

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE For the month of August, Two Thousand and Twenty Two

Temperature

Average minimum: 14.3°C (57.7°F)
Minimum recorded: 09.9°C (49.8°F)
Average maximum: 29.5°C (85.1°F)
Maximum recorded: 36.7°C (98.0°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 7.5 mm
*For the year to date: 556.5 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:03
Sunset: 17:44

We've turned the corner out of the cold weather, although we've had a few splashes of rain this month bring our season to a close on 556.5 mm. There seems to be an abundance of babies everywhere, which is always delightful. The guides have been incorporating wellness practices into their drives – moments of calm to truly connect with Nature. However, there was nothing calm about not only seeing the Big 5 on one drive, but seeing them in one area, and boosting them to the Big 6 with the addition of wild dogs that were chasing an impala into the water at Banyini. The pack killed the impala before two lions came running in to the scene upon

hearing the sound of the dying impala. Then, not one but two, leopards came to drink at the same time followed by five buffalo bulls and four white rhinos. In the distance, along the Pipeline Road, four elephant bulls were feeding.

Here's a sightings snapshot for August:

Lions

- **Nduna Pride:** This pride was seen well west of their usual territory around Lojaan and Nduna Dams. They killed a male kudu near the wall of the Malilangwe Dam, and were also seen at the little waterhole below Pamushana Lodge. Later in the month 11 pride members were seen back in the Nduna area, some were close to the road and four were up on a rock.
- **River Pride:** One of the guides had stopped for sundowners at Chikwete Cliffs and spotted this pride on the opposite side of the river. Guides and guests who'd already crossed the river were able to get to the location and follow the lionesses that were walking and calling to the pride males. The pride consists of six cubs, a single sub-adult male, three lionesses and two adult male lions. The pride met up with one male and gave guests the exhilarating experience of repeatedly roaring right next to them. A few days later the two pride males managed to kill a buffalo bull at the central Banyini waterhole, so they too have been covering some distance.
- **Southern Pride:** News within this pride is that there are two mating pairs. The pride fed well from a buffalo bull they killed south of Mahande River. There are two mane-less males within this pride.

Leopards

- Leopard sightings have been remarkably good this month, thanks to a mating pair that were seen at the harbour several times, in a tree together, and on the banks of the Malilangwe Dam. One sighting of them lasted for 45 mins and it included the odd behaviour of them walking into the water where they had a narrow escape from a crocodile and a hippo!
- Sunset cruises have spotted a leopard in a baobab, and a leopard lounging on a rock.
- Another amazing sighting was seeing the pack of wild dogs chasing a leopard up a hill. No game drive is over until you are back in camp, and guests driving up the lodge driveway were delighted to glimpse a male leopard drinking at the little waterhole below Pamushana Lodge.

Hyenas

- The hyenas have been profiteering off the wild dogs' kills, often stealing them entirely, but they only got the bones of a buffalo carcass after the lions had finished with it. Hearing the crunching of bones, laughing, cackling and growling as they feed is quite eerie.
- An interesting sighting full of unanswered questions was that of an adult female hyena feeding on a young giraffe carcass, with a pair of black-backed jackals and well over 50 vultures looking on hungrily.

Elephants

There have been super sightings of bulls and breeding herds:

- During a heavy morning mist a single bull elephant emerged from the cloak of grey, like an enormous ghost – an amazing sight to behold.
- Two elephant bulls shook an umbrella thorn in front of guests, making it rain green pods upon them.
- It was interesting to watch a bull breaking a thorn tree and then herds moving over to it and beginning to feed on the pods. Then a big cow chased another big cow and her herd away from the tree, with much trumpeting going on.
- The breeding herds have been seen mostly along the river, but a spectacle was watching a herd swim across the river that flows into the dam, from the east towards the banks of Meso on the west.

Rhinos

Sightings of rhino are always excellent on this reserve, but black rhinos are much harder to find. Some of the month's highlights include:

- **White:** A female white rhino and her calf stumbled upon a pair of mating lions, disturbing their moment! A mother and an infant calf that could only have been a week old kept guests entertained with its inquisitive looks at the vehicle and humans, having never seen either. Its mother tried hard to restrain it as it kept trying to come for a close look.
- **Black:** After five days of searching for a black rhino guests had their wish granted when they spotted one near the river. It was very relaxed and approached to five metres from the vehicle, and they stayed with it for about 25 minutes. Another great sighting in the same vicinity was of three black rhinos together - a mother, calf and bull. The guide made a sensitive slow approach from about 300 metres away until his guests were close enough to get some amazing photos, and be in awe of these elusive pre-historic looking creatures.

Buffalos

- Possibly the best en masse sighting was over 700 hundred buffalos enjoying the green grass of the swamps in the Hippo Valley region.

Wild dogs

- It has been an absolute delight watching the pack with their puppies. The larger pack has 14 members. It has gained one new member, an adult female, which we suspect was the fourth missing dog from the other pack of four dogs that are running by themselves. The larger pack has six adult females, four adult males, and out of the pups which now number four, three are females and one male. One female pup has floppy ears making her look like a little gremlin! The pups were numbering seven at the start of the month, but sadly seem to have lost three littermates.
- A dramatic sight was seeing 11 wild dogs chasing a bull sable at full speed across the Banyini open areas. The sable galloped into the pan's depths and stood his ground until the dogs gave up.

Plains game

- The plains game are drawn to the permanent water sources at this dryish time, and in particular there have been good sightings of herds of sable.
- Another baby giraffe lost its life to a leopard, and was then stolen from the leopard by hyenas. Neither the leopard nor hyena were visible when the carcass was discovered, but the tracks told the tale.
- Not exactly plains game, but a delightful antelope to watch are the klipspringers. At the moment there is a little family of mother, father and daughter hopping about on the rocks near the lodge.

Unusual sightings

- A very unusual sighting was that of a brown hyena at Nduna Dam, but sadly the next day the same brown hyena was discovered dead, with a puncture wound in the head and abdomen, possibly from lions or hyenas.
- A hyena was seen having a confrontation with a jackal which was unusual.
- A white-tailed mongoose was glimpsed during an evening return trip to the lodge.

Birds

- It's nesting season and we've had two separate sightings of crowned eagles on different nests. One at a nesting site at Meso and the other just before Lojaan Dam and before the turning to Mhangula Triangle.
- Other observations included a barred owlet, and watching a hammerkop that was using a hippo as a perch.

Fishing

- It's slowly starting to get warmer, so the fishing is getting better.

Water safaris

- Water safaris are so popular! No sooner have guests been on one than they request another, and the new second cruise boat makes this all the more doable.

Bush walks

- It's the best time to walk, be it for a calm appreciative walk to hug the largest baobab on the property, or to view the rock art, or for a more action-filled encounter such as the one when there were two adult, female, white rhinos, two sub-adult calves and an adult bull showing interest in one of the females. It resulted in a lot of rhino vocalisation from the female charging towards the bull a number of times.

Photographic hide

- This hide has been extremely popular with guests and wildlife alike! With the Southern Pride spending much of their time in the area one group of safari goers got to see a pair of lions drink right in front of them, after sunset. Shortly after that they had an older cub and a sub-adult male lion come and drink as well. A predator on a much smaller scale, but no less awesome, was a slender mongoose that came to quench its thirst.

Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft

- Children really enjoy this experience, and dive right in to participating in our ancestors' customs that are demonstrated.

Day trips to Gonarezhou National Park

- The long daytrips to Gonarezhou National Park are always worthwhile – breeding herds of elephants, large tuskers and the Chilojo Cliffs are always on display.

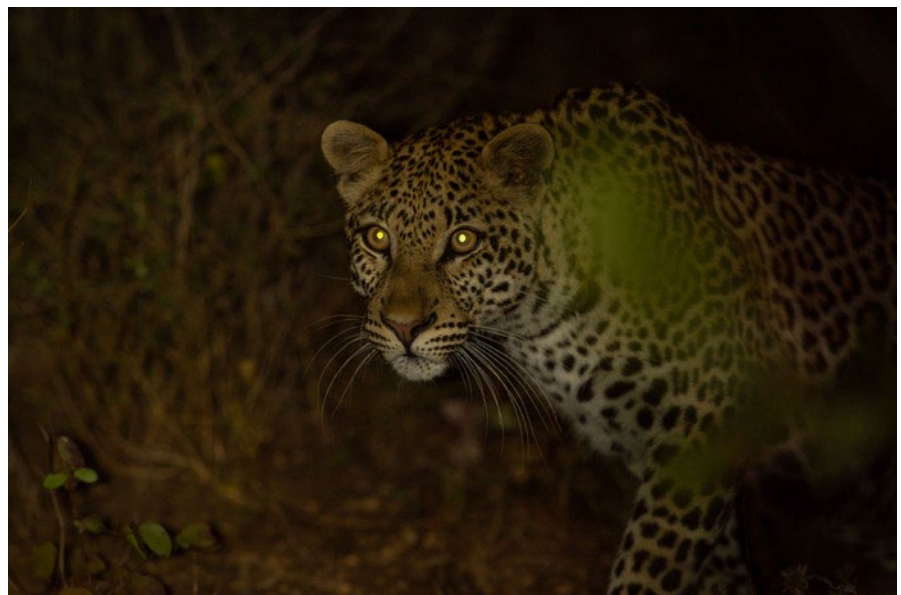
Some Bush Stories follow, as well as an August Gallery of images.

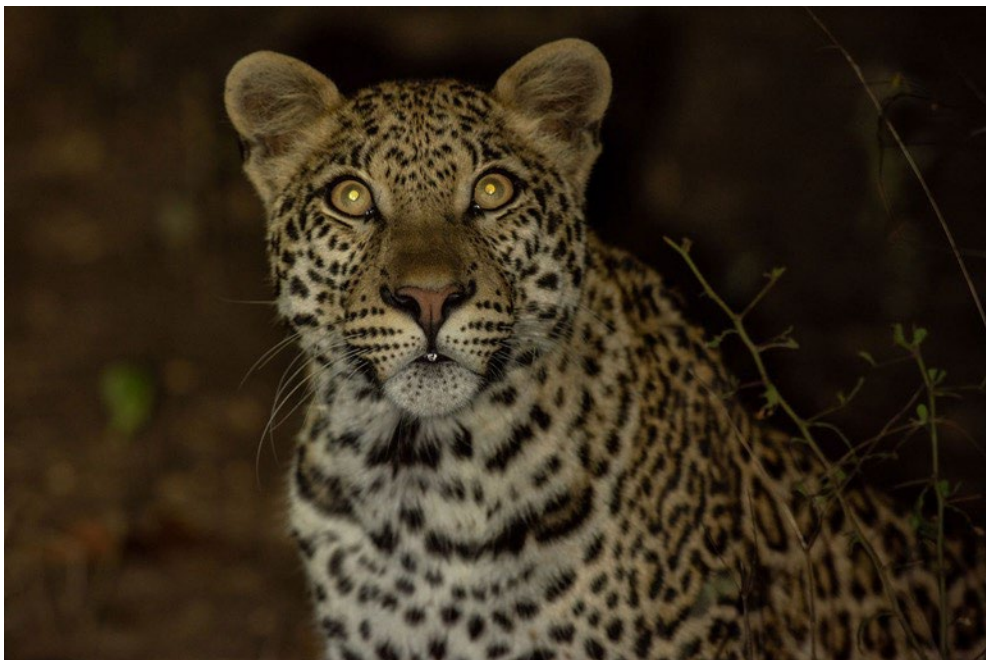
Leopard encounter – Part 2

Last month I recounted my tale about this catfishing leopard, but saved the details of the first part of the sighting for this journal. To recap I was alone and on my way back to the lodge after a scouting drive, swishing my spotlight (a small torch) back and forth half-heartedly after not relocating the leopard I'd seen that morning near Sosigi Dam. And then I got the unmistakable reflection of leopard eyes in my spotlight. He was curled up like a house cat in woodland vegetation. He sat up nervously when he realised I'd seen him. I had instantly cut the engine, and made slow movements getting my camera set up. I was still far away and was not close enough for photographs yet. After about 10 minutes of calm he relaxed again and lay down. I waited a bit longer, then started the engine and crawled forward a couple of metres. The second he shifted I cut the engine. This went on for about half an hour, and I was able to get this first shot of him sitting up looking at me.



I had parked off-road beneath some trees, in tricky terrain. I was just waiting at a fair distance to let him make the first move, and not crowd him or scare him in any way. Then he did an astonishing thing that transported my heart to my mouth while I hid behind my camera and documented it... he walked right up to the vehicle and stared straight at me! He was a youngster in perfect body condition, so that was somewhat re-assuring.

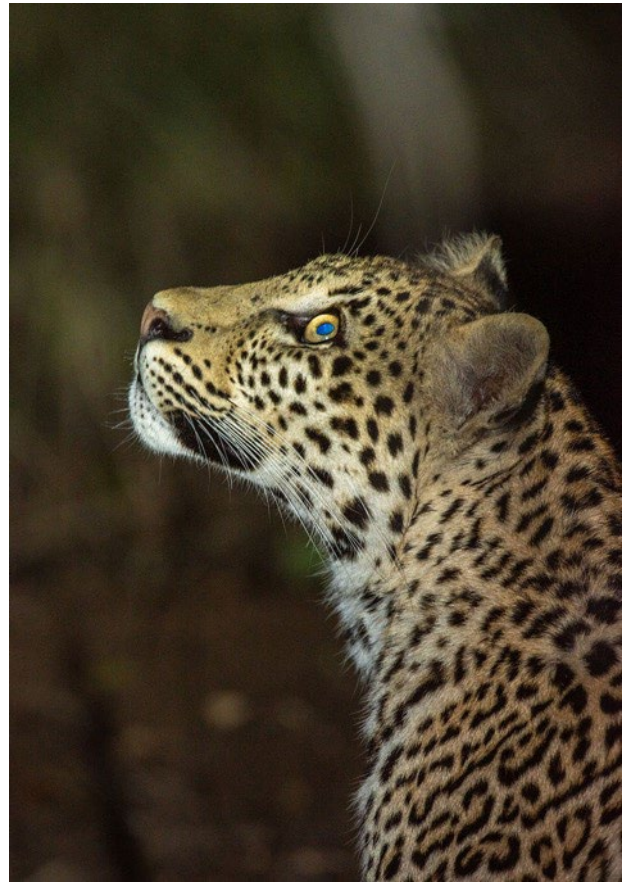




He then began looking left and right, assessing the whole situation, and then began gazing up. He became fixated with staring up and I couldn't figure out what he was doing. It was if he were looking at vultures circling, which was not the case because it was nighttime. He didn't have a kill stashed in one of the trees either as I'm pretty sure I would have seen that. There were no unusual sounds or alarm calls. Then he came round to the driver's seat where I was sitting and sat down right next to me, staring up.

With an explosion of power he raced straight up a tree trunk at the split second that all hell broke loose! Vervet monkeys shotgunned out of the tree screaming in terror! It was raining monkeys, tree debris and flailing leopard. I ducked. He missed. The monkeys escaped.

He sat a moment in the tree watching his fast food scamper away, before descending the tree and eventually making his way to the dam, to try his paw at catfishing.



Buffalo dynamics

American friends recently reminded me of a fantastic expression: the “stink eye”. To either give one, or receive one, it’s a look expressing annoyance, resentment, disdain and disapproval. In southern Africa we are more likely to describe it as the “hairy eyeball”. It is exactly the look buffalo bulls always give me. Like I’m late with some trumped-up payment. I think world revenue services would be even more effective if they used a buffalo stink eye portrait as their logo.



My camera and I being given the stink eye.

This buffalo bull was the first to stare us down at early dawn, as a herd of about 600 left a pan in our central areas and drifted back to their feeding grounds. During these dry months buffalos band together when resources are more isolated. The more we sat and watched them, the more interesting they became. At a glance they all look the same, but on closer inspection each is distinctly different from the next, especially when it comes to the size and shape of their horns. They have complex dynamics. Cows with young calves are ranked higher than others. High rank puts a buffalo cow front and centre of the herd resulting in feeding on pasture that is not completely trampled, and offers better protection against predators. A bull’s status depends on his size, age and strength. A high ranking bull has improved mating rights. Bulls test their strength against one another regularly and full-on fights with head-on clashes erupt.

We watched mothers with their chocolate brown calves walk past cautiously, and sub-adult “teenagers” walk past sceptically while practising the stink eye. A fight broke out between two bulls and it was sobering to hear their bosses (the thick, helmet-like shield at the base of their horns) absorb the brute force of each charge. A couple of bulls formed a defence between us and the crossing herd, although just one look alone is enough to stop any sensible person in their tracks.





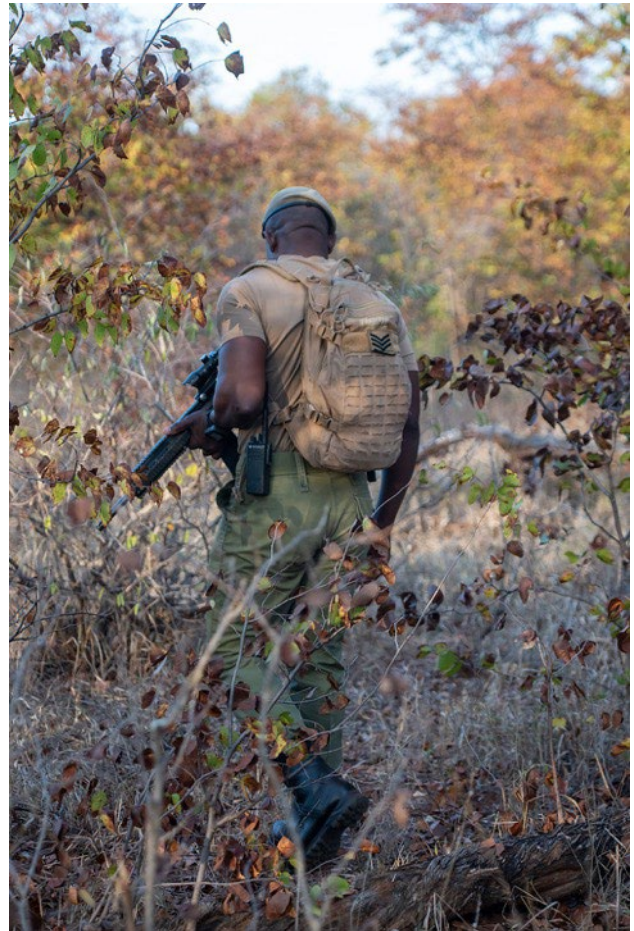
Black rhino tracking

Black rhino tracking on foot with the Malilangwe scouts, or Singita Pamushana's professional field guides, is a bewildering experience... I decided to join the scouts one morning as I was desperate to get photos of black rhinos which had proved elusive.

We started at the Banyini where we found fresh tracks of a female black rhino and calf heading into the thickets to the south.

Well, we walked for over three hours following clues that were, for the most part, a complete mystery to me.

The obvious signs were tracks in the soft sand of a road, and around rubbing posts. The less obvious were the browse marks on bushes where the rhino had chomped off branchlets at a 45 degree angle, or scuffed a tree with her foot as she ran off reacting to a disturbance, or stopped to rest. The completely impossible signs were the tracks or disturbances in the rock hard, leaf littered terrain. I honestly thought that we were just doing a "hack and hope" walk at some stage, but eventually one of the scout's hand went up as we heard oxpeckers



taking off. The oxpeckers are yet another clue when tracking black rhinos or buffalo etc, as they sit on the animal looking for ticks, and are the first to give the alarm if they detect any disturbance.

We'd found our quarry – a female black rhino and her calf, lying down resting. We were still very far away, so silently crept around in an arc to try and get a clearer closer view. I'm not sure if she got our scent or heard the click of my camera shutter (set to quiet mode) but she took off at a gallop to get away from the perceived threat. All I managed was a fleeting, but well worth it photo, of them disappearing into the mopane woodland again.

It's such a fascinating experience tracking black rhino on foot, and knowing how skilled and accurate our professionals are who protect these highly endangered animals.

A rhino rubbing post – a broken tree trunk that rhinos have 'sanded' smooth by rubbing against it.



Tracks in the soft sand of a road.



A tree scuffed by the rhino's toenail.



Finding gold





There's probably some saying along the lines of, "If you are searching for something you are bound to find something else." We were looking for black rhinos and had set out well before dawn heading out towards Nduna, which is about an hour away. At Nduna Dam there was no sign of life so I switched off the engine to listen for a while. Soft carrying contact calls of a lioness were heard, and she was coming our way. I quickly repositioned to across the water from the direction she was approaching, and had this incredible sighting of her drinking as the light changed from dark to dawn.



Trunk calls



We'd stopped to watch a breeding herd of elephants feeding in the dense foliage to the left of us, when our attention was turned to the right as three more elephants appeared shepherding a miniscule elephant calf. The adults had their trunks right up, reaching out to us, sniffing in our scent and trying to assess if we were a danger to the little one. They initially looked like they would cross the track behind us, then changed their minds to cross in front of us, then again changing their minds, relaxing and crossing behind us, allowing us a clear look at their precious bundle of infant elephant cuteness.

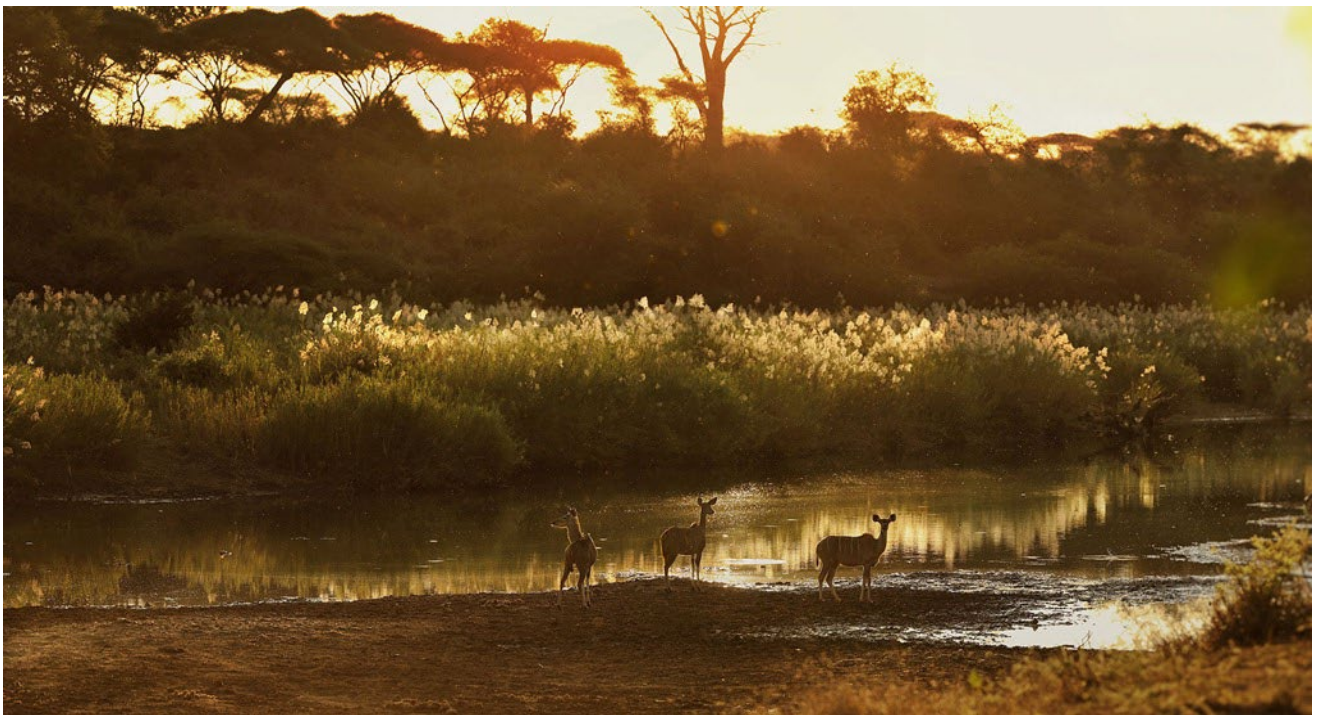


Elephant mothers are remarkable. They are heavily invested in caring for their infants, after a gestation period of nearly two years before giving birth. A baby elephant adds almost 1 kg (2 lbs) of weight every day after birth. Researchers have found that a mother elephant's milk changes four times during the weaning process to meet the baby's needs. During the painful teething process (imagine those little tusks pushing through), an elephant mother changes her diet to include flora that has anti-inflammatory properties. Her milk, then enriched with the soothing anti-inflammatories helps relieve the pain for her baby.

The grannies play a crucial role too - during times of drought the oldest female elephants can remember from years back where permanent water sources are located, and lead their herd there.

Elephants have a very effective matriarchal system that has the welfare of the breeding herd at heart, ensuring that they see out most of their 60 to 70 year lifespan.

In pursuit of beauty



Both photos above by Scott Wenham.

Fellow artist and photographer, Scott Wenham, and I went on a drive with our game plan being the pursuit of beauty. We weren't after any big animals – our focus was on seeing the light, reading the lines and creatively interpreting the views.

On descending an overgrown track to the river we were met with the most arresting scene and I stopped the vehicle immediately. At the river's edge were a few kudu that had just finished drinking from the shallows. If we went any closer we would spook them. The sun was setting and the hour was kicking up gold. The reeds' plumes were backlit and reflecting in the water, the air was full of windborne seeds and tiny insects, the water was sparkling and the kudu were rimmed in gold.

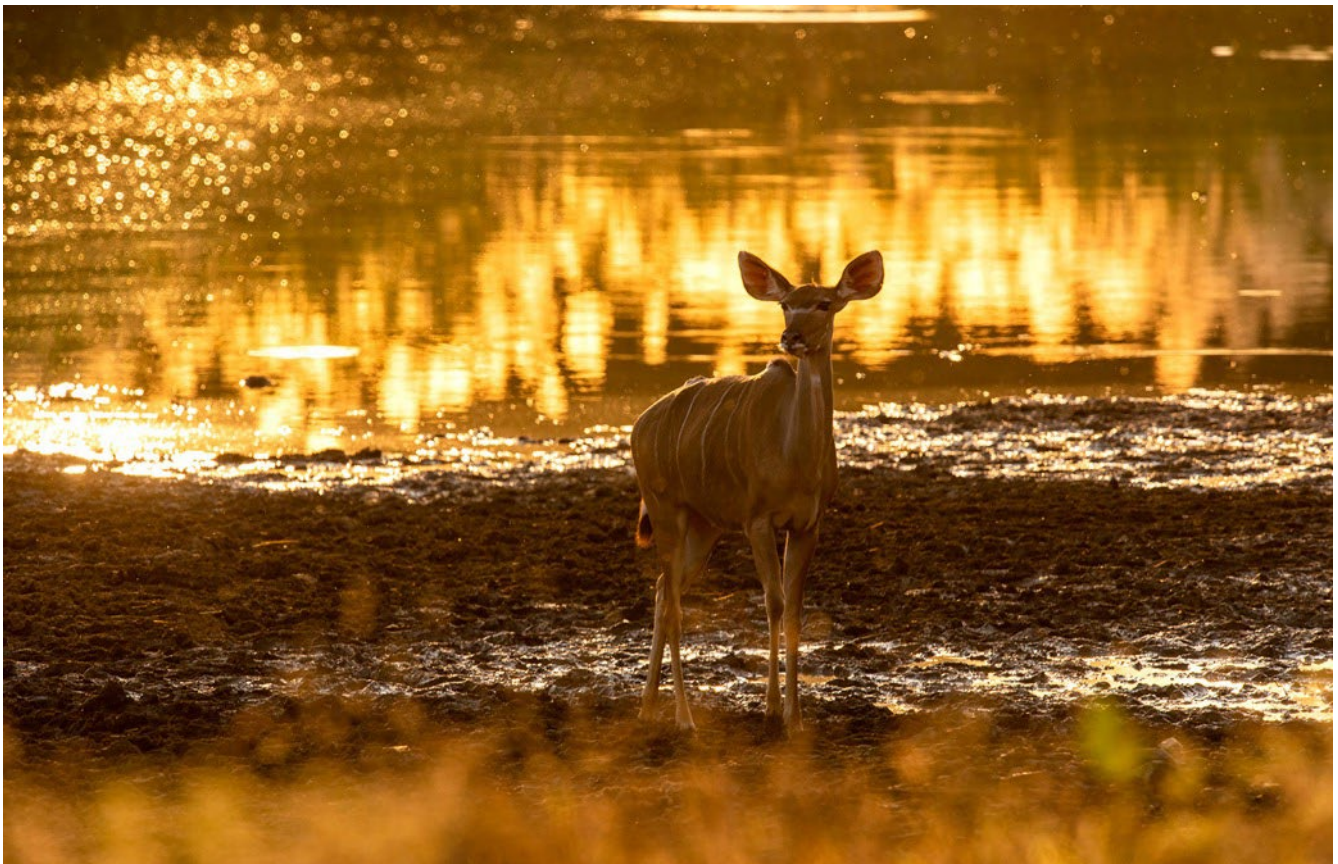
As we both gasped at the scene before us we instantly grabbed our cameras with whatever lens setup we had on. It was going to be mere moments before the reflections turned from cream to bronze and then gone, along with the kudu.

Scott went wide with a deeper depth of field, and I went far zooming in with a shallow depth of field. Scott stitched his images into a panorama later, creating the beautiful landscape on the previous page.

A couple of minutes later the kudu had ascended the bank and were gone. I just love the different results we both got of the same scene, once we'd done our post processing.

We continued our drive, stopping to admire and photograph one of the largest umbrella thorn trees on the property, where Scott again did a panorama and desaturated the colours to a serene palette. After that it was sundowners on the riverbank with a pod of hippos, before we ventured back at twilight.

It was a perfect afternoon for artistic interpretation of pristine wilderness, and such a privilege to experience.





Twitter



This dapper little fellow is an Arnot's chat (*Myrmecocichla arnotti*) and he caught my attention in the mopane woodland with his exuberant song of clucks and whistles. They are quite rare and a big "tick" for birders. One website rather rudely describes them as a "chunky" black chat, and the female having a "messy" white throat patch!



Angelic souls flutter down to earth to a baptismal font.



An African fish eagle (*Haliaeetus vocifer*) finishes off a freshly caught fish from the Chiredzi River.



Guide Nicholas Gaunje had an amazing sighting of a martial eagle (*Polemaetus bellicosus*) that was on buffalo weaver's nest, busy feeding on a baby baboon. Martial eagles are the largest of African eagles, and this powerful avian predator's diet includes a wide variety of birds, lizards, snakes and small mammals, including baboons, monkeys and small antelope.

Photo by Nicholas Gaunje

August Gallery



Our West Valley Road has recently been resurfaced, and this wild dog tested out the traction at full sprint.

Parent giraffe tower over the newborns as they journey away to the nearby browse.





A magnificent sable antelope bull strides through the knee-high grass.



Thirsty zebra mothers drink their fill while their little foals cautiously shadow them.



A playful young elephant in a glorious woodland setting.



Buffaloes wade in the water while a cow ruminates on an island.



We came across the three elephants feeding in the bulrushes, and they quickly waded across the river and disappeared as if they'd been caught in the act of mischief. In contrast these three hippo swam towards us and were getting ready to leave the water for an evening of grazing.

All stories and photographs by Jenny Hishin, unless otherwise indicated.