

wild at heart

Three generations of Wolhuter men have dedicated their lives and work to the conservation of Africa's wild places and animals. Grandfather Harry was the Kruger National Park's first game ranger, and his son, Henry, followed in his footsteps. Third in line is Kim, who continues the family tradition further north, in turbulent Zimbabwe. **Fransje van Riel** went to visit him.

TEXT BY FRANSJE VAN RIEL

a bone-chilling scream, followed by a series of high-pitched shrieks and low-throated barks, pierces the silence of Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve's pre-dawn morning. I awake with a jolt and, in the darkness, clumsily reach for a box of matches to light a candle and check the time. It's just before 05h00. Wondering what caused the commotion, I swing my legs over the side of the bed and shuffle towards the door to peer into the dying night.

The granite sky is awash with a fine dusting of stars and, with only a sliver of silver moon to guide me, I take a few tentative steps into the garden. There I find a troop of raucous baboons in the camp's *Acacia robusta* trees.

After a few final disciplinary grunts and shrill screams, the baboons fall silent and, suppressing a yawn, I return to my room to get dressed. The sluggish swirl of the ceiling fan tells me that the generator has just come on and, switching on a bedside light, I slip into shorts and a T-shirt.

Dassies dash across the driveway as I make my way to Kwali Camp's communal area for a quick cup of coffee. Visiting the ladies' room for what will surely be the last time in many hours is also a prerequisite and, emerging from the mosquito-riddled cubicle, I hear the rumble of an approaching vehicle.

A battered, olive-green 4x4 pulls into camp. At the wheel is Kim Wolhuter. Dark-haired, khaki-clad and barefoot, the award-winning wildlife photographer and film-maker comes to a rolling stop outside my rondavel. We exchange good mornings and I clamber over the permanently locked passenger door into the vehicle and onto a narrow, leather mattress that covers a large silver case containing camera equipment. For the next few days, this makeshift seat will provide me with the opportunity to watch Kim in action.

We spill out of the camp and purr along the dirt road just as the sun begins to rise above the Zimbabwean horizon. It is early February, and the rains have ushered in a time of abundance. ►

COURTESY KIM WOLHUTER



ABOVE Harry Wolhuter poses beside the skin of the lion that attacked him in 1903. The skin can still be seen at Skukuza Camp.

BELOW Young lions play on Malilangwe's grassy plains.

OPPOSITE Following the lead of an adult, three baby elephants quench their thirst at a waterhole.

PREVIOUS SPREAD Kim Wolhuter surveys the lush Malilangwe savanna. 'I love the beauty of the area as much as its diversity,' he says.

With thick, 2.5-metre-high grass carpeting Malilangwe's plains, areas like the lush Banyini Pan, have become treacherous terrain, concealing low-lying predators like stalkers skulking in a grimy part of town.

'I'm currently working on four productions here at Malilangwe,' says Kim, as he skilfully negotiates a corner. 'They're about African wild dogs, lions, elephants and southern ground-hornbills. The wild dog film will be finished in early 2009; the others later in the year.'

He has just completed filming a six-part series for *Animal Planet*, which is due for broadcast towards the end of 2008. 'It's about my two daughters and me working in the bush, and it delves into the history of my family and our involvement in conservation.'

At the private airstrip, we find a family of five resting jackals, their black backs turned to a group of impalas that, with sprightly tails flicking, are grazing peacefully in the coppery light. Nearby, a line of wildebeest marches westwards,

overtaking a small group of zebras with young foals that look just like rocking horses.

Kim's work dictates that he spends long periods of time in the bush alone, a state he professes to enjoy, and, consequently, he's a man of few words. After all, the ways of the wild have coursed through three generations of Wolhuter veins, beginning with Kim's grandfather, Harry Wolhuter, who became the first game ranger of the Kruger National Park in 1902. Harry's decision to accept the post from Colonel Stevenson-Hamilton, the park's first warden, led to a near-fatal incident that has become one of the best-loved anecdotes of the South African bushveld.

On his return from a patrol to the Olifants River in August 1903, Harry and his horse were surprised by two lions prowling in the tall grass. Before Harry could spur on his horse, one of the lions jumped on to its flanks, causing him to be thrown from the saddle and

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KIM WOLHUTER (2)



onto the ground in front of the second lion. As his horse bucked violently and ran into the darkness with one lion in pursuit, the other cat sank its teeth into Harry's shoulder and began dragging him towards the creek. He managed to unsheath his knife and plunge it into the lion's flesh, killing it. To this day, the knife and lion skin are on display in the Stevenson-Hamilton museum at Skukuza Camp.

Harry saw 44 years of service and, on his retirement, his position as head ranger was filled by his son, Henry. For his grandson, Kim, who grew up in the Kruger Park, it seemed only natural to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather.

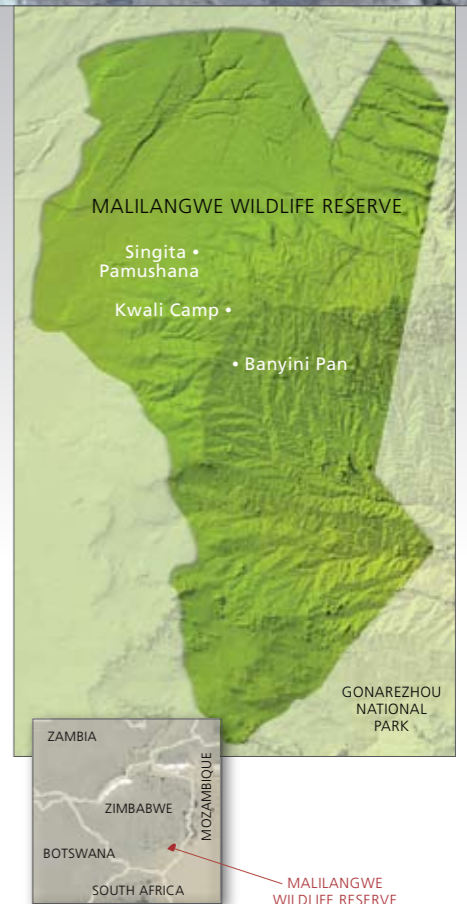
Having obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture at Natal University in KwaZulu-Natal in 1982, Kim moved to Botswana, where he worked as a wildlife manager before accepting the position of senior warden at Mlawula Nature Reserve in Swaziland.

Then, some six years later, an old school acquaintance and veteran wildlife film-maker, Richard Goss, suggested that they should work together, and Kim discovered a passion for cinematography.

After working alongside Goss for six years, Kim established his own independent production company, Mavela Media, based at Mala Mala Game Reserve abutting the Kruger Park, where he filmed several high-profile documentaries, such as *Stalking Leopards*, *Predators at War* and *Hyaena Queen*.

In July 2006, after a decade of filming in the lowveld, Kim relocated to Malilangwe, which means 'call of the leopard' in the Shangaan language. And it's easy to see why. Few places are as soul-stirring as this magical corner of south-eastern Zimbabwe, which spans 40 470 hectares adjoining Mozambique's Gonarezhou National Park.

For 50 years, the Malilangwe Estate, formerly known as Lone Star Ranch, farmed cattle and cotton. In 1994, the property was transformed into a wildlife reserve. The area is distinguished by spectacular sandstone rocks that rise above undulating savanna plains speckled with flat-topped *Acacia tortilis*. Burly baobabs dominate the mopane, riverine and mixed woodland and shield the treasures of some 100 San rock-art sites. Tucked against a rocky outcrop in the heart of this paradise is Singita Pamushana, one of Zimbabwe's ►





KIM WOLHUTER (2)

I followed and filmed a pack of 21 dogs for an entire year, and watched the newborn pups grow up

premier safari lodges. The reserve is funded and controlled by the Malilangwe Trust, and is a global model for harmonising conservation initiatives with community development. The trust aims to restore the area's biodiversity and promote sustainable development within communal areas – a heart-warming vision when viewed against the political ravages of modern Zimbabwe.

'I love the beauty of the area as much as its diversity,' says Kim as we head east. 'I miss it even when I'm away for a few days.'

We are looking for elephants. After several kilometres on a narrow road sandwiched between mopane trees, Kim points to a fresh pile of dung, covered by a shock of delicate white-winged butterflies flapping their wings like a flurry of flustered ladies.

Eventually, we reach a spectacular koppie called Lesililije, where we clamber from the vehicle to stretch our legs. Following Kim, we climb up the slope to look out over the veld. But the

dry stubble beneath us reveals no movement other than a yellow-billed hornbill paragliding into the trees.

It is hot. The sun beats down mercilessly as we scramble back to the vehicle. My arms and thighs are a mosaic of fiery red sunburn and white sunblock cream, and are splattered with grass seeds and squashed insects. I'm no longer worrying about the armies of small spiders running on the car's footwell, and have even started to enjoy the sight of a round-bellied spider balancing itself like a trapeze artist across a silvery thread spun between the gear stick and Kim's fixed tripod.

My reverie is interrupted by a short trumpeting from a north-westerly direction, followed by a crash of breaking branches. Elephants! Kim plunges into the bush and there, at last, we find the herd, huddled together in the shade of a dense cluster of mopane trees.

As we nudge closer, Kim's excitement is tangible. He grabs his camera and starts snapping away. One of the smaller calves, partially hidden behind its mother's hefty forelegs, emerges and lifts its wobbly trunk to smell the air.

Kim's shutter clicks in rapid fire as he captures the scene.

When the herd settles down to rest, Kim finds a comfy spot in the back of the vehicle for a nap. Placing my faith in the trust he shares with the elephants, I also drift off, accompanied by the soothing sounds of swishing tails and elephant snuffles.

Two hours later, we are woken by the herd starting to move. Kim jumps back into his seat and starts the ignition.

Much as Kim loves his elephants, he has a special place in his heart for Malilangwe's African wild dogs. 'I followed and filmed a pack of 21 dogs for an entire year, and watched the newborn pups grow up, so I knew them intimately,' he says. Then disaster hit in the form of an outbreak of rabies, which decimated the pack. 'It was absolutely heartbreaking,' he says.

Kim became aware of the situation when he found the dead body of Toffee, one of the younger females and, following up on the rest of the pack, he discovered that three other dogs had also died. 'We had to put down those dogs that showed signs of rabies. As it turned out, the entire pack, except for the alpha male known as Whisky, contracted the virus. One by one, the dogs had to be euthanased.'

With the rest of the pack gone, Whisky disappeared. 'I went out looking for him every day, hoping to pick up the signal from his radio collar,' Kim says. 'But eventually I had to give up. I haven't seen him for a year now and can only hope that he has ventured off the property and therefore out of range.'

We head off to Banyini Pan, through an area of undulating green savanna grassland strewn with thorny shrubs and flowering acacias. En route, Kim takes me to see some ancient San Bushman paintings depicting hunters with antelopes, giraffes and elephants. At the pan, two impala rams move through an ocean of tall, waving grass. With only their horns visible, they are perfectly concealed from four young lions, their bellies covered with mud, lying next to a shallow pan nearby.

As sunset tints the sky with crimson, we drive to the reserve's airstrip, where Kim drops to the ground to film three giraffes and a small group of wildebeest against the spectacular backdrop. I'm struck once more by his passion for his work. It leaves no doubt in my mind that this third-generation wildlife en-

thusiast is exactly where he needs to be.

It's close to nightfall when we swerve into Kwali camp, where a candlelit table has been set for dinner. From beneath the trees, baboons watch us driving past with nonchalant arrogance. Over our meal, we discuss the day. 'I hope that, through my films and photographs, I can instil the same kind of excitement that I get from living my dream every day,' Kim tells me. 'And, perhaps more importantly, that they will inspire people to respect and protect this fast-fading wilderness. That would be the biggest achievement of all.'

To find out more about Kim Wolhuter's work at Malilangwe, go to www.wildcast.com. For further information about accommodation in the reserve, e-mail reservations@singita.com or go to www.singita.com

BELOW and BOTTOM Giraffes in the flesh and captured on stone. Numerous San rock paintings of hunters and animals are found at Malilangwe, indicating the area's rich wildlife heritage.

OPPOSITE African wild dog pups tussle and tug at each other in play. Kim Wolhuter regularly films the antics of the park's canine population.



FRANSJE VAN RIEL

