

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE
For the month of January, Two Thousand and Twenty-Three

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.1°C (69.9°F)
Minimum recorded: 16.7°C (62.0°F)
Average maximum: 32.6°C (90.6°F)
Maximum recorded: 40.2°C (104.3°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 71 mm
*For the season to date: 384.2 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:36
Sunset: 18:37

January has been the month of queleas colonising, woodland kingfishers calling, dragonflies dancing, and all this while rhinos, buffalos, hyenas and warthogs have been wallowing! We've had some concentrated thundershowers followed by beautiful light as sunbeams break through the brooding clouds. January really is abuzz with activity in this currently lush, thriving landscape. The green season offers such a contrast for the avid nature lover, with so many surprises and discoveries, and is incredible for birding.

Here's a sightings snapshot for January:

Lions

Most of the lion sightings have been of the River Pride, thanks to our dedicated lion scouting team.

- **River Pride:** The pride was seen on a Lichtenstein's hartebeest kill, and a zebra kill during the month. A lovely sighting of them was at Chikwete Pan where they were a few metres away from some white rhinos. It was impressive to see so many members of this pride walking along Binya Road near 02 camp: one male, five lionesses, six juveniles and three four-month-old cubs.
- **Nduna Pride:** This pride has been spending most of the month hunting in the steep hills and thickets.
- **Southern Pride:** The mother of the cubs was seen near Hwata Pan, contact calling for her pride or cubs. Other members were seen hunting right down on the southern boundary of the reserve.

Leopards

Leopard sightings demand luck! That said, there have been many lucky moments, such as:

- Seeing a leopard crossing Binya Road and being able to follow it for about 20 minutes; spotting an adult male leopard relaxing in a nyala berry tree; and returning from a drive to find an adult female leopard chilling at the pan at the base of Pamushana Hill!

Rhinos

White: While the white rhinos are not converging en-masse at the pans due to all the surface water available, they still congregate in those general areas, and guests on one drive counted 12 different individuals.

Black: There have been some brilliant black rhino sightings in open landscape because they are feeding on all the forbs and flowers available.

- A highlight was driving along the Chiredzi River and seeing a surface shining from a distance that looked like a hippo out of the water. It was a black rhino that had risen from its mudbath and had its head down feeding on shrubs. A sighting of a lifetime right in the open!

Elephants

- Elephant bulls are being more secretive at this time of year, but can be found at remote pans drinking and splashing cooling mud on themselves.
- The breeding herds with their proportionately tiny newborn calves are an absolute delight. A spectacular sighting was of a herd of about 70 elephants drinking at Simbiri Dam.

Buffalo

- A nest of dagga boys can be found wallowing in the pan at the base of Pamushana Hill, on most sunny afternoons.
- Herds of up to 700 buffalo have been seen grazing and drinking from the main pans and dams.

Wild dogs

- The wild dog pack of 12 has been hunting the perimeter of the property, in an anti-clockwise direction, sending impalas running for their lives in every direction. But not all hunts are successful, and the hyenas are often omnipresent waiting to steal a meal.

Hyena

- There is a lot of hyena activity at night and their tracks pepper most roads on a morning drive.
- During the heat of the hottest days they've been wallowing and paddling in the shallow pans.

Plains game

- Plains game abounds at this time! Most have youngsters running alongside, and thanks to the grazing presently they are all thriving. Zebras, wildebeest, impalas, kudus and giraffes are seen on every drive, while waterbuck and even eland are seen on most.

Unusual or rare sightings

- Three southern ground hornbills were seen - big black birds with red facial areas. These vulnerable birds wade through the grasslands looking for prey.
- While watching a flock of quelea drinking a crocodile launched itself out of the water trying to catch a jaw full of little birds, but missed.

Boat cruise

- Our most popular activity! Nothing beats cruising the Malilangwe Dam, sundowner in hand, watching the birdlife and hippos. Some magnificent spiral-horned kudu bulls have been browsing the banks.

Fishing

- The fish are on the bite! Many bream, and some feisty tigers have been caught and released. Fishing offers the most zen moments – just drifting along, listening to the sounds of Nature and looking at the landscape, interrupted by intense adrenalin spikes when a fish hits your bait!

Birds

- There's no better time to be birding – every bird is feasting on the insect bounty, courting, building nests, incubating eggs and feeding chicks. To be woken by the dawn chorus that starts at about 04:30 is so wonderful.

Gonarezhou day trip

- Elephants are guaranteed in Gonarezhou! As are the most breath-taking panoramic landscapes and a feeling of the most remote, wild wilderness.



Dawn breaks over the vast escarpment of Gonarezhou National Park, as the Runde River swirls towards the Save, to ultimately spill into the ocean off the coast of Mozambique.

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

The River Pride's new additions

The River pride has been spending a lot of time on our eastern side of the Chiredzi River, and in the past year they've expanded both their territory and numbers. The clearest sighting of them in January was of five lionesses, six juveniles and three four-month-old cubs. In addition to this there are three territorial males accepted by the females, which brings the total pride number to 17.

Spotting a nugget of gold in the emerald grasslands at the crack of dawn turned into a very lucky sighting indeed. My binoculars confirmed it was two lionesses and a scamper of something else. Off-roading in an arc to their spot I came across a pan filled with rainwater where the lionesses had been lying. They'd moved off into thicker vegetation and settled there – along with the “scampers”.

In due course a little face appeared from between the grass spears, then slunk away. Then the aunt lioness came to assess us, and see if we were worthy of her discerning tolerance.



Shortly thereafter the mother lioness did an extraordinary thing – she got up and walked straight towards me, staring down the barrel of my lens, and called her cubs. The cubs were incredibly cautious, but two of them heeded their mother's reassuring encouragement and came to peep at us from behind the foliage.

What an incredibly special moment to have a mother lioness introduce her little four-month-old cubs to us.

The mothers then went off hunting or to join the rest of the pride and we respectfully left. The day before the rest of the pride had been about 200 metres away, but there are six rowdy juveniles in the pride who would not treat the little cubs with kid-gloves so the lionesses must have decided to keep them separate and safe for the time being.





This is one of the rowdy juveniles. While everyone else was sleeping this youngster sat up, tried out a snarl which was hopelessly ineffectual, then stuck out its tongue, and proceeded to pull every face in the book. Watch out world, there's a character on the loose!



Black rhino in a meadow

Leaving the lion sighting we drove back towards the road and in the distance was a rhino, making its way towards us while grazing in a meadow. Grazing and open landscape is where you'd expect to find a white rhino, but a double-take confirmed that this was indeed a black rhino!

With all the flowers and forbs in abundance at the moment black rhinos are stocking up on essential vitamins and nutrients not normally found in their diet of browse material.

I had stopped immediately, turned off the engine upon seeing him, and switched my camera to quiet mode. Black rhinos are very sensitive animals and notorious for their reactive behaviour. He was nonchalantly making a bee-line towards us, unaware we were there.

Then half a football field away he did see us, got a bit of a fright, and paced around wondering what to do. He decided to have a closer inspection rather than gallop away, and a remarkable encounter ensued. There was a lot of bluffing and bluster, and at his closest point even his oxpecker hitchhiker seemed to think, "What now buddy? Just chill with that weed in your mouth and stop disturbing all these insects!"



From looking at his ear-notches our ecologist can tell this is a black rhino bull referred to as Mabhelele, who is eight years old. What was especially interesting is that this rhino has a territory in the central Chekwa/ O2/Nyari/Banyini areas but he recently took an unusual trip to the far south around Chiloveka. Perhaps it was an end of year vacation? But on a more serious note it's good to know he is back in his homeland, looking well and bulking up on the abundant flora available right now.



Stars in stripes



The reserve boasts a large number of zebras and they thrive at this time of lush grass and knee-deep grazing. Many of the mares are carrying heavy with foals, and many others have long-legged mini-me versions trotting at their side. It's lovely to observe zebra behaviour for an extended period, seeing the herd dynamics, the lead stallion, how pairs stand head to tail and fly swat the other's face, how they try and rest their heads on another's rump and nuzzle one another. But the most endearing is when the foals get the zoomies and race around like lunatics kicking and jumping and bucking – exhilarating in their abundant energy, speed and four-legged stability.

These plains zebra (*Equus quagga*, formerly *Equus burchellii*), live in small family groups, called harems, with one stallion, one to six mares, and their offspring. The mares will stay together even if their dominant male leaves or is killed.



Twitter

This month's Twitter feed focuses on red-billed quelea - the most abundant wild bird on the planet, with an estimated population of 1.5 billion birds. Red-billed queleas breed in dense colonies. Thousands of pairs rear their young in trees hanging thick with nests. During the breeding season, the male, wearing his bright mating plumage, begins nest building. During the process he stops work and fervently advertises his skills and eligibility. If a female likes what she sees, they mate, he completes the structure, she lays eggs in the nest and does most of the incubating.

I decided to find a handsome male and a sturdy-looking nest, and only focus on the goings-on of that male and his nest. Their individual colouration varies quite a bit, but he was extra good-looking with a bright red bill, jet black face and golden head. And boy could he weave and dance! Little did I know I was in exactly the right place, at the right time, given a 1 in 1.5 billion chance.

My male wove a blade of fresh grass into the nest, and you could see he'd been busy with it for a few days because of the varying freshness of the grass. Every now and again he'd flutter about frantically beating his wings and serenading the world. A blur streaked by, that of a female, and his performance went off the charts!



After some humming and hawing she decided to poke her beak into the nest. Then she hopped inside. Then he joined her and you could see her testing the strength of the structure by jumping around in it, while he was reassuring her that it was super-strong and he'd reinforce it even more if she decided to choose him as her monogamous mate. And she did!

In the blink of an eye she hopped outside, presented herself, and they mated! (I would have cheered had I not been so busy shooting on continuous high speed as to not miss a millisecond.)



These monogamous birds have breeding colonies which can be kilometres in diameter, but the male and female only defend the immediate vicinity of their nest. The nests are usually attached to a thorny tree along with many other nests made by other males.

Moments after the mating activity another female arrived and tried to enter the nest, but our male shooed her away. The other males stood by visibly gobsmacked that one male could have all the luck, while the female gave her a beady look that made her beat it!

Quelea lay one to five eggs, which are incubated mainly by the female for about 10 - 12 days, which is astonishingly quick considering it takes 21 days for a domestic chicken to hatch. The chicks leave the nest after about 10 - 13 days, and are fully independent about 11 days later. It's all a lightning-quick process!

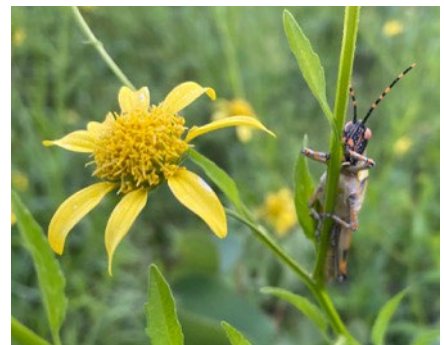
Both parents feed the chicks protein-rich insects and larvae, ideal for the fast-developing young.





Here our male chases off the intruding female, his monogamous partner sits bottom left, and everywhere you look are males shocked with astonishment and envy. Best they get back to their nest building!

January's wild blooms



January Gallery



A white rhino bull scrubs his cheek against his leg after a soothing mudbath, then strolls over to a tree stump to scratch where no oxpecker even dares go!





Leaving Sosigi Dam at a quick march were this breeding herd, while four big bulls strolled along after.





A dassie catches some rays as its vibrissae hairs glisten in the sun.
As odd-looking as Lichtenstein hartebeest are, they have the most graceful gait. All four hooves are in the air!





An African wild dog scans for a shady place to rest.
This hyena found respite from the heat in a shallow wading pool.





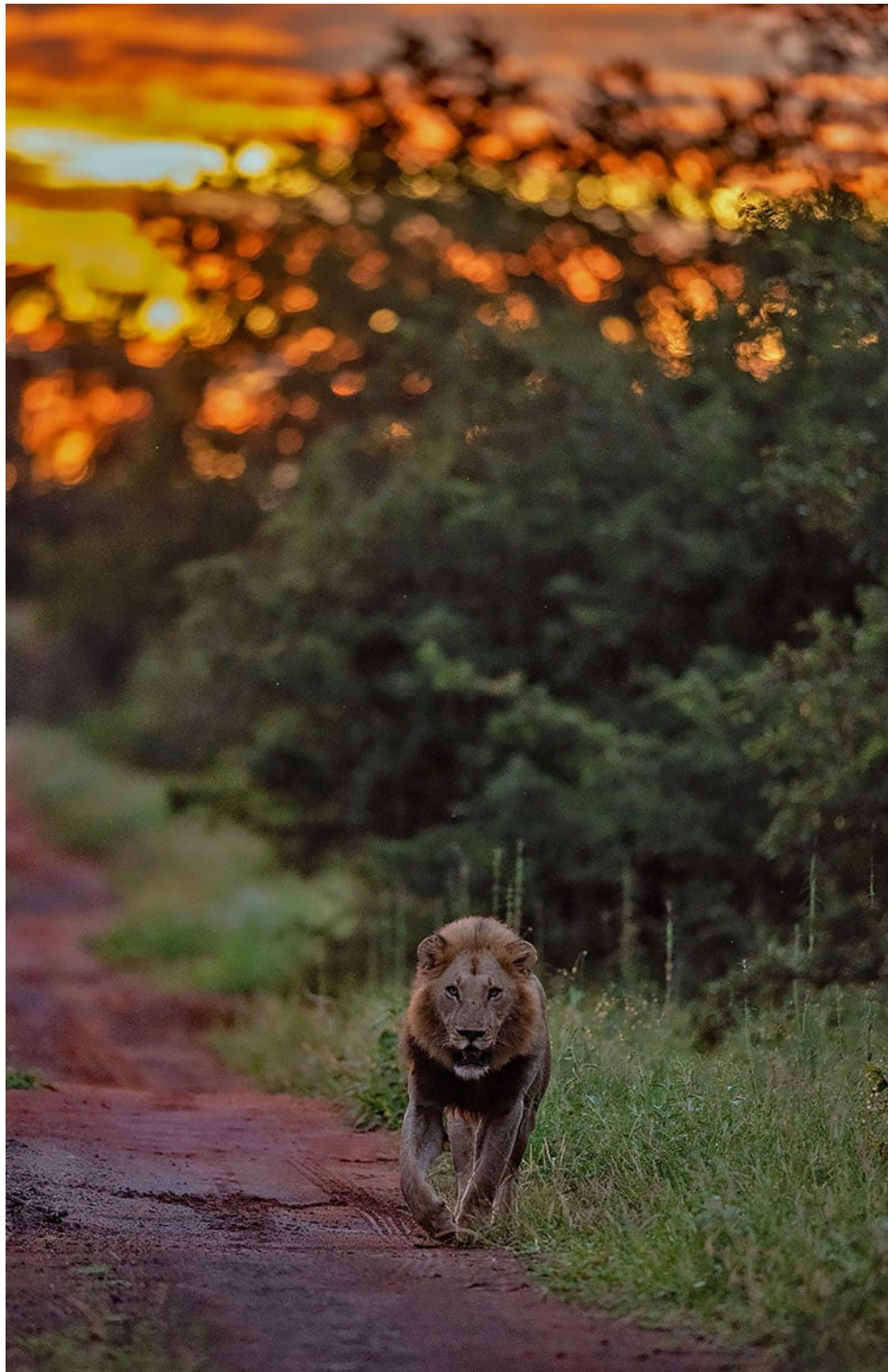
An alert nursery of wildebeest calves nest together having spent the night listening to lions roar.
Mum baboons and their babies set out for the day's foraging and fun.





A woodland kingfisher – in a quiet moment...
Little bee-eaters hawking from their perch in the light rain.





This lion was on a mission. He was marching and roaring and heading east, to consort with the Nduna Pride, having just been with the River Pride. A territorial male in his prime with intentions of dominance.



A European bee-eater out on a limb with a swoop of swallows.