

Do Black Mambas have spots on their bellies?

The answer to this question is unequivocally yes. Yes because handbooks mention it, blotches actually, and yes because I had the fortune of being able to see this for myself. This was whilst conducting a trail on Nyalaland in the far north of the Kruger National Park.

This was not just a matter of looking at a snake, but rather how the snake was found in the first place? 'Mobbing parties' are groups of birds of several species that gather together to face a common threat of danger. The tree squirrel has also been observed adding its weight to the charge. Danger can be in the form of snakes and birds of prey.

In the instance of the mamba, I reacted to a mobbing party of yellowbellied bulbuls, scrub robins and tree squirrels. The squirrels, as is often the case, paid me no attention, and seemed to be at the centre of the commotion. A very careful approach and patient searching revealed a black mamba in the middle of a gardenia tree. Amazingly the squirrels were well within striking distance of the snake. The snake presumably sensed my presence and took to higher branches of a cluster leaf tree, thus affording us clear visuals. From here we were able to gauge its length (roughly 2m) and could also see the for mentioned blotches on its belly.

Walking in the bush allows one to tune into nature. It is only here that you can really use your senses in an environment free of disturbances and limitations. The grey lourie, now the grey go-away-bird has earned its name. When you hear this alarm call be assured there is a raptor around. The forktailed drongo is predictable in its habits, basically being involved in almost everything that takes place in its environment. Watching it will always produce something of interest, from hawking flies off a rhino to harassing even the largest of eagles in flight. Dusk is an interesting time in the mountains of Bushman trail. The eagle owl emerges from its daytime roost, only to be harassed by the never tiring drongo.

Animals have specific alarm calls in response to seeing a predator. Baboons, vervet monkeys; kudu; bushbuck; nyala; klipspringer ;impala and reedbuck each have the same reaction when they see a lion or leopard. The closer the danger the greater the intensity of call. Reacting to these calls while walking in the bush, may give you a chance of observing a predator on foot, a rare opportunity indeed. More often you are only left with tracks of what went by. Predators

are extremely alert animals, and one needs a great deal of fortune to see them.

Watch everything that goes on around you and always question what is going on. Why are the warthogs fleeing with their tails in the air? Why is the giraffe staring so intently in one direction? Why did the waterbuck take to water? There most certainly will be an answer.

It is a privilege to be part of nature and to walk in the wilderness areas of the Kruger National Park. These massive blocks of land are great schooling grounds, and one learns to have a deep respect for everything in it.