

## **Syndicates shoot elephants in the lungs, before hamstringing them and cutting their spinal cords to paralyse them.**

The sight of an elephant's face and trunk lying on the ground, ripped off its skull, is horrifying. It's a sight that rangers are having to endure more and more often in the north of the Kruger National Park, in the Vlakteplaas area.

It was the first sign that the poached carcass of a bull elephant was nearby. Fifty metres further on, in the bush near Shingwedzi, a massive grey mound streaked with white vulture faeces lay in the grass. Closer up, the picture of devastation was complete.

"The poachers shoot the elephant in the lungs, then it runs a little further before it dies," said Vlakteplaas section head ranger Marius Snyders. Sometimes the lung shot only slows it down a little and then the poachers hamstring it before cutting the animal's spinal cord, which paralyzes it completely.

"The first thing the poachers do is take off the trunk and then start hacking out the tusks. It takes about 90 minutes for them to finish."

Snyders said if park rangers were close by when an elephant was killed, they would react quickly.

"At this stage, poachers are mainly shooting male elephants because they are on their own. They don't go for the big tuskers because the tusks are too heavy to carry out."

Similar to rhino poachers, elephant poachers move in groups of three – one has a firearm, one carries food and the third has a bag to put the tusks in. Ranger Joe – a pseudonym to protect his identity as he is a field ranger who lives in the local community – said that when he studied conservation 17 years ago, he had never expected to be in a war.

"Seeing these scenes, they traumatise you," Joe said softly, shaking his head. But he doesn't believe it's time for all-out war yet.

"It's good we have a constitution; we can't accuse a person for no reason," Joe said. This doesn't mean he and his colleagues won't defend themselves when they are in a contact with poachers.

"We have to protect the animals," said Joe. Since June last year, 17 elephants have been poached in the Vlakteplaas area and more than 20 have been killed in the park this year so far.