

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA For the month of April, Two Thousand and Twenty-four

Temperature

Average minimum: 16.9°C (62.4°F)
Minimum recorded: 26.9°C (80.4°F)
Average maximum: 13.0°C (55.4°F)
Maximum recorded: 34.0°C (93.2°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 19.1mm
For the year to date: 518.1mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:09
Sunset: 17:39

Sun-kissed leaves now litter the dirt track that led us through the heart of Singita as we head south towards the rocky, gabbro grasslands. With the early morning rays gradually warming our cheeks they expose the intricate work of unassuming spiders and their dew-laden webs. Stopping and looking closer shows evidence of dazzles of zebra, which are clear on the sandy tracks while the deep guttural sound of rutting impala rams can be heard in all corners of the reserve. As the light mist lifts and pure blue skies fill our surroundings, a young elephant calf welcomes the warm, new day. The month of April has played host to various moments that have filled our guests with joy and wholeness, which lies at the centre of what we do at Singita. It has been the perfect start to the dry season in the Sabi Sand, here is how it all played out:

A Sightings Snapshot for April:

Lions

- After the late rains this summer it has assisted the herbivores in maintaining excellent condition. This, coupled with moon-lit, still nights have made hunting challenging for lions. The Mhangeni Pride felt the full brunt of it up until recently where they made successive kills helping to save themselves from muscle degeneration and starvation. Fortunately for them the grasslands have been teeming with large grazers like buffalo and zebra which has helped them to recover in condition.
- The Tsalala lioness has given birth somewhere close to Boulders Lodge, either in the Sand River valley or the rocky outcrops nearby. Frequent coming and goings from the area reaffirms our suspicions. She has provided us with excellent daytime viewing as she chooses to hunt by day and protect her cubs by night. She has even been seen crossing the Sand River by Pios Crossing which is populated by crocodiles - risking it all for her first litter of cubs.
- In the north there has been another split in the Nkuhuma Pride. A lioness and her two cubs of close to two years of age have left their maternal pride and have been trailing buffalos and zebras. On one morning drive as the three lions looked to be settling down for the day, a wounded stray buffalo calf walked right into the middle of them. The calf stood little chance of escaping and it was a valuable lesson gained by the two young lions as their mother capitalised on the easy opportunity.

Leopards

- Undoubtedly the Nkuwa female and her two male offspring deserve to be mentioned first. The three of them have been seen crossing the Sand River (see gallery for sighting photo sequence), climbing among rocky outcrops, silently observing lions in the distance, and everything in between. These three have captured the hearts of our guest and it looks like they will keep doing so for quite some time as she keeps on providing regular kills for the two cubs.
- In the same region the young Ntomi male has also been making the most of the rutting impala rams with a few kills being recorded. On one occasion he was viewed hoisting a kill in the late afternoon for our guests to witness.
- As the Senegal bush male pushes Xipuku male further west so comes with it new encounters with unfamiliar females. There was a short interaction with the Ximobonyana female who had mothered Xipuku's cub. What sounded like a brief but violent altercation unfolded, it is uncertain what happened exactly but some feel that her cub may have not survived.
- On a positive note, after many months we have viewed the Kangela male close to his birthplace, Ebony Lodge. This was the last offspring of the legendary Schotia female, therefore it is always extra special to spend time with the four-year-old.

Cheetah

- Cheetah viewing was not limited to the south this month - we had numerous sightings of a female cheetah over a period of a week on the northern side of the Sand River. On one such morning the team of Greg and Lawrence, with their guests, found her with a fresh impala kill which she hurried to feed on, and with good reason as it was not long before the Tsalala lioness got wind of the carcass and rushed in to steal it from her.
- The territorial male in the south was expertly spotted by tracker Suzack recently after noticing a herd of distressed zebra persistently staring in the long grass. On closer inspection they discovered the male resting in the long grass, with a full belly.

Elephants

- At the beginning of the month elephant viewing was hard-earned, and the areas surrounding Castleton gave the best opportunity to find herds as they quenched their thirst at the popular waterhole. As we move closer to the dry season, we are starting to see larger herds forming as the matriarchs guide their herd members to the best feed areas. Woody species now supplement their depleted grass diet during these cooler periods of the year.

Wild dogs

- As we approach the denning season for wild dogs in southern Africa, we watch closely as the alpha females show signs of preparing for the arrival of their new litter. It was exciting to watch as the female from the pack of three, originally from the Mbali Pack, dug at an existing aardvark burrow. It is quite early in her gestation for her to be preparing a den but positive signs nonetheless.
- The Othawa Pack, now numbering seven, two females and five males have been sighted numerous times this month with the alpha female looking pregnant as well. Last year this pack denned in the northern parts of Singita, we can only hope that is the case this year too!

Grassland mammals

- There have been healthy numbers of zebras along the old Selati railway line and herds are also starting to move northwards as the woodlands open up at the onset of the dry season. The southern watering holes have been ideal areas to have morning coffee while watching dazzles coming and going back to feed. Their black stripes have contrasted beautifully in the warm fall colours of the deciduous trees.
- Buffalo herds are looking strong after a late rain last month which will bode them well in the months to come. With some herds now numbering well over 500 the battle among bulls heats up as they compete for hierarchical supremacy.

Unusual sightings

- Sightings of serval have increased this month with one that has been seen a few times along Camp Road and a mother with one kitten down in the south.
- With the late mornings warming up significantly into the middle part of the day, the reptiles have been on the move before the cold sets in. Male puffadders are actively looking for females with which to mate, which has offered the opportunity to gain a better understanding about snakes as they cover ground smelling for pheromones of receptive females.
- We have also noticed that a large Nile crocodile has taken ambush along the submerged gravel road through the Sand River at Pios Crossing. Baboons use the rocks at the crossing to move between feeding and roosting areas on either side of the river.

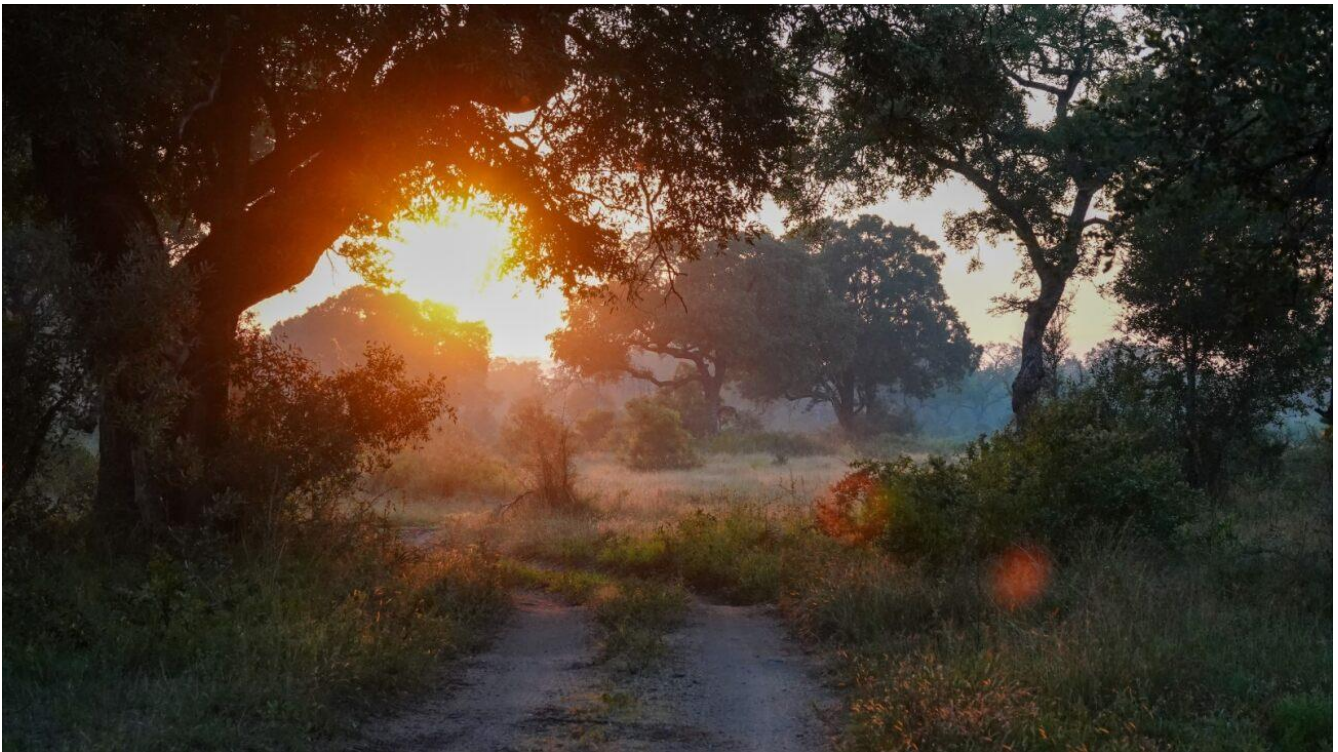
Bird List

The bird list for April includes one new species, bringing our yearly total to 266.

Some exciting and informative Bush Stories follow, as well as an April Gallery of images.

Stepping into the vast wilderness of Africa, one can't help but be captivated by its raw beauty and untamed wonders. Yet there are so many versions of the wilderness - each being entirely unique.

As a guide we have the privilege to see Nature in so many of her various forms. We may observe the entire life of a leopard, from a clumsy cub, to a dominant force, and old age. The first steps of a newborn giraffe or the dying breath of an impala. We see the seasons as they come and go, in the colour of the grass or the course of the river. The natural world is ever changing, and we are fortunate to bear witness to it.



From those we guide, we also get to see Nature through a myriad of different eyes. We see first-hand the joy it brings people as they experience some of Nature's most powerful spectacles. Undoubtedly my favourite is the sense of wonder that plays out in the eyes of children.

This month we welcomed a family to Boulders. The children walked hesitantly behind their parents upon their arrival. Not a moment later however, a herd of elephants appeared in the river below the lodge. I invited the children to walk to the edge of the deck with me. They peered through the railings at the giants in the river, unsure of what to make of the sight. The elephants were splashing around, and the water glistened in the afternoon sun. Suddenly one elephant came from below the deck, its huge grey back moving effortlessly through the vegetation below. The children stepped back and held their breath.

Unnoticed until then, a troop of monkeys jumped above us in the enormous jackalberry tree. Two youngsters sat and peered at us, their long tails hanging down from above like a scene out of the Jungle Book. A buffalo bull lay undisturbed in the gentle flow of the river and a giraffe gracefully walked past on the horizon.

Looking back down at the children, their eyes were now filled with wonder. Any sense of uncertainty had disappeared, and in that moment, I felt like a child again. There we were under an ancient tree, on the wooden deck, suspended in the middle of the African wilderness. A sense of excitement overcame us as the monkeys played above our heads and the elephants splashed in the river below.



During their stay we sat quietly together and looked at a chameleon, changing colour in front of our very eyes! There was no need to explain the physics involved in the dispersing or contracting of pigment granules in the cells of the creature - we wanted only to marvel at the spectacle.



We watched as scarab beetles immaculately rolled their dung balls, and spoke of their ability to use celestial cues to find their way home.

We stared up at the heavens and invented our own “new” constellations with a star pointer. We felt the Land Cruiser vibrate as lions roared around us. We marvelled at the iridescent blue light scattering off the feathers of a starling, and watched a leopard playing lovingly with her two cubs.

To witness the bush through the wonder-filled eyes of a child reminds me that every day is different, and that you cannot become complacent with the world around you. It requires you to take note of the small details. And somewhere amongst this attention to the “ordinary”, it allows us a passage to experience the extraordinary.

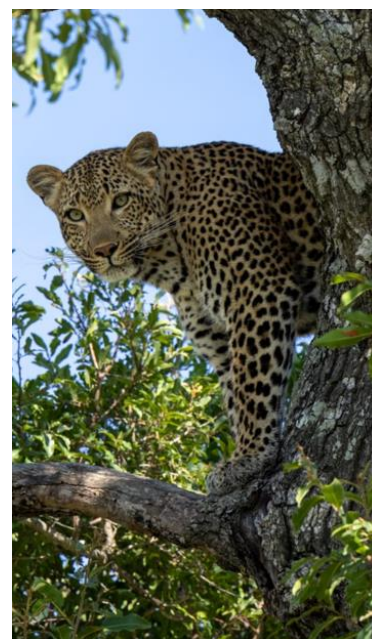
Cats and dogs

During the afternoon game drive, we ventured south of the property in search of a female leopard. Despite our efforts throughout the drive, we were unable to locate her. Piter, my tracker, suggested we backtrack to the last tracks and check them once more.

We asked the guests if they were willing to invest more time in finding the leopard, and they enthusiastically agreed. As we made our way back, someone spotted a pack of three wild dogs. We decided to follow them along the road, and within 20 minutes, they darted into the bush, their target unknown.

On investigation, to our surprise, we discovered the mother leopard and one young male up a tree. The wild dogs then left the scene having chased the cats up there. The mother leopard descended from the tree and began calling for her cubs, neither of which responded immediately. We spent some time observing her, then left them in peace to regroup after their harrowing experience.

By Coleman Mnisi



Communication is important for animals to survive and thrive in the wild, and there are many different ways that animals use to send a message across to other animals, mostly of the same species. Vocal communication is one that can be used for far range communication and is mostly used by cats when announcing their presence within their territory. Birds sing to attract mates, establish territories and warn each other of danger and elephants will use low frequency sound that travels long distances to communicate and locate each other. These are the sounds that we hear on a daily basis when conducting game drives and walking safaris, and we make use of the sounds to locate animals and also to interpret behaviours taking place at that moment.

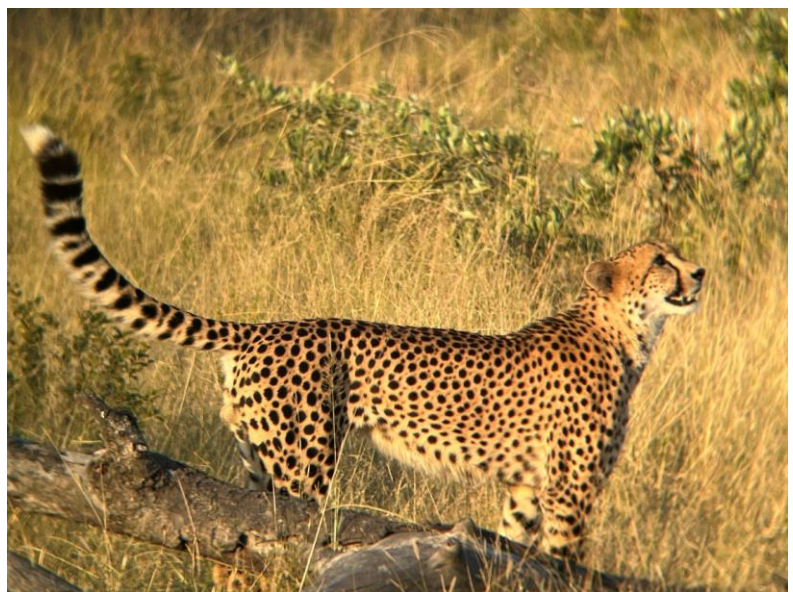
Scent is one important element that most mammals use to mark their territories or indicate their presence within a particular space. Elephant bulls find a mating partner through droppings and urine left behind by an elephant cow in heat. Rhinos make use of middens to mark their territories by revisiting the same spot to defecate and after they have dropped their dung, they drag their feet on the fresh dung which helps them carry the scent everywhere they go and that leaves a message to other rhinos - it can either be to attract mates or keep unwanted individuals away.

All animals use body language as a form of communication too. I have noticed many times in a sighting where different species of herbivores are feeding in the same area because they know they fall prey to predators. You will notice them paying attention to any slight change in body language or behaviour of other animals and they respond accordingly and keep each other safe. Lions, being social felines, have evolved to hunt as a team, and during the hunt silence is very important. The one thing that will keep them on the same page for a successful hunt is watching each other's body language.

We are very fortunate as field guides and trackers to be able to share space with these wonderful creatures and learn from their behaviour in order to entertain and educate our guests. It feels so good to look for an animal and make use of the sounds, markings and tracks until we find them - it just makes us feel like we are one of them!



A midden full of messages.



A cheetah scent-marking.

In the vast expanse of Africa's wetlands, amidst the vibrant tapestry of flora and fauna, exists a remarkable bird that challenges traditional gender roles in parenting – the African jacana (*Actophilornis africanus*). With its striking appearance and extraordinary behaviour, the African jacana stands out as a fascinating subject of study and admiration.

The African jacana, also known as the "lily-trotter" or "Jesus bird" due to its ability to walk on water lilies, is a bird species found in sub-Saharan Africa. Sporting long, spindly legs and intricate plumage, the African Jacana is a sight to behold. However, it's not just their appearance that makes them extraordinary; it's their unique approach to parenting that sets them apart in the avian world.

In the realm of the African jacana, traditional parental roles are reversed. While in many bird species, it is the female who incubates the eggs and cares for the young, in the case of the African jacana, it is the male who takes on these responsibilities.

Imagine a tranquil morning in the heart of an African wetland. A male jacana meticulously tends to a clutch of eggs nestled among the floating vegetation. With unwavering dedication, he guards the precious eggs from potential threats, tirelessly patrolling the surrounding area to ensure their safety. His striking plumage glistens in the sunlight as he carries out his duties with grace and poise.



As the days pass, the male jacana's patience is put to the test. He endures scorching sun, torrential rains, and the ever-present threat of predators, all while steadfastly protecting the vulnerable eggs beneath him. It is here where I captured this image of a male sheltering his eggs against some light rain. As the light drizzle fell over the tranquil wetlands, the male jacana found himself facing a comical predicament. With each droplet that landed on the floating vegetation, his carefully tended clutch of eggs seemed determined to take a dip of their own. With a determined squawk, the male jacana watched as one egg after another threatened to slip beneath the water's surface. Undeterred, he sprang into action, frantically using his beak to push the wayward eggs back into place. But Nature had other plans, and try as he might, the mischievous eggs seemed to have a mind of their own.

With each attempt to keep them afloat, the male jacana found himself engaged in a hilarious game of egg-balancing, his beak bobbing up and down in a frantic dance against the elements.

Finally, after weeks of unwavering dedication, the eggs hatch, and tiny chicks emerge into the world. With the same care and diligence he displayed during incubation, the male jacana now assumes the role of caregiver to his newborn chicks. He guides them through the labyrinth of floating vegetation, teaching them essential skills for survival in their watery habitat. Together, they navigate the challenges of life in the wetlands, forging a bond that transcends traditional notions of parenthood.

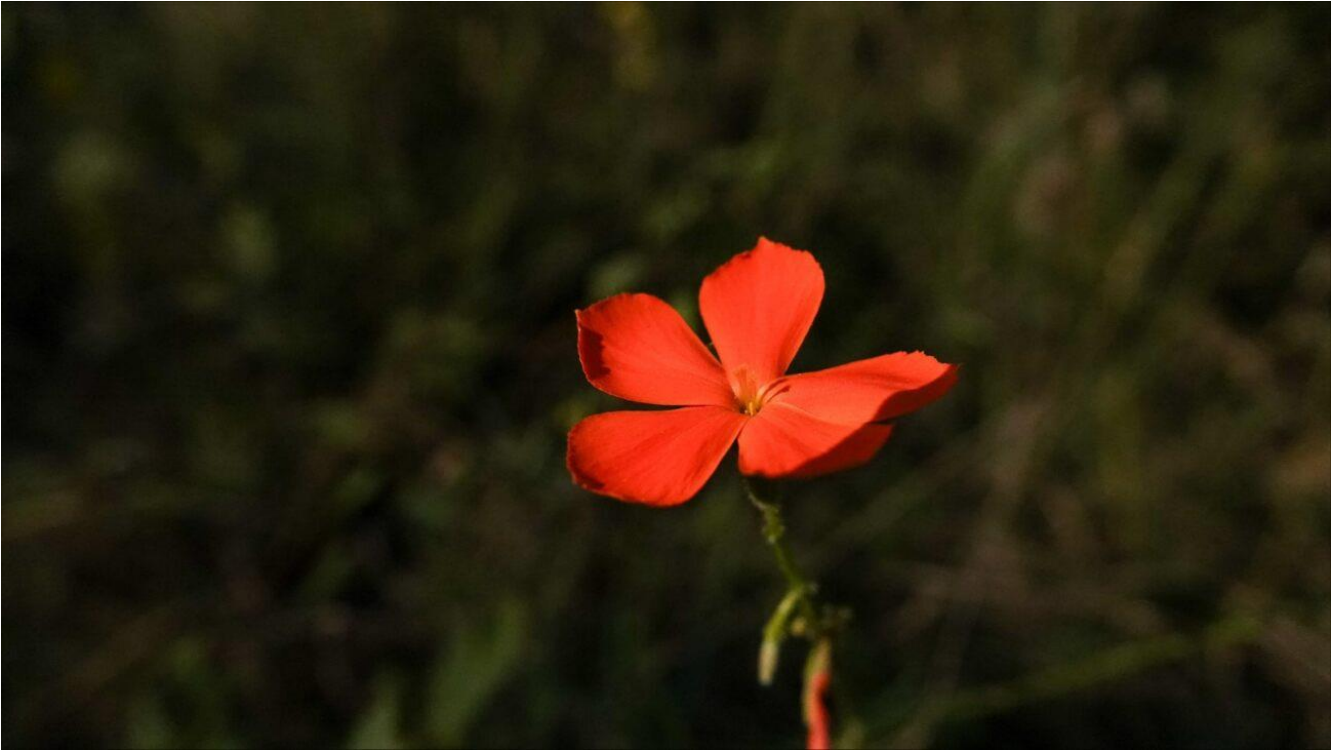
The story of the African jacana serves as a poignant reminder that nature is full of surprises, and as we marvel at the beauty and complexity of the natural world, let us draw inspiration from the African jacana's remarkable story of paternal care and resilience. May we learn to embrace change, challenge stereotypes, and celebrate the diversity of life in all its forms.

April Gallery



The Tsalala lioness has been spending a lot of her time along the Sand River, staying out the way of other prides in the riverine thickets. Images by Marc Eschenlohr and Marc Bowes-Taylor.





Striking colours of blossoming flowers can still be seen where water or some traces of it are present.
Images by Lucy Stoffberg.





A posturing display between nyala bulls, doing their best to intimidate their rival with their exaggerated size.
Image by Marc Eschenlohr.

A breeding herd of elephants in a picturesque woodland.





Left: a yellow-billed stork waits for any subtle movement within the beak to capture food like frogs, fish and aquatic insects.

Right: a brown snake-eagle waits to spot its prey from some distance off. Images by Marc Eschenlohr



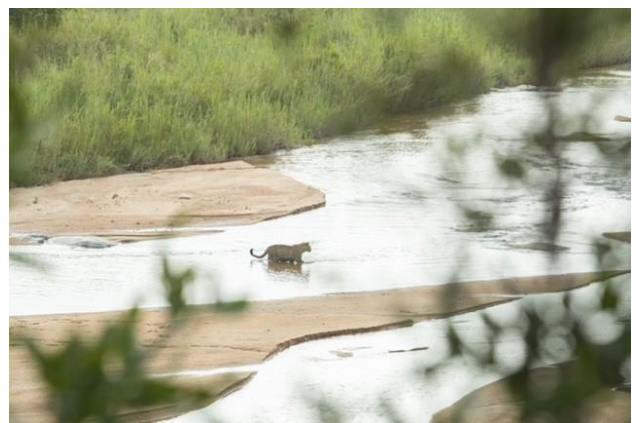
Left: a group of white-fronted bee-eaters wait for the rest of the colony to finish their final dustbathe for the day before roosting along the banks of the Sand River. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.

Right: An immature African hawk eagle in the golden hour. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.

After a successful track by Martin, an incredible scene played out as the Nkuwa female called and led her cubs back south through the Sand River at the Mobeni River confluence.



Both mother and cubs cautiously navigated the broad but shallow river. The two youngsters were very hesitant to follow their mother. Eventually, after persistent calling they crossed and joined her on the rocky outcrops.



Images by Marc Bowes-Taylor.



A sandy silhouette waited for us at the end of the road but not for long as this elephant bull carried on in search of the herd. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.



Reasons to smile: a rhino calf following its mother down the road, totally care-free. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.



Thamba male above and the Ntomi male below. Both leopards are some of the best viewing leopards on Singita due to their relaxed nature around vehicles. Images by Marc Bowes-Taylor.

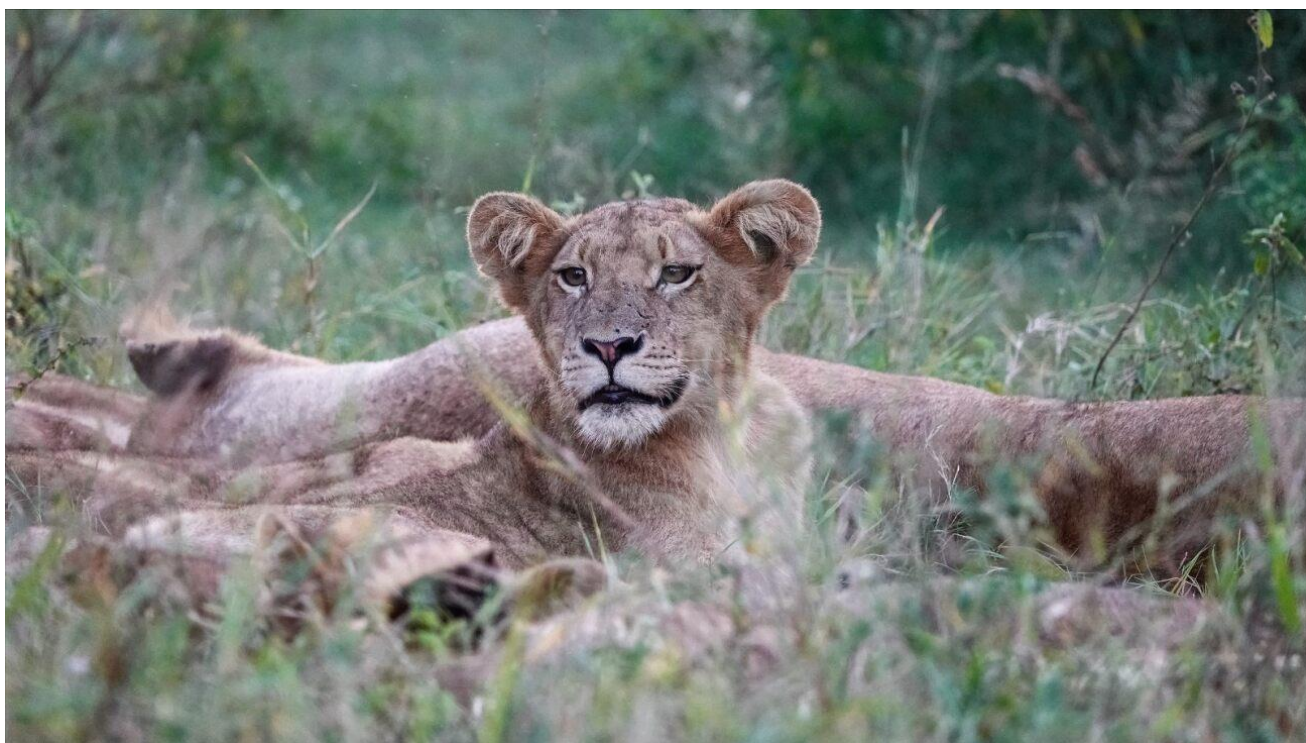




You've got a friend in me! A terrapin takes refuge on a hippo's back. Image by Marc Eschenlohr.



An elephant calf trying to figure out what we actually are. Image by Lucy Stoffberg.



A Mhangene cub watching as a Natal spurfowl slowly wanders unknowingly in its direction.
Image by Lucy Stoffberg.



Relaxing in the golden light of autumnal April, a content pride of lions.