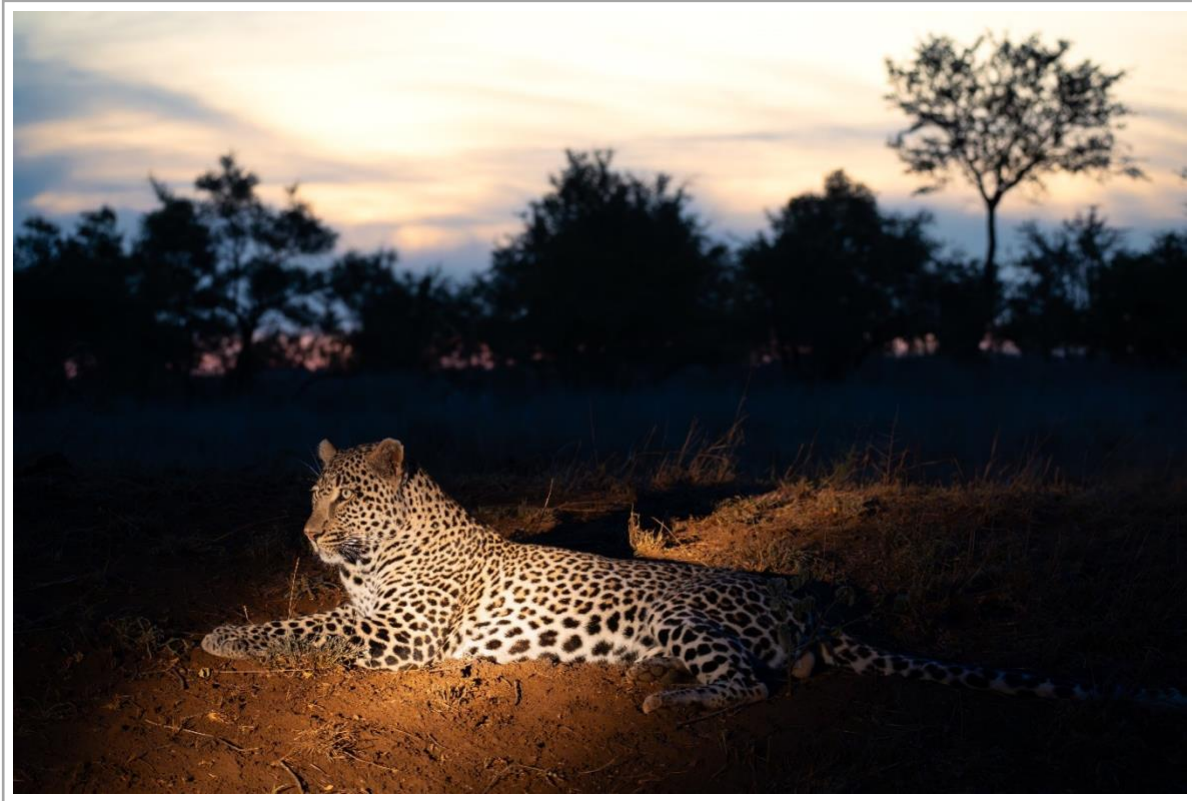


# Singita



Kalanga male leopard – Photo by Monika Malewski

## WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For the month of December, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four

### Temperature

Average minimum: 23.1°C (73.6°F)  
Minimum recorded: 20.0°C (68.0°F)  
Average maximum: 38.0°C (100.0°F)  
Maximum recorded: 47.0°C (116.6°F)

### Rainfall Record

For the month: 56 mm  
Season to date: 129.5 mm  
(\*Season = Oct to Sept)

### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05h05  
Sunset: 18h40

Compared to previous years, December began with intense heat waves, with temperatures averaging 40°C. Without any precipitation to provide relief, the newly sprouted green grass quickly withered, flowers died, and even the N'wanetsi River ceased to flow. Catfish and other aquatic animals became trapped in small pools, attracting hundreds of storks, egrets, and herons that gathered to feast on the easy catch. Then, on the 21st, the Xinkelegane drainage flowed higher than it had in many years,

signalling that Mozambique must have experienced a heavy rainstorm. On Christmas Day, we woke to overcast skies and a gentle drizzle, offering much-needed relief after the sweltering, humid summer days.

### **A Sightings Snapshot for December follows:**

#### **Lions**

- The Mananga Pride were moving around the central depression during the first week of the month, before their oh-so-familiar disappearing act, where we suspect they head into the part of their territory in the Kruger National Park. With the intensely dry conditions, one can understand their draw to the western section of the N'wanetsi River that is still flowing. Towards the end of the month on an overcast day, with much needed relief from the intense heat, they were spotted in the central depression. A herd of buffalo were not too far away, so this was perhaps what had drawn them back into our concession.
- The Chava Pride remain fortunate to hold their territory near the Gudzane Dam which has become a hotspot for the animals in the north of our concession. The Sonop males were with them on a few occasions, but it appears as if they have lost a member as we are only seeing three of the original four.
- The Shish Pride is down to 14 members now and appear to also have moved their core territory to around the N'wanetsi River near Dave's Crossing and the Dumbana drainage in our concession, as well as in the Kruger National Park, northwest of the H6, where on one occasion they were found feeding on a warthog.
- During the course of the month the Maputo male has traversed from the northern sections in an area known as Golf-course Clearings, all the way south to Xinanene open area.
- Towards the end of the month the N'wanetsi male and one-eyed Chava male made an appearance in the grasslands adjacent to the N'wanetsi River. The older and larger N'wanetsi male marked his territory by spraying urine and scrapping his back paws through the wet dirt. Hopefully this means they might settle in the south of our concession.

#### **Leopards**

- The Monzo male leopard has been sighted a few times this month, patrolling his usual areas along the southern portion of the N'wanetsi River. It is interesting how much overlap leopard territories have, contrary to popular belief. A five-year study done by Panthera in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve has shown that when space is limited but resources are high, that leopard territory overlap is not uncommon, particularly amongst related individuals. We do not know for sure if Lebombo male and the Monzo male are related, but the resources around the N'wanetsi River prove to be more than enough for both, as well as a few individual females.
- Nhlangueni has been a bit more secretive, with only one sighting of her traveling north from the central water hotspot that is Xinanene Poort, and a second feeding on an impala she had stashed in a small bushwillow tree in the central regions.
- The Masiya male caught an impala lamb which he draped over the branches of a tall jackalberry.
- Kalanga male also snatched one of the vulnerable new impala lambs near Dave's Crossing.
- The Dumbana female and her two cubs have been the stars of the show this month. She has been working the Nstibitsane drainage, and following the pattern of the month, caught an impala lamb near Xinanene Poort for her cubs who appear to have had a huge growth spurt. Her young male is almost as big as she is. The following day we were watching the three of them playing around on a fallen apple-leaf tree when something caught her eye. She slunk off into the

long grass on the eastern side of the road and stopped, the white tip at the end of her tail eagerly flicking side to side. She lowered her head and body, showing off her muscled legs, and then burst out the bush! We lost sight of her, and a second later a young impala lamb came sprinting straight towards our vehicle, changing direction at the last second to evade Dumbana who was a few metres behind. The female cub, lying to the side watching the scene play out, could not resist, and charged down the stotting lamb. On its new, lanky legs, the tiny lamb flew out of reach of the young female cub who sat and watched as it disappeared into the bush once more.

- Nungu female also made an appearance at the end of the month, near the same pan at which we have been seeing Nhlangueni female, Dumbana female, the pack of wild dogs, and pride of lions over this drier-than-usual December.
- The Zamani male was spotted in the northwest. Due to the beautiful green flush of grass, leading to higher herbivore numbers, it appears as if there is quite a large overlap between Zamani, Mbiri-biri and the Masiya male.

### **Cheetahs**

- A mother and single cub spent a few days on the western edge of our concession near the sticky-thorns (*Vachelia borleae*) before finally heading west, following the N'wanetsi into the Kruger National Park. She returned just before Christmas and had an early Christmas feast of impala lamb which she shared with her cub one overcast morning. Lucky for her, the clouds were too low for ideal vulture flying weather and she had time to finish the carcass in peace.

### **African wild dogs**

- The pack of 15 that were collared two months back on our concession have also realised that the last water sources on our concession have caused a congregation of prey and, as a result, the perfect hunting grounds.
- One early morning, a guide found the pack near a pan in the central areas, the pups energetically playing, jumping and chasing each other through the mud. Suddenly, one of the adults lowered his head and the rest followed suit. After stalking for a few metres, they suddenly broke out into a sprint, and we saw a steenbuck bolt. It was too late however, and all we heard was crunching of bones and a minute later the pack emerged, their mouths' stained red.
- At the end of the month, we found the pack crossing a drainage line to a nearby open grassland. They appeared to be hunting, spreading out in an attempt to flush unsuspecting prey hiding in the grass. After a few minutes they spotted a large herd of impala with over 20 young lambs. They took off in pursuit and within five minutes had caught a lamb, which was devoured in a few minutes.

### **Spotted hyenas**

- The clan denning around a drainage line, aptly named Hyena Crossing, was found wallowing in a small pool nearby during the heat wave. Another clan in the north was seen moving east into the mountains, as well as a few solitary males strolling down the dusty moonlit pathways.
- A single spotted hyena found a still-born lamb at Euphorbia Crossing, and chased vultures off to scavenge the last scraps.

## Elephants

- Daily sightings demonstrate that the N'wanetsi River flowing through our concession provides ideal opportunities to observe not only hundreds of elephants year-round, but also, during times of drought, a variety of game species that gather in search of life-sustaining water.
- A mighty “big-tusker” ambled his way through our concession onto the H6.
- After the rains around Christmas we noticed the elephants had migrated north, feeding on the lush green growth that has been slowly growing after the controlled burns in the dry season.

## Buffalos

- A herd of around a hundred strong spent a few weeks traversing the Xinkelengane, a road following the drainage line that enters our concession from Mozambique in the north and winds its way south until finally joining the N'wanetsi River. It only flows after heavy rainfall in Mozambique, but the adjacent plains and their nutrient-rich alluvial soils provide ample grazing for these heavy bovinds.

## Plains game

- In the middle of the month, a journey of over 50 giraffes was spotted along the road adjacent to the N'wanetsi River. For the past week, the average temperature has hovered around 40 degrees Celsius, making water sources increasingly vital. With nearly all the perennial pans dried up once more, only the pools in the rivers remain to satisfy the animals' thirst and alleviate the effects of the intense heatwave.

## Rare animals and other sightings

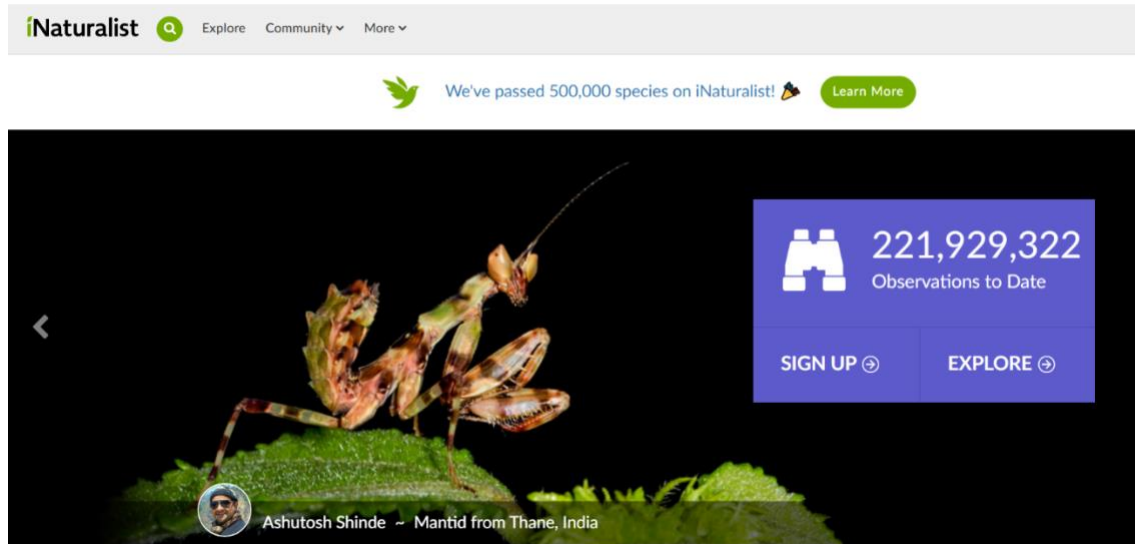
- One morning, a honey badger trotted confidently across the road, its stride suggesting that it knew exactly where it was headed and was in a hurry to get there.
- A few months ago, a shy herd of sable wandered onto our concession, and recently, they were spotted twice on the hills surrounding Xinanene Poort - a deep pool in the valley that usually holds water throughout the year. Given the hot, dry conditions earlier this month, they are likely expanding their range in search of sufficient water.
- A pod of five hippo, including two very small calves, froze as we rounded the corner, and caught them with the spotlight, before continuing to graze off into the darkness. To see just how large these amphibious mammals are out the water is such a treat.

## Birds

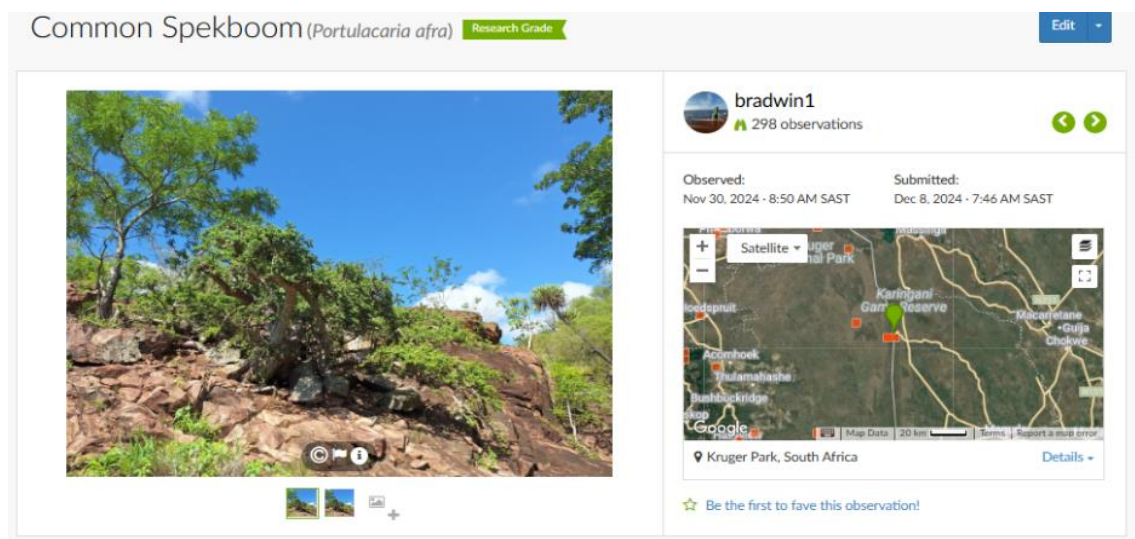
- A flock of four southern ground hornbills has been enjoying the congregation of prey on either side of the big bend in the N'wanetsi River.
- An African crane was spotted moving through the last shallow water that remains at Xingwenyana Crossing by a guide visiting from Singita Sabi Sand.
- A pygmy goose found its way to the weir in front of Lebombo.
- Allen's gallinule, a smallish waterbird with bright red legs and bill, a royal blue body and emerald-green back and wings was seen at a rocky crossing. It is an uncommon migrant with less than an estimated ten pairs in northern Kruger National Park according to “Roberts Bird Guide 2”.

**Some Bush Stories follow, as well as the December Gallery .**

Social media and Artificial Intelligence - two big buzzwords that everyone seems to be talking about these days. Love them or hate them, there is no denying that social media and AI have a massive impact on how we live and interact with the world. We have already seen this with platforms like Facebook and OpenAI's ChatGPT. But quietly making waves in its own way is a lesser-known platform called iNaturalist. It is an amazing tool that connects curious nature lovers and brings together scientists, experts, and everyday people like us to learn about biodiversity. Plus, it is providing valuable data for science and conservation work.



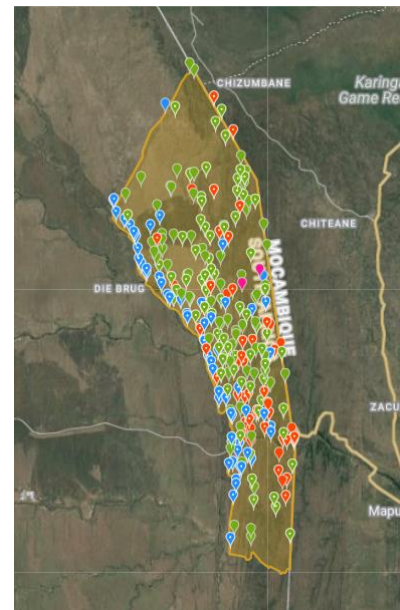
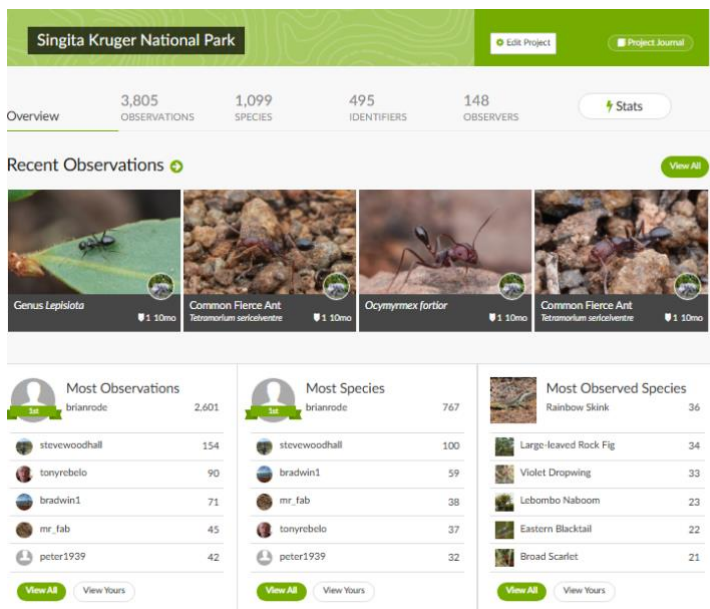
iNaturalist describes itself as many things, but at its heart, it is “an online social network of people sharing biodiversity information to help each other learn about nature.” The idea is simple: anyone, anywhere, can snap a photo of any living thing, upload it to the platform, and share it with others. But what makes it so powerful are a few key features. Firstly, a super smart AI analyses your photo to help identify the species; secondly a huge community of experts and enthusiasts can confirm the ID, suggest corrections, and discuss findings; and thirdly once a species is confirmed, the observation becomes research-grade data that scientists can use for studies and conservation projects.



So, why am I talking about a social media platform on Singita's blog? Well, our guiding team at Singita Lebombo discovered iNaturalist this year, and we have been blown away by how useful it is. I could not wait to share it with you!

We started using iNaturalist in 2024, snapping photos of anything that caught our eye or left us stumped, and then uploading them to the platform. It has been a game-changer for helping us understand more about subjects, like wildflowers. We even created a "project" to gather all the observations made within the boundaries of our concession, and what we've learned has been incredible.

Since starting the project, we've logged an impressive 3 805 observations from 148 contributors, covering over 1 100 species. To put that in perspective, the Kruger National Park's iNaturalist project has recorded 4 717 species so far. That means in our tiny concession (less than 1% of the park's total area) we've documented just over 22% of the species recorded in the entire park. Pretty cool, right?



Of course, while these numbers are amazing, they're only based on what's been observed and uploaded to iNaturalist. The actual number of species in the park and our concession is definitely much higher. And honestly, that just makes it even more exciting because there's so much more to discover.

Back to the idea that "social media and AI can change the world" iNaturalist shows how that can happen in a really positive way. In Kruger National Park, it's helping everyday visitors contribute to research just by sharing what they see. That one photo might feel like a small thing, but when you look at the bigger picture with 131 298 observations of 4 717 species in the park, you can see how all those little contributions add up. They're helping guide conservation efforts and protect these incredible wild places for the future.

This is just the tip of the iceberg in how these advancements close the gap between scientists and everyday people - it is allowing us to all work together to contribute to an ultimate goal, and you can help too... The next time you find yourself in nature whether it is at a Singita lodge or the park close to your home you'll be amazed at the diversity around you when you visit the iNaturalist website.

When I started working at Singita Kruger National Park I had heard many stories about the most beautiful and regal antelope, the sable. In the early days, they were not uncommon to see on the concession, albeit mostly in the far north, close to the Mozambique border. At one stage, there was apparently a large break in the border fence, and a herd of sable crossed over into Mozambique from our side, presumably to see if the grass was indeed greener. The fence was then repaired, leaving the sable trapped on the Mozambican side. As a result, no more sable were seen for a very long time, until recently.

In the last two years, an occasional sable had been spotted once or twice, mostly again in the far north, in and around a rugged area called the Mhlanguleni Valley. These sightings were brief, as the animals were not used to seeing vehicles and would usually flee within a few seconds. In the late winter of this year, a solitary sable bull was spotted heading to the N'wanetsi River near Dumbana Pools to drink, as all surface water in the northern areas had dried up.



Then came the day when I saw my first sable antelope at Singita Kruger National Park. We were driving back to camp along the N'wanetsi River one hot and dry October morning when tracker Floyd spotted the animal heading to the water. Everyone got very excited at the sight of this stocky, pitch-black, scimitar-horned sable bull, but it wasn't long before he turned tail and headed back into the wild and inaccessible hills from where he came. This bull was seen a few more times in the following weeks, but then not again.

In October, a herd of eight sable was found on the foothills of the Lebombo Mountains, where they meet the basalt plains in the south-central part of the concession. This was the largest herd of sable that had been seen in our area for years, and we were all understandably excited. This same herd has now been seen twice in December, and one of my guests was lucky enough to take some lovely photographs of them. This herd seems to be coming to the N'wanetsi River at Dumbana Pools, the old favourite sable drinking spot, to quench their thirst. They are becoming more and more accustomed to the vehicles and are less skittish.



The Shangaan people call the sable *mhalamhala*, and the horn, known as *xipalapala*, has been used for as long as anyone can remember as the trumpet of assembly. In older times, when the chief wanted to assemble his subjects, the envoy would run to the capital of a sub-chief while blowing the *xipalapala* for all to hear. Upon reaching the village, he would hand over the message to a young man, who would then take the horn and blow it on the way to the next village, and so on. In this way, the message travelled throughout the whole tribe in a very short time.



December Gallery



Dumbana's female cub – Photo by Graeme Stuart  
Two of the Sonop male lions – Photo by Graeme Stuart





Egyptian geese – Photo by Monika Malewski



Warthog with piglets – Photo by Monika Malewski



Cheetah and cub – Photo by Bradwin Ardendorff  
African wild dog – Photo by Bradwin Ardendorff





African Buffalo – Photo by Bradwin Ardendorff  
Nile Crocodile – Photo by Bradwin Ardendorff





Journey of giraffe – Photo by Bradwin Ardendorff



Dumbana cubs – Photo by Photo by Bradwin Ardendorff



Young male lion – Photo by Bradwin Ardendorff



Sonop male lion – Photo by Graeme Stuart

Kalanga male leopard – Photo by Monika Malewski

