

Bushwise newsletter

Semester 2
Mahlahla Campus
March 5, 2010

The semester started off on a high note with everybody sharing their stories from the week off, all the sightings they had, amazing places visited etc. With everybody fresh and ready for the second semester, we started with camp clean up to ensure we had clean areas to work in for the semester. Subjects for the first week ranged from Ecology and Taxonomy to Grasses. Now knowing how and why things have scientific names and their roles in nature, we went off identifying different grasses, with some interesting info shared about how some of the grasses gets dispersed and so forth. The following week we stuck to the topic of plants, but this time... trees! We had a short classroom session about the terminology connected to trees, how to use the ID key in books, and off we went on a tree walk. First some easy examples around the classroom, and later that day, a full on tree walk, identifying every tree we came across. The following day was spent on Ethology or animal behavior which was followed by a few game drives to use this newly learnt information, to see why the animals are doing what they are.



Students trying to ID a tree

Further lectures were based on the fields of insects, spiders and scorpions etc, and with each student being given an insect to read up on, we went off on a drive, where students had to spot these insects, and teach their fellow students about them. After we had finished up with scorpions, we waited till dark, grabbed our UV torches, and went out scorpion hunting. Unfortunately the weather was not as good as we had hoped for, however we still managed to find around two dozen scorpions (even though there were only two species amongst all those scorpions!).

The week was followed by some more game drives, with lots of elephant and rhino sightings. One of the days was dedicated to reserve tasks. The camp was fixed up, grass was cut, the eroded camp roads were filled and in the afternoon, a drive with a twist, we went out onto Makalali and fixed up some of the washed away roads. We also cleared the roads of overhanging branches, making them easier to drive on, without having to duck every few minutes.

The next lecture was on those noisy little creatures we hear every night at the dam... Amphibians. Frogs, toads and tadpoles were discussed, from mating, calls to using them as a pregnancy test??? That night, we waited once again for darkness to settle in, and armed with torches, headlamps and containers for samples we headed down to the dam and tried to find as many frogs as we could.... We managed to find a few different species, mainly the tiny little painted reed frogs, which are responsible for most of the noise coming from the dam. Some students were hesitant to get their feet wet, and others not bothered at all, waded into the dark waters up to chest level!

Another big process which was started this semester was the start of the driver's license procedure, a license being quite important to drive guests around! The

booking was made to get the ball rolling. The students will write their learner's licenses mid 3rd semester. A bit later than we had hoped for, but we are certain our students will be able to pass first time so we can move onto the driver's license and PDP license as quickly as possible!

We also went out to the Mica shooting range so the students could get a feel for shooting. They started off with two smaller calibers at the shooting range. Some having shot for the first time ever, this practice was well needed! Everyone now seems more confident with a handling a rifle and at least now everyone manages to shoot in the right direction! Next semester the students will be aiming for Advanced Rifle Handling with a .375 caliber.

Sightings for the semester were looking good, we saw elephants a few times early on in the semester, rhino's fairly often, lions showed themselves twice, and made some very eager photographers very happy! One group was lucky enough to spot a leopard, but not on drive.... On our way to town! Walking along the fence of one of the other reserves in the area. After that they saw Serval 1km from the leopard. A good town trip indeed! However, the highlight of the semester was still to come.....one night, towards the end of the semester, as we were heading back towards camp, another leopard sighting!!! Not just one leopard, but she had a cub too! Roughly about two months old, the little cub walked closely next to her mom as we admired them for about 10 minutes before they disappeared into the darkness. That was definitely the highlight of all sightings so far.

With the rhino sightings fairly often, we decided to see them from a different angle, on foot! We found three of them one morning, and went off in the afternoon on foot, following their tracks until we found them happily eating away. Due to their poor eye sight and us staying downwind from them, we were able to watch them for around 20 minutes without them even having the faintest idea that we were there.



Rhino encountered on walk

Our good deed for the semester found us! Driving past an old cement trough from the time when the reserve was still a farm, we stumbled upon 5 baby terrapins trapped inside. We spent a few minutes watching them, and decided to build them a bridge so they could climb out. After we finished building our masterpiece we spent about an hour watching them, and hoping that our efforts would be used. Who knew 5 little terrapins could keep us entertained for so long by just laying there and watching us.

A very very busy semester indeed! We can't wait to see what the next semester has in store for us.

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Garonga Campus
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The second semester of the first 2010 course at Garonga has come to an end. The days are cooling off and we are finding ourselves not so hot anymore. We are in the very pleasant but short time going from summer into winter. Hopefully we will see some more rain as the rain-gauge indicated only 275 mm for all summer so far. Within 3 months the biggest show on earth, the world cup 2010, kicks off and a lot of us have tickets for the games. We are doing our best to get the football spirit going at Garonga and have played a stunning match against Garonga Safari camp at two in the afternoon. We never knew that we could have been that thirsty and tired! The airstrip is our training pitch and we have played many games of football between activities and studying. This semester we enjoyed an amazing amount of wildlife activity around our farmhouse. The Lions seem to be back. Hoerreeh!!! Almost every night and morning we hear their calls again. This picture was taken of a lovely female near our Big dam where we were surprised by a pride of nine lions! We hope that they love Garonga as much as we do!



Adult lioness on a thrilling impala hunt around Garonga big dam

We also had great elephant sightings from our veranda or stoep. The breeding herds were in Garonga and the big elephant bulls are never far away from them. The most memorable activity must have been the approach on foot of a “crash” of white rhino far away from our camp at the other side of Makalali. We had a very good view of the female with calf and had the sun and wind in our favor. For most students this was the first time to see white rhino on foot, up close and personal. After I tapped the “stock” of my rifle three times to let them know we were close, the rhino’s disappeared into the bush. Amazing!

The students were struggling this semester with the amount of theory to go through. Especially “Botany-trees”. We are aiming at some more practical work to do next semester on this topic.

We had a great “mizzie-free” sleep-out as we chose our sleep-out spot on a high mountain hill. The hyena’s in the area were very interested in our sleepy group. They investigated three times during the night if our watch was not sleeping and their calls were loud and often bone chilling. Scary stuff!



Sundown on our sleep-out spot

On many practical and theory classes we transported the classroom into the bush and the students did their presentations on Ecology, Arthropods, Animal Behavior and the challenging Trees in the great outdoors.



Outdoor Student presentation on the Watercycle.

At the end of the second semester we do our evaluation talk with each students and got the feedback we hoped for. Not only we had very positive feedback on the course content, set-up and ambiance but also some students told us that they want to stay longer in Africa and see field guiding as a career to pursue. This is a very positive signal for the instructors as we see all our energy and knowledge that we put into the course being used and put forward to the placements. We see that our love for the outdoors and our enthusiasm rubs off. Have a great week off!

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