

BUSHWACKERS: Ranger David Tait with Gabrielle Sayer, Isabella Sayer, Chloe Muer and Tara Muer.



BRAVE: Chloe Muer about to win the bok drol spoeq competition by default.
VIVIEN HORLER

The who's-poo of the bush

VIVIEN HORLER

jbjsaturday

POO is amazing stuff, especially when you're in a game park.

That's because trained trackers can tell exactly which animals have been around, just by looking at the poo they've left behind. They can also tell how long ago the animals were there.

Last weekend JBJ went on a game walk at Thula Thula Private Game Reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal with ranger David Tait and four kids. We walked around the reserve's tented camp, at first walking on the lawn and then into the bush.

It seemed a very ordinary place – until David showed us how to look properly. The first stop was at a bush called the magic guarry bush. If you cut a twig from it, you can use it as a toothbrush, and it works even better if you dip the twig into the cool ash from your campfire to act as toothpaste.

Isabella Sayer, 6, of Benoni, didn't think too much of that idea, but her little sister Gabrielle, 5, gave it a go.

Then David stopped near a bush with bright yellow berries on it. This was the poison apple bush, and he told us we could not eat the berries. "If you're hungry in the bush, just follow the monkeys," he said. "If the monkeys



CAREFUL: Isabella Sayer at the hole that is home to an African rock python as long as ranger David Tait's bakkie.

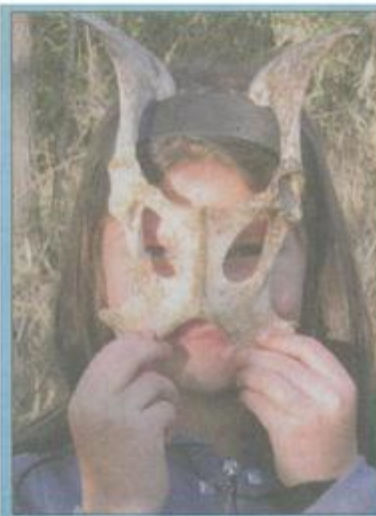
eat something, then you can too.

"But that advice doesn't work for baboons. Baboons can eat things, like these poison apples, that we can't. So you have to be careful."

We came across a big round poo on the path. "That's from a bush pig, the warthog's cousin," said David. "Bush pigs are bigger than warthogs. They're nocturnal animals, so you don't see them in the day. They eat tubers and roots, but will also eat dead animals."

We passed lots of round poo

pellets, also known as bok drols. Some came from impala and some from nyala. Some were shiny, which meant they were very fresh and the animals weren't far away. Although the drols were about the same size, David could tell which came from the impala and which from the nyala by their colour. Impala eat both leaves and grass, so their poo is a different colour from the nyala, who only eat grass. Animals that eat only leaves are called browsers, like black rhino; and those that only eat grass are



MASKED: Chloe Muer finds that an nyala hip bone makes a dramatic mask.



SQUEAKY-CLEAN: Gabrielle Sayer brushes her teeth with a twig from the magic guarry bush.

called grazers, like white rhino.

We saw lots of footprints or spoor in the sand, and David showed us how to tell which way the animals were walking. "The hooves are pointed like an arrow, and always point in the direction the animal is going."

Elephants don't have hooves, but you tell where they're going because the spoor from the front or fore feet are round, while the spoor from the hind feet are oval.

We came across a termite mound. The pile of mud is part of a very clever ventilation shaft, which is designed to keep the termite nest under the ground at the same temperature all year round.

We taught to a large hole in a bank which David said had been made by a porcupine. "But a porcupine doesn't live there any more," he said. "The other day I saw a rock python slither into that hole, and it was as thick as my thigh and as long as my bakkie. "You must never stick your hands into a hole in the ground in the bush, because quite often snakes live in them."

At the end of the walk David tried to organise a competition to see who could spit a bok drol the furthest. David had a go and so did JBJ, but of the four girls only Chloe was brave enough to try it. She said it didn't taste horrible at all. That was because the drols are just made of grass and leaves. You wouldn't ever try the same trick with the poo of a bush pig.