SOUL OF THE WILDERNESS

On Trail in the Wilderness

BY CAROL BATRUS

In successive IJW *issues we have had authors tell their first-person stories about being on the iMfolozi trail in South Africa. In the previous issue of* IJW *(December 2006), Doug Williamson told his story, "Walking with Magqubu: Adult Reflections on Boyhood Memories." The following story is about the same experience told by Carol Batrus, who took her trip at a different time in history and under different circumstances. Two different people with different backgrounds but with similar wilderness experience results.*

It is June 2000. I live in a remote, primitive Zulu community, a century removed and half a world away from all that I have known. I came to help others adapt to their changing environment. It was the environment that profoundly changed me. Being "on trail" with the Wilderness Leadership School in South Africa brought me home.

We are seven campers, three men and four women, standing at the boundary of the Umfolozi Wilderness, one of the oldest game reserves in Africa, anxious to begin our five-day trail experience. Beyond this boundary live lions, rhinos, elephants, leopards, hippos, giraffes, zebras, buffalo, hyenas, jackals, baboons, warthogs, crocodiles, antelopes, ticks, scorpions, snakes and more. The school's goal is to have us experience the natural environment in as pure a form as possible. Each participant carries a mat and sleeping bag (no tents), a few items of clothing, and a share of the cooking utensils and food for the group. The two trail leaders, Paul and Michael, tell us to leave watches, books, and extra food behind in the van. While we reorganize, the leaders inspect their rifles and pack bullets resembling small missiles; then Paul announces it's time for our first safety lecture.

Carol Batrus. Photo by Vance Martin.

He tells us that the bush we are entering is rather dense, so it is possible to surprise a rhino, a buffalo, or even an elephant. If an animal feels surprised or threatened, it could behave in "unreasonable" ways. Personally, I have no desire to reason with a rhino—whatever it wants is OK with me. Paul offers a few suggestions:

"When we encounter animals do exactly as Michael and I tell you, your lives depend on it." No problem, glad to oblige.

"If we give a command to drop and climb, drop your backpack immediately, and climb the closest tree. Climb as far up as you can because rhino are much larger than you might suspect." Why didn't I learn to climb trees as a kid?

He tells a story of a group of campers treed by a rhino. They didn't climb quite far enough and the annoyed rhino managed to dislodge the arboreal refugees. It is highly unlikely that anything like that will happen, but we should be aware.

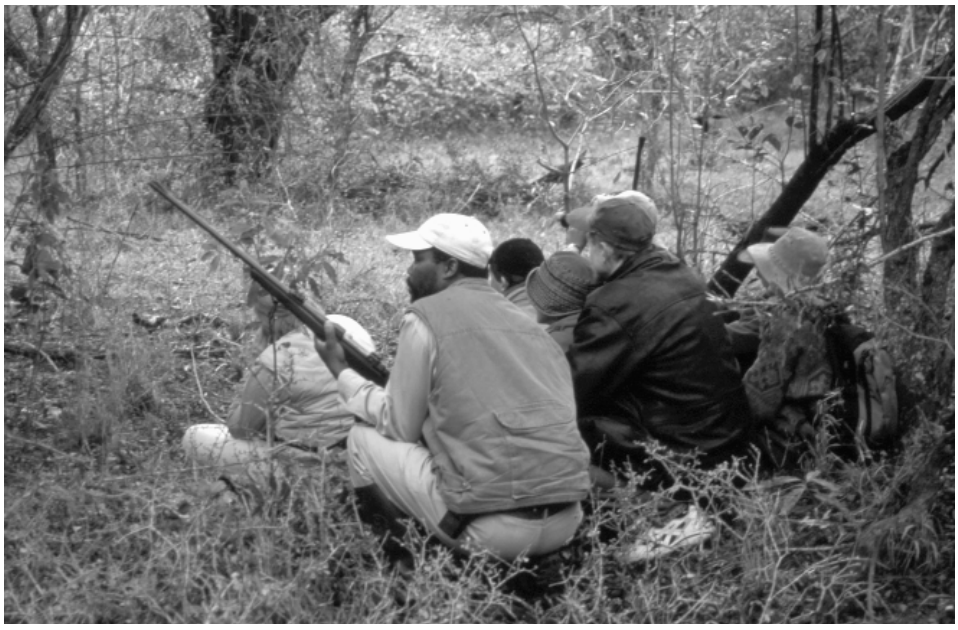
"If we give a signal to be quiet and still, don't move, don't even blink." Thankfully I've learned to meditate and can hold quite still.

"Animal behavior is not predicable. Let's all pay attention and have a safe and wonderful time." Pay attention? I won't let him out of my sight.

We heave our backpacks and head in. After 20 minutes we find animal tracks that our guides call spoor. In hushed tones—Paul doesn't want to scare away any animals—he shows us the different types of spoor: elephant, rhino, hyena, and buffalo. We walk a few yards more. A white rhino and her calf stand about 100 feet (30.5 m) away, calmly browsing. They appear ancient and otherworldly. I remind myself, this isn't *Jurassic Park*: they live here.

Our intended camp is on the other side of the White Umfolozi River. The guides warn us that the river is full of crocodiles so we need to cross quickly. Crocs can weigh more than 2,000 pounds (907 kg) and are incredibly fast. Michael tries to reassure us that the "cold" water (it's June and winter in the Southern Hemisphere) makes the crocodiles more sluggish than in the warmer summer months. Very comforting. Paul tells us to watch for antelope and buffalo. They cross at the shallowest part of the river. In a few minutes we see a small group of impala spring across the river downstream about 150 yards (137 m). We walk to that site. Paul and Michael load their guns. Paul, gun at the ready, enters the river and crosses, twisting and turning, eyeing the water as he goes. Michael, eyes peeled, covers Paul from the shore.

We watch in stunned silence. Once on the other side, Paul walks back, stopping midriver, and signals to us to cross. Boots off, not a word between us, our eyes betray our unspoken fear. We descend the bank. On the first step, my foot sinks into thick, tenacious mire. On my next step I fall to my knees, backpack falling forward and pushing me down. I can't get up. I feel helpless and foolish. Michael descends the bank and pulls me to my feet. I am the last to reach the far shore. We sit on the ground about 20 feet (6 m) from the water's edge wiping sand off our feet, pulling on socks and hiking boots. Michael points to a crocodile 100 yards (91.4 m) downstream from our entry point, sliding into the river. Good lord, what am I doing?

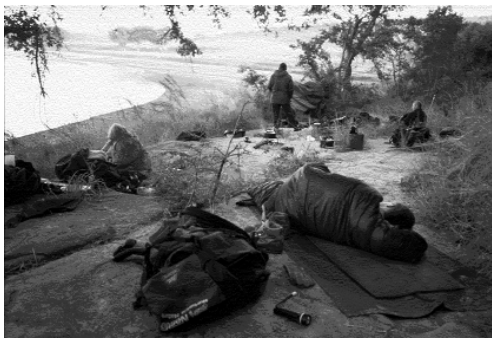


On wilderness trail in the iMfolozi requires attention to your surroundings, and adherence to the instructions of your trail officer. Photo by Margot Muir.

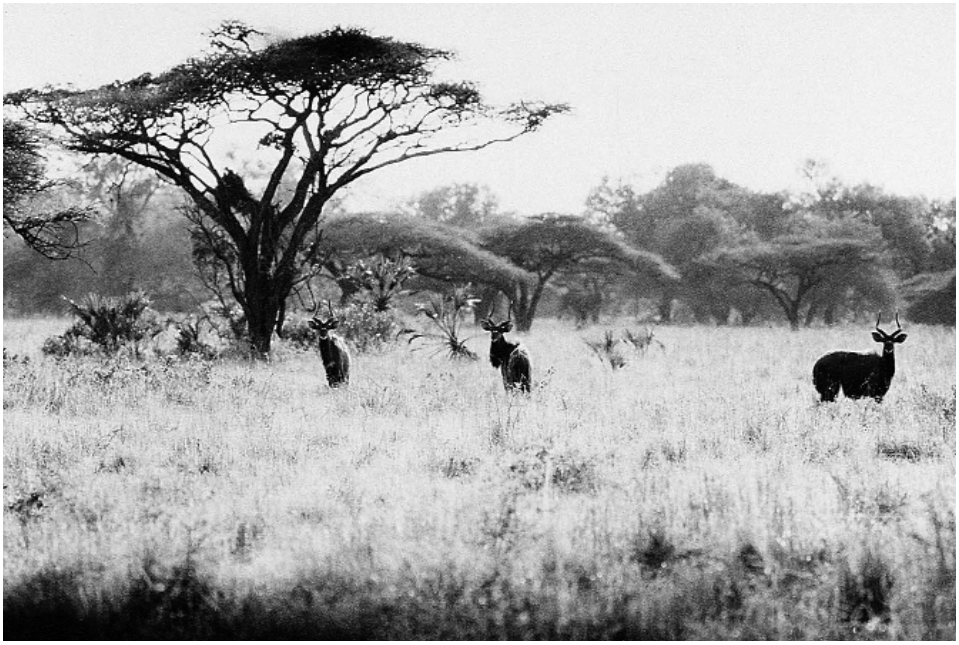
We walk toward our campsite, a rocky, flat area 6 feet (1.8 m) above the river backed by a rock face. As we near the site, I hear loud, raucous, and totally unfamiliar sounds. Paul says it is a baboon colony. The males, called dogs, have enormous canine teeth capable of killing humans. "Select a site for your sleeping bags. Once the baboons know where our territory will be, they will calm down." We gather wood to build a bush fire: three sticks arranged in a triangle to create a small flame. The fire, with a flame, must be kept going all night. We divide the night into seven single-person shifts, and night watch begins.

The first watch stays up, the rest of us retire to our sleeping bags. I lie awake listening to sounds that are new to my ear; unknown animal noises that I am later told are hyena, leopard, toad. … The full moon rests on the east horizon. I try to put words to my emotions: *appreciation*, *trepidation*, *awe*. I must remember where the man who follows my night shift sleeps so I wake the correct person. Locating his spot, I drift to sleep. I awake to a quiet tap on my shoulder. It is my turn for watch.

I crawl out of my sleeping bag, thoroughly shake out my boots, and retrieve my tea mug. My predecessor hands me the flashlight. He kept the fire going and has a pot of water



Waking up overlooking the Imfolozi River. Photo by Margot Muir.



A small bachelor herd of three young kudu bulls. Photo by Margot Muir.

boiling for tea. The night is stunningly still. I walk the perimeter of the camp, poking the flashlight into the darkness. Here we are, little night beasties. You have a whole lot of space to yourselves, no need to come here. I return to the fire and prepare a cup of tea. I sit and listen. I watch the constellations move overhead, feel the stillness, and take comfort in the light of the full moon. I close my eyes to meditate. It is easy to sense the contained energy of the Earth below and the expansive energy of the sky above. I feel harmony, connection, and peace. God is everywhere. It is so obvious. How could anyone doubt it? I feel very protected, blessed, and lucky to be here. Another tour around the camp, another cup of tea, another sit. My watch is regrettably over. Time to rouse the next in line and return to my sleeping bag.

The sun announces day two of life in the wild. Sitting quietly around the fire, the morning starts slowly. We have used all of the water we packed in and are now drinking Umfolozi River water. The water has a repulsive green color with unidentifiable chewy bits floating abundantly on the surface; the smell is reminiscent of an outhouse at a fish-processing plant. Our leaders don't seem too fussy about making sure it boils before drinking it. Drinking the chewy bits is bad enough, unboiled chewy bits in a soup of animal excrement—out of the question!

We break camp then hike in relative silence. On a sandy river beach, we watch as Cape buffalo enjoy a morning drink and crocodiles sun themselves. In open grassland, we see herds of zebra and warthog. We cross a floodplain where the grass is so thick that we can't see our feet. Not a comforting feeling. Paul is leading the walk. His hand flashes up to signal "Halt." He waves at us to back up quickly. He heard the hiss of a Mozambique spitting cobra. Since almost dying from a bite several years previous, he has a healthy respect for getting out of its way. We give the area a wide berth.

Our second campsite is on a cliff overlooking the river. It is late afternoon. We prepare tea to take to the cliff's edge to watch evening events unfold. Three enormous elephants lumber ever so slowly into view. Using their trunks, they snap branches off the trees the way I would pick a blade of grass. One bull elephant seems particularly enamored with the upper branches of a tree. He stands on his hind legs, straining his back as he wills his trunk to reach the topmost branches. He is stretched so high on his hind legs, trunk extended skyward, that he looks like a giant ballerina from a Disney movie. We expect him to topple over backward, but finally he manages to wrap the tip of his trunk around the chosen branch. With the force of a falling building, he drops to the ground, splitting the tree in two. Calmly, delicately, he proceeds to dine on the leaves. When darkness interferes with our view, we reluctantly return to the fire and supper.

Anything eaten in the great outdoors after a day of hiking is enjoyed far beyond its culinary due. We set upon the macaroni and cheese like starved dogs, using our fingers to remove any trace of food left on our plates or in the pot. Our dinner conversation is interrupted by the roar of a lion. Never believe that humans have evolved beyond their primal instincts. The instant the lion roars, my bowels clench and the urge to run—fast—consumes me. A second later, we hear the agonized cry of a beast. Paul says we are listening to lions kill a young Cape buffalo. The camp is silent as the sounds paint a gruesome scene. We listen to the calf's cries as the lions finish the hunt and then we hear the triumphant moans of victory as they eat their evening meal. Quietly, reflectively, we proceed to our sleeping bags armed only with a flashlight for night watch.

The sounds of the night disturb my innocence. For me life has never involved a struggle to survive. I hear lions, leopards, and hyenas performing their roles, bequeathing death, sustaining life. The reality of how exposed I am is ever so much clearer. I feel insignificant pitted against the biological imperative to live. Night watch is solemn and tense, but also expansive, exploring new emotions and a new way of being in relation to nature.

The next morning, aching shoulders surface as a universal complaint. We ask our guides if we may camp a second night in the same spot, allowing us to hike without our packs. We take our plates and pot from last night's dinner down to the river for a cleaning. Soap is not in our guides' vocabulary. Not authentic. They suggest we use the shallow (6-inch-deep/15.2 cm) part of the river and scrub ourselves and the dishes with sand. The guides warn us to avoid the deeper part of the river; crocodiles may be lurking. I give myself a sniff. Not too bad. Certainly not bad enough to justify scrubbing with sand in a crocodile-infested river.

> In five days I have become more alive but less worldly, more enlightened but with fewer answers, and more at peace but seeking truth.

We hang by the river watching animals on the far shore, then head inland. Paul leads us to an area heavily used by rhino. He marches us right into rhino midden (a.k.a. a poop pit). He declares that all of the mysteries of rhino life can be discerned in their poop. He hands me a great glob, proudly instructing me on how one can tell white rhino poop from black rhino poop. Not sure I want to know, but as long as I'm here… . We continue our trek, more animals, more poop, more mysteries uncovered.

Day four arrives. We walk to the beach to observe the morning rituals. A lone elderly bull Cape buffalo suns himself on the sand. When male Cape buffalo become too old to oversee a herd of females, a younger bull replaces them, and the old males leave the herd to live their remaining years in solitude. The rules of nature are forever practical, without a whiff of sentimentality.

Our group is very quiet this morning. After three days of intense exposure to our evolutionary roots we are in a reflective place. Without comment, Paul stands and begins a slow walk downriver. Emerging from the bush into a clearing, we surprise a large group of white rhino cows, young bulls, and calves. They sense us and become agitated. The cows regroup, forming a protective line in front of the younger animals. The guides motion us to huddle up, stand still, and be quiet. Nobody breathes. We are in a tight standoff, neither side moving. Paul and Michael load their rifles and place a second bullet between their teeth. The younger male rhino move into formation. We stand in ossified silence. Time evaporates. Has it been 30 seconds or 30 minutes? Finally the lead rhino slowly turns away, dissipating the tension. We back up and exit the clearing.

Day five, the last day. We all want a bath. One camper asks to learn more about tracking. Paul says there is a crocodile-free swimming hole in a tributary of the Umfolozi. He will teach us tracking on our way. We walk beside the stream, spot lots of spoor, and have more lessons of the wild. We find two small pools of water out of view of each other. The men gather at one pool, women at the other. We strip and, as casually as women putting on lipstick in a bathroom mirror,

On trail with the Wilderness Leadership School is all about taking the time to feel, learn, and understand the wilderness, your self, and the connection between them. Photo by Margot Muir.

Continued on page 23

wildness of our wilderness areas not only because restraint is a human virtue, but because that restraint results in unique conditions that cannot be gotten any other way. Untrammeled conditions are necessary for preserving both the process of wildness and its products, both the place and object of worship. We value wildness, not just because wildness symbolizes a humble human relationship to nature, but because the source of transcendence in nature is its wildness. Even in an era when anthropogenic global change may cause wilderness to become less natural, wilderness may still serve as inviolate areas where wildness has its highest expression. **IJW**

REFERENCES

Aplet, Greg H. 1999. On the nature of wildness: Exploring what wilderness really protects. *Denver University Law Review* 76: 347–67.

———. 2000. Indicators of wildness: Using attributes of the land to assess the context of wilderness. In *Wilderness Science in a Time of Change Conference*, volume 2, ed. McCool et al. (pp. 89–98). USDA Forest Service Proceedings RMRS-P-15-vol. 2. Ogden, UT: Rocky Mountain Research Station.

Burton, Lloyd. 2002. *Worship and Wilderness: Culture, Religion, and Law in Public Lands Management*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Cole, David N. 1996. Ecological manipulation in wilderness—An emerging management dilemma. *International Journal of Wilderness* 2(1): 15–19.

———. 2000. Paradox of the primeval: Ecological restoration in wilderness. *Ecological Restoration* 18(2): 77–86.

———. 2003. Agency policy and the resolution of wilderness stewardship dilemmas. *The George Wright Forum* 20(3): 26–33.

———. 2005. Symbolic values: The overlooked values that make wilderness unique. *International Journal of Wilderness* 11(2): 23–27, 10.

Cordell, H. Ken, John C. Bergstrom, and J. M. Bowker. 2005. *The Multiple Values of Wilderness*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing.

Driver, B. L., et al. 1996. *Nature and the Human Spirit: Toward an Expanded Land Management Ethic*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing.

Elliot, R. 1982. Faking nature. *Inquiry* 25: 81–93. All citations in this paper are from the reprint of "Faking nature," in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. A. Light and H. Rolston III (381–89). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Landres, P. B., M. W. Brunson, and L. Merigliano. 2001. Naturalness and wildness: The dilemma and irony of ecological restoration in wilderness. *Wild Earth* 10(4): 77–82.

Light, A. 2000. Ecological restoration and the culture of nature: A pragmatic perspective. In *Restoring Nature: Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities*, ed. P. Gobster and B. Hull (49–70). Washington, DC: Island Press.

Nelson, M. P. 1998. An amalgamation of wilderness preservation arguments. In *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. J. B. Callicot and M. P. Nelson (154–98). Athens, GA, and London: University of Georgia Press.

PAUL M. KEELING is from San Diego, California. He has an MSC in philosophy from the University of Edinburgh and currently resides in Vancouver, BC. He can be contacted at 2578 East Fourth Avenue, Vancouver, BC V5M 1K3, Canada, or by email at: keelingpaul@hotmail.com.

Continued from ON TRAIL, page 7

proceed to comb through our pubic hair, under our breasts, and behind our knees to remove unwanted blood-sucking beasties. Five days in the bush and we are comfortably simian. How easy and natural it feels. There is no hint of awkward embarrassment; the restrictions of society are meaningless under the circumstances. We play and splash, laugh, then dress, refreshed and smelling tolerable.

As I walk back to the van and back to my life in the Zulu village, I know that this experience changed my sense of self. I spent many weeks in the Rocky Mountain wilderness; this wilderness is vastly different. The difference is not the geography or the unique wildlife. An intangible primal essence emanates from this place that connects all lives. I grasp how relationships in nature are sacred unto themselves and how humans judge behavior and value resources from our own limited perspective, using our fears and needs as benchmarks of right and wrong. In five days I have become more alive but less worldly, more enlightened but with fewer answers, and more at peace but seeking truth. **IJW**

Acknowledgment

This article is adapted from chapter 11 ("On the Trail in Wilderness") in a book written by Carol Batrus and titled *When Elephants Fly: One Woman's Journey from Wall Street to Zululand* (Fulcrum Publishing, 2005, Golden, Colorado, USA).

CAROL BATRUS is the author of *When Elephants Fly: One Woman's Journey from Wall Street to Zululand*, which is a story about her involvement in a South Africa project to help Zulu people balance their economic development with protection of their culture and the environment. Carol is a volunteer with the WILD Foundation and lives in Boulder, Colorado; you can contact her at carol@wild.org.