

# Africa's walking encyclopedia

David Bristow is an author, editor, conservationist and traveller. Scott Ramsay spoke to him about his life and adventures



**My first boss** in the photo-journalism industry was David Bristow, one-time editor of *Getaway* magazine. We called him the "Walking Encyclopaedia of Africa", and he was a mentor like no other. There was little that he didn't know about the continent's wild places, and very few that he had not visited himself.

David is a widely published authority on nature travel and history, and his *Best Walks of the Drakensberg* is by far the best book for any hiker – both experienced and novice – planning to explore SA's biggest mountain range. His recent book, *African Icons*, co-published with Roger and Pat de la Harpe, is a sumptuous collection of wildlife and wilderness travel experiences in Africa.

I asked him...

### Which are your top three wildlife regions in Africa?

I prefer the places where you can still get a sense of "old wild Africa" – where the animals are less accustomed to human presence and the safari lodges are more like camps than villas.

My two favourite parks are Ruaha and Katavi, both in Tanzania. They are, as one safari operator put it, "big places where big animals are always doing big things".

This is most true of Ruaha, with its grand vistas peppered with baobab trees, and with the greatest remaining concentration of wild lions. The lions here occur mostly in large prides, capable of killing elephants.

Katavi has Africa's largest buffalo herd, which in turn makes for plenty of predators.

Most of the safari camps in these two national parks consist of canvas tents, and elephants come around your tent to eat tamarind seeds.

On the other hand, the day my doctor tells me I have to give up red wine, I'm cashing in and heading to the Okavango Delta.

### Your three most memorable wildlife sightings – or wilderness experiences?

Nothing has come close to my first walking safari in Mana Pools National Park with Steve Pope back in 1994. Steve died from cancer two years ago, but his spirit lives on in all of those who shared this incredible experience. With Steve as the guide, we would approach the big game on foot, often freakily close, but he taught us how to read the animals' behaviour and signals, and respond appropriately.

I saw a leopard kill a few metres away, and herds of kudu drinking almost at touching distance. Elephants brushed against us on their way to drink at the spring where he would have us camp. Not to mention lions making buffalo kills around the edges of our camps.

When I was a teenager my friend Don Hunter,

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who was always willing to lead me into trouble, suggested we city kids hitch-hike from Johannesburg to the Okavango. I had no idea what I was in for, but he had been there the previous year on a school geography tour.

We paid a Bayei boatman R10 to pole us up the Thamalakane and Santatadibe channels to Chitabe Island, where we slept on the ground and caught fish to eat.

It was only two weeks later, when we emerged from the "swamps", that we learned that the island had been abandoned because of the menacing lion population. They certainly scared me, but I kept the fire going all night, and the experience was my first big life changer.

Third is about getting my favourite wildlife photograph. Back in about 1995 I visited Ruaha National Park for the first time, with Wild Frontiers wild man John Addison. The only lodge there at the time was Ruaha River Lodge and John, lodge owner Peter Fox and I spent a week together in wildlife heaven.

As we were nearing the airstrip to depart, we noticed a leopard in the grass next to the track, heading for the big baobab we had spied earlier with a zebra carcass in the fork about eight metres up.

Everything was teed up: the sun was just setting behind us, the leopard was making for the tree, I had new spool of Fuji Velvia in my Nikon F5 camera. I set it to continuous shooting mode, waited until the leopard approached the base of the tree, put my trigger finger on the shutter button and said, "don't anyone dare move, or breath ..." held my own breath, squeezed gently and fired. We very nearly missed our plane to Zanzibar but I got the pictures – all 36 of them.

### You've met and worked with some fascinating people in African conservation and tourism. Who has inspired you most, and why?

So much of my own life's trajectory was primed by my friendship with Don Hunter – two teenage trips to the Okavango, later managing associated lodges there (Xakanaxa and Tsaro), spearfishing, scuba diving, rock climbing, paragliding, mountain biking and generally messing about and getting into trouble – so without him I might have been a filing clerk. When he got married his mother asked, in all seriousness, whether I was going to join them on honeymoon. But his bride, Shirley, said no!

Next was the professional satisfaction I gained working with the person I think is the best nature writer in SA – the only one I really rate – Don Pinnock. It might be all the drugs he took when he was young, or the revolutionaries he hung out with, but he has a way of taking the seemingly ordinary and turning it round and round and then pulling out a mesmerising literary trick from his sleeve.

My pleasure in that process was being his editor, and as some wise person once said,

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every great writer needs a great editor (it was Bill Bryson in his book, *Made in America*). We made a formidable literary team for a few years back when.

Third would be Colin Bell, co-founder of both the Wilderness Safaris and Great Plains conservation-safari outfits. Without his guiding force, the safari industry in Africa would be far less ethical or indeed profitable.

We first met as students, spending weekends on hot cliff faces while ringing and weighting Cape vulture chicks for the Vulture Study Group. Our lives have intertwined since then and we spent a few happy years recently researching and putting together the game-changing book, *Africa's Finest: the 50 most environmentally responsible and sustainable lodges in Africa*. The website, if you care to get the inside track on sustainability is [www.africasfinest.co.za](http://www.africasfinest.co.za).

**And who are the unsung or not-so-famous people in African conservation that you have been impressed by? And why?**

That list is long. I have been impressed, and greatly influenced by every person I have met who has dedicated his or her life to making the world a better place, or putting fingers in leaking dykes to try to stop the human flood damage.

My first environmental heroes were the good people of Greenpeace. Returning from military service in the mid-1970s, I seriously considered becoming an "eco-terrorist". The book, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, by Edward Abbey, helped stoke those fires, but I went to Rhodes and got a degree instead.

People like Frank Lloyd Wright, who showed architects they could use natural materials and create buildings appropriate to their settings, have greatly influenced me (my first chosen

direction was architecture). Field biologist George Schaller and his protégés, Jane Goodall and Dian Fossey, I think have been among the most inspirational of African conservationists. They started so much of what we do and know today.

After that, every game ranger, field ranger, anti-poaching patroller, wildlife vet and gate guard who has devoted his life to protecting our wild places. I don't say this as mere a head nod, but in deep appreciation of these people, without whom our world would be a lot bleaker.

**What does African wilderness and wildlife mean to you, personally? Why do you love it so much? What do you miss most about it?**

I think it's got everything to do with our psychological link to the Africa of today and the Africa of time past, the old DNA connection elaborated on much more eloquently by the likes of wilderness philosophers Ian Player and Ian McCallum.

I grew up playing in the veld, collecting snakes and birds' eggs and all that stuff. Stones, crystals, tortoise shells, a feather here, a fossil there... it all intrigued me. Among all the sex and drugs and rock 'n roll of northern Johannesburg, I fell in among a few fellow nature lovers.

I think the apocalyptic moment for me was when I pulled a copy of Eugene Marais' *The Soul of the White Ant* from my parents' bookshelf. There I found the Highveld laid bare, in cross-section if you like, and I had also found my first and most abiding South African idol.

What I have never been able to fathom is when my political enlightenment began, with parents who stood to the right of Attila the Hun! I remember the time of arrogant brown-uniformed policemen around the time of Sharpeville, bullying black people on the streets, and I just knew somehow in my five-year-old head that it was not right.

In the same sort of visceral way, loving and

wanting to protect the natural environment just seemed to come naturally to me. Simple things like littering, or throwing a stompie out a car window, really wind me up. It seems that all my life I have been an environmental Catcher in the Rye, watching people running towards the cliff edge of pollution, deforestation, environmental rape and ruin. But it's the

nightmare version, where I see it all happening and cannot do anything about it. Then I wake up and realise it is not a dream, it's my every waking moment, as though I'm the person in that painting by Edvard Munch and I'm screaming: stop it, just stop it, for goodness sake!

As I've grown older I suppose I have grown

a thick skin to the ongoing environmental degradation around me, but I have not stopped caring deeply. You need to be nice – to other people and to all living things, the entire biota. How could you not be? But most of us just keep on soiling our environmental doorsteps.

Angry, me? I used to be, but I guess I'm more Zen about it nowadays. **LW**

**African Icons, by David Bristow and Roger and Pat de la Harpe**



David Bristow and award-winning photographers Roger and Pat de la Harpe (authors of about 50 books) have pooled their talents and produced a book on Africa's must-see places.

They recently documented and photographed the 21 most iconic places in Africa, including Table Mountain, the High Atlas mountains, the wonders of ancient Egypt, the East African savanna, the great deserts of the Kalahari and the Namib, the jungles of central Africa and Ibo Island in Mozambique.

The result is a book of spectacular pictures and insightful text. Each copy is hand bound in leather and has a page that can be tailored as a gift to a friend.

"We have sought out the foremost designers, printers, binders and other publishing partners," says David. "It is in every respect a work of fine art and craft – the smithing of the words, the magnificence of the images and the hand binding in authentic leathers.

"We hope this is a book that will sit proudly on the tables and in the salons of those who love the history of exploration and discovery of what was once thought of as the dark continent."

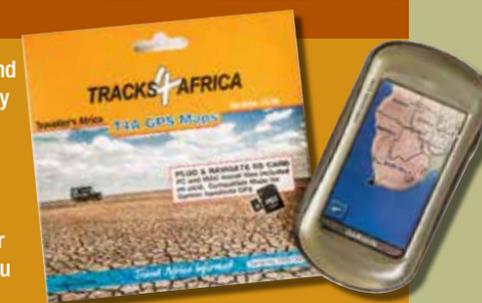
The book costs R3500 and a percentage of proceeds from sales will be donated to Angels' Care Centre, in KwaZulu-Natal, which incorporates a feeding scheme for indigent children, an adult literacy programme and a rape crisis clinic. To order, go to [www.africanicons.co.za](http://www.africanicons.co.za).



**Cape Union Mart gear review**

**K-Way/Cape Union Mart gear review**

I do a lot of exploring of national parks and reserves in remote parts of Africa, and my Garmin GPS and Tracks4Africa mapping software are indispensable. They are an essential part of my work, and if you are planning a 4x4 trip on the continent – anywhere between the Cape and Cairo or Senegal and Somalia, then make sure you have these very useful items.



Tracks4Africa is a huge data set of waypoints, tracks and routes, collated over the past 15 years by more than 500 overlanders who travelled the length and breadth of Africa. When you buy the software, you receive an SD card with more than 900 000km of roads and jeep tracks, which slots into your GPS (in my case, an Oregon 550).

A lot of the data concerns remote areas, so it's very useful in places where normal roads are not properly mapped in mapbooks or standard GPS software.

Tracks4Africa also has mapping of more than 1400 protected areas, as well as 3645 campsites, so if you are looking for a place to camp, you can easily find one.

Buy Tracks4Africa (R799) online or in a Cape Union Mart store [www.capeunionmart.co.za](http://www.capeunionmart.co.za).



**Scott Ramsay**

Scott Ramsay is a photo-journalist focusing on national parks and nature reserves in Africa. He is supported by Cape Union Mart as a K-Way ambassador, and also by Ford, Goodyear Wrangler, Safari Centre Cape Town, Hetzner, Outdoor Photo and Tracks4Africa.

For more information, go to [www.LoveWildAfrica.com](http://www.LoveWildAfrica.com), or [www.facebook.com/LoveWildAfrica](http://www.facebook.com/LoveWildAfrica) and @love\_wild\_africa on Instagram.

