

RHINOS ON THE HORIZON

Although his backside and inner thighs certainly didn't thank him for it, **Dale Morris** recently rode across the Kalahari to raise awareness for the plight of the black rhino. Here is his story.

I was so excited about my upcoming excursion across Botswana's Central Kalahari Game Reserve that I somehow managed to overlook a rather crucial paragraph in the expedition overview.

It was the bit that said something to the effect that "Riders must be competent enough to control their mounts should a lion attack."

It was the word 'rider' that first alerted me to the possibility of horses being involved, but it was the term 'competent' that really got me worried.

The fact it mentioned 'lion attack' was simply icing on the cake.

The last time I'd ridden was during a summer holiday at the beach when I was just eight years old. And it wasn't even a horse... It was a donkey!

Thankfully though, my neighbour just so happened to be a cossack stunt-rider from the Russian State Circus (I kid you not), and so by the time I found myself clip clopping through the Kalahari two weeks later I'd already been the recipient of a rather severe and thorough riding course.

My buttocks were calloused, my legs were aptly bowed, I'd learned how to say "whooooo" in a convincingly deep baritone, and I'd even purchased my very own cowboy hat.

None of these new attributes served me particularly well though when my horse, Bruce Lee, first clapped eyes on a distant line of African wild dogs and took off, much to my surprise, unswervingly in their direction.

Moments later I was being helped up off the ground by Xego Thamai, one of four bushmen who were acting as my guides and protectors on this, a 350km trek across one of the flattest environments on Earth.

"Sorry about that, Dale," said Uncle Willie De Graaf, a local cattle farmer and the man responsible for the trek's logistical backup. "Sometimes wild dogs come onto our farms and kill cattle, so I took the liberty of training my horses to chase them away."

"And what about lions?" I asked him, patting Kalaharian dust from my ridiculously tight jodhpurs.

"No, Dale," he replied. "Horses aren't stupid. Now, best get back in the saddle. We have a lot of miles to cover."

Wayward, buffer zone-crossing lions, I later discovered during one of Willie's entertaining campfire narratives, are dealt with by hand.

"We don't have a dart gun license in the neighbourhood, so when a farmer has a problem with lions eating his cows, rather than have the authorities or someone else come out and shoot them, I get a team of bushmen together and we ▷



Dale Morris is a South Africa-based writer and photographer who's spent the past 16 years being chased up trees by animals who don't like having their photos taken. He's a regular contributor, often penning our 'Photoschool' feature.

▷ catch them from the back of my car using rope nets.”

I had earlier been introduced to these ferocious-looking cats, which he kept in large pens on his property. When they saw me they had jumped against the fence, their huge paws level with my face, their breath hot, their eyes yellow and piecing.

I felt like a steak beneath their hungry gaze.

It is inconceivable to me that mere humans could grapple with these things. But they did.

Later, whenever I chanced to ponder upon these lions, or should I say, their free-living brethren who were, no doubt, lurking unseen in the long Kalahari grasses around me, it sent shivers down my spine.

“What if I should fall off during an attack?” I asked Willie one day, as we slowly picked our way through a section of particularly dense bush. But he just raised an

eyebrow at me as if to say, “An attack won’t happen. But if it does, don’t fall off. Simple.”

Often throughout the trip, when I got scared or when the saddle became too uncomfortable to bear, I contemplated the folly of being on such a long expedition with people who were clearly more competent riders.

But then I remembered why it was that we were there, and that was enough for me not to give in.

“Don’t forget, Dale,” said Willie whenever he saw me flagging, “it’s all for the rhinos.”

Yes, the purpose of this rather long and sometimes arduous trek through the pancake-flat Kalahari, with its golden grasses and stately oryx herds, was to raise funds and awareness for the plight of Africa’s black rhino. As such, the majority of the people who came along for the ride had a background in conservation management. ▷



BLACK RHINO SUBSPECIES

South-central black rhino (*Diceros bicornis minor*)

This is the most numerous subspecies, which historically roamed Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique and parts of South Africa.

East African black rhino (*Diceros bicornis michaeli*)

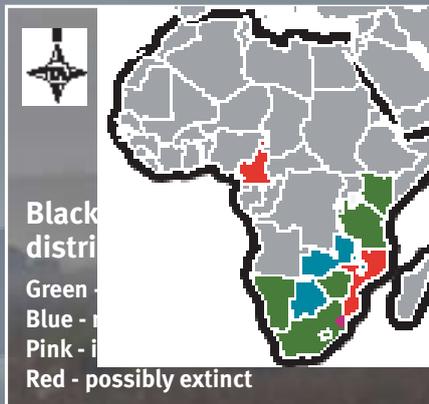
With more grooved skin, this subspecies has a narrow, but long, curved horn. It prefers highland forest and savannah. Although previously occupying areas of the Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania, the population is now found primarily in Tanzania.

West African black rhino (*Diceros bicornis longipes*)

With only ten remaining in 2003, this species is now thought to be extinct. Northern Cameroon was this subspecies' last known stomping ground. In the past, it was widespread across West Africa's savannah belt.

Southwestern black rhino (*Diceros bicornis bicornis*)

Known for its long, straight horn, this subspecies is better adapted to arid climates. Found in Namibia, Botswana, Angola and western South Africa.



Data from the IUCN Red List



“RIDERS MUST BE COMPETENT ENOUGH TO CONTROL THEIR MOUNTS SHOULD A LION ATTACK”

▷ There was Julie Ann Edwards, founder of the Hokoyo Wildlife Trust, who once cycled from Scotland to Zimbabwe to raise money for rhinos, and the De Graaf family (husband, wife and daughter) who ran not only a cattle farm, but also a large private game park adjacent to the main Central Kalahari Game Reserve. Oom Ben, an ex-South African Police officer who was once in charge of an anti-poaching division, was also present, as was Anna Mertz, one of the world's biggest champions of black rhino. Anna was the driving force behind the Craig family's founding of the Ngare Sergoi Rhino Sanctuary (now Lewa Wildlife Conservancy), which has gone a long way to ensuring the black rhino's survival in Kenya (she actually funded the project personally). Anna also authored the best-selling book *Rhino at the Brink of Extinction*.

"When we start running horseback rides out this

way for tourists," Willie told me one evening, as we sat around the campfire listening to lions roaring, "we won't be covering such vast distances. This idea for such a long ride was all Julie Ann's plan. She likes to push herself to the limits for a good cause."

But pushing yourself to the limits with a big team and ten horses in a landscape with absolutely no standing water takes a fair bit of logistical planning and backup. And that's where Uncle Willie came in.

Every night of our 15-day adventure, he and his team of Bushmen were responsible for the hectic task of erecting makeshift stables made from wooden telephone poles dug into the sand and bound together with wire. Two monster trucks, outfitted with double sets of triple leaf suspension (to cope with the sand), were used to transport the camp, the cooks, the gear, the medical equipment and all of the



THE PLIGHT OF THE BLACK RHINO

It's estimated that there were around 70,000 black rhino in Africa in the late 1960s, a sobering figure when one realises the continent's population now stands at only 3600 or so. While programmes such as the Black Rhino Range Expansion Project are paying dividends in KwaZulu-Natal and Namibia, there are regular setbacks across the continent, particularly in Zimbabwe and other areas of South Africa. Even Kenya's well-guarded Lewa Wildlife Conservancy has lost a couple of rhino to poaching in the past year or so.

"Rhino populations in both Africa and Asia are being seriously threatened by poaching and

illegal trade," says Dr Jane Smart, Director of IUCN's Biodiversity Conservation Group. Dr Susan Lieberman, Director of the WWF International's Species Programme, adds: "Illegal rhino horn trade to destinations in Asia is driving the killing, with growing evidence of involvement of Vietnamese, Chinese and Thai nationals in the illegal procurement and transport of rhino horn out of Africa. Rhinos are in a desperate situation – this is the worst rhino poaching we have seen in many years and it is critical for governments to stand up and take action to stop this deadly threat to rhinos worldwide. It is time to crack down on organised



horses' water and food. The bushmen, whose nocturnal task it was to keep lions off the horses, never seemed to sleep, and no matter what time it was that I woke in my tent, I could always hear them speaking outside in a gentle language of pops, clicks and tutting sounds.

Most mornings we would wake before sunrise and eat a hearty fire-cooked breakfast before scrutinising the sand close to our camp to discern who had come inquiring in the night. I could detect nothing but scratches and marks, but the Bushmen were able to point out oryx, foxes, jackals, porcupines, lynxes, lions, leopards, and even scorpions.

"This one here," said Tomxia, while pointing to a shallow indentation, "is the lion who's been following us."

I gulped, and my spine did that tingly thing again.

Thank heavens then, for those brave Bushmen who sat guard throughout the evenings, armed only with local ▷

Main image: The portable camp (and stables!) of the Trans-Kalahari Horse Trek for Rhinos

Inset: One of the helpful souls who worked with Willie on the expedition's logistics



criminal elements responsible for this trade, and to vastly increase assistance to range countries in their enforcement efforts."

The Hokoyo Wildlife Trust (www.hokoyowildlife.org) and its founder, Julie Ann Edwards (www.julieannedwards.com), were the driving force behind the Trans-Kalahari Horse Trek for Rhinos. The trust is aiming to support the future survival of the black rhino species by furthering the development of rhino expansion ranges into the Kalahari and by helping to create high security black rhino breeding sanctuaries. The US\$12,000 raised from the expedition is specifically earmarked for the Kalahari's Black Rhino Sanctuary, where rhinos will be taken care of and bred with the support of the trust and the management team from Grasslands (www.grasslandlodge.com).

THE PURPOSE OF THIS RATHER LONG AND SOMETIMES ARDUOUS TREK THROUGH THE KALAHARI WAS TO RAISE FUNDS AND AWARENESS FOR THE PLIGHT OF AFRICA'S BLACK RHINO

AD



▷ knowledge and perhaps an arsenal of harsh language. We did not take firearms on this journey, and there are no stones in the Kalahari to throw should one need them.

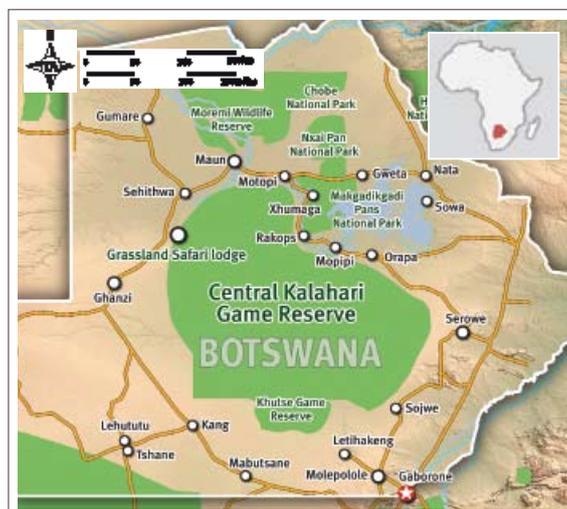
“More or less everything you’ve heard about the skills of the Kalahari bushman is true,” Willie said as we watched Tomxia, Xego, Qoema and Xgara gathering Kalahari truffles from beneath the sand. “They are undoubtedly the world’s best trackers, and one day, when we bring black rhino back into this area, we will use them to take care of them. No poacher, no matter how well equipped, will easily slip beneath the radar of a bushman.”

The journey was a long one, and felt even longer due to the aches and pains my body was suffering from, but when we finally reached the sanctuary of the Grasslands Lodge, I was somewhat sad to bid Bruce Lee goodbye.

It had been an adventure of a lifetime, and I had bonded not only with my horse but also with the Kalahari. I’m now a solid believer that seeing Africa from the saddle is both a unique and amazing experience.

More importantly though, the experience had formed a bond between the people who were present, all of whom I am happy to report are now firmly committed to acquiring black rhinos for the purpose of reintroducing them to the golden sands of the Central Kalahari. 🐾

MY BUTTOCKS WERE CALLOUSED, MY LEGS WERE APTLY BOWED AND I'D LEARNED HOW TO SAY "WHOOOOA" IN A CONVINCINGLY DEEP BARITONE



Above: Good company, local food and warm spirits made the journey an even more rewarding one