

AS WILD as it gets

He had a private plane, a thriving veterinary practice in Florida and no end of poodles and gerbils to fix. But one day Clay Wilson had an epiphany. Now all he has is a Land Cruiser, a tranquilliser gun, a bag of medicines, his passion for wild creatures and the whole of Botswana's Chobe National Park as his office.

BY DON PINNOCK.

There were several tasks at hand, the most pressing being to find an aggressive buffalo with swollen testicles. Then there was the elephant with a bloody breast and an impala with a badly swollen haunch. These were on the to-do list Clay Wilson picked up from the wildlife office as we entered Chobe National Park.

He ambled back to his Land Cruiser and eased himself behind the wheel. On both front doors were signs that read "Honorary Game Warden & Veterinarian. Do Not Follow". "Let's go see what we can find," he said as he drove down the bumpy road along the Chobe River. I could almost feel the Cruiser's grin widening.

The park has 387 kilometres of riverfront and connects to Moremi, Savute and wildlife areas in Namibia, Angola, Zambia and Zimbabwe. It's immense, a long way from the comfortable veterinary practice

Clay sold in America. And the park's 150 000 elephants and lion prides have little in common with the poodles and gerbils he was dealing with before he had an epiphany and fled back to Africa, where he was born.

"I had a big practice with 20 staff in what could be considered the Beverly Hills of Florida," he said. "People had no problem spending two to three thousand dollars on their animals. But one day I'd just had enough. I realised all I was doing was paying salaries. So I sold everything – even my aeroplane. I bought dart guns, other equipment and medicines, everything I thought I'd need and just came here.

And, of course the Land Cruiser. Couldn't manage without it. Hey! There's a buff with big balls. Let's have a look."

We peered at the rear ends of several giant bulls mooching in the woodland and ended up metres away from two lionesses lolling in the shade. "Pretty cats," Clay observed, then turned his attention back to the dark beasts. "All the buffs seem to have big nuts so I guess that's the norm around here. Not our guy."

We headed down to the river where a family of elephants was splashing and spraying. Clay, looking for a bloody breast, got out the Land Cruiser and headed in their direction with me in tow, nervously aware of the nearby lions.

"I don't like to see animals suffering," he whispered as we looked down at the herd below us. "If an elephant goes down it can take five or six days to die. It's a horrible death. You can say we shouldn't interfere with nature, but so many of the problems are man-made, like snares. If we make the problem we should undo it."

FROM PEKINESE TO PREDATORS

Back in the van I asked Clay how he handled the change from Pekinese pups to things that bite to kill. "An animal is an animal," he said, "you know: heart, brain, bones. It's just a matter of different dosages, really. You under-dose a buffalo or elephant when you dart them and they tend to come after you. I've been charged by lions, elephants ... the closest was a buffalo. It nearly killed me. You have to be careful working with wild animals. They're sick and they're hurting and often it's people who have done that to them.

"But, hey, I wouldn't want to do anything else. I couldn't go back to the city. At night I hear lions roaring and hyenas calling. Five



"I couldn't go back to the city. At night I hear lions roaring and hyenas calling. Five minutes by car and you'll run into a herd of elephants."



minutes by car and you'll run into a herd of elephants. Not many places on earth you can do that.'

All the elephants we saw had intact breasts, but deeper into the park we came across a baby elephant stuck in yucky cotton-soil mud at a waterhole. Clay used his vehicle to shoo away the worried herd that had been trying to get it out, darted the mother who wouldn't leave so she'd go to sleep, then hauled the youngster out with ropes attached to the Cruiser.

By then a little crowd of tourists had gathered and when the baby came out, they cheered. Clay was covered in mud, but he was wearing a Jack Nicholson grin. "This is why I'm here," he said, "where I can be useful to wildlife. Chobe's one of the most important ecosystems on Earth. It's a treasure and we have to look after it."

HUFFING AND PUFFING

Sometimes, though, Clay's tendency to just get on with it can get people huffing and puffing in the small town of Kasane. A few months back distemper broke out

among the hundreds of scrawny, stray dogs around. Dead but still infectious dogs were being thrown on the local dump where they were being scavenged by hyenas and jackals.

Clay knew the virus was lethal to wildlife predators and that the whole park was at risk. So he and his partner, Laura, set up an inoculation site and put out the word he'd do the work for free if people couldn't afford to pay. Laura dabbed a spot of white paint on the forehead of each treated dog. They inoculated 650 dogs in four days. Clay then gave warning that he'd shoot any dog without a spot – and after two weeks' grace he did. The SPCA had a fit.

"What else was I supposed to do?" asked Clay, looking puzzled as he negotiated yet another turn to inspect some testicles. What's more important, some stray dogs or the whole darn park?"

On the way back to base Clay got to dreaming. "You know what this place needs? A research centre with world-class experts coming in to study and

assist. And I would like to re-introduce rhinos, which have been poached out, and breed roan and sable antelopes for re-introduction.

"Oh yeah, and I'd like to get some aerial drones – little remote-controlled planes with cameras and GPS and night vision. They'd soon sort out the poaching. They are hugely expensive and I'm running out of money. But I've been negotiating with the manufacturers. And of course I need a new Land Cruiser. You have no idea what this one has been through. Amazing vehicles.

"Maybe I'm too passionate. If I see a problem I just deal with it, whatever it is. Everything here's important. There's no difference between an insect and an elephant. They all have their place in the fabric of life.

"There! That buffalo. Err...no, standard balls. Maybe I'll come across it tomorrow, poor bugger." As we left the park Laura leaned over from the back seat and gave him a hug. "He's perfectly crazy, isn't he?" she said, then gave him another one. ❏