

Project Update: March 2016

Leading a team of four, my two research assistants, a national parks and wildlife ranger and myself into the park, we embarked on our second protocol on the pangolin survey. We took the Ngweshla road but ended at Kennedy vlei where along the way we randomly selected termite mounds for sampling at a practical distance from the road. We measured the depth of the mound if it had any open crevices, its breadth as well as height and recorded the data. We would also note the habitat in which these termite mounds lay in, the soil type and for the interesting bit was noting the presence or absence or sign of activity at the burrows i.e. animal footprints, pangolin signage which includes but not restricted to scales, footprints, and pellets. The same protocol was done at Maincamps Airstrip vlei where the most active burrows were found and GPS locations recorded. Some burrows had very fresh spoors of what we are still cross referring with literature and other experts in the field as pangolin footprints (an interesting find it was). The sites selected were based on a survey that I took asking around if there had been any more sightings between the last time I was in the park and now, and the Maincamps airstrip sighting still has people talking. And of course, tour guides, one even took a GPS location and pictures (have not received them yet, but by next update will do) of what he deemed the biggest pangolin he has seen to date (he claims to have seen five so far in three different locations in his life).

Considering this visit was done in the wet season and so much activity was noted, for a comparable analysis and cross tabulations is necessary for the same to be done in winter as well as the dry season. This will probably enable us to come up with a conclusive baseline study which can then inform conservation measures regarding habitat use of the cryptic mammal. Concurrent protocols will also be done in the Forestry as a number of sightings have fallen in that area as well.

Although actually seeing the mammal in a burrow would have been a great find, it only proves that this animal in its own regard has developed a great sense of protection by being cryptic and nocturnal such that it does not draw attention to its highly threatened survival. Conservation awareness of a rarely sighted species can be difficult but it is possible and mapping the distribution of this animal and understanding its basic ecology is a great first step, one my team and I are proud to be taking.

