

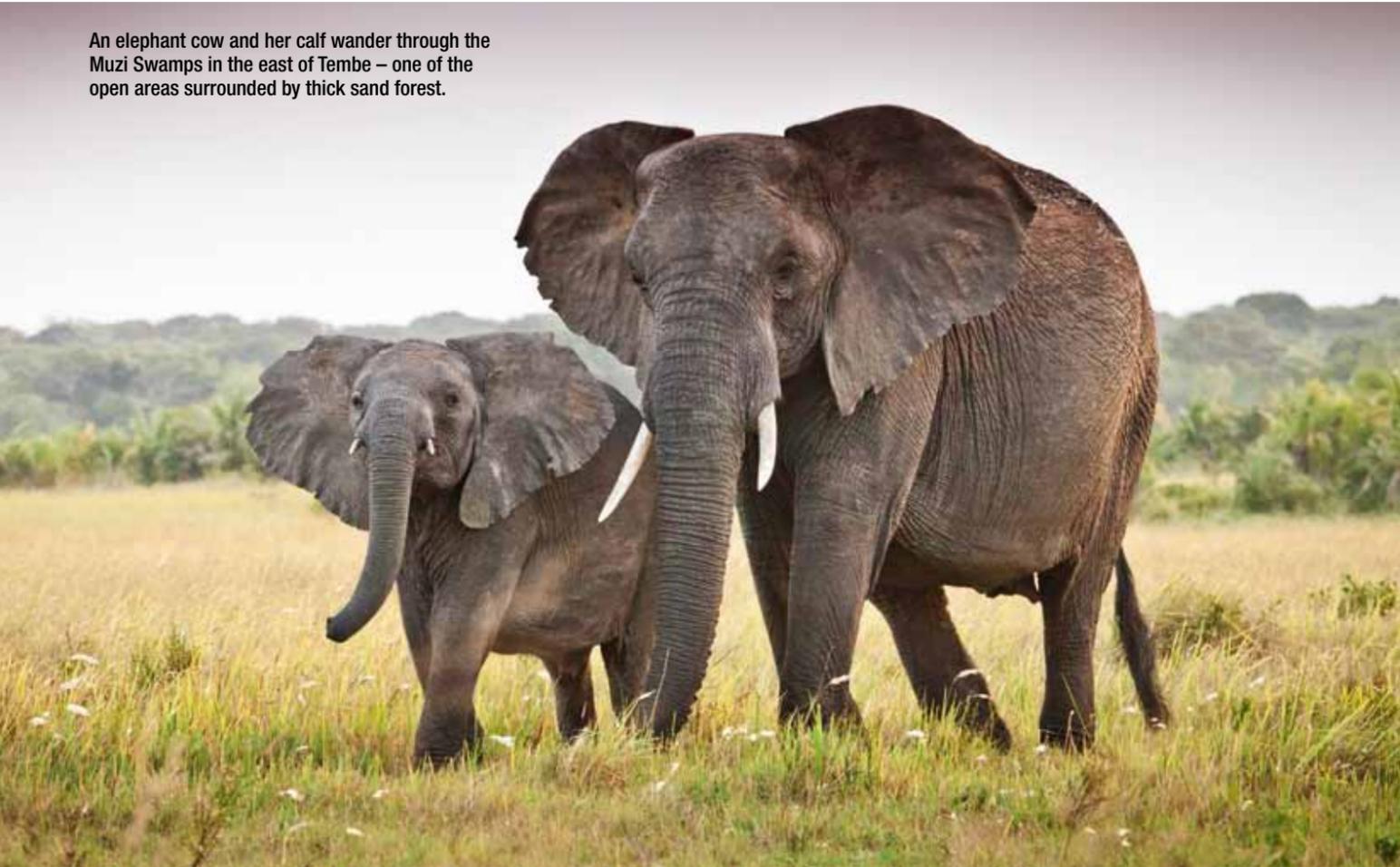


YEAR IN THE WILD
With Scott Ramsay

Home of the giants

As part of his year-long expedition covering 31 South African nature reserves, including all the national parks, Scott explored Tembe Elephant Park – one of the wildest and most remote reserves in the country

An elephant cow and her calf wander through the Muzi Swamps in the east of Tembe – one of the open areas surrounded by thick sand forest.



Tembe Elephant Park in north-eastern KwaZulu-Natal is one of the most special and interesting wildlife reserves I have explored on my Year in the Wild adventure.

Here, on the border of Mozambique, several hundred elephants roam the prodigious sand forests and swamps.

The scenery is unlike anything else in SA. Huge mahogany, tamboti, saddle-pod and Lebombo wattle trees grow in ancient sand deposited several millennia ago by a retreating sea. Hundreds of other tree species grow in this nutrient-poor soil, their

deep tap-roots sucking up ground water replenished by sub-tropical storms.

Tembe protects the largest continuous expanse of this beautiful habitat in the country.

The local Tembe tribe owns and co-manages the 30 000ha reserve, in conjunction with KZN Wildlife. The tribe willingly moved out of the area in 1983 so that the reserve could be created to protect the last sizeable population of free-roaming elephants in SA. But there was another reason for creating a fenced reserve: the

elephants were raiding the communities' crops.

In time, KZN Wildlife aims to drop the northern boundary fence to link Tembe with Mozambique's Maputo Special Reserve, creating a transfrontier park so the elephants can resume their ancient migration patterns. But this is one of the poorest areas in the country, and poaching is prevalent. It will be some time before any fences are dropped.

There are about 220 elephants at Tembe, and if there's one thing you're certain to see there, it's elephants! All elephants are

special, but those in Tembe are unusual for several reasons.

"These are the only indigenous KwaZulu-Natal elephants left in the province," says regional ecologist Catharine Hanekom. "All the others were hunted to extinction. The elephants at places like Hluhluwe-Imfolozi were translocated from the Kruger National Park."

The Tembe elephants behave differently to those from the Lowveld.

"They definitely have a different feeding behaviour," says Catharine. "They don't ring-bark trees, for instance. They seem to know that by ring-barking a tree they are destroying a potential food source for the future."

Although the elephants also feed in the grassy swamps and open woodlands, the dense sand forests are inextricably linked with their survival. For centuries, the largest land animal has used the dense forests as protection from hunters and ivory poachers, and more recently from soldiers during the Mozambican civil war. The Tembe elephants are descendants of a long line of survivors, and some of the bulls carry tusks that are among the heaviest and longest in Africa.

"Their tusk genes have been protected over time from hunting," says Catharine. "The breeding herds and the bulls will go into the forest to hide away, and it would be unwise to follow them. It's scary, walking through these forests when you know there are elephants around!"

Elsewhere in Africa, hunters have eliminated most of the big tuskers, and at places like Addo Elephant Park, many of the elephants have no tusks at all – a genetic response to the hunting in the 1800s and early 1900s. An elephant with big tusks had less chance of survival, and many of them were eliminated from the population.

According to wildlife surgeon and elephant expert Johan Marais, hunters and poachers have killed off most of Africa's biggest elephants, including the so-called "hundred pounders", or elephants with tusks weighing more than 50kg each.

"In the early 1900s, great tuskers were common in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, the south-western corner of Ethiopia, southern Sudan and on the grassy plains of Tanzania and Kenya.

"Bulls reach their breeding prime at 35 to 40 years of age – the same time as they emerge as hundred-pounders. From then on, their ivory grows exponentially, so that it becomes very large over only a short number of years.

"Hunting of these magnificent bulls takes place at this stage, so that few of them are able to pass on their genes to future generations.

This is why the number of hundred pounders has dropped to less than 40 in the whole of



Africa today." But visitors to Tembe can still see some of these remaining bulls.

"The best genes for ivory are currently in Kenya's Tsavo National Park," says Marais. "And the next best place is Tembe."

One of the biggest tuskers in SA, named iSilo, roams the forests and swamps of Tembe. On our first morning, we were treated to a sighting of iSilo – "king of kings" – at Mahlasele waterhole, which has a fantastic hide that makes game viewing very rewarding.

iSilo is the pride of Tembe. He is about 50 years old, weighs between 6500kg and 7000kg, and stands 3,2m tall. His tusks are estimated to be about 2,5m long and weigh 60-65kg each.

At the privately run Tembe Elephant Lodge, guests are taken on game drives to see not only elephants but also lion, buffalo, leopard, rhino (both black and white) and wild dog. There are more than 340 bird species, including "specials" such as Neergaard's sunbird, the pink-throated twinspot and the African broadbill.

The emerald sand forests are also home to the country's largest population of suni, Africa's second-smallest antelope after the blue duiker. Suni adults weigh just a few kilograms, and sometimes fall prey to swooping crowned eagles.

Park authorities are balancing the conservation of the suni with that of the elephants.

"The problem is that because the ellies are now confined, they're having a greater impact on the sand forest which, of course, is hard for the suni," says Catharine. "So it's a delicate balancing act."

The Tembe elephants are part of a groundbreaking study to show that contraception is a viable and successful



Top: Giraffe spotted at Mahlasele waterhole. There is a fantastic hide that offers regular wildlife sightings. Above: A thick-tailed bush baby climbs down into the dining boma area at Tembe Lodge.

Below: Because of the sand forest, Tembe has a big population of nyala, seen here drinking at Mahlasele.



way to control their population. "These are the first truly wild elephants that have been subjected to contraception," says Catharine.

"And it is working very well. This year we've had just three babies, when normally there are about ten."

The contraception study at Tembe has important implications for reserves such as Kruger or Chobe in Botswana, where elephant numbers have increased significantly and landscapes have been damaged by their intensive feeding. Culling is not a viable option, so contraception is seen as an obvious way of controlling elephant numbers.

But Catharine cautions that there's still a lot to learn about the social impact of contraception. "What is the effect on a herd of a reduced birth rate? Will it change the behaviour of the elephants, which are very social and caring creatures?"

The elephants of Tembe used to have a fearsome reputation, because of the Mozambican civil war, but over the years they have calmed down a lot and are now accustomed to vehicles. In fact, iSilo is one of the most relaxed of them all, and is a regular visitor to the lodge.

Even though the camp is protected by electric cables, iSilo regularly dismantles the barrier and wanders at night among the tents and chalets.

"Don't be surprised if you see a glint of ivory in the moonlight while you're walking back to your tent," says lodge manager Tom Mahamba. "For some reason iSilo enjoys hanging around here. No doubt he feels comfortable, but most probably his teeth are wearing down and he enjoys the soft grass and leaves growing in camp."

It's one of the things that make Tembe such an attractive destination. One gets the feeling that the animals are in charge here, not the humans.

During dinner, watch out for the bush babies which scamper down the trunks of the mahogany trees to look for a snack off your plate. And while you're lying in your safari tent, keep an eye out for nyala and kudu that regularly wander through camp. And you are quite likely to hear lions roaring in the early hours...

Because there is no other public accommodation, only guests at the lodge and a limited number of day visitors are allowed to explore the reserve. Vehicles must be 4x4s, because of the sandy tracks.

"Tembe is very wild," says Catharine. "You can drive around the whole day and not see another car. That makes it special."

Overall, Tembe is one of the most rewarding reserves I've explored so far. I recommend it highly to nature lovers who enjoy adventurous destinations.



Top: The Ford Everest in the beautiful Tembe forest, which protects the largest expanse of this habitat in SA. Above (clockwise): Only 4x4s are allowed into Tembe because of the thick sand left by the retreating Indian Ocean thousands of years ago; Dung beetle; Watch out for those beetles! Bottom left: Tembe has a thriving lion population: Only 4x4s are allowed into Tembe because of the thick sand left by the retreating Indian Ocean thousands of years ago.

Getting there

Tembe Elephant Park is on the north-eastern border of KwaZulu-Natal, on the southern border of Mozambique, about 450km north of Durban. The reserve lies between Kosi Bay and Ndumo Game Reserve. Drive north on the N2 for about 270km. Then turn right onto the R22 to Hluhluwe and travel about 150km to a T-junction, and turn left. After a few kilometres, look out for the signs to Tembe on your right. You must have a 4x4 to enter the reserve. Day visitors and lodge visitors both pay once-off fees of R35 per vehicle and a R30 conservation levy.

Where to stay

Tembe Lodge in the south-west of the reserve is the only place to stay. There are 15 safari tents set under the shade of forest trees. Meals are served in a central dining boma, and in the evenings guests are treated to singing and dancing by the staff. Prices range from R795 to R1550 per person per night, including three meals a day and two guided game drives, making it one of the best value for money lodges in the country. Tel 031-267-0144, e-mail info@tembe.co.za or www.tembe.co.za.



Top: The comfortable safari tents at Tembe Lodge. Second from top: In summer, the pool provides welcome relief from the high temperatures and humidity. Third from top: iSilo, the elephant with the biggest tusks in SA, is often seen near Tembe Lodge. Above: Set beneath beautiful mahogany trees, the unfenced Tembe Lodge gives visitors a real sense of connection with the surrounding bush.

Year in the Wild, supported by Ford and Total

One of my sponsors is Vodacom, which has helped me with a cell phone and 3G modem, so that I can upload photos to my blog at www.yearinthewild.com, and stay in touch as I travel around the country.

Vodacom has recently started providing electricity to the rural community near Tembe Elephant Park. Supplying "green power" to the Emfihlweni Community Power initiative. This is a pilot project which, if successful, could be the first in a series that will be rolled out over the next few years. Unlike other communities, Emfihlweni does not receive power from the local municipality but from Vodacom's base stations, which have solar-powered generators. Twenty-five percent of the total electricity generated by the base station in Emfihlweni is being used to power the community water pump, a local shop that will provide a cell phone charging station, and the local high school, which recently switched on the power to its computer centre for the first time.

Vodacom will, as part of the project, supply the school with equipment for its computer centre. This includes 20 computers for pupils, computers and training for teachers, a server and internet access. By now I've travelled around SA enough to know that education is the key to the future success of conservation. As a nation, we have to start educating rural communities about why it's important to look after our natural resources. I'm proud to be associated with Vodacom.

I've taken my Ford Everest across many different types of terrain, including the thick sand of Tembe, and I continue to be impressed by the comfort and capability of the vehicle. Importantly, despite being fully loaded, and having an Eeziawn rooftop tent attached to my Frontrunner roofrack, I still manage about 10 litres of fuel per 100km. My long-range fuel tank can take about 110 litres, and I'm getting more than 1 000km a tank if I drive conservatively. If I push the speed above 130 km/h, the fuel consumption goes up a lot. However, if I cruise at about 110km/h, I'm saving quite a bit of money.

Thanks again to Total for helping me with my fuel bills. 🌟

