

Mashatu Shadow Program

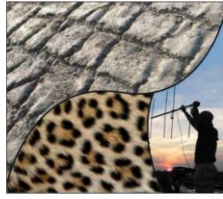
Research Assistant & Volunteer Coordinator, Guy Williams (BSc Hons.)



The Mashatu Research Shadow program is a project, which allows ordinary people to volunteer their time, and some money, to wildlife research in the Northern Tuli Game Reserve. Volunteers accompany researchers or the research assistant from the Mashatu Research group in the field and assist in data collection and capture. Currently the major points of focus for the program are the Central Limpopo River Valley elephant research project, the Northern Tuli predator project, and biodiversity and ecosystem monitoring activities which incorporate birds, insects, vegetation, surface water and climate.

Although volunteers have been helping the research team for some time, the program has really gathered momentum over the past 6 months. The position of research assistant and volunteer coordinator was created and appointed at the end of April and the volunteer accommodation facility came into use in July. These developments have allowed the program to expand, and since the beginning of May we have had twenty eight volunteers from ten countries working with us for an average of 14 days each - this amount to a whopping 424 'volunteer days'! There were seldom more than five volunteers present at one time, and occasionally just one person has the entire research team to themselves. It seems that the longer volunteers stayed the better their

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experience, and their contribution, became. Volunteers came mainly from the USA (47%), while the UK (11%), Italy, Australia and Canada (21%) make up most of the rest. A handful of volunteers (16%) have come from Japan, France, Holland and Switzerland.

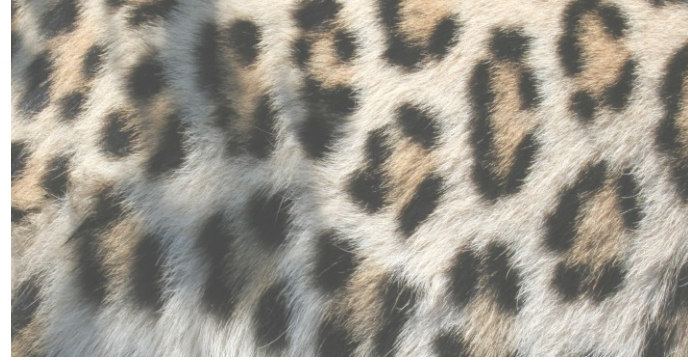


Currently most time (around 8 hrs a day) is spent driving around the reserve in search of elephants, leopards, lions or some other particularly interesting feature (waterholes, carcasses or vegetation monitoring plots), some is spent collecting data on foot and then there is the inevitable 'lab time' sitting in the Discovery Room analysing and capturing data, often on a computer. Volunteers have the opportunity to participate in radio tracking collared animals, observation of behaviour and recording information relating to identity, location, activity and feeding ecology and of study animals. In addition other data collection activities involve identification photography, collection of vegetation samples, measurement of water holes, location of birds of concern and their nests and general bird monitoring.

The contributions of the Research Shadow volunteers over the past six months have been valuable. A large amount of detailed data including age-sex compositions of herds, individual based feeding activity and new identification photographs has been recorded for the elephant research project. The extensive vegetation phenology survey has also yielded a large amount of much needed data on the condition of the primary food sources for the great pachyderms. Despite some frustrations and many hours of fruitless searching, useful information regarding the location, activity and diet of collared leopards and lions have been collected by the volunteers in their extensive searches for these cats and their kills. Birdlife Botswana is



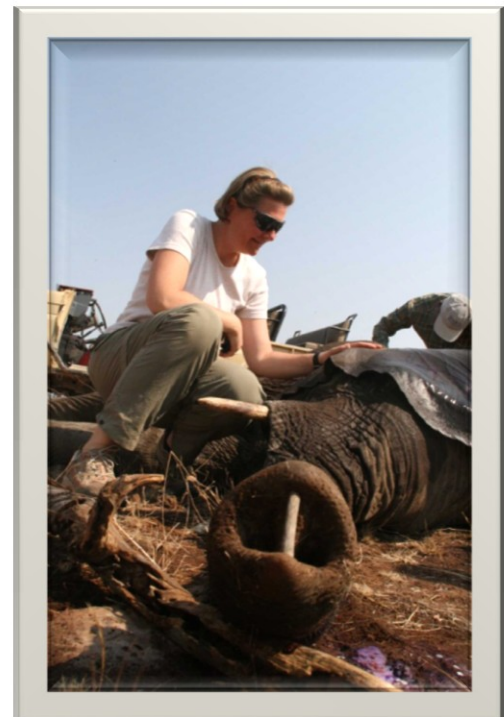
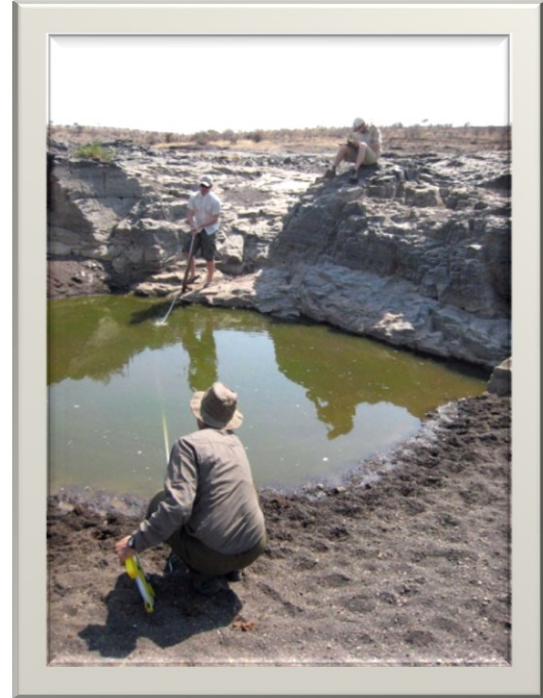
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receiving detailed information regarding the locations and activities of some of their bird species of concern – most notably the Kori Bustard and a number of vulture species – thanks to the efforts of our volunteers. The newly initiated surface water monitoring program will hopefully go some way to improving our understanding of the ecology of the Northern Tuli reserve and animal movements within it. Finally, the unglamorous yet indispensable recording of daily weather conditions is carried out meticulously by our volunteers.

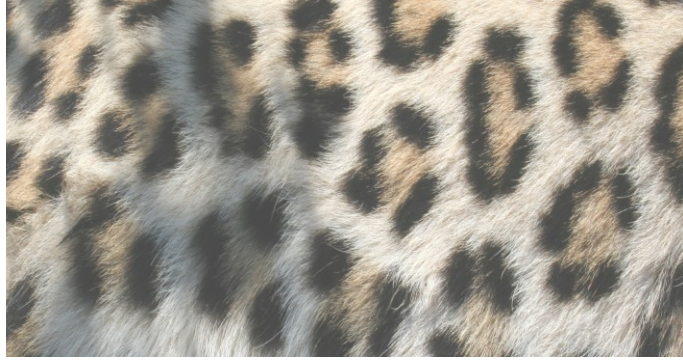
The most exciting events are always those, which cannot be planned, and wildlife research is no different. Collaring opportunities do not occur often, but a number of volunteers had the privilege of being party to the collaring of a male lion, and others a male leopard. On the more gory side, some were involved in operations to remove snares from young elephants and an African wild dog. Many have borne witness to the devastation of snares and have learned the frustration of trying to find a wounded animal in this vast landscape. There have also been a few elephant carcasses, which needed to be inspected and recorded by the researchers, with assistance from the volunteers. The program is not all work and no play however: There is occasionally time for less scientifically rigorous enjoyment of the wonders which surround us, and not always from the back of a game drive vehicle.

While out on research activities a few volunteers have had the privilege of seeing a female cheetah ambush, kill and eat an impala ewe, watch the African wild dogs on the hunt and at the den with their newly emerged pups, relax with spotted hyenas and their cubs near a den and see leopards mating in the Majale River. New arrivals are often so mesmerized by their first intimate encounters with the remarkably amiable Tuli elephant herds that they forget to record information. A regular drive to the western side of the reserve to record elephant and lion activity there coincides nicely with an opportunity to see the Mmamagwa archaeological sites, Solomon's Wall and





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the wonderful surroundings of this loop in the Motloutse River. Exquisite sunsets from Rhodes' baobab with a drink in hand are bound to remain in the minds of many volunteers for some time to come.

