

Trip Report: Photographing at the Hide May 2022

Description

I have added a very special experience to my South Africa Wildlife Safaris for 2023 (our final season) . Our first visit with guests to the water level wildlife observation hide exceeded every expectation and I am very excited to share this will new and returning guests in 2023.



The start of one of the most memorable and awe provoking wildlife visits to the hide

Please enjoy this Trip Report from the final 3 days of my May 2022 safari where we spend happy hours photographing and watching wildlife at the watering hole in the hide.

A Change of Pace and Different Point of View From Game Drives



View Inside the photographic hide

My guests and I have just finished a wonderful, exciting, and exhausting 3 days in the Sabi Sands Reserve. I could not imagine a better safari experience, but we have one more location to be excited about. We are on our way to spend 2 nights at a house with its own underground photography and

observation hide.

This location will be a welcome change from our established daily route for here the wildlife will come to us any time of the day or night and we can set up our cameras in the comfortable hide and we ready for whatever appears.



Looking from the house to the hide and watering hole.



The path from the house leads to the rear of the hide and is protected by electric wire so we can move with caution back and forth during wildlife visits

We are in a reserve north of where we started at the tree house lodge and the town of Hoedspruit. Yet Sabi is no more than 2 hours away. Like Sabi, the hide located on a reserve that is a part of the contiguous Greater Kruger Region. Private owners of these lands agree to wildlife management standards and drop fences between it and park. This means any species is possible from lion prides, to rhinos, elephants, and rare birds.

The owner and former ranger / guide trainer built the hide after consulting with a photographer friend, but not as a copy of one of the other few other such hides in Africa. Beside the house is the watering hole observable from the house, deck, and fire pit. Leaving the house there is a short path that leads to the back of the concrete structure. Inside there is one small side window to see animals approaching on a popular wildlife path. On the back wall is a long bench running the length with cushions for sitting, sleeping, etc. For staying refreshed the hide is equipped with a bar fridge and coffee kettle. We enjoyed a few snacks while inside. A raised front portion of the bunker has rolling desk chairs and 4 shutter panels which open up the whole front facing the watering hole. The water level is even with the window openings and just a few inches away. Shelves, power plugs and clamp mounting bars give the photographers many options for placing their cameras. We had a combination of using gimbal mounts, resting on bags, monopods and in the case of small GoPros, just setting it on the windowsill and letting it run. We are permitted to be in the hide all day or night and if you are at the house when an animal approaches, it is possible to quietly make your way down to the hide and get in position.



Set up and comfortable in the hide using various methods to secure our cameras (some provided, some we brought)



A view from the fire pit deck area at the house looking down at the hide when an elephant suddenly appeared before we were ready!

<https://youtu.be/M0Ruf0Sfcq4>

We had the option of a game drive or walk in the surrounding reserve. The terrain is more rocky than we had seen so far and it would have been a departure and interesting backdrop to photos, but everyone agreed and was happy to sit in the hide – perhaps next time we must take advantage. Honestly, the back to back game drives and excitement for the last few days at Sabi left us a bit physically exhausted and it was nice to spread out in the hide and just ready ourselves for action while downloading and reviewing photos or experimenting with getting the best settings for where we were and the time of day.



This female elephant was so close that we could hear her breathing, murmuring to her clan. She sprayed us with the swinging of her trunk.



A grey Lorie drinks and makes a perfect reflection

We had so much action periodically through the day that we did not dare miss a minute.

A Lovely Setting even without a Watering Hole Observation Hide



The baobab tree outside our rooms is near the observation platform used to spy on the hornbill nest or see the sunset



The lodge has space to dine, lounge, work, or use the swimming pool and deck.

The house is comfortable and spacious with a large dining, a lounge, outside dining, sun deck by the pool, and a fire pit in view of the watering hole. The rooms are in a row at the back of the house and

each has ensuite bathroom with inside and outside shower. We enjoyed snacks in the hide, meals served on the deck or around the firepit. A baobab tree is close to the house and a leadwood tree next to it has a frequent hornbill nest in it. There is an elevated observation platform from which to photograph the birds. Also for birders there is a small tent style blind and a bird feeding and bath fixture for use to get close ups and provide a good setup for those with smaller lenses.



The water lilies, birds, insects, and frogs gave us practice and distraction while we wait for the large wildlife

When we arrived, we had barely moved our things in when a large bull elephant arrived to drink. We should have predicted this since we saw him on the drive in. We raced into the hide and managed a few photos after quickly assembling the cameras. We stayed and got organized and were 100% ready for the next family herd of elephants. They stayed a good long time with the juveniles trying to move a branch out of the way (the owner put it there to protect a pipe). The herd had a few babies who were very entertaining to watch as they drank and played. One of the large elephants looked as if it was going to go completely into the water, but a signal by the matriarch said it was time to go.

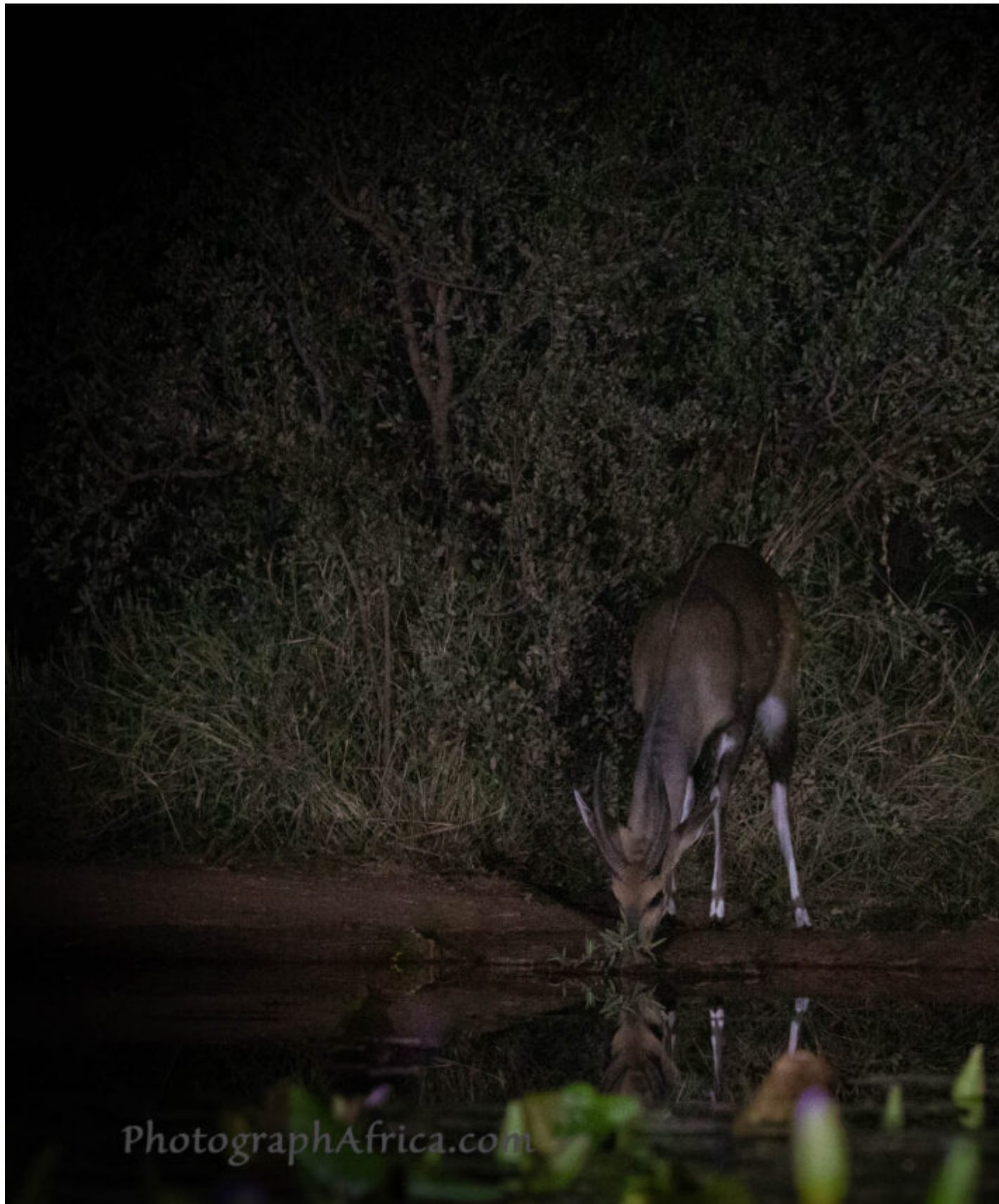


A happy and protective matriarchal family



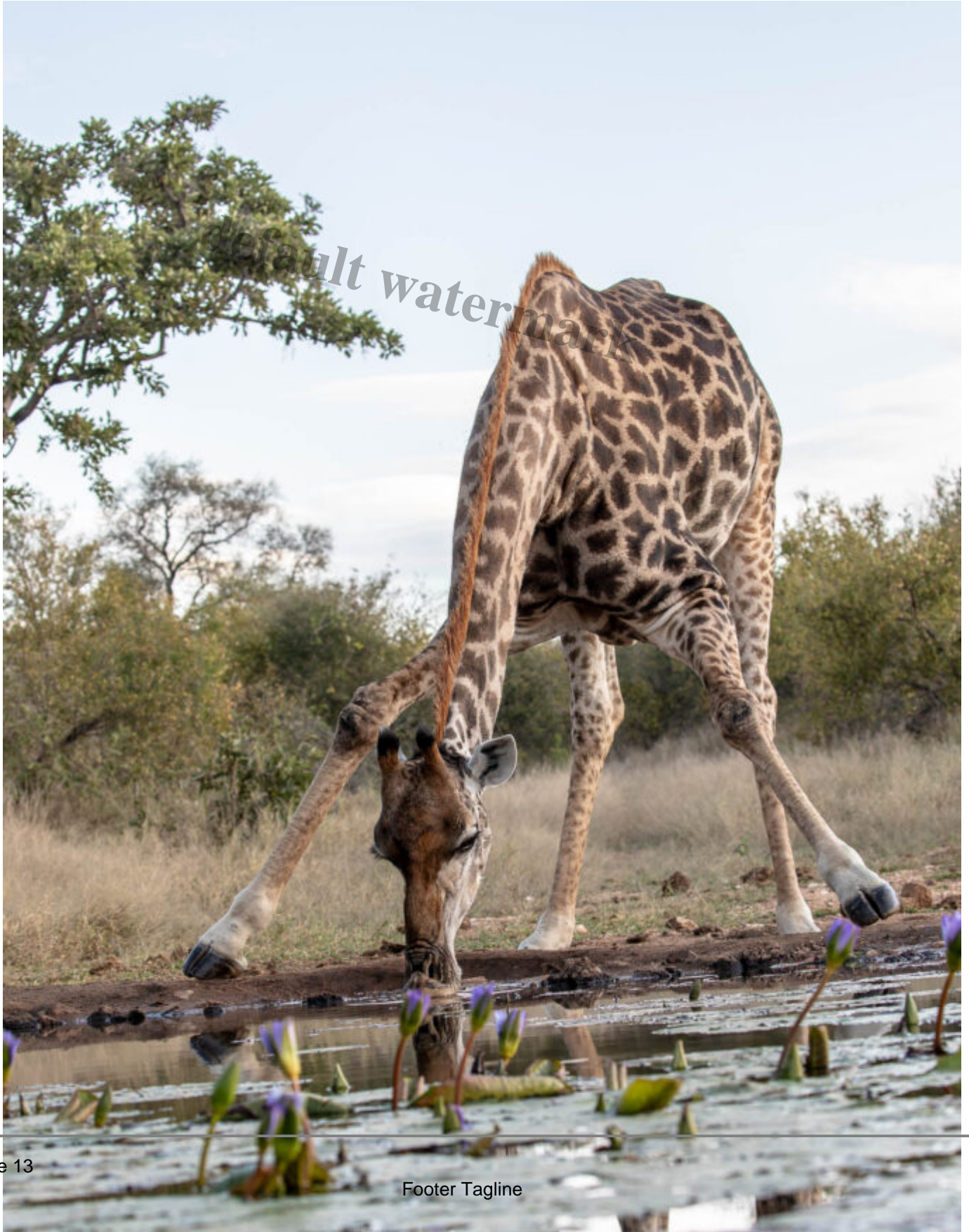
The body language of this young elephant gives away that he is the ornery one that tries to dig up a water pipe each time he visits.

Night was a magical experience with the cool air and sounds from the bushveld. The watering hole has a light which helps us spot and focus across the water (animals are used to it after a few years and do not mind it). With limited lighted sight range, the wildlife appears quickly out of nowhere to the waters edge. I missed photographing a hyena for this reason. While waiting we quietly reviewed and processed our images from the trip. It was a nice time to exchange knowledge and advice among ourselves. We set up an informal sleeping in shifts system for second night most of us did not spend much time in our bedrooms as we tried to man the hide consistently all night long. The cushioned bench in the hide was nice to have for short naps. The silence in the middle of the night and the stars above is a special memory from those nights.



night photography is possible with the aide of the lights which help with focusing

The wildlife visits picked up a bit close to dawn and we had several other visits with elephants also on our 2nd day along with impala, birds such as the grey lorie, robin, and hornbill visited. The true highlight on the second day was a troop of 7 giraffe which approached from in front of us opposite of the way the elephants were arriving. They took their time to get comfortable and take a drink with us worrying whether they would drink at all or shy away. We stayed very still and quiet the whole time. This was the most incredible angle with them facing us and at $\frac{3}{4}$ to our position as one by one they bowed down to drink each taking the 2 or 3 dips to get satiated.



With patience and keeping quiet, we were treated to photographing giraffes in the middle of their drinking

The sounds of drinking and feet and snorts from such large animals just 15 feet away made us speechless; at least until all the troop had had a drink and wandered off, about 35 minutes later. It was then that we all had an exhale through lips parted in wide smiles and we knew this was a very magic moment. Even our host was impressed and filled with pride by the encounter we had just had in his hide.

For me, photographing from the hide was much more than getting great photos. Being so close to the wildlife immersed us in so many sensory events: breathing, dust, water spraying, the low murmurs of elephants “talking”, stamps and shuffles of feet, and visual details of hair, eyes, and ears. These came to us while the wildlife took no notice of us making us truly “flies on the wall” and visitors into their world.

I am fortunate to be able to share all of this wonderful South African wildlife with my guests and these different ways to enter their world.

Please let me share this with you in 2023. [Visit my website for details](#)

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Date Created

2022/08/08