

Singita



Photo By Rudi Hulshof

WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For January, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four

Temperature

Average minimum: 20.8°C (69.4°F)
Minimum recorded: 18.0°C (64.4°F)
Average maximum: 33.1°C (91.6°F)
Maximum recorded: 38.0°C (100°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 5.5 mm
Season to date: 432 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:20
Sunset: 18:43

A new month, a new year, new beginnings, same old beautiful location in the Kruger National Park. The N'wanetsi concession is abundant with tall green grass and lush woodland, the thick scent of the *Terminalia* trees cyclical flowering fills the air after heavy rains. Twice we have had the main rivers flooding and subsiding thanks to local and regional rainstorms. The marula trees are dropping their sweet fruit on a yellow and green carpet to the delight of all in need of something sweet.

A Sightings Snapshot for January follows:

Lions

- The new year has brought with it new cubs to the Mananga Pride. We have yet to see all of them together for an accurate head count, but a few of our guides have been spoilt with brief glimpses of a mother carrying a cub from one den-site to the next. There has been more of a presence from the

Mananga Pride this month with three females spending the majority of their time around the sticky thorns and in the drainage line below Green Apple Hill, as well different individuals seen around the Central Depression. All were seen with full bellies after feeding on a waterbuck bull near the end of the month.

- The Shish Pride, now a total of seven females and 14 cubs, were seen at the beginning of the month near the Granophyres. A few days later they moved west and were seen on the H6 near the S41. It appears that they have temporarily moved into the grasslands just west of our concession, perhaps taking advantage of the plethora of general game in that vicinity.
- The Trichardt males have mainly been seen on our concession boundary, along the H6 and S41. At the beginning of the month, one of the brothers was mating with a Mananga lioness, and then seen feeding on a wildebeest near Ostrich Link. Only towards the end of the month did we see the brothers reunited before heading west out of our concession. Hopefully, them spending so much time out of our concession means that they are keeping strange males away from the vulnerable new cubs in both the Mananga and Shish Prides.
- The absence of the Trichardt males in the northern half of the concession has meant that the Maputo male and Xai-Xai have felt confident enough to push south, and have been seen multiple times this month. Maputo was mating with an unknown lioness near Xinkelegane Fly Camp in the beginning of January, and Xai-Xai was seen following another female who did not seem to appreciate the company, growling at him when he got too close.

Leopards

- Mbiri-Mbiri was seen twice this month, first feeding on a warthog in a leadwood tree and later in the month eyeing out some impala from another leadwood tree near Figtree-link. He is starting to bulk out and the first signs of a dewlap are showing under his neck.
- Dumbana 3:3 has once again dominated the leopard sightings this month, moving all around our concession, probably trying to establish a territory for himself whilst avoiding the other dominant males in the area.
- Dumbana 1:1, preferring the mountainous areas east of the N'wanetsi River, has been seen a few times this month. Towards the end of the month, we spent a few hours watching him stalk impala, but with no success, unfortunately.
- Monzo male has been patrolling his usual route along N'wanetsi, north of the lodges, west into the Kruger Park, and back into the concession near Xingwenyana Crossing where he was seen sniffing around.
- The Lebombo male, sharing an overlap in the territory with Monzo in the area along the N'wanetsi River north of the lodges up to Ostrich Fly camp was seen multiple times this month. One afternoon he was seen chasing Monzo male westward away from an impala kill in a knob-thorn. Having already fed on the impala he soon gave up and allowed Monzo to feed, but growled at him from the base of the tree. More on this sighting in the bush stories below.
- The Gudzane female made an appearance this month in her usual area around the Gudzane Dam, resting in a large leadwood.
- Nhlanguleni female and her previous young female cub were seen on separate occasions.
- JJ female was seen moving along Nyala, now fully independent of her mother, yet still young enough to remain in her territory for the time being.
- The Dumbana female has finally reappeared, and now we know why she was hiding; she was looking after two adorable brand-new cubs. It seems as if they are old enough now to start eating meat and were found by one of our guides who had spotted Dumbana on a young impala kill and followed her up the ridge until she started calling, and the two cubs emerged from behind some rocks with inquisitive eyes.

African wild dogs

- We were treated to seven different sightings of wild dogs this month. The Floppy-ear Pack of seven adults and seven pups were seen hunting impala just east of the S41 in our concession and towards the end of the month again around S41 and H6. Four adults from another pack were seen on the Ostrich link and headed straight north. Perhaps this is the pack we see moving between Karingani Game Reserve in Mozambique and our concession?

Cheetahs

- A few cheetahs have been seen on the H6 on the way to the airstrip. A subadult was seen mid-way through the month along the S41, calling for its mother before heading east into our concession. At the end of the month, three cubs were seen, estimated to be roughly seven or eight months old. The last time we saw them was in October, so we're happy to see they are all alive and well.

Spotted hyenas

- Spotted hyenas were spotted a record 27 times this month! The majority of sightings have been of lone individuals strolling down the roads with an apparent sense of direction and destination. A few times an individual was drifting behind the wild dogs that were subsequently chased away when it got too close. A clan of five were seen in the Central Depression vocalising and greeting. The same clan, then with six individuals, were seen a few days later north of Warthog Pan. The southern clan were found resting together on the Sisal Line, and a desperate hyena lay waiting nearby the leopards' impala carcass.

Elephants

- Despite marula season being in full swing and our expectation of seeing fewer elephants as they move west in search of the juicy fruit, we have experienced the opposite and the beginning of this month saw an incredulous gathering of herds in the central western plains around an area we call Kori Clearings (due to the amount of kori bustard sightings we have there). One guide and tracker team counted over 400 individuals that afternoon. A large portion of these were seen a few days later further north and then again further south in the Central Depression.
- One afternoon we encountered multiple breeding herds along the N'wanetsi River. We estimated over 100 elephants were spread out in the river and along its banks, including a small bachelor herd and a large bull in musth causing havoc amongst the females with young calves.
- A particularly large elephant bull with impressive tusks has been wandering between the plains east of Ntoma and back down to the Central Depression around Warthog Pan demanding respect from anyone brave enough to stand in his way.

Buffalos

- A breeding herd of between 200 to 300 individuals has been roaming the grasslands around Nyeleti, Mangwa and the Xinkelegane Fly Camp. There are multiple calves of various ages, and most of the buffalo are looking strong and healthy after the rains have brought back the thick leafy and nutritious grasses.

Plains game

- The warthogs are back, a few stout lone boars munching on the long grass and sounders of mothers with tiny piglets running after their tails comically sticking straight up above the grass.
- Zebra herds numbering up to 100 can be seen in the open plains accompanied by dozens of wildebeest, impala and the odd black-backed jackal trotting up and down looking for any small rodent or spurfowl to torment. Most species have given birth, with only one or two "laat lammetjies" (late lambs) scattered amongst the herds. With the height of the grasses over one-and-a-half metres in

some areas, most of the plains game are crowded into the last remaining short grassed areas and sodic sites, making for spectacular game viewing in these areas.

Rare animals and other sightings:

- After the heavy rains north of our concession caused the N’wanetsi River to flood, the weir became a hub of activity as fish unable to fight the current were washed over the bridge and into the jaws of hungry crocodiles waiting on the side downstream of the weir. At least eight crocodiles were counted on one occasion.
- Two sables were spotted in the north-eastern section one morning, and the female eland is still being spotted amongst the zebra herds.
- Two serval kittens were seen one afternoon near the sticky thorns briefly before returning into the thickets, and a caracal was seen feeding on the remains of an impala lamb on N’wanetsi big bend.

Birds:

- The red-billed quelea have begun to set up their breeding colonies with thousands of birds nesting along Sisal and fence lines. One colony is near Pan-link, and another large colony is forming from the fence line and Nyokena junction to Nsimbitsana. Many lesser-spotted eagles are in attendance along the fence line.
- Along the eastern sections of Mbatsane, our northernmost boundary, all the way up to Big-view Hill, is another draw-dropping colony. More about these wonderous birds in the bush stories below.



Nile Crocodile – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

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

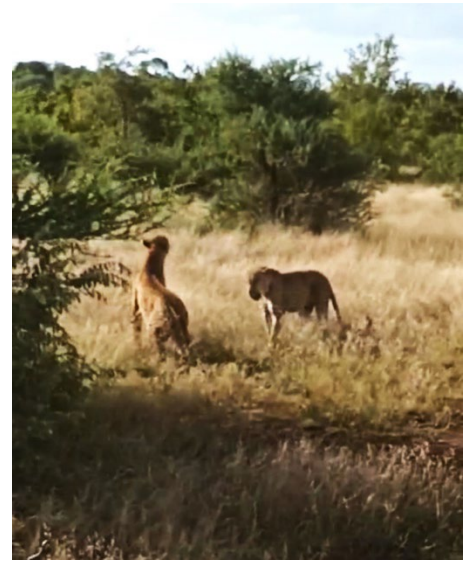
It was a typically warm and very humid summer afternoon and the last thing I expected to see was a spotted hyena. I had decided to drive along the N’wanetsi River, hoping to find animals moving to and from the water, specifically elephants. I was so surprised when I glanced over my left shoulder and staring back at me from underneath a dense sickle bush were the deep black eyes of a spotted hyena. It took me a couple of seconds to comprehend and I had to reverse a few metres back to confirm what I had seen. I started doubting myself, and then suddenly the hyena lifted her head and we all exclaimed with surprise. I edged closer until eventually; we could see that the individual was feeding on something small and unidentifiable. Not even two minutes after I switched the engine off, Sunday said he could hear an impala alarm calling just west of us. We listened carefully and took off in search of the impala. We found him quite quickly and when he didn’t even dare to look up at us, for fear of losing sight of something else, I knew there was a large predator nearby. Swinging our heads in the direction the impala ram was snorting towards, we spotted him; the Monzo male leopard!

He was lying in the shade of a raisin bush, panting from the heat. A few moments later he stood up and slowly walked past the vehicle towards a knobthorn thicket. As he passed by the front right side of my vehicle his posture changed, he stood stiff, then turned suddenly and trotted back in the direction from which he had come. We glanced to our right, and Sunday exclaimed, “Another leopard!”. The regal Lebombo male leopard, standing taller than Monzo, strode past the front of our vehicle and on seeing Monzo’s retreat, took up chase after him. I quickly turned the Landcruiser around and we stopped in an open clearing just as the two leopards connected in a growling ball of territorial dispute. Realising Lebombo male was ultimately more experienced and slightly larger than him, Monzo backed down. Lebombo wasn’t satisfied with just this, however, and followed Monzo west until they both lay down in the shade about 200 metres from one another. The drool was seeping from Lebombo’s mouth as he panted. His stomach was protruding, and we now knew why the hyena was around.



Lebombo Male – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

Monzo was looking quite hungry, his waistline far more visible than the satiated Lebombo. He stood up and walked a large circle around where Lebombo was resting, bee-lining for the same knobthorn thicket we saw Lebombo emerge from earlier. He went straight up into one of the larger trees and started greedily feeding on the remains of an impala ewe. Lebombo by this point had followed him to the base of the tree, hissing and snarling at his rival. It appeared as though he had already fed enough and as such did not feel the need to chase Monzo out of the tree. He did however scrape his hind paws through the dirt, urinating at the same time, to leave his scent behind as a territorial marker. A piece of the rib cage fell to the earth next to Lebombo, the sound attracting the attention of the spotted hyena, who came to investigate, only to backpedal as quickly as he had arrived. At the same time, Lebombo stood up and moved a few metres away to crunch on the last of the soft ribs.



Lebombo male (left) with his head held high, laterally displaying and Monzo male (right), ears back in submission – Screenshot from video by Sunday Ndlovu.

Besides the loud cracks of bone crunching and malicious glances every so often, the atmosphere had settled, both leopards temporarily tolerating the other's presence. The sun began to sink below the pink and orange clouds on the western horizon. The birds sang their final chorus before evening set in.

Monzo had by now finished the leftover scraps and descended from the tree. Lebombo jolted up, having suddenly lost all his patience, and gave one final chase to get Monzo out of his territory. This time Monzo did not stop, and we watched as he ran off into the sunset. The Lebombo male lowered his head and sawed loudly.



Another male leopard who's been keeping an eye on proceedings this month – the Confluence male – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Red-billed quelea male in full breeding plumage – photo by SKNP guides

It's that time of the year again when the rolling and dancing clouds of these little seed devourers make their appearance here at Singita Kruger National Park. With an estimated breeding population of +/- 1.5 billion, the red-billed quelea is possibly the most abundant bird species in the world and a common occurrence during the spring and summer months.

Irruptions:

Described also as the most destructive birds in the world, they are considered uncontrollable pests by grain farmers and can cause havoc on their crop production. The reason for this is that the bird has shifted its attention from indigenous grasses to cereal crops in agricultural areas and large flocks can consume up to 500 000 kg of seed in a day. But to naturists and conservationists, they indicate a healthy ecosystem and bountiful land especially when their irruptions reach the millions.

Irruptions occur when birds move in massive numbers into new areas, generally in response to drought or short food supplies. Notorious for this, hundreds of thousands of red-billed quelea move from one area to another in enormous, plague-like flocks numbering tens of thousands, earning it the name “feathered locust”.

Colonies:

At the time of writing this report, we can confirm at least four large established colonies within this concession, with all four occurring in the upper north and east areas of Bejane, Nsimbitsana, Big View Hill and Sisal Line north of Nsimbitsana Junction. These are the colonies which we know of but there are certain to be more which we haven't discovered yet. Interestingly, one of the largest colonies ever found was on the Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve in Zimbabwe, where Singita Pamushana is located, which measured a staggering 20 km long and 1 km wide.

The concession has an abundance of different varieties of lush indigenous grasses at the moment which are attracting the large flocks to the area. Spectacular ‘roller feeding’ movement can be witnessed when large flocks feed on seed on the ground, with individuals continually flying over from the back and landing ahead of those on the ground in front. A variety of terrestrial and aerial insects are also taken to supplement their diet.

Each colony is a hive of activity and they have provided prolonged entertainment for our guests as the little birds go about their daily excursions. The colonies are generally being built in *Senegalia* thorn thickets such as knobthorn and Delagoa thorn trees, with each tree containing hundreds if not thousands of nests. Nest building is swift and they are fully constructed within 2 to 3 days by the male. This species is monogamous and it is amazing that both the male and female can locate each other in the middle of the swarm. Being highly colonial and breeding within the colony closely synchronized, all birds may leave the area within 41 days of the first nesting. Chicks develop incredibly quickly and young birds fledge at +/- two weeks, are fully independent at three weeks and sexual maturity is reached in one year. While in the nest, parents will feed the nestlings seeds and insects, with the latter consisting between 35 to 50% of their diet. When not breeding, they are nomadic, occurring mainly in dry thornveld and mixed bushveld.

Predators:

The sheer number of queleas at the moment is creating a feeding buffet for all sorts of predators, both aerial and terrestrial. Steppe and lesser spotted eagles as well as gabar goshawks are never too far from the colonies. Historically, a wide variety of predators other than birds have also been recorded at colonies such as egg-eating snakes, rock monitor lizards which feed on the eggs and chicks in the nests. Being opportunistic, lions and leopards have also been recorded.

As already mentioned, being classed as a pest by farmers, millions are culled annually to try and control their numbers. These methods include aerial spraying of avicide poisons and fires and/or explosions at roosts. Other methods used involve the harvesting of chicks for food by local people. Up to 400 bags, with a 50 kg capacity, can be filled with chicks per day.

As a result, the annual mortality rate is in the region of 100 million birds. Despite this high number, quelea populations are remarkably resilient and there is no long-term effect, due in part to their nomadic wanderings in search of food and their rapid breeding cycle.

The mystery of the murmuration:

For a long time, it was not fully understood how each bird knew which way to move. The mystery of the murmuration was a fascinating example of a natural phenomenon that hid secrets about the world that scientists had yet to uncover.

The answer to this is due to an interesting phenomenon known as allelomimetic behaviours. This refers to the tendency of members of the same species to imitate each other's behaviours, particularly shown in activities such as feeding, bathing, contact-calling, fleeing and so on. The perfect example of this is at a feeding tray where, as soon as one member of a flock of birds descends to feed, the rest of the flock follows quickly. The same happens at a water source, be it a natural pan, mud wallow or river edge: it takes only one individual to start bathing to set others off also, and it is not confined only to birds of the same species. For example, a red-billed quelea starting to bathe in a puddle will attract conspecifics as well as different species, i.e. whydahs, sparrows, waxbills and firefinches to bathe in the same puddle within a few minutes.

Close coordination between the activities of members of the flock is seen in the extreme precision with which flocks of the red-billed quelea fly. The whole flock moves as if by command, but the only command available to the birds is the visual stimulus of one bird changing direction. So strong is the allelomimetic programming of these birds that their response is immediate and complete.

A similar phenomenon that feeding or drinking flocks perform, is the so-called 'dread'. While drinking at the edge of a water source or foraging on the ground for seeds, an entire flock of red-billed quelea will take off and perch in a tree from, no apparent outside signal. The apparent adaptive significance of dreads is to keep the

birds alert to danger on the principle that ‘if there isn’t any danger, there might have been, so keep your escape behaviours sharpened.’



A comparatively ‘small’ flock of red-billed quelea displaying allelomimetic and dread behaviour – photos by Rudi Hulshof.

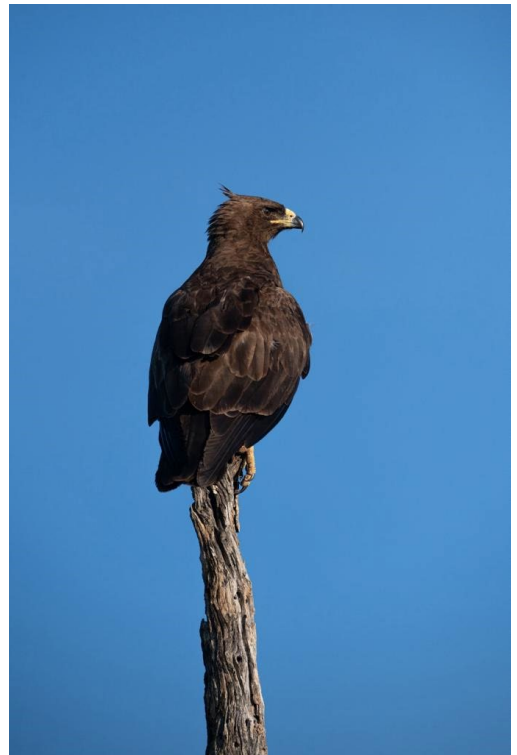
January Gallery



Mananga Pride with new cub – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



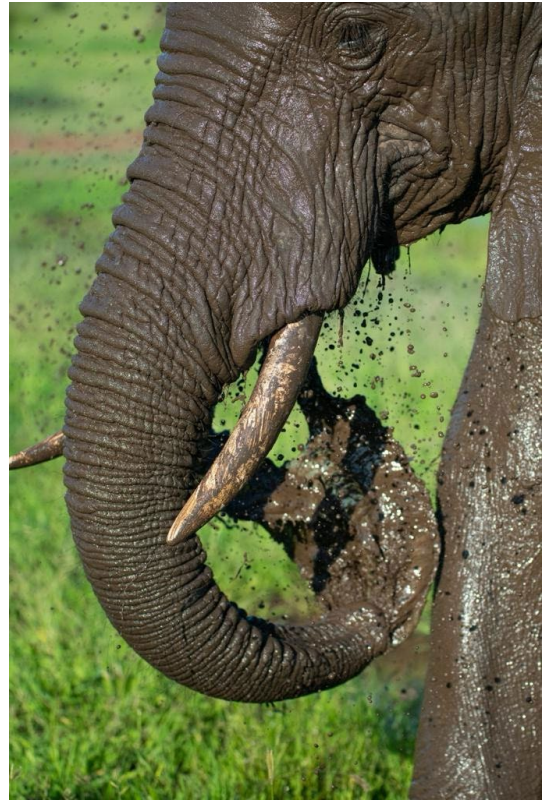
Vervet Monkey – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Wahlberg's Eagle – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Zebra with foal – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Elephant mud wallowing – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



One of the Dumbana leopard cubs – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Cape buffalo – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



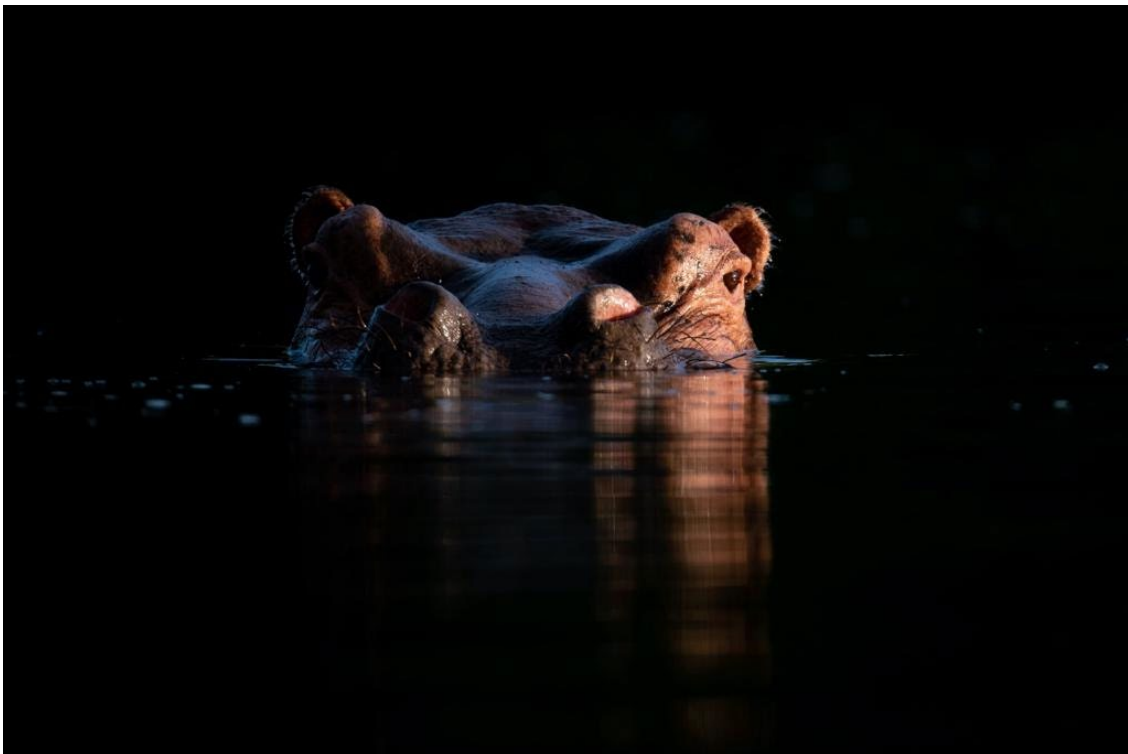
Shish Pride - Photo by Bill Drew



Nhlanguleni female – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Elephant bull – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Hippopotamus – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Elephant calf – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

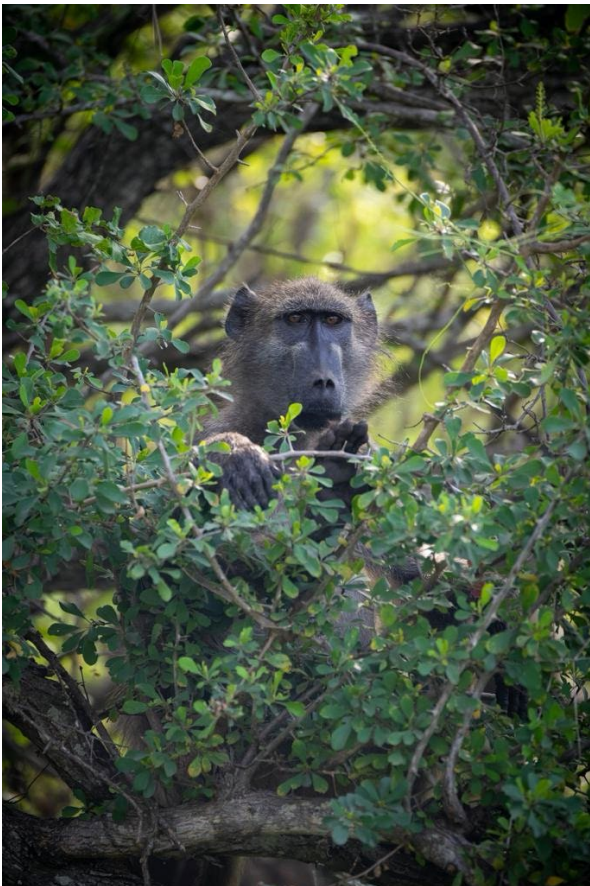


Maputo Male – Photo by Bill Drew



Cheetah cub – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

Chacma baboon – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Elephant calf – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

