

# Guiding Zululand

By

**Christa Panos and Ryan Tippett**

Nature Guiding is one of those dream jobs, that is envied by many for good reason. While it is certainly hard work, the rewards are numerous. The typical image of a Nature or Field Guide, would be picturing the guide in an open game viewing vehicle with guests in the back, ready with binoculars and cameras, driving through beautiful grasslands, with lions relaxing and elephants browsing somewhere in the distance! While this picture rings true for many areas in South Africa, guiding in Zululand takes on a whole different dimension. The reason for this being the absolutely breathtaking diversity of the region. A biodiversity that according to Dr. Ian Player overtakes that of the entire Kruger National Park and even the Okavango Delta. Working in such a diverse area offers the nature guide many possibilities for specialisation.

So what does it mean to be a Field Guide in Zululand? Nelson Mandela stated that this (the Isimangaliso Wetlands Park) must be only place on earth where the world's oldest land mammal(Rhino) and the world's biggest terrestrial mammal(elephant) share an ecosystem with the world's oldest fish(coelacanth) and the world's biggest marine mammals (wales). As a Zululand guide, you can easily go from doing a Big 5 Hluhluwe-Umfolozi game drive on one day, birding the Mkuze Fig Forest on the next, Tiger-fishing on the Jozini dam, Frogging around the many wetlands of the area, to diving the Sodwana Bay Coral Reefs, and doing a Turtle Tour at Kosi Bay. The coastline offers unique opportunities for guiding on horseback, while many guides in the region also work extensively on boats and kayaks. *(The Field Guides Association of Southern Africa, (FGASA) has recently launched a new guiding qualification for Marine Guides, that is gaining recognition through various other regions of the sub-continent as a good entry-level for guiding in Marine Protected Areas. )*

The combination of unique terrestrial and marine eco-systems of Zululand and the Elephant coast, surely makes this the most exciting region for any field guide to work and pursue his/her passion for wildlife and the environment. Working as a specialist bird guide in Zululand can be very rewarding, as was recently seen with the flocks of birders and ornithologists that streamed to the Pongola Nature Reserve to see the rarely spotted Golden Pipit. Within two weeks of the sighting of the Golden Pipit(*Tmetothylacus tenellus*), other rare vagrants such as the Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Tryngites subruficollis*) and the Pectoral Sandpiper(*Calidris melanotos*) were spotted at Muzi Pan, outside of the Mkuze Game Reserve – for many guides in the region this offered the opportunity of adding 3 very rare vagrants to their recorded sightings within a period of only 3 weeks. Reserves such as Ndumo and Mkuze has long been rated the top birding reserves in Southern Africa, and while this is spectacular on its own, it is even more impressive when one considers that Ndumo is also right next to Tembe Elephant Park, a park that is unique with its Sand Forest habitat, and is also known for having Africa's largest tuskers.

**Butterfly Guide Amon Nldovu** is full of praise for the regions high diversity of butterfly species, but more importantly is the fact that the favourable climate here means that butterfly guides can work year round as there are always an abundance of species to be found to share with guests. Amon is also a FGASA guide and currently works as a Junior Instructor for Bhejane Nature Training, where field guiding students get the opportunity to learn how to follow in his footsteps, to become specialist butterfly guides.

Bhejane Nature Training Instructor, **Ryan Tippett**, is a FGASA Level 3 (Advanced) guide that has been guiding in Zululand for over 6 years and is still in awe of the botanical diversity of the region. Below is an extract of an article written by Ryan about his guiding experiences in Zululand.

“My first impression of the forest (Ngome Forest and Ntendeka Wilderness Area) was one of sheer amazement. It almost seemed like I was in a fairy tale, with almost everything festooned with mosses, orchids and ferns. Anyone with even a passing interest in plants will be captivated by the place. It is floristically extremely rich and has an intense tropical feel. The Ngome forest receives a high rainfall and as a result there are a myriad small streams and rivers criss-crossing the forest floor. The forest is noted for its variety of orchids and fascinating plants that include the Giant-leaved *Streptocarpus* (*Streptocarpus candidus*), Clivias (*Clivia miniata*) and a large fern called *Didymochlaene trunquatula*, which has fronds extending to two and a half meters in length.

The undulating grasslands support many rare and unusual wild flowers and are the only grasslands in Zululand frequented by the endangered Blue Swallow.

There is a wealth of bird species, and on my last visit I was able to find the Orange Ground Thrush and Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon. Both of which are generally uncommon, furtive and hard to see. This is as good a place as any to find these special birds. Another incredible creature to be found there is the Emperor swallowtail (*Papilio ophidicephalus*), South Africa's largest butterfly species. It can be seen cruising around clearings, high in the canopy. One could be forgiven for thinking that its shadow was cast by a medium-sized bird!

**False Bay Park** is another unknown Zululand treasure. The park is an important refuge for South Africa's rarest small antelope, the Suni (*Neotragus moschatus*). A quiet walk on one of the trails should almost guarantee a sighting. The reserve is noted for its abundance of smaller mammals. Many of which occur in good numbers. With luck you may be able to spot - Red Squirrel, Samango Monkey, Honey Badger, Red Duiker, Banded Mongoose and Serval amongst others. The reserve also contains a healthy Leopard population. Tracks and other signs of their presence are often seen.

Most of the reserve consists of sand forest, a rare and threatened forest type, found only on deep sands. It reaches its southern-most limit at False Bay. Sand Forest is known for containing a staggering variety of tree species. There are some truly magnificent trees in the park, none more so than the stately Lebombo Wattle (*Newtonia hildebrandtii*). Many of the larger specimens can be seen almost completely draped in epiphytic orchids.

It is one of the best places to find elusive birds such as Narina Trogon, Southern Banded Snake Eagle, African Broad-bill and the endemic Neergard's Sunbird. When the lake levels are suitable there are often many hundreds of flamingos to be seen. The lake is also a reliable area for the threatened Saddle-billed Stork.

In recent years, it has come to light that the reserve harbours a small population of Plain-backed Sunbirds (*Antheptes reichenowi*). In South Africa they are restricted to two small populations in the sand forests of False Bay and Tembe Elephant Park. They are not easy to find but with patience and knowledge of their call and habitat you stand a chance of seeing them.

Possibly the most diverse area of them all is **Kosi Bay**. This is a superb complex of four large, interconnected lakes and an estuary with a narrow mouth that opens to the sea. Part of the attraction is its remoteness. There is also a vibrant, tropical island feel that can be found nowhere else in South Africa.

The estuary has some superb shallow water coral reefs where several hundred species of fish have been recorded, most of them fantastic and brightly coloured. The water visibility is brilliant and makes this a veritable paradise for the keen snorkeler.

The lakes are separated from the Indian Ocean by high, forested dunes which descend onto the country's most pristine beaches, vital breeding grounds for Logger-head and Leather-back Turtles. Hundreds of them return to these beaches to nest every year.

The inner, western shores are fringed by verdant forests and marshes. There is also a unique forest of Raphia Palms (*Raphia australis*). This is the habitat of rare birds like the Palmnut Vulture and Pel's Fishing Owl.

A lot of time is needed to fully explore the lakes. Many of the spots are hard to get to and some knowledge of the area is very useful. Whether you explore the system on foot, by boat, canoe or 4x4 the wonders of this area will not easily be forgotten."

**FGASA Marine Guide Freya van de Wiel**, adds that the Elephant Coast, is recognised as the most biologically diverse area along the entire South African coastline, and guiding includes not only diving and snorkeling amongst Africa's southern most coral reefs but also viewing Turtles nesting and Humpback whales migrating through the area. The rocky shores of the Elephant Coast is also filled with many unique treasures for guides to interpret to their guests – one example is the very interesting Bouton's Skink – possibly South Africa's only Marine Skink, that can be found exclusively on the rocky shores of Black Rock at Kosi Bay.

Ryan is equally inspired by the Tembe Elephant Park and writes that

"Tembe Elephant Park is an altogether different experience from the others. It is an expanse of dense sub-tropical woodland, sand forest and swamp that carries a distinct wilderness feel. Entrance to the park is kept to a daily limit and a four wheel drive vehicle is essential. This means that one often gets to drive around and not have to see another soul the entire day. The reserve lies adjacent to the Mozambique border and has a hot and humid climate.

The thing on most people's minds when they arrive at Tembe is the elephants. These herds are the last naturally occurring elephants in KwaZulu Natal. They are also unusually large elephants and are amongst the biggest in the world. As if this wasn't enough, some of the older bulls are now also amongst the biggest tuskers in Africa. To see one of these immense bull elephants is a truly wonderful experience. There are currently around 250 elephants in the park and the chances of seeing them are high. You need a lot of luck, however to lay eyes on one of the giant bulls. They are usually seen alone and are often out of sight in the wilderness areas of the park.

Tembe is not only notable for its elephants; it is in fact home to all of the big five. There is a healthy lion population and they are often seen. The buffalo herds tend to confine themselves to the swamps that run up the eastern flank of the reserve. They are not fond of the dense, dry woodlands and forests that span most of the reserve due to the paucity of water. There are good numbers of both black and white rhinos and Tembe is a key reserve in their continued fight for survival. The often shy black rhinos are seen regularly and they seldom fail to entertain with their quick tempers and nervous temperament. The last of the big five is the one you're the least likely to see, the leopard. They are around but remain elusive. The dense bush in the reserve does not help in spotting them either.

I always associate Tembe with the chance to see something different, rare or unusual. On previous visits I've seen Side-striped Jackal, Tonga Red Squirrel, Selous' Mongoose, Striped Polecat and African Civet. Other mammals that are often seen include Nyala, Kudu, Giraffe, Samango Monkey, Blue Wildebeest, Water Buck and Bushbuck amongst others.

Tembe's sub-tropical bushveld is also home to several bird species close to the southern limits of their distribution. These include Retz's Helmet Shrike, Barred Owlet, Plain-backed Sunbird, Woodward's Batis and Bat Hawk. The birding is very rewarding and the majority of the regions 'specials' can be seen here.

The opportunity to view game amongst patches of forest containing huge trees and colossal termite mounds, gives you an entirely different perspective of the bush, indeed one you won't find anywhere else in South Africa." Northern KwaZulu Natal can definitely be considered as an absolute mecca for nature guiding!

