

# Zebras Without Borders

The recent discovery of a new trans-boundary long distance migration could assist with planning and conservation measures in the wider KAZA-TFCA  
 Story and Photos by Kelly Landen



**T**he riverfront of Chobe National Park is not only one of the best places to view wildlife in southern Africa, it is also crucial habitat for Botswana's magnificent biodiversity. Hippos snort and bob along the shore, Nile crocodiles sun-bath along the river banks, whilst Pied kingfishers swoop in and out of the water in search of a wriggling dinner. Elephants and Cape buffalo descend the hill to the river's edge to drink and bath, whilst Carmine bee-eaters dart in and out of their nests to feed their young.

Rising into a landscape that turns lush and green during the wet season, the Chobe River remains an essential source of water in the dry season. But, while some animal populations make a year-round home of the Chobe, other species come and go. Finding out just how and when these migrating species move in and out of the Chobe is an important aspect of conserving this important river ecosystem.

How do we know which species move, and where to? A Kasane-based NGO, Elephants Without Borders (EWB), began studying the movements of elephants more than a decade ago, and has greatly improved our knowledge of elephant ranges in this region of southern Africa.

Working throughout the span of the five-country Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA TFCA), EWB has recently expanded its projects to include other large



**Below: Exotic-looking frogs are amongst the smaller species found at Nyanga. Facing page: The sparkling rapids of Pungwe Falls lie just a short walk from the self-catering Pungwe cottages.**

**FEATURE**

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**In their duet, the haunting sadness portrayed by Andy and Gape was perhaps the biggest moment of the evening.**





herbivores. The major emphasis of this new research project is to provide novel and meaningful data to conservationists and policy-makers on the ecology of wildlife species for which we currently have limited or no information.

On the western floodplains of the Chobe, this means zebra. Driving along the riverfront in August or September, one nearly always crosses paths with large herds of zebra; each holds fuzzy foals to harems of fillies, sporting its own unique pattern of black and white stripes.

EWB's aerial survey wildlife counts have shown that large zebra herds – numbering approximately 3 000 – gather along the Chobe River during the dry season. However, it has remained a

long-standing mystery where the zebra go when the rains begin.

To try to answer this crucial question, in August 2012 EWB initiated a research project, which had support from the Botswana Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP), and with funding provided by the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation and San Diego Zoological Society's Institute for Conservation Research.

Researchers fitted satellite collars on zebra along the Chobe floodplains in order to be able to follow their seasonal movements.

What they found was unexpected and exciting. There was no surprise that during the hot, dry season water dependent zebra gather along the Chobe floodplains to drink at the river's edge

and graze on large tracts of grasses. At the peak of the season (in October), many of the zebra cross the river, extending their grazing range 15 kilometres north, into Namibia's Caprivi Strip.

However, the monitored zebra showed that when the rains finally did arrive, usually in November, the zebra begin to move south through the interior of Chobe National Park, in search of fresh sprouts of grass. Almost as if a trigger was pulled and a shot went off, the zebra suddenly began to move quickly – with a seemingly intended destination in mind.

EWB documented two dispersal routes: one south-east towards the Seloko Plains region, amongst the Chobe Forest reserves, and the second, a remarkable 260 kilometres straight line south to Nxai Pan (part of Makgadikgadi/Nxai Pans National Park)!

As EWB researchers uncovered these zebra tracks, they learned of another researcher, Robin Naidoo (supported by the Namibian Ministry of Environment and Tourism, with assistance from WWF Namibia) who had collared zebra during the same dry season, across the Chobe River in Namibia's Caprivi Strip. The zebra he monitored verified the exact same route, at the same time and speed, south to Nxai Pan.

These movements certainly do not reflect the commonly accepted assumptions about where Chobe's zebra move in the wet season. Many conservationists, guides, and scientists in the region speculated that, during the rains, the zebra migrated west to the Linyanti, or perhaps towards Chobe's Savute Marsh, or to Nogatsaa, within the interior of Chobe National Park. And yet, none of the monitored zebra have confirmed those assumptions; rather they surprised everyone – with routes no one had conceived of!

These new cross-border zebra routes have never before been mapped. The research constitutes a major conservation finding at a time when long distance movements are being lost around the world. The findings would assist government planners and policy-makers in preserving migratory corridors, which are becoming more and more crucial to safeguarding large populations of wildlife.

Further research – and more time – might reveal that the dispersal between the Chobe River floodplains to Nxai Pan may possibly be the longest trans-boundary mammal migration in southern Africa. And, the dispersal to Seloko Plains is critical and timely to note, as there is a growing concern over possible land-use and management changes that are happening in the surrounding area.

EWB recently conducted a wet season aerial survey of Nxai Pan to count the actual numbers of zebra that utilise this wet season range. Researchers recorded over 1 500 zebra on the pan in one day. They also plan to survey Seloko Plains soon, which will provide a better understanding of zebra ranging distribution.

EWB's director Mike Chase and Robin Naidoo have agreed to jointly publish their findings, in the hopes of shedding further light on these exciting insights into zebra movements in the KAZA TFCA region, to help conserve this critically needed habitat. They hope that this collaboration will also provide a positive example of how researchers and organisations from different countries, within the KAZA TFCA, can work together, in the spirit of a trans-boundary initiative designed in part to help understand and maintain wildlife corridors.

So the next time you are fortunate enough to see zebra in the wild, ask not whether they are black with white stripes or white with black stripes – but rather, where they make their home during the rains! **P**

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**For more information, contact Elephants Without Borders, Tel/Fax+267 625-0202 ; [www.elephantswithoutborders.org](http://www.elephantswithoutborders.org) [www.facebook.com/elephantswithoutborders](https://www.facebook.com/elephantswithoutborders)**