

About Sheldon Hooper



Written by Sheldon's father

On 18 August 2020 we lost a dedicated and capable Field Guide, Sheldon Hooper, who died tragically after being attacked by an elephant at a lodge in Limpopo in South Africa. Those who knew Sheldon, knew him to be a competent and passionate man, with a great sense of care for both the bush and his fellow man. Sheldon died bravely through his keen sense of duty to the safety of both lodge guests and staff alike.

The seeds of Sheldon's passion for nature and its conservation go back to his grandparents.

His paternal grandfather, Dolfie, was born and brought up in the Little Karoo, second born son of a well-known ostrich farmer in Oudtshoorn. Whilst he did not pursue agriculture (Dolfie qualified with an FRCS in ENT in Edinburgh, and practiced in Durban his whole life), he was a true son of the great outdoors, and carried this culture through into our family.

His paternal grandmother, Mary, is the daughter of a pioneering Kenyan farmer and grew up in the bush proper. The black-and-white pictures of the leopards, lions, elephants and giraffes commonly found on their farm back in the 1930s hang on the walls at Sheldon's parents' home to this day. These were the days prior to reserves, and the stories his grandmother tells of Africa as it was then ring on in family conversations.

Sheldon's maternal grandfather, Evan, was the HR Director of a well-known public transport company. Barney, as he was affectionately named, also spent considerable years in the deep bush of Zambia (Northern Rhodesia) in the police services of that country. Barney had an amazing combination of both rationality and compassion, coupled with an extraordinary ability to make things happen in terms of practicality. He could fix anything. Sheldon's "get it done" character spawned here.

His maternal grandmother, Alice is one of those rare people who is able to listen intently for unlimited periods of time, and develop a deep sense of empathy and care for people and her surroundings. Sheldon's acute sense of care and compassion, especially for the "little people" and "little creatures" is largely vested in Alice's embrace as a little boy.

It would be brash of me to talk of his parents, Cindy and I. Save to say that through our love of the natural world out there, Sheldon grew up in the Hennops River Valley amidst a wide variety of fauna and flora, and with the barefoot grit associated with rural lifestyle.

The DNA set in these origins did not show through immediately. As a teenager Sheldon aspired after computers and engineering as many do. His short sojourn at varsity studying engineering wound up in disappointment in terms of maths grades.

Unsure what he wanted to do, I reached out to an acquaintance, Bambi Notten, who owned a small lodge in the Timbavati (Nottens). Sheldon was offered a July holiday job in return for board and lodging in the staff quarters.

Having been brought up in a rural environment, Sheldon was no stranger to the many cultures of South Africa, and flourished at Nottens essentially working as a labourer. This is where he also began his journey with the Shangaan language.

The Notten Family invited Sheldon back again for the December holiday. They had noticed not only his work ethic, but that he had a way with guests who found him to be endearing. In addition, as I was told, he was appreciated for his inclination to spontaneously get things done without being asked, and to never complain about anything.

At the end of the December holiday, Sheldon was invited to become a permanent member of the Notten's Team. It was there that he became very close friends with Tracker Joe who had been with the lodge for the better part of 40 years or more. During this time, Sheldon

developed excellent fluency in Shangaan, a skill that took him deep into the workings of the bush as he learnt his trade from its true teachers, the Trackers.

In addition to this real-world experience, Sheldon steadily went about acquiring the relevant qualifications for Field Guiding, a quest which he never let up on. He became passionate about his education, finally.

In his eight years in the bush, Sheldon worked for Nottens, Sabi Sabi Bush Lodge, Chitwa Chitwa and Thornybush. At all these lodges, his primary role was that of a Field Guide, but he showed extensive interest in photography and videography (mentoring many guests in these fields) as well as social media marketing.

His “fix it” nature also took him into a wide range of maintenance activities. I was surprised at the complete and meticulously cared for set of tools and maintenance equipment that Sheldon collected in his personal capacity during his adult life.

His photography was truly artistic. He studied art to Matric level, and had a unique approach to the visual arts. In addition, he developed a very personal and engaging way with words as he matured. Here is an article he wrote a few months into Lockdown ...

Forget We Were Even Here

Covid-19.

This simple word has created so much upheaval and change for everybody on the planet!

Well, almost everybody.

There has been quite a storm of speculation online regarding the effect of Covid-19's worldwide lockdowns and the reduction in interaction with wild animals in game reserves such as the Greater Kruger National Park and the Thornybush Private Nature Reserve, to name but a few, and the subsequent effect of this lessening interaction level. The opinions differ as to what the animals make of it, do they breathe a collective sigh of relief now that the gawking has reduced to a trickle? Do they even notice that we are no longer present in the numbers we once were?

From the personal experience of fellow guides with whom I have had the pleasure to know, as well as my own personal experience, we have found that this worldwide disaster has been almost completely unnoticed by the animals we are privileged to spend time with. Their day to day lives continue as they did when the reserve was bustling with eager eyed visitors, happily snapping away with their cameras in order to preserve their special memories of this beautiful, abundant oasis of nature.

This however is currently just a happy memory for us humans, relegated to our own cages for durations unknown and to an unknown future. The animals? They don't seem to mind in the slightest that there are now fewer vehicles with fewer people on them, much as they did not mind before this entire calamity forced us into the safety of our own homes and prevented us from wandering as freely as they do now. In a way we simply do not exist to them regardless of our number or presence.

The Wildebeest graze now as they did months ago, without much care for those around them save for the potential threat of lions or for the occasional false alarm which inevitably causes great consternation.

The Elephants go about their endless and voracious search for food, regardless of the now faint memory of the rumble of the occasional game viewing vehicle.

The sharp eyed eagles, vultures and multitudes of other bird species that call Thornybush home, continue their aerial dance in search of a morsel of food, now unnoticed by dusty, shelf bound binoculars.

The wily Leopard continues its hunt in the dark of night, now without the added presence of a rather sharply edged green bush, sporting multiple heads and rolling around on four very peculiarly shaped round feet, that smells rather curiously of diesel, sunscreen, mosquito repellent and multitudes of other odorous chemicals.

The lions laze in the shade of the nearly leafless trees avoiding the midday heat that once ran rivulets down eager foreheads, braving the sun whilst patiently waiting for them to lift their heavy heads for that perfectly picturesque moment.

The Impala are as abundant as ever and frolic uncaring of the fact that there are no longer comparisons made of them and their antler bearing northern counterparts, nor of the many slights towards them for being as numerous as they are.

When we are lucky enough to go out on a patrol, or to do some maintenance of the roads (the elephants have definitely not given up their relentless pursuit to return our

roads to the bush), we are privy to all of these wondrous animals and their continued necessary lives. And as far as we can see, they have not changed nor altered their patterns in the slightest compared to when we were present in greater numbers.

Nor will they, their lives continue unfussed by our now minor part in it, whilst we wish for the return of better days when we were able to share these amazing beasts and their spellbinding lifestyles with guests. We wait eagerly for the return of these times and hope that one day soon we will once again have the privilege of introducing you to the lovely secret lives of these amazing creatures whose home we are blessed enough to share.

Story and Images by: Sheldon Hooper (Waterside Lodge Guide)

On a rather quirky note, Sheldon liked to wear his hair and beard long. This always put him in disfavour with prospective employers, who felt it was important to “uphold the image of their establishment”.

Being a child of the 60s myself, I recall the obsession that some people have that long hair, beards and the like implied inherent incompetency and suspect morality. It appears that human nature seeks safety in conformity - I guess that is where racial, cultural and religious intolerances foment.

Again, without complaint, Sheldon would shave and go short back and sides to get the job, and then promptly start growing it all again. He used to say “oh well, there goes another thousand Rand’s worth of hair care products!”, and then laugh like a drain.

Interestingly, his new employers never asked him to cut his hair or shave his beard again. Why? They soon realized that they had a whole new crop of guests as a consequence of employing Sheldon.

Sheldon had a large following of guests from across the globe who always sought him out for their safari holiday, irrespective of where he worked. Some of the most beautiful letters after his passing came from these loyal followers.

There must be a lesson in this.

His hair and beard earned him the nickname Mandhevhu amongst his vernacular speaking peers. I understand that this translates literally into “a man who likes to wear his beard long”. His Tracker colleague at Chitwa explained to me that Sheldon was given this name because his look reminded him of “a lion’s mane”.

The man who wears a lion’s mane, Bethuel told me.



As mentioned, Sheldon was always in tune with the “little people” and the “little creatures”.

On the one occasion that Cindy and I had the privilege of spending a few days being driven by Sheldon (at Sabi) we chuckled at how the other guests on the vehicle kept badgering him for the Big 5 upfront on the drive, but at dinner in the evening their conversation was about the termites or the orb web spider.

It was the same with people, Sheldon would always confer personally with the woman who packs one’s bags at the Pick ‘n Pay till (as his grandfather, Dolfie did). Skattie, a scullery maid at The River Lodge, hugged me and burst into tears when I met her, referring to Sheldon as “her angel”.

Sheldon was acutely aware that so-called Trackers formed the “clutch plate” between the fauna and flora and the guest experience. He talked to us often about this. He also talked often about how poorly Trackers are appreciated and treated by the safari lodge industry in

general. Sadly, it appears that many of the decision-makers and leaders in the industry suffer from the disabling Apartheid blind-spots created by the Nationalist Party between 1948 and 1994.

Sheldon's passion, one he often shared with us, was to create a difference by helping to improve the status of, empathy for, the respect and business standing of Trackers in general.

In turn, he saw this as a link into the preservation and upliftment of local communities competing with nature conservation for survival. It seems that he could see that a healthy safari industry 100 years from now would depend on the nurturing of the "little things" that don't seem to matter much in the grand commercial scheme of things.

Sheldon rests on our piece of nature in Hennops River beside his Grandfather Barney. His headstone encapsulates his passing and personality...



With enormous and eternal love from Sheldon's father,

Gordon Hooper