

Pachyderm down

On safari in Zimbabwe, travel writer Cheryl Mandy took part in an elephant collaring operation.

His breath gurgled and wheezed all the way down the trunk then whooshed out the tip, parting the tufts of grass in front of which his flaccid feeding organ lay. He was out for the count and doing just fine. Six breaths a minute was okay, less than three was not. My role was to count them and make sure this didn't happen.

My sense of unease was ridiculous. I felt his fate lay in my ability to count effectively. 'I'll be the only one in the whole world,' I thought despairingly, 'to kill an elephant by not counting properly.'

But veterinarian Roger Parry was there, dishing out curt instructions with accustomed authority and, boy, did all of us tourists listen. He had just felled an elephant – or rather had sunk a well-aimed tranquillising dart filled with Etorphine into its backside. He did this to secure a GPS satellite-tracking collar around its neck.

He and Jessica Dawson, wildlife vets and managers of the non-profit Wild Horizons Wildlife Trust, had been dispatched from Victoria Falls to Musango Safari Camp in the Matusadona National Park on the shores of Zimbabwe's Lake Kariba to collar a bull elephant with particularly large tusks. Impressive to us, but also to poachers.

The charity, established to protect wildlife in Zimbabwe and rehabilitate orphaned or injured animals, also carries out anti-poaching activities and provides veterinary services to wildlife. Elephants Without Borders donated the collar, which acts as a deterrent to poachers, as well as a research tool monitoring the targeted elephant's whereabouts and behaviour.

Owner of Musango Safari Camp, Steve Edwards, a professional guide in the country 'for as long as he can remember', spotted the bull and showed it to Larry Norton, a Zimbabwean artist, conservationist and Wild Horizons Wildlife trustee.



• Roger Parry tightens the GPS tracking collar on an elephant bull whose big tusks make it a target for poachers. Guests from Musango Safari Camp assist him while lodge owner Steve Edwards keeps a lookout for the elephant's friend.

Steve and his wife Wendy hosted the two vets and all eight of the tourists in camp (from nine to 69 years old) wanted to help. We were assigned tasks such as data collection and carrying paraphernalia.

Five minutes after the tranquilliser penetrated the elephant's tough hide, the five-tonner crumpled elegantly to the ground. His friend disappeared into the scrub, as only elephants know how. The team, having been briefed by Roger earlier, went into action.

Someone monitored the up-side ear to check pulse rate, Roger grappled with folds and flaps of neck and ear to clamp the eight-kilo collar (containing a GPS unit that downloads daily to a satellite and VHF radio transmitter) while others cooled its body with water, measured tusks, took photographs and pulled, plucked and prodded to collect data.

Senior wildlife officer Timothy Mandi and his team of armed rangers from the Matusadona National Parks Authority watched over us just in case the elephant's friend returned. After Jessica extracted the final blood sample and

Steve had tried to obtain a faecal one (with moderate success), an antidote was injected. Within two minutes, the elephant was up on his feet, a little bewildered but quite cool about it, possibly wondering if he had been hit by a bus, then casually sauntered off in search of something more edible than the flattened grass all around him.

Steve had another task for the vets: wire snares set by poachers inside the park. Steve has stopped trying to punish offenders from the nearby village of Msampa who were simply trying to survive. Now he's educating and working with them. Musango has established a borehole and a church, teaches self-sufficiency methods and wants to introduce solar power and an electric fence. But it takes time to break old habits.

One snare was embedded in the mouth and head of a painfully thin baby elephant. Both baby and mother had to be tranquillised. Then, using a wire cutter, Roger released the snare and administered first aid to the blackened wound.

He also tried to dart two more snare-damaged animals but, alas, they were skittish and the sun was nearly down. An impala still wears a snare just above its hoof where its scent gland sits. Without it, the animal is unable to lay a scent down to find its way back to the herd. A buffalo carries one that will eventually tighten like a noose around his upper body unless help comes his way again.

Steve removes as many snares as he can, but it's a dangerous and costly task. Musango's anti-poaching efforts are supported by the national parks department, which has anti-poaching patrols but is strapped for cash.

As our Cessna veered away from Musango Safari Camp, we looked down as the bush and its inhabitants got smaller and smaller. I felt privileged to have contributed in a tiny way to helping Zimbabwe's struggling wildlife. ■

New safari lodge in Gorongosa

In November 2008, *Getaway* reported on the resurrection of Gorongosa National Park, formerly one of southern Africa's greatest safari destinations, which was devastated by Mozambique's civil war. At the time of our visit, the only accommodation was at Chitengo, the main public camp. Now a new luxury safari operation has opened in the heart of the park.

Explore Gorongosa conducts walks and game-drives from their unfenced, seasonal tented camp on the Mussicadzi River close to the famous Casa dos Leões. There are just eight beds, so it's the perfect base for a private discovery of the spectacular landscape. The camp is owner-run, décor is quirky and the atmosphere is friendly and warm.

Explore Gorongosa is offering *Getaway* readers a special rate of R4900 a person



• Gorongosa National Park is offering *Getaway* readers a special discount for a new luxury camp.

sharing on a three-night package including accommodation, meals, drinks and game activities. The normal price is R9000. The special is valid until 15 December 2009 and for April and May 2010. Tel +258-82-862-4975, e-mail jos@oneafrica.co.za, web www.exploreorongosa.com.

Support Sanparks with an SMS

The Honorary Rangers of Johannesburg South are running a competition to raise funds for conservation. SMS Sanparks to 35118 and stand a chance of winning monthly prizes worth a total of R75000 (SMSs cost R3). You can enter as many times as you like and the competition ends 31 August 2010. Web www.hrjhb-south.org for monthly winners.

Hwange's elephants need a bakkie

The Save Hwange Trust, which helps to maintain the camps and water pumps in Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park, is in urgent need of another 4x4 pick-up to continue its work. If you have a suitable second-hand vehicle you are willing to donate, please e-mail brett@flameofafrica.com. If you would like to help with a donation towards one, the Save Hwange bank account details are: First National Bank, Sea Point branch number 201809, account number 6209-3759-086.



New Year's full moon hike

Start New Year's celebrations with views of the sun setting over Table Mountain on a hike up Klappmutskopie. At the top, drink bubbly and watch the full moon rise.

The hike starts at 18h30 on 31 December 2009 from Dirtopia Trail Centre on Delvera Farm off the R44 between Stellenbosch and Klappmuts. There are two options: a 9,75 km

return hike or a 5 km walk with a lift in farm vehicles.

It costs R80 a person and includes a permit, a glass of sparkling wine, optional shuttle and a map. It's R40 for kids under 10. Take a torch, warm clothing and hiking boots. There's another full moon hike on 2 December.

To book, tel 021-884-4752, e-mail info@dirtopia.co.za, web www.dirtopia.co.za.



• Drink in the views over the Cape Winelands this New Year's Eve on a hike to the top of Klappmutskopie and watch the full moon rise over mountains and vineyards.