

CONSERVATION AREAS

# Animals given freedom to move

Lesley Stones

**G**ame ranger Bradley Sheldon laughs with delight as a dozen elephants swing past his vehicle, stretching out their trunks to smell us. He oozes as much excitement as the two Brazilian honeymooners on their first trip to Africa, even though he does this for a living.

Game drives in Thornybush Private Nature Reserve near Hoedspruit never used to be like this, Sheldon says. There were only 62 elephants in the reserve 18 months ago. The last census recorded a five-fold increase to 350, so close encounters are practically guaranteed.

Last March Thornybush landowners ripped out a 27km fence that separated their 14,500ha from Timbavati Game Reserve, which has open borders with the Kruger National Park. Now animals can migrate from the Kruger into Thornybush, and they're doing so en masse. "Now there are bulls all over the show, big tuskers coming from the Kruger," Sheldon says.

Lions have also discovered this new hunting ground. "The lion activity has changed with males coming



**Included:** Vegetation surrounds the pool at Thornybush Game Lodge, a private game reserve. /Supplied

and going so anything can happen now. It's no longer a case of always seeing the same male lion. Now it's still be around? There could be a pride takeover at any time and that dynamic makes things a lot more exciting."

Sheldon has worked at Thornybush for nearly three years and says the rangers love the added thrills since the fence fell. He's based at the five-star Thornybush Game Lodge, which has 20 chalets. With eight teams of rangers and guides, there are never more than six guests to a vehicle.

Tracker Orlando Mawele

points out a young lion ahead, then spots its two siblings. A grumpy old buffalo expelled from his herd is eyeing them, spooling for a fight. A lion makes a sudden dash and leaps onto the buffalo's flanks. They charge into the scrub and we hear a mele of yelps and snorts, then spot the buffalo changing the bloodied and chased lion.

When the action dies down, Sheldon says "The dynamics have changed completely so it feels more wild and pristine, and the interactions are more interesting. Before it was very confined. There was no chance of anything coming in because

of the fence, so this has created a nice freedom of movement." That freedom has led some animals to drift east into the Kruger, especially grazers looking for the tastiest grass. But they'll be back as the seasons change now that their traditional migrating routes are being restored.

Later we watch flocks of red-billed quelea propel themselves out of some trees in unison, swirling and swooping and miraculously never hitting each other. A determined elephant pushes over another tree to reach its roots, cuts for a moment and wanders off.

The drastic landscaping now wreaked by the influx of elephants is being assessed every quarter by zoologists. If too many of the largest trees are demolished, the vultures that clean up dead bodies and stifle the spread of diseases will be homeless. As the whole ecosystem depends on vultures, things could get messy.

The latest report is that the pachyderm population is stabilising, says Nic Griffin, CEO of Thornybush Luxury Game Lodge Collection. "It's inquisitiveness, the elephants heard there was a new place to go. When they see it's not a lot different from where they're used to, they go back to where

they were. The boffins who have this vision say it will all settle down and we will have a much greater variety of game and they will be happier that they can move around."

The next fence likely to fall will be with Kapana Private Game Reserve to the west, but Guernsey Road lies between them, so a traffic issue must be resolved first.

The open access is encouraged by the Peace Parks Foundation, founded by Dr Anton Rupert, with the vision of reopening ancient migration routes that let animals move between SA, Mozambique, Malawi, Botswana and Zimbabwe. The aim is to create vast conservation areas straddling national borders. But with many stakeholders involved, it typically unfolds over many years.

Poaching and politics are among the biggest challenges, Griffin says, but the mind-set of people with the power to make it happen is shifting. In game lodges it's a smart business decision, because customers are pushing them to accede as much as the conservationists.

"One of the impediments to Thornybush was that we were a closed reserve, so many travel agents said it's just a big zoo. It's the right thing to do to allow



**Up close:** Elephants headed to Thornybush after the fence with Timbavati Game Reserve was removed. /Lesley Stones

animals to be less restricted, and it's enriched our whole game experience," Griffin says. He was delighted when neighbouring farmers and landowners finally agreed to pull the fence down, although he had one reservation.

"Without animals we don't have a business, so at a board meeting I asked what would happen if we take the fences down and our animals run away. I was absolutely for it, but I wanted somebody to give me some sleep-easy that it wasn't going to happen."

"Nobody could, but they assured me it hadn't happened in previous experiences." It turns out that animals want the same as humans want,

he says: food, water and security. Thornybush has an abundance of watering holes, rich vegetation and strong anti-poaching protection, so it has gained far more than it lost.

There are 12 lodges trading under the Thornybush Luxury Game Lodge Collection, which owns some, leases others and markets them all.

That offers economies of scale for administration and marketing abroad, as 80% of their guests are foreigners.

Although Thornybush is now entirely accessible to animals, most local humans find its 178 beds prohibitively expensive. It's impossible to operate at rates that appeal to the average South African because running a lodge

is very costly, Griffin argues. Security costs alone have more than quadrupled over two years because of poaching.

Another expense is staff accommodation, because they can't travel home through the reserve at night.

The 20 rooms at Thornybush Game Lodge were recently renovated at R1m each – more than double the cost in a city. Its remoteness and the fact that work could only be done when guests were on game drives meant the workmen spent long periods waiting to continue, and the project took 14 months.

Griffin hopes the investment will be recouped when more visitors support the reserve now that it's open to the Kruger.