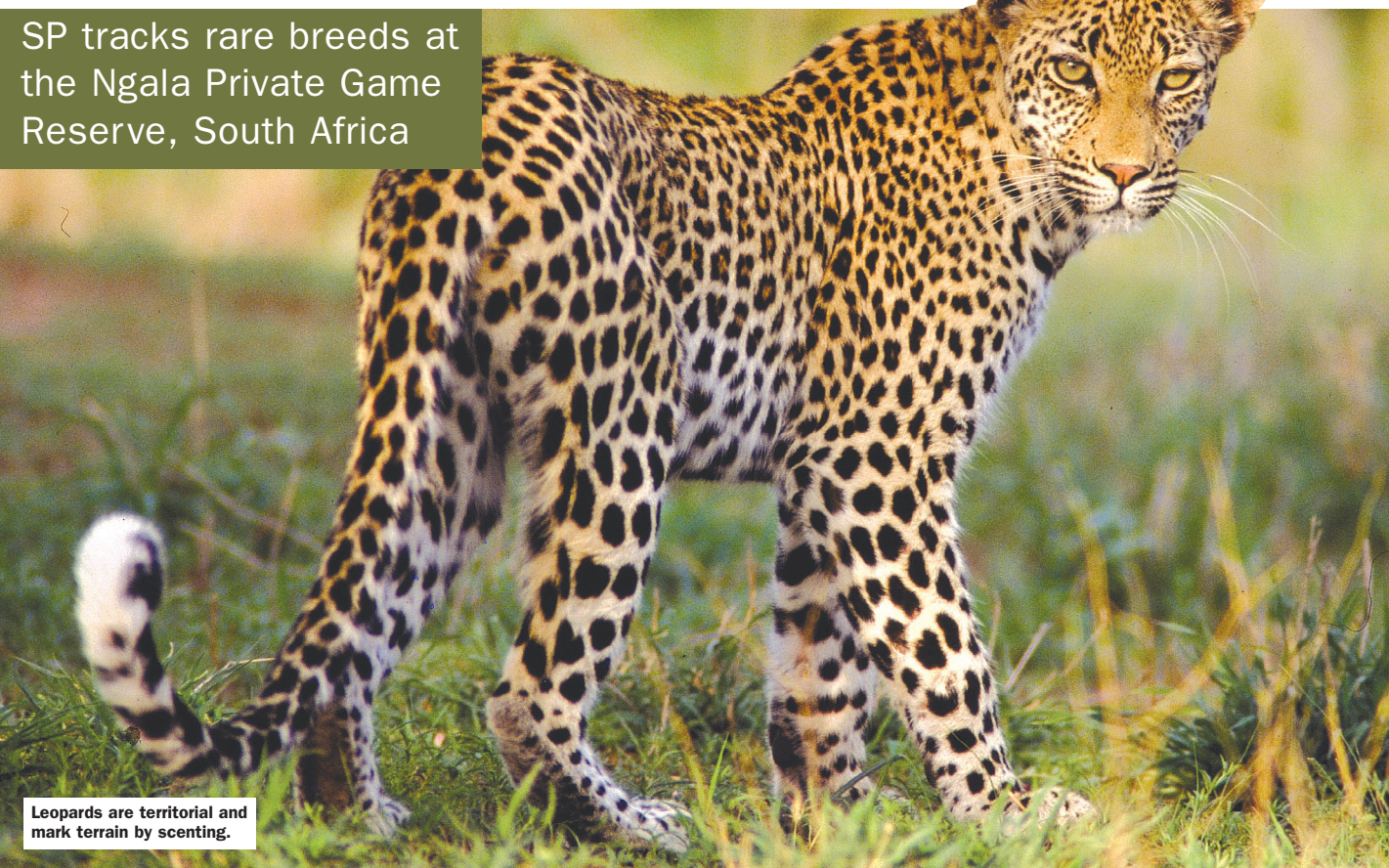


STALKING ADVENTURE

SP tracks rare breeds at the Ngala Private Game Reserve, South Africa



Leopards are territorial and mark terrain by scenting.

COURTESY OF SOUTH AFRICA TOURISM

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Leopard urine smells like popcorn. Or so field guide Mark Shaw insists. But I can't smell it. Maybe it's because my nose is overwhelmed by all the aromas of the South African bush or maybe it's because I don't really want to stick my nose into a shrub freshly marked by a territorial female leopard. "You can't smell that?" Shaw shrugs. "It's so strong. Like movie theater popcorn. I love it."

He shifts the open-air Land Rover into gear and continues trailing a few yards behind the animal known as Clara to the rangers at Ngala Private Game Reserve. Every few bushes, she stops sauntering and sprays again. As the sun dips below the horizon and dusk settles in, she slips into a thicket and eludes us. We drive in search of other wild animals, trailing their scents under what is now an ink-black sky.

It's my first game drive, and I've just seen one of the "big five"—leopards, lions, elephants, cape buffalo and rhinoceroses, the most difficult animals to hunt on foot. When we head out again the next morning, I anticipate catching a glimpse of a few more. But Shaw explains that animal-tracking is unpredictable. "The No. 1 question we get asked is, 'Where are all the animals?'" he says. "They

move around to feed themselves. They're not caged like in a zoo. There are no fences and they can cross boundaries that we can't. It takes time and a lot of hard work to find these animals."

Owned by Conservation Corporation Africa and operated in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund South Africa and South African National Parks, Ngala occupies 36,500 acres of the nearly 5 million acres that make up Kruger National Park. That's a lot of space for animals to hide in. Tracking them down is a team effort: Shaw drives while Sam Siltson perches in an elevated chair at the front of the vehicle. They follow scents, sounds and visual clues like broken branches and paw prints.

Sure, elephants are big and easily recognized, but finding one on this outing proves to be a challenge. We follow prints that weave back and forth across the dusty road that cuts through the long grasses. The road is littered with dung. To see if it's fresh, Shaw jumps out of the vehicle and plunges his hand into a pile, proclaiming, "It's warm. We're close." He grins and stands up, his outstretched hand holding a whole marula fruit plucked out of the pile. "Look at this," he says of the apricot-size greenish-yellow fruit.

Because elephants swallow marula whole and their digestion is poor, the fruit comes

out intact, which disproves the popular myth that elephants can get intoxicated by eating fruit that may have fermented on the ground. Elephants aren't the only ones attracted to the sweet fruit: Locals collect ripe marula to use as a base note for beer and also to make a wine that is distilled, aged in oak and blended with fresh cream for Amarula Cream Liqueur, which is the second-best-selling cream liqueur in the world and available in 150 countries. But because the marula tree grows only in subequatorial Africa, it's a noteworthy find.

The clues indicate that the elephants we've been trailing have wandered beyond Ngala's borders. So we turn in a different direction and spy a hippo relaxing in a pond, impala jumping over a fallen tree, some blue wildebeest jogging in the distance, three baby wart hogs trailing behind their mother, a kudu peeking at us from behind a bush and a magpie shrike swooping across the blue sky.

On a subsequent drive we detect the scent of Cape buffalo amid the licorice aromas of wild anise seed, tannic Mopane leaves and sweet wild basil. We follow the intensifying odor and come upon several animals that lead us to a huge herd.

Coming around a bend, we advance toward an elephant bull scooping marula off

A bedroom in one of the 20 air-conditioned cottages available at the lodge at Ngala Private Game Reserve in Kruger National Park.



COURTESY OF CC AFRICA

of the ground. An elephant consumes about 375 pounds of foliage and bark each day, Shaw says. Riding with him is like having an audio wildlife encyclopedia at the ready: "Elephants typically die of starvation," he says, "because their teeth wear out ... red-billed oxpeckers feed on the ticks they find on other animals ... male lions scratch a brand on the flank of their defeated opponents ... spotted eagle owls mate for life ..." He rattles off answers to questions that, before this trip, I never even knew I had.

Shaw's underlying message? An African safari is a "memorable adventure that helps make people aware of what's going on in the environment."

Indeed, it's a joyous, interactive experience—one I feel lucky to have had. **SP**

IF YOU GO

Getting there

Multiple carriers, including Delta, offer flights from Atlanta to Johannesburg. Fly from Johannesburg to Phalaborwa via South African Airways, www.flysaa.com.

Where to stay

To book a stay at Ngala Private Game Reserve or any of Conservation Corporation Africa's properties, visit www.ccafrica.com.

When to go

Marula fruit is harvested mid-January to mid-March, but going on safari is a year-round activity. Remember, Southern Hemisphere summers coincide with our winters.

For general information

Visit www.southafrica.net to learn more about South Africa and www.amarula.co.za/us to learn more about Amarula Cream Liqueur.