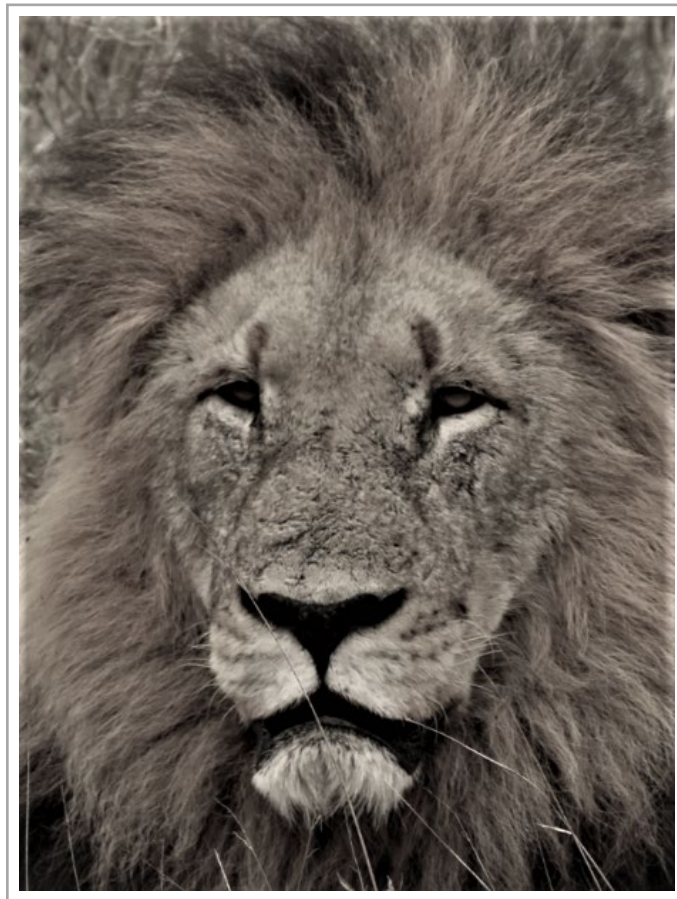


Singita



“Xihamham” by Garry Bruce

WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For March, Two Thousand, and Twenty-three

Temperature

Average minimum: 20.7°C (69.2°F)
Minimum recorded: 17.0°C (62°F)
Average maximum: 30.8°C (86°F)
Maximum recorded: 36.0°C (96.8°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 7 mm
Season to date: 386.5 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:00
Sunset: 17:52

The transition from the summer into our dryer months has begun. The verdant colour palette of the concession is slowly giving way to the more neutral colours of our winter months. The last week has seen us experience much cooler temperatures as the days have shortened, announcing the end of summer. The barn swallows are starting to gather, and most of the colourful migrants have left us again for their long journey towards the

northern summer regions. The movement of animals is still governed by the vast amount of standing water that was brought on by the tropical cyclones from last month, the herds of grazers can be found spread from north to south of the property. The lions continue to cover large distances following the herds of prey animals. However, this month will long be remembered for the death of “Xihamham” the old Shishangaan male lion.

Here’s a Sightings Snapshot for March:

Lions

- The Shishangaan male lions have been noticeably venturing far south on a few occasions. It is unclear if they have been responding to the Trichard males moving north or if they have been searching for the highly mobile larger portion of the Mananga Pride.
- The Trichard males have been very confident this month, the latter part of the month has seen them push northwards into uncharted territory for the brothers. Most evenings and mornings they have been heard vocalising.
- On the 30th of this month, early in the morning, tracks were found of a number of lions. The tracks indicated a skirmish between the individuals. The tracks led to the Trichardt male lions north of the Gudzane stream, deep in the Shishangaan male lions’ territory. At first, they were thought to be alone however, an injured male lion came out behind a bush. The Trichardt males circled this lion who was then noticed to be the older Shishangaan male known as “Xihamham”, he was then attacked and mortally injured. This is certainly an end of an era.
- The Mananga Pride has continued to be split most of the time into what we have been referring to as two groups, the larger and the smaller portions. The larger portion has been moving large distances and seems to be focusing its efforts on larger prey, especially the large buffalo herds that often cross north into the wilderness areas over our northern boundary road. The smaller portion which consists of two females and six younger members that were born at the end of 2021, is usually around the Gudzane area. The entire pride as well as the two magnificent Shishangaan males were all found feeding on a wildebeest during the first week of the month. It is unclear what the future holds for this pride with the demise of the Shishangaan coalition that has sired all of their cubs.
- The Shishangaan Pride has revealed five new members this month. They have not been seen on too many occasions and seem to be keeping the cubs not too far from the lodges. Towards the last days of the month, the two mothers and the cubs were seen feeding on an impala. The other members of the pride have been seen fairly regularly. They all seem to be doing their best to avoid the Trichard males.
- The Mountain Pride was found deep in the concession close to Mozambique, feeding on a zebra. This is the first sighting of this historical pride in many months. The eight members were in great condition.
- The Maputo male was seen in the north of the concession and has settled into his nomadic lifestyle. He showed signs of a fight with other males but was generally healthy.

Leopards

- The Dumbana female leopard was seen on a handful of occasions during March. As communicated last month, we suspected that she had given birth to a new litter of cubs. We can now confirm that this is in fact the case as she was seen with suckle marks on her belly. We have not seen her cub/s as of yet but she has been viewed going to and coming from the ridge line just north of Green Apple Hill so this is likely where the den is. Hopefully next month we can confirm that they have been found and the number of little ones.
- Nhlangueni female was only seen on two occasions - once with both of her female cubs and once by herself. We also had a sighting of one of the cubs but with Nhlangueni and the other cub not present. The three are still spending most of their time on the ridge line between Central and Ma-4-Pounds/Ntoma area. The Nhlangueni female is still doing a great job and both cubs are still looking in good condition.

- Just like last month, a number of unknown leopards, both male and female, were seen. A female and cub have been seen on Park Road between the Mbeki Drainage and N'wanetsi Crossing, another female with suckle marks near the Gudzane Dam area, as well as a female viewed on a few occasions near the Stickythorn Quarry area. An unidentified male was seen in the south eastern parts of the concession early in the month.
- The Pelejambo male was found feeding on an impala ram carcass at Stickythorn Quarry in the middle of the month and then again on the 28th vocalising and marking territory in the central depression. We find his tracks more often than we view him though, but hopefully this will change going forward.
- The Dumbana males continue to provide us with fantastic leopard viewing and have provided the bulk of our leopard sightings once again this month. The 1:1 Dumbana male is still spending the majority of his time in the central regions. We also viewed him and his mother, the Dumbana female, together in two separate sightings. They both kept their distance and there was no animosity towards each other. The 3:3 Dumbana male, is now spending most of his time west of his brother in the stickythorn thickets. They are spending more and more time apart as they prepare for their nomadic lifestyle that lies ahead. However, they are still seen together sporadically, once feeding on an impala ewe carcass. With three large males - the Lebombo, Monzo and Pelajumbo - as well as their mother, in the immediate vicinity, it is anyone's guess for how much longer both males will remain in the area. Until that time comes, we will continue to enjoy both males presence in this amazing concession.
- The Lebombo male was seen on four occasions. He is mostly seen between Dave's Crossing and the lodges along the N'wanetsi River and Park Road (S41) to the west.
- The Monzo male provided great viewing for the month, having been seen on ten separate occasions, twice with impala kills. Just like the Lebombo male, he is often seen between Xingwenyana Crossing and the lodges to the south and Park Road (S41) to the west. Both the Monzo and Lebombo males were seen mating with the Dumbana female in October and one is more than likely the father of the cub/s.
- The Mbiri Mbiri male was seen on three separate occasions with the last sighting on the 28th. He was found with an impala ram carcass in the north eastern parts of the concession which was placed in a tree. Mbiri Mbiri has shifted his territory more north in the last couple of months due to the presence of the Pelajumbo male in the Central/Stickythorn areas.

Wild dogs

- It has been a very quiet month for wild dogs. The small pack of three was seen only once and there were no other sightings of the other packs that have been viewed over the last few months. We did however have two sightings of two males at the beginning of the month. Hopefully both males can meet up with a nomadic female/s and breed. Packs generally include several related males, and one or more related females originating from a different pack. Wild dogs can cover huge distances in a very short amount of time, therefore it is normal to have sporadic sightings. One of the few truly nomadic carnivores, pack home ranges can vary from 150 to 2 000 km². This is also the time of the year when wild dogs begin to breed and pack ranges contract considerably when there are small pups at the den requiring regular feeding.

Spotted hyenas

- Sightings of all three known clans continued to be good during the month. Most sightings were of the clan holding territory around the lodges, with the area from Border Fourways to N'wanetsi Big Bend being particularly productive.
- A deceased adult was found on the morning of the 31st on Ntsibitsane, just north of Monzo Fourways. Being territorial, and with each clan defending their territory vigorously, this could have potentially been a territorial dispute. However, as we were not there to witness what took place, we can only surmise.

Elephants

- The majority of these sightings were of breeding herds that have now made their return to the open basalt plains after being in the southern sections of the Kruger National Park where they have been feeding on marula fruit. The majority of the herds are now feeding on grass and creepers, and the waters of the Nwanetsi River and Gudzane Dam is sustaining them.

Cheetah

- There were no cheetah sightings on the concession for the month of March. There were reports of cheetah on the H6 and the area surrounding the staff village. We are confident that conditions will improve during the next month and we will enjoy seeing them again.

Buffalos

- Multiple buffalo sightings of different numbers and social structures have been recorded during March. Various lone “dagga boys” have been seen throughout the concession as well as bachelor groups and small to large breeding herds, culminating with a herd of +/- 1 000 at the end of the month at Cassia Open Area.
- A leucistic calf within a herd of +/- 300 was seen on the 12th around the Xinkelengane/Nyelethi area.

Plains game

- As per usual the general game species have been abundant and all of the species are in excellent condition after the above-average rainfall over the summer. Giraffes and zebras are found all over the concession.

Birds

- Most of the migrant bird species are still present but their departure is imminent. Large flocks of barn swallows are beginning to gather in trees prior to migration and it is just a matter of time before the daily calls of woodlands kingfishers, European bee-eaters and Jacobin cuckoos, amongst others migrants, cease.
- A number of species are still sporting their full breeding plumage – a male southern red bishop has set up home at Mbeki’s Crossing, indigobirds are in abundance, southern masked-weaver colonies are in full swing and multiple long-tailed paradise whydahs can be seen flying overhead with their bulky long tail feathers. However, the males will transform back into their inconspicuous eclipse plumage within the next couple of weeks, blending in better with their surrounding environment.
- A large colony of red-billed quelea are nesting in the Stickythorn thickets. Multiple groups can be seen foraging throughout the concession, before returning to their nests as the sun sets. The noise from the 1 000’s of individuals can be heard from quite a distance away.
- Two confirmed nesting sights of southern ground hornbills have been found – one on the N’wanetsi River east of Dave’s Crossing and the other at Fig Tree Link, with both sites in sycamore fig trees.
- A number of corn crakes have been seen in the multiple ephemeral pans that have developed in the grasslands as a result of the abundance of water from the heavy rains in February.
- A Little Grebe was seen at the weir and a Black Stork was seen near Golf Course Clearing.

It feels like just yesterday that we were welcoming the arrival of the new impala lambs. But, believe it or not, this was five months ago. With the cuteness overload now over, we are now entering the other major event in the amazing life of impalas – the yearly rut.

A highly successful species, in terms of survival and abundance, the impala is the only indigenous mammal in South Africa to have increased its numbers and broadened its range/distribution over the last century. In fact, impalas outnumber all of Kruger's other herbivores/antelope put together. There are many factors that contribute to this amazing feat, one of them being synchronized breeding which is a direct result of the rut.

So, what exactly is the impala rut?

Essentially it is the breeding season which generally begins at the end of the summer rains when food is plentiful. During this time of the year, as the days get shorter and the nights longer, impala rams' testosterone levels start to increase dramatically and they begin to fight for territory and dominance over female herds. Once dominance and a territory are established by individuals, all adult rams that do not hold a territory as well as rams too young to challenge for a territory, form bachelor herds.

Rams over four years old, in peak condition and ready to challenge a territorial ram, will leave their bachelor herds. The challenger gives notice of his intentions by raising his tail, yawning, flicking his tongue and lowering his head. Rivals next engage in ritualized displays such as parallel walking and head bowing, facing each other head-on, advancing and retreating without actually touching. This presents an opportunity for one to back down – if neither gives way, then battle is commenced and horns clash as they joust.

There are few instances of critical injury and/or death which is partly due to the protection provided by a shield of thickened skin that covers a ram's head, shoulders, upper neck and part of his back. On average only 1% of fighting rams are killed in fights.

In the majority of clashes, one contestant breaks off and flees, leaving the victor holding his head high in the proud posture. Usually, by April/May, most territorial rams have staked out a four to eight hectare, resource-rich patch, to hold and defend – this provides them with breeding opportunities until the females move onto a neighbour's territory.

As already mentioned, due to higher testosterone levels associated with territorial and reproductive activity, territorial rams are not only more aggressive but also have thicker necks than bachelor rams, and their skin is made greasy by copious amounts of pungent sebaceous secretions. As a result of rubbing their forehead secretions on branches, dark bare skin around the eyes makes their eyes appear bigger than normal. Intensely competitive rams advertise territories by raising their tail and flashing the white underside while uttering explosive barking roars followed by deep guttural grunts that can be heard for over a kilometre. Roaring lasts for +/- two to three months and at the height of the rut a territorial ram may roar nearly two hundred times an hour.

All this roaring and herding of females helps advance oestrus in ewes and synchronize ovulation. Synchronized mating leads to synchronized births, with most fawns born within a two to three week period seven months later (mid-November) which coincides with a green flush of new grass. Mass births have advantage of swamping predators so that fewer lambs are taken at their most vulnerable age.

Three main social structures are found during the rut season:

1. Territorial rams with and without breeding females. (Impala rams are strictly territorial when it counts as only they have the opportunity to mate).

2. Bachelor herds of non-territorial adult and juvenile rams.
3. Breeding herds of ewes and juveniles including young rams less than four years old.

During the rut, territorial rams are highly susceptible to predation due to lessened vigilance and loss of conditioning due to the physical demands of defending their territory from challenging rams. At the height of the rut, dominant rams will sometimes maintain their territory for as little as eight days before being pushed out by a stronger challenger. This is nature's way of ensuring that the strongest genes are always circulating through the gene pool. The deposed ram does not just give up though – instead he starts feeding and conditioning himself until he is ready to challenge for a territory once again, and with it access to ewes.

Then, as quickly as the rut began, rams territorial urges wane and they regroup into bachelor groups or join breeding herds, signalling the end of the rut.



Two impala rams fighting for dominance.

As spring has sprung in the northern hemisphere, we have begun to see a change in our seasons down here in our corner of the African wilderness, at Singita Kruger National Park. The days are noticeably getting shorter and the temperatures are cooling off.

The Lowveld area is on a migratory route where birds from central Africa, Europe and even Asia make the annual trip down to the southern parts of Africa during our summer. They do this to take advantage of the pleasant weather conditions and bountiful food resources that are available during this time. Many of our wonderful guests seem to follow the birds' behaviour and visit us during these warm months for much the same reasons.

Over the last week, it has been evident that the barn swallows and European rollers have been preparing for this journey. These little visitors are the most abundant and widely distributed species of swallows in the world and visit Africa during the annual migration. These little birds have been gathering and congregating in busy little flocks in trees and I believe I have been observing what is known as a migratory restlessness, which is only known by the German word "Zugunruhe".

These incredible birds start to prepare for their long journeys north as soon as the South African temperatures start to drop and their food supply decreases. This is usually during the month of March that they start to prepare to undertake their epic journeys back north. They have gathered in large flocks and I have observed them swooping in on flying insects no doubt filling up their energy stores for the arduous long-haul flight. This behaviour is called hyperphagia, which means 'energetic eating' which results in a fattening up process called hyper lipogenesis which is vital as it is these stores that will be burned as energy for the journey. This fat is stored throughout the body as a layer beneath the skin, and many birds can put on 50% more than their normal mass before their departure.

Most migratory bird species rarely fly to their destination non-stop, but some species interrupt their journey with rest stops. They seem to mimic our travel behaviour with similarities to our airports and roads. They depend on these networks of natural rest stops for food, water and safety and these areas function much the same way as our gas or petrol stations do when we are travelling on a long road with our families, where they can rest and regain some strength. During the days and weeks before the long flight, there is evidence that the organs of these tiny birds may go through a change, with the flight muscles and their hearts growing much larger but their stomach, liver and intestines getting somewhat smaller. Some birds are known to even double in weight before starting this journey through binge eating activities before the migration.

Migrating birds have incredible navigational abilities that allow them to fly these hundreds of kilometres without becoming disoriented or lost. The full spectrum of birds' navigational skills is yet unexplained but it does seem that they use many different methods. Some birds seem to use the sun to somehow maintain their flight path. Bird eyes are sensitive to UV rays emitted by sunlight, which may be seen even on overcast days and possibly at night. There is evidence that birds can detect the earth's magnetic fields. Most migratory bird species have magnetite-based sensors in their nostrils. These help the bird by determining north and staying on course. It is also possible that some species that migrate at night follow the stars somehow.

I will certainly miss these colourful visitors during the winter months but I am looking forward to their return later in the year.



European roller, by Brian Rode.
Barn swallow, by Brian Rode.



March Gallery



Impala ram proclaiming his territory, by Rudi Hulshof.
Cheetah, by Liam Henderson.





Leopard near Gudzane Dam, by Liam Henderson.
Yellow-throated longclaw, by Liam Henderson.





Wild dogs, by Liam Henderson.
3:3 Dumbana young male, by Liam Henderson.





The Shishangaan male lion coalition, by Garry Bruce.
1:1 Dumbana young male, by Garry Bruce.





Woodland kingfisher, by Garry Bruce.
The last photograph of Xihamham after the fight with the Trichardt lions, by Garry Bruce.

