

Limpopo Leopard Conservation

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After receiving the kind donation of £200 from the Glasgow Natural History Society, I used the money, along with other donations, to become a volunteer research assistant at the Kruger National Park, alongside the beautiful Oliphants River in South Africa, during July and August of 2015. Whilst there, I took part in various tasks including game transects, camera trap work, habitat assessments and bird point counts, which all contributed to the leopard conservation work that was being carried out in Limpopo.

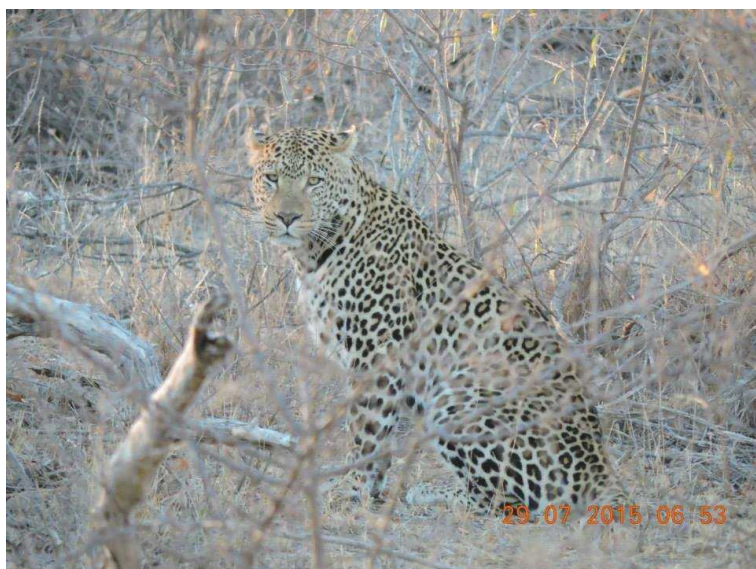
I arrived in South Africa and met the rest of the team which included eight other volunteers like myself and three safari guides who we would be living and working closely with for the two weeks.

Our daily routine consisted of getting up at five forty-five in the morning, to the sound of hippo calls, and heading into the bush to conduct game transects. We drove for ten kilometres where we identified, counted and recorded all mammal species and their location such as impala, water buck, kudu, giraffe and elephant. The information recorded gave us a census of all the different species of animal living in one area.

Camera trap work was another main job we had to do. I helped to set up camera traps in specific locations we were most likely to spot leopards, for example, near a game trail or water source. The images were then downloaded onto the Panthera database; the wild cat conservation group, where we had to identify and record what animal had been captured in each image.

Panthera are trying to work out if the hunting quota on leopards is too high. Hunting quota is when hunters are only being permitted to hunt a specific number of a species. In Limpopo it is only thirty-five leopards per year. Panthera want to know if thirty-five is a healthy number, and if it is, indeed, only males being hunted.

Habitat assessments were long and difficult. We sectioned off areas of land, occasionally having to climb through trees, and identified, counted and recorded tree species which were growing in each area. Tree height, width and number of branches were recorded along with the abundance of grass and any damage by fire or elephants. Recording elephant damage was important, as it gave us an indication of how many elephants were in one habitat, and whether there was too high a population of elephants for that particular area.



Another morning job was bird point counts. We headed out to five specific locations near a water source and identified, counted and recorded all bird species and their location for ten minutes at a time. This gave us an indication of how healthy a habitat was, for example, the abundance of different bird species showed that there was a healthy population of insects and small mammals, which showed there was a healthy population of plant species.

Each day we had a lecture on conservation and biodiversity. Our first lecture was on snakes, spiders and scorpions of South Africa. It was disrupted by a herd of elephant grazing on the bank on our side of the river.

I couldn't believe how beautiful the national park was. The front of camp looked out onto the river, which glistened in the sunlight. The hippos were forever at the river, and we would hear them from time to time. Crocodiles would also make an appearance to bask in the sun, along with a baboon troop on the other side of the river, and an abundance of other animals.

One highlight of the expedition was seeing a leopard. He was sitting on the side of the road one morning as we headed out to conduct a bird point count. It was incredible. We were so lucky to see a leopard as they are so elusive.

Words really cannot describe what an amazing, life changing time I had when I was on this expedition. It was honestly the most incredible two weeks of my life. Not only did I contribute to the leopard conservation work, but I learned so much and made great friends along the way.

Thank you to the Glasgow Natural History Society for helping me make a difference.