Paul Kirtley Podcast Episode 61 Transcript

[00:00:00] **Paul Kirtley:** This is the Paul Kirtley podcast, episode 61,

[00:00:05] **Podcast Announcer:** The Paul Kirtley Podcast, Wilderness Bushcraft, Survival Skills, and Outdoor Life.

[00:00:17] **Paul Kirtley:** Welcome, welcome to episode 61 of the Paul Kirtley Podcast. Today I'm joined by James Steyn, a FGASA Scout. This is the highest guiding and tracking qualification in Southern Africa. FGASA, in case you don't know, is the Field Guides Association of Southern Africa. James is general manager of Senalala Safari Lodge in the Klaserie, part of the Greater Kruger, and he's been guiding professionally for more than 30 years.

He's also a long standing FGASA assessor and one of only a handful of people to hold both the top level FGASA dangerous game trails qualification and have senior tracker status under the CyberTracker system. In this conversation, James shares the twists and turns of his career from growing up on a cattle farm near Kruger to guiding wilderness trails inside the park to working with legendary conservationists like Dr. Ian Player.

We get into what makes walking safari so special, the structure and standards behind FGASA, guiding, the rigor of the CyberTracker system and what it really means to qualify as a Scout. This is a wide ranging and insightful discussion about guiding, conservation and deep skills in the African bush.

I hope you enjoy my conversation with James Steyn.

Well, I am very happy to welcome James Steyn to the podcast. Welcome, James.

[00:01:45] **James Steyn:** Thank you.

[00:01:46] **Paul Kirtley:** And it's very good to have you here. Well, very good to be here with you because we're at your lodge in South Africa and we can talk more about that shortly. And I've been enjoying your hospitality and your wisdom and your experience while I've been here, and that's been fantastic.

I think for the listeners what would be really useful if we start off a little bit with where you've come from in the sense of your career. 'cause I think that will give a really good context to what you're doing now. If they understand a little bit about where you've come from in terms of where you've worked, how your career has progressed.

Yeah. Some of the twists and turns along the way. So you are you're working now as a guide in South Africa, and we'll get into the qualifications and the experience required to do that. But how did you, as a young James Steyn, how did you decide that this was a path that you wanted to follow, and then what were the first steps on that path?

Sure. If you wouldn't mind sharing that with us.

[00:02:40] **James Steyn:** Not at all. But thanks for having me. And I think the best part is the fact that you're here. Yes. Yeah. That's nice. It's always nicer to, I suppose, interview someone and be in the environment. Absolutely. I think that helps a lot. Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. I've, I started pretty much, I was fortunate enough to grow up on a farm, a cattle farm most of my younger life, close to the world famous Kruger National Park.

And I think, so there, there was a seed planted there already. On occasion, we would just pop into the park and on the farm I would ride horse and shoot birds with a small caliber rifle and things like that. So, I never thought directly about this as a industry or a career path, never. But naturally my soul just gravitated into it.

So when I got a bit older, I started to have this, I have started to have this yearning for. The outside environment. 'cause we did at some stage move away from the farm and live in cities as well. And I think it was rekindled by wildlife shows. And then I started reading books and then I started thinking and understanding that I need to make a conscious effort to get into this industry somehow.

And I think that's pretty much where it all started off. And I remember the first thing that I did that was active was I got involved in environmental education with younger kids. So I worked for a, an organization at the time many years ago now, 30 years ago, called the Gaia Foundation.

And the whole idea there was to take underprivileged kids into nature and basically just show them the odd track or the odd tree and the odd bird and so on and so forth. So there wasn't anything very structured. Pretty much you've got so much freedom with kids of that age, you can do with them just what you want, pretty much in terms of what you're educating them in.

So you didn't have to do much to get a good reaction out of them.

So that's where it started. And then I started sourcing information about getting into the industry and understood that there's some formal qualifications you've gotta have for that. And I started out on that route getting qualified.

I've got a degree in conservation, nature conservation, which is more loosely based on conservation principles and management thereof rather than guiding, which is something that happened. It happened later.

[00:04:49] **Paul Kirtley:** So the degree, did that come after working with the underprivileged kids? Was that something you think, well, I like being out in the environment, I'm gonna follow up with my own personal education in that realm, or was that something that came before you worked with the kids?

[00:05:02] **James Steyn:** Okay. So that is interesting because I, after that, I remember one day traveling between cities and I saw this sign that there was a game reserve. And I then knew in my heart this is pretty much what I wanted to do. So I, something just pulled me in

there and I literally drove in there, went down to the main office, asked to speak to the manager, this is how it happened.

And I met the guy, Neville Halla was his name, I'll never forget. And I said, look I've done a bit of environmental education. I'm currently busy with that. I'm aiming towards going to study in the field in that particular field conservation at a later stage. So I hadn't started studying yet.

What's the likelihood and the chance of getting a job here? And I didn't exactly know what that even pertains at the time or what that meant. It just looked good. And I knew that nature is what I like. And he said, sure. He said, can you start tomorrow? So, so I said, oh, okay. Maybe in a month's time, if you don't mind.

So that's pretty much how it started off. And I. Yeah, I was doing some odd jobs at the time that wasn't too fulfilling.

And I went and started working there as a guide and I worked there for about five years as a guide, which they trained me up to be. And it, it naturally came very easy to me.

I have to say, some of the learning the plants and some of the birds and some of the concepts and I think growing up on a farm, going to the Kruger National Park as a youngster, had a lot to do with that. It came quite easy to me and I guided for them for five years and then I got involved at the same reserve with a guy called Dr. Ian Player who was, is world renowned for saving white rhino from extinction in the 1960s.

And our reserve were going to get additional black rhino introduced from back then what they were called the old Natal Parks Board. And he was heavily involved in that. But one of the criteria for us getting the rhino was that we had to have a active anti-poaching unit.

So whether there was poaching or not, didn't matter. We had to have a unit.

And I saw this was going really in the direction that I want, or that I'm interested in. And I stuck my hand up for that. So they send me off to KwaZulu-Natal, which is one of the provinces in Southern Africa where the Natal Parks Board, which is the oldest conservation body in South Africa Natal Parks Board, they were the very first people that officially made conservation a tangible thing. And I got some training under them and went back and started a mounted anti-poaching unit on horseback. Because I had the horse background from growing up on the farm. Farm. And I thought it'd be ideal way to patrol a large area very quickly is using horses. And I started and I ran this anti-poaching unit for about two years for them on horseback. But there was always something missing inside of me, which I was yearning back towards this part of the country. The Eastern Transvaal as it was known then, now Mpumalanga, where the Kruger National Park is.

And I started then remembering what my initial purpose or idea was to go and study, to have officially attained some sort of a qualification, which could put me back in this area. And I then left and studied full time. So I had worked in conservation and guiding for about six or seven years before I went and studied.

[00:08:21] **Paul Kirtley:** Okay. So even though you were guiding and that's what you wanted to do, you still saw some value in going and studying?

[00:08:28] **James Steyn:** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:08:28] **Paul Kirtley:** Full time. And was that because you wanted to go... you thought that would directly improve your guiding ability, or did you think that you were maybe gonna go in a different direction at that point?

[00:08:38] **James Steyn:** No.

[00:08:38] **Paul Kirtley:** Particularly with the conservation and the anti-poaching. Is that a thinking point at that point?

[00:08:43] **James Steyn:** Sure.

That would've influenced directly the route I wanted to go in originally, which was conservation management. And I needed that. And also at the time to work in the Kruger National Park, which was always my dream, having grown up next to it. I knew I had to have a formal qualification to get in there. And so that never disappeared. Momentarily there for the six or seven years that I was at this other reserve. It is almost the case of I'm already now in what I want to do. Why should I formalize it all?

And in fact, it's quite interesting because in conversation with Dr. Ian Player at the time, he said this to me because I told him what my aspirations were. And he said, well, why do you wanna go and study to do something you're already doing? Doing? Yeah.

Yeah.

And, but I knew I always wanted to work in the Kruger National Park, and I required this degree to be able to do that.

Okay. And so I gave all of that up. I'd saved some money. It was quite interesting because I had left school much earlier on in my life than most other people. I was, I guess what you would call a dropout. So, having now a couple of years later, going back into formal education was quite a challenge.

And I, I never knew how I was gonna do that, but I didn't care for it somehow. I just always. Stayed positive in thinking that I would be able to. And I arrived at this college where you studied and I was given a special exemption alright. Because I didn't have the high school grades to be able to gain access into the formal structure.

And the dean called me in at the time, which is a very nice guy, and we friends to this day. And he sat there and he said to me, he said, you just have to understand that you're at the lower end of the spectrum here because you don't have all the qualifications and the grades that are necessary for this, so we are gonna be keeping a really good eye on you.

And if you fail one subject you're out. So this was the mandate that I was given mm-hmm. by him. And somehow I managed to get through it and at the end of it, which was quite amazing, I think we started out with 56 people in the class. We only 16 people qualified. And I ended up with six distinctions. Wow. Which I never ever thought I was capable of doing, but clearly when I found what I was really interested in

it brought out the best in me. And then I did this three year degree there's a year practical as well, and. The practical is an interesting component because when I was on the practical, I started making connections with other people who led me into the reserves where I wanted to end up being in the end anyway.

During my practical, it was quite interesting how it worked. I was supposed to go straight back to college after the practical year, which is wedged in the middle of that degree. And instead I met somebody during my practical that had ties with the Natal Parks Board and trails guiding specifically, they call it a wilderness trails officer.

And all that is really, is you're someone who guides people on foot through the wilderness where dangerous game occur. As you can imagine, there's a lot of skills involved in that. So, so then this guy during my practical, when it came to an end actually got me a job in Natal Parks Board as a trails officer already.

And I went and did that for two years. And only after that went back to the college to finish the degree. So this stood me in really good stead and I knew it would, because ultimately I wanted to get into Kruger National Park.

So now I had the degree they were looking for in Kruger National Park, and I had experience already in the field I wanted to go into initially. So understanding, I know I said conservation management, but in order in the Kruger, you start out as a trails guide.

[00:12:22] **Paul Kirtley:** So everyone starts as a trails guide.

[00:12:24] **James Steyn:** Who wants to become conservation management right. Or managers first start out as a trails guide.

And once you've proven yourself there for a year or two and a conservation management job comes available, you then gravitate into that. Okay. So that's how the system work. And I understood the system 'cause I constantly spoke to people who were involved in it, in management and so on. To understand what I need and how I should get there.

And it was actually an amazing thing because my final exam, I got a message on a answering machine of a friend. There were no cell phones back then. It was an answering machine. Yeah. And I got invited to an interview in Kruger National Park. The flagship of National Parks in South Africa.

It's a very large game reserve. It's the size of a country. , 2 million hectares. That's about that's about 19,782 square kilometers. Worth of natural environment, which is absolutely amazing.

It spans three, four different countries. South Africa, Mozambique, Botswana, and Zimbabwe.

And I got this interview lined up and I remember packing my bags the morning. I wrote my final exam and driving for two days straight 'cause that's the distance it took, arrived in the park. Met up with management, had the interview the next day. And this was an amazing thing for me because when I arrived in the interview room, there were 10, I think they said there were almost 500 applicants because it's a much sought after job.

I think only less than 2% of the country's population will ever get an opportunity to be able to be a trails guide in Kruger National Park. And I remember arriving in this interview room and there were nine candidates sitting there. I was the last guy in and I had a suit and a tie, which I thought at the time was the right thing to dress.

And these other nine guys all sat there with their parks board uniforms on. So they all already worked inside the park. Ah,

yes.

And I remember that there were only two positions for 10 people.

So I remember that creating a bit of a emotional let down inside of me thinking there's no way I'm gonna get this job.

These guys already work here.

And then I learned some of them already have been assisting on some of these trails. But I did know that I had the degree that was required. Which probably they also have, but I had the two years as a trails officer already in and wilderness trails as a concept in South Africa started in Umfolozi, and that principle was brought from there to the Kruger National Park.

So,

[00:14:44] **Paul Kirtley:** What's, just for people who, dunno what's Umfolozi, can you just,

[00:14:47] **James Steyn:** yeah. So, Umfolozi is the flagship game reserve under the Natal Parks Board. Like the Kruger National Park is the flagship game reserve for National Parks in South Africa. And they're based in two separate areas, but they're still under Savannah, under the same kind of biome with the same kind of animals.

And Natal Parks Board has been renowned forever for their conservation efforts, almost even before Kruger did some things. So there, I ended up and I remember going into the interview and it went really well and I was told a couple of days later that I was successful with another guy who again is a friend of mine to this day. So then I ended up in Kruger National Park as a trails guide where I always wanted to be.

So it's the dream job. I got the dream job I was always after. And what year was that? Can you remember what year that was? I can I got that job in, it was about February.

2000. Yeah. But now understanding I'd already worked in conservation and guiding prior to that for about seven years. Yes. Yeah. Yes. So I think I started my guiding career in I remember the, not think I do remember the 1st of January, 1994. I started my guiding career. And then I had the degree wedged in between there.

In there. Yes. Over a period of time. So that brings me currently to 30 years, 30 odd years that I've been involved. Yeah. And yes, I got the job and that's where it started. So now just to cap all of that, to end this conversation, I was then in the system to hopefully become a conservation manager. But when the conservation manager positions came round, something inside of me just told me just to hang on to the walking safari component. And that's what I did. And so I missed the boat essentially for those jobs that were available. And then from there I moved on into the guiding industry as it is today in the private sector.

And I never got to be the conservation manager, but that's fine because I naturally. I think became what I was meant to be in some way. What? Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. So,

[00:16:48] **Paul Kirtley:** so when you were working in Kruger as the trails officer Yeah. You were guiding people. What did that con consist of?

What did that entail? Who Yeah. What type of people were you getting? What were you doing with them? How were you having to look after and just, so that people listening can picture that in their mind. Sure. 'Cause I think it's it's an interesting concept. Concept.

[00:17:07] **James Steyn:** It's very interesting.

So

it's, I think if you, to ask me to suggest the highest quality guiding experience that you can have, maybe even in Africa. I'd say it's first and foremost, it's a walking safari.

Walking safaris are vastly different from driving around in a vehicle because you are on the ground.

But I think a Kruger National Park Wilderness Trail is for me, right up there as probably the best wildlife experience you can have. So what it basically entails is that we were all allocated a small camp, a primitive camp. It had a fence around it, and you could take eight guests at a time.

And there were two guides, a head guide and an assistant, and then there was a cook and there's no electricity at these camps. And they stuck right out in massive wilderness areas. I remember the one that I spend most time in was. About 150,000 acres of wilderness that you have to yourself and those eight guests for three days at a time. Amazing. Yeah, it is absolutely amazing. And there's several of those throughout the Kruger National Park. Again, that spans the length of several countries. So you would meet your guests twice twice a week.

There was it, a trail would go in on a Wednesday afternoon and come out on a Saturday morning.

Then the Saturday night you'd have at home. And then Sunday afternoon you'd go in again till Wednesday morning. So you'd do two in a row, and then the next trails guide pair would take over.

So

you only did two trails a month pretty much. Okay. But they've got challenges.

They're not as easy always as people living remotely, primitively like that. It's not always as easy as people think. And of course you've gotta understand, we are dealing with things, these dangerous animals that potentially wanna kill you all the time. There's mosquitoes that wanna kill you, that ticks are eating you alive, so, so very challenging.

So we would meet our guests then at one of the main camps in Kruger National Park, and we'd drive them out. We'd do the shopping first for the whole trail. All the food and all the drinks. And we'd meet the eight guests, driving them into the wilderness camp, settle them in on the first afternoon.

And then for the next three nights you're at this camp. And for two full days, you walk. And it's only walking, it's exclusively walking in these wilderness areas. So you'd go on an early morning, one, come back for a brunch, walk again in the afternoon, and the whole thing would repeat itself. So for two days, so there's basically four walks, two morning walks, and two afternoon walks.

And your job then as a representative of National Parks, wasn't just guiding, per se, it was really, you are an ambassador for the conservation principles of national parks. So you had to, it wasn't just about tracking and finding dangerous animals on foot for people, which is a large part of it, of course.

But you had to be able to have knowledge to explain water policies, burning policies. So how the park uses fire as a management tool. How the park manages water, whether it's artificial watering points or whether it's natural water. Game capture, for instance. So a whole array of things. So now you're becoming a conservation officer that is guiding people and relating those principles to them.

And then on the side also just enjoying, seeing nice birds, looking at tracks discussing botany. Finding dangerous game on foot, which is a great thrill as you can imagine. So that's what the job of a trails ranger in Kruger National Park. And just to cap that in the private sector, also do these trails in their own capacity, whether they just a morning walk from a lodge.

Or a several day sleep out type walk with a backpack. That's also something that you could do. Yeah.

[00:20:33] **Paul Kirtley:** Yeah. Well, we'll come onto to that for sure, because I think that's, yeah. That kind of brings us up to date in some ways. Yeah. 'Cause you're still doing those.

[00:20:41] **James Steyn:** That's right.

[00:20:41] **Paul Kirtley:** But how long did you work in Kruger for then? 'cause you said you passed up these opportunities to, to take the next step. Yes. How long did you end up working as a trails guide?

[00:20:49] **James Steyn:** So, so I was in Kruger for about five years. Yeah. So I did roughly about six or five or six years in the private sector.

Studied Kruger for five years and I've been 20 years currently. here. As we, where we are currently speaking to each other at Senalala in the private sector. Yeah.

[00:21:05] **Paul Kirtley:** So Senalala is the lodge that you run, you manage now and you have part ownership in that business. Yes. So do you wanna explain a little bit about the setup here and how that works and what you do here?

So, and then, because there's a lot we can talk about around that, but that's right. Just to set the scene for people and then we can delve into different areas. Sure. Yeah.

[00:21:25] **James Steyn:** So, so along the entire western boundary of the Kruger National Park, there's privately owned land, which is open to Kruger, so there's no fences.

So that's the distinction between national parks that's managed by the government and owned by the government and the private sector who's owned by private entities. So essentially it's the same animals, it's the same bush, everything. It makes no difference, but it's private versus government owned.

These large track of land tracts of land have private safari, photographic safari lodges in them. So guests from all over the world come and stay. And some of these lodges are at high luxury, five star, six star. Some of them are more primitive, some of them are very primitive. So there's something for everyone depending on what you're essentially looking for.

So you come on a quintessential African safari, you stay at this lodge, they feed you three times a day and they take you on activities, whether they're driving safaris from a vehicle or walking safaris from on foot. And I've been managing Senalala which is in one of these privately owned concessions next to Kruger National Park now for the past 20 years.

I'm the general manager here alongside my wife and also guide as well. I have got guides working for me, but I do some of the guiding, especially the more specialist guiding. And that's how the system works in these private reserves.

Yeah.

[00:22:41] **Paul Kirtley:** So in, in terms of the guiding let's explore that term a little bit.

Sure. 'cause we've used it in describing what you did early in your career. Yeah. It's still a term that you used and attached to what you do and what your team do. What does a guide in South Africa do and what does the job encompass and what areas of knowledge does that encompass? 'cause it's probably broader than a lot of listeners might imagine in terms of all the things that you need to know about in, in the environment as well as looking after the guests.

[00:23:11] **James Steyn:** Yeah in 30 years it's gone from very gung-ho guys with really short shorts and, and, and, and tears.

[00:23:21] **Paul Kirtley:** No, I'm just, there's still some people wearing short shorts.

[00:23:25] **James Steyn:** No. There is,

[00:23:26] **Paul Kirtley:** and the listeners will know who I'm talking about. There's a certain British individual who still wears short shorts and all of you now laughing, I'm laughing with you. Anyway. Sorry, James.

[00:23:38] **James Steyn:** Oh, that's very good. So, shirts that were washed out with tears in them.

And I think some guys would've rolled the pack of camel twenties in their sleeve.

It, it really, back then that's, that it was seen as this really, the camel man kind of a thing. Okay. And rough, unshaven and so on. And it was quite, it was, there wasn't, it wasn't very formalized back then, but yet the people taught themselves in many ways.

So guiding has just gone from that 30, 40 years ago to where it's a lot more structured and professional today. Not that it wasn't professional back then, it was just, it was a rough diamond if you can imagine that. And so. There's a structure in South Africa now called FGASA, the Field Guides Association of Southern Africa which really regulates guiding.

It's a, it's an organization that, well, let me rephrase that. It's not the organization that regulates guiding the government regulates, guiding. So the government requires you to have a certain structure of qualifications in order to be legal, to guide. And that's interesting in South Africa, because there's many other African countries and globally organizations where people guide people in the wilderness, where they don't need any formal or structured qualifications. Then what FGASA does, the Field Guides Association, they've created a series of qualifications that essentially guide you along a route to become the best possible guide that you can be.

So different levels there's a theoretical and a practical component that, so the amount of this amount of hours that you need to get in on foot or in a vehicle, and then theoretical studies that you have to do, and the two work together, which is actually quite nice because you can't do the one without the next one.

So in order to guide Inside Africa, first and foremost, you have to get qualified to be legal. And then you can go and you can then get a job at one of these lodges. And that's

a FGASA qualification that, that's a FGASA ation. There are different levels of FGASA qualification. Yeah.

There's many. So, so there's a basic, there's a basic, in the olden days, they used to be called level one, level two, and level three.

They've been restructured. Now they now they're now called NQF two because it's the government structure that's attached to it.

So it aligns with a sort of level of education elsewhere. Yeah, that's correct. In other areas that you could do, yes. The

QCTO, the qualifications framework or structure in South Africa has, they've divided every job possibly that you can get in South Africa into different levels.

And there's a level for guiding there as well. So there's an NQF two, which is an introductory guide. Often also referred to as an apprentice guide. And then as an NQF four four, which is field guide. So everyone strives to be at least field guide. No, nobody really wants to be called an apprentice.

Even though at that level in QF two, you can, you're already legal to guide. But FGASA being the private industry recognizes you only as an apprentice at that stage. So the standards are higher than what's required, essentially. To be legally guiding. Which is what FGASA has always stood for.

But it's quite interesting because as an organization through the years it, it takes a lot of flack, like everything, because nobody's, you can't be everything to everybody all the time. So there's always people who, are inquiring and not agreeing and think this should rather be and so on and so forth.

So there's always a bouncing backwards and forth, but the point being, it lays out a good structure a path for you to follow, to qualify yourself and at least have some proof. That you're a competent guide. Yeah.

[00:27:08] **Paul Kirtley:** And so when they're doing that level two and level four. And when people are aspiring to level four Yeah.

What's encompassed in those? Sure. In those in the levels, certifications and levels. You don't have to go through what's in level two versus level four, but when someone gets to level four Yeah. What have they learned about, what have they studied, what do they know about? Okay. Alright. Just for people to understand what's included in there.

[00:27:30] **James Steyn:** So, so there's level one, two, and three or NQF two NQF four, and then Professional Field Guide. Which is the old level three. Now professional is where everybody wants to be. Now what's nice with Professional Field Guide is it opens the door for you then to specialize in certain fields within the FGASA framework.

On the side of that running parallel to all these different guiding levels, there's also what we call a trails guide qualification, which really enables you to be able to take walks in a dangerous game area. So you can stay a vehicle based guide if you want to. You can stay a vehicle based guide if you want to, or you can do the walking component as well.

So you could do both. Or you can just focus on either one of those two. And the field, the streams of fields are there for both of those to do. So when you do the professional field guide qualification, you then open yourself up to what we call SKS qualification, special skills and knowledge and just to name a few.

They're always working on developing more, but just to name a few. There's dangerous game. It's called S-K-S-D-G, then there's astronomy, there's wild flowers and there's birding and so on and so forth. So you can then specialize. And I think everybody who's serious about guiding aspires to be the higher levels.

If you wanna get just the entry level qualification or just be a field guide, that's fine. And those guides are good enough to do a relatively good or create a relatively good guiding experience for people. And that's fine. And then just stay there. But you're always wondering when you're in this pathway, what's the next thing?

Or shouldn't I know more or must I move on? And so on and so forth. So not everybody gets right at the top levels, but it's also not necessary. And it's important to make that distinction because it's not required of you. There's no pressure on you other than yourself. I love this saying that a friend of mine says he's an ex Navy Seal.

He says, the only person you should be competing against is yourself

yeah. Yeah.

And I've always liked that as I always listened to that in my mind when I think about this. So, what's interesting now, alongside FGASA in South Africa FGASA Guide FGASA covers the guiding component or aspect.

There's also a tracking component and aspect called CyberTracker. Yes. Which was started by Louis Liebenberg.

A gentleman who spent a lot of time in Namibia, which is the western part of South Africa, Southern Africa, where there's mostly desert and there's an indigenous group of people there called the San or the Bushmen who lived very close to nature. They were hunter gatherers. And they had this tracking ability or skill reading the sand like a newspaper. And or finding a fresh track of a specific animal that they need as a food source. And then following it by looking at the tracks, eventually finding it.

So CyberTracker governs tracking in South Africa and FGASA governs guiding in South Africa. And and right at the very top of the qualification system for both those organizations, there's a combined qualification, called a Scout. Which was initiated by one of the most prominent figures in South Africa in both those fields.

A guy called Adrian Lowe. So if you achieve professional field guide specializing in dangerous game walking and you achieve Senior Tracker in CyberTracker, which is the highest tracking level that you can get there. Then the combination of that, those two give you the Scout qualification of which currently in South Africa there's only 12 people.

[00:30:58] **Paul Kirtley:** One of which is you.

[00:30:59] **James Steyn:** Yeah. Yes. I was fortunate enough to, I either just made it through the back door or I really put in the effort,

[00:31:05] **Paul Kirtley:** knowing you a little bit now, I don't think it was a shoe in. I think you earned your place there. So can we remind people, we have talked about CyberTracker before on this podcast with a Senior Tracker in the uk, John Rhyder, and if people haven't listened to that podcast it's well worth a listen.

But there are some differences that I've noticed. How you get to senior tracker here and it, the structure's the same, but the the animals are different. That's right. It took me a few times of having it explained to me how that system works. So, while we're on the subject, and I think we might come back to some of the FGASA stuff.

Yes. But while we're on the subject of CyberTracker, can you explain to me a little bit like you did the other day Yeah. With the whiteboard. Sure. How it all fits together in the context of you being here in Africa and how CyberTracker works here for you guys.

[00:32:00] **James Steyn:** No, sure.

If I can just quickly come back to what we spoke about prior to this, before it slips my mind.

Okay. 'cause it already has, yeah, because you asked me about the FGASA qualification. Yes. Yeah. So the theoretical components there centers around knowledge of the environment. And that's essentially what you're guiding them on. Ecology, botany, zoology how to talk to guests, how to interpret their natural environment.

Birding. So there's a whole aspect of that. So the theoretical components are covered by things like that. Mm, mm-hmm. Pretty much just to get, just to finalize or cap what you, we spoke about earlier.

[00:32:31] **Paul Kirtley:** Yeah.

I think if people haven't had an experience of going on a safari, going out with a guide here, I think it's.

It, what surprises me and what surprises other people is the depth of knowledge that you guys have - you guys and girls have of the environment. Whether it's the bird species, the plant species, the trees, and obviously people think about safari, they think about lions and elephants and giraffes.

But the level of granularity of understanding, of knowing what all the species are and being able to name them common names, scientific names, but then the ecological knowledge that underpins all of that as well. And how these different plant and animal systems interact in the environment.

It's mind boggling, for, the standard's very high is what I'm trying to say. And the depth of knowledge is very high. And I think there are so many places in the world where the term guide is bandied around. It's some random dude who's been doing it three months and he takes you on a trail.

And he's the guide. He's your guide. But the level of education is completely different here. And that's something I think is worth highlighting. Yeah. Because it's not immediately apparent because the word guide gets so used in so many different ways, in different parts of the world that it's easy to gloss over what that actually means in the context of,

yeah.

What you guys are doing here

Yes.

Under that term. Sure. Which is very different to many places.

[00:33:59] **James Steyn:** It's very formalized in South Africa, unlike any other country in the world. And I've got a wonderful term that I always teach when I teach guiding to younger people. I say, you never know you had a good guide until you had one.

Because ultimately you can actually create quite a nice, good guided experience, even if you're not that experienced. So you'll only ever know you had a good guiding experience. If you go with a really good guide after you've had one, that's mediocre. Yeah. But this, again, there, this structures your help to point people in the right direction and get them really up at a much higher level.

But we take it serious. It's a profession and it's formalized and it's one of those things, when you get into it, you wanna be the very best at it that you can be. So people are quite happy. Most people are happy to progress Yes. Constantly through all the qualifications. Yeah.

[00:34:46] **Paul Kirtley:** And the junior guides seem to get a lot of support from them.

Like, certainly witnessing you and the people who work for you, but I also get the impression it's similar in other places that the younger guides, in the twenties and the thirties are learning from people who've been doing it like you for, 20, 30 years. Sure.

And have the experience so that it's not, they're not just doing exams and learning. From books, they're actually learning from really experienced people as well on the job.

[00:35:15] **James Steyn:** Yeah, that's a very important point there. Yeah. 'cause it's like a lot of things in life. This is an experience based industry. So you can read as many books as you want. Ultimately the experience is what's gonna make you a good guide. And that exposure, I can't remember who said this, but somebody said it's one of these very successful people in America said that you hire for personality and you can teach the rest.

Yes. And it's very much the same in guiding as well. Because personality plays a crucial role. And you can teach all the other skills.

[00:35:41] **Paul Kirtley:** Mm-hmm.

[00:35:41] **James Steyn:** And when I started guiding, guiding had probably only at that time, maybe been maximum when I started 20 years old in South Africa as occupation.

So there weren't many people at the time who were open to teaching us, we picked up a little bit of skill from the guides who we worked with immediately, who were there before us. But in some cases, some of them were even just there for two or three years. So I think initially what was very prevalent to notice was that my era, I think, and before we taught ourselves a lot of stuff we had to read.

And again, back there, there was no internet. There was only books, no internet, and they weren't mentors readily available. Where today there's a lot of mentor, there's the internet, there's books, there's courses, there's qualifications, there's mentors and the mentors today are very open to teaching new people, where back then they were few and far between.

It's not that they didn't want to teach, they just necessarily weren't that many of them around. And I always say that what maybe took me 10 years to learn as a guide can take someone five years today just because of the support structure they have. So if there's somebody who applies themself and they're a go getter, they can fast track the process now.

So yes, there is mentors today available who are leading the front of the industry and passing the knowledge on to younger people. And again, there's not too many of them. So, there is a bottleneck there. But if you're lucky enough and you put the effort in as an aspirant field guide, you will get some exposure from some of these people.

But it's a lot easier today to become a good guide than what it was back 30 years ago. 'cause back here you didn't even understand what being a good guide was then. Where today you do know, because there's so much structure available in. In the whole concept of guiding in, in, in South Africa.

Yeah.

[00:37:32] **Paul Kirtley:** Yeah.

So the regulation and the education works. Yeah. Yeah. It develops people. It does in a positive way and more quickly than they would otherwise. Absolutely. Yeah. No, that's good to hear. That's good to hear. There are some aspects of that I would like to come back to, to fill, but let's jump onto this cyber question.

Cyber track and how that works. Okay. And then we can, you mentioned that there's a, yeah. Yeah. We can talk about how it fits together Sure. At the Scout level again, in a moment, but let's just run through.

[00:37:59] **James Steyn:** I'll do that. Yeah.

[00:38:00] **Paul Kirtley:** If you don't mind. And again for listeners, some will understand the CyberTracker system very well, no doubt.

And others maybe haven't heard of it before. If they have, and maybe they don't really fully understand the structure, so Yeah. That's useful in itself. And then also, you could perhaps illustrate what you had to do, sure. To get the different levels. Not to put you on the spot, but it just, again, it illustrates I think, again, the high standards that are there.

It's not. Just a rubber stamping exercise. Yeah. It's it's, from what you've described, a very rigorous process. So anyway, over

you and you can Yeah. Great. Do your best.

[00:38:36] **James Steyn:** It's fun to talk about these things because it is exciting and interesting things to talk about. So, as I mentioned earlier, it was started by Louis Liebenberg.

He was the father of CyberTracker, as we know today, as a qualification structure. It's an interesting field in the sense that it's almost a hundred percent practical. There's very little theory involved in it other than maybe extrapolating some theoretical evidence out of a track to understand it better.

Round toes versus sausage shaped toes, for instance. A flat pad versus a asymmetrical pad, and so on and so forth. But the point being, the only way to get really good at this is to spend time on your knees in the field, on the ground. Looking at tracks. And so it's all practical and, which is an amazing system.

It was really well developed by Louis Liebenberg. What he did, which was exciting and amazing, was that he got scientists involved in the process of creating an evaluation system. So it was mathematically designed to give a person the best possible score for the effort and the time that they put in.

And so tracking is divided into two components. It's divided into a track and sign component, and then a trailing component. So track and sign is seeing things in the field that reminds you of the activity of animals. Or insects or birds for that matter. Where trailing is the function of finding a fresh set of tracks of a lion, and then following it by walking on the actual track for as long as you possibly can.

And if it's fresh enough and then environmental conditions are in your favor, then you would potentially find the animal.

So that's something in the safari industry that's been very important also for the past 50 years because you've historically gotten these combinations and teams of guide and tracker that work together as a team on one vehicle.

And the guide would usually have the theoretical knowledge of the environment and the ecology and so on and so forth. And the tracker would be brilliant at physically spotting, game spotting signs of animals, and then also being able to quite easily hop off the vehicle, jump onto a track of a leopard. And half an hour later call you on the radio and say, I've got the leopard in the tree.

So you can imagine how successful that's been as a team effort throughout the years to create the safari industry as we know today. Now, not everybody uses trackers. In some cases, like my lodge for instance, I train my guides to be guides and trackers. So I want them to have a good knowledge and understanding of having both the skills.

And I, at the end of the day, that makes a really good guide. If you not only have the guiding skill, but also the tracking skill.

So those are the two components of CyberTracker. And then there's a series of evaluations and levels that you go through for both of those that run parallel to each other.

There's, at secondary level, we call it secondary level. There's a level one, a level two, or level three, and then a level four or tracker one, tracker two, tracker three, and then a professional. And or a specialist depending on where you, how far you go with the system. So pretty much how it works is if I take track and sign, for instance, it's based on a score out of a hundred.

So you get taken into the field, you get asked 50 questions, signs or tracks, and then depending on your achievement based as a percentage, you get a different level. So you can then get a, you'll be a. Level one a, level two, or a level three. And if you get out of the a hundred, if out of the 50 questions, if you get all of them right and you get a hundred percent, you get level four and or refer to on secondary level as professional.

Professional. So you then become a track and sign professional. Mm-hmm. What happens then is you then get invited to a senior assessment, which is the next level up from that. And there they ask you 57 questions, which are all really of a high standard. And if you were to get a hundred percent there, eventually it could take several years.

You then become a track and sign specialist. And if you get specialist for both track and sign identification and trailing, you then have specialist track and sign and specialist in trailing you become a Senior Tracker.

And I think as we speak on the CyberTracker system, I speak under correction 'cause I haven't looked on the website for a while, but there's maybe only 40, maybe max 50 people globally who are Senior Trackers.

Understanding that CyberTracker is now gone out internationally into the world. The process has been taken to North America. It's gone into Europe. It's some countries which people would never expect, potentially this would go Spain, Italy. And so now it's a globally recognized qualification and a lot of people from those continents came to Southern Africa and trained here and then branched out with the system into other countries.

So that's pretty much how the structure works, or the system works, and yeah. It's an incredible thing. It's very addictive. As you can imagine. You're drawn to the ground in a in a way that you never would've expected. I've heard, I heard someone once say that if you qualified as a pilot and you fly airplanes or helicopters you always find yourself when you're not flying, looking up to the skies.

So, certainly I've recognized this in tracking, now that I'm a qualified tracker I find myself looking at the ground all the time. Which may or may not be a good thing. Always. Yes. If you're walking in the bush, you can't just be looking at the ground. You've gotta be looking around.

Otherwise, next minute you look up, you'd be right in walking into an elephant standing there waiting for you.

Yes.

[00:44:25] **Paul Kirtley:** Well, that, that kind of brings me onto a couple of other things I was gonna ask you about, first off, in the context of particularly the trailing Sure. Here Yeah. At the senior level.

Yeah. Can you explain what you need to do? Sure. To get to that? Point where you can Okay. You've got the highest level on the trailing side, because I think for a lot of people that would be, quite intriguing.

[00:44:49] **James Steyn:** That is, it's very

intriguing. Yeah. It's actually quite extraordinary.

It almost seems magic. If you go with someone who's a good tracker and they show you a track of an animal that's fresh, and they said, let's follow this, and two hours later they find the animal, it blows people's minds. They're almost thinking you're cheating or you knew where this animal was.

They can't, it's very difficult for them to equate the skill to what their brain understands about what just happened. Happens. Yeah. And that, so that is fascinating. You're a hundred percent right.

So when I was invited to seniors for the trailing component I got the track and sign out of the way first.

So that I could focus on the trailing, because trailing for me was the more challenging component in the sense out of track and sign and trailing in the sense that it's very subjective. Track and sign is objective. This is an elephant track because of these features. That's a lion track because of these features.

And once you start studying those different features and you spend enough time in the field, you eventually get to a level where you're competent enough to identify most things. Mm-hmm. Not everything. Mm-hmm. Most things and or variations thereof. Mm-hmm. But the trailing is is a, is an art form.

It's not a skill. It's an art form. And it requires a lot of time spent following animal tracks because as you can imagine, I mentioned earlier, it's not only about how fresh the track is and how good you are as a tracker, but it's also about, are the environmental conditions at the time weighing in on your, in your favor?

Pretty much. You can be a really good tracker and the tracks are fresh, but that particular day, the environmental conditions are of such a nature that they're just not giving you that extra little bit of assistance that you need. So I went for my first, I went for my first trailing assessment at senior level.

And at the time when I was still doing it, there was a limit to what you could trail, and that was only either lion or leopard. It's changed a little bit now in the last couple of years they've thrown more diversity into that, which is actually also a very good thing because now you can see a person's skill and their ability on more diversity rather than just lion or leopard track.

And if you ever go on one of those evaluations, you'd understand that you. You're one of four or five or six people over a period of time, two or three days. And you could be thrown onto these tracks at any given time. So you, somebody might get the, what we call the good slot early in the morning when the tracks are fresh and the environmental conditions are great 'cause the sun is not that high yet and the wind hasn't come up, and so on and so forth.

And then look really good. And then you're waiting in line and you get the bad slot, what jokingly called the bad slot at 12 o'clock when the sun is almost directly above you and there's a lot of glare. And the tracks have already started weathering away and they've had secondary disturbance on top of them, other animals or things walking over them.

And so, so they're not as crisp and as fresh as they potentially were early in the morning. So that's why that system was brought in to give more diversity and variation to the process of

assessing someone so that people can't turn around and say, yeah, but you had the good slot and I had the bad slot.

You know what I mean? So that's, and it's a very good system. Again, there I have to emphasize scientifically how well this system was developed by Louis Liebenberg and the people who played major roles in the format with him after him. It's an incredible system. So I did my first trailing assessment and I did four.

And I think so this might also be interesting, but from the start of the process of becoming a senior tracker to the end, the whole process took me six years. Mm-hmm. After I'd already been a very skilled, highly qualified in some people's eyes walking guide. So what I'm trying to say by that is I'm not blowing my own trumpet.

I'm saying I, I wasn't a beginner,

I was somebody who had a lot of walking experience. I'd seen tracks, I had in some form done some tracking to what I, at the time thought or believed tracking was, and so on and so forth. So for somebody with a lot of experience, especially walking experience, to take six years to acquire qualification, that's a lot of hard work.

And the emotion rollercoaster that comes with that process is a joke in its own right. There's so much humor involved in that. And when people go through the system together or the process together, how the emotional sentiment that you share as a, as it's us against them, that kind of a thing.

And you're always looking for, you're always looking to blame things other than it's only just your ability. That's not good enough yet, in a joking sort of a way. Not officially. It's always like they were trying to catch me out. No, they weren't trying to catch you out.

You just weren't good enough yet, but that becomes a lot more visible to you later on when you develop further in the process and you actually become an evaluator, which I also did, and I'm fortunate enough to be one of the CyberTracker evaluators. On the same side of the coin, on the flip side of the coin to that I'm also a trainer and evaluator for FGASA for all their different levels. So that becomes, when you start training, evaluating and assessing other people, then you start realizing what the process is really about.

I think the most I learned about trailing and about track and sign identification was when I started teaching it to other people.

Which I think is like, most things in life ends up working like that. So I did my first one and I got 98%, which I thought was very good. It's very, at that level to get 98% is very good. And I did four in total and on the fourth one I got a hundred percent. But the journey there.

It's not as easy as what I make it sound just by saying, I did four and I got it. It doesn't work like that. I seem to remember that. So the aim is to find fresh enough tracks, and the evaluators are, they don't point the tracks and say you trail that. They let you sit on the front

of the vehicle, drive around and maybe respond to lions calling early in the evening or early in the morning that you could hear and go in that direction and look for the tracks.

But they make you sit on the tracker seat, which is a seat off on the bonnet of the vehicle.

And they make you look for the tracks and you decide. So there's more pressure on you now because you've gotta make sure you find fresh enough tracks that are likely going to give you an opportunity to maybe find those animals.

'cause that's part of, it's a component of the process, finding the animals. But it's not the only component. There's many other things in between that the evaluators look at, but, so I did, I did four. I got 98, 98, 98, 3 times, which is good. I didn't drop

As far as I can remember. Yeah. And I was fortunate enough to find the lions all four times, but I remember on, so it was

lions every single time.

Lions,

every single time I chose. Yeah. But I remember on the third evaluation I had trailed what I thought at the time. Went really well. And I found the lions and we were standing looking at them, and the one lioness, they were lying, sleeping under the tree, lifted her head and like, looked at me with one eye.

And of course, that's a immediate fail. Okay.

[00:51:43] **Paul Kirtley:** So, so the idea, because you've already explained this to me Yes. In the vehicle the other day. Yeah. So the aim is to find the tracks Yeah. That are fresh enough to follow them, to get to the animals without them knowing you're there. Yep. Observe the animals and then extract yourself without the animals ever knowing you were there.

Correct. And then, and that's a pass,

[00:52:03] **James Steyn:** That's gold standard. So, and then there's the issue of secondary disturbance as well along the route. You must be super sensitive to everything along the way. If you disturbing animals, because you've got a very loose attitude to, you know, along the, the way during the process you could also fail, not because the lions potentially see you at the end of your four hour stint of trailing, it takes you that long.

But because you were too relaxed with other mammals along the way that noticed you too much. So, so it's a very, it's a very intricate system and it's well developed and very challenging. Yeah.

[00:52:38] **Paul Kirtley:** And so that secondary disturbance is the concern there. Just environmental sensitivity, is it that they might alert the target species?

Okay. Or is it, and it could be all of these. Of course. Yeah. Is it that you also need to be wary of other animals in the environment? You're not just so blinkered that, you're focused on the target species, but then you're ignoring the danger from female elephants or,

[00:53:03] **James Steyn:** correct. No, that's, it's all of those.

That's a very good point. And it's a great question. Yes. It's all of those. So it's environmental sensitivity in general to the bush, to the environment. Again, just mentioning that, that's another thing. I always teach guides. I say you've got, as a guide, you've gotta be sensitive to the environment.

The animals, the guests, but more importantly to yourself. And that's what makes a good guide, somebody who's sensitive to all those different aspects. Coming back to the tracking. Yes. Those are great. That's a great question and good points. So, sensitivity to the environment and to the animals, but then safety management of safety is important. Exactly. That you don't wanna be going along and then bump into a, an old buffalo bull that's highly dangerous. Or seen to be highly dangerous. That could give you a potential problem. So there's that component of it as well. And then there's the issue of disturbing other animals that may alert the target species of your presence.

So you've gotta be cautious in that manner as well. And it, it just looks at your general stealth or your ability. To move Stealthily through the bush. So that's pretty much what that's

[00:54:09] **Paul Kirtley:** based on. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I think that would blow most listeners' minds con contemplating tracking lions to contact, but without them knowing you're there That's right.

In the bush. Absolutely. And avoiding all the other dangers along the way.

[00:54:23] **James Steyn:** That's right. And it's an apex predator. And they're highly aware of what goes on around them. So they're always, the likelihood of them seeing you before you see them is very good. And there is a bit of humor in the final assessment or evaluation.

Mm-hmm. I've gotta share this, but I realized on the third one when the lioness saw me, that's gonna be an issue. That's an issue. I realized that. So, so on the final evaluation that I did, the fourth one where I got a hundred percent I remembered doing the evaluation in a neighboring reserve.

That's the other thing about the system. It can move throughout different habitats and game reserves in Southern Africa. So you don't always necessarily have the homegrown advantage or home ground advantage. That's something to consider or think about. And this game reserve further south of us it's quite a tricky reserve to trail in.

There's a lot of phytomass at ground level shrubs, Forbes grasses, and so on and so forth. So I remember trailing a pride that they refer to there as the black dam pride. And there were seven lions strong. And the evaluators said to me, you can go first. We started very early in the morning.

It's just getting light. They said, you can go first. So I jumped on the tracker seat and we set out in a direction we are not really even sure where we are going. We're just looking for fresh tracks. And I remember they, shortly after we got mobile finding fresh black rhino tracks on the road walking in the same direction as we were going.

So I stopped the vehicle and I said to the evaluators, there's very fresh black rhino tracks going in the same direction as us on the road. And then we continued driving and it wasn't long after that we found the black rhino in the road. So I remember thinking to myself like, yes, that's already a little feather in your cap.

Because they can see your equation of fresh tracks versus potentially finding this animal and that it shows a bit of tracking acumen already, doesn't it?

So that, I had a good start there and I, it's almost like that day the universe culminated into everything working out perfectly for me to get that qualification. Because I felt so good after just that initial start. And then not long after that, we found very fresh tracks of that pride of line crossing the road from right to left. And some, somehow something inside of me said to me, bank this, but just continue driving a little bit.

And we must have gone 200 meters. And I found fresher attracts than that, going from left to so I immediately understood that they had first crossed from right to left. And then further down from left to right. So I started on those tracks and I think we were only two people during that two, two students being evaluated and two or three, I can't remember exactly, maybe two I think.

And then we, I said, I wanna follow these tracks. So I jumped onto the tracks and I tracked for about, it was almost four hours. I remember that I was on the track most of the time. 'cause that's something that they look at. They look at momentum, they look at how you manage the trail, how you manage the other people that are with you, how you manage safety, how you manage stealth.

So it's all these different things. Anticipation of tracks, anticipation of animal movements, animal behavioral knowledge. So all these things come into play. So it's not just physically following the track. There's all these side branches that come into play, which the evaluators are looking at. And at any stage along that trail, they could stop you and ask you a question.

They could say, are you still following the same animal? What do you notice? And you may say, oh, well I see another one has come from that side and joined this one. So there's a lot of things like that's going on, not just following the actual trail. And then I, so about four hours later I go into this Terminalia thicket, which is a particular tree that we get here that I've shared with you.

That's an indicator of a shallow water table. Those that, that we made we made. Natural cord from it yesterday, you and I. So I went in there and I knew the lions were close now because the tracks were getting progressively fresher. And I also know the time of the day, 'cause I know that lions move early morning and then at about 10, 11 o'clock, depending on, and it was in the summer, so it was hot.

They're gonna go lie down in the shade where there's some air current or air movement. And I remember one of the evaluators was right on my shoulder, and the other one was a little bit further back in the other one or two guys who were also being evaluated was just behind them. And I walked in and it was, there was quite a lot of shadows, so you had to like, almost readjust your eyes to change the light. And I noticed the one lioness lying on their back with a one leg up like this, which is typical of when they've eaten recently, they, that, that helps them with digestion and it's very comfortable. Takes the pressure off the stomach, which puts pressure on the diaphragm and the lungs and so on, lying on their backs.

[00:59:03] **Paul Kirtley:** So they're rolling around, they rolling with full belly, basically. That's exactly it. Yeah. Like,

like all of us after Christmas dinner or something.

[00:59:09] **James Steyn:** That's exactly that. Yeah. And uh, and I, and I spotted the lioness. So now you go over into the next phase, which is managing this situation. So that these lions don't become aware of you.

You've put in this four hours worth of exceptionally hard work. Yes. Very strenuous. Taxing. It takes a lot of focus and concentration. And this is the make or break now. So I felt the assessor or the evaluator's hand on my shoulder and I'm thinking, oh no, he saw the lion before me. 'cause that also could potentially, sometimes maybe just maybe put a little dampen on things, if you weren't aware, that could maybe make or break it for you as well. And I turned around and I looked at him and he said to me, what do you think these lions have done? So then I realized he hadn't seen the lion yet. So I just lifted my finger and I pointed to the lion lying literally five meters away from us.

And he saw the lion. And then I turned and I looked over his shoulder and I saw the other evaluator was still catching up. And I very slowly and cautiously showed him to come over. And when he got to where the two of us were, I pointed to the lion. And they were all sore. But then what I did, and this is where the humor comes in, I turned around and I got out of there as quickly as I possibly can.

Yes. 'cause I didn't want to be responsible for waking them up again. Yes. And I went and wait, and I waited for them much further down. So if they wake 'em up, that's that problem. That's their problem. It's not my problem.

And I remembered them coming out and one of my evaluators was an ex, extremely good tracker, Colin Patrick, well known in the industry as well, with Adrian Lowe, which is essentially also the after Louis Liebenberg the next father of tracking in South Africa.

And Colin came out and he looked at me and he made eye contact and he had this grin and he started laughing and he said to me, I know what you did, understanding that I got the hell out of there as quickly as I could so that we don't wake these lions up.

And then yeah. Then I made it. And I have to say, Paul, not that I've done maybe many things in my life that were difficult.

I think getting my degree in conservation later in years, not so long ago I got a helicopter license. But I think out of the major sort of things in my life, I think that, for me was one of the most challenging qualifications to achieve. It's not easy if you're not working on the ground, putting in the effort every day consistently. And it's a perishable skill as well. Sure. You're not gonna achieve that qualification. So that's pretty much how it works. Yeah.

[01:01:32] **Paul Kirtley:** No, thank you for sharing that with us, James. Thank you. In terms of you guys operating on the ground, on foot, clearly you are operating on the ground on foot when you're tracking, but more when you're trailing.

Sorry. Yeah. More generally, you are operating on foot when you're leading walks. Yes. When you're leading overnight camps.

Yeah.

What are the safety considerations and safety management things you have in place? What we haven't talked about towards firearms, for example. I'm sure some people are wondering, are you guys armed?

Yes. Like, what, how is all of that? How does all of that work? And what training do you receive in that respect? And you can go into as much detail as you want on that. 'cause I'm sure some people listening to this don't know anything about firearms, in which case they'd be interested to, to know.

Yeah. And there'll be some people who know something about firearms, but still are interested to know the specifics of perhaps what you use, how you use it, what and also just the more broad considerations of Yeah. What you are thinking about when you are out on foot. Okay. Whether you are trailing or whether you are just leading people to see animals that they want to see.

[01:02:41] **James Steyn:** Yeah. Alright. No, very good. That's that's also very interesting in its own right. Again the process starts at the lower levels of guiding with the trails guide qualification, as I mentioned earlier. So. Pretty much learning how to walk in the bush. And, And that's set out in three different sections, if you like.

There's a theoretical section there, or component, and there's a rifle handling component, and there's the practical building of hours. So you keep a log book pretty much in the same manner as a pilot would.

And so that's, it starts out very early in your guiding career there, and then it develops through being on the ground, physically doing the activity.

Now the rifle handling understand that, yes, we do carry rifles in, in southern Africa on walking safar specifically. Even in the vehicles in some cases. But before people are alarmed and have, wanna throw their own ideas in your and opinions and so on and so forth. It's a precaution.

It's absolutely a precaution. If you're in a vehicle carrying a firearm and the vehicle is mechanically sound and you understand animal behavior, you're probably never likely to use that rifle in 30 years worth of guiding. If you are walking, you're carrying it again, just as a precaution.

And you are well-trained. And there's the respect that I spoke about, the animals, the people, the bush. Yourself, then again there, you're probably never likely to ever use it. And no guide sets out early in the morning on a bush walk from their camp with guests thinking, ha, I'm gonna shoot an animal today.

There's no guide who has that mentality or that even cares for that ever in their life. Nobody wants to do that. But understand that if you're gonna partake in these activities, there's a inherent danger involved in it. It would be the calculated risk that you take when you're flying in an aircraft or you're driving on the roads during Easter holiday or you skydiving or you swim in the ocean. This is just what it is. So we manage that risk by carrying a rifle. And then of course there's an, there's a whole sequence of training that goes with that. Training exercises from becoming competent with a firearm at a basic level right through to specialist level.

And there's many different exercises and you've gotta stay on top of that with shooting regularly. So we have targets at different distances and we have targets that move and targets that pop up and all sorts of, and understanding the theory behind shot placement 'cause that's crucial.

Understanding how the firearm works, how you seat cartridges in the magazine how you keep it clean, how you maintain it. Because you want this thing to work. Course when you wanted to work, yes. But never in the process of that training, are you ever taught that the rifle is the most important thing.

We teach people that their fundamental skills based on animal behavioral knowledge tracking, situational awareness, which is probably the most important thing.

And then just being sensitive to everything around you and just generally savvy, general savvy. Yeah. Yeah. So, so, so we want the guide to fall back on all the other factors long before he even thinks about ever having to use the firearm.

And that's very important to understand because people see us with these guns and they go, oh, what? It's gungho, big African white hunter. It's not that at all. Not even close. Is it ever there? In fact I've been involved now in training guides and assessing guides FGASA, not for CyberTracker, necessarily for about 17, 18 years.

And I've never come across a guide or met a guide who I thought in any way or form, was thinking that I would love to use this gun one day on an animal. Never have I met anybody. In fact, most people are extremely reserved towards the idea of ever having to do that. So if you don't wanna use the gun, which is just a tool. Like the knife. Like the leatherman. Like the radio that you carry with you. It's just a tool.

[01:06:50] **Paul Kirtley:** So it's more like an emergency torniquet than anything else.

[01:06:53] **James Steyn:** That's exactly what it is. And we teach because that's the most important principle is to teach people that is what it is. It's the emergency tourniquet

That's it. And so no guide gets taught in any way, shape, or form that shoot your way out of trouble.

That it's not what we're taught yah.

[01:07:08] **Paul Kirtley:** I guess there's also a certain amount of education required to make sure that people don't see it as a crutch. Because I guess if you out walking in the bush without a firearm, you naturally would feel more exposed than walking in the bush with a firearm, I would suspect.

[01:07:29] **James Steyn:** No, you're right. A spot on. Yeah.

[01:07:31] **Paul Kirtley:** And therefore, it would be easy to think that the, it'd be easy to allow the firearm to become a kind of crutch in your mind, but as you say, it's important to, for people to see all the other measures as the important things which you would do regardless of whether or not you had a firearm.

[01:07:49] **James Steyn:** Yeah. No, that's exactly right. And I, if I can, maybe, if I can bring that to bushcraft if you teach people how to effectively use a knife and an ax. But the safety is more important than anything. Absolutely. Yeah. It's just a tool. That that has a function.

But if you're not taught from the beginning what the safety mechanisms are and how to use the tool correctly and how to maintain the tool just as important.

Then the tool is of, is gonna be of no use to you. Yeah. And that's the same principle. It's exactly that. We've not, we taught the other things around getting yourself out of a dangerous situation by, for instance animal behavioral knowledge is probably the most important thing there.

If you're gonna find a lioness with small cubs, it's probably not a good idea to go close to her on foot. But if you're gonna find a big male lion sleeping by himself, there's some allowances you can take there to go a little bit closer than you would. That's the principle. Yeah.

[01:08:37] **Paul Kirtley:** So it's an understanding of the environment, understanding how you approach Yeah.

Understanding of animal behavior, that those are the important things. No, for sure. Which of the animals that you are most cautious around? I heard a, whether that's on foot or in a vehicle. Sure. Yeah, sure.

[01:08:51] **James Steyn:** I heard a, I heard an old timer. I dunno if I'm now an old timer after 30 years but I heard an old timer once say that the most dangerous animal in Africa, in the bush is the one that you have a problem with.

So it's different for different people. However, there are some things, so you wanna avoid animals with small calves or babies or young. You wanna avoid animals that are mating. You wanna avoid animals that are ill maybe injured. You wanna avoid animals that are.

That have been, you wanna avoid a buffalo that the previous night, for instance, has been harassed by a pride of lions and he managed to get away, he's gonna be very irritable and so on and so forth. So I think animal behavior first and foremost, and understanding what the limitations are and what you can and can't approach.

But yes, naturally, if you're looking at what we call what the safari industry has coined as the big five, which incidentally quite interesting is, was the five most dangerous animals to hunt on foot in Africa. It comes from the 18th and 19th centuries ivory people, people who who went after animals for the sport of hunting,

[01:09:58] **Paul Kirtley:** Selous

[01:09:59] **James Steyn:** and those kind of characters. That's where it comes from. But it's quite interesting in, in, in this, in the modern photographic safari era, how companies have jumped on the bandwagon with that and made it a tourist attraction.

And sadly so, because unfortunately in many cases people come on safari and there's this undertone of, if they didn't see the big five, they think they didn't have a good safari. Anyway, be that as it may, so you're gonna worry about the big animals who can potentially throw a vehicle over and an elephant can easily push a vehicle over, even roll it, and it has happened before.

It for me and in my context, in, in my experiences of more than 15,000 hours on foot, walking as a dangerous game guide, teaching it, training it, having done it many times, still doing it. I would avoid breeding herd of elephants with small calves at foot for the sake that they're very nervous, they're very protective.

And they've got numbers and they're very likely to all come at you at the same time if somebody points out in the direction of what they perceive to be the danger.

So, yes. But I mean, the, the principles saying that it's important to understand the principles of approach remain the same.

It doesn't matter if it's a black rhino or if it's a buffalo bull, or if it's a breeding herd of elephant, you're still going to approach them on foot in the same manner. You may vary the distances away from them. You may increase your safety net. So in context of that, when you're approaching dangerous game on foot, you must never use the animal to dictate the approach.

You must use the topography or the lay of the land, that's the most important thing. So you're always looking for escape routes for you and for the animal. Safe ground for you and for the animal. Where's the sun? What is the wind doing? You want those things in your favor. So I teach the principle of using the lay of the land to dictate the approach or not the animal.

So the approach remains the same. There's just different levels of respect and distances and cover that you may or may not use and safe ground that you may or may not use depending on what animals they are. But they, I wouldn't with open eyes, walk straight into the middle of a breeding herd of elephants with small calf.

That's not a good idea. It's not a good deal. And I have to tell you, Paul, I'm, I have been surprised in the past at how relaxed some people can be around that. And it's not a que and this is the important thing to mention. It's not a question of being afraid or scared. It's a question of knowing exactly what you're doing and understanding what safety is and how to manage it.

That's the thing to remember. Yeah. Yeah. So you can walk away from it and live another day.

[01:12:30] **Paul Kirtley:** Yes. You mentioned a number of hours there. You said something to me the other day in terms of the trails guiding the difference between the sort of professional field guide and if I'm right in capturing this question correctly. And the SKS yes. There's a big difference in hours

[01:12:52] **James Steyn:** Sure. For the walking component for sure. Yes, absolutely. So you can qualify legally as a walking guide with 200 hours. Mm-hmm. Um, And then you're legal to lead walks in a dangerous game area. And it's a really well laid out structure.

It's, it has four different components in it. It's got 50 hour increments of which there's four. So the first 50 you would do on a training course with mentors as an observer.

So there's amount of hours there, and there's an amount of encounters there as well. 10 encounters that you have to get.

And that's a really good, because it builds a solid foundation. You're learning from really good mentors during that period. About the basics of approaching this new system or technique. Then the second 50 hours you walk as a second rifle. So you are assisting a well qualified walking guide,

[01:13:40] **Paul Kirtley:** and that's with live guests?

[01:13:41] **James Steyn:** It can be with live guests, or it may not be with live guests. It depends the context of where you are working. What mentors you have available to you, and so on and so forth. So when we designed this system it was part of this as part of the dangerous game committee FGASA. You gotta be careful, you gotta find a balance between making it achievable and making it too difficult.

Yes. But not making it easy.

[01:14:03] **Paul Kirtley:** You want it rigorous, that's it, but not unattainable. Absolutely.

[01:14:06] **James Steyn:** That's correct. So, so then there's the, then the third. Then the third 50 is is you walking as first rifle. And the qualified guide, then the mentor walks as second rifle that can also be in the context or with, or without guests.

And then the final 50 is you walking as third rifle leading walks in the work environment with paying clients. Okay. Makes sense. So it's a very good structure, but they, that's 200. And then once you've reached 1,200 hours as a lead guide, then you're eligible for this dangerous game specialist qualification.

And there's a rigorous evaluation process. At the end of that, there's a dangerous game workbook that you've gotta complete. Then you've gotta pass a shooting evaluation, which is maybe three times more complex than the standard one for walking, guiding.

And then you have to do an, a practical evaluation to, to demonstrate your skills, which is in the form of a backpack wilderness trail. So a sleep out trail.

And during this process, the evaluators look at everything.

And so in that, there, there's a lot of, there's a lot of, maybe some bushcraft skills that, that can potentially come out in that. So we look at the person's ability to find a venue. We look at the ability to organize the activity. We look at their ability to create a really good experience based on using all their skills. So then, their situational awareness, their tracking their dangerous game, approaching skills, their animal, behavioral knowledge, route selection, time management. Those are so, so it's not just about the animals. Route selection and time management is two of the components of walking in the bush that can get you into serious trouble. If you don't do it correctly.

It would be like going on an afternoon walk and running out of daylight. Because you overstay your welcome in a particular sighting. So the time management and the route selection is crucial. route selection is crucial because understanding the people who accompany you as guests on these things very often aren't as mobile as you are.

They're not as fit as you are. They can't move through the vegetation as quickly as you can. So, so those are two very important things. So we look at that. We look at his communication skill, we look at the person's general knowledge during this evaluation. We look at the ability to find a suitable camping site.

Is there water, is there wood? Where do we pitch the tents? Do you pitch your tent on a major game trail where an elephant's gonna come and walk over it at night? Not that they do that, but you understand what I'm saying? Yes. So it's a very involved assessment. And, I think when you pass that or when you get that qualification that you've really earned it.

Just like the CyberTracker stuff. When, you've earned a qualification, when you become a Senior Tracker, there's nothing like it. It's very in depth.

[01:16:52] **Paul Kirtley:** No, that that's interesting. That's interesting. What sort of people do come on overnight walking trails. Okay. 'cause that's not most people's view of a safari. Most people think of sitting in the back of an open Toyota or a Land Rover looking across at game with a long lens or a camera or what have you. Clearly there's a subset of people that want to get out on foot, but who what's, some people might even be listening to this thinking, I didn't even know that was possible.

Sure. So, sure. Yeah. How do people go about that and what sort of people come and are there any prerequisites or

[01:17:24] **James Steyn:** yeah. Look, I don't think there's any prerequisite for safari really. Especially vehicle based safaris. Sure. I think it's up to the individual to understand what their limitations are.

It's probably not a good idea to come on a three night backpack trail where you are walking about 10 or 15 kilometers a day in 37, 38 degrees Celsius heat when you've just had a hip replacement. Yeah.

[01:17:44] **Paul Kirtley:** Or maybe it's the best time.

Yeah. Yeah. May just before

a hip replacement. The hip replacements these days are in incre.

Like I know two people who've had hip replacements relatively recently, and they've gone from being virtually crippled to being like. Free and easy and doing 10 k runs and, going out, walking every day. 'cause the, yeah. And within relatively short periods of time. But I take the point.

No. I'm very happy. I point,

[01:18:06] **James Steyn:** I'm very happy for them. And that's, they've got a new lease on life. Exactly. That's incredible. But during that recovery process, yes. I get it's probably not a good idea. Idea to do that. Yeah. And they're probably not

that fit if they've been in mobile for That's right.

20 years. Or

let's say you've just been to the cardiologist and he says to you, dude, yes, you're probably, your heart is not in a con. If you had to come around the corner and a lion growled at you, you're gonna get a heart attack. Yeah. So you've got it within reason. There's some limitations.

And I and we are always hoping that the people who come understand what those limitations are for themselves. Yeah. But most people, I'd say 80% of visitors on safari are vehicle bound or vehicle based people. And they're happy with that. And you can have an incredibly good safari just by sitting in a vehicle.

You need nothing more than that. But then the walking is, there's a different element there, which enriches the experience overall.

We get a lot of people, 'cause we sell Senalala as a walking lodges or destination as well. Because I've been, I've been in walking for a long time and being involved in this as a specialist skill, also training it.

So we offer it to our guests and we get a lot of guests that are interested in it.

It is a, it's a very good thing you are asking because I can share something interesting. 30 years ago, people who came on safari were really. They were really passionate about the idea of an African safari.

They were generally middle aged people who had, and it's quite interesting back then, 30 years ago, it was mostly Americans, Germans, and Brits. So now in the modern time so, so there were people who, there were people who they saved up all their life maybe to come on one African safari.

[01:19:38] **Paul Kirtley:** It was like a retirement thing or a bucket list trip.

[01:19:41] **James Steyn:** Absolutely. Yeah. And today, in the last 10 years, what I've seen is I've seen the average safari go is about 35 years old. And much younger group of people are doing safaris now and a broader spectrum of people. We are getting people from South America, from all over Europe, from Australia, from New Zealand, from Russia, from people are from all over, are coming on safaris.

And I think the world's become a smaller place. So travel is more accessible, but I think a lot of the people we see today on Safari, not all, but a lot of them are younger people who are looking for an experience.

that maybe has an element of adrenaline involved in it. And so it's almost a case of it's a cool thing to do.

And you ticket alongside the fact that you've done skydiving or climbed Kilimanjaro. Rather than you came here for the traditional. Idea of what an African safari is all about. So it's interesting how it's changed over the years. But so a small component of people do understand the value of the walking.

So we've got guests that ask us to walk quite a lot. And then we do short walks, two hour walks in the morning or in the afternoon from the camp, and it's usually enough. Understanding you don't necessarily always bump into dangerous game on Bushwalk because you've gotta cover a lot more ground than what you do in a vehicle to see animals on foot.

But you do inevitably end up bumping a group of lion that was sleeping or seeing an elephant off in a distance and so on and so forth. So it's very exhilarating and exciting. So I think a lot of people nowadays wanna do bush walks for the exhilaration of it rather than that it's an historic, traditional thing that they thought about.

They read, oh, the Green Hills of Africa. Or that I can't remember the author now, but that somebody wrote back then and they associated that with this old traditional african safari. As far as the, as far as the multi-day walks go, or the wilderness trails as we call them, and all backpack trails.

And a backpack trail. All it is really is, it's like you're a through hiker. Walking the. Pacific Crest or the Appalachian or the Camino or whatever. But yet you're now doing it in an environment where there's dangerous game.

And fortunately for us, I think most of the people that do those, again, comes back to the first thing I said.

They know their own limitations and they know what they're capable of. So we get a lot of people for the backpack trails specifically, who are hikers. They are backpackers. They come with their own kit. And they've got the best kit. And they've got the lightweight kit and they know what they're letting themselves in for.

And I think in a way we are quite lucky in that sense.

[01:22:05] **Paul Kirtley:** So they're self-selecting in that sense.

[01:22:07] **James Steyn:** Absolutely. Yeah. That makes sense. And that's nice. And I'm not suggesting that people who know nothing about it mustn't do it. It's a wonderful experience. I'm just saying the people who generally come, they know exactly what they're letting themselves in for.

So that helps you a lot as a, from a safety point of view, managing equipment and distance and walking and water and, how much water do you have to drink? Well, you manage that accordingly. So, so that's, we are lucky in that sense.

[01:22:32] **Paul Kirtley:** Interesting. Interesting.

One of the things that you often hear people talk about, sleeping out in the bush whether a dangerous game around is that a fire's gonna scare all the animals away.

What do you think about that concept?

[01:22:44] **James Steyn:** No, I'll laugh at that. Firsthand experience has told me that it's not necessarily the case. I'll tell you what a fire does do. A fire creates a surrounding environment where there's noises. And movement and smells, which are a little bit unnatural to the animals.

And so they would avoid that at the best of times, they're not scared by the fire as a unit itself. They're scared by the fact that they can smell, there's humans around that fire. Or there's movement and voices around that fire. So it's really the, it's the secondary disturbance around.

It's a third time I mentioned, but it's a secondary disturbance around the fire that's probably more off-putting to the animals than the actual fire itself. 'cause many times sleeping in a riverbed with a small fire going. There's also two versions of that. There's one where people bring tents and we sleep in the tents.

At which case we don't do security night shifts by people sitting up. And then you can do a more primitive style where you sleep just in your sleeping bag around the fire. And then people take turns throughout the night to stay awake and keep watch. And then alert the guide if there's anything that they think is, something you have to worry about to untoward.

But I, we've sat many times quietly around the fire and an elephant or a rhino or a buffalo has walked past in really close proximity, not even looking in our direction. So, no, the fire doesn't really it's not a deterrent for animals in general. It's the associated activity around it.

Around it. Yeah.

[01:24:08] **Paul Kirtley:** Because I guess, we've seen a few things this week where, for example, you showed us something just this morning where. There was a tree that had caught fire, fallen over and burnt an area of ground around it due to a lightning strike. Yeah. Back in the summer. Fire's not an alien thing to these animals.

Yeah. They potentially have seen and smelled No, that's right. Bigger fires than you gonna have Sure. In your, in the little campfire.

[01:24:31] **James Steyn:** The savanna as a biome is a fire driven system. So it's important to understand that Yes. It wants fire it. wants a natural fire at once fire. That's point ignited.

In order to burn and create a mosaic. So patch burning, you can't, you don't want the fire to burn in an homogenous way because it's gonna create an homogenous vegetation unit. And that's not a healthy vegetation unit. A healthy vegetation unit is something that's got structural diversity.

So that's what a point technician fire does. It creates structural diversity because it burns very fast in a particular direction. It slows down in another direction. It stops burning somewhere 'cause there's something blocking it from going. And so that's what a natural fire does. It's point ignition and it burns in different directions at different speeds, creating different intensities, different rejuvenation or damage, which then creates this patch mosaic, which is. That structural diversity that you're looking for, which is a healthy system.

So yes. Animals in Savannah are very used to fires. Yeah.

[01:25:30] **Paul Kirtley:** And there are plants and trees that are fire adapted.

[01:25:33] **James Steyn:** Very much so. Yeah. In the Savannah biome, most of the larger trees that have very thick bark outer bark, which protects them against fire, understanding that fire is really driven by the amount of fuel that's available to it to consume.

And the speed is dictated to by whether there's wind or there isn't wind. So if you've got a lot of phyto mass, which is the layer of fuel that's burning, essentially, if you've got a hot fire which sits in one place, 'cause there's no wind and there's a lot of fuel, it's gonna damage and destroy a lot more than when you've got a fire that's driven by a really strong wind and there isn't enough phyto mass or fuel for it to consume, to burn long enough and warm enough to actually destroy bigger trees and things like that.

So it's either gonna scour the land very quickly because it's driven by a wind and there isn't much fuel, or it's gonna burn very slowly because there's no wind and there's a lot of fuel. So, and that's also how they use fire as a management tool.

They by understanding those principles, but the animals in the African savanna are well adapted to fire.

Very much so. It's not a concern for them. Yeah. They just get out of its way and it's nothing, it's not uncommon when you're fighting a fire and we do it yeb with beaters mostly and water trucks. It's always in the evenings most of the time it's nothing to stand there beating a fire and an animal comes running past your left and past your right to get away from the fire.

It happens. So it is an interesting thing in its own right. Yeah. Interesting. Just related to the dangers of the backpack trails, 'cause I remember now you did ask about that as well, but these conversations are lovely because you tend to get away from Yeah. Or go into other routes and then not always maybe comprehensively answering everything like you want to.

[01:27:17] **Paul Kirtley:** It's fine. We can always circle back to that.

[01:27:19] **James Steyn:** No, sure. But it, as it comes to mind now you've gotta first and foremost have the required skill based around the dangerous game and secondary to that will be your camp craft, bushcraft field craft. Wilderness skills. Whatever you want, call those.

'cause at some point they do all intertwine intertwined. Yes, indeed. So, so, so definitely first and foremost, you need to be a competent, dangerous game guide. And then you can manage other things after that. Like where do you put the tent? Do you put it under a tree and the trees fall on you or do you put it close to the water, close enough that you have the water available, but not too close that a breeding herd of elephant arrived there that night and have to now get all nervous and worked up because they're not sure where they should go. 'cause the tents are right there on the water's edge. So the dangerous game knowledge in this context is the most important thing.

And then secondary to that will be campsite selection and all the other associated crafts that go with that. Yeah. Yeah.

[01:28:18] **Paul Kirtley:** That's interesting. And it's been interesting. We've had the opportunity to observe elephants around waterholes a couple of times in the last few days. And it's interesting how the other animals behave around the elephants when there elephants around.

Yeah.

[01:28:34] **James Steyn:** Well, yeah. At that time they were in charge. And nobody daress come close. And the younger individuals talking about the elephants now, especially the bulls, they'll make a point of making sure that the other animals understand exactly that, a little bit boisterous. And they'd come, they'd trumpet and open their ears and rush the animals away from the water.

There's some. There's some, obviously some level of protectiveness over the water or the resource when they're there. Yes. And they don't want anyone else to come and share it with them. But it's not the old experienced, elephants, they don't care for it. It's the younger, inexperienced ones that are throwing their weight around.

That, that it's classic.

[01:29:07] **Paul Kirtley:** And they're quite fussy about the water as well, aren't they?

[01:29:10] **James Steyn:** They are. So they want the water to be as clean as they possibly can. If there's nothing else available, they're gonna drink. 'cause they're water dependent species. They have to drink at least twice a day, sometimes even three times a day, depending on how hot it is.

And how much are they drinking? You're looking at a adult elephant drinking about 160 liters of water a day. And the trunk can take anything between nine to 14 liters of water in one, one go again, depending on the size of the elephant. I, we are gonna have people on the other side listening to this, going to Google this and go, you were wrong.

They only take seven liters in their trunk. So, so it's important to throw in there that it depends on the size of the elephant as well. If you talk about, if you talk about the. The consumption needs, whether it's food and water. And so rather than saying, rather than saying an elephant eats about 150 kilograms of food per day.

The better way to address that is to say that an elephant on average eats between four to 6% of its own body weight per day. And you can figure that out based on the size of the elephant. So four or five ton elephant, that's about 200 kilograms. But obviously that's not gonna be the same for a young elephant.

That weighs 70 kilograms. So it's all, but I've put my foot in it many times in the guiding industry being too specific. And especially in the modern era now, we seem to be living in a time where people. Wanna make it their business to confront other people about the wrong facts. It doesn't matter where you what industry you're in, but you're always you've always got challenges.

[01:30:35] **Paul Kirtley:** Absolutely.

[01:30:35] **James Steyn:** Yeah. So it is, there's a lot of humor in that. So, so I don't say, I don't say an Impala, which is one of our antelope that we have a gestation of 195 days. I say that all African antelope have a gestation between 190 and 240 days. You choose what you want it to be, but I've covered myself pretty much.

So that's the right, you learn quickly as a guide to make sure and nowadays I find it interesting, there's all these apps popping up that you pointed at a bird and it tells you what the bird is. It's getting really, it's actually getting scary in a way. You've got the plant apps, which no doubt you've seen.

[01:31:11] **Paul Kirtley:** Yeah. Some of 'em are better than others.

[01:31:13] **James Steyn:** Correct. But you wonder at which point guides to some extent, other than having the, keeping the guests safe, so going to, according to the guests and their minds become redundant,

[01:31:22] **Paul Kirtley:** well, I think one of the things for both of us both in terms of what you do, but also in terms of what I do you have the apps are great.

Yeah. But you need your attention to be drawn to that plant in the first place for some reason.

That's right.

Before you put the app onto it and go, what's this? Someone's not gonna go around the bush, the felts, the forest, wherever they are. Putting the app on every single thing that they see Sure.

Or could put the app on. Sure. No,

that's right.

But that just becomes a very weird way of interacting with the environment. That's right. I don't think anybody's gonna do that. You need your attention being drawn to something. Yeah. Because some species are more prevalent than others. Some are more useful than others.

Some have maybe more of a prevalent role in the ecosystem for what you are talking about at the time. There's a reason why you are going to show me that species. The silver leaf species with the with a cordage in the bark. Sure. 'cause we're interested in bark. That's right. It's not just because we want to Id the tree.

It's 'cause we, we want to highlight that. Or you are highlighting a different species because it's an indicator of water. Yeah. Or you are highlighting another species because. It's

notorious for dropping its limbs. Sure. And you don't want to camp there. There's a reason why. Yeah.

You as the guide or you as the bushcraft instructor are showing somebody something. It isn't just a random selection of plants in the environment. Yeah. But whereas if you put somebody that's got no knowledge in the environment with an app, they're gonna make a random selection of plans to stick it on.

Yeah. And that's not as instructive. So Yeah. I would argue that despite the apps Yeah.

[01:32:59] **James Steyn:** There's always gonna be value. Yeah. Yeah. I, I had this conversation yesterday or the day before, I can't remember, but you said it's all about context. And I understand that you're a hundred percent right.

It's what value people get out of. If somebody gets value out of just knowing what the tree is, that's fine, but they won't know any more detail beyond that. Yes. You also referred, you also explained to me as in our discussions of bushcraft and wilderness skills and so on, you said to me that in the context of the bow drill, and I wanna mention this if I may because, because I liked it a lot.

It was very good for me. Because these blurred lines between what is survival, what is bushcraft, what is camp craft, what is woodcraft, what is wilderness skills? You said that if you make a bow drill because you've got nothing else, all your kit has fallen in the water and you've got only a shoelace and a knife.

Then it's in the context of survival. If you make a bow drill because you're doing it for your friends, 'cause you're gonna have a barbecue. It's a party trick, right? Yes. Yes. And I really liked that a lot. It was, there was so much context to that. And then you said if you just, if you make it in the context of showing other people as students, it's a, it's essentially a bushcraft.

[01:33:59] **Paul Kirtley:** Yeah. If you choose to use it Yeah. As part of your skillset in the bush. It's a bushcraft skill. That's right. Yeah. You don't have to use it. You don't even have to be there. That's right. You've chosen to go into the bush, you've chosen to use that over another technique. You might have a ferro rod in your pocket.

Yeah. You might have a cigarette lighter in your pocket, but you've chosen to use a bow drill because you like it, you like the aesthetic, you like the connection with the environment. You're also good at it. Yes, you might be showing students or guests the skill but it could be just something that you choose to use because you want to, you like it.

Yep. It's a bushcraft skill. Yeah. You're not doing it because if you don't do it, you won't survive. You'll die of hypothermia or you'll succumb to hypothermia. Whereas in a survival situation, you might be cold, wet, hungry, as you say, your equipment has been compromised or damaged or lost and then you need a fire and you rely on that skill.

Then it's a survival skill. And I would argue as well that far too much emphasis is put on primitive skills. And by primitive, I don't mean that in a pejorative sense. Yeah. People do use primitive as somehow simple or basic or unsophisticated.

Primitive just means like first or earlier, like Correct. bow drill is more primitive than a Bic lighter. Yes. Yeah. It came first, it came before that. That's all we mean by primitive. Yeah. So if you're choosing to use primitive skills and that's fine in the context of bushcraft, you're choosing to do that and you might even have a backup in your pocket in case you can't manage it.

You might have a bic lighter or a ferro and you kinda go, well, okay, I wanted to use bow drill. I really like it. I really like the aesthetic, but for whatever reason, I'm not getting it today. You can pull out the thing that you know is gonna work. If you are preparing to use bow drill as a survival skill, if you think, well, if the, proverbial hits the fan and I'm going to rely on bow drill, you better be flipping well good at that. That's right. Yeah. I, even I'm pretty decent at bow drill. Yeah. And I would not think to have bow drill as my primary fallback if I need a fire because it's irresponsible. I've got easier methods. That's right. Particularly if I'm responsible and I'm not even talking about guests or clients.

If I've got my partner Amanda with me or a friend, and we're doing a trip, if I, in my mind, in terms of my emergency planning for that trip, saw bow drill as my primary survival technique for lighting a fire, I'd be being irresponsible. Correct.

Yep.

And so that's an important point in itself, even for people who are competent in the skill.

But then there's also, there is, there is this blurring as you say, and particularly, with YouTube videos, people talk, people bandy the term survival skill and bushcraft skill and woodcraft and wilderness skill around. But I think particularly if you're couching things like hand drill and bow drill and other friction methods into the survival skills bucket I think you're actually being potentially dangerously misleading to your average viewer.

[01:37:01] **James Steyn:** That's a good point.

[01:37:01] **Paul Kirtley:** Because there's a big difference between understanding that you can do something Yeah. And being able to do it, for starters. And I see that week in, week out on my courses. I've, I have students who come and do a basic course. They've watched YouTube videos. It's often how people become interested in the skills these days and they understand that bow drill exists.

They understand. Whereas when I went and did a fir my first bushcraft course I'd seen sort of sketchy diagrams in books, but I never really, I don't think I ever really thought that people were actively able to do it. Sure. I dunno. It just what didn't cross my mind. Right. Yeah. You know, It was pre YouTube, it was, again, largely books that, I was looking at at that stage and I hadn't read widely on Bushcraft and Survival, but you know, when I first saw someone demonstrate it, I was like, wow, okay, people can do this. Yeah. Whereas now if we're

interested in the subject matter, you see it on tv people are watching YouTube on their tv, people see it on their screens, the TV or laptop or phone or what have you.

And people know it's possible. People see it, but there's still a big difference between knowing that one can do it Yes. And other people can do it and being able to do it. Sure. Simple analogy would be like, you've seen, you've never learned to ride a bike and you see somebody riding a bike doesn't mean you can ride a bike.

You can do it. That's correct. Yeah. And you know it's possible, but you don't know how to do it. You still need to go through the process of learning it. And I would say that's a good analogy for bow drill. But then even when you've come and done a course or you've, you've done an online course or you've worked on the skill yourself and you get to an ember with a particular species of wood in a particular environment at a particular time of year, that doesn't mean to say that that's a reliable skill for you.

Yeah. It's a technique that you're starting to learn about, not until you've done it many. It's like what you are talking about with the experience on the trails or the experience with the animal behavior. There's so much variation with different species trying it in different humidities, whether you're tired, hungry, has it been raining, is it dry? Can you make it work under lots of different circumstances? Only then I would say you can then start to rely on it as a survival skill. And I would say for most people don't even think of it as a survival skill.

Because you're lulling yourself into a full sense of security, it's much better to put a ferro rod, a box of matches in a waterproof container and a Bic lighter in your pocket. Yeah. And know that you can rely on those. And even those require some optimization. That's right. I you can fail with matches, you can fail with Bic lighter, you can fail with ferro rods, but your average person is more likely to be successful under duress.

Yes. With those things Correct. Than with bow drill. Yeah. Very good point. But yet people are putting this stuff out on the internet saying this is a survival skill. And you see it in books as well, and you see it on websites. Yeah. And so anyway, I don't mean to hijack your interview, but I think it's that a good's amazing.

That was a good, it's a good thing to talk about. And it's important.

[01:39:59] **James Steyn:** No, it is very much, I was leading it into that because I, because it's nice to hear your opinion on these things.

[01:40:04] **Paul Kirtley:** One of the important, well, let's just stick with survival skills perhaps in this environment. Obviously you get different amounts of rain at different times of the year. But and where we are now there's a drainage system. Yeah. There's a drainage in front of us. There's, but it looks like a dried up river bed at the moment.

Sure. There's no obvious surface water there on that. Yeah. On that river bed. And I think for a lot, and it is quite arid here at the moment. Yeah. And the sun's, even though it's coming into winter as we record this in the southern winter, it's still quite warm during the day. It's

cooler at night, but you still need a reasonable amount of water during the day if you're active.

Can you talk through your process of thinking and some indicators for this environment that obviously we don't have a visual medium to, to show, but can you describe some of the factors that might lead you to water in these sorts of environments?

[01:40:53] **James Steyn:** Sure, I can do that. So South Africa, first and foremost is a dry, it's considered a dry country.

We only in this particular area, the eastern part of South Africa, we get we get about 300 millimeters of rain per year. If on average and that's not a lot really. No. It's like for

the Americans it's like 12 inches.

Okay. Yes. So, so that's, you're spot on in saying that this is a relatively dry environment and certain times of the year, 'cause our rainfall season is an our summer.

So you're looking at anything from about September through to March, but we get most of our rain maybe December, January, February. In our winter, it's dry. In, in large tracts of wilderness land or wilderness areas like this, in, in South Africa, you've got these dry drainage systems. So what they really are the terrain here is fairly undulating and when it rains, the water concentrates in the lower lying portions of the topography and it gets drained into the major rivers from there. And there are a few perennial rivers around, but in between the huge distances there are, they're just these dry river systems. And they substrate inside there is sand pretty much. So if you dig in that sand at any particular time of the year, obviously in the summer months when it's raining, more so than in the winter, you will get water.

So in the summer it goes from digging five centimeters to getting water, to having to potentially in the middle of winter, towards the end of winter, digging maybe a meter deep to get water, but there is always water there. And sourcing the water is. One thing, but finding the water and finding those drainage systems from a context or perspective of survival is a different thing altogether.

But some of the things that you can look at here and concentrate on is first and foremost, if you are lost and you've got no water and you don't know where you are, you can start heading to high ground. That's the first thing that you wanna do. And look for associated vegetation to these drainage lines.

So the trees that grow along the drainage lines are much taller, much more established, and much greener. And there's a lot more species along those drainage systems, which have their leaves all year round, so they evergreens. So if you're on higher ground, look for that. And generally that's gonna be in the lower lying areas, so naturally gravitate downhill towards these areas.

What you're gonna find along the way, understanding that this place is overrun by wildlife and they all need water as well, especially as we said earlier on with elephant. Rhino Buffalo, there's many different species who are water dependent, who need water at least twice a day. So their game trails are going to go straight to and from water sources.

Whether they're natural or whether they're unnatural. Understanding that in the private reserves like this, some people have water holes, which they've created to attract the animals, therefore the guests you see. So follow, get onto these prominent game trails and follow them. Gravitating downhill, obviously, to the lower line areas.

And at some stage, as you get closer to the water, you'll see there's additional game trails that will start converging. And essentially that then forms an arrow and it points in the direction of the movement.

So find a prominent game trail really well used that's got fresh movement on it. Understanding you may or may not know what animal tracks are look like, but fresh movement, most people can see why is fresh important, because the animals will use those to go to dedicated water points where they know it's guaranteed to find water as well.

[01:44:13] **Paul Kirtley:** So, so can you have trails to. Places that don't have water.

[01:44:19] **James Steyn:** No. Most of these trails walk between water sources. Yeah. And water points. You can get trails that sometimes go off these trails that end up into grazing areas, perhaps. But if you're on a prominent one downhill, you're going to water most of the time.

[01:44:32] **Paul Kirtley:** I guess you could go to a dried up if it's not fresh. Yes. It could be a trail that's going to dried up water hole.

[01:44:37] **James Steyn:** It could very definitely, it could be, it could go to a seasonal pan perhaps, where there may be water certain times of the year, but if you continue the process you are bound to find water at some stage.

[01:44:47] **Paul Kirtley:** But if there's fresh movement, it's more likely to be a current water source.

[01:44:50] **James Steyn:** To be a current water source. Yeah. Yeah. And go for the ga go for the species who are water dependent. The big mammals, the large land mammals, they're gonna show you where the water is.

So, so what you can do is get onto one of these game trails, gravitate downhill, and you're likely to get to the, to, to a drainage line.

And then you've gotta dig for water. And how deep you need to go. It depends on how desperate you are, but you will do it if you, if your tongue is swollen. So it's important to understand that you can also, when you get to the drainage lines, there's many things you can look at inside the drainage line as well.

You can go and look where this to find water.

[01:45:21] **Paul Kirtley:** So this is, if there's, so you've come downhill, there's converging game trails, but you haven't found. A surface water source. Correct. So you're gonna have to dig.

[01:45:30] **James Steyn:** You're gonna have to dig. Yeah. So now in, in order to find the best places to dig, 'cause some are gonna be better than others. Look for where the animal activity is. So look for where the congregation of tracks is. The congregation of animal dung is. And in most cases, there's already places where you can see elephants have dug. 'cause they also do this. And then look for the camber of the river. So where's the lower lying portions?

Find bends in the river because water's more likely to be before the bend. 'cause water slows down when it gets there, as it takes the corner and it starts backing up. So the water sits there a longer time and then drains slower into the sand. So, so, so use the animals to aid you in finding the water.

If you are lost and you're walking and you find a herd of buffalo, for instance, late afternoon, early morning, if you follow them, they'll take you directly to the water. So that's something else you can use. You can use birds here. So there's certain bird species that are very much associated with water.

Water birds, waders, herons geese, for instance, certain plover species.

[01:46:30] **Paul Kirtley:** Well we saw those Egyptian geese yesterday when we were out on foot. Correct. They went they were perfect sign, weren't they?

[01:46:36] **James Steyn:** Absolutely. They flew straight over us and started losing altitude as quickly as possible and went straight down. And that there was a water source there. Yes.

I guess the challenge here though is Paul, you have to have some knowledge, yes. And that's maybe a good takeaway for people who are interested in wilderness. This wonderful saying idea that you have to have skills, knowledge, and equipment to facilitate survival if that's the situation you are in, or just facilitate your experience in the wilderness.

Yes. And that's a very important thing. Nobody plans to improvise, right? Because you, you're not gonna make it. You've gotta have some knowledge and some skill. So maybe before you go to a wilderness area, do extensive, not, maybe you should do extensive planning Yeah. And understand what you're letting yourself in for.

So you understand to look at indicator species. Yes. Birds, plants, mammals, that will help aid you in finding water. So that's very important, but that's some of the things you can do. Yeah. The large water dependent mammals, whether it's their tracks or whether it's them as individuals, or whether it's the areas they utilize to move in, they're gonna show you where the water is.

[01:47:34] **Paul Kirtley:** And the other thing that you showed us the other day, which I really liked, was spotting the oxpecker up in the sky. Sure. To locate those larger animals. Correct. Yeah.

[01:47:43] **James Steyn:** So, so, so oxpecker are a group of birds in Africa that, that sit on some of the mammals and they groom them of ticks, essentially.

So mostly found on giraffe all the antelopes, zebra, wildebeeste, buffalo, rhino. Those are the animals that they prefer to sit on, and they, there's a, there's obviously a mutual relationship there. The bird gets a food source and the animal is cleaned up off de-ticked, essentially.

So the rid of external parasites. And those birds, again, knowing what they look like, knowing what their calls are, that's more important. And looking for their activities will associate them with large land mammals in the day.

And again watching them early morning flying, starting to, from the roosts flying to look for animals and watching them late afternoon, flying away from the animals to roost again.

But that activity in between in the daytime they almost always tell you where large land mammals, and I can't tell you how many times we've been on foot that we found rhino and buffalo, just because we know what the birds look like and what they sound like. By looking at their activity.

It may be a giraffe of maybe Impala, but it could also be a buffalo and a rhino. So we don't only use their activities just to find the animals that can potentially help us for water. We also use them from as a scaries, essentially. They're actually a scaries for the animals they sit on because it's a pre-warning system.

Because they get very vocal when predators approach. So the animal can utilize 'em in that sense too. But in the same way we can use them as well to tell us where the dangerous animal is. And then we are more cautious.

Yeah.

But they can tell us where the herd of buffalo is, that you can follow down to the water.

Yeah. Yep.

[01:49:17] **Paul Kirtley:** Yeah. And the other, the other, as you say, the more. Broad thing I've noticed as well is how tuned, particularly when we're out on foot, but not exclusively how tuned in you are to bird calls. Yeah. Alarm calls. Yeah. I mean it is just that situational awareness.

[01:49:34] **James Steyn:** That's right. And the safety management that comes with it.

Again, they alarm calling birds can give predators away, their positions. And they can aid you in finding the animals for whatever the case may be, but also to be aware that there are animals like that maybe waiting in the direction that you're walking so that you can take the precautions you need to.

Yeah. And the more you do this, the better you become at it. It's like anything in life. A colleague of mine always says referring more to the tracking side of things, but he says you need dirt time.

Yes.

And I really like that phrase. And that's the bottom line here. This is, again, I mentioned this earlier.

I said, this is an experience based industry. And that's actually in its own right. Another conversation, which is quite interesting. But you get a lot of younger generations of people who find themselves stepping into the guiding industry. Now add what I've noticed, certainly they add value only to the theoretical component and not to the practical component.

So they go and do a course, and then they come out of the course after six months or a year thinking they're a guide. But they're not a guide. You need a whole. Time span worth of practical exposure and experience to really become a good guide. And so they learn very quickly, make their mistake, they learn very quickly.

Okay. No, I understand now. But it is interesting how people think that the theoretical component is the beginning and the end. And it's not, it's only the start.

But dirt time in the bush on foot, understanding what the animals do, where they are, how they move what you need to look for, so on.

That's really what makes you a good guide at the end of the day is time spent. And I'm always surprised at, I've been to the States, I've been to beautiful places there, like Montana and Wyoming and Colorado and I was, I'm always surprised there at, and I dunno what to call it. And I'd be careful not to offend anybody, but how people could in a national park, they just stop their vehicle at a dedicated point and what they call the trail head and start walking from their, into the wilderness.

Unaccompanied, no experience, no skills, no equipment. Maybe a backpack with a water bottle on it. That's all. And yet they actually get away with it most of the time. Yes. Where. And we spoke about this right in the beginning of this conversation about how formalized guiding is in South Africa and how structured it is and how it's governed, and that's why it's so professional because of that fact.

So, so we are not in South Africa, we definitely, you, there's nowhere in a national park or in a game reserve or nature reserve where there's dangerous animals where you can just get out your car, walk into the bush without a qualified guide accompanying you for that.

And I would like to see more of this globally actually.

Because it, people don't realize that yet, but it enriches their experience when they've got a qualified guide going with them.

The thing is, they're in a situation where they don't know what they don't know.

They don't even know that they don't even know. If they only knew the value that a qualified experience guide can add to the ex that, that excursion

Yes.

They'd much rather have that than just walk the trail from the trail it to the top of the hill and back by themselves. And that's the value again of guiding in South Africa at and people love it. Yes. They love having, being in, being a, being in the company of somebody who's really good at what they do with the necessary skills.

[01:52:41] **Paul Kirtley:** So it's not just about driving them to the Big five or making sure they're safe on a walking safari. There's a whole raft of other enrichment and education. Sure. Interpretation that goes along with guiding. Yeah.

[01:52:57] **James Steyn:** It supplements all of the animals. And I think that's it. It comes back to that earlier thing about maybe the big five makes up 1% of the total experience.

And look in their mind, we spoke about this a little bit this morning on the vehicle, humans are visually stimulated, firstly, first and foremost. So understanding that it's a lot for you to take in when you see these animals initially because you are overwhelmed by their grandeur.

Which I understand and get, but they're really only a small facet of the total experience. And you can, with, if you're a good guide, you'd understand how to manage that so people get other exposure as well, not just to those animals. But there's a part of that, which is whether the person, the guest, the visitor is receptive or not.

And you get people who are open to understanding new experiences beyond that. And you get some people who are not. And in some cases that's also fine. It doesn't bother us in any way as guides. You give people what they want. Yes. If people are here purely to see the wildlife, then show them the wildlife.

If you see there's an inkling of wanting to understand more than give them more.

[01:54:01] **Paul Kirtley:** So understanding the ecosystem more deeply. And That's right. That's what you mean.

[01:54:05] **James Steyn:** Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

And you based different interpretation styles, levels and volume on what the people are capable of receiving from you.

And that's the mark of a good guide, essentially. For me. Ultimately, it's about recognizing what the people are there for, what they need, and then giving it to them in the right amount at the right time. Without overcomplicating it so that they don't understand it or lost lose the translation of it. Complication

[01:54:31] **Paul Kirtley:** lost focus. Yeah. 'cause there's so much information. Yeah. That's right. And do you find, 'cause I mean you have quite a high rate of re return guests Yeah. At your lodge. Do you find that people over time, well some people at least want to delve more deeply. Yeah. They, maybe the first time they come they just want to see an elephant. They wanna see a giraffe. They wanna see a rhino. And then the next time they come, yeah, of course they wanna see those things again perhaps, but they then want to learn more granular detail about place.

[01:55:01] **James Steyn:** Yeah. My answer unfortunately is gonna be disappointing. You get some people who do, and you get some people who don't right.

You get some people who they, the value they add to the safari experience is purely by seeing the large mammals. The hairy and the scaries, as we call them. Yeah. And other people. Yes. They may progress a little bit beyond that and start seeing the value in other things.

So, and again, there give the people what they want, it is what it is and it's, you're not gonna change. You can look, you can influence some people in some way and try and change their mindset a little bit, but people know what they want and they know what makes them happy. And it's difficult to change that in some way.

Even if you're a really good guide, you're not gonna convince some guy that he should be interested in the botany when he's actually there to see the mammals. Yes. Yeah.

[01:55:46] **Paul Kirtley:** That makes sense. That makes sense. A couple of things I'd like to circle back to. Sure. Yeah. It kind of feels like addendums, but perhaps for some people we didn't delve into it.

And also just some things I, again, just to paint a picture in people's mind about certain things, i'm not a firearms obsessive. Sure. I'm not going back to this because I am, but it, I think it would be interesting 'cause I've seen the rifle that you carry in the bush. It's a lovely firearm.

But again, for pe maybe people think you're wandering around with automatic rifles or bazookas or, two magnum strapped to your waist. That's right. What are what are you using? And why Sure. That's interesting 'cause it is a tool. It is, but it's the same kind of conversation as someone asking me, why do you take a particular axe on a winter trip?

Yeah. Versus a summer canoe trip. So, what do you use and why? Just to cover off that kind of interest for people if it's, sure. Yeah.

[01:56:36] **James Steyn:** And again, it's a very interesting question. We certainly don't carry hand grenades with this but, so, so you're gonna need we carry what we typically refer to as bolt action rifles, which has a magazine capacity of usually three, four, or five cartridges. You can customize them but that's about traditionally what we have. And then they've gotta be of a certain caliber or diameter in bullet width to be able to be large enough or effective enough against a quarry, a large stick skinned animal.

Yeah. So, so we generally, we recommended a minimum caliber of a 0.375 Holland and Holland. And then it goes up from there till. Infinity really. But I think the most commonly used caliber in, in guiding in southern Africa is a 4 5 8. Which 0.458 of an inch. That's the diameter of the bullet.

And then depending on how long the case is and how much propellant or powder you can put inside of that, you're gonna get a different velocity.

And so you need a combination of the right velocity and the right weight to get the right stopping what we call stopping power.

A bolt action rifle is a very good looking tool in some cases.

People make them aesthetically really nice and they operate on the principle of you. You have to lift a lever up and pull it back all the way for the cartridge to jump up into, in line with the chamber. And then that bolt has a extractor on it, which grabs the back of the case and feeds the cartridge into the chamber.

You've then gotta close that bolt again and only then do the firing or does the firing p gauge. And then if you squeeze the trigger, essentially the firearm is then ready to fire that projectile. But it's, yeah, there's a minimum caliber. There's,

[01:58:13] **Paul Kirtley:** is that a mandated minimum caliber?

[01:58:16] **James Steyn:** No, it's by, it's, the guiding industry dictates that it isn't really mandated, but we all know that's about as low as you want to go.

You can get away with something even less than that if you're really skilled and wanted to, but it's probably not a good idea. Mm-hmm. Again, understanding we letting a lot of. New people coming to the industry that's maybe not au fait with firearms and things like that. So you wanna give them the best possible chance.

Chance for sure. But then you, so, so from there it can go up, but you must understand, and this is probably the most important thing, there's a thing called recoil with these large firearms, which has significant effect on your shoulder at any given time. So you want to keep that caliber choice within your ability to handle recoil.

Because if the recoil is too excessive, you're gonna lose accuracy. You're gonna start flinching, you're not gonna want to use the firearm anymore. So there's a balance in between

there. And again, we find 3, 7, 5, or 4 5, 8 to be a really good balance for most people on average.

and that's about it.

So well-trained, understand how to clean and maintain the rifle. And understand. It's the very last resort. It's never something to fall back on. And anyway, I'm much more proud of being able to use my knowledge of animal behavior Yes. Of course. To get myself out of a situation than ever thinking that I have to fire shots.

[01:59:29] **Paul Kirtley:** Sure. Yeah. And that's why I was a little bit reticent to come back to it because I didn't want to overemphasize, but I think there'd be some people who would just be interested in that. And I think the other thing is, it's not like you're just giving reasonably large caliber bolt action rifles to 20 somethings and saying, there you go.

I mean, there's a, There's a fairly, even at the lower level, would you be able to explain what tests they have to go through before they're

[01:59:54] **James Steyn:** Yeah, I can do that for sure.

Yeah. So, so in the, in, in the theoretical component of the Trails Guide qualification, there's a whole section dedicated to firearms.

And there you teach them firearm safety, understanding the mechanisms of how the firearm works. Understanding bullet diameter, velocity and what it's capable of doing. You are you teaching them animal shot placement for that matter. Understanding that hunting an animal and having to maybe put an animal down that's coming at you with the intention of killing you is a very different thing altogether.

So there's very important principles there in, in the difference of how you would approach and handle that. And again, hopefully may that never happen to you in your guiding career. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And nobody wants that. Mm-hmm. Uh, But unfortunately you never know, Paul. You could come around a bush and there could be an animal lying there that had a fight with another animal.

He's all beat up. He's got excessive wounds on him. He's in a bad mood. He just, and he thinks at that particular time, in that day, I'm not gonna run away. There's another intruder here, there's another entity coming to cause me bodily harm and I'm already not feeling bad as it is. You're in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Maybe for a moment you, that's just what it is. You don't walk in the bush. Always getting the conditions perfect. That never happens. You've gotta make the conditions perfect with your management of what you do, and then this animal decides that it's gonna vent its frustration and pain out on you.

And then unfortunately maybe not, you may have to use the firearm. So, we teach that in principle to people, and then they've gotta do a practical test. They gotta, they've gotta prove their competence with the firearm in its safety, in its cleaning and in its application use.

They've gotta prove their competence in understanding where to place the shot. If that's a requirement and it's every three years you've gotta do a shooting assessment, which is uh, it's not an easy assessment by any stretch of the imagination, but if you're well-trained and comfortable with a firearm, it shouldn't be a problem for you to pass it.

So yeah, that's pretty much how it works. With new people, introduction and I, this is an interesting thing for me 'cause a lot of people are, they're very they're very judgemental over firearm and firearm use, but it's surprising and I've seen it in this industry, how many people, once they get to understand the firearm, use it and see its application, they actually start enjoying it.

They enjoy the skill. They start enjoying the skill, and that's the important thing to say there. So, so once you are skilled at using a rifle in a very safe manner, understanding what its application purpose is. People, actually, a lot of people that never thought they'd like it get smiles on their faces the first time they're on a shooting range, shooting at a paper target, and they get the shot placed in correctly, the place where they aim.

It's a skill. It's a difficult skill to initially master and once you got it, there's some level of satisfaction. Satisfaction Yeah. And pleasure that comes out of being able to handle the tool correctly. Yes.

[02:02:50] **Paul Kirtley:** Yeah. And, And taking pride in, in being skillful Absolutely. As a professional. Absolutely. Yeah. No, that makes sense. That makes sense. The other thing I wanted to come back to we did cover it quite early on but just something that I think is worth emphasizing about the area that you are operating in is how open it is. So you are sure you are in the Greater Kruger Yep. Here. Yeah.

And then there's the Kruger National Park proper, so to speak, which is the government managed bit. That's right. And then there's Mozambique if we're going east, west to east, further east, yep. That's right. And then as you go north, you're going up into other countries again, out the top.

Are there any fences there? Because that was something that I think. Perhaps it's, people think there's a border fence. Yeah. Or people think there's a fence between Yeah. The private and the national,

[02:03:43] **James Steyn:** if you look at, if you look at the context of African countries, if you go to Kenya, Tanzania Zambia, Botswana, places like that, traditionally they don't have any fences separating humans from animals in most of their national parks.

South Africa, very on, very early on, decided that there's a dedicated area for wildlife and we should at some, to some extent, segregate that from people with fences, just for the sake of

safety, property damage. The animal safety just as much as the human safety. Right? Mm-hmm. Right. People don't think about that.

Fences are not really there to keep animals out. They're there to keep the people in. If you're in a, if you're in a camp that's got a fence around it it's not to keep the animal out. 'cause in some cases it doesn't. It's to keep the person in, in. So, so the fence is therefore the safety of the animal and the person.

And I think South Africa, it's wildlife areas and national parks are very structured.

So they did have fences around some of their game reserves and more recently, in the last. 15, 20 years, they've dropped the fences with all the neighboring countries. In order to open it up and create this trans frontier park that spans over several countries understanding that in those countries that Kruger National Park borders, they've already got no fences.

So it wasn't a big something to get used to for them. It was more something to get used to for us. So if you look at Kruger Park, it's in the northeastern side of South Africa. And it's about 365 kilometers long and about 70, 65, 70 kilometers at its widest point. That's just a national park.

So just that compo, just that portion, just the national park is what is, like I said earlier, 2 million hectares. So the size of Wales or Israel, if you wanna compare it to a country, and then along its Western boundary there used to be a fence separating the private game reserves, but they've taken that fence down in 1983 already.

So they very much on the far western side of these private reserves, there is still a fence because it divides all the natural areas from towns. Communities living in rural parts of that portion of the country. So there's and roads. And roads and so on and so forth.

Yeah. So, so there's only a fence on the western boundary but on the northern boundary, which is the Limpopo River where Kruger National Park and some of the private reserves border Botswana. Zimbabwe and Mozambique, there's no fence. And then on the entire eastern and southern boundary of Kruger National Park, it borders Mozambique.

There's no fence there either. Mm-hmm. So now you're sitting with something the size of maybe in total about 2.5 million hectares. Mm-hmm. Which is massive. Yes. And it's all wildlife. The wildlife roam free. There's some, essentially some management that goes on inside the ecological management.

But the animals roam free and they're left to do what animals do. Mm-hmm. So, you know, whether that, whether they're injured or depending on how high profile they are, if we see an Impala, for instance, with a, with an injury 'cause it ran away from a leopard and it managed to get away, but it fell or, and hurt its leg or something, we're not gonna interfere in that.

'cause that's nature and it needs to take its course. Yes. But unfortunately, recent, of recent um, we are going through a, a thing, you know, a period of, of severe poaching of specifically

rhino for their horn. And so if we were to see an injured rhino, we may intervene because that species at a profile level is important, especially because it's endangered and it's at risk.

So they may intervene there. But, so it's a massive area and, yeah. The poaching issue is, yeah, no, it is a big one. It's very unfortunate. Yeah. That's a, that's almost a podcast and it's for itself. Yeah.

[02:07:25] **Paul Kirtley:** And also, I guess we maybe need to be a bit careful about what we say there. 'Cause we don't know who's listens to these things, but Yeah. There are measures in place Correct. To try and Yeah. They are curtail that. But it's a big problem. It's a big problem.

[02:07:37] **James Steyn:** It is, unfortunately. Yeah.

[02:07:39] **Paul Kirtley:** That's all been super, super interesting. Believe it or not, we have been talking for two hours and 15 minutes.

[02:07:45] **James Steyn:** Oh, that's incredible. Which is, time flies when you're having fun.

[02:07:48] **Paul Kirtley:** Time flies when you're having fun. And I, I suspect we will have around two at some point early days. But I think there'll be some, for listeners, there'll be some collaborations between me and James. And so watch this space. More on that and due course, it should be quite exciting.

Where can people find out a bit more about what you do, James? If people want to look you up Yeah, sure. Or look up your place here.

[02:08:11] **James Steyn:** They can look on our website. We've got a web presence, so Senalala. If you type in Senalala, that's all. So it's spelled S-E-N-A-L-A-L-A. Senna, la la. That's how you spell it? Yeah. If they get that on the web, they go straight at

[02:08:24] **Paul Kirtley:** And is that dot co dot ZA?

[02:08:26] **James Steyn:** Yeah, that's correct. Yeah. So,

[02:08:28] **Paul Kirtley:** and I'll put links to all of these things Sure. Under the, in the show notes as well. But yeah, that's useful to have that for people just listening on one of the podcast platforms so they can look at that

[02:08:37] **James Steyn:** and they can type in CyberTracker if they're interested in tracking.

Mm-hmm. Yes. And they can type in FGASA if they're interested, Field Guides, Association of Southern Africa, if they're interested in that component. And just while we, to finish up with that, even FGASA has got some capacity for people globally to do some of the qualifications online.

Okay.

So, so you need to be put off by the idea of that this is a qualification dedicated just for South Africa.

Mm-hmm. It's not at all, it's actually something you can do part-time as a hobby, almost as an enthusiast. And get some knowledge about what it must be like to be a guide. Yeah. So that's something that people must look into.

[02:09:11] **Paul Kirtley:** Yeah. Wonderful. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. Well, you clearly love what you do and you've been doing it a long time, but you clearly love what you do and it's fantastic to talk to someone that's so enthusiastic about all the different aspects of what they do.

So I, I really appreciate you taking the time, James. I really appreciate you doing what you do and uh, taking this time to explain some of it. And I look forward to the next round. Sure. Thank you very much.

[02:09:36] **James Steyn:** Pleasure. Thanks Paul. Thanks for you coming out here to Africa to meet me. That's incredible.

Mm-hmm. To brought Amanda with, I'm sure she's loving every moment of it. Absolutely. And like you said earlier, I'm also very excited for potentially what the future holds for collaboration. Indeed. Thank you indeed.

[02:09:49] **Paul Kirtley:** Thanks James.

Well, thanks again to James for joining me in this episode.

I hope you enjoyed our conversation and that it gave you a deeper appreciation for what goes into high level guiding, walking safaris, and the discipline of tracking. All the links we mentioned are listed on the page for this episode over at paulkirtley.co.uk/podcast61. That's forward slash podcast six one.

And if you'd like to go deeper into bushcraft with me, I've created a structured sequence of articles, podcasts, and videos that takes you step by step through key skills and ideas. It's the best way to follow my free online material in order and for you to get the most value from it. You can join at paulkirtley.co uk/emails.

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