

A rhino in the toilet

Jude and Bob joined Jonathan Durward on the 2015 Zambats expedition.

Regular readers of the news letter will remember that this time year I was on crutches forbidden to anything and some of you have been aware of my attempts at getting mobile again. One of the things which has driven me on is the desire to join the Zambats 2015 expedition. There were times that this seemed a dream out of reach, but a mixture of stubbornness and support from lots of people, plus a horrendous injection into my knee bone meant I was able to make it.

OK, so I didn't go down into caves or scabble over uneven terrain, but I made it. As far as possible I avoided camping and took the soft option by having a chalet, which Bob out of the kindness of his heart shared with me. There was, however, one place where I had no choice but to camp. Helen Taylor had arranged for camp beds for Bob and me, and to be honest I was dreading it, remembering the unstable, low hung camp beds of my youth. I had no need to worry - these were almost normal bed height and as stable as a stable thing.

We camped out in the bush, which was an amazing experience. Kasanksa is run by a Charitable Trust and relies mainly on tourists for its income. We stayed at Pioneer Camp, which was luxurious in that it had two toilets (one of which came with its own snake) and two showers, which were kept supplied with hot water by the hard labour of Kasanka staff, who heated water over a fire some distance away and carried hot water to the site in wheelbarrows, and then emptied the buckets of hot water into reservoirs on the roof. These were simple brick built



buildings and on more than one occasion there were shouts of "There's a Rhino in the toilet" which conjures up a dramatic but unrealistic picture what was there was *Rhinolophus* bat which escaped capture. (People took to going to the loo with their gloves just in case, but it evaded capture).

What was perhaps more alarming was the constant presence of scouts; not your British bob a job chaps, but young African men in camouflage clothing brandishing AK47s. Their role as to protect us from wildlife and poachers, and we needed them as we were camped close to a river which was home to crocodiles and even more dangerously hippos.

These ambled into the camp at night to graze and several of the party reported hearing the muffled grunts and chomping produced by hungry hippos and there were fresh tracks in the morning. This posed a real dilemma as it was not safe to leave the tent once every-one had settled down for the night- an ideal opportunity for pelvis floor exercises. The highlight of our time there was going to see the straw coloured bats returning to their roots at night.

In order to do this, we had the opportunity to climb a rickety hide, built by the BBC. I had already decided this was not for me, and any residual doubt was quickly

dismissed when I saw the thing in real life.



Les, our guide, said he thought it would be too difficult for me, and I agreed with considerable alacrity, having not only an arthritic knee, but a poor head for heights, a fear of things rickety and a clear grasp of the workings of gravity.

Instead Jonathan escorted me to the public viewing place on the ground, resisting the temptation to throw me off a rickety bridge or two on the way in retaliation for the endless digs in this newsletter about his constant holiday. I kind of knew what to expect having watched clips on You Tube, but was really unprepared for the scale of the thing.

In the last couple of years I have been to see the murmurations of starlings at Willington as was reduced to open mouthed silence, by the beautiful shapes they weave in the sky as the clouds of birds constantly changed shapes as more and more birds joined in, until in a trice they settled and were gone.

I suppose I thought it would be a bit like that - but it wasn't. There was no master choreographer. The numbers built slowly, a chaotic maelstrom like a boisterous infant school turning out at the end of the day, with each child running towards its parent with a disregard for the other pupils, or group of demented Black Friday

shoppers making for a star bargain. Sometimes similes are useless I decided, in the end I gave up. The only sound was the gasps of amazement from those watching and the whirring of cameras. I just sat gobsmacked. The viewfinder of the camera only gave you a tiny glimpse of the sky, but as numbers grew they were everywhere, the whole sky a whirling silent mass of bats moving like ash from a bonfire, except they were moving towards the vanishing point of the trees on the horizon, something no wind-blown ash could achieve. So I gave up photographing as well and just sat sucking in the experience aware as I watched that

this was beyond words.

As darkness fell, I picked my way back the way I had come, knowing this was an experience of a lifetime. At dawn some of the others went back for a second visit to the hide while I lay in. The views were if anything more spectacular, especially when something disturbed the bats so that they rose as one from the trees in which they were roosting completely filling the sky

The photo below is one of Bob's, I will put it on the website as a black and white image really does not do it justice



While we were trapping we had to be accompanied by a scout at all times, which sometimes prevented us from trapping as they had to go off to try to catch poachers, but it is not every day that you are forbidden to check a mist net because of the close proximity of hippos. We caught some lovely bats there, including this gorgeous straw coloured bat. This was a large bat, with a highly mobile neck, piercing eye, and a benevolent personality. *Photo Jude Hirstwood*