

Singita



Photo by Brian Rode

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

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.3°C (70.3°F)
Minimum recorded: 19.0°C (66.2°F)
Average maximum: 31.9°C (89.4°F)
Maximum recorded: 35.0°C (95.0°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 130mm
Season to date: 330mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05h34
Sunset: 18h46

Crackling electric lightning streaks across the stormy skies, illuminating the earth in a flash of dazzling light. Impalas huddle closely under the protection of bushwillow and apple leaf trees, their large eyes wide and alert. Drumming is the sound of the rain as it pours down. White curtains cut through the mountainous topography, wiping fresh the history of days gone by. An abundance of colourful fruits adorn the trees and bushes, wild-flowers burst open amongst the tall grass stems, showing off their beauty to flying observers. Every pool and pan are alive with an almost defining chorus of frogs.

This month has brought a wealth of richness. New life emerges as well as leaves as the cycle of the bush continues on its relentless path.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for January:

Lions

- The Mananga Pride and Shish males have been sighted several times this month, mostly towards the north-western section of our concession, however, they ventured further east a couple of times and we found them once at Pebble Pan on a zebra carcass. One early morning we found tracks of the pride heading north to Gudzane dam. Upon following these prints, we located the pride laying peacefully in a clearing. Minutes later the cubs started playing and interacting and then from out of the bundle of lions emerged three new tiny cubs! An exciting discovery to behold, we look forward to following their progress in this fast-growing pride. After a particularly rainy twenty-four hours, the guides found the entire pride of twenty-two lions and two Shish males on a buffalo kill in a waterhole. An incredible sight to behold with every lion coated thickly in dark mud as they gorged themselves.
- The Kumana male and Maputo male have been seen together regularly, with one amazing discovery of them on a waterbuck kill just north of the lodge. Another afternoon, late in January, we found the pair feeding on a young zebra around Ostrich Fly Camp. The males were joined by the Shish lionesses and three cubs. Upon finishing the kill, the Maputo male left with the older Shish lioness, walking south to the H6 road. It was there that we located them the next morning where we witnessed them mating.
- A portion of the Shish Pride, one adult and three sub-adult females, have been sighted on several occasions in the southern part of our concession. They enjoy the open H6 road and we often see them patrolling at night.
- Driving along the fence line parallel to Mozambique, we noticed a big line across the road. Upon examination, we realized that it was a drag mark and even saw an indentation in the fence. Tracing the drag into the bushes we found the Xirhombe male lion, lying in the shade. The Xirhombe male is a skilful killer, using the fence to his advantage to chase prey into the wired wall. On this occasion, we saw the remains of a large kudu female – a feast for the old male.
- The Mountain Pride has been moving frequently through the grasslands and mountains. A large herd of around two hundred and fifty buffalo was grazing in Kori clearings for a few days and with the mountain pride very close to this location it was inevitable that they located them... Stalking quietly through the tall grass, the pride of 11 made their approach. The lionesses split up, each choosing their direction of attack. With the wind not in their favour, however, the buffalo soon became edgy and started raising their noses, sensing the invasion of the predators. Curious bulls moved closer to the lions, tension, and unrest in their movements. Then they saw them. Minute long seconds of suspense suddenly turned to chaos as the bulls started to chase the pride. When the rest of the buffaloes realised what was happening, they too joined the pursuit. With their energy wasted but lessons learned, the Mountain Pride hurried from the scene into the bush.

Leopards

- The Euphorbia male leopard has been seen a few times in January patrolling his territory along Park Road and stalking impala. One evening we followed him into some long grass where we waited in the pitch black. Minutes passed and we were sure we could see him still in the bright moonlight. Minutes carried on and we waited. Our waiting was rewarded though as just as we thought he'd moved away, the large male leapt into the air out of the tall grass – an exciting display to see at night!
- An impressive sighting of the Mbiri-Mbiri male showing his strength when one of our trackers located him with a zebra foal in a leadwood tree. This young male leopard is growing strong and has started to become more and more dominant in the area.

- Mating leopards have been seen north of Lebombo next to the N’wanetsi River. The female seems to be quite shy, however, we’ve had some incredible viewing in the cover of night.
- Driving in the mountainous northern sectors, the Mhlanguleni female has been sighted a few times. She seems to be pregnant and we expect to not see her for a while as she looks for a den to give birth.
- Around Gudzane Dam a large unknown male leopard has been seen a few times scent marking and patrolling.
- This month we have been treated with many sightings of the Dumbana female leopard and two cubs. They’ve been seen with several impala kills, both newborn and adult impala. The cubs seem to enjoy resting in small apple leaf trees as on several occasions, we’ve found their tails hanging from branches and curious eyes peering out from the branches. Their playful personalities continue to delight us.

Wild dogs

- What a month for viewing wild dogs! We counted three packs on our reserve at a few points! Chasing impala and being chased by zebra, the dogs never cease to entertain.
- One morning we stopped to have morning coffee at a beautiful fig tree. Just as we were clearing up, a pack of nine wild dogs ran past. Quickly, we jumped into the game viewer and pursued them. The dogs headed to Golf Course Clearings, a usual hot spot for zebra, giraffe and impala. A dramatic entrance into the clearing caused impala to scatter in all directions. The dogs gave chase and managed to catch a baby impala in the chaos. We lost the pack in the bushes where they continued their morning adventure.

Spotted hyenas

- One afternoon a spotted hyena was seen feeding on a leopard tortoise. It’s incredible to see the strength and power in a hyena’s jaw and this meal was putting that to the test!
- The Xinkelegane Fly Camp den-site is still active and the cubs are getting bigger every day, and are almost ready to leave the den and start following the adults on their nightly voyages.

Elephants

- Huge breeding herds of elephants wander through our concession, making use of rain-filled dams and streams. These herds have included a large number of baby elephants, suckling, playing and learning how to use their trunks. A few solitary bulls in musth with close to “big tusker” status have been sighted meandering around in search of females in oestrus.

Buffalos

- There have been frequent sightings of a pair of old buffalo bulls along the drainage systems and pans, enjoying the new muddy wallows. Large breeding herds have entered from the north of our concession and slowly made their way south, passing through the good grazing areas and one of our central pans, where we were treated to a sighting of a breeding herd of over 150 individuals and 100 elephants together.

Plains game

- The ever-lengthening grass has caused dazzles of zebra to congregate in the shorter grassy open plains with often more than fifty individuals scattered amongst large herds of impala and wildebeest. The central depression has become home to many new warthog piglets, a few of which have ended up in the talons of the mighty martial eagles. Giraffes are abundant along the Delagoa and knob thorn thickets with several males necking, as they fight over a nearby female.

Rare animals and other sightings

- Bushpig tracks were sighted in the Nyokene drainage, and a few porcupines avoiding the dangers in the long grass have been followed down the dirt roads in the early evenings. An African rock python was discovered moments after it had grabbed a new impala lamb and we watched how it used its powerful body to crush the young impala before attempting to swallow the large meal.

Birds

- Red-billed quelea have begun looking for suitable nesting sites, one being started south-east of the granophyre ridge and a second near the Mozambique border in the south of our concession. A few groups of southern ground hornbills have been regularly seen along the N'wanetsi River. There have been many sightings of martial eagles feasting on Nile monitor lizards, warthog piglets as well as a few of the common game birds.



Photo by Monika Malewski

Some bush reflections and articles follow, as well as the January Gallery of images.



Male and female red-billed quelea, photographed by Monika Malewski.



Red-billed quelea flock, photographed by Brian Rode.

Moody, rain-filled clouds hang heavy on the evening sky, weighed down with the energy of another hot summer's day. The sun starts her descent behind the Lebombo mountains, casting rosy shadows across the granophyre ridge. Driving up the rocky terrain our ears start filling with a continuous drumming noise. The closer we drive and the beat increases... Electric currents seem to run through the air in a stream of passion and purpose. Small dark silhouettes come briefly into focus as they swiftly dart through the sky, a clue to the noise and for what is to come. We drive on. Chattering and flapping, twerking and twitching, an aerial dance starts to unfold in front of us.

Synchronized chaos bombards our senses as we stumble upon the culprits of the raucous orchestra. An area previously rather empty is now filled with thousands upon thousands of tiny birds, all darting and flying around madly. It's an intensity I've never come across before and looking closer through the tangled mess of knob-thorn thickets the clues unfold. Bounteous numbers of birds are hard at work. The male red-billed quelea are the primary designers, selecting grass stems to weave into an intricate woven basket. Construction can take up to three days with the result resembling a small oval ball with an entrance at the top. With such a complex and delicate work of art, each monogamous pair defend their small nest from other quelea. A fluttering affair as the pair dart around singing and displaying. This theatrical performance of thousands of red-billed quelea will only last a few weeks, as once the young have fledged, the masses will be on the move again. We are so blessed to witness this incredible phenomenon. What a beautiful start to a new year.

The oxpecker

Article by Evidence Nkuna



Yellow-billed oxpecker, photo by Brian Rode.

Doing a game drive in the summer season is one of the best things at Singita Kruger National Park and the rest of the park in general. The vegetation is thick and the grass is tall which makes it a bit difficult to spot game and even worse to spot predators like leopards, but it is a wonderful time because all the herbivores are getting enough food and water. They are all in a good condition and the game is spread out which makes it more interesting to be out in the bush. Lots of babies are seen at this time and the birding is great because we have a lot of migrant birds like European rollers and southern carmine bee-eaters that come here for our summer season because it is warm and there is enough food.

The long green grass makes it easy for a lot of animals to get parasites such as ticks, and the hooved animals are not able to remove all those parasites - in some areas they need help from others. An oxpecker is the best friend to many herbivores as they easily pluck the ticks for food and in doing so, they help the animal. Oxpeckers live in association with medium to large mammalian herbivores. The smallest host they use is impala and warthog, and the largest is rhino, buffalo and hippo. These birds spend their daylight hours picking and consuming out of the pelage of their hosts in a win-win relationship known as mutualistic symbiosis. Both species receive advantages from their relationship.

Oxpeckers also benefit their mammalian hosts by offering an early warning system. Birds are generally more vigilant than mammals and oxpeckers, especially, fly up noisily if they are startled, hissing and rasping characteristically. Herbivores react to oxpeckers' alarm calls.

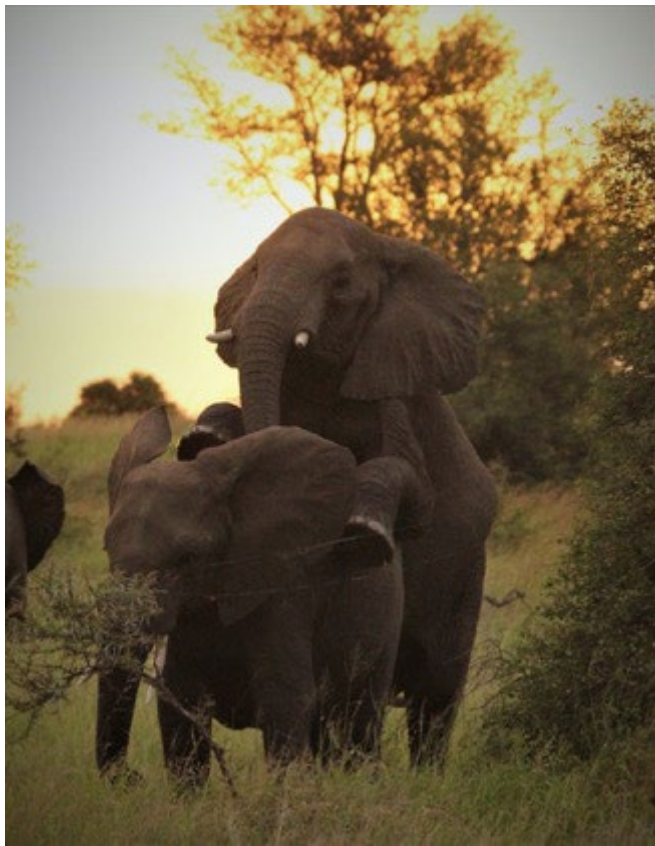
Oxpeckers can help warn humans of potential danger or alert them to the presence of large herbivores. They will fly up off the backs of their hosts if startled, indicating the presence of a potentially dangerous game. They also descend onto their hosts noisily. The dipping flight of a flock with the accompanying chip-chip-rasp call is unmistakable. One can track the birds' flight and witness where they descend. At that location, it is most likely that there is a host species.

For the most part, the association between the oxpeckers and herbivores is mutually beneficial but this relationship can degenerate to the point where oxpeckers are almost parasitic. Oxpeckers tend to irritate the edges of old wounds and scars and they often peck open surface irregularities caused by skin parasites. They do this to access the small amounts of the host's blood which in itself is not significant enough to be harmful. Oxpeckers line their nests with hair they pluck from their mammal host. Oxpeckers have short legs and very sharp claws which help the bird to cling to the fur of their hosts while they forage for parasites. They also have specially adapted tail feathers, which are stiffened and act as a manner of tripod to help prop the bird up against the bodies of their hosts.

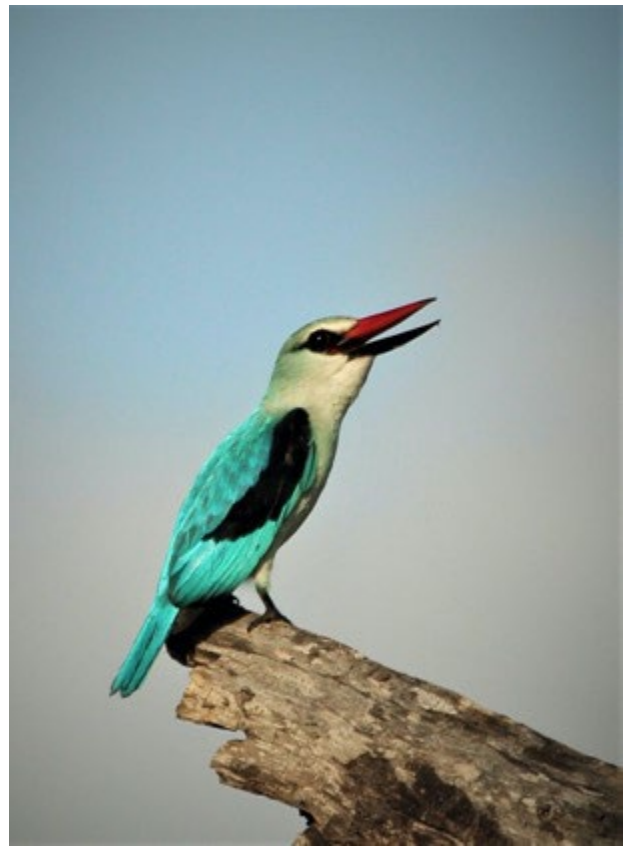
In this area, we have two species of oxpeckers, the red-billed oxpecker, and the yellow-billed oxpecker. The most common one is the red-billed oxpecker. With their host species like impalas, that are seen on every single drive. The yellow-billed are likely to be found with large herds of buffalo and on rare occasions, with kudu.



Impala and wildebeest congregate in open plains.



Elephants mating



Woodland kingfisher



Nile crocodile.



Leopard with carcass.



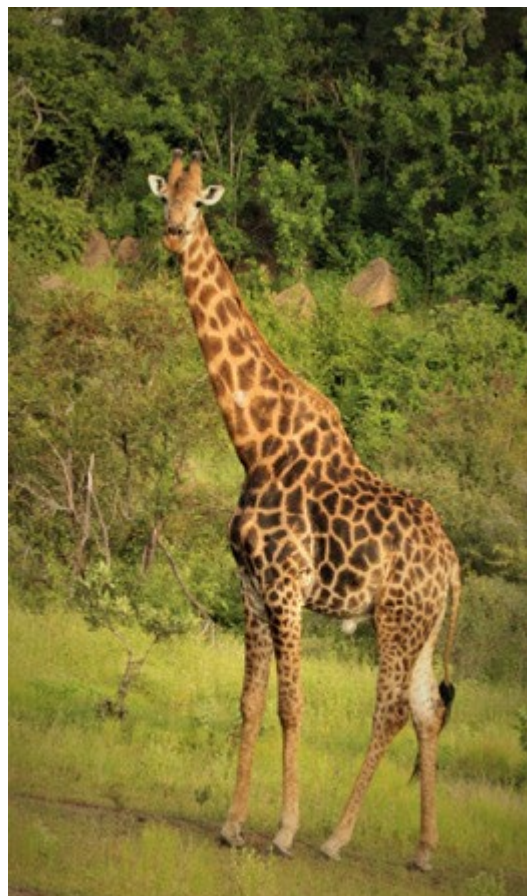
Pearl-spotted owlet.



Restful zebras.



African wild dogs being watched by zebra.



Giraffe bull.



Elephant bull feeding under sycamore fig tree.



Amur falcons hunting termites erupting from underground.



Lioness with cub.



Muddy lion cub, photo by Gary Bruce.



Leopard in tree, photo by Monika Malewski.