

WAITING FOR RAIN

N P Squires - Wilderness Trails

The transition to summer this year has not been spectacular at all. Spring was short lived and low key. Normally the Weeping Boerbeans, the Knob thorns and the Tree Wisterias put on a magnificent display with their respective colours brightening up a dull winter veld. The contrast is amazing, and is a precursor of more changes to come.

This time round, the rains have not fallen. It is the end of October and the veld is stuck in a state of inertia. Lightening fires have exacerbated the problem and there is a strong feeling of anxiety everywhere. The animals look in poor condition, and on hot days shade is hard to come by. Water is a precious commodity and determines the movement and distribution of game.

Overnight the tension is released. Man and beast feel an enormous relief. Rain has fallen throughout the night and has continued into the morning. The veld and animals alike will react positively to this elixir of life. It is only a matter of time before the Impala lambs will be seen. Green grass will cover the veld and the animals will benefit from this new nutrient boon. What a sight to behold to witness a field of Barberton Daisies amongst a sea of bright green grass. The volume of birdcall is deafening. This is a time of plenty and a time to reproduce.

Walking is strongly influenced by the favorable conditions that now prevail. The rejuvenating burnt veld, after rain, is a pleasure to walk in. Visibility is excellent and game densities are high. An experience on Wolhuter trail in these conditions is worthy of a mention. In similar burnt veld, we were walking on a prominent game path one morning, when we came across very fresh sign of ever-present White Rhino. In this instance it was a wet patch of soil, on which a territorial bull had urinated. This is accompanied by the scraping of his feet on it, something that is frequently done, so as to demarcate his status and dominance of a particular area. My colleague, quiet by nature added his voice to what we were seeing. He uttered sweswi, which in his language meant "right now".

We proceeded to follow the tracks, which headed through some Terminalea woodland. The spoor became difficult to follow once it left the path. I decided to fast track the process by choosing a clump of rocks in front of me, which would give me an elevated vantage point to scan for the Rhino. I left the group behind in the care of my colleague and headed for the rocky outcrop. When walking alone, as opposed to 10 people in a group, you are practically silent. Within 3 steps I was on a ledge, and literally in the same breath I was on eye level with the Rhino, which had selected a clump of green grass to graze.

I backed off, the old bull being none the wiser. After a quiet chuckle I positioned the group on another vantage point and we watched the animal grazing at our leisure. The environment is ever changing, and has many influences. Walking in these wilderness areas over time and through changing seasons allows you the privileged opportunity to see its many faces and moods.