffe Springs alone.

GIRAFFE
Surprisingly very few giraffe were seen. Groups of 7 animals were seen at Dom Pan, 6 and another 5 at Nyamandhlovu Pan, 5 at Shumba and 4 at Masuma Dam.

STEENBOK
Not many seen and on each occasion only single animals. Sexes undetermined. A total of 8 separate steenbok were seen in 7 days.

BUFFALO
Six large very old "dagga boys" were seen drinking at Dom Pan. Two bulls at Nyamandhlovu and several hundred at Mandavu Dam. One of the herds at Mandavu Dam consisted of over 400 animals, another of 150 and a third group of 42 animals. As all three herds drank at the top end of the dam and well away from the Picnic Site, it was difficult to accurately count the numbers of animals in each herd.

TSESSEBE
Four tsessebe (unsexed) were seen at Shumba Pan.

HIPPO
Only 6 hippo seen at Masuma Dam (1 a baby).

WILDEBEEST
Small herds of wildebeest were seen in several different parts of the Main Camp and Sinamatella area as follows:

Main Camp: 21 animals (all seen at night with a spot light) lying under the large trees within a 100 metres of the staff houses. They were with ± 50 impala, 6 giraffe and 15 zebra. It is of interest to note that each night all these animals would congregate close to the staff houses possibly because they were aware that large predators would not venture close to where humans were living!!

Nyamandhlovu Pan: Herd of 16 animals together with 11 zebra.

Shumba Pan: 6 wildebeest only.

Dom Pan: Herd of 12 wildebeest.

ZEBRA
Over 40 zebra were seen scattered over the open grasslands around Shumba, 15 at Main Camp close to the staff houses, 4 at Giraffe Springs, 11 at Masuma Dam, 12 at Sinamatella, 11 at Nyamandhlovu and 5 at White Hills Pan.

IMPALA
Good concentrations of impala were seen throughout the Main Camp area. Without spending a lot of time trying to count the animals that were always "bunched" into groups and in thickets only approximate numbers were obtained. For example we saw at least 50 impala at Main Camp, 21 at Balla Balla, 11 at Dom Pan, 26 at Nyamandhlovu, 14 at White Hills and 42 at Shumba. There were also 3 different herds at Masuma Dam of 18, 12 and 21. Those at Masuma were accurate counts as the herds were in the open at the edge of the dam and easily counted.

YELLOW-SPOTTED DASSIES
A large number of dassies still occur at the Picnic Site at Mandavu Dam where they have been for many years. The population could be at least 30 animals. Many of the females had tiny babies with them. In addition a small population also occurs in front of the restaurant at Sinamatella and on the rocks along the side of the road leading to Sinamatella Camp.

It is of interest to note that all babies seen were less than a month old with many being newly born. These births were at least 2 months later than the rock dassies (*Procavia capensis*) at the Matopos where babies were dropped in March and April.

Another small group of yellow-spotted dassies were seen on an outcrop of granite just north of Shumba Picnic Site.

KLIPSPRINGERS
A group of 2 females and 1 male were seen with the yellow-spotted dassies on the granite boulders north of Shumba Picnic Site.

LEOPARDS
A pair of leopards called each night at Giraffe Springs Camp. On the night of 7th June the male was trying to mate with the female within 5 metres of my tent. Even though I shone a torch light on them it made no difference and they made no effort to run away and continued with their sexual activities.

The next night (8th June) they killed an impala ram very close to my tent and spent the next ½ hour feeding on the carcass until 3 spotted hyaena arrived and after driving the leopards away dragged the remains of the impala carcass out of the camp and into the bush. Next morning we followed the drag marks but the carcass was nowhere to be found.

SPOTTED HYAENA
A spotted hyaena den in a hole in the ground at Main Camp was seen with only one baby and a second "den" occurred

near Bos Long One Pan where a female had hidden her baby in a concrete storm water pipe under the main road. Single hyaena were also seen at night at Giraffe Springs, Guvalala and Main Camp.

The population appears to be a lot less than what it was several years ago when the species was very often seen at night.

LION

Apart from one lone male, which was heard calling on three separate nights at Giraffe Springs, no other lions were heard or seen in the area.

This trip to Hwange in June 2005 was the only trip to Hwange in the last 6 years that I had not seen any lions. However, they still exist in good numbers and perhaps I was just unlucky on this trip.

BAT-EARED FOXES

The only bat-eared foxes seen were at Nyamandhlovu and Dom Pans. Three groups of 2 animals each were seen at night with the aid of a spot light.

There is no doubt that there has been a very large decrease in bat-eared foxes numbers over the years. Throughout their range in the Hwange National Park they are now encountered less often than previously.

VIVIAN J. WILSON

10th June, 2005

THE HWANGE SITUATION – OCTOBER 2005

I have just returned from Hwange National Park yesterday, i.e. Wednesday 19th October after releasing a leopard and other animals back into the wild in a remote part of the Park. I have been visiting Hwange continually since 1965, which is now 40 years and this last trip was really the worst one I have ever had over that long period of time. Just to give you an idea of the water situation as I saw it over a period of a few days:-

Dom Pan near Nyamandhlovu and indeed Nyamandhlovu are completely dry. All the pans going towards Shumba are dry as well. Guvalala Pan is also dry, so is Shapi, Danga, Roan, Skova etc, etc. In fact between Main Camp and Shumba not one single pan had water in it. On the morning of Wednesday the 19th October a National Parks vehicle pitched up at Dom Pan and started pumping water into a concrete trough. Even though no elephants could be seen at the time, the moment the pump started working elephants started pouring out of the bush to drink. They had heard the starting up of the pump and knew that water was going to be available. A dead hyaena was also present at the edge of Dom Pan. The National Parks people then moved on to Nyamandhlovu where again they started the engine and started pumping water. Standing around the dry trough at Nyamandhlovu were 20 zebra, a couple of sable bulls, a few buffalo and a large number of elephants, all waiting for the water to enter into the concrete trough. No matter how fast the water was pumped out of the ground, it was consumed by the elephants and other species and I doubt if any water would actually get as far as the actual pan itself.

Guvalala is a pathetic sight. Obviously no water has been pumped into the pan or the trough for some time and several species are waiting around hoping for some water. Shapi has been dry for some considerable time and even though there is a pump there, it has not been used. None of the seasonal pans obviously have any water in them.

I had a rather nasty experience with a hippo in Dom Pan. It was lying in a patch of mud, which was still slightly wet, with only the top of its back and half of its head exposed. I got out of the vehicle to see if the animal was alright and I can assure you it was very much alive! It raced out of the mud and before I knew it the hippo was almost on top of me. I sprinted about 20 metres back to the vehicle and only managed to get back into the vehicle just as the hippo caught up with me. If I had tripped while running back to the vehicle, it certainly would have been the end of my wildlife career.

In 40 years of visiting Hwange I have never seen the situation as bad as it is at the present time. Never have I ever seen Dom, Nyamandhlovu and Guvalala Pans dry. These three pans, as you know, are on the main tourist route. At Nyamandhlovu there were 5 other vehicles with tourists and the occupants of each vehicle complained about the lack of water in these very important pans. I am also fully aware that there are not large numbers of deaths of animals at the present time and while many species look thin, they will no doubt survive if water is available for them. The vegetation is unbelievably dry and this is to be expected because of the drought and the long hot dry period that we are going through at the present time. I watched elephants feeding on dry sticks because there were no leaves or any vegetation and only a very few species of trees that are generally unpalatable have leaves on them. As far back as June this year elephants were destroying the Gardenia trees in the Main Camp area and they have continued to do so. Gardenias are a much sought after species not only for elephants but also giraffes and I can assure you in the very near future there will not be a lot of Gardenia trees left in the area.

I certainly do not wish to be an alarmist and I work closely with National Parks all the time and am doing many projects on their behalf, but I do believe that some help or additional help should be given to the Main Camp area, which is so important as far as tourists are concerned.

I am sure that the Wardens and Research Staff at Main Camp are keeping National Parks Directorate and the Principal warden at Bulawayo informed of the situation in Hwange and my e-mail is merely to add a little more detail to the situation. I also know that if it rains in November the situation will improve a great deal; but what will happen if it doesn't rain?

VIVIAN J. WILSON

10th June, 2005

THE HWANGE SITUATION – NOVEMBER 2005

Zimbabwe Independent Local*News* November 11,2005

Wildlife decimation threatens tourism

Zimbabwe's tourism industry faces collapse after reports of extensive wildlife deaths due to poaching and lack of water in National parks with Gonarezhou and Hwange particularly badly hit.

Government this week made a tacit admission of the growing disaster; although National Parks Authority officials have been evading questions on the threat posed to the tourism industry by rising deaths among wildlife species.

Tourism minister Francis Nhema this week said government was moving swiftly to save the animals.

"We have begun drilling strategic boreholes and moving the animals to the nearest water points," he said.

"Our major problems are the elephants because they need more water: We are hoping that the rains will favour us and alleviate the problem."

Nhema said the receding water table in the parks has exacerbated the crisis prompting government to transfer water in bowsers to the affected areas, while identifying new water sources to supplement these efforts.

Wildlife plays a central role in foreign currency generation through game viewing and licensed hunting. The water problems will further worsen already dwindling tourism business casting doubt over government's resuscitation efforts.

Hundreds of animals are reportedly dying daily due to lack of water in the arid national parks with elephants the most vulnerable. Tourists have been forced to watch animals fighting over scarce waterholes.

Hwange National Park spans 14 000 square kilometers and has a population of 50 000 elephants, 36 000 more than the carrying capacity of 14 000 elephants. An elephant requires at least 100 litres of water a day to survive.

Another dilemma facing the parks authority is the lack of adequate boreholes.

Out of 60 boreholes only seven are working. But this failure is due to lack of maintenance, conservationists charge.

National arks Authority spokesperson, Retired Major Edward Mbewe, said his organization had managed to put in corrective measures to deal with the situation.

"We have managed to dig a 2,5 km trench from a water point managed by Zinwa (Zimbabwe National Water Authority) at Hwange National Park. The water points have high yielding pumps, and the water will be funneled to a central point where distribution to the park will be made."

Mbewe said Hwange Colliery had donated pipes for the project, which will alleviate prevailing problems.

He said plans were under way to construct at least three troughs per borehole for water holding and preservation purposes.

Private sector organizations such as the Zimbabwe Conservation Task Force have been instrumental in getting fuel supplies to the affected areas.

Zimbabwe Council of Tourism chairman, Tom Chuma, said government and National Parks authorities should put their house in order considering the economic benefits of wildlife.

"Our industry depends on wildlife and the parks. The state of their health is what drives the tourism industry," he said.

"We expect all responsible authorities to do what they're supposed to do, and that is ensuring the wildlife and parks are in a functional state."