



# IN CONVERSATION WITH...

FRANSJE VAN RIEL



GRAHAM COOKE (2)

Graham Cooke has been a game ranger since 1989 and has worked as a professional guide in South Africa, Zambia, Botswana and Swaziland. Fransje van Riel caught up with him at Djuma Game Reserve and asked him about his life, his loves and his pet peeves.



## WHAT CHARACTER TRAITS ARE REQUIRED TO BECOME A GOOD GAME RANGER?

You need a genuine, deep-seated passion for the wild, coupled with a broad knowledge about the bush. Throw in a lot of patience, understanding, sensitivity and a big helping of respect and that about sums it up.

## IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A TYPICAL DAY IN THE BUSH?

For me, an average day means getting up at dawn, making a cup of coffee, then greeting the guests. We spend the morning driving to look for the animals that reveal themselves. After that I spend a few hours responding to e-mails and blogging about Djuma's wild dogs and other wildlife before another drive in the bush.

At the moment I have several projects on the go simultaneously. I am collaborating on a book about my experiences of hand-raising and releasing two leopard cubs back into the wild. I am also studying and filming the antics of a troop of baboons and do a bit of drawing and a whole lot of wildlife photography. I am in the process of going into business producing replicas of the animal skulls I've been collecting for 15 years. They are fascinating objects. Guests have often shown an interest in the bones and this led to the idea of reproducing them for sale. My day ends after dinner with my guests at the camp.

## WHAT MAKES LIVING AND WORKING IN THE BUSH SO SPECIAL FOR YOU?

There is no single thing. Every moment in the bush is special.

## HAVE YOU EVER WANTED TO INTERFERE IN A NATURAL EVENT?

Yes, but I have also been in situations where it was proven that it is best to not delve into realms we cannot understand. On one occasion we came across a lioness with three cubs – two males and a female. We had seen the group before, but this time we noticed that one of the male cub's back legs appeared paralysed. We couldn't detect any obvious physical injury, so I thought it may have been caused by rickets. A month later there was no visible change for the better, so we took pity on the cub and held a meeting to discuss putting him to sleep or leaving him to suffer what would in all likelihood be a protracted and miserable death, or being ripped apart by a hyaena.

The decision was made to not interfere and to leave him to his fate. For a while no-one had any sightings of the family. Then one day we came upon it and saw that the crippled youngster had made a full recovery. We had come close to wasting the life of a young lion. Since then, I have become cautious about projecting our limited human senses onto these magnificent animals.

## HAVE YOU EVER HAD A LIFE-THREATENING ENCOUNTER WITH A WILD ANIMAL?

On many occasions! One that stands out was when an elephant cow charged and rammed my vehicle. I thought, 'This is the day I'm out of here!'

## HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT GUIDES PULLING OUT ALL THE STOPS TO PLEASE THEIR GUESTS?

Unfortunately, many guides today intrude into the animals' lives. They are not interested in learning to read an animal's natural behaviour, for example watching a lion closely so that the safari vehicle can be positioned to allow the creature to approach on its own terms. I get angry if I see guides causing an animal to change the route it was following because of an image that they or a guest are after. I always tell guests that it's much better to observe an animal by allowing it to move freely – it enables them to watch it for a lot longer and under better circumstances.

## YOU ALSO OFFER PRIVATE GUIDING. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Many of my guests are repeat clients who enjoy having me as a private guide because I tailor-make their bush experience. [Private guiding] allows me to fine-tune drives to suit individual interests and preferences.





**DO TOURISTS ASK SILLY QUESTIONS?**

Depends on whether you think asking if a fish-eagle eats fish is silly!

**ARE YOU PARTIAL TO ANY SPECIFIC WILD ANIMAL?**

That's a tough question as I appreciate the beauty and inherent value of any living creature. Having said that, I do have a special place in my heart for young elephants.

**YOU HAVE RECENTLY RELOCATED TO JOHANNESBURG. DO YOU FIND CITY LIFE DIFFICULT?**

I've always felt a strong connection with animals, more so than with people in fact, and I've known since I was three that I would work in the bush. When I could do so, I abandoned Johannesburg to spend all my time with wildlife. It was quite difficult to return to the city, but I am lucky to be able to spend a lot of time in the bush.

**WHAT'S THE BIGGEST COMPLIMENT A GUEST COULD GIVE YOU?**

Leaving the bush with tears in their eyes. That's when I know that they've really been touched on a deep level and that they will become another ambassador for the wild in general. Having said that, a good tip never hurts either. The worst guest is one who judges the bush and the wild animals as a personal possession. I

find it difficult to be with people who feel a sense of entitlement to both. **AG**

*For more information about Graham Cooke's private guiding or skull replicas please contact him at +27 (0)83 326 7667 or go to [www.sentinelsafaris.com](http://www.sentinelsafaris.com). Follow his bush experiences at [www.djuma.com/blog](http://www.djuma.com/blog)*

*Fransje van Riel's latest book, To Live with Leopards, is a warm and personal account of Cooke's experiences while raising two leopard cubs in the wild. The book is due for release next year.*

Some of Graham Cooke's favourite wildlife moments: ABOVE An African buffalo stamps in the dust in preparation for battle with a fellow member of his group; BELOW A zebra duo; OPPOSITE Leopard brothers Luangwa and Kafue tussle in play at Djuma Game Reserve.

PAGE 28, ABOVE Graham Cooke in his environment of choice. BELOW An impala bounds across the grassland, attended by a trio of attentive red-billed oxpeckers.

PAGE 29 A chameleon.



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