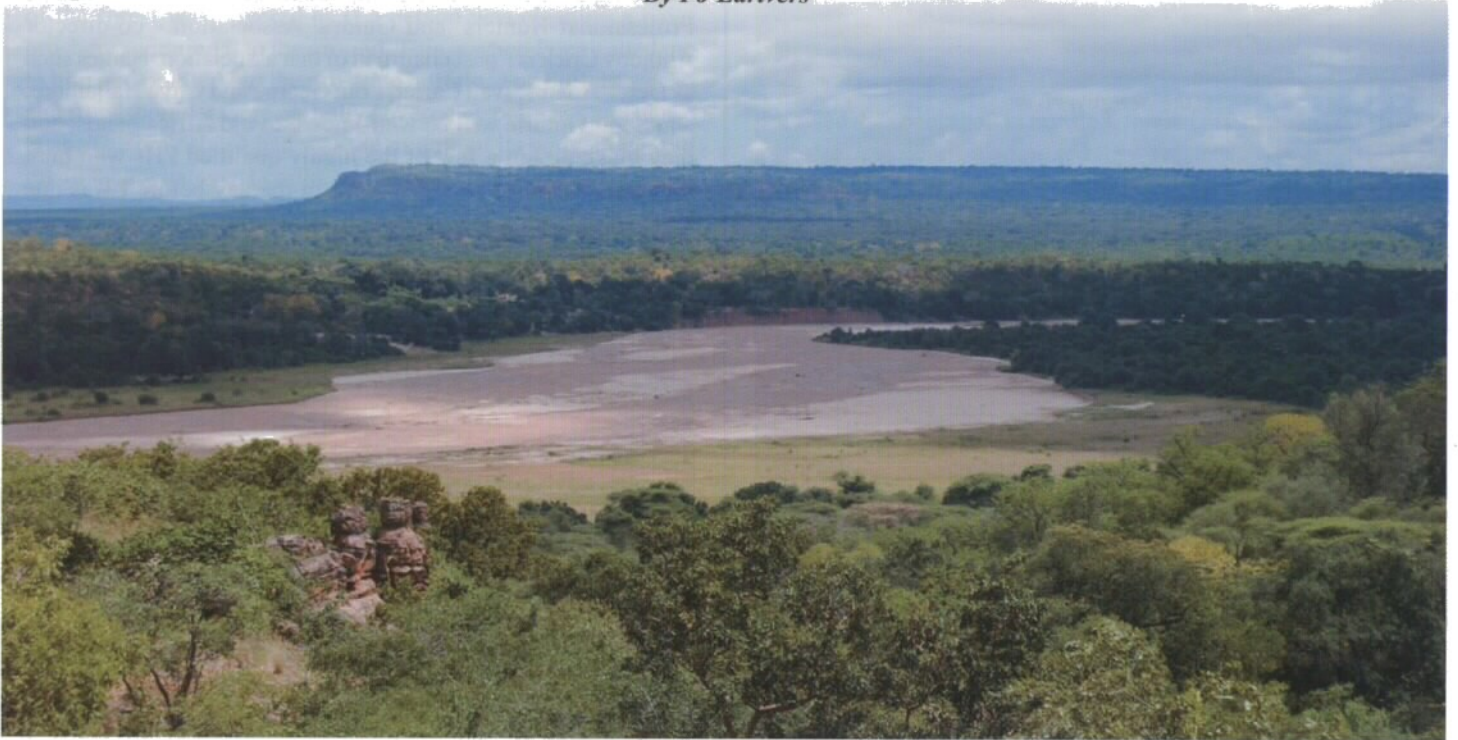




HHK's Chirisa Concession - Africa at its Finest

By I J Larivers



The Sengwa river

I don't think you could really ask for a finer piece of Africa than the one HHK Safaris Chirisa hunting concession lies nestled in. I first came to know the area as an ecologist with Tsetse Control during the end days of the Rhodesian bush war. We conducted tsetse control culling operations out of a rustic Wild West-type fort that was built below the Charama plateau - where I first came under hostile but pathetically inaccurate insurgent fire one fine afternoon in 1979 - and had double mopane log walls that would stop an RPG-7 rocket. No trace of it remains today, but the area around it is still as pristine and diverse as it was three decades ago. Much of what is now Chirisa Safari Area was in those long ago days pegged out by Anglo American, and it's nice to see that they apparently didn't find anything of "value"!

The trip in back in the '70s was a logistical exercise of some note. Because of the security situation at least two vehicles had to travel in convoy, and there was no wide tar road from KweKwe to Gokwe in those days - we would take the narrow tar road from just past Kadoma as far as the turnoff to Empress Nickel mine, and from there it was dirt the rest of the way into Gokwe. There was also no Sengwa Coal mine road, so after an overnight in Gokwe owing to the relative slow going we instead followed the dirt track that led through numerous picturesque and potentially lethal little villages to the Charama plateau, hoping that landmines were in short supply. This time around I experienced doing it the easy way. I was met at Harare International Airport by Giles Raynor, who operates an excellent

charter operation called Altair Aviation. We climbed into his Cessna 206, and an hour and a half, not two days, later, we landed at the well-maintained little grass airstrip at Chiwonde.

I was collected at the airstrip by learner PHs Ben and Matt, and we drove to Ingwe camp, collecting a gang of labourers who had been carrying out road repairs along the way. That evening, accompanied by Phil, the camp manager, we drove back through the National Parks station at Sipani Gate in response to a plea from the local villagers just outside the safari area to shoot a PAC elephant to compensate them for crop losses. It was a very pleasant few hours in the bush, but no elephant put



A typical 'A' frame chalet at Ingwe Camp



A comfortable bar and dining area overlooks the Sengwa river



The easiest way in is in a Cessna 206

in an appearance and we were back at Ingwe just before 02.00 the next morning. After a late breakfast and one of the more comfortable night's sleeps I'd had for a while, I started looking around. Over the next couple of days, Phil drove me around the various camps and through the adjacent safari area while Matt and Ben got along with the business of road repairs and camp maintenance - an Italian client was due in in less than a week. Being just after the rains, the bush was thick, but we did get to see quite a lot of wildlife. Vociferous hyenas came close into the camp at night, and their whooping calls are one of my favourite bush sounds.

Chirisa Safari Area abuts to the northwest on the Chizarira National Park, and while the park has recently been hard-hit by poaching, there is a plethora of game and birdlife, and varied highveld and lowveld vegetation forms a particularly dense ground cover as a result of the Sengwa river running directly through the HHK concession, being fed by numerous perennial springs. Because of the thick bush, the area boasts one of the highest game concentrations of any safari area. And because of the thick bush, Chirisa offers up some of the best fair-chase hunting to be had anywhere. It is especially well-known for its lion and buffalo, but the elephant hunting is also good as the concession lies along the elephant migration routes between the Zambezi river and Hwange National Park in the west.

HHK Safaris is one of the big names in Zimbabwe - and Africa, owned by Graham and Anton Hingeston and Anthony Crick and with exclusive rights to some of the finest and well conserved hunting and fishing concessions. They operate over 15 different camps around Zimbabwe, each one with something unique to offer, and can tailor any hunting or fishing trip or combination of both as requested by their clients. They are registered with the Safari Operators' Association of Zimbabwe, and maintain extremely high standards within the industry.

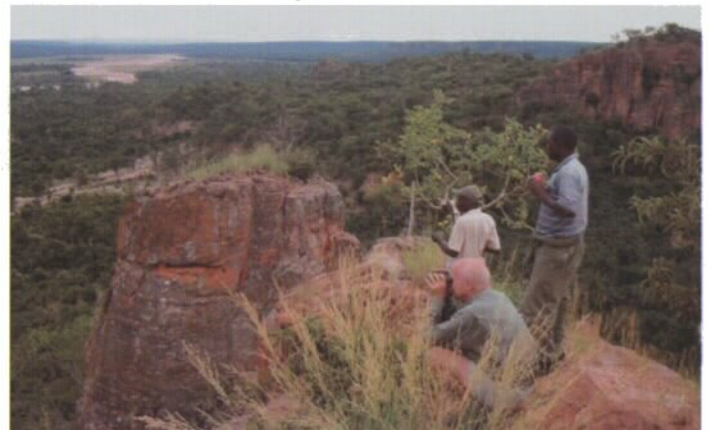
During my stay I was superbly looked after by the camp staff, who kept my 'A' frame immaculately clean, did an

excellent job of washing and ironing, and provided three fine meals per day - far more than I could eat.

The number of hunters that HHK will accept during a season is limited of necessity by very strictly-managed quotas, which provides very good trophies for the early birds. It has been largely through the efforts of HHK and its PHs that National Parks has lowered a number of the quotas - buffalo are now down from 70 to 30 per annum, and the resulting improvement in trophy quality has already been seen.

At HHK, there is no such thing as "another client" - one of the hallmarks of the operation is that each and every hunter receives the maximum degree of personalised attention possible, including their own PH who will be a member of the Zimbabwe Professional Hunters' and Guides' Association - co-director Anthony Crick is a past chairman of that association. Names such as Derek Adams, Ivan Carter, Lou, George and Clive Hallamore, and Scott Guthrie will be well-known to old Africa hands, and they make up but a few of the highly qualified PHs who hunt for HHK. "Gomez" Adams drove in the day before I was due to leave, as a client was coming in with Giles on the flight I was to take back, and we had a very pleasant evening by the fire pit.

HHK Safaris operates three different camps in the 300,000 acre Chirisa. In this way the company can offer a high degree of exclusivity to their clients. Two camps - Ingwe and Nyati - are situated on the high plateau overlooking the Sengwa River and its adjoining floodplains, and in order to make the best use of a common infrastructure - skinning shed, generator and stores - the company's Chirisa camps are nonetheless located in close proximity to one another. However they are discreetly sited so that none of the camps intrudes on another's privacy.



The high ground above the Sengwa offers some breathtaking scenery



The lion has just stepped out - how many other tracks are visible



Majestic baobabs seen from Chiwonde



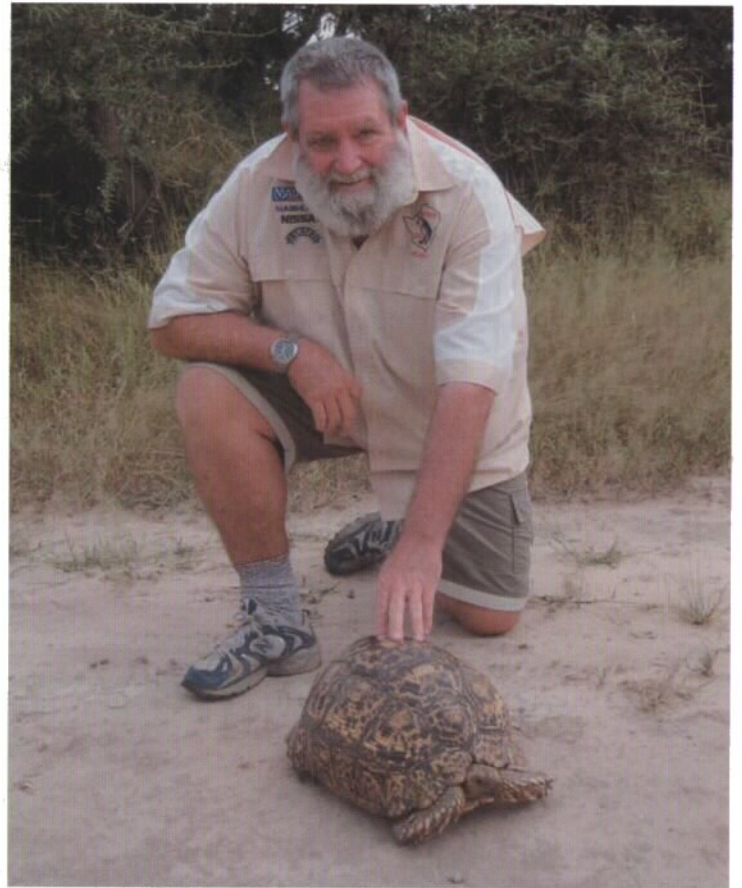
Shooting a .416 Off the bench isn't everyone's idea of fun, but the camp has a dedicated firing range

Ingwe Camp comprises four double 'A' frame bedroom chalets, and is the HHK flagship camp in the area, able to cater for six hunters or three couples. Ingwe overlooks the Sengwa river, and there is plenty of game viewing on the floodplains bordering the river. Each chalet has two beds, a shower, flushing toilet and basin. An overhead fan eases the heat during the warmer months. The rooms have electrical lighting and three pronged square plug sockets for plugging in battery chargers &c. There is a central bar-dining room-lounge area which includes an outside firepit for relaxing around in the evenings. The gardens are well maintained and a swimming pool adds a nice finishing touch, especially in the hotter months.

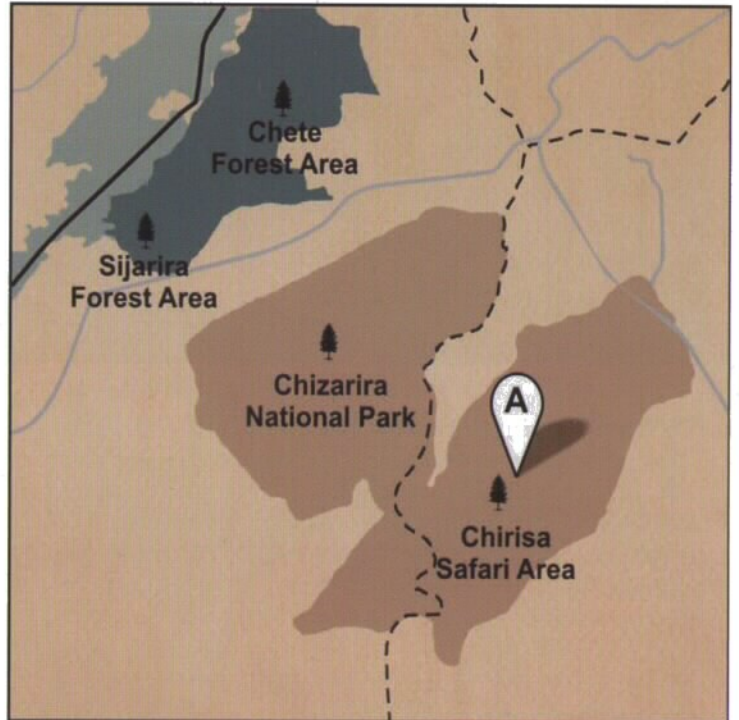
Nyati Camp is similar in design to Ingwe Camp, but situated on a spectacular rocky cliff overlooking the mopane woodlands on the banks of the Sengwa River. The three 'A' frame chalets, although slightly smaller than the Ingwe chalets, have the same amenities. Situated among imposing granite rocks, the well-kept lawns are the playground of rock hyraxes and squirrels which frolic each morning and evening, oblivious to any visitors. There is no swimming pool at Nyati, but the central dining and bar area is large and comfortable. The outside fireplace is set on the edge of the cliff and must surely be one of the most scenic fireplaces in Africa, but attention should be paid to the number of little brown bottles consumed of an evening!

And then there is the adjacent 90,000 acre Sengwa concession where HHK maintains a comfortable house at the National Parks Sengwa Research Station, from which clients can hunt the surrounding area.

Being one of the examiners for the firearms proficiency phase of the learner professional hunters' and guides' examinations, I was very pleased to see a well-developed shooting range at



This fellow's been around for a great many years - the tortoise, that is



Chirisa. It is, of course, essential for clients to check the zero on their firearms when they arrive, but it is equally essential for even full-license PHs and guides to keep their hand in. I am a gun-nut, and it is really nice to spend time with folks who see their firearms as more than just another tool required for the job; Phil and Ben and Matt's knowledge was excellent.

The few days I spent at Chirisa were a trip down memory lane, but much more than that too - I got to experience a safari camp as it should be run - with all that that entails.