Singita

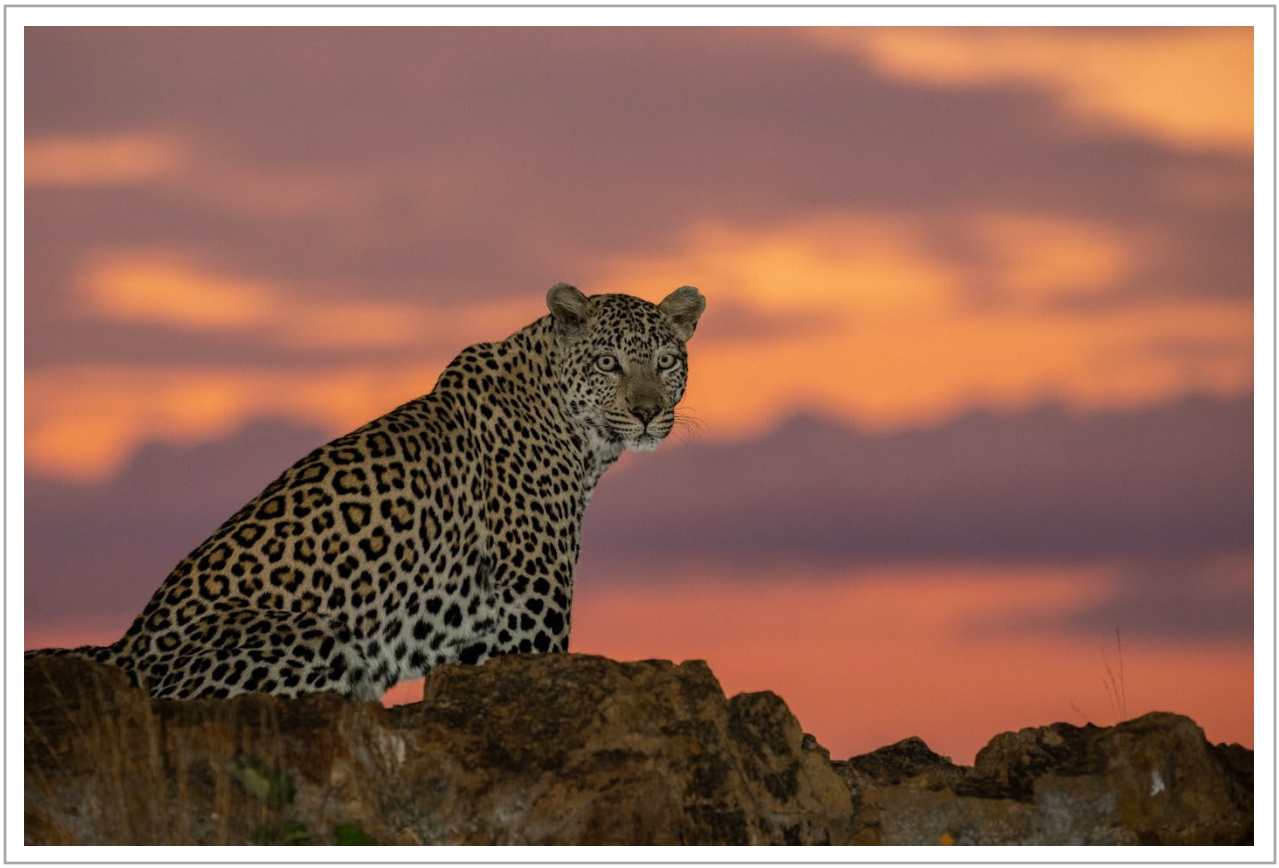


Photo By Rudi Hulshoff

WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA
For the month of May, Two Thousand and Twenty-three

Temperature

Average minimum:	17.3˚C (63.2˚F)
Minimum recorded:	14.0˚C (57.2˚F)
Average maximum:	29.7˚C (85.4˚F)
Maximum recorded:	35.0˚C (95.0˚F)

Rainfall Recorded
For the month: 11 mm
Season to date: 413.5 mm

Sunrise & Sunset
Sunrise: 06:31
Sunset: 17:15

We have now come to the end of autumn and winter is about to start. Amazingly, there is still a lot of water in the concession. Normally at this time of the year, the seasonal pans have all dried up, as have all the small streams in the hills. At present, there are still pools in the hills and the Xinkelengane drainage. There are also still patches of green grass in areas of the concession, particularly closer to the drainage lines. The grass in the hills and the basalt plains, however, has turned golden again. The grass is still long and we are expecting that it will be flattened in the next few months.

Every year the Kruger National Park burns approximately 5% of the park, to remove the moribund grass, so that when the electrical storms start in November, we do not get run-away fires that burn hot and may destroy the bushes and trees. The park undertakes these controlled burns during the winter months when there are fewer smaller creatures moving around and when the birds and animals are less likely to be breeding. Two of the blocks in the concession were burned and we are expecting that, when the new green grass comes up in spring, it will attract a lot of grazers into those areas. The smoke from these burns filled the sky and the sunsets during this period were even more awesome and the skies lit up bright crimson. We are expecting to have great game-viewing this winter as we do still have a fair amount of water and grass in the area.

A Sightings Snapshot for May follows:

Lions

- The Shishangaan Pride has been seen regularly this last month. The five cubs are growing up quickly. They are estimated to be between three and four months of age and are very cute. Fortunately, this pride has been moving around an area close to camp. One of our guides saw a lioness from the Shishangaan Pride heading up onto the Granophyre Ridge and he thought that he heard young cubs vocalizing from there, so it is possible that there are new cubs in amongst those rocks. If that is the case then we should start seeing them in a few weeks. This last month we have witnessed the Shish lioness feeding on two waterbuck, one wildebeest, and one impala.
- The Trichardt males have been seen regularly this last month. They have often been seen in the company of the Shish lionesses and cubs (the Trichardt males are the fathers of the cubs).
- Sightings of the Mananga Pride have been quite scarce this last month. We assume that after Xihamham (one of the Shish males) was killed last month by the Trichardt males, the Mananga Pride has been nervous. (Xihamham was one of the dominant males over the Mananga Pride). They are obviously aware that the only remaining Shish lion is quite vulnerable now (to other males who may want to take over the territory). Should new males come into the area all the young members of the Mananga Pride would be at risk of being killed by the new males. In fact, one morning this month the two Trichardt males were seen returning from the area where the Mananga Pride normally resides and we later found the carcass of one of the Mananga sub-adults / juvenile males. We assume that the Trichardt males killed him. For a while we did not see the Mananga Pride at all and then finally they reappeared, coming out of Mozambique. Perhaps they were hiding out there until the conditions stabilized? Towards the end of the month, we saw some of the Mananga lionesses with an unknown adult male.
- The Maputo male was found one morning in the central area of the concession. We had not seen this lion for a while before this and assumed that he has been in Mozambique. On the day that we saw him he was limping and did have a few fresh wounds on his back legs. When he got mobile that evening he was roaring loudly. He seems to be more confident now, and by roaring, is obviously trying to establish himself in the area again. Perhaps he knows that Xihamham is now dead and gone? Towards the end of the month we found him again, close to Gudzani Dam. He was lying next to a carcass of a large bull kudu. Since the carcass was almost finished and the lion's belly was not that full we assumed that he stole the carcass from the Mananga lionesses.
- The other Shish male (Xihamham's coalition partner) was only seen on one occasion this last month. He was seen with one of the Mananga lionesses and they were on the far north-western part of the concession.
- Towards the end of the month we came across five unknown young male lions (still with Mohican hair styles – three to four year olds) near the Sticky Thorn thickets. There was also a lioness with them. We were not sure if it was one of the lionesses from the Shish Pride or from Mananga Pride. The lioness

was seen mating with one of the males. These male lions are unknown to us and are obviously not from this area as they were quite shy of the vehicle.

Leopards

- The Nhlanguleni leopardess and her two female cubs have been seen on numerous occasions this last month. They have mainly been seen in the central area of the concession, near Dudu's Crossing and Name-Badge Hill. The Nhlanguleni female was seen on one occasion in the north of the concession, quite far away from her normal stomping grounds. On another occasion she was seen near the Sticky Thorn area where she came across an unidentified male, who she chased away. She was also seen on one occasion near Butterfly Crossing, where she once again came across an unknown male. The male was quite interested in her, but she reacted very aggressively towards him and he ran away. Towards the end of the month one of her two youngsters was seen in the same vicinity, near Name-Badge Hill, for a few days. We assumed that the adult had gone off to hunt (leaving the youngster behind) and had obviously not been successful over that period. Early in the month she was found with an impala ram carcass up in a large tree.

- The Dumbana Female was seen on quite a few occasions this last month. We had not seen her regularly prior to this as she had given birth to cubs up in the hills near Xidulu Pan. On the afternoon of the 18th we found one of her previous sons (Dumbana 1:1) in the Ntsibitsane drainage line. While we were watching him we saw another leopard dash across the riverbed a little bit further north. It was the Dumbana female. She then came walking down the dry riverbed and passed by her son, whom she hissed at! She then went further south and called a cub from the thick vegetation. Finally, we got to see her new cub. She then headed towards the N'wanetsi River with the cub. Two days later one of the guides found her with an impala carcass in a large leadwood tree. She seemed quite skittish and quickly descended the tree and hid away in a thicket nearby. The next morning her son (Dumbana 1:1) was seen in the tree finishing off the carcass. The next few days we found her in the same area walking around and calling for the cub. The cub did not respond and we are now guessing that the cub may not be alive any more.
- We have only seen the young male leopard, known as Dumbana 1:1, a handful of times this last month. He has mainly been seen in the region near the Ntsibitsane Drainage. He and his brother have obviously separated from each other now. This young male was seen feeding on an impala ram in a large tree, which he stole from his mother.
- The Dumbana young male (3:3 – brother of 1:1) has also been seen a few times this last month. He has been ranging widely across the concession. On the 5th he was seen feeding on an impala ram near Madagha Crossing.
- The Monzo male leopard was seen regularly this last month. He is a large adult male leopard. He has mainly been seen in the area just north of Lebombo Lodge.
- The Lebombo male was seen on only one occasion this last month.
- We have also had a few sightings of unidentified leopards.

African wild dogs

- We only had two sightings of these rare animals this last month. This was not unexpected as the dogs usually den in June / July and their den-sites are often in old aardvark burrows. Since we do not see aardvark here (possibly due to the clay soils that are typical of this area) the dogs do not have great options for dens here.
- On the morning of the 13th we found two African wild dogs chasing kudus near the access to the lodges.
- On the morning of the 18th a pack of eight or nine dogs (known as the Floppy-eared Pack) were found in the central area of the concession. They were on the hunt and ran up the side of one of the hills and we lost sight of them. On the morning of the 28th we saw this pack again near the Granophyre ridge.

They were running, looking for prey, and we soon lost visual of them as they headed through a thickly wooded, rocky area.

Cheetahs

- We have had two sightings of cheetah this last month. One was seen on the tar road that leads to the lodge access and the other was seen by one of our guides near Satara Rest Camp while he was on a full-day drive.

Spotted hyenas

- We have had quite a few sightings of hyenas this month. Most of these sightings have been of individuals.
- In the first week of the month we saw three hyenas feeding on an impala carcass near Xinenene Grasslands. This is an area that the Nhlanguleni Leopard likes to hang out in and we therefore think that the hyenas may have stolen the kill from the leopard.
- One morning we came across a spotted hyena that was walking across the open area near the Central Depression. He headed straight to the Xinkelengane drainage where he found the old remains of an impala that a leopard had killed and eaten a few days before. The hyena then proceeded to crunch the bones in order to get to the marrow inside. Hyenas have got extremely strong jaw muscles that enable them to crush bones.
- Towards the middle of the month we came across three hyenas resting in the open area at the "N4". They had very full bellies.
- One morning we found an impala carcass in a large leadwood tree. The leopard that had been feeding on the kill had moved away from the tree and a spotted hyena was wandering around the base of the tree hoping that it could find scraps that may have fallen out of the tree.

Elephants

- Elephant sightings have been good this month. We are seeing quite a few bachelor and breeding herds (females and young). There has been a particular herd moving through the concession with two cows with very long tusks.

Buffalos

We have had quite a few sightings of dagga boys this month:

- There has been a single male buffalo seen in the central depression a few times.
- Two other old bulls have been seen loitering around in the Nhlanguleni Valley, particularly close to the Mozambique border, but also near Hyena Pan.
- In the middle of the month, four males were seen near the drainage line below Green Apple Hill. They were quite shy of the vehicles and acted aggressively towards the cars.

Plains game

- The central depression has provided us with a beautiful sightings of plains game. We have seen a large number of zebras, wildebeest, and giraffes feeding together. The game has spread out from Pony Pan to the Kori clearing south of Two Thekwane. We have seen an increase in the warthog population, these amazing animals have been spotted feeding together with some impalas, and the other plains game in the beautiful grassland in the middle of the concession along the Depression.
- Waterbuck and kudu have been seen mainly along the N'wanetsi River from anywhere near the lodge all the way to basalt grassland.

Rare animals and other sightings:

- A couple of honey badger sightings have been recorded for May. Most sightings were around Lebombo, we believe we have a pair that lives near the lodge and they have provided us with beautiful sightings on our way back from game drive.
- We were also lucky this month with Sharpe's grysbok sightings, three different sightings were recorded. They live in loose rocky areas and because they are very small we do not see them often.
- A sighting of an African wild cat was recorded near the Park Road around the Border Road. The cat was very relaxed with the vehicle. Another relaxed African wild cat was seen near Dave's Crossing.
- The guides also had a few sightings of servals this last month. These are very beautiful cats that look like miniature versions of cheetahs (with bigger ears and a shorter tail).
- One night, on the way back to camp, one of our guides had a view of a very relaxed Cape porcupine.
- One of the guides was lucky enough to see a pair of common/southern reedbuck in the grasslands near Bejane Road. We very seldom see these antelope in the concession. They tend to prefer more marshy vegetation with long grass.

Birds:

- A total of 182 bird species were seen in the concession this last month.
- This time of the year most of the migrant birds have left the area, returning to the northern hemisphere. We did, however, see a few birds that were a bit late with departure. These included a sighting of a single barn Swallow, a sighting of a Jacobin cuckoo and a sighting of a woodland kingfisher.
- With winter approaching some of the altitudinal migrants have come down to the lowveld from the top of the escarpment (which lies west of the Kruger National Park). These include African stone chats, red-capped robin-chats and African dusky flycatchers.
- The following Red Data Species were seen this month (I.U.C.N Red Data List - The letters in brackets behind the species name refer to their status i.e. CR = Critically endangered, E = Endangered, V = Vulnerable, NT = Near-threatened): hooded vulture (CR), white-backed vulture (CR), white-headed vulture (CR), saddle-billed stork (E), lappet-faced vulture (E), tawny eagle (E), martial eagle (E), bateleur (E), southern ground-hornbill (E), black stork (V), great white pelican (V), marabou stork (NT), kori bustard (NT), greater painted snipe (NT) and half-collared kingfisher (NT).
- Some other unusual and special birds (to the area) that were seen in May include: goliath heron, woolly-necked stork, African openbill, Ovambo sparrowhawk, peregrine falcon, eastern nicator, yellow-billed oxpecker and mosque swallow.

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

Breeding strategies **Article by Brian Rode**

Shish pride cubs Photo by Brian Rode

We are very fortunate at the moment to be able to see young lion cubs in the concession. A few days back I was sitting with four of the Shish lionesses and their five cubs, which are now between three and four months old. They are very cute! It is great to watch them running around, playing with each other and giving their moms grief. They even play with the two adult males (the Trichardt males are their fathers). It surprised me how tolerant the males are with the young cubs, even when the cubs jump on top of them and play with their tails.

While we were watching the lions one of the guests noticed that the cubs are much spottier than the adults. I explained that when lions are first born they have faint spots all over their bodies (and particularly around the legs, bellies and on top of the foreheads) and that these spots fade as the grow up. If one looks carefully at the adults, one may still see remains of the spots on their legs and bellies. I elaborated that this aids in camouflaging the youngsters when they are still babies and often left hiding near the den or in the thickets while the adult lionesses go out hunting. Lions cubs are actually quite obedient, remaining at the hiding place while the females go out hunting.

There are quite a few animals whose young are coloured differently to the adults. I gave the examples of young deer, who are often covered in spots so that they blend in better with the environment where they are hidden by their mothers. Cheetah cubs also look different to the adults. They have a distinctive pale mane (or longer

hairs) on the backs. The spots on the bellies are much closer together than those of the adults giving their lower halves a darker appearance. They almost look two-toned. The long hairs on their backs are pale in colour and blend in well with the veld grass. It is often said that the baby cheetahs have the appearance similar to honey badgers (which are extremely tough animals often avoided by other predators). This colouration of the cubs aids in not only hiding the babies but also by giving the impression that they are more dangerous than they actually are. Thus, it discourages other predators from attacking them.

Cheetah cubs Photo by Rudi Hulshoff

Spotted hyena cubs also look very different to the adults when they are very young. Hyenas hide their cubs in dens, which are usually holes in the ground or in caves. For the first two to three months the cubs are a dark brown colour and thereafter only do they start to show their adult spotted patterns. The dark fur of the cubs keeps them camouflaged in the dark dens while they are still young and more vulnerable.

Black-backed jackal pups are also different in colouration to the adults. They do not have the distinctive saddles on their backs when they are young and are much greyer in colouration. They thus blend in better in the grassland habitats that they live in.

Even Blue wildebeest calves look different to the adults. The adults are a bluish, grey-brown colour, whereas the calves are tawny. This tawny colouration allows them to better blend in with the grass.

This discussion opened up further into other breeding strategies that lead to a better survival rate of baby animals. When we look at antelopes, we can differentiate between those which are hiders and those which are followers. In some species when the female gives birth to the young calf, she hides it for a few days. In this case the baby is hidden in thick vegetation and is usually left there until the mother comes back to allow it to suckle.

This is often the case with antelope that live in thicker vegetation such as the spiral-horned antelopes (e.g. kudus, bushbuck, nyala etc). The diminutive antelopes (such as steenbok, common duiker and Sharpe's grysbok) can also fall into the category of hiders. Once the baby has grown up to the point where it is strong enough and fast enough to follow the mother around, she will then stop hiding it and may introduce it to the rest of the herd. Many ecologists refer to these ungulates that are hidden when they are really young as fawns (particularly with antelopes or deer) or lambs.

Followers have a different strategy. When their young are born it is not long (sometimes only a few minutes or hours) before the youngster is able to stand and follow the mother around. Examples include Blue wildebeest, giraffes, buffalos and plains zebras. Often the followers tend to be animals that live in larger herds or in open grassland habitats. Animals that are nomadic and are constantly on the move often fall into the category of followers. Young animals that are classed as followers (particularly in the antelope groups or ungulates) are often referred to as calves.

This then leads to the concept of altricial versus precocial youngsters. According to the Oxford dictionary the term "altricial" means "(of a young bird or other animal) hatched or born helpless and requiring significant parental care", whereas the term "precocial" means "(of a young bird or other animal) hatched or born in an advanced state and able to feed itself and move independently almost immediately".

Hiders, therefore, tend to give birth to young that are more altricial, whereas followers give birth to young that are more precocial. Predators often give birth to altricial young. If we compare lions with wildebeest, lions tend to have much shorter gestation periods than wildebeest do. Lions are pregnant for three and a half months, whereas blue wildebeest are pregnant for approximately eight and a half months. When lion cubs are born, they are blind and helpless. Wildebeest calves, in contrast, are able to stand and move within minutes of being born. The reason for this is that it would be very difficult for the lioness to hunt if her babies remained in the womb until they were more developed and larger in size. Blue wildebeest are considered to be prey species (as opposed to being predators) and their babies would be more vulnerable to predation if they were less developed at birth. Even herbivores that hide their babies when first born have youngsters that are more precocial than, for instance, predators. As a result, many of the predators make use of dens (or hiding places) to hide their youngsters when they are still blind and helpless. This gives added protection to the infants.

On our night-drives we often see scrub hares, usually running in the road in front of the cars. In our area we do not see rabbits. One of the main differences between rabbits and hares is their birthing strategies. Rabbits usually give birth or hide their infants in warrens or holes in the ground and their young are naked and helpless at birth. Hares, in contrast, give birth to their young above ground in a nest called a "scrape" or "form". Their young are much more precocial and are fully furred and their eyes open much earlier than rabbits. When we look at scrub hares it may lead us to ask how they manage to survive in an area that has many predators (especially because scrub hares are nocturnal and lions, hyenas and leopards also tend to be more active at night). It is not that the scrub hares as individuals survive long, but rather that they are able to breed rapidly, thus allowing the species to continue. Scrub hares do not usually have more than two leverets (baby hares) at a time, but it is maintained that a female can have up to four litters per year.

When we look at animals that are large in size and that live long lives, we find that they tend to have fewer young at a time and tend to spend more time raising and teaching their young. In contrast smaller animals that have shorter life-spans tend to have more young at a time and their young become sexually mature at earlier stage. Ecologists often refer to the term "r and k strategists" when it comes to differentiating between species that give birth to numerous young, numerous times during their lifetime and those animals that have fewer young.

Scrub hare leveret Photo by Brian Rode

Small animals that live short lives often fall into the category of r-strategists. According to Wikipedia "*r*-selected species are those that emphasize high growth rates, typically exploit less-crowded ecological niches, and produce many offspring, each of which has a relatively low probability of surviving to adulthood". R-strategists include many insects, bacteria, cephalopods and small mammals such as rodents and hares. Larger animals tend to be k-strategists, giving birth to fewer young at a time and taking the time to raise or teach those youngsters until they become adults. Elephants are prime examples of k-strategists.

Another survival strategy of animals, relating to their breeding, is the seasonality of their birthing. Some animals in the bush breed seasonally whereas others give birth any time of the year. Many of the seasonal breeders do so in order to take advantage of the abundance of resources during the summer months. Animals such as impalas, wildebeest and zebras usually give birth in spring when there is an abundance of lush, green grass, which helps the mothers to produce milk. These animals tend to have specific rutting or mating periods in order to ensure that their youngsters are born at a time that the environment is more conducive to the survival of their young. Many bird species lay their eggs during the spring and summer months. This is because spring and summer are the times that the insect numbers are at their greatest and when the grass comes into seed. African wild dogs tend to den during our winter months. It is thought that this is the case because when the pups are just getting ready to leave the den and run with the adults it is the time that the impalas (the main prey source of the dogs) are heavily pregnant and, therefore, slower, or have already given birth (providing a great abundance of vulnerable prey). Not all of the large mammals give birth seasonally. Elephants, giraffes, kudus, lions and leopards (amongst others) are examples of animals that can give birth at any time of the year and are not seasonal breeders.

Impala ewe with creche of youngsters Photo by Brian Rode

Species that exhibit seasonal breeding usually give birth round about the same time (often within a very limited time period). A great example of this is the impala. Impalas have a set rutting period (April/May) in southern Africa. The lambs are generally all born within a few weeks of each other. This results in an abundance of babies of that species at that time. This means that hungry predators may catch and kill a few of the babies and they are then full, only having to hunt a few days later again, when the remaining babies have had time to grow a little bit and become more active and faster and thus able to evade the predators better. Impalas, therefore, saturate the market with babies. Kudus, in contrast, give birth intermittently throughout the year. This means that a predator that finds a baby kudu will kill it and feed on it and then may potentially find another new-born kudu when it becomes hungry again. Fortunately, kudus tend to live in thicker vegetation where they are able to better hide their babies. Because of the open habitat that “plains species” live in these animals often give birth seasonally, whereas those animals that live in more concealed habitats do not.

Lionesses also tend to give birth within the same time period. This is not as a result of living in any specific type of habitat, but rather based on convenience. Lionesses within a pride often come into oestrous round about the same time. This means that the cubs from different females are all born at the same time. It is much easier to raise youngsters of the same age together and there is less competition between older cubs and younger cubs (the older cubs would have a distinct advantage in obtaining milk / food because they are bigger and stronger and therefore more dominant over their younger siblings). The five cubs that we are presently seeing with the Shish Pride are from two litters. If one looks very carefully one can see that two of them are slightly smaller than the other three, although the size difference is really negligible and the larger cubs, therefore, are not dominant over the smaller ones.

Predators tend to have a very high mortality rate when they are babies. The young cubs/pups are very vulnerable and are easily killed by other predators (particularly when the adults are out hunting), by disease, from lack of nutrition, from poor weather conditions or from foreign males (males who are not their fathers) who enter into the area and find them.

Dwarf mongooses **By Evidence Nkuna**

Source: https://southafrica.co.za/dwarf-mongoose.html

Dwarf mongooses are the smallest carnivores in the lowveld. They are also often the most numerous carnivore found in the bush due to their gregarious nature. They live together in cooperative groups of about 12 individuals but these groups may sometimes expand to include up to 30 individuals.

Dwarf mongooses playing Photo by Solomon Ndlovu

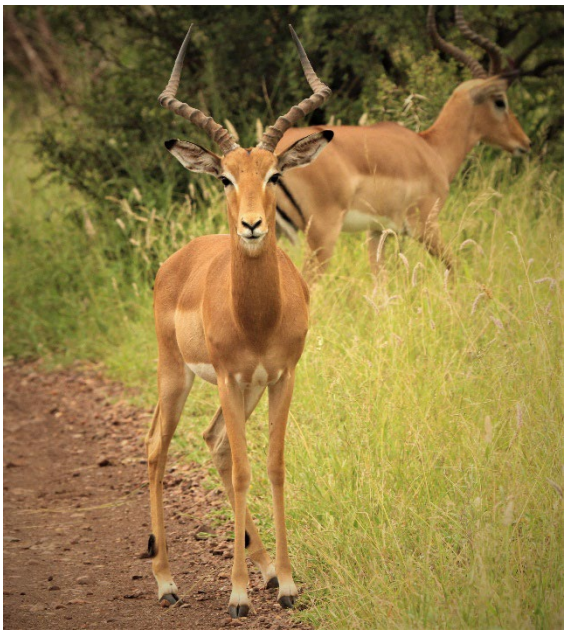
They are extremely social cooperative breeders and within their community they show great organization of roles. The group is dominated by an alpha pair that is solely responsible for breeding and for leading (alpha female) and for defence (alpha male) of the group. The other members of the group perform duties that range from guarding, grooming and protecting the group to babysitting, playing with, warming, transporting and raising the young or caring for the sick and wounded.

The assistance of the group produces a collective effort that improves the survival of the individuals and allows for maximum breeding success that would otherwise be compromised if the animals paired off without the helpers. The alpha female is free to feed while up to three mongooses babysit her brood and this augments her milk production. Sometimes, despite being sexually suppressed by virtue of their subordinate status, in the group, other females may also lactate to help feed the young.

Dwarf mongooses utilize home ranges of about one square kilometre. They require a network of termite mounds (with exposed ventilation holes) and other small refuges (like shallow burrows or tree hollows) to act as night-time stopovers and bolt holes when threatened by predators. During the day dwarf mongooses forage through piles of leaf litter or under fallen vegetation and progressively work from one sleeping site to the next covering the extent of their home range in a rotation lasting about three weeks. In this way, they are able to reduce the pressure on their food resources and remain in their home range on a sustainable basis.

Dwarf mongooses have excellent senses and prey is detected by smell and sound. Their vision is adapted for spotting aerial predators via horizontally elongated pupils that allow for the enlarged visual field. They spread out when they feed but maintain contact amongst themselves with constant ‘peeping’ noises. Once the alarm is given, a group of mongoose will freeze as an initial response. This allows them to escape detection through lack of movement. They may then rise up onto their hind legs using the tail as a prop, in order to have a better look around. When the members of the group are satisfied that the threat is no longer pending, they will continue feeding. If imminent danger looms, the pack will dart for the nearest bolt holes. Dwarf mongooses are renowned for their brave rescue attempts to retrieve their captured members.

May Gallery

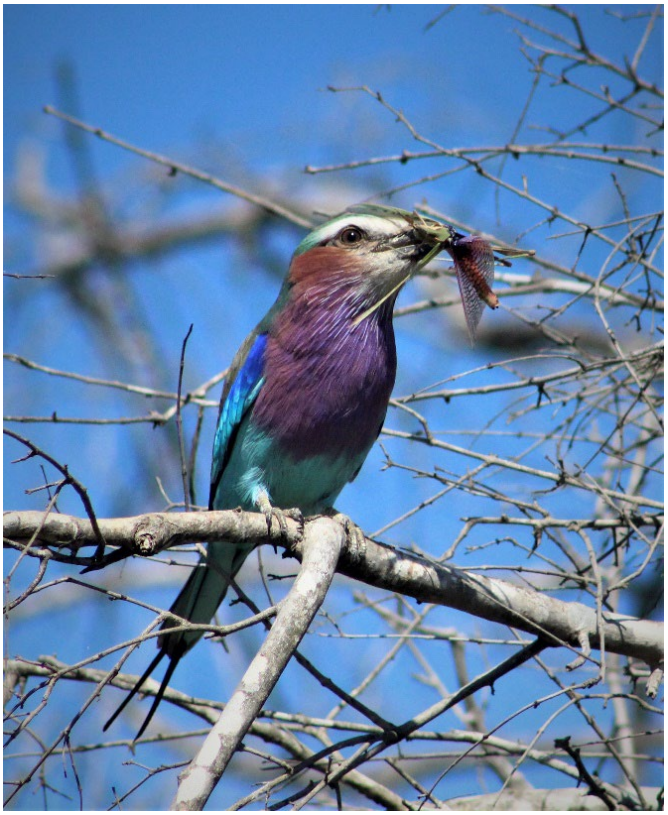


Impala rams (By Solomon Ndlovu)

Little bee-eaters (By Solomon Ndlovu)

Elephant calves (By Solomon Ndlovu)

Elephant dust-bathing (By Rudi Hulshoff)



Lilac-breasted roller (By Solomon Ndlovu)

Trichardt Male lion (By Rudi Hulshoff)

Tawny eagle (By Evidence Nkuna)

Rock monitor (By Evidence Nkuna)

Trichardt males walking down the road on a misty morning (By Evidence Nkuna)

Leopard silhouette (By Rudi Hulshoff)

Sunset with smoke from a nearby fire (By Brian Rode)