

# Anyone can walk with lions, but the pros don't get eaten



**WILD  
WORLD  
MARK  
CARWARDINE**

With about 20 years' experience as a game ranger in the African bush, Les Brett is South Africa's answer to Crocodile Dundee. He's about as qualified as they come. He has passed all the exams (such as the one where they stick trainees in front of a charging buffalo to see how they react) and is filled with the kind of enthusiasm for wildlife that has him curled up in front of the campfire with a good book on the stools of African mammals.

For me, being a game ranger like Les was always something of a childhood dream. But to do it for real would take years of lectures and training and, unfortunately, I had only ten days. So I joined a crash course at Timbavati, a private wilderness reserve of flat grass and bush-covered plains next to Kruger National Park in the north-eastern corner of the country. Les was the senior instructor.

We did everything from handling venomous snakes and stitching wounds to using termites to identifying some of the local birds — by their calls. Some bird species actually help trainee rangers to identify them by calling out their names. The aptly named go-away bird, which



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looks like a rather sombre, grey magpie with a spiky haircut (*above*), really does tell everyone to go away (strangely, though, young go-away birds haven't quite grasped the principle and call out 'how? how? how?').

Toilet affairs feature particularly big in the bush and Timbavati turned out to be a dung-lover's paradise. When we hunted around a waterhole early one morning, even I could tell that the enormous pile of droppings we found had been made by a creature much, much bigger than myself. But Les could go at least

one better. He picked up a handful and pulled out thick, undigested pieces of bark — evidence, he said, of a middle-aged elephant with badly worn molars.

We also learned how to walk in lion country. Anyone can walk in lion country, of course, but the pros do it without being eaten.

"If we stumble upon a lion," explained Les, "we'll get out of the area by moving slowly backwards. We will not run. If we run, we have a 100% chance of being killed."

With those odds still ringing in our ears, Les announced that we'd

be spending the next night sleeping rough in a dried-up riverbed. We set up camp next to an incredibly noisy roost of chacma baboons. I say 'camp' but that's an exaggeration. We had gone back to basics, with no tents, no mats, no mosquito nets — just us, a roaring campfire and enough food to survive 24 hours.

When the baboons quietened down, soon after dark, Les worked out a roster for keeping watch. He told us to wake him "only if a lion

is about to jump on everybody", and promptly fell into a deep sleep. The rest of us didn't sleep a wink. There were lions roaring around us all night and every time a twig snapped, we spun around expecting an imminent attack. The attack never came, of course, and

there were no casualties during the night. Just tiredness.

Les awoke looking fully refreshed. The baboons awoke fully refreshed, too, and immediately resumed their chattering before crossing the riverbed in front of us. Among them was a tiny baby no bigger than my fist, with bright pink sticking-out ears and a puzzled look on its face. Riding like a miniature jockey on its mother's back, and leaning against her upright tail, it was about to start another day of its own baboon-style training course on survival in the African bush. Somehow, I knew it had a better chance of passing the final exam than any of us could hope for. ■

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