

**SEMESTER 3 1st half of 2009**

**Bushsounds**

This semester we did another sleep out for 2 nights. On the first night all students were a bit nervous sleeping out in the open in a big5 game reserve with just a sleeping-bag around you and a fire to keep warm. The students were quiet and stressed but the stars were shining bright and every student had to stand guard for an hour so no hyena or other animal could surprise the sleepers. Without much talk everyone went to bed.

The dry riverbed proved to be an excellent place to sleep as the sand inside the bedding was soft and comfortable. Last December we were surprised by a sudden torment of rains flooding the river within an hours-time and cooler-boxes, mattresses and other gear floating around within seconds! This time it stayed dry.

During the day on our walks and trails around sleep-out base camp we focused on birds and bird calls as this is not an easy topic for most of us and far away from the world the students came from 4 months ago. It needs rehearsal and repetition. Hearing the sounds of birds with our city-ears is difficult but a necessity to pass the FGASA level 1 practical AND to become a good guide. Birds will tell us often with their calls which animals are around us and can lead you to a beautiful but venomous snake or warn us for a herd of buffalo close by.

It usually takes a couple of months before students from big-city area's start to hear the birds. After this the work starts to recognize their voices one by one. It's a learning experience that never stops but very rewarding. In the bush your sense of hearing sharpens again when it is not being overloaded with city-sounds so the great thing is that you start hearing more and more detailed!

The progress by most of our students has been excellent and the hours in classroom and rondavels listening to birds on the I-pods paid finally off. Sitting in front of a fire listening to the pearl-spotted or barred-owlet calls at night in the dry-river bedding is magical and reminds us all why we came to Africa. Everyone has a different reason but mine is simply to enjoy the beauty of nature by listening to its voice. We are blessed indeed.

Cheers,

Robin

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Semester Report  
3<sup>rd</sup> Semester Garonga

The third semester was filled with a nice balance between practical and theory. We covered some of the more popular and interesting topics, including a comprehensive look at birds, mammals, geology and fish. For all of the above-mentioned topics we had great corresponding practical sessions.

After covering the bird module in class, we concentrated on bird ID drives, which culminated in a Big Birding day in which the 2 groups of students tried to outcompete each other by racking up the highest number of confirmed bird species for the day. Unfortunately we couldn't make the magical 100 mark, but managed respectable scores of 87 and 81 respectively.

We surprised the students with a full day outing to the Kruger National Park once we had completed the Mammals and Geology module. A great day was had with sightings of all the Big 5 including a few big elephant tuskers and a beautiful leopard resting up in a Leadwood tree. Bird sightings included a Secretary bird, Lappetfaced vulture and Kori Bustard.

For a little variety, we headed down to the Makutsi River to cover the Fish Module. We had class on the banks of the river followed by a fishing session where we caught and released 3 fish including a monster 8kg Barbel or Catfish.

This semester also saw the start of the Rifle Handling Assessments. Most of the students had not fired a weapon in their lives, let alone a high calibre rifle. Although most still need a bit of work, we were surprised to find we had a few snipers in our midst!

One of the highlights of the semester came in the form of a sleepout. We slept on an open sodic area around the fire with groups of 2 taking it in turns to watch for animals throughout the night. We brought in a Guest Speaker for the sleepout in the form of Brendan Pienaar, an astronomy fundi who gave us a talk on the night sky followed by a look through his telescope at some of the prominent visible stars, nebulae and planets. Brendan had to battle against a lion that was calling not more than 200m away to keep the attention of the students during his talk. The lion ended up calling on and off throughout the night in relatively close proximity, resulting in very little sleep for some of us.

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We also got stuck into a reserve project during this semester. One of the old farm dams on Garonga was in a bit of a sorry state with bare soil prone to erosion surrounding the water. We harvested a variety of reeds and sedges from the Makutsi river and transplanted them on the edge of the dam, with the hope of stabilizing the soil and attracting some birdlife. The reeded area was then brushpacked with Knobthorn trees in an attempt to keep elephants from eating up our backbreaking work. Once complete, we ended up doing what any self-respecting field guide does in such a situation and had a good old mudfight while swimming in the dam.

All in all it was a most enjoyable 4 weeks with much learned and much fun had by all.

Wayne Te Brake

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