On location with the black rhino

In late August 2008, Wellington Zoo Herbivore team leader Ben Pocock spent seven weeks in South Africa where he gained invaluable insights into *in situ* conservation field practices.

Ben visited Cheetah Outreach, Johannesburg Zoo and the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) in South Africa, and here he shares his highlights of the KwaZulu-Natal where he worked alongside the Black Rhino Research Project team.

The main reason for my trip to South Africa was to spend five weeks as a field biologist assistant in Hluhluwe-Imfolozi National Park. This would enable me to directly contribute to the *in situ* conservation of an endangered species while learning as much as I could about wild African animals.

It was only when I settled into a hut with Victoria University PhD students Roan Plotz and Roz Anderson-Lederer that I realised what I was in for! The hut was built in the '60s for overnight stays by two tourists at the most - needless to say it was a squash for three relatively unacquainted scientists and all of our equipment.

Unfenced and surrounded by thick bush, our hut was basically sitting in the home of a huge array of African wildlife, including the largest population of the critically endangered black rhinoceros.

The black rhinos were the main reason for this trip. I helped Roan research their home ranges and resource quality of the habitat, so that park management can more accurately estimate the park's carrying capacity.

With Roz, who is a casual guide at Wellington Zoo, we also studied intra-specific behaviour, browsing habits, predator density relating to pregnancy and birth rates, and how ox-pecker birds affected the vigilance behaviour of the rhinos.

This meant that the majority of our fieldwork was spent tracking rhinos on foot through the grasslands and bush-veld, with a trained guide in the lead. Bom, a Zulu man, carried an elephant gun with him everywhere and has one of the longest histories with the park.

Bom has a great sense of humour that overrode the language barriers, and he taught me a lot about the behaviour of the wild animals, and about his village culture.

Despite our best intentions we did not always spot the black rhinos before they became aware of us, and as a result we found ourselves scrambling up trees more often than not!

A large healthy tree is the only place to be when you're spotted by a black rhino, and the trees are also good lookouts so we collected a lot of data while clinging to the branches.

To help track black rhinos, we worked with the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife Game Capture team to insert radio transmitters in the rhinos' horns. Established thirty years ago, the team is the most experienced in South Africa and they have the best of equipment including helicopters and off-road vehicles.

I spent eight thrilling days with the game capture team, mostly catching rhino, but I also helped with nyala capture operations - it's amazing how they manage to net these wild and flighty antelope.

Immense thunderstorms kept Roan, Roz and I trapped in our hut at Masinda on several occasions. This was the ideal opportunity to input data into the computers, although this was made difficult by intermittent power supply and battling tick bite fever. I think cabin fever would have been a more serious issue had I not been in such good company.

I enjoyed being immersed among wildlife, freely observing giraffe, zebra, wildebeest, buffalo, impala, hyenas, the odd leopard and an array of birds every day. Even the insects and reptiles were incredible. Simply being there was an experience that made the trip worthwhile.

Ben Pocock, Herbivore Team Leader, Wellington Zoo

Above: Wellington Zoo Herbivore team leader Ben Pocock spent seven weeks in South Africa where he gained invaluable insights into in situ conservation field practices.

Right: A number of black rhinos were anaesthetised so that radio transmitters could be inserted into their horns.

Photos: Ben Pocock.