

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT
SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE
For the month of July, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four

Temperature

Average minimum: 11.9°C (53.4°F)
Minimum recorded: 06.4°C (43.5°F)
Average maximum: 29.6°C (85.2°F)
Maximum recorded: 33.7°C (92.6°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0 mm
Season to date: 350.6 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:24
Sunset: 17:35

The bushveld has changed to her winter wardrobe of shades of gold and there've been some overcast days that we consider cold, but overall we've been enjoying glorious high-season sunshine. Thirsty vegetation is sparse, and animals are drawn to waterholes and rivers, making for excellent game viewing. The cooler weather and clearer landscape is now ideal for guided bush walks – one of our favourite activities. Another highlight is the clear night skies, offering great conditions for spectacular stargazing.

A sightings snapshot for July follows:

Lions

- Southern Pride: Members of this pride have been spending time around Hwata Pan in the north of their territory. They had a buffalo kill to the east of the pan. It was a treat to watch them feed on the carcass – eating at different times, giving each other the opportunity to feed. There were two

lionesses and three males of about six years of age. Between feasting they sat in the shade panting. Afterwards they were seen drinking, full-bellied, at the pan.

- Nduna Pride: Three males and two lionesses were seen at Nduna, and two pairs were mating.
- In the central area there was a pride of three that killed a buffalo on the eastern side of Banyini.

Leopards

- There have been excellent leopard sightings along the West Valley Road and also at the harbour. Leopard mothers have been seen with cubs, although it is hard to say precisely how many they have as it seems some are shyer than others at showing themselves. Young adult females have been seen, as well as males. On the Hippo Valley side of Chiredzi River a bib male was seen trying to hunt impala.

Wild dogs

- The pack of five adults that denned in the south-west have been doing a great job of raising their eight pups. Guests have relished watching the pack, including one occasion when the alpha male was on babysitting duty while the other adults were out hunting.
- The larger pack that denned in the north have been seen in that area, on one occasion with pups. In the weeks to come the pups should be running with the pack and then we'll have a better idea of how many there are.

Hyenas

- Hyenas are seen patrolling the roads at dawn and dusk. One individual was seen with wounds on its back legs, so it seems there has been an altercation of some sort.

Rhinos

- Rhino Ops have been underway this month, which is when young rhinos are ear-notched to enable scouts and researchers to recognise every rhino individually. Being able to gather information on rhinos at this level of detail ensures that population estimates are accurate and that social dynamics are understood. With this information at hand Malilangwe is confident in sending two more compatible white rhinos to Imvelo's Community Rhino Conservation Initiative. Partnerships like this reinstate rhinos to ranges that they have been extinct from for decades, they awaken awareness of the value of conserving landscapes and species for local communities, and they hedge conservation bets by spreading risk.
- Black rhino sightings have been excellent – on one occasion five were seen together. Other sightings have included these curious animals coming to inspect a vehicle from over 100 metres away.
- White rhino sightings are guaranteed. Highlights this month were watching a bull fastidiously mark his territory, and seeing a mother with a very young calf.

Elephants

- Now is the time of year that elephant bulls turn their attention to trees in order to get enough nutrients. We watched as a lone elephant bull ate from an umbrella thorn that he had pushed over. On another occasion two bulls pushed over a mopane tree to feed on its small soft branches. It was also fascinating to watch two elephant bulls feeding on palm leaves – the way they held the palm leaves with their trunks and then used their feet to help pull the leaves.
- The breeding herds have been found along the banks of the Chiredzi River, or at the dams. Following one elephant crossing Binya Road it disappeared into thick bush, then emerged at Sosigi Dam where over 100 elephants had gathered.

Buffalos

- A large cloud of dust is a tell-tale sign that a herd of buffalos is on their way to water. Arriving at the source before they do, and getting your own beverage organised, is a great way of enjoying these characterful animals.

Plains game

- Now that the vegetation has thinned out and water is scarce, we are seeing a lot of plains game, especially the shy species such as Lichtenstein hartebeest, eland and sable.

Boat cruise

- The cruises are as idyllic as always. A special observation was seeing a fish eagle catch a tigerfish, then flying off with it and perching in a tree. The fish wriggled vigorously in an attempt to escape but the eagle made sure it went nowhere other than down its throat, bit by bit.

Fishing

- Despite the cold water there have been some good catches of bream, and a couple of tigerfish landed.

Photographic hide

- Sometimes you arrive at the hide and no animals arrive to drink for hours – it could be the weather, or the possibility of predators in the area, or enough water elsewhere, or too much disturbance. But if your luck is in it is the most wonderful spectacle. One of the highlights this month was watching elephants splashing impalas as a way of chasing them away from drinking.

Walks & rock art

- It's the best time to walk, and our walks often incorporate a rock art site or two, or some other impressive feature like a gigantic baobab. A highlight of one walk was coming across an adult female sable on her own, and a closer look showed that she was lactating so probably had a newborn calf hidden nearby.

Daytrips to Gonarezhou National Park

- It's a treat to see the park in her winter colours, dotted here and there with groups of grey in the form of elephant herds.

Some bush stories follow, as well as the July Gallery.

Heavily pregnant

The best time for white rhino activity at waterholes is usually late afternoon, sunset and evening, so I was quite surprised to see a huge white rhino lumbering up to the waterhole at dawn, with a smaller rhino in tow. The large cow, thanks to ear-notching identification, was the rhino “Mahlupeka”, one of The Malilangwe Trust’s original cows that were purchased and relocated from KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa around the turn of the century, for the (now highly successful) rhino programme. In these photos she's with her son “Mungana”. Being heavily pregnant she probably chose to drink at dawn, avoiding any possibly boisterous activity from other rhinos. She just needed peace and quiet in the final weeks of her long, approximately 16-month, pregnancy. Since these photos were taken she has given birth to a new calf - her 11th calf born on the reserve!



Her son Mungana has a big transition to make. He’s probably been at his mother’s side for about two to three years, but Mahlupeka will not want him around when she has a tiny newborn to look after. Mungana would have been weaned when he was a year to a year-and-a-half old. At this sighting his mom wasn’t paying him any attention and you could see he was a little frustrated and playing up. His mother was entertaining none of it!

When a rhino cow gives birth she will encourage her older calf to leave. That older calf will need to become independent and integrate into other social groups. They often form bonds with other young rhinos or join subadult groups. This process ensures that the mother can devote her energy and resources to the new calf while the older calf is equipped with the skills to survive on its own.

May Mahlupeka and her new baby thrive! All going well the calf will be notched and named in the next two years. Meanwhile Mungana will spend the next few years focusing on growing and developing his physical strength and fighting skills. If he wants to establish dominance he will start his bid at maturity, typically around 10-12 years of age. This involves aggressive behaviour and physical confrontations with other males, including sparring with horns, pushing, and charging. Once a bull has established dominance over others, it can claim a territory.



Mahlupeka is a magnificent specimen – and mother. She’s given the world 11 more precious white rhinos to continue her and her species’ legacy.



Mungana is none too happy about the lack of attention from his mother, but he is about to enter an exciting new chapter of independence and discovery. Do your mother proud Mungana!

2 IC

Nobody really enjoys being the second-in-command, unless the pay and perks are exceptional, right? We had to chuckle at this male lion who was flopped down and doing his best to ignore his coalition partner that was busy mating with a lioness a few metres away. We dubbed him the 2IC. He wasn't a remarkable actor either – despite feigning sleep he kept a beady eye on the couple. At one stage he even rolled over, raised his head and yawned in the direction of the tedious scenario he was subjected to.



But, as the 2IC, he does play a crucial supportive role. While the dominant male primarily focuses on mating opportunities and maintaining control over a pride/s, the subordinate male helps in defending the territory, hunting, and protecting cubs. These subordinate lion/s benefit from the coalition by gaining access to resources such as food and shared protection against rival coalitions and predators. Though they may not have immediate mating rights, their alliance with the dominant male increases their chances of survival and future opportunities to challenge for dominance, especially if the current leader weakens or dies, which can often be the case.

The size of coalitions vary, but typically range from two to four lions. In some cases, coalitions can be larger, with up to six or more males. Coalitions are usually composed of related males - often brothers. Many years ago, in South Africa, at Singita Sabi Sand, there was a coalition of six males that became known as the "Mapogo". They were formidable! (A documentary was made about them, there's also a Facebook page, and I see they even feature on Wikipedia!)

Of small boats and leaf blowers

I used to think hippos got a bad rap as being one of the world's most dangerous animals. They seemed like jovial not-thin characters - chuckling, wallowing, swimming and basking in the sun. However, I have had to radically readjust my opinion of late due to two encounters with aggressive males...



Researching hippo behaviour provides some insight. Territorial bulls establish territories in water but not land, and these may range from 250 to 500 m (270 to 550 yd) in dams or lakes, and 50 to 100 m (55 to 109 yd) in rivers. The bull has breeding access to all the cows in his territory. Younger bachelors are allowed to stay as long as they defer to him. A younger male may challenge the old bull for control of the territory.

Within the pods, the hippos tend to segregate by sex and status. Bachelor males lounge near other bachelors, females with other females, and the territorial male is on his own.

It is mainly the territorial bulls and challenging bachelors that are aggressive and unpredictable in nature. Agitated bulls have frequently been reported charging and attacking small boats which can easily be capsized by hippos and it is then when humans are in grave danger. In fairness I suppose a small boat with a high-pitched whining engine buzzing around your space when you're in a bad mood from fighting with another bull, is akin to a neighbour using a leaf blower, in the wind, on a Sunday morning, after a late Saturday night. So it is entirely understandable. (But fear not as Singita Pamushana has large, stable, quiet boats that we use for our fishing and sundowner trips, and the hippos pay little attention to these.)

Some other interesting hippo facts include that the mean adult weight is around 1 480 kg (3 260 lb) for bulls and 1 365 kg (3 009 lb) for cows, and it seems that male hippos continue growing throughout their lives, while females reach maximum weight at around age 25. Also, although they are chubby-looking, hippos have little fat. "Yawning" serves as a threat display. Their lower canines are sharpened through contact with the smaller upper canines. The canines and incisors are used mainly for combat instead of feeding. Hippos are not particularly good swimmers, nor can they float. In deep water they move by bouncing off the bottom. Hippos move on land by trotting. They can reach an airborne stage when all limbs are off the ground when trotting fast enough. A "flying" hippo is something I'd prefer not to see!

Tusker



We admired this handsome “tusker” feeding one afternoon, as we were heading towards a popular waterhole. Apart from long well-matched tusks he also has a long distinct trunk. We left him in peace and spent a few productive hours at the waterhole, but as evening drew near something blocked the sunset. We turned to see him walking towards the water, his head hung low with the weight of his ivory, and his long trunk coiled up so as not to drag on the ground.

An elephant bull is considered a tusker when he possesses large tusks that are significantly longer and thicker than average. These tusks, often weighing over 50 kilograms (110 pounds) each and reaching lengths of 2 metres (6.6 feet) or more, are a genetic trait found in a small percentage of male elephants these days. Tuskers are highly esteemed in elephant populations and can be easily identified by their impressive ivory, which sets them apart from other bulls.

We love to celebrate the tuskers on Malilangwe and in the Gonarezhou National Park, as evidence of conservation efforts and the genetic diversity among the elephant population in this region.

Twitter



Wagtails hold a special place in my heart, so I couldn't resist these three perched so artfully in a dead tree. Also making the most of an artful tree was this Verraux's eagle-owl.



July Gallery



Gold, copper, bronze green, black and white – and everything in between.
A third elephant casts his shadow over the bull closest to camera, as they all drink.





This bull's personal spa is at the base of Pamushana hill where he is often found soothing his skin.
Two young adult male lions chillaxing for the time being.





High-key colours at midday on the Malilangwe Dam.
The saturated pastels at sunset as a black rhino sips from a pink pond.

