

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE For the month of July, Two Thousand and Twenty-Six

Temperature

Average minimum: 12° C (53.6° F)
Minimum recorded: 09° C (48.2° F)
Average maximum: 27° C (80.6° F)
Maximum recorded: 32° C (89.6° F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0 mm
Season to date: 630 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:25
Sunset: 17:33

Crisp mornings, cloudless skies and golden afternoons were the order of the day in July. The landscape is becoming increasingly dry, opening up the bush and making wildlife easier to spot, while the winter air carries herbaceous scents and the type of powdery dust that's a tonic for your skin. Aloes add vibrant spikes of colour, while Sabi stars/impala lilies continue to flower, offering happy contrasts to the winter palette.

This month's journal steps away from the usual focus on mammals to shine a spotlight on the remarkable birdlife on the reserve, and a fascinating tigerfish research project currently underway on Malilangwe Dam.

Nevertheless, the reserve's larger residents continued to provide exceptional sightings, so an overview for the month follows:

Lions

- A lioness was observed with two cubs, new additions that we look forward to following.
- An exceptional sighting of the River Pride was enjoyed south-east of the swamps. Later in the month seven lions from the pride were seen feeding on a buffalo kill near Chikwete. The lions were highly vocal and repeatedly chased off vultures that flocked to the scene.
- A pride of two males and seven lionesses were walking along the road at Nyari. Two lionesses tried to hunt baboons, but failed.
- Members of the Southern Pride made a kill south of Mahande, which they defended from some opportunistic hyenas that were lingering nearby.
- Six members of the Nduna Pride were seen sleeping in the shade at Chimbiya.

Leopards

- During sundowner drinks on the boat, watching a group of hippos, the deep call of a leopard echoed from the base of a nearby hill. Only a brief glimpse of the elusive cat was had.
- A leopard and her cub were observed at Croc Creek as they stalked a group of helmeted guineafowl. Their hunt was unsuccessful when the alert birds spotted the pair and flew away.
- Another rewarding leopard sighting was enjoyed on the Hippo Valley area near the swamps.

African wild dogs

- The pups are running with the pack! One amazing morning started with a pack of 23 wild dogs at the junction of the Kwali and HQ roads. There were 16 adults and 7 pups – their faces covered in blood. They had been fighting over an impala with five spotted hyenas. The hyenas lost the fight and the impala was consumed in a few minutes. A herd of about 20 elephants heard the commotion and came charging to the scene, sending the wild dogs and hyenas scattering.

Elephants

- A favourite sighting was of a bull elephant enjoying an exuberant mud bath before making his way to a favourite rubbing tree, where he spent time scratching against the bark.
- Over 40 elephants were seen crossing the Chiredzi River at Ray's Drift.
- A relaxed breeding herd of elephants was observed in the Chikwete area, followed by a solitary bull in musth displaying the distinctive behaviour of a sexually active adult male.

Buffalo

- A small group of buffalo bulls was found drinking at Banyini Pan almost every day.
- An impressive herd of more than 600 buffalo was observed grazing near the swamps, alongside a crash of six white rhinos.
- A breeding herd of well over 300 buffalo engulfed Hwata Pan on various hot days.

Rhinos

- Numerous white rhinos were seen, including a cow accompanied by her young calf.
- A memorable sighting of a black rhino cow and calf was enjoyed along the Mahande River.
- A relaxed, old, black rhino bull was seen near the swamps. He had one deformed ear and several recent battle scars.

Spotted hyenas

- An inquisitive spotted hyena approached the remains of a kill lions had made. The lions lay resting nearby but the hyena was wisely cautious and uncertain. She slowly moved closer, eventually reaching approximately two metres from the carcass before retreating to rest in the shade at a safe distance to the south. Only fools rush in where angels fear to tread!

Plains game

- A wide variety of plains game has been encountered, including sable and hartebeest. A particularly impressive herd of more than 30 eland was seen in the Chivi area.

Photographic hide

Hwata hide has been a hotspot this month:

- On arrival at the waterhole during a late morning visit, a herd of blue wildebeest, a small group of buffalo bulls, zebras and impalas were already gathered nearby. Once the guide and guests were inside the hide, the wildlife activity quickly increased. Several zebras waited patiently near the water, appearing reluctant to drink until another species approached first and provided reassurance that the area was safe. Two warthogs broke the ice, followed by the herd of impala. Another group of buffalo bulls arrived from the south and was soon joined by Lichtenstein's hartebeest, additional warthogs and a herd of kudu bulls. Two elephant bulls then took centre stage, drinking before enjoying a mud bath. At one point, five different species were drinking at the waterhole simultaneously!
- Returning later that day for sundowners provided sightings of several white rhinos. As the sun set, the rhinos communicated continuously through soft grunts and squeaks. A large bull was repeatedly chased away by a cow that clearly had no interest in his attention. An elephant later arrived to drink, adding to an already exceptional afternoon at the waterhole.

Unusual sightings

- African wild cat, north of Banyini.
- A leucistic red-billed hornbill was seen at Mikela.

Bush walks

- During one walk, the party encountered a solitary large tusker. It made for an exciting and memorable elephant experience.
- A longer walk was thoroughly enjoyed by guests. While moving through the bush, the group encountered a bull elephant browsing on a thorn tree. From a safe position, they were able to observe his feeding behaviour before continuing. On the return journey to the vehicle, a relaxed white rhino appeared ahead of the group and was observed grazing peacefully.
- Doing the short walk to Malilangwe's largest baobab never fails to impress our guests.

Rock art

- Guests visited various rock art sites where they explored the area on foot and gained insight into the region's rich cultural heritage.

Boat cruises

- Quality time was spent observing hippos, before enjoying sundowner drinks and snacks on the water. A boat cruise is the perfect end to a perfect safari.
- Shoreline animals seen during the month included waterbuck, elephants, wild dogs and a leopard.

Fishing

- Fishing on Malilangwe Dam has been excellent, with several impressive tigerfish landed, including some record catches. This month's journal includes an overview of the tigerfish research currently being conducted here, offering insight into the ecology of this remarkable predatory fish.

Gonarezhou National Park

- Gonarezhou National Park is firmly on the map for 4x4 safari enthusiasts across southern Africa. Singita guests have the exceptional opportunity to enjoy a full-day excursion into this vast and spectacular wilderness area from the comfort of an open game-drive vehicle, accompanied by their knowledgeable guide and tracker team.

Some bush stories follow, as well as the July Gallery.

Still waters run deep with the secrets of tigerfish

Tigerfish are among Africa's most formidable freshwater predators. Their streamlined bodies, powerful jaws and unmistakable razor-sharp teeth are perfectly suited to life in fast-flowing rivers and large lakes. Yet, in the Malilangwe Dam/Reservoir, below Singita Pamushana Lodge and Malilangwe House, a thriving population is challenging what is known about this iconic fish. Guests that partake in the activity of fishing for bream and tigerfish might spot Joshua Clegg on the water, busy with his research work, and wish to know more about it.

Joshua grew up on the Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve and went on to study Ichthyology & Fisheries Science at the JLB Smith Institute of Ichthyology at Rhodes University. After obtaining his BSc (Hons) this avid fisherman and scientist is currently busy with his MSc research. From January 2026 to February 2027 Joshua is studying the tigerfish population throughout the seasons, examining three key aspects of their lives: what they eat, how they grow and how they reproduce in a closed water system.

In 2003, tigerfish were introduced into the Malilangwe Dam – a closed, artificial waterbody with no flowing river system. More than two decades later, they have not only survived but established a self-recruiting population, successfully reproducing in an environment very different from the rivers and large lakes with which the species is traditionally associated.

Fish of different sizes are being sampled using various fishing methods, allowing him to build a detailed picture of the population.



One of the large 5 kg specimens. The largest tigerfish ever caught in these waters weighed 8.1 kg (17.8 lbs).

By examining stomach contents, Joshua is determining whether tigerfish change their diet seasonally and how the diets of young fish differ from those of adults. In a reservoir, where seasonal floods and river flows

do not bring new pulses of prey into the system, understanding how these predators find and exploit food is particularly important. Preliminary findings suggest that juvenile tigerfish feed primarily on insects, while adults rely mainly on baitfish. However, they are highly opportunistic predators, consuming almost any available prey, including rats and even birds. Remarkably, tigerfish are among the few fish species ever documented leaping from the water to catch and eat flying birds, such as barn swallows, which occurs during the summer months on Malilangwe Dam. They are also regarded as one of the fastest freshwater fish in the world.



Above: Fishing for secrets beneath the water's surface.

Right: A morning's catch put on ice to be taken back to the lab for processing.

Their growth is also being studied through their scales and otoliths – small structures in the inner ear that record information about age and growth, much like the rings of a tree. By counting the growth rings in these structures, researchers can accurately determine the age of individual fish. This is helping to reveal how quickly the fish grow and how their development compares with that of tigerfish living in more traditional riverine environments.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of the study concerns reproduction. Tigerfish are generally associated with specific seasonal hydrological conditions, and flowing water has long been considered important for successful spawning. Yet the Malilangwe population is clearly reproducing successfully. Joshua is investigating when and where spawning takes place, and which environmental conditions are associated with breeding. Potential spawning sites are being monitored using drones, while searches are being conducted for tigerfish eggs in suitable habitats. Preliminary findings indicate that reproduction takes place in both summer and winter, contrary to what has previously been documented for the species, as most populations are thought to reproduce only during summer.



The research has implications far beyond Malilangwe. Across southern Africa, rivers are increasingly being altered by dams, weirs and water abstraction, while climate change is expected to affect river flows even further. Understanding how tigerfish adapt to artificial and changing environments could provide important insights into the resilience of freshwater species and how best to manage and conserve tigerfish.

The tigerfish of Malilangwe are already telling us that this iconic predator may be more adaptable than previously believed. We wish Joshua every success in his research to release more of their secrets.

Right: Sampling the prey species targeted by the tigerfish.

Below left: Testing the oxygen content of the nearby Chiredzi River.

Below right: Processing and recording data from each fish caught.



The hunt for my 'bogey bird'

For more than a decade, the Narina trogon (*Apaloderma narina*) has been my bogey bird at Malilangwe - the one species that has repeatedly eluded me, despite years of searching, listening and scanning every likely patch of dense woodland.

The Narina trogon is one of southern Africa's most sought-after birds. Although it is not globally threatened, its secretive habits, preference for forests and woodland, and remarkable ability to disappear among the leaves make it exceptionally difficult to see. Its dazzling plumage seems almost too flamboyant for a bird so skilled at hiding: the male is feathered in shimmering green above, with a vivid crimson breast and belly below. Yet, when disturbed, a trogon can simply turn its green back towards an observer and melt into the foliage.

Even the origin of its name has a touch of romance and mystery. The bird was described by the French explorer and naturalist François Le Vaillant, who used the name "Narina" for a Gonaqua woman with whom he allegedly had a relationship. Some accounts suggest that Narina may also have been a Khoi word associated with a flower. Whatever the true story, it seems fitting that such an exquisite and elusive bird should carry a name surrounded by intrigue.

News arrived while I was away from the property that a pair of Narina trogons had appeared in the lodge gardens. Better still, according to the lodge staff, they were frequently seen near the gym at around 09:00 each morning.

In due course I returned to the property, but there was only one problem: at 09:00 each morning, I would be out on game drive, somewhere deep in the wilderness and nowhere near the lodge. Naturally, I immediately issued an all-points bulletin. Everyone - guides, trackers, lodge staff, gardeners, housekeepers and anyone else who happened to have functioning eyesight - was instructed to alert me, by any means possible, if either trogon appeared.

What followed was a comedy of errors. Almost every time I returned from game drive, someone would greet me with a variation of: "Oh, did you see it? It was calling near Villa 3 at breakfast earlier." Or: "It was at the gym yesterday. In fact, it flew right inside, and we had to leave the sliding doors open so it could find its way out." Then came the most painful report of all: "A guest was running on the treadmill, and the trogon was sitting outside on a branch right in front of her. She asked us the name of the beautiful red and green bird."

At this point, the situation had become personal.

On several late mornings, I staked out the gym, hoping the trogon would honour its routine. During one such vigil, a visiting technician was servicing the air-conditioning units. Of course, I asked whether he had seen a particularly beautiful bird with bright red and green plumage. "Oh," he replied casually, pulling out his old cellphone. "You mean this one?" He then proceeded to show me a video he had taken of the trogon the previous day.

I am not making a word of this up.

My desperation eventually reached unprecedented levels: I climbed onto a treadmill and went running inside a gym - for the first time in my life. Questionable coordination and exhaustion were the only results.

The morning before my flight home, I made one final search of the lodge gardens. Apparently I thrive under pressure. But after searching every likely tree, listening for its haunting call and peering into every patch of foliage, I was once again out of luck.

As I was leaving, I greeted one of the lovely housekeeping ladies and mentioned the trogon - again. "Oh, it was at Villa 2 earlier this morning," she said.

Villa 2!

I pivoted in that direction. I searched around the villa, the rocks in front of it, crept through the undergrowth and peered into every tree. If guests had been staying there, they might have assumed that a slightly unhinged wildlife photographer was stalking them.

Then, at last, the trogon appeared. It flew directly overhead before disappearing into the treetops. I sat. I waited. Departure time ticked away.

And then, finally, the bird returned. It settled on a branch - not merely visible, but within camera zoom distance. After more than a decade of searching, I was shaking so much that keeping the camera steady felt almost impossible. Nevertheless, I fired off a rapid series of photographs before the trogon disappeared once again.

Mission accomplished. Success was mine!

On the flight home, I proudly downloaded the photographs onto my laptop. A man sitting a few rows behind me noticed the images and came over to ask: "What is that incredibly beautiful bird?" Imagine my nonchalant delight when I was able to inform him that it was a Narina trogon - and that I had happened to photograph it that very morning.



But this story doesn't end there. While reviewing the photographs in detail, I noticed something remarkable. One sequence, captured on high continuous shooting mode, revealed what may be the rarest of rare wildlife photographs: Narina trogon poop! Look closely at the first photograph and you will see the tiny droplet falling beneath the bird.

After a decade-long search, countless missed opportunities, spectacular miscommunication, a gym stakeout, an unsolicited treadmill session and a frantic hunt around Villa 2, the Narina trogon had finally given me the sighting I had dreamed of. And, apparently, a little something extra.



A very unusual meal

The African openbill (*Anastomus lamelligerus*) is a distinctive species of stork, easily recognised by the gap in its bill that gives it its name. This gap is non-existent in juvenile birds and develops as the bird ages. The adult plumage is overall black with iridescent green feathers on their backs, whereas the juvenile plumage is usually less vibrant and browner in colour.

The specialised bill is perfectly adapted to its specialised diet of aquatic snails and mussels. The gap in the bill of the African openbill was first hypothesised to serve as a nutcracker, crushing the shells of the prey. Scientists later demonstrated that the bill does not serve this function. Rather than crushing the shells, the openbill uses the curved lower mandible to slip beneath a snail's operculum – the small, hard plate that seals the shell – allowing it to remove the soft body while leaving the fragile shell intact. Opening mussels poses a bigger problem to the storks. Since the African openbill can't open the mussel by itself, it will usually gather them up in large piles on the shore and wait for the sun to kill them. Once dead, the mussels release their hold on the shells leaving the meat accessible to the birds.

In different parts of their range, some individuals have been observed to eat terrestrial snails, frogs, crabs, fish, worms and large insects, but none of these are the preferred food choice of the African openbill. Apparently nestlings of the African openbill stork never voluntarily eat anything else other than molluscs. Even when extremely hungry, the nestlings will not ingest other types of meat unless being force-fed.



Juvenile African openbill with a baby terrapin in its bill.

This made an unusual sighting at Banyini Pan all the more intriguing. I was surprised to see a juvenile African openbill foraging there, rather than along the Chiredzi River, a far more likely place for aquatic snails and mussels. On closer inspection through my binoculars, however, I realised that it was not trying to extract a snail or mussel from its shell. It was attempting to eat a baby terrapin!



The African openbill dipping the terrapin in the shallows.



The young bird repeatedly probed and manipulated the terrapin with its bill, seemingly determined to reach the morsel inside. It struggled for some time and even dipped the terrapin into the shallow water on several occasions, almost as though it were trying to wash it clean before trying to open it again.

After consulting available research, and one of southern Africa's foremost birders, it appears that this is highly unusual behaviour for an African openbill. Could the young bird have mistaken the terrapin for a snail or mussel and attempted to use its specialised bill to pry the meat from the shell? Whatever the explanation, it was a fascinating example of an inexperienced bird attempting to tackle an unfamiliar and particularly challenging meal.

This is not the first time I have seen Banyini Pan's terrapins meet an unfortunate end. In the March 2024 Wildlife Journal, I described marabou storks catching terrapins in the shallows and flipping them onto the backs of their shells on the shore. Some managed to right themselves and escape back into the water, while others remained stranded in the sun – potentially allowing the storks to access the loosened and tenderised flesh once the terrapins had succumbed.

A pearl-spotted surprise

Heading back to the lodge after sunset I turned the corner at the airstrip. Something caught my eye, but it took another 10 metres before my brain fully registered what I had seen. I immediately issued instructions for complete silence and for everyone to have their cameras and binos held at eye level, before reversing at the pace of snail.



There, perched right beside the road was a perfect pearl-spotted owlet.



For a few magical moments, we sat alongside this tiny predator, admiring its beautiful plumage and tiny size. The pearl-spotted owlet may be one of Africa's smallest owls, but it is full of character. Its warm brown upperparts are covered in distinctive white "pearls", while its bright yellow eyes give it an alert and inquisitive expression. It had a nervous disposition, turning its head and looking in all directions in case it had been spotted by other birds that might mob it and give away its presence.

Despite its small size, this little owl is a formidable hunter, feeding on insects, small reptiles, rodents and even other small birds. It is often active during the day, particularly at dawn and dusk, and its distinctive call is one of the sounds most closely associated with the African bush. The familiar, whistled "poo-lee" call is often repeated in a series and can be heard echoing through the woodland, especially during the breeding season.

One of its most fascinating features, however, is hidden from view when the owlet is facing you. On the back of its head are two dark patches surrounded by pale feathers, creating the convincing illusion of a pair of large eyes. These "false eyes" may help deter predators by making it appear as though the owlet is watching from both directions.

We sat with our little roadside companion perched beside us for quite a while before it flew off to a different perch above a grassy area where I suspect it may have heard the rustlings of a little rodent.

Twitter



An immature lappet-faced vulture showing white feathers on its upper back, unlike adults which have a dark back and distinct white thigh feathers.

A juvenile bateleur eagle with brown feathers and blue-green facial skin, unlike adults which have black feathers and a brilliant red-orange face.



Note the formidable claws of this raptor as it flew off.



Top: Cattle egrets decorate a tree.
 Left: A pair of African hawk-eagles, each resting a leg.
 Above: A tiny malachite kingfisher tries to balance on a reed.

July Gallery



Top right: Abstract patterns of the lichen. Do you see the side profile of a human head?

Top left: Abstract art on a plate, thanks to the chefs preparing breakfast.

Abstract ripple reflections on a mother and calf white rhino, as they drink at night.





Dawn light filters through an umbrella tree as an elephant passes by.

Dusk settles as doves make way for a heavy drinker.





Seeds, mud and dung being transported by buffalo for dispersal elsewhere.

Grasshopper caught in a community spider web.





*This umbrella thorn (*Vachellia tortilis*) is one of the oldest standing on the reserve. They can live for up to 650 years in the wild, with scientific studies using radiocarbon dating estimating mature individuals to generally range between 200 and 650 years old.*

A huge white rhino bull bulks up on the dry winter grass.



Right: A hoof-flicking midday dust bath for this zebra.

Bottom: Stopping for a morning coffee break at Chikwete Cliffs we found members of the River Pride sunning themselves in the riverbed below.

Far Bottom: A baby hippo gets a piggy-back ride on mom's back.





Star trails over Sosigi Dam.

During the two hours of pitch darkness in creating this photo, lions, hyenas and a leopard were heard calling nearby, and an elephant walked past a few feet away.

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