

Singita



Photo by Solomon Ndlovu

WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For February, Two Thousand and Twenty Two

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.2°C (70.32 °F)
Minimum recorded: 18.0°C (64.4 °F)
Average maximum: 31.9°C (89.94 °F)
Maximum recorded: 38.0 °C (100.4 °F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 7 mm
Season to date: 337 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:51
Sunset: 18:31

February has been very hot due to the unusually low rainfall. The second month of the year is generally when we expect our highest rainfall of the year. A tropical cyclone was building in the Indian Ocean in the early part of February, but it weakened and dissipated once it made landfall and the rains did not reach our concession. Now, as we approach the end of summer, and long sunny days fade into crimson sunsets, the standing water is starting to dry up. However, the veld is still lush, the grass inflorescences have bloomed and a rich aroma fills

the late afternoon air. Somewhere a large pride of lions and their cubs stroll through red grass hidden from the glossy eyes of their prey. With all the rains the previous months there has been an increase in insect life too. On evening game drives, once the sun has set, fireflies paint an enchanting picture as their glowing green bodies float above the waving grass, giving our guests a magical light show.



Mananga Pride Lioness moving through the long grass Photo by Monika Malewski

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for February:

Lions

- Lion sightings have been consistent with the Shish Pride often seen close to the lodges. The pride appears to be split in two for the moment. The older Shish lioness and the limping female and sub-adults have been seen together. The other two lionesses have each given birth to a litter of three cubs, which is exciting. The most recent litter was only revealed in the last weeks.
- The Shish Pride killed an impala near the weir that crosses the N'wantesi. A few days later they were seen feeding on a baboon.
- The Kumana male and Maputo male have been seen mating with the older Shish female on at least two separate mating bouts. The Maputo male was, on both occasions, first in attendance and the Kumana male took over a few days later. They caused much delight in the camp when they spent some of the time mating on the entrance roads to the lodges.
- We have seen the three unknown nomadic male lions on occasion this month. They are only seen in the far northern parts but are moving more south of previous sightings. On one occasion they were found with one Mountain Pride lioness lying up a kilometer away from them. She was very injured, with a lot of blood on her body, and the other members of the pride had run off to the west.
- Sightings of the Mountain Pride have been scarce, with sightings being mainly in the mountains. They were also seen on the Mozambique border as far south as the lodges and even crossed into Mozambique a few times. They have not been recorded this far south for some years. They seem to be avoiding the threat posed by the new intruder males in the north. In the latter part of the month, they

were viewed in the central parts, hunting near the N'wanetsi River. On one occasion they managed to kill a blind buffalo calf.

- The ever-impressive Mananga Pride has been pushing into the central parts of the depression and were seen hunting the large herds of zebras. They managed to kill a warthog one evening and shortly thereafter a Mountain Pride lioness strolled into the Mananga Pride. They chased her into the mountains. The pride seems to be moving between Gundzane Dam and Mananga Trails in Kruger. It also seems like some of the lionesses have taken their cubs to hunt separately from the rest of the pride, probably to limit the competition because we have seen 18 together a couple of times.
- The Shish males are still around but it seems like their territory is slowly shrinking and becoming more like a fixed territory. They are under a lot of pressure from the new males.

Leopards

- The handsome Mbiri-Mbiri male leopard has continued to produce great photographic opportunities, mainly along the Xinkelengane drainage line. He was seen resting in trees on a few occasions.
- The Dumabana female is doing very well raising her two cubs in the area of Ntsimbisane, Dumbana, and Milkberry. Every time we locate her or her cubs we know that is going to be a good quality sighting and almost everyone on the game drive will be able to view them.
- The Euphobia male was also sighted a few times along Nwanetsi near the Euphobia crossing. He does not have an established territory yet, so his movements are between H6 and Nwanetsi River.

Wild dogs

- The pack of seven was regularly seen hunting impala. The sightings have been spread out across the entire concession.
- Another pack of six was also seen coming from Mozambique, in the area of Ostrich Link, Sisal, and Ntsimbisane. This has been a great month for us as we do not see wild dogs often in the concession and they have become a regular sighting in the past couple of weeks.

Spotted hyenas

- Xinkelengana Clan have moved north towards Golf Course Clearing. We think they might have moved because of the previous experience of the Mountain Pride spending time near the den-site. We have not located their new den-site yet, but we are suspecting the area north of the Golf Course Clearing.
- In other hyena sightings, single hyenas have been spotted around Rhino Skull, H6, Ntsimbisane, and Ostrich Link.
- In the evenings, when we drive back along Park Road, we have also come across a pair of hyenas in the area of Sticky Thorns.

Elephants

- Elephants have been seen almost all over the concession. We have enjoyed large groups of about 20 to 30 together. Most of the cows have youngsters and the herds are looking healthy and doing well.
- They have been sighted in the south along the Sweni River where guests were able to view them from the lodge, and all the way north into the basalt grassland.
- We have enjoyed beautiful sightings of the breeding herds feeding on the basalt grassland - the grass is still green and lush and they are making the most of the grasses and the fruiting marula trees.
- Some very large solitary bulls have been recorded along the H6 towards the lodge.

Buffalos

- A very large herd of buffalo was seen moving between the depression and west towards Kruger. They have been spending time along the Xinkelengana drainage line when they are in the concession, enjoying good grazing and water along the drainage.

- There have also been quite a few sightings of buffalo bulls. Four bulls are spending time around Scotia Pan and Nhlaguleni, and another solitary bull around Pony Pan.
- In the northern section, we have also seen a large herd of more than 150 buffalo.

Plains game

- We witnessed a zebra giving birth in the Kori Clearing grassland. The entire birth was viewed by one of our tracking teams from the beginning to the end when the foal dropped.
- Most general game sightings have been around Kori Clearings and the central depression area, with a good number of zebras, wildebeest, the ever-present impala harems, as well as many sounders of warthogs with little piglets.
- It has been challenging to spot the small antelope, like grysbok, this month because of the long grass. We recorded one sighting around Mbeki's Crossing.

Rare animals and other sightings

- One evening one of our guides went to the Poort and on their way back they spotted a very relaxed caracal in the open area of Tortilis Clearing- a very special sighting!
- African civet cubs have been sighted around Secret Pan.
- A regal sable antelope was seen close to the Mozambican border.

Birds

- Birdlife has been phenomenal with many migrants taking advantage of the abundance of insects after the early summer rain. The vibrant European roller has been being particularly plentiful.
- We have seen huge flocks of red-billed quelea flying around the plains feeding on grass seeds. This year, the quelea have established a colony south of the lodge, close to the border with Mozambique. The little birds and their woven nests have been targeted by marabou storks, lesser spotted eagles as well as Wahlberg's eagles waiting for the easiest of meals.
- Other migrants such as the Amur falcons and barn swallows have been seen feeding in preparation for their journeys back to the northern hemisphere.
- A pallid harrier was seen on a few occasions near the H6.



Verreaux's eagle-owl at sunset. Photo by Garry Bruce

Marula magic

By Garry Bruce

During the first months of the year, something rather interesting happens here in the bush. A very special tree is bearing fruit and it's not just any tree, it's the famous marula tree (*Sclerocarya birrea*). The genus name *Sclerocarya* means 'hard nut' and the species name *birrea* is derived from the word birr, the common name used in Senegal. The tree is called *Nkany* in the local Shangaan language.

On our concession here in the Kruger National Park, we do not have as many marula trees as our lodges do in the Sabi Sands and this is due to the tree's preference for more sandy soils - the dark clay basalt soils dominate here. Fortunately for us, the elephants have been a lot more prevalent than we have been used to in the past marula seasons and if you scan the grasslands from the Lebombo Mountains you will be rewarded with seeing some of the herds of elephants moving from one marula to the next.

The trees each produce hundreds of small green plum-like fruits that fall to the ground where they then ripen to a yellowish color. The fruit is highly nutritious and the taste is tart, sometimes sweet depending on the ripeness and, in my opinion, the tree. These little fruits pack a punch and have roughly eight times the vitamin C content than an orange, and lots of other antioxidants. There is a little edible nut in the center of the kernel and it has lots of protein and high levels of vitamin E.



The marula tree grows up to a sturdy 18 m (59 feet) tall and has a distinctive grey mottled bark with wide-spread branches.

The trees and the elephants have co-evolved with the elephants feeding on all parts of the tree from the roots to the leaves, but they also perform a vital function where they facilitate the germination of many of the seeds that they have eaten. So they certainly do cause damage to some trees but they help others to grow. The seeds go through a process of scarification, which is when the seed passes through the relatively poor elephant digestive system which then alters the coat of the seed and encourages germination, and this is then further facilitated by the fact that the seed is deposited in a smelly pile of compost!



The trees have many uses with a homemade jam preserve being one. But a favorite must be the cider or beer that the local Shangaan people so dearly love to make during these hot summer months. The fruit is collected and mixed with water then allowed to ferment for a few days. It is then transformed into a delicious, healthy, and rather refreshing alcoholic drink. The commercial liquor Amarula is made from the same fruits.

The relationship between the tree and alcohol does not end there. The “drunken elephant myth” is something that most guests believe to be true. However, science does not agree with this. Studies prove that elephants don’t usually eat the fermenting fruits - they seem to have more of a fondness for the ripe ones. The fruits take no more than two days to pass through the elephant’s digestive tract which would not be long enough for internal fermentation to take place. The studies show that they would also need to eat over 1 400 fermented fruits for enough alcohol to be produced for the elephant to feel any effects. All this being said, they do seem to show lots of excitement when savoring these little fruits and so the story of the intoxicated elephant will long remain in African folklore, and aptly so!



Hiding in the long grass

By Monika Malewski

It was a warm summer evening, the air still thick with the scent of elephants. We had just passed a family of giant pachyderms slowly feeding down the Lebombo hills towards the mighty N'wanetsi River. Their presence has been enjoyed all month, which is not typically the case during this time of the year, as most move westwards in search of marula fruit that blanket the ground with yellow surgery treats for all to enjoy.

The long and lush grasses have enticed many herbivores onto our concession and following closely behind them, the opportunistic felines. Of all the African cats, there is one that evokes a sense of awe when I am lucky enough to catch a glimpse of it, the regal caracal. The raw power in this medium-sized cat is unmatched. They are the fastest of all the smaller African cats and have powerful legs enabling them to leap over three metres to catch birds mid-air. They are resourceful generalists, and will also feed on rodents, hyraxes, mongooses, and small monkeys.

The sharply pointed ears with long black and white tufts are distinguishing features of these cinnamon-coloured cats, and it was that which caught my attention, as we made our way back towards the lodge after the most beautiful sunset from a high point on the mountains overlooking the river. We had just reached the open plain below the gorge, and in a quick movement of the spotlight, an odd shape on the side of the road caught my eye. It turned to face our vehicle and my heart skipped a beat. It was a young caracal! Not quite a kitten anymore, I estimated her to have recently left the care of her mother. They mature comparatively quickly, being independent at 10 to 12 months. She was very interested in something scuffling away into the grass and gracefully pounced, but missed what was possibly a rodent of some sort.

I edged the vehicle forward to take a closer look and to our amazement she remained still, her amber eyes peering up in curiosity. I have never had the privilege of photographing a caracal, but tonight was different. We shared a magic moment in silence, and as if it had all been a dream, then she turned and slinked off leaving only the fireflies glittering in the long grass.



February Gallery



Herd of impala. Photo by Solomon Ndlovu



Leopard tortoise. Photo by Solomon Ndlovu



Mbiri-Mbiri male leopard. Photo by Monika Malewski



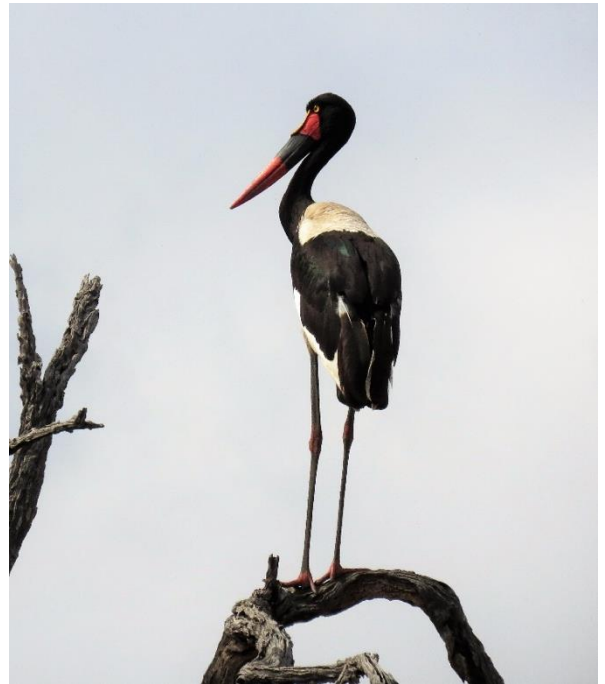
Mbiri-Mbiri male leopard. Photo by Gary Bruce



Shish lioness walks in front of Lebombo. Photo by Tovhi Mudau



African wild dogs. Photo by Monika Malewski



Blue-cheeked bee-eater Photo by Garry Bruce

Martial eagle. Photo by Gary Bruce.

Saddle-billed stork. Photo by Garry Bruce