

SAFARI PLAINS

A WARM WELCOME TO THE PLAINS OF AFRICA

GUIDES NEWSLETTER JUNE 2019

Written By Isaiah Banda



Congratulations to Elias Mangwane for being shortlisted for the Lilizela Awards 2019. These awards recognize and reward tourism players and businesses who work passionately and with pride to deliver a world class product and service and whose delivery grows South Africa's global destination competitiveness. Elias will be going for the provincial adjudication process on the 08th July 2019. Goodluck Elias and all the best.

Winter here at Safari Plains is in full swing and early morning safari drives are particularly chilly. These cold mornings are always exciting because many of the animals who usually retire to the shade once the day begins to heat up, can still be found wondering around in the broad daylight.

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The natural environment is deeply connected to the climatic conditions and it's no different here at Mabula. Being out and about for six to eight hours a day on safari, we are fully immersed in our surroundings and bear witness, firsthand, to the plants and animals reacting accordingly to the imminent roll over from rainy season to dry. For most, the time of plenty has come to an end and so measures need to be taken to prepare for the coldest and bleakest months. Several strategies are taken up, but none quite so fascinating than the migratory bird species.



The journeys that these birds undertake twice a year are often several thousand kilometers, with some species crossing three continents and an ocean to get to their destination. We as humans also make similar journeys but with the assured assistance of advanced technology and GPS systems that took us ages to develop and design; all the birds have is a fresh set of feathers and a complex combination of instinct and intuition as well as their incredible senses.

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Regardless of how the migratory birds find their way to and from southern Africa, some of them sure do brighten up the summers at Mabula with their vibrant colours. One of my favorite migratory species is the Woodland Kingfisher.



We know through observation that the migratory bird species do not always learn their migratory routes from their parent birds because, as is the case with the cuckoos for example, they can be raised by a non-migratory foster parent (this is another fascinating breeding strategy used by some birds known as brood parasitism; a topic for another day) yet still embark north on a migration at the end of the summer. But how do they know where to go without the guidance of a parent?



There are three main theories as to how the birds navigate their long-distance travels. The first of these suggests that the birds – many of which take to the skies under cover of night – rely on the stars to guide them on their journey. Majority of these birds' journeys are spent flying over the open ocean with little to no points of reference to allow them to maintain their sense of direction, yet still they find their way.

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The second theory, quite like the first, suggests that the birds rely on the sun as their compass. They orientate themselves using the position of the sun in the sky during the daylight hours. During cloudy days bird species can in fact see ultra-violet light (a form of light that the sun emits) which penetrates through cloud cover and allows the birds to still see the position of the sun on overcast days! The sun is one of the greatest constants. Along with providing us and the rest of the living world with energy for life, the sun rises, sets and follows a predictable path through the sky from east to west everyday making it a handy navigational tool for humans and birds alike.



The third theory, and possibly the most fascinating, birds can align themselves to the earth's magnetic field. The earth essentially acts as a large magnet with greater magnetic pull towards the poles and less at the equator. birds are known to have abnormally high levels of trace metal elements in the hippocampus region of their brains that allow them to tap into this magnetic field and get a greater sense of direction.

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As soon as one question is answered about bird migration, 10 more are posed. Will we ever know all the ins and outs of their fascinating journeys? Whether we will or won't, I still feel like the birds should be lauded for the phenomenal migrations they undertake. When the first Wahlberg's eagle rolls in towards the end of August, I may well give it a standing ovation. I doubt it'll take a bow, but at least the sentiment will make me feel like we're giving the bird it's due...

Pictures courtesy of Isaiah Banda, Marguerite Strydom, Liam Heighton, Riette Smit and Tiaan Muller

That is all for this month.
From Isaiah and Safari Plains family
Bushveld Greetings