

A zebra orphaned by the game-capture industry; a leopard saved from a hunter's bullets. What happens to animals that have been affected by pain and human cruelty? Familiar with the world of game capture and relocation, Louise Joubert is at the helm of the SanWild Wildlife Trust, a sanctuary for wild creatures that have been rescued from certain death. **Fransje van Riel** went to see the work of this motivated woman for herself. ▶

TEXT BY FRANSJE VAN RIEL

animal ASYLUM



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE, TOP African wild dogs. This rescued pack was about to be set free within the SanWild Wildlife Trust reserve; Louise Joubert and wildlife veterinarian unload two sedated lions that were destined for hunters' guns; SanWild's dense, bushy vegetation is home to almost 5 000 rescued animals; a meerkat duo.

PREVIOUS PAGE Kariba, the female giraffe calf that almost lost her life when her mother was caught in a snare. The foal now lives with the SanWild herd.



Shafts of pale yellow sunlight filter through the thick foliage as I open the curtains of my room and peer into the bush. A small group of impalas are nibbling on the dew-covered, deep green shoots but, alerted by my movements, they cease chewing, casting velvety brown eyes in my direction. I stand still and after a moment's hesitation they resume their early morning feed.

Not far off a troop of vervet monkeys are chattering away while wildebeest youngsters kick up fine puffs of dust as they gallop playfully across the clearing beside the waterhole. The adults, less excitable, have calmly bowed down to drink.

This peaceful scene appears typical of any early morning in the African bush, but here at SanWild Wildlife Trust the majority of the animals have been given names. They also bear the burden of a personal

history that, in every case, is almost too gruesome to comprehend. But they're safe now. At this unique 6 000-hectare sanctuary, some 60 kilometres west of South Africa's Kruger National Park, they are offered a secure home, and each one represents a triumphant rescue.

Founder Louise Joubert has seen the uglier side of the country's commercial wildlife industry and knows the ins and outs of a world whose activities eclipse the conservation successes of which South Africa is justifiably proud. Once an advertising executive, she left the business world to work with wild animals in Limpopo Province and found herself involved in the game-capture and relocation industry. During her years there, she saw numerous episodes of cruelty and tragedy, and decided she needed a change of direction.

'I'll never forget the day I saw a tiny zebra foal in the back of a game-capture truck, covered in the dried blood of its dead mother,' Joubert said. The truck had swerved on the road to avoid a collision with a car and the herd it was carrying had become so stressed that they had trampled several young ones to death.

'After the incident, we could not get the foal's mother to calm down; she kept jumping around until she eventually crushed her skull against the roof of the truck and died.' It was a gruelling experience.

'When I climbed aboard, the foal lay there with her little head hanging in defeat. It was only when I tried to lift her to her feet that she showed some fighting spirit, biting me on the hip. Then she stood in a corner of the truck, shivering with exhaustion. I was determined not to let her die.'

Later, over a cup of coffee in the lounge of Savannah's Camp, one of SanWild's two luxury lodges, Joubert continued the story. 'I was still working for a game-capture organisation when the foal crossed my path, so I took her home and cared for her as best I could. Thankfully she made it. A few months later she was joined by another foal. And so it all began, with orphans coming in from all over the place.'

'I saw unweaned youngsters chased back into the veld while their mothers were trucked off to a new destination and I knew they would die of starvation; I saw them having their throats slit and being thrown into the bush. I realised I had to give them a place of safety.'

Fortuitously, Joubert and her partner André Grobler were offered a 960-hectare piece of land in 1998 and, although badly neglected and lacking any form



of infrastructure, it was ideal for her envisioned sanctuary. She resigned from her job and the couple camped on site while they converted the property into a small functioning reserve; as they did, more animals filtered in. In 2000 Joubert and Grobler founded the SanWild Wildlife Trust, a non-profit organisation dedicated to raising funds for the land, rescuing injured and orphaned wild animals and securing their long-term welfare. For the animals in their care, it was good news indeed.

It was certainly a blessing for the zebra mare that had escaped from a boma in which her entire herd had been rounded up to be shot to supply the skin trade. A neighbour, finding the mare on his farm with multiple bullets in her body, phoned Joubert and managed to load the animal into a truck and drive her to Tzaneen, where a local veterinarian performed emergency surgery in the early hours of the morning. One year later, the zebra was successfully integrated into an existing herd. Joubert has many such tales, and they involve every kind of wild animal imaginable, from tree squirrels to leopards, hartebeest to lions and porcupines to elephants.

In the face of animal rescue, Joubert seems fearless. She's been in more than one tricky situation and has even posed as a wildlife broker to save predators from hunting outfitters. While undercover, she was offered a brown hyaena for a canned hunt and met the trader at an airport to fetch the would-be trophy for her 'client'.

'I was filled with rage when I saw the tiny metal container wedged between suitcases in a trailer,' she

said. 'It had just a few air holes drilled into the side of the box. I rushed the hyaena to a local vet and we opened the container to find an extremely emaciated animal with a metal chain around its neck.' Near death, the hyaena looked like it had been imprisoned for several days, as urine and faeces littered the floor. Its paws were raw from standing in its own excrement.

Sadly, despite treatment, the animal's organs started to shut down and it was kinder to relieve it of its misery. 'The traders told me that they had found the animal on the side of the road, that it had been hit by a car. They said they'd taken it to a vet to be treated, but then they sold it to me as a trophy. Can you believe it?' Joubert exclaimed.

Luckily, SanWild also has many happy stories to report. Joining Joubert and Grobler on a game drive, I realised the extent of the couple's efforts. We passed a pool in which two hippos, removed from their miserable lives in a French travelling circus, wallowed contentedly. Moving on, we came across a group of three giraffes.



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Louise Joubert's approach to wild animal rescue has provoked mixed responses, but there's no doubting her dedication to the safety of the animals in her care.

'That's Kariba,' Joubert said, pointing to the smallest of the trio, a female calf. Kariba and her mother Sindile had been found pacing along a perimeter fence on a nearby farm where the mother giraffe had walked into a snare. Although Sindile had managed to pull the snare free from the tree to which it had been secured, it remained entangled around her neck and, as her week-old calf was unable to clear the cattle fence, she refused to leave the property.

When the SanWild rescue team arrived by helicopter, the animals were so weak that their chances of survival were slim. An attempt was made to dart the calf from the air, but it collapsed before the dart had been released. The ground-rescue team sped to its

assistance and, establishing that the animal's heart had stopped, administered CPR. Some 18 minutes later, the calf started breathing again. Its heart stopped once more en route to a holding facility, but was astonishingly revived yet again. The youngster's weakened state demanded that it be raised by hand, and its mother was released into the reserve. Kariba soon became strong enough to leave her human carers and rejoin the resident giraffes.

We drove through the lush vegetation looking out for elephants, which had arrived in 2006. Their story is equally grim. Originally cull orphans from Kruger, they had been relocated to the 100 000-hectare Thukela Biosphere in KwaZulu-Natal in the early 1990s to roam freely. There they had come close to being shot by professional hunters, and found themselves in more trouble when successful land claims resulted in the reserve shrinking to less than 10 000 hectares. In 2000 it was closed. The elephants that remained started venturing into adjacent farmlands where they were harassed by frustrated farmers, and a decision was taken to shoot them.

Before that could happen, though, the SanWild team organised a rescue attempt and managed to dart the elephants for relocation. It was an arduous process, but, on arrival at the sanctuary, the animals dispersed into the bush and have settled down remarkably well. Joubert believes that their calm behaviour challenges the accepted belief that they were 'problem' animals with an 'aggressive' nature.

We drove past jackals and servals, rescued after being hit by vehicles on the road, caracals freed from wire snares and nursed back to health, and an enclosure in which a pack of African wild dogs were awaiting release into the reserve. SanWild's magnificent lions were all originally destined for hunters' guns.

'The thing that really gets me is how insignificant an animal's eyes become once life has left them,' Joubert reflected on the big cats' intended fate. 'The softness, the glow, the love, the amusement, the fear, the excitement, the anger and hatred – all of these emotions ebb away. What possible beauty does one see in the glass eyes of a stuffed trophy animal?'

Heading back to Savannah's Camp, named for a leopard that Joubert had rescued from the canned hunting industry, we took a corner and confronted Bruce, the buffalo whose closest friend is a domestic cow. Joubert laughed, saying, 'Well, all of these guys are basically misfits, but they have been given a new lease of life. That's what is important to me.'

Wildlife rescue is not for the faint-hearted. In addition to the financial hardship and personal sacrifice, it is a lifestyle and not a hobby. 'One needs round-the-clock commitment 365 days a year. There are no weekends, no holidays and no "Me" time. Generally one only has the funding to meet the sanctuary's financial commitments,' I was told. And with 4 500 wild animals in SanWild's care, life can be a struggle. For Joubert though, giving the animals a second chance is clearly priceless.

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HOW YOU CAN HELP

SanWild Wildlife Trust is a non-profit organisation created to raise funds for the SanWild land, to rescue injured and orphaned wild animals and to secure their long-term welfare and safety. You can help the trust in a number of ways: by making a donation, by purchasing a conservation certificate to save wild animals in critical need of help, by booking a holiday at one of its two luxury camps or by volunteering your assistance. To find out more, tel. +27 (0)15 383 9958, or +27 (0)83 310 3882/459 4913, e-mail louise@sanwild.org or go to www.sanwild.org. To book a stay at Savannah's Camp or Bukisa's Tented Camp, e-mail lizel@sanwild.org



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