

Tracking at Entabeni

Something unusual happened the other weekend. I had a spare couple of days! A weekend not booked up by scorpion or spider lectures, courses or taking people out for a guided walk. It's not that I don't love to do these things. It's just that sometimes I need to find time for myself, stop and catch my breath. Oh no I thought! What do I do... where do I go! After a few phone calls I had a couple of offers. Timbavati, Vaalwater, Port Alfred, Cape Town, Entabeni, or I could just stay at home and catch up on some writing. Hmmm... the agony of choice...

The choice was actually easy. Lee was giving his students a tracking assessment in at the weekend so I could spend the weekend at his lodge writing, pottering about photographing things with lots of legs or no legs at all, or joining the students in their lectures and tracking sessions. Lee runs Entabeni Nature Guide Training. I give the Spider and Scorpion weekends which his students go through. Lee offers FGASA accredited 25 day and 6 month courses. He is author and an authority in numerous fields including Tracking, wild flowers and animal behaviour. Lee and I share a passion for the smaller things that many overlook. He wrote *The Bushveld, a Comprehensive Guide to the Waterberg*. A whopping thousand plus pages on all aspects of the Waterberg. It's incredible to be around someone who knows so much and is so passionate about what he does. He also operates in a Big 5 reserve so there are plenty of opportunities to bump into large cantankerous animals that want to eat you or stomp on you. Time spent with Lee is always full of surprises.

Lee has really given me direction in what I do. A couple of years ago I knew where I wanted to go with my Spiders and Scorpions, but the question was how? It's pretty unique in what I do. My courses have developed through feedback from Lee and others into something very special and unique. This has allowed me to get where I am, Scorpion King!, known for my sometimes an obsessive appreciation, love, compulsion and excitement for all creatures especially when they have 8 legs. Of course there was a lot of hard work in between. But I can hardly call following my passion hard work!

Friday I arrived and joined Ian for a spot of pre assessment tracking. Ian is unbelievable, he is a lecturer at Entabeni. His knowledge of nature humbles me. Ian sews everything together. Flowers, mammals, birds, geology, Weather, Human history. In fact just about everything all in one go. I can identify the spider species from the kind of silk they spin, tell if a scorpion burrow has been made by which species and if it's a male or female scorpion. Lee says I have an extra sense. Spiderman has a Spider sense, Hey! I have a Scorpion sense! That evening as I contemplated Mother nature in the bigger sense of the word, the roaring of lions was heard as they took out a wildebeest not too far away.

The next day started at 5:00am with a spot of reading on animal spoor and signs. I have to say that I had no preparation in tracking even though I was just along for the ride. I had agreed to take the assessment and see how well I did. Just before 6am the noisy lion walked down the road about 30m from where we gathered. We climbed onto the Landcruiser and headed out for the tracking assessment.

The day started with Ground squirrel tracks, toad, millipede, jackal, Aardwolf, vervet monkey, bushwillow seed, dung beetle, and tortoise. When looking at tracks you need to identify how the animal moves, what the animal was doing, where the animal had been and where it was going. The area in which the animal was in is important as is the time of day, age of the spoor, shape of the spoor and the substrate. It's an art to understanding animals and the environment and how they interact. I learnt very quickly that tracking was all about appreciation and knowledge of the environment, the animals that live in that environment, how the animals live and how Mother Nature affects the environment.

After lunch, we covered wildebeest, lions, impala, warthog, bush pig, laying down jackal, wildebeest rubbing post and territorial markings, a branch that had been chewed by an elephant, klipspringer, white rhino, even a terrapin track and squirrel alarm calls. Both Lee and Ian are masters at tracking. As the day grew on, I developed a new appreciation for what is involved in reading the ways of nature. 50 questions later the sun beamed down on us as we scoured the ground for hints and clues at the tracks we were looking at. Scuff marks, hoof impressions, mud smears, chew marks, tail marks, drag marks, foot drag marks and even dung composition and position.

The tracking assessment ended late afternoon. Later on I took a Landcruiser out and just parked at a dam. Venus rose and the sun set. As the light faded lions, hippo and jackal called out. It was a perfect end to an amazing day. After dinner with Lee and his family. I headed back to my room to make some notes on tracking. I wanted to capture everything I had learnt from Lee and Ian during the day's events.

Field Guiding is about learning from the people who know. It requires knowledge and an understanding that can only be passed down through hard work, concentration and dedication. It's not easy, it's not quick and it takes a

special kind of person who is committed. If you are thinking about going into Field Guiding for a career remember this. It is an extremely rewarding, ever satisfying and ever growing. The more you know about Mother Nature the more you realise that you do not know. I lay in bed that night listening to lions roaring loudly nearby.

Sunday was a day of studying for the students. They were writing their FGASA exam the next day. I joined Lee for a morning pottering about, checking out the lions that had made such a racket all night, strange photos techniques, checking out fungus, ants, lizards, flowers, signs of beetle larva and just chatting about book stuff. I joined Sarah for some computer work and a chat about websites. Later that day we took a quick drive to find the nearby lions. A great end to a great weekend.

Lee runs one of the top field guide training schools in southern Africa. His 25 day and 6 month and 1 year programs are extremely popular. If you are interested in Field Guiding or just want to experience Mother Nature in a unique and special way with the people who know, then check out the website of Entabeni Nature Guide Training.
<http://www.natureguidetraining.co.za/>