



PHOTO BY CRESTINA MARTINS

‘I’m a bit *nomadic*’

Wildlife photographer and conservationist Veronica Baas always game for adventure anywhere in the world

BY BARBARA AGGERHOLM

People don't typically admire the hyena, but Veronica Baas isn't typical. Raised in suburban Waterloo, but passionate about seeing the world and protecting wildlife threatened by humans, Baas is as footloose and curious as the hyena she admires.

She has taken road trips across Canada, backpacked throughout the world, photographed wildlife on islands halfway

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Elephants, seen greeting each other, are one of Veronica Baas's favourite creatures. An experience with an abused elephant ignited her passion for wildlife conservation and ethical travel.

WILDLIFE PHOTOS BY VERONICA BAAS

between Norway and the North Pole, volunteered at a wilderness reserve in South Africa, and worked as a trained safari guide and researcher.

In South Africa, she has monitored birds of prey and cheetah, cleared roads, gone on anti-poaching patrols, worked to control invasive species and counted ungulates – hoofed animals like rhinoceros – to check the balance of wildlife.

“Africa so gets under your skin,” says Baas, 44. “To drive through the bush and, all of a sudden, there’s a herd of elephants crossing the road.”

Baas was so taken by her experiences at the Askari Wilderness Conservation Programme in South Africa that she introduced her former college professors to the program in 2010. Askari is located in the Pidwa Wilderness Reserve in Limpopo province, which shares borders with Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. As a result, students in the ecosystem

management program at the Lindsay campus of Fleming College (also known as Sir Sandford Fleming College) have been doing field placements there since 2011.

In blogs, students describe the experience as “life-changing.”

“Thanks to Veronica, the door opened to South Africa and it has now become a fantastic opportunity,” says Barb Elliot, a program faculty member who, with fellow faculty member Michael Fraser, helped make it happen.

“Veronica . . . is one of the most passionate people I know when it comes to nature and conservation,” says Michelle Sole, friend and a fellow safari guide in South Africa who has travelled extensively with Baas.

“A perfect day for Vron (Veronica) is being out in the bush from dawn until dusk looking for animals.”

You can see some of Baas’s photographs on her website at www.veronicabaasphoto.com. She has been developing her pho-

tography skills since she was a teen, and a photo taken in India recently won a prize in Kitchener Public Library’s photography contest.

Sitting at her computer in the kitchen of her mother’s Waterloo home last summer, her blond hair tied back, Baas was working on a new website. She’d finished her landscaping job in early August and was preparing to travel to Western Canada to explore and photograph and sort out her next work options.

The birds were singing loudly in the garden of her English-born mother, Catherine, whose exploring father helped give them the travel bug. A couple of months earlier, Baas and her mother went to Svalbard, situated above the Arctic Circle, where they saw polar bears, puffins, seals, reindeer and fjords while travelling by ship.

Both have maps of the world covered in

pins to show where they’ve been.

Baas has a different mindset than her Canadian friends, many of whom are married with children, mortgages and busy schedules. But “I don’t mind being different. It’s taken me to very many places.

“You’ve just got to get out there and see and explore. There’s so much outside of Kitchener-Waterloo to see and do and experience.

“I’m a bit nomadic.”

Even as she prepared to head west with Sole, going wherever the wind takes them, the sights and sounds of South Africa are rarely far from Baas’s mind.

One of the things Baas misses most when she’s back in Canada is the playfulness of the hyena and its many calls. While its giggle can be scary, she says, it’s the “woo-ooop” call that she likes best.

She also remembers the hyenas’ less melodious noises when she and three friends took a break from their guiding

to camp in Moremi Game Reserve in the Okavango Delta in Botswana.

The camps are like Canadian campgrounds in that there are pull-in sites with a comfort station in the middle.

“The difference is, that as the majority of trees are thorny and very large, potentially dangerous animals roam the park. Most people have trucks with a pop-up tent on the roof, not flimsy nylon tents resting on the ground – but that is what we had.”

Bedded down on their first night there, they heard hyenas running around the unfenced camp. The sound was followed by screams of people running for their trucks. Her group stayed put.

“Yes, hyenas have a very strong bite and yes, they are potentially dangerous, but they weren’t being aggressive, just curious and we weren’t being seen as a meal – they were looking for dinner scraps,” she says.

In the moonlight, they watched the hyenas’ antics from cracks in their tent



When thinking of South Africa, Baas misses the playfulness and the sounds of the hyenas.

doors, checking to make sure that the animals weren’t chewing their tires. They saw the hyenas play tug-of-war with a towel before finally moving off to find food.

Elephants and hyenas are Baas’s favourite creatures.

An abused elephant was the lightning rod for her passion for wildlife conservation and ethical travel.

Baas was a young adult on a travel

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vacation in Thailand when she and other visitors to a “tourist trap” agreed to ride an elephant.

“When I got off, I had to leave. I was in tears,” she recalls. “I was horrified at the treatment, the way they handled them and to see them tied by a chain and hit with a stick with a hook at the end of it.

“There was blood behind his ear by the time the walk was done,” Baas says. “Never again will I do something like that.”

In some places now, tourists no longer ride elephants, she says. The animal is ridden only by its mahout, a keeper and trainer usually assigned to the animal early in its life, creating a lifelong bond.

“Tourists get to go out and walk through the jungle behind them,” she says.

“As a tourist, it’s your responsibility to educate yourself as to what tours are good things to do.”

Baas witnessed the devastation caused by poachers on protected reserves in South Africa.

“It’s horrendous to see a rhino with half of its face missing where they’ve taken off the horn,” she says. “Your life will be forever changed if you see an animal that way.”

In one incident, poachers had killed the mother rhino for its horn and injured the spine of its baby. Guides and volunteers had been clearing roads when they heard the animals’ screams.

“The reserve manager had to kill the young rhino. It was an education for volunteers to see and explain so they could take it home and tell people and tell the world and be affected.

“It happens every day on a different reserve. It will forever be with me, and I feel strongly about humans and our use and abuse of animals,” Baas says.

While those memories bring tears to her eyes today, Baas is also overwhelmed by the beauty that she saw during her guiding years, from 2012 to 2016, in

South African reserves and during her travels in Namibia, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Baas felt drawn to South Africa. She’s a graduate of Fleming College in the two-year parks and recreation program and holds a certificate in urban tree maintenance. She returned to the college to study ecosystem management for a third year, with a desire to do conservation and environmental work.

After a cross-Canada road trip, which included stops in Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk, Baas investigated international volunteering in conservation.

She discovered the website for Askari Wilderness Conservation Programme in South Africa.

She paid to volunteer at Askari for a month in 2009, doing everything from wildlife monitoring to painting fences. On the plane home, she’d already decided to return. She used her savings to go back in April 2010, this time for six months.

She met people from around the world. She went on a day trip to Kruger National Park, a massive park the size of Switzerland in the northeastern corner of South Africa where cubs and a lion gazed at her through her camera.

“It was such a privilege,” she says.

She came back to Canada after six months and worked for a while, but was restless.

“Africa was still in my head,” she says. She returned to South Africa, this time to train as a safari guide. She visited Fleming College students doing their field placements at Askari’s program.

“You could just tell she was in her element – being in the bush, being in nature, being free, being free to communicate that excitement to other people,” Elliot says.

“The experience she has gained from around the world is nothing short of

amazing,” Fraser says.

The six-month guiding course in 2011 at a reserve north of Johannesburg was challenging.

She learned to identify birds from their calls, animals, insects, tracks, trees, plants – anything that tourists might spot. She qualified to handle a rifle, learning how to shoot, if necessary, a moving target such as a buffalo or lion to ensure the safety of visitors during walks.

“It was quite intense. You have to have so many hours on foot before you’re a lead guide,” she says, adding she achieved the number but preferred to be a backup guide.

After a six-month placement – a year’s training in total – she was placed on a reserve where she was paid to guide for more than a year. The pay wasn’t a lot by North American standards, but it was enough to support her, with room and board included.

There was pressure in the work. Every day, she’d get up, not knowing exactly where the animals would be. She looked for tracks and listened to fellow guides’ radios to hear where others had spotted animals. She found it challenging to be the centre of attention, standing at the front of the vehicle.

And some tourists had high expectations.

“Everyone who goes to Africa wants to see a lion,” she says. “There can be pressure to see the Big Five – leopard, lion, rhinoceros, elephant and buffalo. People say they want to see a kill by a lion. You have to say you’d see what you can do.”

But “lions are active two to four hours a day and if you don’t catch them then, they’ll lie there and just laugh at you,” she says.

“We can’t plan nature. It doesn’t happen every day. There is the expectation that you will see a National Geographic documentary every time you drive.”

She would warn visitors about their preconceptions and spend time educating them about the birds, trees, plants, geology and history of the area as well.

She loved when she could show visitors the highly intelligent elephants, whose growth, family structure and protectiveness of their young she admired.

“They have so many muscles in their trunk. To see a young elephant use their trunk; they have to learn to manoeuvre muscles in the trunk to pick up food.”

Having seen elephants and giraffes after the death of their young, she believes the animals mourn. “I’ve seen giraffes hanging around while lions feed on their babies,” she says.

“It’s nature. You can’t become too emotional, but you kind of want to root for the underdog.”

After about a year and a half of guiding, Baas moved to a reserve close to Kruger National Park where she was paid as a research assistant and guide.

Among her jobs, she looked at movement patterns of elephants, lions and cheetah for the reserve manager and researchers. She helped track animals that needed to be tranquilized so their monitoring collars could be replaced. She carried out anti-poaching patrols in the middle of the night.

Her friend, Sole, 31, knows how dangerous that job can be, noting that two rangers were killed by poachers last summer in the Kruger National Park in South Africa.

Sole calls Baas, who is a vegetarian, “veggie Vron.”

“Vron also responded to a number of rhino poachings and on one occasion spent two days looking for a rhino calf whose mother had been killed,” Sole says. “The calf was successfully found and taken to an orphanage to be cared for as it was still dependent on its mother’s milk.”

Baas and Sole travelled with friends to see Namibia, Botswana, Zambia and

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Elephant herd at dam.

“A perfect day for (Veronica) is being out in the bush from dawn until dusk looking for animals.”

MICHELLE SOLE

FELLOW SAFARI GUIDE AND TRAVELLING PARTNER



Veronica Baas relaxes with a rhino nearby.

PHOTO BY MICHELLE SOLE (@AWILDSOLE)

Zimbabwe, staying in hostels or campgrounds. They encountered no problems, aside from one night in Botswana when their truck broke down. They stayed with the truck until morning.

In 2016, after about four years of guiding and researching, Baas left South Africa when her work permit expired. It was more difficult for foreigners to get work permits and “it was time to move on again.”

Using her savings, Baas, along with Sole, bought tickets to travel around the world in November 2016. The trip was cut short for her friend when Sole got sick from four intestinal parasites and had to return home. In India, Baas also got sick with intestinal parasites, but decided to continue to Cambodia. She ended up in hospital for a week in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia.

Neither Baas nor her friend let illness sideline them for long. They met up again in Singapore and continued on to Australia, New Zealand and South America together. Baas returned home for a while to say hello to her family, then met Sole in California where they camped in national parks, including Yosemite where Baas’s photographer hero, Ansel Adams, found his inspiration.

They stopped travelling when they ran out of money; Sole returned to guiding in South Africa and Baas to landscaping from August 2017 to this past August.

Last fall the pair was together again, exploring and camping in British Columbia, keeping an eye open for a job along the way that would let Baas use her skills in guiding, conservation or photography.

If Baas had a dream job, what would it be?

“A job like (English broadcaster and naturalist) David Attenborough’s would be amazing,” she says. “Wildlife photography would be a dream, or some kind of documentary photography.

“I don’t really have an end goal,” she says. “I may find somewhere I love and want to settle down. I am open to possibilities.” 