A day by day journal of the fun and adventure of a group of 13 tourists from Alabama and Mississippi on an agricultural study tour of South Africa.
**Tuesday, May 13**

**Atlanta to Capetown**

The darkness gradually gave way to incredibly clear skies as the huge Boeing 747 streaked through the southern part of the African continent. Our destination was Johannesburg and finally on to Capetown, South Africa. From the tiny window at 38,000 feet, I could see brownish red earth, undulating ripples in the landscape, and an occasional escarpment or mountain below. Descending into Johannesburg, the city appeared to be an oasis of industry, superhighways, and green neighborhoods in the otherwise parched earth. After an hour layover, we were off again to Capetown and more of the same landscape below. There were farms surrounding Johannesburg but at this time of the year - late fall in the Southern Hemisphere, the fields were brown. There was little green in the landscape below. The 2-hour flight to Capetown revealed more red earth below. It reminded me of flying over parts of Nevada, Utah, and Arizona in the winter. I cannot see how this landscape can support much human habitation, and it apparently doesn't. From the west side of the 747, I can see only an occasional streak in the landscape indicating a road. Where it goes is a mystery. We passed over the famous diamond mining area of Kimberly. Otherwise, looking westward out of the plane, all I see is desert.

Our tour plans will take us along the southern and eastern coast, the "Garden Route", where most of the population lives. At this point, we've been flying about 4 hours over Africa and I haven't seen a single cloud. I'm told, on the other hand, that Capetown can be rainy this time of year. We'll see.

**Friday, May 16**

We're now in a VW van or "combie" as the South African's call it, one of three in our entourage. David Bransby is driving ours which carries Paul and Sandra Ash and, of course, Allyn Bransby and my wife, Peggy and me. David's brother, Ray is driving the other one which has Kathy Glass and Marven and Deloris Smith. Ed Moran is the sole right handed driver of a left handed vehicle. It is his fate to learn to drive on the left hand side of the road. His passengers are his wife Dorothy, Robin Huettel, and Judy Owens. We're headed east along the southern N2 route of Western Cape Province along what is known as the "Garden Route". We've just completed three wonderful days enjoying the sights and food of the Cape Peninsular area and Capetown.

**Capetown**

After landing in Capetown, we were met at the Capetown International Airport by David and Allyn Bransby, our official hosts and organizers of this trip, David's brother Ray Bransby who lives in Capetown and will be one of our van drivers, and David's nephew, Allen Bransby who is a local banker. They gave us a quick introduction to the area in route to our hotel, the Protea Breakwater Hotel. The hotel complex is in the heart of the Capetown waterfront area, a busy shopping district built near the old city wharves. The hotel itself is part of an old prison built in the late 19th century and renovated recently into a hotel. Part of it is used for the Business School of the University of Capetown. Our room was as nice, convenient and comfortable as any nice hotel in the U.S. After 18 hours on a plane, anything with hot water, showers, and a bed would have been welcomed. We had a much needed 2-hour nap before continuing our exploration of Capetown.
Hout Bay
The gang met at 4:30 p.m. for a ride back through the City, over the mountain range, to the seaside village of Hout Bay, a tiny beach surrounded by steep mountains on the Atlantic side of the Cape Peninsular. The 45-minute ride gave us our first flavor of the diverse vegetation and climate of this unique region. The Cape Peninsular is one of seven unique floral kingdoms in the world. Eastern North America and most of Europe is in the "northern boreal forest" region, the largest. The Cape Peninsular Floral Kingdom is the smallest, found only in the extreme southern tip of Africa. However, it contains one of the largest collections of plant species. Over the next three days we would be introduced to this totally unfamiliar collection of plants and some of the animals that live in the environment. Two groups of plants are the "finebaus" or fine-leafed shrubs and the "proteas", the magnificent blooming shrubs found only here and in parts of Australia. Here these plants cover the steep slopes and flat hilltops of these shallow, rocky, dry soils.

An option this afternoon was to take the cable car (cableway) to the top of Table Mountain. Table Mountain dominates the landscape of Capetown. It rises steeply to over 3,000 feet from the ocean at the beginning of the Cape of Good Hope. The sprawling city of Capetown sets at the base of its steepest point with the busy port in Table Bay. From here, Table Mountain meanders southward to the tip of the Cape where we will be going later. However, today (Tuesday) the mountaintop was covered with a blanket of clouds that seemed to set right on top. Even if we rode the cableway to the top, all we would see is fog today. Therefore, after the ride to Hout Bay, we had a pleasant and very filling buffet dinner at the hotel restaurant, walked down to the waterfront shops for a few souvenirs, and retired early.

Table Mountain
Wednesday was our first full day of adventure in South Africa. We began with a huge buffet breakfast at the hotel followed by a short ride to the Cableway station on the slope of Table Mountain just above the city. There were no clouds on the mountain today - just a perfect morning. The cableway station was packed with people taking advantage of a rare, cloudless day to ride to the top. School-age kids were everywhere. This is the most popular tourist attraction in South Africa. However, it didn't take long for us to board one of the round cable cars. Each holds 65 people and the round cars rotate as it travels to the top of the mountain. What a spectacular view! It was even more spectacular from the top.

The nearly flat, rocky top of table Mountain is a national preserve. One can hike up or down the steep slopes on designated trails but it could take an entire day to make the trip by foot that we made in just a few minutes. The top is a unique environment shrouded in clouds and mist most of the time. Table Mountain is home to plants and some animals found nowhere else. But on the day we visited and in fact for the rest of our stay in Capetown, there were no clouds anywhere. Are we lucky or what? You could see everything from the Atlantic Ocean to the west, Robben Island near the
entrance to Table Bay, the Indian Ocean to the East, and the City of Capetown directly below. What a way to start our South African adventure with a bird's eye view of everything and an introduction to this unique environment!

I almost forgot to mention the little furry dassies (hyrax) which inhabit the Cape Peninsular and the top of Table Mountain in particular. On the mountain top, they are used to people and are quite photogenic and friendly although we were told they will bite. Don't feed them! These interesting animals inhabit the rocky cliffs and remind me of a groundhog in size and shape but they are not rodents. We're told that these are the nearest living relative of the elephant.

Groot Constantia
After we arrived back near sea level, we traveled to South Africa's first and oldest vineyard and winery, "Groot Constantia". I do not recommend that one sample 5 different wines at 2:00 p.m. on an empty stomach! The entire group staggered to the winery's restaurant down a lovely, tree-lined path past well manicured vines over rolling hills. Here we experienced our first South African lunch - slow, no hurry, about 2 hours.

Cape Point
We finished lunch in time to drive on down the coast past villages of Fish Hoek and Simon's Town to the tip of the Cape Peninsular. This entire tip is part of a national park. This is the "Cape of Good Hope", the traditional southernmost tip of the African Continent with the Indian Ocean east and the Atlantic on the west. Peggy observed that she couldn't see a difference. Actually, Cape Agulhas is the true southernmost point but it is some distance east of here. The world has traditionally accepted the Cape of Good Hope as that point. Certainly, the scenery is spectacular from the old light house that sits at the peak of this point. The weather was incredibly clear, a rarity I'm told. The finebause-covered hills are also a fenced wildlife preserve; we observed springbok, eland, and all sorts of birds that I don't know.

Cape Penguins
On the way back to Capetown from the Cape Point, we stopped in Simon's Town just about dusk. Here on a rocky beach is a tiny national preserve for the Cape Penguin.
The seashore and adjacent bush-covered slope was covered with the little black and white birds that stood about 18 to 24 inches tall. The nested and slept under the thick canopy of the bushes. A fenced trail allowed us to view the little birds up close and personal. Obviously, they are used to people. They seemed more upset with each other than with us.

Africa Café

It was dark for most of our trip back into Capetown. The days are quite short here in the Southern Hemisphere in late autumn. The sun is up around 7:00 a.m. and sets by 5:00 p.m. Fortunately, we have a glorious, full moon for our evenings in Capetown. After a brief stop at our hotel, we had dinner at the "Africa Café", a downtown restaurant serving authentic African dishes from throughout the continent. The fixed menu allowed each one of us to sample about 20 dishes. We didn't leave hungry!

Robben Island

Thursday was to be a little more relaxed. It was another beautiful, clear day that began a little cool (about 50 F) but warmed rapidly in the bright sunshine (about 80 F). We took a 45-minute boat ride to Robben Island (Robben is Dutch for "seal"). The island has been a national historic site since about 1996. This island has been a prison since the mid-1800s. From 1960 through 1990, it was an "apartheid" prison holding black political prisoners, the most famous being Nelson Mandella. He was held for more than 20 years on this island. The tour was about 1½ hours. It included the island, the nature preserve, the rock quarry where prisoners labored, and the prison itself. One of our guides was a former prisoner here. It was a very sobering experience.

Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens

Back at the Victoria and Alfred docks in Capetown, we had a late, long lunch of fish and chips and beer at a nice, dockside restaurant. The afternoon was supposed to be free but considering the lateness of our lunch, there was little time left. Sandy and Paul Ash and Peggy and I were the only ones who wanted to visit Kirstenbosch, the National Botanical Gardens in Capetown. Late as it was, Ray Bransby gladly chauffeured us across town to the gardens.

What a treat! Next to Table Mountain, this had to be a highlight of our visit to the Cape. The extensive gardens set along the base and northern slope of Table Mountain. This small area obviously gets more rainfall than just a few miles away. Within just a few feet of walking and a little change in elevation, one can visit many different ecosystems indigenous to southern Africa. I felt so lost in this strange botanical world of totally unfamiliar plants - incredibly huge trees unlike any I have ever seen before. Tree ferns and cycads gave way to finebaus and protea on the higher, drier slopes. Even though it was late fall, the gardens were alive with mostly indigenous species of
blooming plants, shrubs, trees, and herbs. It is truly a plant-lovers paradise. Paul took to the trees while Sandy, Peggy, Ray and I explored all we could before the sun set on us. It was dark when we tried to wander out of the gardens, getting lost in little nooks and crannies that we had yet explored. I commented that it was impossible to get really lost here because in the gardens, there are only two directions, up and down. In the spooky dark we encountered some magnificent carved African statues. It was about then that Sandy began calling, "Paul, Paul, come find us!" After wandering the dark trails and pathways, we finally found Paul and the entrance. What a botanical paradise!

No one was particularly hungry this evening but David had arranged another special meal at a restaurant in the dockside shopping area within walking distance of the hotel. The City Grill Restaurant served South African game such as springbok, crocodile, ostrich, etc. This was a real taste of the country. South African restaurants are generous with their proportions. The wines are pretty good, too. We left stuffed!

**Tygerhoek Ag. Research Station**

Now, it is back on Friday and we're in route east along the Garden Route of South Africa. West of the City of Swellendam on Route N2, we stopped to visit Tygerhoek Agricultural Research Station in the Renosterveld area of Western Cape Province. We were met by Dr. Mark Hardy, a project leader at the research station. In spite of the fact that the electrical power went off, he gave the group an excellent overview of the agriculture of South Africa and the Renosterveld in particular. This is the breadbasket of South Africa. After crossing a mountain range where we actually saw some fruit trees (pears and apples) and some more vineyards, we drove for miles and miles - rather kilometers and kilometers - through green rolling hills and steep rocky slopes planted to wheat and barley. There were extensive pastures as far as could be seen of alfalfa (South Africans call it "Lucerne") supporting huge flocks of sheep. Sheep are everywhere in this region. Occasionally, we'd see a few ostriches in the sheep pastures. When we asked Dr. Mark Hardy about predators attacking the sheep, he acknowledged that near the mountains, leopards could occasionally get a lamb or two. By far the biggest predators were the two-legged species i.e. humans. Ostriches are put in pastures and rangeland with the sheep because they will attack humans. Unless you are skilled in handling ostriches, they can be quite a threat.

The ladies seemed to be impressed by the free condom dispenser in the restrooms at the research station. Posters were prominently displayed encouraging their use. This is one attempt to combat the severe AIDS epidemic in this country - especially among the black workers.

After his presentation, Dr. Hardy gave us a brief tour of one of his research projects, a huge, long-term project involving rotations and grazing systems that included wheat, barley, alfalfa, winter annual legumes, canola, and lupins. His paddocks were one hectare in size (2.5 acres), and he had 30 or 40 of these on the station. Each paddock was subdivided into three different cropping systems. It was a huge and complicated research project involving a lot of researchers and laborers. I was impressed
with the complexity of the cropping systems in a region that receives only about 200 mm (6 inches) of rainfall on soils that contain 30-50% rocks. This is a terribly challenging agricultural area for farmers who have to compete on a world market with no subsidies.

**Zandrift Restaurant, Swellendam**

Dr. Hardy joined us for lunch in Swellendam at a quaint restaurant in a 300-year-old building in a garden-like setting. The Zandrift Restaurant was part of a local museum complex. We dined out doors under a grape arbor. The proprietor and cook, a vivacious, middle aged lady of obvious Dutch ancestry, recommended a homemade winter squash soup and bread, which everyone ordered. It was served by her barefoot, daughter, a 30-something blonde lady. The soup was delicious as was the cheesecake some of us had for dessert. Several in the group bought a cookbook of South African cuisine that featured this restaurant on the cover and several of the proprietor's recipes.

**Eight Bells Country Inn**

It was another one of those slow, unhurried, South African lunches. By the time we finished lunch and were on our way, it was 3:00 p.m. We drove through Mossel Bay, an industrial city on the coast. Our destination for the evening is a country inn/bed and breakfast called "Eight Bells" in the mountains north of Mossel Bay. Dusk was fast approaching when we arrived. David and Allyn encouraged us to take a quick hike before sunset to view the mountain scenery behind the inn.

The hills were laced with hiking and horseback riding trails but due to the late hour, we decided to just take a quick, 30-minute walk down the hill to the pond and stream below the inn complex. Of course, Paul and Sandy Ash, the energetic "fast forester" and the "racing redhead" pushed ahead. Dodging horse dung piles on the trail, the rest of us headed back immediately after reaching the pond dam. It was getting dark fast. Clouds had moved in and we certainly didn't want to get caught in a strange country, in unknown mountains with strange plants and animals, and in an unfamiliar setting. We could hear vervet monkeys' chilling cry in the surrounding trees but I couldn't see them. No telling what else lurked in the darkness. We were walking rapidly back up the hill when Ray and I realized that Marven Smith was missing from the group. Peggy, Kathy, and Robin went on back to the lodge. Ray headed back downhill in the darkness looking for Marven. I stayed put on the hillside in case Paul and Sandy came this way. I could hear more vervet monkeys calling in the trees and Ray calling for Marven in the darkness below the pond dam. Terrible thoughts developed while I waited and listened, "Well, that's one less person to keep up with in the vans." Deloris will just have to return to Lucedale, Mississippi, by
herself knowing that her companion of all these years will spend eternity with the vervet monkey's in darkest Africa."

On the trail far ahead of us, appeared three ghostly shapes in the darkness. Judging from the speed of their walking, we guessed two of them were Paul and Sandy. The third had to be Marven! Deloris won't have to return to Mississippi alone after all!

After another grand meal in the lodge's restaurant, we retired in our lovely, well decorated rooms, our entourage together, happy, content, full, and ready for another long night's rest.

Saturday, 17 May

We awoke to a misty, rainy, foggy, dreary day. Can't complain. We've had wonderful weather until today. After all, we are in mountains directly above the Indian Ocean. A continental breakfast in the lodge's restaurant and we were off again. Bump! Uh oh! Ed just backed van #2 into the entrance post to the lodge. The right bumper now has a nice vee dent in it. Fortunately, that's all that was damaged. We continued hoping the insurance will take care of it.

Safari Ostrich Farm
Not far away and we are in the heart of ostrich country. Everywhere you look are pastures and rangeland and ranches. You don't see cattle, or goats, or sheep. You see these huge birds, balls of feathers on stilts with long flexible necks. We were told that this district grows 1/6 of all ostriches grown in the world. Of course, this is their native home. Around the turn of the last century, they were grown strictly for their feathers for the European and American markets. Today, their skin is the most valuable part. About 60% of their value is in the skin. Thirty percent of their value is meat, and ten percent is feathers. Ostrich meat is most popular here in Africa and in Europe.

The Safari Ostrich Farm near Oudtshoorn was our destination. Here we were given the whole story. How they are bred. How the eggs are collected and incubated and hatched, and a little on bird nutrition. Ostriches can live to be 50-60 years old and produce 20 to 40 eggs per year during the breeding season. Chicks are raised to about 11 months of age before slaughter. They graze on very nutritious, flood-irrigated alfalfa. Some supplemental grain is fed, too. Reality is that ostriches will eat almost anything including the buttons on your shirt.

This is a working ostrich farm. Tourism just supplements the owner's income. Our guide, John, says that about 35 people work on the farm full time. The entire farm is about 5,000 hectares.

The real treat was watching the ladies (and Marven) have their pictures made sitting on a real, live ostrich. Sandy is the only one of our group small enough to actually ride an ostrich. Kathy got a motion picture of her holding on for dear life, screaming while the ostrich made a hasty run around the kraal.

The two black guys that helped Sandy ride the ostrich then did their own version of the Oudtshoorn Derby, jockeying two ostriches in a race of about 100 meters. These birds really take off when someone is on their backs! They put a sock over their heads to
After tea and coffee and a little shopping at the gift shop at Safari Ostrich Farm, we went into Oudtshoorn to check out Allyn's favorite gift shop - among many. It contained a nice collection of handmade, African artifacts and souvenirs - especially those relating to ostriches.

Peggy has complained about my A.U. Agronomy & Soils cap for the entire trip. It serves a purpose in keeping the sun and rain off my bare tete. It may identify me as an Alabama redneck, but it works. Nevertheless, to satisfy my wife, I purchased a very nice, leather "safari hat" in the gift shop. Peggy got a few other items such as ostrich feather dusters for gifts. Outside the shop, a young boy was selling ostrich feathers - more like begging as is common throughout the country. At least he had something to offer. I gave him 5 Rand (about 70 cents) for a feather for my new hat. Now I look like a real, Afrikaner dandy!

The hat came in handy as a cool, misty rain followed us the rest of the day. Ostrich feathers don't hold up well in rain but the leather hat was great!

**Knysna**

Back over the cloud-enshrouded mountains, we arrived in the coastal town of Knysna (pronounced "nice-na") in the early afternoon. Lunch was at the waterfront shopping/tourist area at a "Spur" restaurant. This is a chain of family-style restaurants serving mostly American-type food - hamburgers, Mexican dishes, etc. It sort of reminded me of a Shoney's only better. I think we all had the salad bar for lunch. Someone ordered onion rings, good but greasy, and fried mushrooms which we all shared and enjoyed.

After lunch we drove out to the entrance to the bay, a place called Knysna Heads. This is a very narrow passage between rocky cliffs where the Indian Ocean crashes against the rocks at the entrance to the bay. The crashing waves only added to the still misty rain that was falling. Fortunately, the City of Knysna has a little park there with trails and a boardwalk that lets you enjoy the view up close. It was dramatic!
The rest of the day was dreary. A slow, misty rain fell on us most of the way to Port Elizabeth. If it had not been so cloudy, foggy, and rainy we would have seen more. We traveled though a region of dense trees - almost a jungle - something rare in South Africa. David said in one area there was a small herd of jungle elephants but one rarely sees them. The land seems relatively flat until we cross a river or stream. These are huge, deep, ravines - almost canyons. One bridge over Storms River, I think, is more than 1,000 feet above the stream below. The views would be incredible in good weather. Today, about all we see is fog. I'm told this rain is a South African gully washer. We would barely call it a mist in Alabama.

Port Elizabeth
It was well after dark when we pulled into Port Elizabeth, South Africa's fifth largest city (#1 Johannesburg, #2 Capetown, #3 Durban, #4 Pretoria, #5 Port Elizabeth). The rain has stopped. We checked into the Protea Marine Hotel on the beach and near the big, local Casino. We met Pat, David's first wife who we knew from her Auburn days, and Katherine, their daughter who has now graduated from college. She was no more than 10 or 12 when Pat moved back to South Africa. We all had dinner together at the hotel restaurant.

Sunday, 18 May
This was our morning to relax, take it easy, go to the beach for an early morning jog, or just sleep late. We were not leaving until 10:00 a.m. Unfortunately, the "sleeping late" took more time than we intended. It was 8:30 when we finally got up. By the time we showered, dressed, and had breakfast, it was time to leave. We had to enjoy the beach from the window as we drove north out of Port Elizabeth.

We had walkie-talkies in each of the vans. The one is ours rarely worked. It did this morning. We heard some confusion from Ray's van. It seemed that a hotel vehicle had run him down with an urgent message that the maids had found someone's passport in a room back at the hotel. This could be tragic. They didn't give a name. Whose could it have been? Everyone in our van had his or hers, we thought. It must be Marven's. We turned around, and the entire entourage headed back to the hotel.

It was not just one passport. It was two - David's and Allyn's in David's vest that he had left on the bed. Earlier, we had teased David about being a typical South African professor. What is typical? Well, I have known only two South African professors in my career, David and Dr. Malcolm Sumner from Georgia. David said Malcolm Sumner had actually taught him at the University of Natal. We decided that the typical South African Professor is triple A: ARROGANT, ARGUMENTATIVE, AND ALWAYS RIGHT (or Always Wins). Now we can add another "A" word to the description, ABSENTMINDED. We had a good laugh at David's expense.

Heading east from Port Elizabeth, we passed incredible sand dunes along the coast of the Indian Ocean. Then we turned north leaving N2 and getting on N10 toward Bloemfontaine - our destination for the evening.

The Karoo
The vegetation changed rapidly from the lush green pastures and thick shrubs of the coast to dry, desert vegetation. We saw Angora goats, lots and lots of sheep, scattered ostriches, Boer goats, horses, some cattle, and some native wildlife - black wildebeest, springbok, blesbok, mongoose, and many birds - notably one or two huge secretary birds that eat snakes.
We have entered the famous Karoo region of South Africa. This is a very dry region of shrubs and grassland that remind us of west Texas. There are nearly flat, rocky plains surrounded by small mountains. All are covered in the same vegetation. The annual grasses are a bleached brown color now. David says they grow in the spring and summer when some rains may fall and then reseed this time of year. The size of the grass, about 12 inches high, indicates that they've had a good summer growing season. Livestock appear healthy. Cattle are fat. In spite of low stocking rates and the uninhabited vastness of this area, the grasses and finebaus are amazingly nutritious. In South Africa, Karoo lamb is considered a gourmet dish. There is supposed to be a particularly delicate flavor imparted by the animals grazing the grasses, forbes and bush of this region. Scattered patches of prickly pear cactus are cultivated for those ultra dry years when there is nothing else for the animals to eat. We think of prickly pear in Alabama as a low-growing, shrubby plant. Here it is almost tree size, 6 to 10 feet high.

Farms (they don't call them ranches) in this area must be thousands of hectares in size. David said about 5,000 ha would be needed to make a decent living. Whenever you see a clump of trees in a valley, this is probably the center of the farm, the farm house and headquarters.

Cradock
We stopped for gas and a quick lunch-to-go at a gas station in the Karoo city of Cradock. Lunch consisted of cheese, bread, dried fruit, bananas, ice cream bars, hot meat pies, etc. depending upon individual tastes and appetites. It is still a long drive of several hours to Bloemfontaine. No time for a leisurely South African lunch today.

Driving into Cradock, I observed what is becoming a familiar site. Outside of the town was a hillside covered in small, pastel-colored, concrete buildings just large enough for a small family. They were packed together - hundreds, maybe thousands of them built on the arid, open desert just outside of the city. All the dwellings appeared inhabited. David remarked that these are a relic of apartheid, an attempt, I suppose, to keep the black workers isolated from the white, Afrikaners in the city. Residents of the shanty town were seen carrying water in buckets, hauling precious firewood, or just walking the highway. Roadside stands were selling handmade crafts - particularly windmills and objects fashioned from 16-gauge wire. Very creative.

Free State
In late afternoon, we crossed the Orange River into the Province of Free State. The rather large river is the largest and longest in South Africa. It begins in the Drakensberg
Mountains in the east and flows west to the Atlantic. Free State Province is reputed to be the heart of conservative, Afrikaans South Africa.

The evening was spent at a very new Protea hotel in Bloemfontaine. I noticed that the hotel grounds were surrounded by a tall, decorative metal fence and a very high (2 m) brick wall with a manned guard gate. This made me a little apprehensive about security in the area. But the accommodations, the food, and the service at the hotel were superb.

Monday, 19 May

We were met outside the hotel at 8:00 a.m. by Dr. Hennie Snyman, a grassland scientist at the nearby University of Orange Free State (UOFS). On the way to visit some of Hennie's research plots, we drove through the UOFS's campus in Bloemfontaine. We were told that the University has around 20,000 students on this very modern and attractive campus. Prior to 1990, it was ultra-conservative, all white, and very Afrikaans. Today the enrollment is about 50% black South African. In agriculture, it is more like 25% black.

In the bright but cool morning, we walked through some very interesting native grassland plots used to study the effect of grazing, stocking rates, fertilization, fire, etc. on the native grasslands. Overgrazing encourages loss of desirable grasses such as "red grass" and encroachment of the Karoo into the grasslands. Because of overgrazing, the Karoo west of Bloemfontaine is gradually creeping eastward. The objective is to keep the Karoo west of the City of Bloemfontaine.

After visiting Hennie's plots, we were joined by Mr. Luis Schwalbach, another grassland scientist, who is hosting us on a visit to a local Boer goat farm.

Boer Goats

The goat farm was about 10 km outside of Bloemfontaine. It was about 1,000 ha and was owned by Mr. C.B. du Roan and his son, Stoffel. Stoffel actually ran the farm. He was a graduate civil engineer from UOFS and also worked in town. The farm grew maize (corn), wheat, and sunflowers as cash crops but their main enterprise was the raising of Boer goats for breeding purposes. These are the native, meat goats of South Africa, a large, muscular goat capable of producing well on the semi-arid vegetation of this area.

After showing us the goats in the kraal (Afrikaner for corral), the family treated us to coffee, drinks, and lots of home-made treats in the dining room of their vintage 1907 farm house. The ladies really liked this, particularly the dining table made of native stinkwood.

Although I was hypoglycemic during most of this visit, the sweet treats revived me enough to present some A.U. Agronomy & Soils caps and Old Rotation cotton bales to our hosts and fellow scientists. There's something special about being on a real, production farm that gives you a sense of the country and its people. Afrikaner hospitality is most gracious and generous.
The rest of the day and afternoon was spent driving east toward Kwazulu-Natal Province and the Drakensburg Mountains. Along the way are vast, open, dry grasslands and scattered fields of corn, sunflower, and other crops. This is the high plateau that gets more summer rainfall than the Karoo to the west. This allows some row crop production. Towns are few and very far between but all the land is fenced and used for either cattle, sheep, or game farms.

At the border with Kwazulu-Natal Province, we rounded a curve and looked off the road to our left into a vast, huge, panoramic view of the valleys below. The escarpment that is the Drakensburg Mountains is impressive. David told us that this was the escarpment where the little bushman thought was the end of the world in the movie, "The Gods Must be Crazy". In the movie, when the little bushman reached the edge of the cliff, the valley below was obscured with clouds. When you see the dramatic drop, you realize that for two days we've been climbing imperceptibly through the Karoo and grasslands. We were over a mile high in places. The tops of the highest peaks in the Drakensburg Mountains are over 10,000 feet.

Our destination for the evening is Royal Natal National Park in the Drakensburg Mountains. We're staying in little thatch-roofed cottages in the park at a camp village called "Thendele", the Zulu word for the little Franklin bird that we see scampering through the bush. At the visitors' center, we had our first up close encounter with a family of baboons. What interesting creatures to watch - very amusing as they go about feeding and grooming. Everywhere in the park are signs, "DO NOT FEED THE BABOONS". They can become very accustomed to human food and can be dangerous. But when observed out the window of the van, they are quite amusing and humanlike.

Sunset is about 5:30 p.m. so when we finally arrived at our cabins or chalets as they are called, there was little daylight left for hiking and exploring. (We kept our eye on Marven!) Each cabin had a magnificent view of the valley below and the mountains above. A large living room/dining room/kitchen combination opened up to a covered porch and small patio with a view of the mountains. There were separate bedrooms and a bath - all under a typical thatched roof with high ceilings. Although unheated, they were quite cozy in the cool, dry mountain air. Wild guinea fowl roamed the grounds.

If we had come prepared we could have cooked in the cabins or had a "braai" out back on the grill. Since we had no food, we squeezed back into the vans and traveled back down the narrow road to a very nice,
upscale hotel and restaurant in the park. Here again, we had wine and a very good buffet dinner - arguably the best we've had so far. I'm still amazed at the service one gets at these nicer hotels and restaurants in South Africa. I guess labor is abundant and unemployment high so good service is easy to find. I could get spoiled.

Just outside the park entrance is another one of those huge villages of mostly concrete houses and rondovels (round, thatched-roof huts made of mud, concrete, or brick) and occupied by Blacks - Zulus I presume. Since there is no town anywhere nearby, most of these villagers must survive off the land. I hesitate to call them farmers although a few do have cattle and goats. It is the barest of subsistent existence. Those lucky enough to work in the park are truly fortunate.

After dinner, as the three Volkswagen combies were pulling into our cabin parking pads at Thendele, Ray's van (Van #3) began belching smoke, sputtering, and just couldn't make it up the final grade. He had to back onto the pad of another cabin. The engine died not to be revived.

Tuesday, 10 May

It is hard to believe we have been in South Africa for an entire week now. Time travels so fast when you're having fun and seeing so many new and exciting things.

Our plans were to do some hiking in the early morning and leave Thendele around 9:00 a.m. No breakfast was planned - just whatever you had in your suitcase. I think Sandy and Paul and maybe Marven were the only ones to manage a daybreak trek through the hills. Allyn, David, and Ray were also up early trying to contact National Car Rental and make alternative arrangements for our transportation now that we had lost one van. I guess the stress of the trip was just too much for it. David and Ray pulled out early to find some gas for the remaining two vans. I didn't quite understand all the complications that ensued, but by the time David and Ray returned, it was 10:00 a.m. They had made arrangements to get two new vans in Pietersmaritzburg later in the day. We were one hour late leaving the park - the entire entourage and all our luggage packed into the two remaining vans. This situation is where friends are made or lost.
Cedara Agricultural Research Station

As we traveled east toward Durban on the coast, the landscape changed again from rolling plains to low mountains. Grasslands changed to mixed grasslands and hills planted to tall, straight, pine trees and eucalyptus in neat rows. Just before Pietersmaritzburg, we stopped at Cedara Agricultural Research Station, a unit of both the national and provincial governments. Bryan Mappeldoram, the director of Cedara and several of his associates and researchers met us. They had prepared a wonderful smorgasbord of luncheon snacks for us. He told us all about the station while we enjoyed their hospitality. Most of us had little or no breakfast. After lunch, we walked over to a new lecture hall for a presentation on the ryegrass development research being done at Cedara and the new variety, 'Enhancer' recently released by the station. Bransby has this in a special test in Alabama where it appears to perform as good or maybe better than 'Marshall' ryegrass. While the lectures were interesting to those of us involved in ag research, the ladies attention was attracted by a colony of fuzzy caterpillars on the steps outside. These unusual creatures had formed a long line about 2 meters, each caterpillar head to tail and marching along all following the leader. I was attracted by the driveway that was lined in colorful plane trees or "sweetgums" as we call them. It was about the only fall color that we saw.

Pietersmaritzburg

Just a short distance away from Cedara and we dropped off another plateau to a subtropical climate in Pietersmaritzburg. We drove past David's old stomping grounds and the University of Natal to the Faculty of Agriculture's research farm, "Ukulinga Research Farm". It set atop a hill not far from the airport. Again, the entire farm was surrounded by a high, people-proof fence and a guard gate to keep out unauthorized intruders. We had to wait at the gate until Kevin Kirkman, the head of the Grassland Science Department, arrived to escort us in. Kevin and his associate and Ph.D. student, Richard, showed us two very interesting, large, long-term (circa 1950) grassland experiments. One was a burning and clipping management study and the other was a fertility experiment with rates of N, P, K, and lime. Both experiments address the long-term effects of treatments on grassland composition, ecology, and soil properties. It was getting late, windy, and very cool when we left for Durban. We gave Richard our last A.U. cap and Kevin our last Old Rotation cotton bale.

Durban

Pietersmaritzburg is about an hour from Durban along a busy, controlled access highway through the hills and valleys of the coast. Durban is South Africa's largest seaport and third largest city. It was dark when we arrived at our ocean-front hotel, Protea Hotel Edward. This was the most upscale hotel where we have stayed. The accommodations, service, and facilities were all first class. We had a sumptuous buffet and wine in the hotel dining room before retiring to our luxurious rooms with balconies overlooking the Indian Ocean.

Wednesday, 21 May

The sun coming up over the Indian Ocean shone brightly in our room in the Edward Hotel. As soon as it was up, we could see
surfers out riding the long, rolling waves coming into shore. After another hearty breakfast buffet, Peggy, Kathy, Judy and I went out walking along the boulevard separating the hotels from the wide beach walkway. The walkway was lined with street vendors selling African creations-carved animals, beadwork, wooden tableware, jewelry, etc. Most was nice - not junk. The wares were mostly spread out on woven mats in the shade of trees. Some vendors had their wares under thatched-roof canopies. It was all very neat, attractive and well patrolled by local policemen.

We walked out on a long, public pier extending about 150 meters into the ocean. Surfers used the pier to jump off the end where the waves were largest. Fishermen lined the sides. We watched the young, mostly white surfers and the old fishermen for about 30 minutes. The ladies shopped the vendor stalls for souvenirs while I walked a few blocks to find a bank to change dollars into Rand so Peggy can shop some more. The weather here was warm and much more humid that just a few kilometers inland.

The Bank
Changing money is quite an experience in a South African bank. When I arrived shortly before 9:00 a.m., there was a line or queue about 30 people deep. Most were black. I joined the end. The bank opened promptly at 9:00 a.m. One had to go through quite a security check before entering. I recall this same system in France. Individually, you enter a locked door. The door closes. You are locked into a small, phone-booth size enclosure where you are checked by a security guard. Then another door opens to let you into the bank. You go to a "consultant" who then directs you to the appropriate teller. For whatever reason, it seems to take forever, at least 20 to 30 minutes, of the teller's time to check your passport, fill out paperwork, check each of your U.S. bills for counterfeit, consult with her supervisor, fill out more paperwork, punch in something on a computer, fill out more paperwork, go back to the computer, more consultation, more computer work, get you to sign some documents and finally give you the Rand. Later, on the way to Umfalozi Park, Robin Huettel discovered that they never gave her back her passport, or so she thought. Don't know what we'll do. Maybe just leave her in South Africa
David, our grand and dependable leader, will find a way to smuggle her back home.

Three new vehicles were delivered to the hotel to replace the dead one, the dented one, and the good one that remained. The only problem is that these are not the vehicles that David was promised on the phone. These were Toyota "condors" - small, mini-vans that can carry 6 passengers each but no luggage. And with all the shopping going on, our already voluminous luggage was growing with every stop. Somehow, we managed to pack everything and everyone into the three condors. We were on our way again.

Sugarcane
Leaving Durban on the N2 highway, we were again heading north surrounded by hills and hills covered in crops of sugarcane. I was expecting sugarcane to be grown on flat land as in Louisiana or Florida not land with 20 to 30 percent slopes! Some hillsides were incredibly steep. David said it is all worked by hand. It had to be. A tractor would turn over on such steep hills. Some fields were just being harvested. The sugarcane here is a little shorter than I would have expected but that is probably due to the lack of rainfall in this region. What they lack in height, they make up in cane volume. Everywhere, the hills are covered in sugarcane.

We stopped for lunch in the hilltop town of Eshawe at a placed called "Adam's Out Post". I was expecting a rough and tumble, rustic sort of place. It was a tea room on the grounds of an old British fort and museum. We had a light lunch under another vine-covered arbor among flowering shrubs and avocado trees. After lunch, we walked through the basket museum but didn't have time to learn much about the rest of the area and the fort. It was all we could do to get away from the very talkative lady host at the basket museum. She wanted to tell us absolutely everything about the baskets and the Zulu who made them. We just didn't have the time to linger. She was still talking when we walked out. We had to get on to Shakaland.

Shakaland

Shakaland must be one of the best kept secrets in South Africa. It is in the heart of Zulu country and is located on the site where the 1985 TV epic, "Shaka Zulu" was filmed. This is also the ancestral home of the famous Zulu warrior and leader. It is located off a secondary highway, down a very dusty, dirt road for 3 or 4 km and up a dry hillside. The site has a wonderful view of the surrounding countryside and the lake/reservoir below on the river.

* After sweating it for a couple of days, Robin found her passport in her camera case. What a relief! The bank was not guilty in this case.
Shakaland is a recreated Zulu village of the 1800s complete with native dress, native language, native artisans and native guides. We stayed in mud and thatched-roof rondovels just outside of the village entrance. However, our huts were managed by the Protea hotel chain and came with all the modern conveniences. I don't think Zulu rondovels had electricity, hot and cold running water, tiled baths, and maid service.

At 4:00 p.m. we were given a guided tour of the village - complete with a Zulu beer tasting ceremony with the chief and his wife. I think I'll stick with South Africa's Castle beer instead. After a regular type buffet dinner that evening, we were led by a Zulu war party to the grandmother's hut, the largest, to experience a Zulu dance ceremony. With the drums and singing, it was quite a show! It was easy to see the origin of modern-day, African-American gospel singing, stomp dancing and break dancing.

Peggy was reluctant to sleep in the rondovel with the windows open even though it was relatively warm. The rondovels had no heating or air-conditioning although they did have an electric ceiling fan. I suppose the free-roaming chickens, guinea fowl, goats, and cattle in the village made her a little apprehensive. It didn't bother me to step over cow pies and goat dung on the way to dinner.

Thursday, 22 May

We awoke to rooster crowing, goats braying, and cattle wandering by the hut. After another filling buffet breakfast, we were treated to another Zulu cultural experience. There was a Zulu wedding proposal, stick fighting, spear throwing, and spear forging. The final event was inside the smoke-filled hut of the medicine man. We were glad to get a breath of fresh air after this. Before leaving, several of us purchased animals carved from native woods. We didn't realize that the wood was green so we hope our little rhino doesn't crack as it dries out. Another interesting craft is the handmade baskets. They were once made of native grasses but now the most popular ones are made of colorful telephone wire - very interesting! Shakaland was truly an eye-opening experience into the African culture of the Zulus!
Hluhluwe-Umfalozi Game Park
Our next destination was Umfalozi Game Park about 2 hours away. After a brief stop in the city of Empangeni to buy groceries for the next two days, we arrived at the park. The two game parks, Hluhluwe and Umfalozi, are separated only by a highway but are managed as one. This huge area of several hundred square miles represents natural, undisturbed-by-man, African bushveld. The area is characterized by steeply rolling, rocky hills (we'd call them mountains in Alabama) covered with grasses, small trees (e.g. acacia), and shrubs - very typical savanna-type vegetation or "bushveld" in South Africa. Thick vegetation covers the wetter creek and river bottoms of the park. Almost all were dry this time of the year. Since this is the beginning of the winter dry season here, I can't imagine what this area will be like three months from now with no rainfall! Most of the 15 inches or so of rain comes in the summer.

As soon as we entered the park we began seeing wildlife - a kudu, warthogs, a family of baboons, and giraffes in the middle of the road. Our list rapidly expanded as we drove up to our camp, Mpila Camp, near the middle of the Umfalozi Park: impala, waterbok, wildebeest and cape buffalo.

We quickly checked into our accommodations. Peggy and I, Sandra and Paul Ash, and Ed and Dorothy Moran were assigned to tents. The rest had thatched-roof cabins. The tents were the neatest! They were permanent structures built on sturdy wooden platforms about 3 feet off the ground. I never was convinced that 3 feet is sufficient to protect one from a hungry lion, leopard or hyena. The "bedroom" tent was fully enclosed with one end enclosed in a reed wall with a tiled-floor bath complete with hot and cold water. An open deck connected the "bedroom" tent with an open-air kitchen tent. The kitchen was fully equipped with gas stove and refrigerator, hot and cold water, and all the necessary utensils. The roof was just a thin sheet of canvas. Inside the tent at night, you could hear everything - lots of movement and wild animals (including Sandy and Paul next door). You were warned to lock up all food at night because creatures could enter the kitchen area and help themselves. "Well", I thought, "If they can enter the kitchen area to eat, what's to prevent them from entering our bedroom tent to eat as well". All that separates us from them is a thin canvas screen. Baboons and monkeys were the main culprits, I hope. One morning we awoke to find impala and zebra grazing within a few feet of our tent. I heard a warthog in the bushes and saw monkeys in the trees. Animals inside the park have never been hunted or abused so they have little fear of humans.
We spent the rest of the afternoon and the next day riding the dusty, dirt roads of the park looking at wildlife. The evening after we arrived, we took a 2½-hour guided night tour with a park ranger. Some animals are more active at night. During the night tour we saw or caught glimpses of hares, a genet, spotted eaglet owl, porcupines, white-tailed mongoose, a white rhinoceros, an elephant, and a blue wildebeest. In general, I did not think the night tour was very good because it’s so difficult to see much in the bush with a spotlight at 40 km/hr. The ranger’s English was difficult to understand over the roar of the diesel truck, and it was cold.

We found our own day drives were where you really had a chance to experience wildlife. We could stop, listen, and watch them at our leisure. This is what we did on day two, Friday, of our visit to the game park. Each vehicle went their separate way in search of wildlife.

We considered ourselves very, very lucky when around 7:15 a.m., shortly after beginning our drive, we spotted a huge leopard in the middle of the road. Leopards are considered the rarest of the Big Five in Africa and the most difficult to see. They hunt at night and lay up during the day. The one we spotted crossing the road was a big one! It did not seem alarmed by our presence as it continued across the road and slowly, steadily disappeared into the bush beyond. I frantically rolled down the window and grabbed my digital camera in an attempt to get a photo of this beautiful creature. I managed one shot. When I later reviewed the image, all I could see were bushes - no leopard. It had disappeared just as quickly as it appeared. What stealthy creatures!

We continued our safari until noon, returned to the camp for lunch, and rested during the heat of the day. We resumed our hunt at 2:00 p.m. until dark. For the afternoon hunt, we headed over to Hluhluwe Park. Now we were looking for elephants and lions. We had seen most of the others and counted four of the big five: Cape buffalo, rhino, elephant, and leopard. We still had not seen an elephant or a rhino in the daylight. Some wildlife were so abundant e.g., impala, warthogs, and zebra that we soon just ignored them and kept driving. Our car never found an elephant but the other two came across a herd of about 15 in the northern part of the park. They saw a small leopard about dark and caught a glimpse of a lioness in the bush. We saw lots of everything else- rhinos, giraffes, impala, nyalas, zebras, warthogs, Cape buffalo, wildebeest, and birds of many kinds.

One of the more interesting observations is the effect of the animals on the vegetation. In certain areas the grass would be grazed down to the barren soil. In other areas, it appeared untouched. Elephants can be extremely destructive pushing down trees in large areas. David explains that the elephants are a valuable part of this ecosystem by helping to assure open grassland. Otherwise, the bush would gradually take over the grasslands upon which many of the species depend. We were impressed with the huge, stone roadway markers throughout the park. I thought this was for esthetics. David said it was because elephants kept pushing up standard road signs on posts.

After an exciting day of game viewing, we gathered at Allyn, David, and Ray’s cabin for a braai, wine, and sharing of stories. Our first African safari was a real treat - something we’ll always remember.

Saturday, 24 May

Trek from Umfalozi to Kruger
This is a travel day. We have about 8 hours of riding before we reach Kruger National Park in the far northwestern corner of the country along the border with Mozambique.
Kruger is the grandest, largest, and best known of South Africa's game parks.

Just outside of Hluhluwe-Umfalozi park boundary, we enter the real world again. After a short distance the pavement ends, and we are travelling on an unpaved, dusty, gravelly, national highway. The adjacent landscape is one of steep, dry, slopes with impoverished, subsistent farmsteads everywhere. These natives live in rondovels and concrete block or cement huts with thatched or metal roofs. Residents walk the highway carrying water or firewood or doing whatever they do to earn a meager living. We see lots of children and women and only a few men. David said often the men work in Johannesburg or somewhere else leaving the women and children to fend for themselves. The unpaved road is a remnant of apartheid. This area appears to be 100% black African probably Zulu heritage. They speak their native language. I expect environments such as this is where AIDS is rampant.

In this area, we passed the only cotton field I saw on the trip. It appeared to be several hundred acres in one small area and was being harvested, by hand of course. I suppose it is grown without irrigation. The crop didn't look too bad. They certainly don't have to worry about fall rains damaging the crop.

As we passed into the South African province of Mpumalanga, David pointed out another change in vegetation. We're losing some of the bush. The hills are now mostly grasslands reflecting a slightly higher rainfall at this higher elevation. We continue to see the subsistence tribal huts and impoverished farmsteads on the hills but we also see expanses of bleached brown grasses covering the hills on the horizon. Cattle graze in larger herds than we've seen near the villages. We also see scattered patches of planted trees, mainly eucalyptus, in the higher rainfall areas. This province is part of the former Transvaal region of South Africa. We passed through towns/villages of Nongoma, Magudu, and Pongola before getting on the N2 highway again toward Piet Retief. It's 1:00 p.m. and still a long way to go. We have to check into Kruger Park before 5:00 p.m. when they close the gates. There'll be no leisurely, South African lunch today!

Sunday, 25 May

Kruger National Park

We arrived at the Malelane Gate to Kruger National Park about 5:25 p.m. just as the sun was setting. They close the gates at sunset because they don't want people or drivers wandering around the park after dark. It's dangerous for the animals and for the unfortunate people who could become prey. Fortunately for us, the gates closed at 5:30 p.m. instead of 5:00 as we thought. If we had been just a few minutes late, we would be staying at the Malelane Econo Lodge and dining at KFC.

Dave's anxiety level reached an all time high as we raced through the City of Nelspruit
and through the Crocodile River valley surrounded by irrigated citrus, sugarcane, avocado, pineapple, and even pecan orchards. Ray and Ed kept their own pace that further exasperated Dave and raised his anxiety even further. But we made it and checked into our thatched-roof bungalows at Berg-en-dal camp just inside the park. Dinner was in the campground restaurant. Several of us had "sosatie". Peggy had chicken sosatie, and I had lamb sosatie. Sosatie is an African sish-ka-bob.

Bright and early this morning our car of 6 took off for a pre-breakfast game drive in the park. We rode for about 45 minutes and saw lots of impala, birds of many kind, and one rhino. Back at the camp restaurant, we had a good breakfast, spotted a hippo in the waterhole below the visitor's center, and checked out.

Elephant Dung
The rest of the morning's hunt was for elephants and lions. Dave noted that Kruger is so huge, the wildlife is more spread out. The roads are better than in Umfolozi and the vistas are more spectacular but the game are not quite as concentrated. However, before the morning was over, elephants in Kruger became more like warthogs in Umfolozi. They seemed to be everywhere. I suppose we spotted over a dozen. The roadways had lots of elephant droppings; we saw signs of their tree uprooting scattered throughout the rolling to level plains. One huge elephant blocked traffic on the road while he slowly and deliberately ate the lush grass along the roadside, his enormous rump blocking traffic in both directions. He didn't care. After we took a lot of photographs of his rear end, Dave decided to risk going around him. If the big elephant had decided to mark his territory as we passed, Sandy would have had a window full of elephant dung.

Jock of the Bushveld
We stopped at a picnic area/reststop to use the facilities. One is not allowed out of the vehicle anywhere else in the park or one could become prey. In the gift shop at the rest stop, Allyn and Dave found a copy of a popular, South African video entitled, "Jock of the Bushveld", a true story about an early trekker and his dog, Jock. The gift shop did not have a version that would play on U.S. systems. They told us to go down the road to a private resort within the park, and we could find a U.S. version of the movie. The attendant had to call ahead to let them know we were coming otherwise we would not be allowed inside the gates to the private resort. We traveled several kilometers down another unmarked, dirt road to the entrance gate to "Jock of the Bushveld" resort. We later discovered that the resort is owned by South African film director Duncan MacNeillie who was also producer and director of the film of the same name as the resort. It was filmed here in Kruger in 1986.

We were met at the gate by a pleasant and very friendly, older black lady dressed in colorful native attire as were all the women servants and maids at the resort. She called the office to get permission to let us in. What security! The well landscaped grounds and parking area led to the main reception area that overlooked the Sabie River. Everything was built of native stones and native woods. The reception center and gift shop was built underneath a 700-year-old marula tree. The tree seemed to envelop the thatched-roof structure. On the way to
reception, we were personally greeted by several well dressed black men and several young, white South Africans who were obviously guides for the resort.

Inside, we bought the videos. Meanwhile, a nice looking, young man came up to Dave and asked him if we were on the Robbens Island tour last week in Capetown. He was on the same boat and remembered us. I guess we Americans stand out in a crowd. This young man's name was Gunter (something) and he gave us a personal tour of the facilities and one of the rooms in the resort. Everything was first class! Each unit overlooked the Sabie River with a private dining porch. You could watch your own, personal wildlife show while dining in style. There was even a tiled, private, outdoor shower in addition to the indoor one. If you have the money, this is the way to go. We left!

Skukuza Camp
The three cars met for lunch at Skukuza Camp near the center of the park, and we checked into our new bungalows for the evening. Accommodations in the large rondovels at the camp were very nice - not up to Jock-of-the-Bushveld standards - but okay for a bunch of U.S. tourists and Alabama rednecks.

After a short nap in our new accommodations during the heat of the day, we were off again looking for game. I'm amazed at how hot it can get during midday and how chilly it gets at night but the humidity is always very low. We rarely see anything like a cloud in the sky. The bush is also very, very dry - more so here in Kruger than in Umfalozi Park. But the animals seem healthy and at this point, our car has seen four of the Big Five. We spent the afternoon in search of lions. However, we knew that the chances of seeing one was slim until late afternoon. The other two cars went off in different directions.

Lions and Elephants on Parade
It was about 3:15 p.m. along another dusty, dirt road when we spotted a tour jeep stopped in the road ahead. This is always a sign that something has been spotted - probably another giraffe, a kudu, a warthog, or a herd of impala. One of the problems with official tours is they don't give you time to experience the wildlife. As we approached, the tour jeep left. We had no trouble spotting what they were looking at.

In the bush to our right, a pride of huge lions lay resting in the shade about 150 feet from the road. We had found number 5! They were huge, fat and healthy. Even though I had seen lions in zoos and circuses, these were the first in the wild. I was astounded by their majesty - the King of Beasts! And we were the only ones here to see them. As we maneuvered to get a better view through the bush hoping for a nice photo, Peggy spotted elephants in a small watering hole further to the right - about 300 yards from the lions. The water was barely visible but you could certainly hear the huge elephants splashing around. The lions heard them too.

I recall that there is no love lost between elephants and lions. Elephants are about the only beast that frighten lions. The lions certainly weren't afraid of us; they ignored our vehicle. The lions began to act nervous. Slowly, they arose and began moving away from the elephants and toward us through the bush. There were 2 males and 4 females. The elephants smelled the lions
and began lumbering in the direction of the
scent - toward us and the lions. What drama is about to be played out? Dave cut the engine and we sat there quietly watching. With little haste, the lions slowly crossed the road directly in front of us to escape the elephants. Cameras clicked. As one group of elephants came in our direction, we saw more entering the water hole in the distance. Wow - elephants in slow pursuit of lions!

What a photo opportunity! By the time the elephants were parading not 50 feet in front of our vehicle, the last lion has disappeared into the bush on the other side of the road. A large female elephant, probably the matriarch of the herd, stopped to smell where the lions had lounged in the grass. The odor really bothered her. She trumpeted. What a sound! Still they came - huge females, some with young calves, young females, more calves. Just when we thought all had passed, more emerged from the bush. They kept coming. We estimated the herd must have had a total of near 60 individuals. Sandra wore out her battery taking photos and Allyn ran out of film. Still they came. The last were a group of perhaps a dozen or so young males. One feisty teenager looked as if he wanted to challenge us so Dave backed away. The whole incident lasted about 40 minutes. What an amazing display of two of Africa's Big Five! And to think all we wanted was to see a lion. We finally starting breathing again!

This was it! We were ready to go back to Alabama satisfied. Nothing we would see for the rest of this trip could match this display.

Heading back to camp on a paved road, we saw another old bull elephant feeding on the roadside. He was so close that we couldn't pass up another photo. He was no more than 20 feet from the vehicle when I leaned over Sandy for the shot. This old male had one broken tusk and Allyn thinks he is the same one they photographed the last time they were in Kruger. She plans to compare photos. Well anyway, right after I took the picture, the old bull decided he didn't appreciate us being so close. He started shaking his head. Not a good sign. As he was about to charge, I started asking Dave to move forward. "Let's go Dave! Move Dave! Get outa here Dave!" Dave sat there. Finally, at the last minute, he got the vehicle in gear and pulled forward just before Sandy got an up close visit from a broken elephant tusk.
On back to camp, we saw a huge family of baboons playing in the road. There seemed to be several dozen of them doing what baboons do. They are amusing to watch and are so used to vehicles that they just ignore us. We also saw our first family of hyenas living in a culvert underneath the highway.

The Leopard in the River
Just before reaching camp, another road crosses the Sabie River on our right. We saw several vehicles stopped on the bridge - another key that something interesting is below. We drove out on the bridge to join the search but the sun was setting fast. In the rocks and reeds along the river below the bridge lounged a big leopard. He blended in so well that most of us had a hard time spotting him (or her). After a while, he got up and walked out on the rocks in full view of his audience on the bridge above him. Cameras clicked. Everyone was excited. Leopards are considered the most difficult of the Big Five to see. Our vehicle has now seen two, the one in Umfolozi and this one. To be such huge, powerful animals (this one appeared to be at least 12 feet from nose to tip of tail), they move so slowly and quietly. One would never see him if he didn't move. This leopard walked under the bridge directly below us, sat on the rocks for a few minutes, and then eased on into the reeds on the other side. Some speculated that he was stalking a lone duiker (small antelope) on the edge of the river.

We left camp early at 6:30 a.m. with our bags packed and the vans loaded. Again, each vehicle went in separate directions in the park. We headed north toward Satara Camp. After yesterday's excitement, we really didn't have any great expectations for today. Cheetahs would be nice since this is the only big cat we haven't spotted. Along the way we saw zebra, hyenas, 2 rhinos, lots of giraffes, baboons, waterbucks, a warthog, wildebeests and lots of signs of buffalo and elephant. Because the area in the north is more open, it is perfect Cheetah country. Allyn and Peggy spotted two large male lions lounging beside the highway. This excited us. We took a few more photos
before they moved on back into the bush.

We arrived at Satara Camp at 9:00 a.m. and had a short break before heading back—still looking for cheetah.

**Sandy's Underwear**

What a fun group to travel with! There are no secrets among traveling companions especially when you've been squeezed together in a small condor all week with luggage that grows with every gift shop. While at Satara, I went walking out to the fence that surrounds the compound to see the giraffe and impala on the other side. Here, I'm in the "cage" and they are free. I also wanted to admire the construction of the elephant-proof fence. Posts were railroad irons braced with steel cable. After seeing this, an eight-foot deer fence around my orchard should be easy to build. While I wandered around, the rest of the group took immediate advantage of the facilities. Thatched-roof rest rooms don't contain sound very well and us Americans are not known to be discreet—certainly not quiet. I don't know the details but from the conversation back in the car, it seemed that Sandy broadcast to all of Satara Camp about her leopard-skin underwear. Even if they aren't true leopard skin, they must be impressive for everyone to be talking about them.

**Leaving Kruger**

Before lunch, we had spotted lions on two occasions although they were difficult to see in the bush and we didn't linger. In one pond of deep water, we saw a hippo. Some of the group saw another hippo as we crossed the Sabie River back into Skukuza Camp. We met the other two groups here for lunch and then headed out again for our last afternoon in Kruger. Our group chose to visit the local museum at the camp before heading back into the bush. We learned a little of the history and legends of this area. As a result of the visit to the museum, I'm convinced the American movie of a few years back, "Ghosts of the Darkness", starring Val Kilmer and Michael Douglas was based on the story of the construction of the old railroad bridge across the Sabie River at Skukuza Camp. In the movie, I recall the bridge was across the Sabie River and the setting of the movie looks a lot like this area. In the museum, the story is told how an Irish engineer was responsible for the building of the bridge. Val Kilmer played the Irish engineer. There was also a photo showing the real engineer with two lions he had killed. This is what the movie was all about.

The afternoon ride back to the main gate at Melalane was relatively uneventful. We stopped and watched two separate herds of elephants cross the road in front of us. At one dry river crossing, we stopped and watched two big males dig in the dry sand with their trunks until they found clean, fresh water. They were still drinking when we left. I had seen documentaries on TV about this, but it was amazing to watch.
How they knew exactly where to dig is a mystery. 

Although we exited Kruger National Park without seeing a cheetah, we saw everything else in abundance. Our Kruger Safari was one we'll always remember. And if we forget, collectively we have about 1000 photos and digital images to remind us of this adventure.

Tuesday, 27 May

Crocodile Inn
We spent our last night in South Africa in a very nice, Protea-run facility west of Nespruit called "Crocodile Inn". It was on the Crocodile River which flows eastward, forms the southern boundary of Kruger Park, and flows through Mozambique into the Indian Ocean. The inn is in a very tropical setting among gardens. As I write this, I am sitting in the shade of several large trees that I cannot identify including palms that surround the pool. It is 9:45 a.m. and very cool. Like our last few days in South Africa, the sky is cloudless and it will get very warm by midday. It is suppose to be much cooler in Johannesburg about four hours away and over one mile high. Our flight back to Atlanta leaves Johannesburg at 8:10 p.m. this evening. There is one scheduled refueling stop in the Cape Verde Islands, I think. We arrive in Atlanta at 8:20 a.m. tomorrow after more than 18 hours on the plane. My back and my bottom are not looking forward to it. But the pain of a long transcontinental flight is a small price to pay for the absolutely wonderful experiences of the past 15 days.

Memories
The weather couldn't have been better. Only one cloudy, rainy day and that was a travel day. The rest was mostly shirt-sleeve weather even though it is late fall in this part of the world.

We owe a tremendous thanks to David and Allyn Bransby for planning the trip down to the smallest detail. And when things don't always go as planned such as a dead vehicle, they come us with alternatives.

Ray Bransby has been with us all the way driving one of the vehicles and providing the local color that only a native South African can provide. From Ray we learned such details as Johannesburg is really pronounced "janiceburg"; impala are "impies"; no one wears a "fanny pack" in South Africa; and a South African can still drive after having all four fingers smashed in the car door by Deloris Smith. Deloris said that Ray deserved "stars" and this was her way of giving them to him.
The trip was made even more fun by the wonderful couples and individuals on the trip. Everyone seemed to get along so well and were so very compatible. We needed Paul and Sandra Ash to keep us moving, to set the pace, to get us up and going early in the mornings - the "fast forester" and the "running redhead". Whenever our vehicle seemed threatened by a rogue elephant, Sandy was on that side of the vehicle to protect us from either end of the beast.

Kathy Glass captured all those exciting images and video of wildlife with her new camera. We can't wait to hear the audio.

Judy Owens, the sole Crimson Tide fan in the group, really felt at home with all those elephants around. The rest of us had to search out carved rhinos or giraffes to take home. She could find carved elephants everywhere. She was the perfect travel companion even if she did premier the South African version of Shaka Zulu's revenge.

Marven and Deloris Smith were the real seasoned travelers in the group. Marven seemed to travel more than the rest of us. He was always disappearing to see this or that, explore a village, take a picture of the entrance gate to Kruger or see the creek bottom at twilight at Eight Bells Inn. It took Deloris and the rest of us to keep track of him. But his tales during dinner were always entertaining.

Robin Huettel was the bird lady of the trip. While the rest of us searched for huge beasts, she was fascinated by the little, feathered creatures. And there were lots of colorful, unusual birds in South Africa to learn. A nice glass of South African Chardonnay before, during, and after dinner really helps recall those colorful creatures.

Ed Moran was the only right handed driver of a left handed vehicle for two weeks. This extra task never seemed to bother him or Dorothy. Maybe it was because he was the only man in a vehicle of women, and they kept him on the left hand side of the road. Ed must have felt like one of those male impalas in the park surrounded by females. The entire group owes Ed a big thanks for taking on this extra responsibility - keeping up with Dorothy, Judy and Robin - not driving.

And if not for Peggy, I'd have spent the last two weeks in my office in Auburn or trekking around Alabama on Extension business rather than exploring South Africa. She's the one who really wanted to come and talked me into it. Thanks, Peggy, and thanks, too, for keeping up with me and all my stuff.

It's been a wonderful trip!

Charles Mitchell
May 27, 2003