

HPH Publishing

Walking Wild – Hiking the length of Kruger National Park

José A Neves

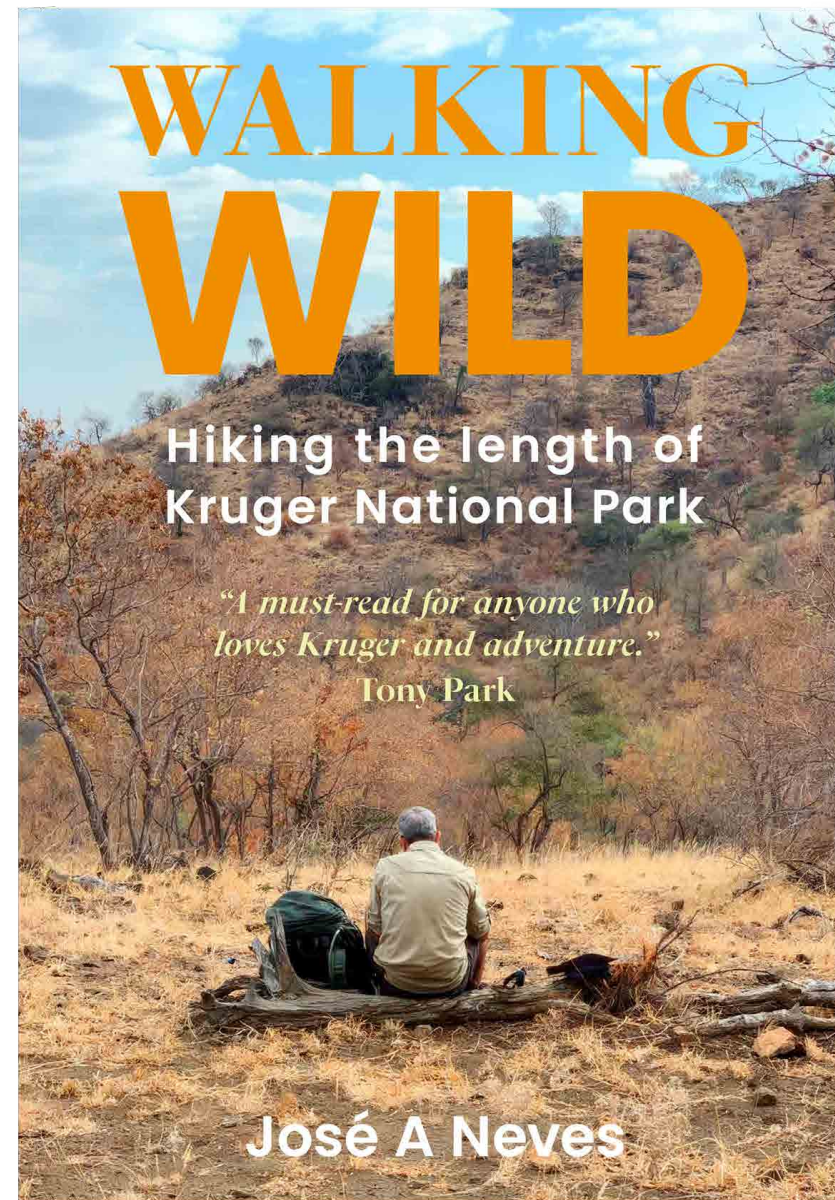
Walking Wild is not your typical safari – no game drives, no cool sundowners and definitely no fences. Instead, it's 605 km of dust, sweat and unforgettable moments as an unlikely group of strangers sets out to walk the entire length of Kruger National Park.

Over six stages and three years, they walked from Crooks' Corner in the far north to Malelane in the south, averaging 20 km a day with heavy backpacks and only the wild for company. Led by two armed guides, they braved blistering heat and violent storms. At night, as hyenas nosed their tents and lionesses strolled right through camp, some slept soundly – others lay wide-eyed, waiting for dawn.

They drank from murky trickles in dry riverbeds, navigated thick riverine bush teeming with hippo, buffalo and crocodiles, and slowly learnt to read the bush – from the smallest antlion to the distant roar of a lion.

But Kruger's wilderness is not without its challenges. Poachers – both criminal syndicates and those in search of bushmeat – move in the shadows, rivers bring pollution from beyond its borders, and conservation battles rage on. Walking Wild captures the magic and the madness of life on foot in one of the world's most iconic national parks. It's a story of adventure, camaraderie and deep immersion in the wild – a journey that leaves no one unchanged.

Walking Wild is a testament to resilience, discovery and the deep connection between people and nature. If you've ever dreamt of experiencing Kruger beyond the safari vehicle, this book is your ticket to the trail.



"Informative and honest; a true walk on the wild side."

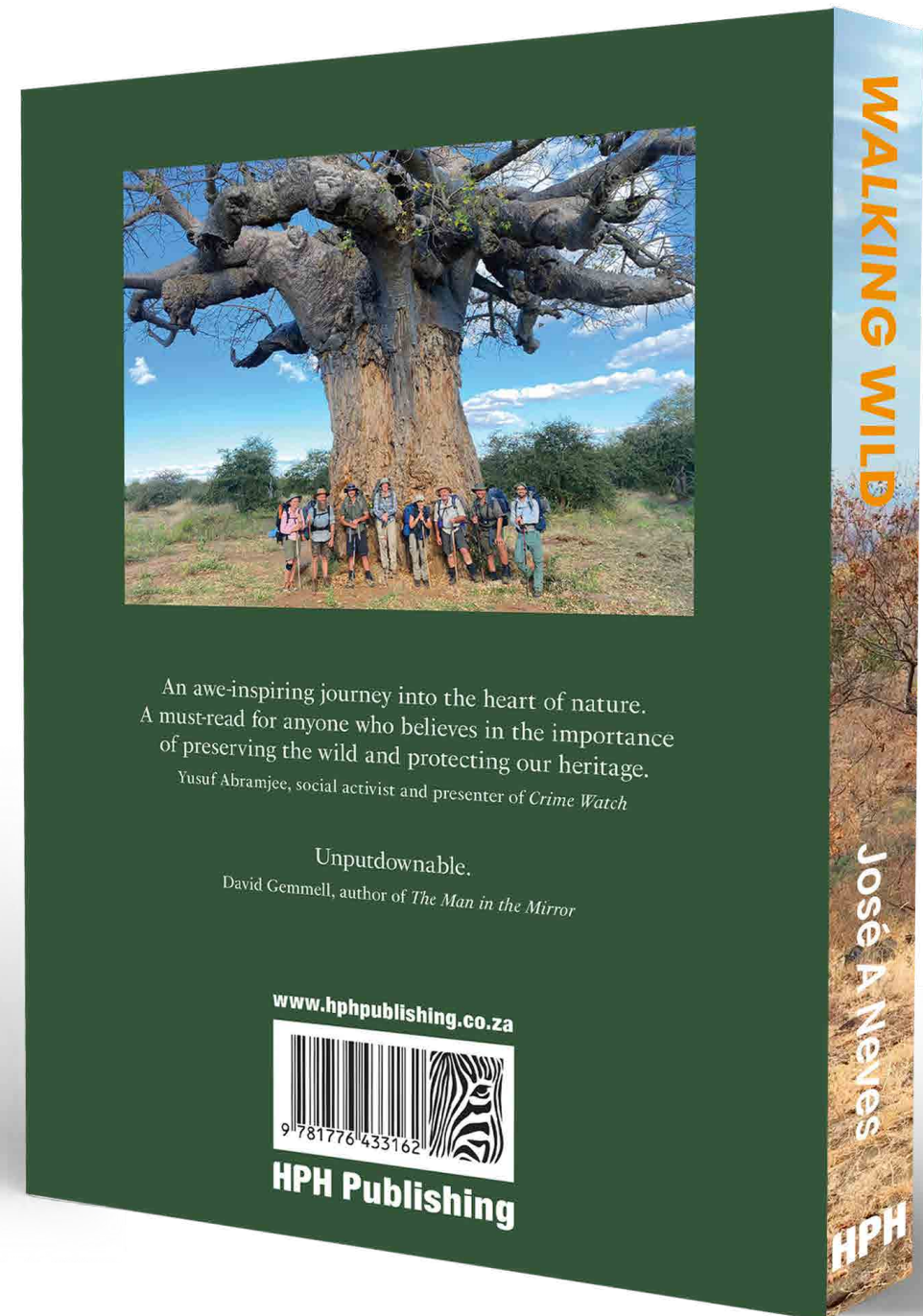
Tony Park

"An awe-inspiring journey into the heart of nature, this book beautifully captures the untamed spirit of wildlife. Each page immerses you in the raw beauty, struggles, and resilience... Whether you're an animal lover or simply someone who appreciates the wonders of the world around us, this book offers a deep, reflective experience that will stay with you long after you've turned the last page. A must-read for anyone who believes in the importance of preserving the wild and protecting our heritage."

Yusuf Abramjee - Anti-Crime Activist, Social Activist, Presenter of Crime Watch

Walking Wild by José Neves, who walked the length of the Kruger National Park, is a fascinating close-up of real life in the reserve. Almost en passant, he provides a profusion of astonishing and at times terrifying facts; as he amusingly describes his odyssey of six separate hikes. Unputdownable.

David Gemmell, author of The Man in the Mirror





The Kruger Trail

We are closer to life when in the wild; the vulnerability of birth, defence of the young, the place of the aged, and where death coldly diffuses life back into the ecosystem. A part of the magic of the wilderness is the silence, coupled with the dusty dirt, the smells, and the feeling of being part of the circle of life. And, of course, we become hyper-alert to avoid becoming an inadvertent part of the food chain.

Many live surrounded by walls and hemmed in by roads. They may interact with domestic animals and landscaped lawns, but rarely meet nature on its terms. I get two responses when people learn I hiked more than 600 kilometres through the Kruger National Park; a place with large herds of elephant and buffalo, prides of lion, leaps of leopard and chuckling hyenas. They either admire what they regard as a courageous adventure, or they don't get why I wouldn't rather view wildlife from the comfort and safety of a motor vehicle. Both responses are valid, yet these words by Spanish author Javier Marias also resonate: "There's ... something that prompts us not to act and not to take that step, not to leave the house and not to move, not to speak to anyone and to avoid others speaking to us." But he assures, "Only the first step is difficult."

The first steps on the first day of The Kruger Trail – every time of the six occasions I walked it – were the most difficult as I worked to shake off city thinking. It was also the day newcomers were most likely to fall, distracted by the unusual task of remaining silent and walking with eyes on the ground to avoid roots, sticks and stones that could cause a mishap. It takes time to consider the profound lessons silence and mindfulness teach us.

The Kruger National Park is one of the world's oldest and most significant wildlife reserves and is located on the northeastern border of South Africa. Traversing its vast expanse creates an immersion in nature allowing for a deeper understanding of the distribution and life of mammals. The vigilant observer learns about predator-prey relationships and the multi-layered connections between animals, terrain and the

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The camp set up in a disused artificial waterhole.



Elephants at the busy Matlovo Spring.



Splash splash, Lourens and Morri were takin' a bath.

Opposite page: Training in the farmlands of Mafikeng, Eswatini for Leg Five. Front of group to back: Cooper the dog, Ian Salt, José Neves, Grant Goldstone, Zocks the dog.



A toast on the Mpondo Dam wall.



Anie, Jennifer, Lourens and José – the four who completed the hike from start to finish – at Malelane Rest Camp.



Celebrating in style with Cuban cigars and French champagne at Lower Sabie Rest Camp. Left to right: José, Lourens, Clifford, Warren and Anie.

LEG FOUR

Olifants Rest Camp to N'wanetsi Section Ranger's Post WINTER, JULY 2021

Covid-19 was rampant. We did not know if South African President Cyril Ramaphosa would ease restrictions in Gauteng where most of the Panthera lived, to allow the hike to continue. My youngest daughter, Georgia, was also leaving for the start of a three-year degree in Acting for Film with the New York Film Academy at their campus in Hollywood. I obtained a permit that allowed me to travel from my home in Eswatini to Pretoria to wish her well.

The lockdown was lifted on Sunday night and it was all systems go for the hike. Delaying the start by a day, instead of cancelling the hike, had paid off. I left early in the morning for the long drive to Satara Rest Camp and stopped to buy a bottle of whisky to make good on the Rand-Dollar exchange rate wager I lost to Clifford on the previous Leg. A road accident close to the top of the remote 11 kilometre Abel Erasmus Pass in the province of Limpopo between Tzaneen and Ohrigstad had traffic at a standstill. A truck laden with oranges had jack-knifed and spilled its load. It would take hours to clear. With no cell phone signal, I could not look for alternative routes on Google Maps. I backtracked down the pass and took a route past the private Timbavati Private Nature Reserve. Entering the Orpen gate of Kruger Park, my stress eased when I encountered elephants milling about the wildlife research station close to the gate. The drive was filled with antelope and birds, dwarf mongooses and more elephants. An extensive controlled burn had etched the grasslands in charcoal and green shoots were pushing through.

At Satara, I walked past Warren Deyzel, who I knew from Leg Two. He had shaved off his bushy beard and initially I did not recognise him. Warren introduced me to Paul Sher, our new lead guide, and Mark Montgomery.

"Are we such a bad bunch we need three guides to look after us?" I joked.



Surprise lunch-stop at Afsaal.



Alice making do without a table for lunch.



José making notes after a Menthylolate injection.



Clifford preparing his glühwein treat on the Mpondo Dam wall.



Ash celebrating atop Thlabaye Hill.



José with his stone picked up at Crooks' Corner, for the cairn on Thlabaye Hill.



Ashraf Sayed looking for the elephants we could hear.



Early morning sun at the Mpondo Dam. Left to right: Jennifer, Lourens, Brigitte, Warren, Anie, Marie, José, Clifford, Alice.



Following tracks of a different kind on the dismantled Selati railway-line.



Elephant rubbing past.



Denser bush in the south of the park.



José removing a thorn from his boot.



José and Marie in the prime seats for the final sunset on the trail.

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José Neves is an accomplished corporate executive, sportsman and father. A Nomads golfer and endurance athlete – which includes completing 10 Ironman events – José heard about the opportunity to hike the length of the world-famous Kruger National Park, and he felt compelled to accept the challenge. Walking Wild is the personalised account of his 605 kilometre backpacking journey through the world-renowned wildlife destination. José worked for 22 years in leadership positions within the Coca-Cola system in three southern African countries. He now consults on supply chain and logistics in the public health sector.

