

HUNTING FUNGI IN THE KRUGER NATIONAL PARK

FABI Director Prof Bernard Slippers, Dr Martin Coetzee and PhD candidate Darryl Herron travelled to the Kruger National Park during February to join a field trip with collaborators from the University of Venda, Prof Ednah Kunjeku and Elelwani Ramabulana. The purpose of the trip was to hunt for species in the Botryosphaeriaceae, a group of fungi that, like leopards, hide in trees. Elelwani is currently a Ph.D. student studying the diversity of the Botryosphaeriaceae in some of South Africa's native tree species, including marula (*Sclerocarya birrea*) and false marula (*Lannea schweinfurthii*). She divides her time between FABI and the University of Venda.



FABI has worked extensively on this group of fungi, characterising its diversity and distribution in other tree species across South Africa, and even named some of the newly identified fungal species. The Botryosphaeriaceae contains a number of taxa that include saprophytes, endophytes and pathogens and are important not only in native environments but also in industries like ornamentals, horticulture and forestry.

While many see the Kruger Park as a place to see the Big Five, Elelwani saw it as a refuge for some populations of marula and false marula that, save disturbance by elephants, remain relatively undisturbed. Part of her project is to compare these protected sites to others that have various levels of human activity. This collaboration between the Universities of Pretoria and Venda seeks to help further our understanding of this diverse group of fungi and their role in these ecosystems.