

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL

SINGITA PAMUSHANA / MALILANGWE, ZIMBABWE

For the month of July, Two Thousand and Twenty-Three

Temperature

Average minimum: 12.1°C (53.7°F)

Minimum recorded: 08.8°C (47.8°F)

Average maximum: 25.6°C (78.0°F)

Maximum recorded: 32.8°C (91.0°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 9.8 mm

*For the season to date: 695.8 mm

*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:25

Sunset: 17:34

It has been a month of crisp mornings giving way to blissful sunshine days. Punctuating the time between game drives have been a few soccer matches where some of our young and super-energetic guests have teamed up with staff to have a game on our well-kept soccer pitch. Continuing the sports the youngsters have had great

fun lobbing baobab fruit off the trees in order to taste the sherbetty seeds within. But back to the serious business of game drives here's an overview of wildlife sightings for the month:

Lions

- Southern Pride: This pride provided great sightings as they spent time around Hwata Pan.
- River Pride: This pride has been spending much of its time on the western side of the Chiredzi River.
- Nduna Pride: There has been mating activity within this pride. A mating pair were seen on Bandama Road, and later in the month three males and two females were mating, around Lojaan area. As the safari group approached this sighting they also saw a white rhino walking towards the lions.
- Male coalitions: Two males killed a wildebeest on the Banyini open areas, and fed heartily on the carcass while keeping some hyenas and jackals at bay. An added sighting bonus was of them drinking at the pan after their big meal.

Leopards

- The leopard news is that there is a female nursing cubs around the Nhangá Pan area. The cub/s are yet to be seen...
- A lucky sighting was of a leopard that came to drink water at the confluence of the Nyamasikana and Meso Rivers, while guests were on a safari cruise having sundowners.

Elephants

Standout sightings were:

- Hearing a commotion of elephants trumpeting and splashing water, to such an extent we thought it might be a breeding herd trying to defend their calves from lions. It turned out to be some exuberant elephant bulls swimming in the river and having a whale of a time! While watching them a herd of buffalos traipsed down to the riverbed as well.
- There have been fascinating sightings of breeding herds along the river banks interacting among themselves, feeding and trumpeting out warnings and discipline.

Rhinos

- White rhinos: Sightings have been prolific. On one occasion 18 white rhinos were seen during an afternoon/evening drive. A white rhino highlight was seeing a little calf with its mother.
- Black rhinos: Black rhinos are always trickier to find, and sometimes they find you. One group of guests was watching the pack of wild dogs and pups when a black rhino crossed the road about 30 meters in front of their vehicle. One group of guests spent a few days in pursuit of a black rhino sighting, and were rewarded with a mother and calf. The guests were so happy they whooped in delight!

Buffalo

- There have been daily sightings of vast herds, either drinking at Banyini, Hwata or along the Chiredzi River.

Wild dogs

- It's just the very best news to announce – that a pack of 11 African wild dogs has a litter of seven pups in the northern area of our reserve. The pups should be leaving the den any day now.

Hyenas

- Spotted hyenas are seen almost daily. One standout sighting was when a lone hyena tried to have a drink at a pan where rhinos and three elephant bulls were drinking. The hyena tried to join the drinking party but one bull elephant was having none of it and kept chasing it away.

Plains game

- During these dryer months the plains game sightings are at their best, and antelope such as nyala, sable and eland are seen regularly.

Rock art

- Now being the ideal time to walk in the bushveld many of the conducted walks have included visiting rock art sites. It's incredible to hear about and see these paintings while enjoying a rest and refreshment stop during a walk.

Photographic hide

- During these dry months wildlife has no choice but to drink at permanent water spots, and our sunken hide at one of these provides 'up close and personal' animal observations. One patient group spent the afternoon and early eve there and were rewarded with elephant bulls, white rhinos and lions.

Walks

- Walks can take the form of a general stroll looking at the nuances of Nature, or tracking and safely approaching an animal, or visiting a rock art site, or deciding that your destination is the biggest baobab on the property. Often the journey is as rewarding as the destination.

Gonarezhou Day Trips

- A guaranteed way to see breeding herds of elephants, and incredible scenery.

Boat cruises

- These safari boat cruises are a unique offering of Singita Pamushana and Malilangwe House. In a way they're mesmerising. Regardless of whether you see a tiny malachite kingfisher or an enormous crocodile there is simply no better place on the planet to enjoy a sundowner!

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

Wild dogs delight

Spoor and fleeting glimpses of the African wild dog pack hunting led us to believe they were denning somewhere in the central north region – an area not often frequented. A couple of forays into the area had yielded no sightings and it is our policy not to disturb a den-site for the sake of the pups' safety. So, imagine our delight when we spotted adult wild dogs in the distance, playing in the middle of an existing road. They paid us no attention at all and carried on with a wild game of rough and tumble – at one point using the vehicle as the end marker of their race track!



Here are explanations to some of the many questions asked about African wild dogs (which are neither dogs nor wolves):

WHATS THE IMPORTANCE OF THEIR PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS?

Individuals differ in patterns and colours, indicating a diversity of genes. Their unique patchwork coats offer excellent camouflage and aid in visual identification, as African wild dogs can recognise each other from far away. (Interestingly there's been a report in the last few weeks of a rare leucistic wild dog pup born in Botswana. It has extraordinary white colouration and it'll be fascinating to see how its coat develops, and its behaviour too, should it survive.) African wild dogs are lean and tall, with outsized ears. They have a graceful beautifully balanced skeleton, and weigh between 18 to 36 kg (40 to 79 lb). Their teeth are highly specialised

for a hyper-carnivorous diet. Their middle two toepads are usually fused, and they lack dewclaws giving them a longer stride and speed.

HOW DO THEY HUNT?

They rally together before setting out on a hunt. This involves playing, chasing, nuzzling, nipping and 'sneezing' - a short, sharp exhale through the nostrils. They hunt after dawn and around dusk and capture their prey, mainly impala in this region, by using stamina and cooperative hunting to exhaust their target. They prefer to hunt in relatively open areas that do not obstruct vision or impede pursuit. They'll chase an impala and reach speeds of 66 km/h (41 mph), then immobilise or pull it down and tear it apart – a violent but mercifully swift death for the impala. As hunters they tend to be very successful, and are fast eaters.

WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT TO HAVE AND PROTECT?

African wild dogs are vital for a balanced healthy ecosystem. By hunting slower, weak and sick ungulates they help to control the spread of disease among affected ungulates. They also keep the ungulate numbers in check which regulates the impact those grazers have on the ecosystem and the available vegetation which is habitat to a myriad of other animals and insects.

WHAT'S THEIR FAMILY LIFE LIKE?

They have the most wonderful and enviable pack bonds, stronger than those of lion prides and spotted hyena clans. A family pack consists of about two to 27 adults and yearling pups. Males and females have separate dominance hierarchies. The alpha female is usually the oldest female. Males may be led by the oldest male, but a new alpha male can replace another, so some packs may contain elderly former alpha males. The dominant alpha pair typically monopolise breeding.

Here in Zimbabwe the breeding period is around April to July. The gestation period is about 70 days. They produce more pups than any other canid, with litters containing around six to 16 pups. After giving birth in a den, the mother stays close to the pups, while the rest of the pack hunts. She suckles them and introduces solid food when they are three to four weeks old. The pups are weaned at about five weeks, and are fed regurgitated meat by the other pack members. This regurgitation behaviour also extends to the adults, as a central part of the pack's social unit, to feed those who were babysitting or may have been injured. Once the pups reach the age of eight to ten weeks, the pack abandons the den and they follow the adults during hunts. The pups are allowed to eat first on kills – a privilege they relish!

African wild dogs have an average lifespan of about 10 to 11 years in the wild. When separated from its pack an African wild dog can become depressed and die as a result of broken heart syndrome.

WHO ARE THEIR NATURAL ENEMIES OTHER THAN MAN?

Lions will kill African wild dogs where possible, while hyenas trail them and steal their kills (kleptoparasites).

HOW DO THEY AVOID INBREEDING?

Interestingly it is the males that remain in the natal pack, while females disperse to look for new packs to join. Dispersing females join other packs and evict some of the resident females related to the other pack members, thus preventing inbreeding and allowing the evicted individuals to find new packs of their own and breed.

Packs of African wild dogs have a high ratio of males to females. This is a consequence of the males mostly staying with the pack whilst female offspring disperse, and is supported by a changing sex-ratio in consecutive litters. Fascinating studies by dedicated researchers have found that litters born to maiden females contain a higher proportion of males, second litters are half and half and subsequent litters biased towards females with this trend increasing as females get older. As a result, the earlier litters provide stable hunters whilst the higher ratio of dispersals amongst the females stops a pack from getting too big.



WHY ARE THEY ENDANGERED?

African wild dogs once ranged across much of sub-Saharan Africa, but have been largely exterminated in north and west Africa, and greatly reduced in central and northeast Africa. The majority of the species' population now occurs in southern and southern east Africa, in fragmented, small populations. It's estimated that there are around 6 600 adults (including 1 400 mature individuals) living in 39 subpopulations that are all threatened by habitat fragmentation, human persecution, and outbreaks of disease. It's predicted the species could become extinct within 100 years due to the unavailability of unrelated mates. Wild dogs rely on genetic diversity but because the populations are so fragmented this is becoming impossible to achieve.



Armed with all this knowledge you can just imagine our delight when we began hearing the yips and squeals of what could only be puppies further down the track, off to the east. Slowly driving past we caught a distant glimpse of puppies at play and being fed by adults. Although very difficult to say due to the distance and vegetation, I counted seven white-tipped little wagging tails!

Hopefully we can bring you more news of these precious endangered African wild dogs as our team continues to conserve and protect this wildlife reserve that they call home.

Black rhino inspection

How beautiful are these bushveld colours at the moment? When the mopane leaves are green, bronze and copper, and flutter like a kaleidoscope of butterflies the bushveld is at its most beautiful – and even more arresting if there's a black rhino bull peering at you through them!

Black rhinos are very curious, but don't have the greatest eyesight. This imposing male crept closer and spent quite some time inspecting us before deciding we were of no particular interest, and then bumbled off into the bush.



Visitors to the hide

Kudu are such magnificent creatures to observe and photograph, but notoriously shy, and inevitably seem to dash away the moment you raise a camera to photograph them. We were spending time in the sunken photographic hide at a pan and were delighted to hear oxpeckers chirring away announcing the arrival of their host. It turned out to be this impressive kudu bull. The oxpeckers quickly flew off his back and had a drink as his muzzle touched the water. Oxpeckers feel very vulnerable on the ground, so they're speed drinkers and bathers who swiftly return to whatever herbivore carried them to the water's edge. (See them lined up in the photo below.)

The kudu bull was quite brazen considering he was alone, and walked into the water to cool down and drink, only occasionally looking over his shoulder to assess potential risks. The oxpeckers resumed combing through his coat searching for ticks, and those that had been brave enough for a bath clung to his coat and fanned out their feathers to dry.

A kudu bull's horns begin to grow from the age of six months or thereafter. The horns form the first spiral rotation at around two years of age, and reach the full two-and-a-half rotations when they are six years old; occasionally they may even have three full turns. This majestic male had a full two-and-a-half rotations, so we can guesstimate that he is at least six years old.

It was such a treat to observe this animal from the hide, without him feeling threatened by us – as we were concealed, and to have the afternoon light shining on his coat and casting long deep shadows of his body and horns.

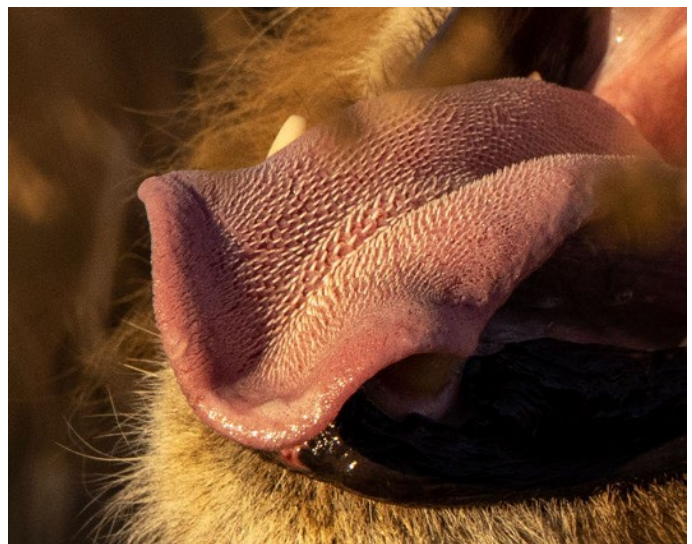


These red-billed oxpeckers (*Buphagus erythrorhynchus*) are about to add sips of water to their preferred diet of blood and blood-engorged ticks and other insects.



Spine-chilling

This male lion was napping in unruly vegetation making it almost impossible to photograph him. Occasionally he would look up and the grass would cast jagged scar shadows across his face. I've changed the white balance of this first photo as it was so richly golden in the golden hour, but have a close look at the spines on this lions tongue in the next two photos.



These backward-facing spines are called papillae and make his tongue as rough as sandpaper. These spines help with grooming (not that lions are fastidious groomers like leopards) but they're also capable of cleaning meat right off the bone. A rather spine-chilling thought in every way!

Twitter



Here are some of the month's little jewels to be admired:

Top left: The white-fronted bee-eater (*Merops bullockoides*) eyes an in-flight meal.

Top right: This female Arnot's chat (*Myrmecocichla arnotti*) was the subject of much interest by some males in a particularly beautiful mopane woodland. (The males have a white cap.)

Bottom left: This little blue waxbill (*Uraeginthus angolensis*) is completely dwarfed by some red-billed quelea (*Quelea quelea*). Waxbills weigh only 10 grams (that's a tablespoon of butter). Quelea are tiny too - they're about 12 cm (4.7 in) long and weigh about 20g (0.7 oz), but here they look like giants!

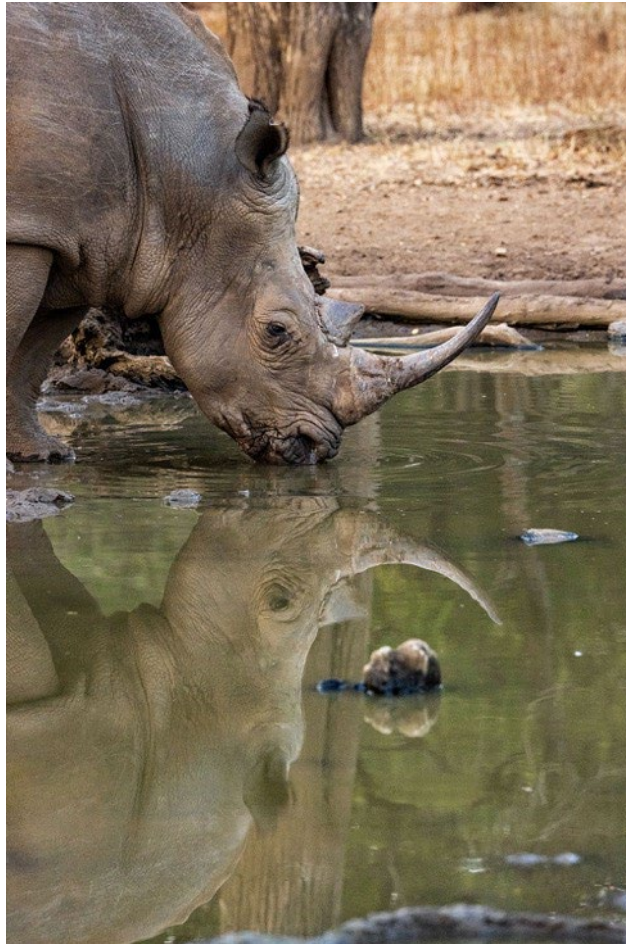
Bottom right: This golden-breasted bunting (*Emberiza flaviventris*) perched resplendent on a rock. The females are very similar, but slightly duller in colour.

July Gallery



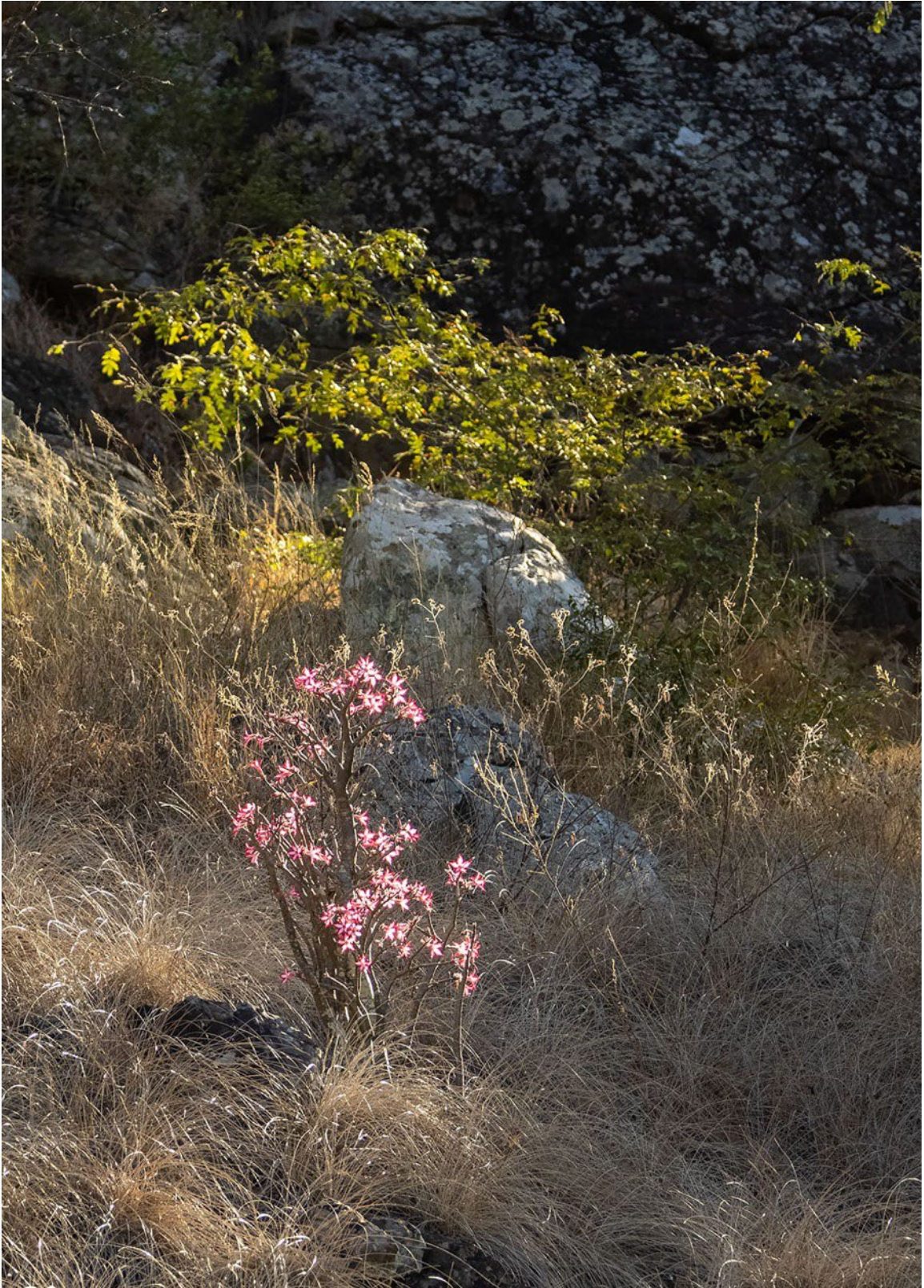
Beautifully barcoded zebra foals.
A white rhino, with white powder on his face, tramps past a delicate dove and fork-tailed drongo.





Stopping for a drink he creates a magnificent mirror image reflection.





A delightful pop of pink in the form of wild Sabi star flowers.

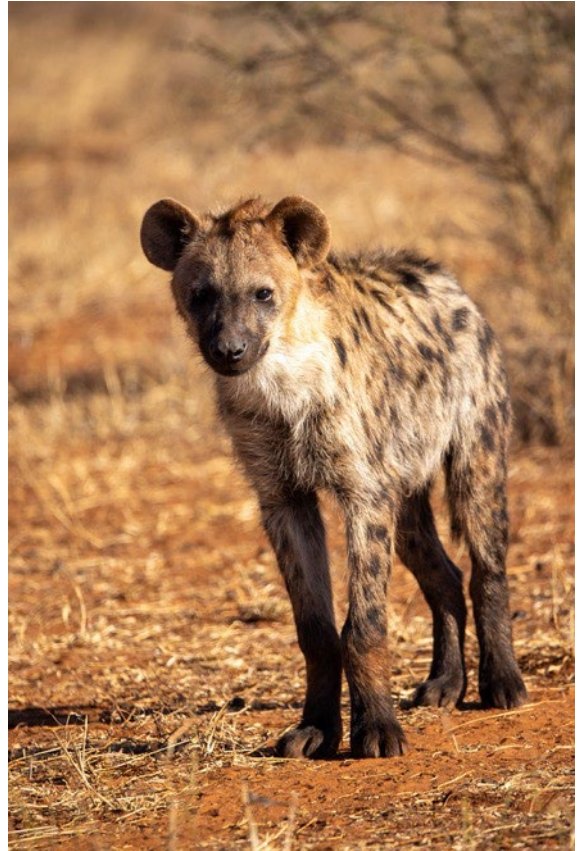


Trying to have a quiet drink when the oxpeckers, doves and guinea fowl have other ideas. As the rhino grinds his horn a fleeing impala bounds away in the background.



A curious young hyena with the most enviable dark chocolate paws!

Dawn at the waterhole with guinea fowl kicking up dust.



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