

STORIES

TALES FROM THE TRAILS

The MYTH of Muanza – written by Scott Allan



"How many toes did it have?" muttered Willem as he finished his cigarette. That was his first question to the news we had found and followed some fresh Leopard tracks a few miles downstream of camp. He continued, "There is a cat who comes through now and again who is missing two toes, we don't find his tracks often though"...

Our first day in Muanza saw us arise at 3am, drop trackers off in strategic areas and then patrol separate areas of our own scanning the ground meticulously for any sign of a Leopard. We found a full footed cat fairly quickly and his tracks seemed to be from the night prior, we wandered in his footsteps as far as we could before allowing the dogs a chance at his trail sometime around 8am, already the scent had started to burn up by this stage and the maddening Tsetse flies were out in force.

Tsetse flies are infuriating little bugs that bite English men and dogs, it would seem Americans taste sour as I was bitten easily 10 times a day whilst Cody and Russell probably averaged a bite every fifth day. The problem with the Tsetse is that it carries *animal trypanosomiasis*, a disease that can kill both dogs and, in extreme cases, humans. Often referred to as the 'sleeping sickness', one bite from an infected fly can put you to sleep, permanently. Because of this, once the Tsetse flies would begin their daily routine of chasing me through the African bush like I was the robotic hare and they, the greyhound. Our chances for that day were over and the dogs retired to their kennels.

We didn't manage to get onto the cat on day one, nor the same cat on day two due to the aforementioned reasons. On day two however we did learn that he had joined up with a female cat and was now traveling with her. Then he disappeared. Both of them did.

For the 8 days that followed we checked every millimeter of the *Samanyama River* and the *Mupico* which was a small tributary leading off it. Nothing. Every morning we awoke at 3am. Same bridges, same patrol routes, same result, nothing. The only bit of hope that kept us optimistic were the guides, they were hearing a Leopard roar right by camp, Every. Single. Night. But even that got to the point where I, and I'm sure Cody and Russell too, stopped believing them. If we are waking up at 3am daily and they are hearing the Leopard roar through the night, why not just wake us up? What difference would it make to us if we arose at 1am instead of 3am?

Our accommodation was on the bank of the dry sand river and so every morning we would send the trackers out East of camp to check the area they were hearing him but again. Nothing. The cat had become nothing more than a myth, a 'scary' story about noises in the night. It made no sense for him to be so close. We last tracked the cat going West with a female, maybe 8 miles away or more. Somehow he has made his way to camp without leaving a single footprint?

On day 11 we awoke to the same old routine. Meet at the fire, listen to the tall stories about 'cats going roar in the night'. Load the dogs up and prepare for another morning scouring the sand repetitively querying myself 'did I look at that track yesterday?'. Don't get me wrong, we were still very optimistic and confident we were going to get our cat, however you must appreciate that after 10 days of not only struggling to find the cat, but struggling to find the cat at 3am, morale and energy levels start to drop. It was for this reason that the night before we had offered up a \$100 bounty to whichever tracker found the track that ultimately led to a Leopard being tree'd. Well I don't know if they saw us coming and had rehearsed this 'bit' multiple times but sure enough, on the eleventh morning the cat had been in the river, not just in the river, but in the river just 300 yards away from camp. The trackers hurriedly made their way back to notify us and we drove straight to the scene to see the tracks. Yep, there they were, fresh as could be. In a location we had checked every day prior and found nothing.

We followed him along the river maybe 50 yards until his tracks led off into what would best be described as a Mozambican Rainforest. We readied the dogs and followed him slightly further up, he re-entered the river again before then leaving and remaining in the jungle, damp with the dew from the night.

The dogs were initially slow to start but soon began to pick up the pace. They tree'd something maybe 500 yards away from the river but once we reached that area, the dogs were long gone. We scoured the canopy just in case we were being watched. They ran another 500 yards and tree'd again, but again, when we reached that area, dogs were gone. We scoured the canopy like before but there was nothing to be found.

We then picked up the pace and moved maybe a mile before the dogs could be heard baying again. The baying then moved further away from us and Gavin, of Panther Trackers, began to run. I ran with him but soon enough I was 20 yards behind, then 40 yards behind, before I knew it I was stuck and forcing my legs through spiky vines that did not want to break. I had lost sight of Gavin, I had lost sight of the trackers. I was whistling but no one was whistling in response. My legs were covered in blood and I could hear the hounds baying near to me. "I'm a meal if this thing comes my way" I thought to myself.

I pushed on further before discovering what I now believe to be a tracker who specialized in overweight Englishmen. He pointed me in the correct direction and the look on his face was enough to reveal his thoughts. I then rounded a bush and found Gavin, luckily I was there before Cody and Russell so I had a great chance to fabricate a story as to why I was late to the tree and highlight the fact that my fellow hunters were not yet there. Thus deflecting any frustrations away from myself.

I looked up and there he was.

At the top of the highest limb in front of me stood the cat, square on, looking down at the dogs. The sun was now well into its morning routine and the soft light set his orange coat on fire. He stood atop that tree glowing like a campfire. I had a minute or two to snap some photos before the guys arrived, Cody lined up his shot and shot true. The cat fell 2 ft initially and landed upside down before then dropping to the floor, stone dead.

A dream, realized. Frustrations, evaporated. Morale, boosted. Wallet, \$100 lighter.

It had finally happened, we made our way to the tree and everyone's emotions were high. We all admired this amazing cat as he lay there serenely. We stroked him, stared at him, repositioned him carefully and then we checked him out and were all left very surprised. He had two missing toes on his front left foot. This confused us all, yes we had heard the story but we had all seen that morning's tracks and not one of us had noticed two missing toes? Had we lost our initial cat and got lucky? Were they traveling together? Competing? It was all very strange.

We took some nice photos and decided to take the cat back to our starting point in the river for some more shots and to check out the tracks again. The journey took around 15 minutes in the vehicle and the eight trackers sang a beautiful rendition of their Leopard song which was truly moving.

When we arrived back at the river we inspected the tracks and found that it was him, the two missing toes were only just indented into the sand presumably from the fur and obviously not from the pads that were missing. We shared the moment with Cody's dad, Tommy and the rest of the camp came down to celebrate with us too. It was an incredible way to culminate the trip. We didn't just catch a Leopard, we became part of a story. A cat that lacked two toes who would only move through the area now and again. A cat that roared near camp every night but no one but the trackers would hear him. A cat that left no sign of his presence. A cat that moved like a ghost. A cat that for 10 days, was nothing more than a myth.

The smiles stretched from ear to ear that night, mine, Cody's, Russell's, Tommy's and Gavin's. Not to forget of course the tracker who successfully found the track. Boy was he happy, rigor mortis had not even set in and he was already off to the town with his \$100 in pursuit of some tail of his own.

