

Project Update Aug 2008:

We made our camp knowing that the lions must have been close by.

We have camped in the bush many, many times but this was different, Jealous had looked at me in disbelief when I told him that we had to camp in the bush. We were on Starvation Island, following up on a report from Edward Muchuchuti that he had seen the spoor (footprints) of at least one lion. The local fishermen confirmed that a male and female lion had been seen on the island.

We were astonished. It is 1.5km in a straight line to the main land. The water in between is quite deep. What had motivated the lions to make such a swim??? We would never know. The fact is they were there.

The Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority (ZPWMA) had responded immediately to my request for permission to intervene. A letter authorizing me to dart and thus immobilize the lions then remove them from the island had been issued within minutes.

Jealous and I drove to Tashinga and met up with Edward for a meeting with the Warden. He was positive and cooperative as he always is, immediately putting 12 ZPWMA scouts at my disposal.

Fresh lion spoor was all around us as we climbed out of the boat onto the island and carried our kit to the chosen area for our camp. Nervous laughter and a few jokes masked the tension. I prepared my darts.

With the camp quickly established, we set out in an extended line to search the thick bush for the lions. The plan, if you could call it that, was to get me close enough to be able to dart the lions. I would need to be 30 metres from them, on foot. We moved through the bush, following the fresh spoor, the lions were walking all over the island, maybe exploring or perhaps searching for the dogs? On the northeastern side of the island we found very fresh spoor and moved closer together.

It was blistering hot and I was sweating hard, though my mouth was dry. Cautiously we moved forward, the bush getting thicker and thicker. A blur of movement to our right sent us all spinning around instantly. We stood motionless, trying to control our breathing. We moved forward again and came out on the other side of the thick bush into the open. No lions. It was getting dark now so I called off the search. I could not dart the lions at night, it would not have been safe for the lions or us. Exhausted by the search and the tension we slept soundly that night.

Another search of the island the next day revealed little. The ZPWMA scouts suggested we hang some bait in a suitable tree and build a blind for me to sit in and wait for the lions to come. I agreed. A suitable tree was located and the bait was dragged around the island to create a scent trail while the rest of us were busy making the blind and preparing the area, clearing the long grass so that nothing could get in the way of the dart. I was careless and cut my leg while clearing the grass. The deep wound needed stitches but that would have to wait. Jealous joked that my blood would help attract the lions!

With the bait set I took up my place in the blind, which was constructed of leafy branches and grass, camouflaging me from the lions, just 26 metres from the bait. I sat in silence, two ZPWMA scouts sat behind me. I looked around at the construction of leaves and grass and doubted that it would stop a lions charge. I wondered if the nerves of my two scouts would hold out. Darkness fell and we abandoned the blind to trudge wearily back to our camp and the waiting search party. The next morning we checked the bait and found the three dogs sitting underneath it, there was no sign of any lions. Another exhaustive search of the island failed to reveal any presence of the lions and we were convinced that they had swum back to the mainland. The bait was cut down from the tree and the dogs enjoyed a feast.