

Obituary: Ray Sparrow

Alan Sparrow

When the history of game ranching in the south-east lowveld of Zimbabwe is written, the names of several pioneer ranchers will be prominent. These were Despard Bridges of Devuli Ranch, Ian de la Rue of Ruware Ranch, C. E. Sparrow of Fair Range, George Styles of Buffalo Range, Stanley Stockil of Essanby Ranch, Derek Henning of Samba Ranch and Ray Sparrow of Lone Star Ranche, among others.

Ray Sparrow started Lone Star Ranche in 1949, after serving a stockman's apprenticeship on Devuli Ranch. In Ray Sparrow's own words, "*I spent considerable time on Devuli Ranch hunting predators - lions, leopards, hyenas, wild dogs - that plagued the livestock in heavy bush country. I also spent a great deal of time maintaining and repairing stationary engines and pumps, on which all the inland sections depended for watering cattle. This was good training for my future plans*"

Ranching cattle in the harsh lowveld was a challenge in those early days due to the high number of predators. Ray followed the local African Hlengwe (or Shangaan) practice of not dehorning the heifers to allow the cattle to defend themselves from lion attacks. He employed a Hlengwe tracker named Nyarhi, who was to hunt with him for many years.

The second major challenge was the provision of water for cattle and wildlife. The drought prone lowveld is a harsh, unproductive environment without water. Ray built several dams and weirs, the largest of which is the Malilangwe Dam. The provision of water was to provide for the management of wildlife in the seventies, when Lone Star became one of the earliest private ranches to start hunting safaris in Zimbabwe. Lone Star Ranche also pioneered the capture and translocation of a wide variety of wildlife, notably rescuing young elephant from the culling programmes in Hwange National Park. He was also a staunch supporter of protecting endangered species in Zimbabwe such as the Lichtenstein's hartebeest and introduced white rhino onto Lone Star.

After nearly sixty-four years on Lone Star (now Malilangwe Trust) Ray Sparrow passed away recently at the age of 92. Ray Sparrow was held in high regard by a wide spectrum of people and communities in the lowveld and the country at large. Such was this respect that his funeral was attended by leading traditional and community leaders. After his love for family, his passion for all things natural governed his life. His knowledge of trees, plants, animals, the Hlengwe language and culture has not been equalled by any other.

Ray Sparrow was the first to acknowledge that without the unwavering support of his beloved wife "Dossie" Sparrow and family he would not have succeeded. His passing represents the end of an era. We shall not see his like again. We salute him and we shall remember him.

