

A Traveller's Tale

The Big 5-For Photographers

by Mario and Jenny Fazekas

For many visitors to SANParks, seeing the 'big 5' is a high priority. They just don't feel like their trip is complete without seeing Buffalo, Elephant, Leopard, Lion, and Rhino. Jenny and Mario Fazekas, photographers and wildlife enthusiasts, share their thoughts on their very own big 5...

The traditional grouping of 'big 5' animals were so-called by the big hunters of this century, and the century before. These 5 were considered the five most dangerous animals to hunt. They were characterised as dangerous adversaries, and their reputations as crafty animals, with strong instincts for survival grew. They had few natural enemies, were difficult to track and lethal if wounded or cornered...

Visitors to our national parks today, armed with cameras and not guns, have inherited these ideas about the big five, and for many travellers, sightings of these so-called "Big 5" are of the utmost importance. However, not all of them are particularly challenging to photograph.

Jenny and I have therefore come up with a 'Photographic' big 5. These are animals that are always a challenge to find and an even greater challenge to photograph. They are as follows: Black Rhino, Brown Hyena, Cheetah, Leopard and Wild Dog

During the past eleven years we have kept a record of our animal sightings and we have seen the following numbers of "Photographic Big 5":

3 Black Rhino –of these 3, just 1 allowed good photos.



Black Rhinoceros mother and calf who charged our vehicle on the S30 Salitje road in Southern Kruger Park.

3 *Brown Hyena* – never seen in SANParks. When seen outside of the park however, only 1 presented a good photo opportunity.

Brown Hyena drinking early in the morning in the North West Province.



11 *Cheetah* – 7 in the Kruger and 4 in the Kgalagadi of which only 2 allowed good photographs.



Cheetahs normally climb onto logs and termite mounds to scan for prey. This Cheetah was sighted on S28 Crocodile Bridge road in southern Kruger, climbing down from a dead tree.

14 *Leopard* – 13 in the Kruger and 1 in the Kgalagadi, of which 4 presented us with good photo opportunities. In our first 5 years we saw no leopards and one of the reasons was the fact that we would race around the parks looking for leopards and we then realised that most of our predator sightings occurred when we had stopped to look at something else. Our strategy then changed and we would stop to watch birds, insects and even Impala and our Leopard sightings increased dramatically!

This leopard was sighted in a dry river bed on the S92 road south of Olifants camp in central Kruger. We had stopped to watch a Hammerkop bathing in a small pool of water when we noticed movement in the grass. We spent the next 30 minutes photographing the leopard that yawned, sprayed and walked around.



6 *Wild Dog* – all in the Kruger of which only 1 sighting resulted in good photographs.



We watched a pack of wild dog hunting along the S44 road north of Olifants camp in central Kruger.

Most of the above sightings were fleeting – cheetah running away from a kill as cars stopped to photograph them, a leopard's tail disappearing into the bush, a black rhino stopping to look at us for just a second before vanishing into the bush and so on.

The trick to finding, and photographing these animal is to know where and when to look for certain species. To find our alternative big 5, we check the sighting boards in the Kruger camps and speak to the game rangers, and other visitors to the park.

We then choose our route and drive it slowly, watching the behaviour of birds and other animals – they will let you know when they have sensed a predator nearby! Once we have spotted our subject we try to position our vehicle in the best position in order to eliminate twigs in front of our subject and to ensure the background is not too cluttered. We also have to be considerate of other viewers and vehicles, and of course, our subject.

We take a few photographs as soon as we see the animal, in case it disappears, and then gradually move closer if possible, taking photos each time we move. This provides maximum opportunities and allows us to work within the animal's comfort zone.

We spend as much time with the subject as we can as this provide opportunities to take photographs of different behaviours and to ensure a good number of photographs to choose from. We cannot believe how many people just drive past us – they see us looking at the Hammerkop but just keep driving, as they are looking for only the traditional big 5. And even when we have stopped to photograph a stalking Cheetah, for example, that is in full view; many people will pull up take one or two photos and then speed off. These same people complain that their photographs are not good and blame their cameras!

Despite wanting to get away from the constant focus on the original big 5 it can't be denied that lion sightings are always impressive and this animal's majestic combination of beauty and power always stirs up excited conversation around the evening campfires!

We watched this magnificent male lion walk to a termite mound stand on it and roar for a few minutes and then he sat down and glared at us.

