

On patrol with the Black Mambas in South Africa

06/11/2026 In the latest instalment of Porsche Newsroom's Sunday Drives series, Black Mamba ranger Vongani Masingi explores South Africa's Olifants West Nature Reserve, where a specially modified Porsche Cayenne supports the all-female anti-poaching unit's daily work.

South Africa |Around February each year, when the plum-sized yellow fruit of the Greater Kruger's marula trees start to draw in sweet-toothed elephants, the Black Mambas pay even closer attention than normal. The all-female anti-poaching unit, who carry out daily patrols along the fence line where the trees grow, know there may be calves among the herd; and where there are calves there are mothers, intent on keeping them safe.

It's one of many things for the Black Mambas to monitor in a landscape that's rich with so much life. But it's the threat of illegal poachers that concerns ranger Vongani Masingi the most.

Keeping watch for poachers

For this Sunday Drive, the 33-year-old is on familiar ground, but there is no fixed destination. Her route takes in gravel tracks, stretches strewn with rocks and connecting asphalt roads. Through the windscreen, the track narrows between patches of bush before opening onto savanna. The rougher sections call for a slower pace, picking a line between the stones. A journey might be five kilometres or 10 – and its course can change with the next request for help. “It all depends on where the emergency might be,” she says.

Patrolling in pairs, and often on foot, the world’s first all-female anti-poaching team protects endangered rhinos across approximately 200 square kilometres – a patch roughly the size of Stuttgart. When a patrol needs back-up, that’s a lot of ground to cover. Which is why Masingi is in a specially modified Porsche Cayenne.

Reading the bush

From behind the wheel of the SUV, there is much to see – but it takes an experienced eye. An open stretch might offer a clear view of what's ahead but in thicker woodland, anything beyond the track immediately in front can be hard to read. Olifants West is ripe Big Five land: rhinos, elephants and buffalo share this environment with lions, leopards and more. For the women patrolling it, knowing what to look for doesn’t just take training and close observation – it also takes courage.

Masingi’s working day begins with equipment checks – her handheld radio and smartphone keep her in contact with the operations room, which coordinates responses to reports from the field. The Black Mambas patrol fence lines and watering holes, searching for snares and clues as small as a discarded cigarette butt. They also conduct checks and inspections at roadblocks and use thermal night-vision goggles to scan the bush after dark. If someone is on their patch, they need to know about it.

A Cayenne on call

The unit’s second-generation Cayenne was donated by Porsche South Africa and prepared by Porsche Centre Johannesburg, with suspension upgrades, underbody protection and off-road tyres. Spotlights help with night work, while a roof rack carries a full-sized spare wheel and equipment. The vehicle plays a crucial role, transporting patrol teams and supplies and enabling them to respond to suspected poaching activity.

Its distinctive livery also serves a purpose, because the Black Mambas want to be seen. Their regular, visible patrols are intended to deter poachers from entering the protected area in the first place. Armed only with handcuffs and pepper spray, their peaceful approach means they rely on specialist response teams when back-up is needed.

Boots on the ground

Back at HQ, a map records all the places where wire snares and thicker cable traps have been found so that those locations can be checked regularly, in addition to scoping fresh territory. Each snare that is found and removed is a threat taken out of the landscape, and Masingi's pride is obvious when she says the numbers found on searches are lower now than in the project's early days. "It doesn't mean we're not needed, it means that what we are doing is very much effective. Our boots are always on the ground," she says.

When Masingi joined the Black Mambas in 2019, her father worried about her safety. "But I never wanted to wake up one day thinking 'I should have, I could have, and would have'," she says. "I want to make a difference."

For Masingi, the women's compassion and talent for quiet detective work help make them effective rangers. In her community, women are often expected to remain at home. The Black Mambas challenge that expectation, offering paid work and responsibility. Many are their families' breadwinners, supporting children or helping siblings continue their education.

The Black Mambas' sister programme, Bush Babies, has also been taking conservation education into communities and schools since 2015. The charity's workers want those children to grow up knowing living rhinos, rather than learning about an animal lost to extinction.

On a mission to help others

"I always imagined I would become a lawyer, and I wanted to vouch for people who cannot vouch for themselves," says Masingi. "But I'm doing that now. The animals help us, and we also help them. They act as our eyes and we act as theirs. Because they are voiceless, these iconic animals. Without us they cannot vouch for themselves."

As she looks out over an expanse of bush, her radio signals that she's needed on a call. And with that, she turns the Cayenne around. Masingi might not know where exactly the next drive will take her, but she's certain that the Black Mambas are on the right path.

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