

A CRITICAL LOOK AT KRUGER NATIONAL PARK
THE SAND RIVERS

Does one of South Africa's - and indeed the world's -
most famous nature reserves live up to its glorious reputation?



Antonella scans the landscape looking for wildlife. Several scenic viewpoints in Kruger NP allow visitors to step outside their vehicle.

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

The endless expanse of the South African lowveldt



South Africa's legendary Kruger National Park was first gazetted in 1898 as the Sabie Game Reserve by the then president of the Transvaal Republic, Paul Kruger. He first proposed the need to protect the animals of the lowveldt in 1884, but his revolutionary vision took another twelve years to be realised when the area between the Sabie and Crocodile Rivers was set aside for restricted hunting. This enormous and magnificent protected area is one of the most popular public-entry National Parks in the world. Its density of permanent wildlife is almost unrivalled, with hundreds of different species; 507 birds, 336 trees, 147 mammals, 114 reptiles, 49 fish and 34 amphibians. This abundance of wildlife makes Kruger National Park - on paper, at least - one of the premier wildlife-watching destinations in the world. It is quite possible to see all the classical African big wild animals during a short stay here, including elephant, black

and white rhino, hippo, giraffe, zebra, buffalo, warthog and many antelope species. Large carnivores include lion, leopard, cheetah, wild dog and spotted hyena. There are also many smaller mammals species, too numerous to list here but of great scientific interest nonetheless, and reptiles include spectacular species such as Puff adders, Mozambique spitting cobra, Black mamba and Nile crocodile among others. The subtropical landscape is quite varied, with a prevalence of flat bushveldt mixed with gigantic rocky outcrops and wide, open-banked rivers. Huge stretches of tall-grass savannah are also common. Sighting and possibly photographing the so-called "Big Five" has become something of an obsession for many people when on safari, and the Kruger National Park has more than its fair share of these, with an estimated population of 1.500 lion, 12.000 elephant, 2.500 buffalo, 1.000

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■ *The spectacular panorama viewed from Olifants Camp, with the river of the same name seen here at very low water level in the dry season.*





Several bridges spanning Kruger's wide rivers offer excellent opportunities to observe and photograph wildlife from vantage viewpoints. This is a hippo *Hippopotamus amphibius*.

Rocky escarpments offer excellent opportunities to observe the minute but very elegant Klipspringer *Oreotragus oreotragus*, a small antelope which is highly adapted to steep, stony habitats.



leopards and 5.000 rhino (both black and white). Rhinos are being currently killed at the rate of one a day by poachers, however, and lion populations are crashing all over Africa, making this an endangered species. However, it should certainly not be a pre-requisite of a safari to see these (or even a priority), as there are plenty of other fascinating animals and birds in the African bush. Kruger boasts a list of over 500 bird species, some of which are not to be found elsewhere in South Africa. Hornbills, starlings, vultures, rollers, bee-eaters and shrikes

typify the ubiquitous avifauna and birdwatchers can look forward to the "Big Six" (Saddle-billed stork, Kori bustard, Martial eagle, Lappet-faced vulture, Pel's Fishing-owl and Ground hornbill). The far north of the Park (encompassing the Pafuri and Punda Maria regions) is regarded as one of the birding landmarks of the country - with many regional rarities to be found - yet birding throughout the entire Park is absolutely excellent. Eagles are common - Bateleur, Martial, Black-chested Snake, Brown Snake, African Hawk, African Fish and Tawny eagle

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A multitude of different habitats and biotopes

■ A close-up portrait of an iconic Kruger species - the very irritable and often dangerous African or Cape buffalo *Syncerus caffer*.



■ A large bull African elephant *Loxodonta africana* offers a dramatic background to a Fork-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis*. This species is often seen accompanying elephants, swooping down now and then to catch insects flushed from the tall grass by the giant's footsteps.





Stunning and yet common examples of the Kruger's avifauna. Left, the beautifully iridescent Cape Glossy Starling *Lamprotornis nitens*; top right, Little Bee-eater *Merops pusillus*; bottom right, Woodland Kingfisher *Halcyon senegalensis*.



are all regularly seen, and in summer Wahlberg's, Steppe and Lesser Spotted eagle can be added to the checklist. The Park's numerous water points (even those ugly concrete, man-made ones) make for excellent wildlife viewing, while the rest camps and picnic sites are exceptionally rewarding for birders. The far north of the Park is the wildest and most difficult area to access: however, with greater ecological co-operation across African borders, several countries bordering South Africa have agreed to take down some fences, and those between Kruger and Mozambique's Limpopo National Park and Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou have been demolished to create the Greater

Limpopo Transfrontier Park. This has resulted in a colossal and rather unique wilderness area, again at least on paper (poaching is sadly still rampant in Mozambique, and landmines left from the civil war are still inflict grieving damage to humans and wildlife alike). No self-respecting wildlife enthusiast and photographer should leave South Africa without having visited the Kruger National Park or one of the private reserves along its borders - the list of accomodations inside or bordering the Park is quite extensive and it offers a multitude of options to all, from low budget and self-catering campsites to luxury game lodges. However, as we shall see, there are a few problems.

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*A paradise for birdwatchers
and raptors lovers*



A beautiful Tawny Eagle Aquila rapax, a fairly common resident of the Kruger's wooded areas. This is a highly variable species.



From the left: male Waterbuck *Kobus ellipsiprymnus*, Giraffe *Giraffa camelopardalis*, Plains Zebra *Equus quagga* (formerly classified as *burchelli*, a species whose range is now restricted to Central and East Africa).

■ A big bull African elephant *Loxodonta africana* shows its displeasure with us. Kruger elephants are noted for their short tempers and must be approached with a measure of caution.





Left, African or White-backed Vulture *Gyps africanus*; top right, the truly dazzling Burchell's Glossy Starling *Lamprotornis australis*; bottom right, Carmine Bee-eater *Merops nubicoides*, a common resident and visitor during the austral summer.



BEAUTIFUL, YES – BUT IS IT WORTH IT?

Now, all this sounds quite wonderful – but is the Kruger a truly exceptional destination for wildlife photographers, as the promotional brochures of tour operators worldwide say? Well, yes and no. We have been there twice, in two different seasons (winter and summer), and we have once spent a full month exploring it – covering more than 4,000 kms on tarred and dust roads in the process. We might have been unlucky, but the results in both occasions have been rather mixed - as you can see from the photos which accompany this text, we succeeded in documenting a lot of species, but the truly great shot eluded us. Make no mistake, others have been much more successful than

we, and in much shorter stays! But again, it's a matter of luck - and in the Kruger luck apparently counts more than it does in most other places, which is not necessarily good news for a wildlife photographer.

To understand our ambivalent attitude towards the Kruger, one has first to fully understand its general layout and its visitors rules. The Kruger National Park itself covers an enormous area (19,485 square kilometres /7,523 sq miles) and is crisscrossed by a network of very well-managed tarred and dust roads. Visitors with their own vehicle can stay in several affordable, rather basic government-run camps and lodges (both full-board or self-catering) well sited within the Park in strategic locations, but if they desire to use their own car they can only travel around in

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Lead by the ■ dominant male, a troop of Savanna Baboons *Papio cynocephalus ursinus* crosses the Letaba river.



This Leopard Panthera pardus portrait was taken while staying at King's Camp in Timbavati, as the feline's intense gaze was fixed on a herd of impalas a few yards away. The following attack was unsuccessful.

Left, Leopard
Panthera pardus
at Timbavati, summer;
right, Blue Wildebeest
or Common Gnu
Connochaetes taurinus
at Balule, winter.
Notice difference
in vegetation.

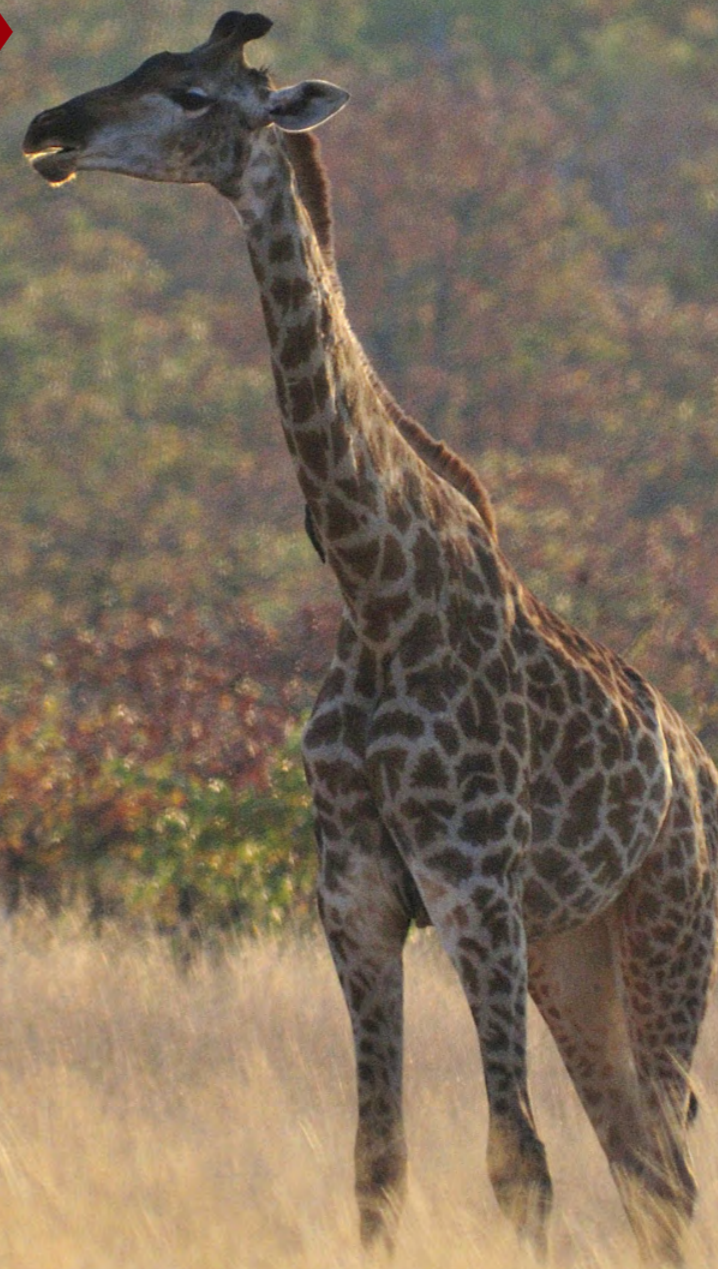


a closed (not open-topped) vehicle and must stick to the roads, with no exception - transgressors will be heavily fined, which is only good given the great numbers of people visiting the Park on their own. Given the nature of the environment (mostly lowveldt bush, ie a sparsely wooded grassy plain, intersped with small trees and thorny bushes), this can however often prove extremely frustrating for viewing and photographing wildlife, as subjects can be tantalizingly close and yet half-hidden by branches and foliage. Well-

camouflaged and cryptic species (such as lions in tall dry grass, for example) might even go unnoticed at all, as the only wildlife which can clearly be viewed at all times is that which is actually crossing the road or staying in close proximity to it. Most casual visitors are perfectly satisfied to click a snapshot of a lion lying on the tarmac, but we are not! Large animals - such as elephants and giraffe - are always guaranteed, but even buffalo or rhino can disappear with disconcerting ease and speed in such a habitat, so the best

spots for open, unimpeded sightings are those by the wide, sandy river banks or from a few well-sited permanent hides. We certainly do not condone "bundu bashing" (offroad driving in the bush, usually without caring too much about bushes and the like), but being forced to miss a good shot because there's no way to get a bit closer to the subject or to view it from another angle can be very unpleasant. For those unwilling to use their own car, the government lodges offer group game drives in large, open truck-like

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■ A Giraffe *Giraffa camelopardalis* bathed in the golden hues of the drying lowveldt at the start of winter.



■ *Left, stiff, unmistakably long eyelashes protect the eyes of the endangered Southern Ground Hornbill *Bucorvus leadbeateri* as it forages among thorny bushes and sharp grasses; right, the striped liveries of Zebra *Equus quagga* prove irresistible to photographers.*



■ A bull African elephant *Loxodonta africana* ambles among the scorched remains of a bush fire. Large expanses of the Kruger lowveldt are destroyed yearly by naturally-occurring fires.





The beautiful Bateleur Eagle *Terathopius ecaudatus* is a very distinctive and common sight in Kruger. Its common name derives from the habit of rocking wings during gliding or soaring as if balancing on a rope.



vehicles - rather expensive and not ideal for the serious wildlife photographer. Game viewing is generally good, granted - but the fact that one is forced to stick to the tarred road and to stay inside a closed vehicle gives to the whole experience a rather unpleasant, artificial aftertaste, compounded by the crowds of noisy and rather disinterested-looking visitors which rapidly converge on the site of a sighting. Kruger National Park itself is relatively affordable, easily reached and even more easily driven around, but in our experience it seems to be lacking that extra touch in atmosphere or wildlife encounters that other, less well-promoted destinations offer today.

THE GREATER KRUGER: A REALISTIC OPTION?

The so-called Greater Kruger area is today part and parcel of the actual Park, comprising a large number of private Game and Nature Reserves which border it - most of the wildlife-proof fences which separated these enormous properties from the Park true in the past have been now taken down, allowing wildlife to roam freely. Here the situation is completely different - a large number of well-run private properties, bush camps and lodges compete fiercely for an international and affluent clientele, generally providing high quality services, often

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A rare sight as a juvenile but nevertheless enormous Martial Eagle *Polemaetus bellicosus* swoops down from its perch.



Top left, a pair of African Hoopoe *Upupa africana*; bottom left, Egyptian Goose *Alopochen aegyptiacus*; left, Grey Lourie *Corythaixoides concolor*. All three species are quite commonly observed in the Kruger NP.



*Death comes from above
when the Martial Eagle strikes*

Another unusual ■
sighting as an adult
Martial Eagle
Polemaetus bellicosus
feeds on a
mongoose it has
just killed. This huge
raptor will actually
catch and kill even
small antelopes.



■ Left, a truly beautiful adult male Greater Kudu *Tragelaphus strepsiceros*, one of Africa's largest and most stately antelopes; right, Lilac-breasted Roller *Coracias caudata*, a colorful and common resident.



A true icon
of the bush -
the African elephant
Loxodonta africana.
Sadly, the healthy
local populations are
now being targeted
anew by poachers
for the illegal ivory
trade.





Top, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill *Tockus leucomelas*; right, Red-billed Hornbill *Tockus erythrorhynchus*; bottom, Long-tailed or Magpie Shrike *Corvinella melanoleuca*.

extremely luxurious accomodation and a greater flexibility. The names of Londolozi, Timbavati or Sabi Sands are truly legendary among wildlife photographers and nature lovers from all over the world, and wildlife and habitat conservation are taken very seriously indeed here. Private reserves and lodges offer two-hour long, well-guided game drives in open-topped 4-wheel drive vehicles and even bush walks with armed wardens, offering

truly unique opportunities to the demanding wildlife photographer. There are no proper tarmac roads inside the private reserves, and most game drives take place along white roads or even - occasionally, and only if the situation warrants it - off road, so spectacular close-up portraits of lions, leopards and rhinos are virtually guaranteed, with great chances of viewing and photographing less common but equally interesting species

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■ A lovely portrait of a female African elephant *Loxodonta africana* and her newborn calf by the Letaba river.

such as hunting dogs, hyena and even cheetas, not to mention scores of herbivores and birds. But alas, there is a caveat - with so many lodges competing among themselves in a very lucrative business, often charging exceptionally high prices and usually guaranteeing sightings of the Big Five to casual visitors (who - most of the times - will stay there for one or two nights only), one cannot wonder if there isn't a

grain of truth in the rumors of human-habituated animals, "kills" set-up for the benefit of the client and faked "lucky" encounters with feeding lions and leopards. We have absolutely no direct proof of this, and we certainly do not believe all private lodges do this, but rumors abound. It certainly is a shame hearing such stories, because there are a lot of very hard-working professionals operating in the Greater Kruger area

and several very respectable operations which have built spotless reputations in the years past - after all, even if several private reserves cover truly enormous areas, a certain behind-the-scenes familiarity with some of their resident and most confident wildlife is to be expected, and field researchers are usually fully aware of this. Wild animals - or at least some of them - get used to jeeps and humans more easily than people think. We are mentioning this

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Plains Zebra *Equus quagga*
grazing at sunset with Blue
Wildebeest *Connochaetes*
taurinus in the background -
an idyllic scene by Satara camp.

A large White or Square-lipped Rhinoceros Ceratotherium simum emerges from the thorny, stunted vegetation of the lowveldt. Rhinos in the Kruger are being relentlessly targeted by poachers peddling their horns to the Asian market, with an average of a rhino being slaughtered every day.



being fully aware that for most tourists and wildlife photographers this is not a problem at all - indeed, it might even be considered a plus by the casual visitor. For us, however, the idea of photographing a human-habituated animal from the safety of a car is a bit of a cheat (there's a fine and occasionally blurred line separating a nature reserve proper from a zoo), so we suggest choosing your lodge very carefully, trying to read between the lines and

seeing if it truly suits your needs - there are plenty of lodges and camps in the Greater Kruger where animals are really wild, difficult to spot and often dangerous. Habituated animals or not, visiting one of the many private reserves of the Greater Kruger is the only sensible choice for a seriously motivated wildlife photographer - if one can afford the cost, which will often be astronomical for a safari lasting more than a couple of days. In conclusion, two options are

possible: visit the Kruger itself on your own, keeping costs down and being prepared for long drives and possible disappointment, or visit a private reserve in the Greater Kruger, plan a much shorter visit and be prepared to spend a fortune for great sightings of the Big Five and spectacular photo opportunities. If that sounds like a tough deal, just remember most other National Parks in Africa do not even offer you the luxury of choosing between the two options. ●



A sleek female ■
Leopard *Panthera pardus* fleetingly
crosses a Park road
at dawn - a typical
Kruger sighting .



■ Top left, Black-backed Jackal *Canis mesomelas* at Balule; top right, bull African buffalo *Syncerus caffer* by the Olifants river; bottom left, Hadeda Ibis *Bostrychia hagedash* at Letaba camp; bottom right, lionesses *Panthera leo* at Timbavati. Once common everywhere, lions are fast becoming a severely endangered species throughout Africa.



White or Square-lipped ■
Rhinoceros *Ceratotherium*
simum at a watering hole
in Manyeleti, photographed
while staying at Pungwe.



Left, a baby Savanna Baboon *Papio cynocephalus ursinus* saddles its mother's back in typical jockey fashion. Right, a large male of the same species feeding. Bottom left, the very large Kori Bustard *Ardeotis kori*, an impressive resident of open woodland and dry grasslands.





Left, a male Impala *Aepyceros melampus* - a common and extraordinarily elegant species which is sadly ignored by most visitors. Right, a portrait of the stately Waterbuck *Kobus ellipsiprymnus*, another most impressive antelope species which is also often underestimated by tourists.

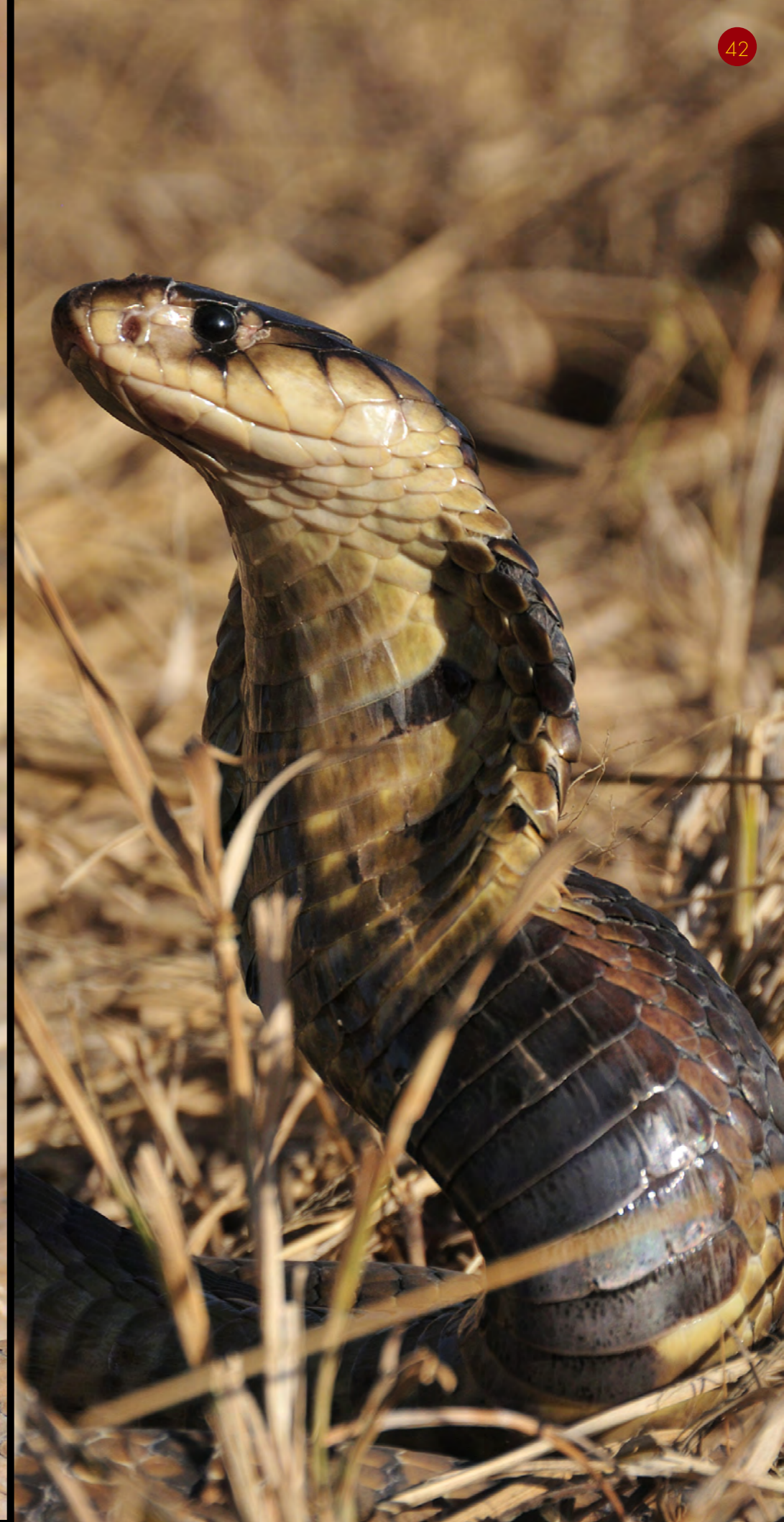


Several wide bridges spanning some of the Kruger's main rivers allow visitors to step off their vehicles, regaling photographers with excellent opportunities. This is a Nile crocodile *Crocodylus niloticus* basking on the Olifants riverbed.





■ Kruger and its surroundings offer wonderful reptile sightings: left, Rinkhals Hemachatus haemachatus; center, Mozambique Spitting cobra Naja mossambica; right, Snouted or Egyptian cobra Naja annulifera. All three species are highly venomous and can prove extremely dangerous to man and beast alike.





Two stunning examples of cryptic coloration and pattern: left, Southern African Rock Python *Python natalensis*, a powerful and aggressive constrictor; right, Puff adder *Bitis arietans*, one of Africa's most dangerous venomous snakes.





Left, African Grey Hornbill *Tockus nasutus*, often sighted in small groups; top right, Brown-hooded Kingfisher *Halcyon albiventris*; bottom right, two female Ostrich *Struthio camelus*, a truly enormous and flightless bird 2 meters tall.





Left, Tawny Eagle *Aquila rapax* in its dark brown color morph; top right, Red-crested Korhaan *Eupodotis ruficrista*; bottom right, Three-banded Plover *Charadrius tricollaris*. Kruger can be a veritable birdwatching paradise, especially during the wet summer.





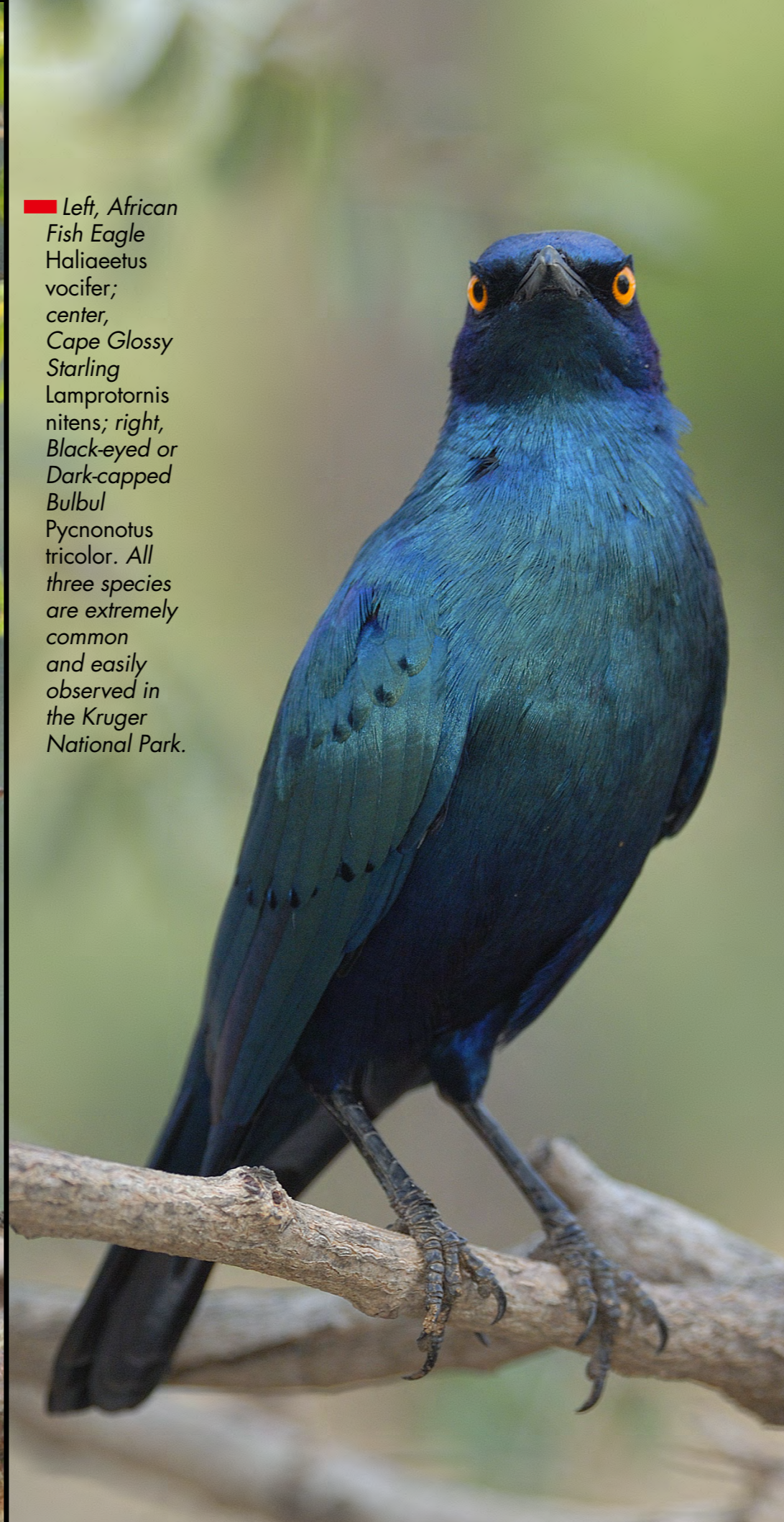
■ Left, Crested Barbet
Trachyphonus vaillantii;
center, Fork-tailed Drongo
Dicrurus adsimilis;
right, Lilac-breasted Roller
Coracias caudatus.





■ Left, a summer visitor, the European Roller *Coracias garrulus*; right, a dazzlingly iridescent resident, the White-bellied Sunbird *Cinnyris talatala*. Sunbirds can be best and safely observed in most of Kruger camps' flower beds and gardens.





■ *Left, African Fish Eagle
Haliaeetus vocifer;
center, Cape Glossy Starling
Lamprotornis nitens; right,
Black-eyed or Dark-capped Bulbul
Pycnonotus tricolor. All three species are extremely common and easily observed in the Kruger National Park.*



The Snouted or Egyptian cobra *Naja annulifera* is a large and very active elapid, quick to spread a hood and bite aggressively in reaction to disturbance.



■ Top left, a massive bull African buffalo *Syncerus caffer*; top right, Goliath heron *Ardea goliath*; bottom right, the dazzling blue and turquoise flash of a Lilac-breasted Roller *Coracias caudata* caught in mid-flight; bottom left, a large Nile crocodile *Crocodylus niloticus* basking on the Letaba river banks.





■ The tree-dwelling Boomslang *Dispholidus typus* is a rather common, extremely beautiful and exceedingly dangerous rear-fanged snake, whose bite often causes death by internal bleeding. This is a male, easily identified by its bright green color.



■ Top left, a Nile crocodile *Crocodylus niloticus* in shallow water in the Letaba river; top right, the fearsome tusks of a yawning hippopotamus *Hippopotamus amphibius*; bottom right, a huge herd of African buffalo *Syncerus caffer*; bottom left, a rare nighttime sighting of a Cape Porcupine *Hystrix africaeaustralis* at Baluleni.





■ The huge and seriously impressive Golden Brown Baboon Spider *Augacephalus* sp. is a rare and endangered species which is very seldom seen by tourists.



■ Left, Steenbok *Raphicerus campestris*; center, the striking flowers of the Impala Lily *Adenium multiflorum*; right, Flap-neck Chameleon *Chamaeleo dilepis*.





■ The art of blending and even disappearing in the surroundings is not exclusive of small-sized species: left, African elephant *Loxodonta africana*; right, a pair of Klipspringer *Oreotragus oreotragus*. Most lowveldt species in fact display a cryptic coloration.





■ An image which proves beyond doubt the danger posed to hikers by the Puff adder *Bitis arietans*, a large, sluggish and heavy-bodied viperid much feared for its cryptic livery and lightning-fast bite. This very common and prolific species is widely distributed in most of Africa.

Two African vultures *Gyps africanus* silhouetted against the sunset sky at Manyaleti - an image somewhat symbolic of the demise of most of Africa's once abundant wildlife.

