

Singita



Dumbana female's cub – Photo by Bill Drew.

WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA
For February, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four

Temperature

Average minimum: 22.4°C (69.4°F)
Minimum recorded: 18.0°C (64.4°F)
Average maximum: 35.2°C (91.6°F)
Maximum recorded: 41.0°C (100°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0 mm
Season to date: 432 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05h47
Sunset: 18h22

This time last year we were experiencing the consistent rains accompanying Tropical Cyclone Freddy, which had traversed the Indian Ocean for five weeks before making landfall in Mozambique, bringing with it extensive rainfall across our region. February now has been much drier in comparison, and the lack of rain coupled with a number of very hot days has resulted in the grass becoming very dry and losing its rich green tone, and the wallows and waterholes are slowly drying up, but the bush is still full of life.

A Sightings Snapshot for February follows:

Lions

- The Mananga Pride have been a prominent part of our lion sightings for the month of February, with about four of the females clearly showing signs of suckling. They have been moving in and around the stickythorn thickets in the central-western regions of the reserve. We believe the cubs are being kept in the safety of the tangle of thorns, with occasional sightings of the cubs with their mothers. The rest of the pride members, including two young males and a young female have been keeping a respectful distance from the mothers, but still remain in the vicinity, never too far away. The lioness and cubs have been joined by the Trichardt males a couple of times, but they have not been regular visits. How special it has been to learn that the pride has grown by a couple of members, and we are so looking forward to watching them grow.
- The Shish Pride, with their 14 cubs have been rather scarce this month, opting to spend the majority of their time on the western side of Park Road, making use of the vast herds of zebra which are occupying the grasslands to the west of the reserve, where the fires moved through last year. With so many mouths to feed, the lioness have to work very hard to maintain the health of their family, and following the food is the best way to do that.
- The Trichardt males have been moving extensively through their territory, and possibly even seeking to expand their reign, as their presence has been noticeably less this month, with all the mature females in the Shish and Mananga Prides all raising their cubs already. With no females coming into oestrus to draw the males to the prides, they have been moving further afield and covering much more area on a regular basis than when they are attempting to mate with the prides they already have in their territory.

Leopards

- Mbiri-Mbiri male has been sighted four times this month, once with an impala ewe kill in a tree on the far eastern side of the reserve, and from here the next sighting of him was a number of kilometres to the west, along the Xingkelengane drainage, and beyond.
- Dumbana 3:3 was a regular sight this month, having been reported every few days throughout the month. One sighting involved him hunting an impala, which was seen by some of our guests firsthand.
- Dumbana 1:1 was seen for the first week of February and then has not been seen since, unfortunately. It is believed he was seen at Orpen gate midway through February, so we are unsure as to whether we will see him again.
- Monzo male has been seen a few times this month, and during all sightings he has unfortunately been looking rather grim, skinny and worn in his face, but still moving with purpose, but seemingly into the area more north of his usual range, perhaps being pushed out by the Dumbana 3:3 male who has been dominating our leopard sightings in the southern-central regions.
- The Lebombo male has been seen, mostly lying around in the cool long grass of the N'wanetsi River and the drainage lines. One sighting of him was when he killed an impala and dragged it swiftly under the cover of the thick vegetation, where he started feeding without the pressure of vultures seeing him and drawing attention to his kill.
- Although the Mhlangulene female has only been seen once this month, her daughter has been seen a few times in recent days around the water sources of Double Crossing, in the central region of the Xingkelengane drainage. Still young, yet able to completely provide for herself, this female seems to be using the environment to her advantage, waiting for her prey to come to her as the herds are attracted to what little water is available.
- The Dumbana female was seen with her cubs in an amazing sighting where she had an impala kill hoisted in a leadwood tree, and two cubs were seen with her at various times in the tree. She proudly lounged in the lower branches while her cubs sat above, some of the guides were even lucky enough to see the cubs feeding. A pack of wild dogs even flushed the little family from the thick foliage below the

tree one hot afternoon, but luckily the kill and the family were out of reach, so the dogs moved on. Since then, there have been tracks and signs of another kill but no one has been lucky enough to spy these elusive little ones again.

- There have been a few sightings of a skittish leopard, whether male or female, we cannot be sure because it disappears almost as quickly as it appears, giving the guides no chance to have a good look. It is an adult, but with every sighting being of a tail swiftly disappearing into the foliage, we can only hope it may slowly become more at ease with the vehicles in the future, if it stays. There have also been a few sightings of unknown male and female leopards moving through the region. With these sightings being inconsistent and inconclusive on identification, we cannot be sure if it is the same individual being seen or different nomadic wanderers moving through.

African wild dogs

- In the last few weeks of February, we have had a number of sightings of the Floppy-eared Pack, still going strong with their seven pups, which are almost the same size as some of the adults. They are such a pleasure to watch as they trot through the long grass, distracted and attracted to anything that moves and could be food. The sight of impala stotting past at high speed, tailed closely by a few streaks of tan, black and white in hot pursuit can send a real adrenaline rush through the body, especially when you come around the corner to find that their hunt has been successful and all the members are eating frantically (although sad for the impala).
- A pair of female wild dogs were seen in the central regions of the reserve finishing off an impala kill which had not lasted very long, but we are not sure if they were a dispersal pack or a hunting party that is actually part of the larger pack.

Cheetahs

- Three sub-adult cheetahs were seen in the reserve for a couple of days, without a mother in the area it is uncertain as to whether they had simply been separated or if the youngsters may have in fact lost their mother to a predator. With the last view of the trio being within unsettling proximity to the two Trichardt males and two Mananga lionesses as the sun was setting, we can only hope their mother had taught them enough to avoid any contact with the much larger predators, but the guides moved out of the area so their presence would not influence any outcomes, in the hope that the cheetah would move away from the threat.

Spotted hyenas

- Spotted hyenas have been a regular sighting over the last few weeks, with possibly two different den locations being found, although they are in very rocky areas where the vehicles have no access, but we have seen mothers with cubs lounging about in two distinct areas which could be evidence that their dens might not be far away.
- Sightings of the wild dogs have often been accompanied by these intelligent scavengers trailing not far behind in the hope of an opportunity for an easy steal of an easy meal.

Elephants

- Daily we are having the most amazing elephant sightings, with herds spanning across the grasslands and moving back and forth from the river and pan systems. Many of the females have tiny babies with them which are always a treat when you are in the right place to have a closer look at them, and even if you aren't, the older youngsters in these family groups are all sorts of entertaining. It is such a special thing to sit with a herd of elephants as they feed, or drink, or just move silently through the vegetation, as if floating through a sea of grass.
- A number of impressive bulls have also been seen, some in musth and following the breeding herds, but some just moving through the area enjoying the grass and thick shade of the drainage lines.

Buffalos

- A number of very large breeding herds have been seen earlier in the month of February, moving through the grasslands, never too far away from water and wallowing areas, but the majority of buffalo sightings have actually been of lone bulls in the drainage lines. Specifically, one very large old male who has a severe limp and a nasty demeanour! It is understandable that he might be moody, he is probably not comfortable, both physically and psychologically, because being an injured individual animal out here can only end one way, and he is not planning to go down easily.

Plains game

- With the herds of impala and wildebeest moving around with calves that are already starting to show their little horn growth, we are now starting to see the arrival of some of the other antelope species. The kudu and waterbuck are now starting to emerge, some still with wobbly legs as they work to keep up with their mothers.
- The masses of zebra herds moving through many of the grassland areas are also accompanied by many foals, normally keeping close to their mothers but every now and then they are overcome with excitement and energy and go sprinting off into the distance, only to turn around and sprint back to their mothers when they realize they have travelled too far.

Rare animals and other sightings:

- There has been the odd sighting of African civet, but not as many as we have seen in other months, perhaps due to the longer grass making spotting these smaller, nocturnal creatures more difficult. It was special though for one of our guides to have seen a mother with some cubs, always happy to know populations are growing.
- A serval mother with three kittens was also seen in the centre of the reserve, which was a lucky sighting to have.
- Multiple klipspringer have been seen in the rocky outcrops of the Lebombo Mountain ridges.

Birds:

- Thousands of eagles, including lesser-spotted, tawny, steppe and Wahlberg's, were seen over the period of about a week in the northern reaches of the reserve, all taking advantage of the nesting queleas in the knob-thorn thickets. Kettling in the thermals above the nesting colonies, these eagles were joined by marabou storks and lanner falcons waiting for opportunities for easy meals.
- With the red-billed queleas having fledged, the colonies are no longer attracting masses of eagles to the northern-most regions of the reserve. There is still the odd sighting of large flocks of the queleas flitting across the grasslands, but much less impressive than just a few weeks prior.
- It has been interesting to have a few sightings of a group of six southern ground hornbills together. We are accustomed to seeing pairs, or perhaps a pair with their sub-adults in tow, but seeing six of these massive birds moving together, foraging in the grass, is quite impressive. Even more so when all of them take flight together with their large black and white wings moving gracefully in sync.
- There have been a few sightings of a large male ostrich in the grasslands around the central regions of the reserve.
- In previous months we have had the occasional sightings of broad-billed rollers and February has been no different, with the occasional calls being heard and the flash of deep purple in the N'wanetsi River north of the lodge.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as a February Gallery of images.

Among many of the incredible things to witness on safari, some of the most special sightings are of young animals, whether an impala lamb or an elephant calf, they are always memories that will last a lifetime.



Shish pride cub – Photo by Graeme Stewart.

At Singita Kruger National Park we are very privileged to have an array of young animals that we get to see, but one that stands out for me at the moment are lion cubs - little sharp-toothed fluffballs of energy! A few members of the Mananga Pride have recently given birth to a number of cubs and seeing them grow up day by day, when the mothers allow us of course, always sparks an interest, the wonder of what exactly they are experiencing as they develop. I'm sure with many species the first couple of weeks must be an assortment of emotions as the senses adjust to the surroundings, and with saying that lets have a deeper look into what really happens as the lion cubs grow.



Mananga lioness with cubs – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.

At birth the cubs' eyes remain closed for several days. For this reason they are born in a den and their mother will remain close for protection as they are very vulnerable to predators and rely fully on her milk for the nutrients needed to grow. The cubs will only begin to feed on meat after the first two to three months which ensures that they do not need to leave the safety of their den until then.

When it comes to big cats, one of the main sensory organs are their ears. With the majority of their communication being done by vocalizations these cats rely heavily on their incredible sense of hearing. The cubs begin to vocalize to their mother at a very young age for milk and comfort, and they also start to listen. When the female leaves the den to hunt, the cubs are very vulnerable, so any sound that they are not familiar with sends them immediately into hiding in the dense vegetation or rocky outcrop where their mother had left them. If they are not paying attention to what's happening around them, they could be in serious danger, so their ears are essentially their lifeline from a young age. We see this behaviour continue until they are adults - a lion seemingly fast asleep reacting immediately to a noise close by. When the mother returns to the cubs, she will give very soft contact calls to them. She can't be too loud as this could attract unwanted attention very quickly, but this will bring them out of hiding, and a loving greeting ritual ensues, almost a celebration each time that they are still alive.



Mananga lioness and cub – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.

As cubs motor skills develop, they start to become more like a miniature adult by the day, in just twelve to fourteen days they begin to walk, becoming more confident and adventurous to explore their home. In a matter of one month, they can run which then plays a vital role in the skills needed to survive and contribute to the rest of the pride members. A few weeks after they have mastered the art of running and chasing each other, they begin to practice the more specific skills needed to hunt such as stalking and keeping themselves concealed in the long grass to burst out at unsuspecting prey. They do this by hunting their litter mates, or occasionally the black tip at the end of their mother's tail, or even their mother as their confidence grows.



Mananga lioness and cub – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.

I have had the privilege of watching cubs grow up and its one of the most exciting times. You see this burning desire in their eyes to catch whatever moves. I can remember, like it was yesterday, with the cubs of the Shishangaan Pride, also found in Singita Kruger National Park, the three youngest all seemed to put their minds together and came up with a plan to stalk and hunt their mother's tail as she was resting in the shade during a very warm afternoon. In unison, they began to crouch, heads down, bodies low to the ground, (keep in mind these cubs are only around three to four months old so the coordination skills are not quite there), as soon as they were close enough a jump took place and all three cubs landed on top of one another a mere few inches from where they were! Hilarious to witness and so unforgettable, and to think in a few years those same cubs could tackle a buffalo.



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Shish pride – Photo by Graeme Stewart.

As the cubs gain more confidence and strength, they begin to pay more and more attention to the rest of the pride members, especially their mother. The instinct to chase and stalk can only take them so far, but by watching what the other adults do, they learn specialized skills from different individuals such as hunting skills, the art of killing and the fight of feeding. The skills they pick up will ensure that they have a part to play in the survival of the pride in the next three to four years.

As these cats grow day by day we quickly realize how important they will become in the circle of life as well as how unique they really are. These predators are incredibly important for the survival of the entire ecosystem of the African bushveld. An animal that starts off as a small fluffball only will soon become an apex predator, the largest big cat in Africa. Every second they have to learn from one another will make the world of difference for the survival of the pride and species, and how lucky we are to witness the process.



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Shish pride cub – Photo by Graeme Stewart.

The theme song most heard recited on a safari when a common warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus*) comes into view. This stocky little creature may be a beloved character in one of our favourite childhood movies, but don't be fooled by the cute appearance - a threatened warthog can pack a punch. Despite their relatively small size, with little legs keeping them close to the ground level, their strength comes from powerful neck muscles enabling these diurnal pigs to dig up roots and rhizomes using their snout as a shovel, but that same power can be used in an "upper-cut" from the tusks to defend itself against a predator.



Warthogs – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.

Interestingly, there are actually two species of warthog, surely, we are mostly familiar with the common warthog, which is found across a wide distribution in most of sub-Saharan Africa. Then there is the less well-known desert warthog (*Phacochoerus aethiopicus*), which is found in limited range in the region of the 'Horn of Africa', from Ethiopia to central Kenya, after having gone extinct in South Africa in the late 1800's. This could possibly have been around the time when the lack of control over hunting in the country caused concern enough to warrant the government of the time to start the process for creation of the Kruger National Park.

Here in the Kruger National Park of South Africa, the last few months of the rainy season has seen a new generation of little warthogs appearing. A single sow (name given to a female of the pig or Suidae family) can produce up to eight tiny piglets in a single litter after a gestation of about six months, in the safety of a burrow where the piglets will remain in sheltered safety for about six weeks. The use of burrows is not limited to raising their young, warthogs make use of burrows for sleeping every night, keeping themselves warm and bundled up with the other members of their sounder (name given to a family of warthogs) since a sparse covering of hair leaves them sensitive to the cold. The burrows are usually originally dug out by other animals, such as aardvark or porcupine, which are subsequently left abandoned when the animal moves on, leaving it available for occupation by the warthogs. Warthogs are not the only animal to take over aardvark holes, about 40 different creatures have been known to take over these well-excavated burrows when aardvarks leave them unoccupied.



Warthogs – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.

When entering a burrow, warthogs will reverse into the entrance, so if anything tries to follow them, or comes snooping around while they are inside, the first thing any potential predator encounters will be the sharp tusks. Mothers also retain this behaviour, except they will send the piglets into the burrow first, so she can reverse in after them, putting herself between the piglets and the entrance. This is a very effective strategy, because most predators think twice before going headfirst into a burrow, however many have learnt to lie in wait right above the hole, for unsuspecting pigs to venture out in the morning.



Warthogs – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.

After about three weeks of being kept safe underground and relying completely on their mother's milk for nutrients, it's time for the little piglets to venture out into the world, where they can start grazing and supplementing their milk diet with grasses, roots and other vegetation as well as carrion, eggs and even insects. Unfortunately, even when they are ready to emerge, they are still relatively small and therefore

vulnerable to an array of predators, and a litter of eight may not remain a litter of eight for very long, with a mortality rate of over 50% within the first year.



Warthogs – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.

But despite the odds against them, warthog populations still manage to grow, with a couple of piglets surviving each season, and staying with their mothers for between one to two years, until she has her next litter. Females often stay with their mothers, while young males will move on, often associating with other males in bachelor groups, where they have safety in numbers and peers to wrestle and fight with, developing the skills which will be needed to defend their breeding rights when they are adults. Warthogs are sexually mature at two years old, but many males will take longer to have the opportunity to breed as they need to fight for the privilege to pass on their genes, to a new generation of piglets to face the world.



Warthogs – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.

February Gallery



Dumbana 3:3 – Photo by Bill Drew.



Kingfisher – Photo by Amy Roberts.



Trichardt male lion – Photo by Bill Drew.



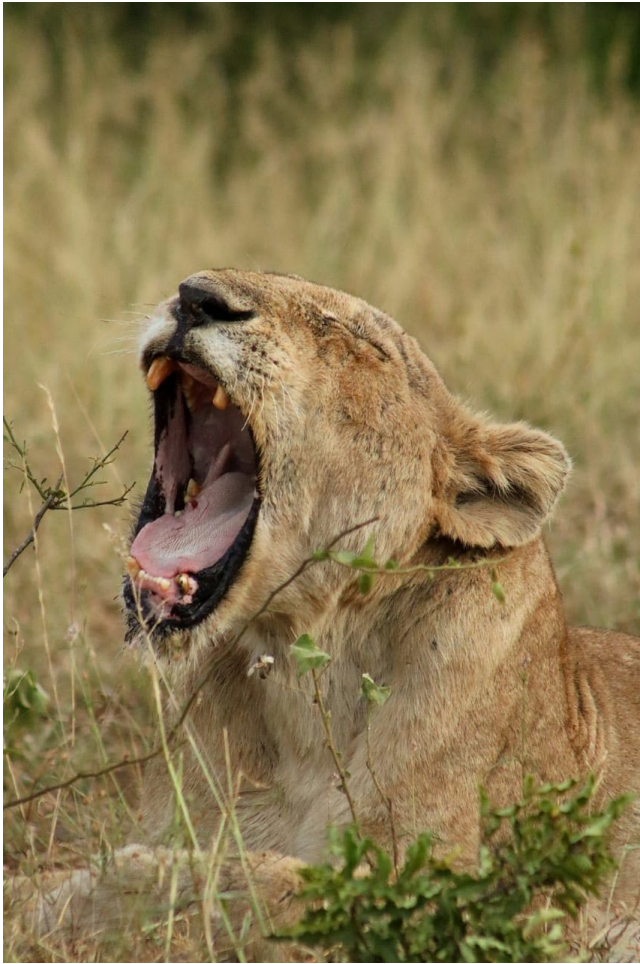
Lesser-spotted eagle – Photo by Amy Roberts.



Dumbana female – Photo by Bill Drew.



Giraffe – Photo by Amy Roberts.



Shish Pride lioness – Photo by Bill Drew.



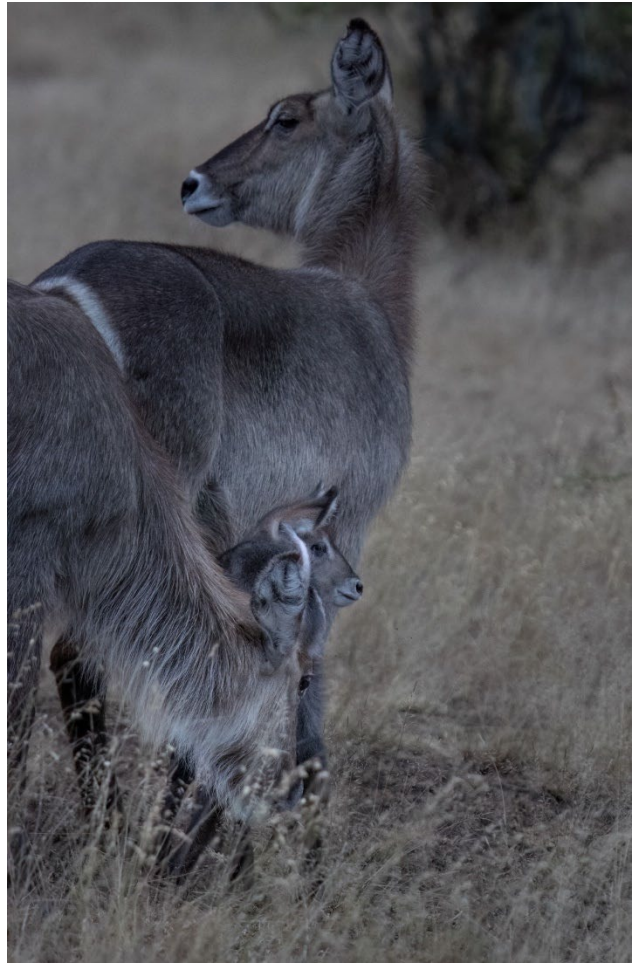
Spotted hyena – Photo by Amy Roberts.



Dumbana 3:3 – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.



Mbiri-Mbiri – Photo by Bill Drew.



Waterbuck with calf – Photo by Amy Roberts.



African wild dog – Photo by Bill Drew.



Mhlangulene female – Photo by Bill Drew.



Mondzo male – Photo by Bill Drew.