

# Singita



Elephants in the basalt grasslands - Photo by Monika Malewski

## WILDLIFE JOURNAL

### SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA

For the month of February, Two Thousand and Twenty-Five

#### Temperature

Average minimum: 23.3°C (73.9°F)  
Minimum recorded: 21.0°C (69.8°F)  
Average maximum: 33.7°C (92.6°F)  
Maximum recorded: 40.0°C (104°F)

#### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 103 mm  
Season to date: 400 mm  
(\*Season = Oct to Sept)

#### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05h45  
Sunset: 18h25

February at Singita Kruger National Park has been marked by frequent rain, with downpours every few days and gentle drizzles softening the landscape. The ground is saturated and slippery, making traversing the concession a challenge. The wet conditions have brought an abundance of butterflies and the delicate, golden silk threads of orb webs stretching across trees. Dense vegetation makes animal sightings less prolific, but with the cats often frequenting the roads, we catch occasional glimpses of the elusive leopards. Toward the end of the month, the ground rumbled with a magnitude 3.5 earthquake near Maputo, Mozambique, just 13 km (8 miles) away from the South African border, adding an unexpected twist to the month's experiences.

## A Sightings Snapshot for February follows:

### Lions

- On the second of this month, the Shish Pride finally returned after more than six weeks away, teasing us with only their tracks near the Mozambican border. All 14 were accounted for initially, but now they seem to have split up. The reasons are only speculative, but there have been tracks and audio for male lions nearby, as well as the Mananga Pride, and potentially Sonop males, in the area the Shish Pride was last seen. Due to the fact that a few of the Shish Pride cubs are still under two years old, they are still vulnerable to attack by any unrelated males, and this is why their movements are erratic, unpredictable and keep us guessing as to where they might be. One evening we even encountered them on the road just south of our staff village, a twenty-minute drive from the lodge. A few days later they were back on our concession boundary (S41).
- Three adult Shish females and one sub-adult are spending their time on/near to our concession, whereas the remaining ten, have moved further west, resting in the early hours on the H6 past the Sonop waterhole.
- The Mananga Pride spent the first week around the central areas near prominent drainage lines before heading back west out of our concession. With the extraordinary amount of rain received so far this season, all of the pans, even the slightest depressions made from elephants stepping into soft mud, are holding water. The grass has grown, trees are fruiting, and this means that most animals have dispersed, making hunting that much more challenging. Where one might think the lions have an advantage of increased cover, they themselves cannot even see above the tall grass and their prey cleverly stick to open areas to avoid ambush.
- Towards the end of the month, they returned to their usual hunting grounds around the sticky thorns, and headed back west, out of our concession. The grass just west of our boundary road is shorter, attracting more general game. And this is why we believe they, as well as the Shish Pride, are spending more time in those areas.
- The Chava Pride's two older cubs, now almost a year old, have been spotted by themselves around the N4. We have not seen the newest cubs again since last month, but it is not uncommon for mothers to move den sites to prevent parasite build up.
- The three Sonop males seem to have officially settled in the north-western sections of our concession, taking advantage of the plethora of game on the short-grassy plains north of the Gudzane Dam.

### Leopards

- At the beginning of the month Kalanga male was found feeding on an impala ewe in a beautiful weeping boer-bean tree (*Schotia brachypetala*), where he remained for the next couple days. After that he followed the N'wanetsi River out of our concession and into Kruger National Park.
- The Dumbana leap have taken advantage of the short grass plains along the Ntsibistane drainage, where large herds of impala take refuge in the evenings. One ram however, was not able to escape her experienced cunningness and the family of three feasted on it for a few days at the beginning of the month.
- A shy female managed to haul a large impala ewe into the fork of a striking leadwood tree. We spotted her at night as she jumped out of the tree, disappearing into the long grass.
- One afternoon, an adult kudu cow lay motionless on the road. On further inspection we saw two bite marks on her neck and later that afternoon a male leopard sprinted out the long grass. The next morning four of the Shish lionesses lay full-bellied near the carcass after moving off to digest the meal in the long grass.
- In an amazing show of his skills, and keen eyesight, one of our experienced trackers noticed a piece of hide dangling from the lower branch of a long-tailed cassia, about 200 metres from the road. On closer inspection we found a hyena still wandering around, waiting for scraps to fall, meaning there was a very good chance the leopard was still in the area. We inspected every shady patch in the vicinity, with no luck. On returning to the road, he looked back over his shoulder. "There's the leopard!" he exclaimed, and on the other side of the road, about 400 metres away, was the silhouette of a leopard sleeping on the branch of a beautiful jackal-berry tree. It was Masia male, his golden amber eyes, and single spot above his right whiskers giving away his identity.

### **Cheetahs**

- These beautiful spotted cats prefer shorter grasslands at this time of the year, to avoid accidentally bumping into the other larger predators, so unfortunately have been scarce this month.

### **African wild dogs**

- The trio of wild dogs roamed the southern stretch of the concession near the lodges during the first week of February before swiftly heading further south once more.
- It's that time of year again, and one of our guiding teams were in the right place at the right time, seeing a pair mating in the far northern open area aptly named Golf Course Clearings. During their intimate moment, they were distracted by a large herd of impala. They darted across the plains, the impala appearing to fly as they leapt away in all directions. Unfortunately for the dogs, they were going to have to wait for the afternoon before they could eat. They had missed their opportunity and by now the sun was beating down. All they could do was have a quick dip in the muddy pools and take refuge under a large guarri bush.
- At the end of the month the Floppy-ear Pack returned, being seen initially near Lebombo Lodge, then followed the N'wanetsi River south and east towards the Mozambican border.

### **Spotted hyenas**

- This month saw many single individuals skulking down the roads, and a clan of five feeding on unidentifiable remains of something most likely killed by the Shish Pride. The lions had been lying around the same area the day before, panting as their full bellies only allowed for shallow breaths.
- A single individual sniffed out an impala carcass hoisted by the Masia male leopard into a long-tailed cassia and waited patiently for scraps to fall.
- The den-site in the granophyre ridge is still active, as we are seeing many adult females with obvious signs of nursing.

### **Elephants**

- The current height of the grass is perfect for the elephants. Their trunks curl around clumps, pulling the grass with the sound of blades sliding out of their sheaths as they feed slowly in a steady direction.
- A few very large bulls in musth paraded the open grasslands, seeking any female in oestrus to court and procreate.

### **Buffalos**

- A large herd of roughly 300 strong moved across the H6. Currently the open basalt plains offer more security than the well-wooded areas of the Lebombo mountains, meaning that only a handful of solitary bulls are sighted around our concession.
- A few large herds wandered into our concession from the northern boundary towards the end of the month.

### **Plains game**

- The only places we see general game now, is in the open areas with grass short enough for them to see any ambushing predators. Impala, zebra, wildebeest, warthogs and giraffe congregate together, taking advantage of each other's unique abilities to see and hear any approaching threats. A few late impala lambs, and wildebeest calves frolic amongst them, while the ones born last year begin to show the sharp tips of growing horns.

### **Rare animals and other sightings**

- On the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, one of our guiding teams came across what appeared to be a pink elephant amongst a larger herd passing by a prominent pan. This is extremely rare, and is not a distinct separate species, but is rather due to a genetic condition marked by a lack of melanin, the pigment responsible for the colour of skin, hair, and eyes. In elephants, this absence of melanin results in pale skin. Instead of being pure white, their skin often appears a soft reddish-brown, and when wet, it can take on a light pink hue. The pink colour becomes more prominent when the skin is damp or when sunlight reflects off the pale surface. Albino elephants also have light-coloured eyelashes and toenails, further setting them apart from their darker-skinned relatives.
- A mother civet and her two kittens casually walked down the road one evening, just long enough for us to catch a glimpse. As nocturnal creatures, civets are already a rare sight, so seeing their young is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for some.

### **Birds**

- With all the rainwater having filled every pan and depression, we have seen a corn crakes fly up out of the reeds on a few occasions. An African crane was also spotted in a pan in the basalt plains surrounded by beautiful long red oat and guinea grass.
- A pair of pygmy geese enjoyed the serenity of the N'wanetsi River near to where it flows into Mozambique.
- A coqui francolin sang proudly, and even showed itself for a few seconds before disappearing again into the long grass.
- A family of six ground-hornbills perched high up on a dead leadwood, called together. Their eerie deep "dudu.. dudu.....dududu" resonating through the savanna.
- A Marico flycatcher and spotted thick-knee, two birds not often seen, made an appearance this month.

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

Summer at Singita Kruger National Park, and the area feels like something from a fairy tale. We have had a fair amount of rain, which was well received after the heat waves that drained us in the early days of December 2024. The rivers which had been flowing gently through the dry season dropped even lower than they had been in the winter months, and the vegetation which had been tricked into thinking the dry season had turned from brown to green, very quickly went back to brown again.

Now, we are grateful to see the beautiful green grasses have become thick and lush, blowing gently in the wind with all the different shapes and sizes of the inflorescences, which will give way to an array of seeds and tassels, all part of the plants attempt to propagate and spread in the short growing season. The herds of elephants that decided not to move west for the marulas have been revelling in the abundance of the season.



The trees and bushes are also full of their deep green foliage, flowers and eventually seeds and fruit are emerging on the ends of the branches adding beautiful splashes of deep purples, bright yellows and juicy greens. The baboon and vervet monkeys are spending their days foraging in the trees and the brown-headed parrots and African green pigeons call happily and with full bellies from the fig and jackalberry trees.

The birds are not the only ones calling happily, there is an abundance of life that emerges on those hot days following the small bouts of rain, and tries desperately to seize the opportunity to mate while conditions allow. Crickets and katydids “chip” and “chrrr” and the cicadas fill the hottest hours with a constant “bzzzz” and then, as the evening falls and the temperature cools, the frogs have their turn.





Every drainage line across the reserve has a soft trickle of water flowing downstream towards the main river, the N'wanetsi, which flows in front of the lodge and snakes its way out into Mozambique. But now the rivers are not the only places for aquatic life to thrive. Every little stream, every mud wallow that has grown in size little-by-little year after year, even the puddles on the road hold life, especially frogs and toads.



These little creatures are a very special addition to our summer chorus, as you drive along a road you know where the little puddles are, not because you can see or smell them, but you can hear them, a seemingly

constant din of calling. What's interesting is that the calling is not truly constant, it only sounds so because of a behaviour known as 'time-sharing' where multiple frogs in an area call at slightly different times from their little spots to enable the females to find where the specific male that is attracting her is sitting. If all the males called at the same time, the females would be unable to pinpoint where her suitor was positioned, and therefore may not have the opportunity to mate with the male whose call she found most appealing, an important part of mate selection.



The success of their breeding is also very dependent on the environment, especially the availability of water as their eggs are externally fertilized and then require an aquatic environment to develop, as do the tadpoles as they start their metamorphic progression. This is where all these small water sources become so important: if all the frogs in the area were forced to breed only in the river, the survival rate of the offspring would surely be far less, as there are far more predators in permanent water sources. Little temporary puddles could be much safer, as long as the water lasts.





This is where frogs also become such an important indicator species in an area and symbols of conservation. They are one of the first to suffer when an area struggles with pollution or deterioration due to human activity and global climate change. Not only is their breeding heavily affected, but the adults themselves are incredibly sensitive to environmental pollutants. So, we count ourselves very lucky to have such a thriving amphibian population, as it indicates a healthy and balanced environment, something that many areas across the globe are not lucky enough to have.

In the last 500 years, there have been 777 known extinctions across the globe, most being attributed to the effects of human activity and influence. There are believed to be even more which have gone extinct before having been identified by scientists... So among other animals in the same situations, many species of frogs and toads are so specific to their environment that they exist nowhere else on earth. Now, because of humans, their very specific environments have been altered, no longer able to provide them with a suitable habitat, and so the species as a whole disappears, sometimes without anyone even noticing they were there in the first place.





It was a particularly warm summer afternoon, with rain having fallen the day before and more predicted for the coming days, creating a dense and humid atmosphere. It was the kind of afternoon that wraps around you like a warm blanket, the light filtering through making it as beautiful as ever. The bush was alive with the sound of frogs calling and an array of insects all around us.

We had been driving around for quite some time, crossing over the N’wanetsi River and clambering through drainage lines in search of any sign of a leopard, but to no avail. As the light started to fade and the temperature finally dropped to a more comfortable degree, the colour of the sky changed before our eyes, and a masterpiece painting of rich, warm, golden clouds appeared. It felt as if Africa was holding its breath, waiting for something magical to happen.

I decided we should look in one more area, one last hope for the elusive cat. We came around a bend, dropped down into a river crossing, my trackers eyes scanning through every bush and tree. All of a sudden, I see his posture change, a flicker of movement caught his eye and without saying anything, he raises his hand telling me to stop. I turned off the engine of the cruiser, he turns around and whispers, “leopards”.



Dumbana’s female cub – Photo by Graeme Stuart

There they were—not just one, but two leopards—lying in the cool, wet sand, gazing directly at us. The ultimate definition of beauty. I believe we all held our breath, and perhaps even shed a few tears, as we took in the sight. Over the past few weeks, it had been a challenge to find these animals due to the chest-high grass and the dispersion of prey. So, for us, this moment felt perfect; everything was perfect.

As we sat and watched the two leopards, they stalked, ambushed and jumped onto each other. This is how they learn the skills needed to be a successful leopard. We decided to change our position and try get another view of these cats. We were lucky enough to drive into the drainage line where they were playing and could sit and watch them for over an hour. In that time, if a full sentence was spoken, it was a lot. Everyone was in complete awe, not just of what we were watching, but also of what we were a part of.

As the temperature began to drop, the leopards grew increasingly curious about our presence and decided to investigate. They crept through the grass and climbed onto fallen branches to get a clearer view of us, remaining elusive yet incredibly brave at the same time. Their mother's features were evident in both of these magnificent animals.

We sat there for a while, watching as the setting sun dipped below the horizon. The warmth of the evening gradually gave way to the coolness of night, while the bush remained as alive as ever. What felt like only five minutes had actually been over an hour, but we knew we had been granted a rare glimpse into the lives of these elusive cats - a moment we would never forget.



Dumbana's male cub – Photo by Graeme Stuart



February Gallery



Dumbana female – Photo by Graeme Stuart



Water thick-knee – Photo by Monika Malewski

Carmine bee-eater – Photo by Graeme Stuart





African buffalo – Photo by Bradwin Ardendorff

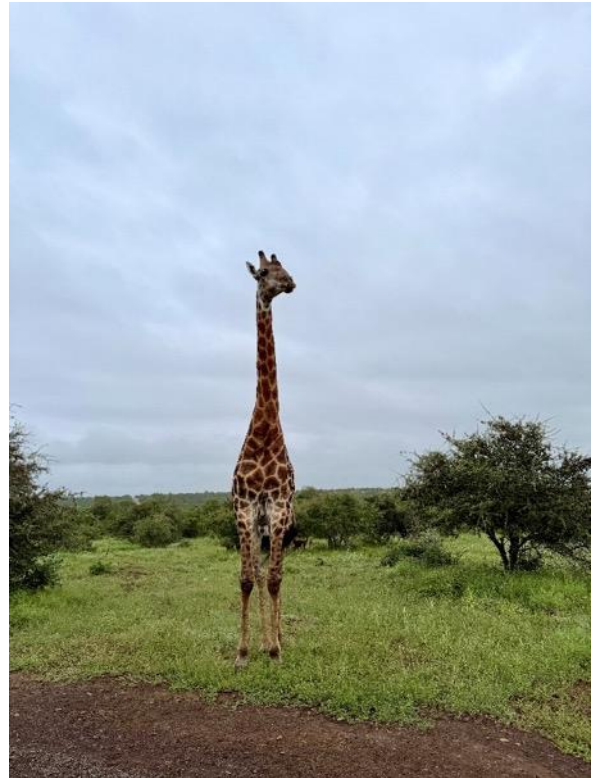


Leopard on the granophyre ridge – Photo by Bradwin Ardendorff





Swainson's spurfowl – Photo by Damin Dallas



Giraffe – Photo by Damin Dallas

Dumbana male cub – Photo by Graeme Stuart





Elephant – Photo by Graeme Stuart

Lion tracks – Photo by Damin Dallas



Sonop male lion – Photo by Damin Dallas







Nightjar – Photo by Matt Holland

Nile crocodile – Photo by Matt Holland





Masia male – Photo by Monika Malewski

Sonop male – Photo by Monika Malewski

