

Singita



Photo By Rudi Hulshoff

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

Temperature

Average minimum: 20.6°C (69.8°F)
Minimum recorded: 16.0°C (60.8°F)
Average maximum: 31.4°C (88.5°F)
Maximum recorded: 38.0°C (100.4°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 65 mm
Season to date: 426.5 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:05
Sunset: 18:43

December in the Kruger National Park has seen an amazing transition, after a heat wave at the end of November caused the grasses and waterholes to dry out, the rain has brought back a bit of life and a bit of colour. The desolate pans which, until recently bore dry, cracked earth, are once again full of slushy mud for the elephants, rhinos and warthogs to wallow in. The grasses have, for the second time this season, changed from brown to green and sent up their inflorescence, with the helmeted guineafowls and flocks of red-billed sueleas enjoying the abundance of seeds. Some trees appear decorated for the festive season, the purple-pod

cluster-leaf and certain *Verchillia* and *Senegalia* with their yellow pom-pom flowers, alive with the hum of pollinators.

A Sightings Snapshot for December follows:

Lions

- The Shishangaan Pride was seen more than 20 times this month, with all 15 cubs still accounted for and healthy. This strong group of seven lionesses have successfully kept their young alive, even though the territorial Trichardt males have been very distracted in other areas of their territory. The pride is moving regularly, with the mothers keeping their cubs in the rocky outcrops of some of the smaller ridges in the southern portion of our reserve as they venture out to try and hunt.
- Interestingly, the majority of the 15 sightings of the Trichardt males this month have been in the company of one or multiple of the Mananga lionesses, with one of the males being seen mating with a younger Mananga lioness over a period of three days. With their interests peaked by their new females within their more recently obtained portion of territory, the Trichardt males have been spending much more time in the central-western sections of the reserve in the last few months than we have previously seen.
- The Mananga Pride is still relatively divided, with sightings being irregular and not always with the same numbers of individuals. They have been seen a few times with up to 11 individuals, but mostly we have been seeing smaller portions of between three and six individuals together.
- The Maputo males were seen once in the far north-western region of the reserve, interestingly scent-marking in an area that the Trichardt males had been seen a few days prior.
- An unidentified pride was sighted three times in early December, along the western boundary of our reserve. They were a bit uncertain of vehicles, but it will be interesting to see if they stay in the area, and allow us to see them again.

Leopards

- The Nhlangueni female has been seen a few times in December, with the odd sighting too of one of her daughters, but never together, although the young female is remaining within the territory of her mother, which is normal.
- The Dumbana female has been seen a handful of times this month, with most of the team hoping she may still have cubs hidden somewhere.
- Dumbana 1:1 male, although not as prevalent as his brother, still appears to be making himself comfortable in the south-eastern reaches of his mother's territory. More recently, he was found to have a baby wildebeest hoisted in a leadwood tree, which he fed upon for two days in the safety of the branches as a hyena circled below waiting for scraps.
- Dumbana 3:3 has been the most commonly seen leopard for December. He has been moving a great deal within the reserve area and covering a lot of ground from the south, close to the lodge, to the central areas. During his movements, he has been seen scent-marking in certain areas, so perhaps in the absence of the constant presence of other males, he is laying claim.
- The Monzo male leopard has been seen patrolling his usual territory, mostly near the N'wanetsi River coming north from Lebombo Lodge.
- The young female leopard who has been seen around the southern sector of the reserve for the past few months is still seen regularly. She grows in confidence around the vehicles and has even been seen with a kill in a leadwood tree - a male impala which she had hoisted.
- An unknown male and female pair were seen mating in the western regions of the reserve, close to Gudzane Dam. The female seemed slightly unsure of the vehicles, while the male appeared much more confident, but the female's drive to mate drew her close to the male even if that meant coming closer to the vehicles. These were not the only unidentified leopards seen this month, which is fantastic because it shows there is a healthy population in the area.

African wild dogs

- A pack of seven adults with seven pups was seen a few times in December, most often in the mountainous areas to the east, where they can rest in the cool nooks and crannies of the drainage lines during the heat of the day. With plenty of baby impala and wildebeest around, easy prey is plentiful.
- A pack of four males has been seen a few times since mid-December. These males could very well be a dispersal pack which have left their natal pack behind in search of other opportunities.

Cheetahs

- We have not had any cheetah sightings reported on the reserve in December, but they have been seen between the lodge and the airstrip occasionally, hunting in the open grasslands.

Spotted hyenas

- Many spotted hyenas have been seen in the past few weeks, most often alone or in pairs and regularly near the pack of African wild dogs or waiting patiently at the base of the tree in which a leopard has stashed its kill. It is always difficult to predict where we might find hyenas because they seem to always just appear when you least expect them!

Elephants

- December has been a great month for elephant sightings, there have been so many breeding herds and bulls moving around and enjoying the vegetation which is in abundance. Many bulls have been in musth, which is a period where the bulls are essentially ready for breeding and their hormone levels change accordingly, driving them to seek out a female who might be receptive. In this time, breeding herds can become stressed with the presence and advances of these big males, and will often try to avoid them to keep their calves out of harm's way.

Buffalos

- Although there has been plentiful quality grazing across the reserve, and an abundance of water for drinking and wallowing, there have been a handful of buffalo sightings on the reserve in December, but when they have been seen, it has been in very impressive, large herds spanning as far as the eye can see, which is amazing to behold.

Plains game

- The open grasslands in and around Singita have been teeming with zebra, taking advantage of the abundant and good quality grazing coming up in the open areas, especially those which were burnt earlier this year.
- The impala and wildebeest young are out in full force. They are sometimes curious of the vehicles as we drive up to them, often running away but then slowly edging closer to get a better look or a better smell of this big grey creature that they see so often. They make for very cute entertainment.

Rare animals and other sightings

- To the surprise of everyone, there has been a sable antelope sighted in the northern reaches of the reserve, which was cause for great excitement from the guiding team, as this is not common at all.
- In the last few months, December included, there has been the occasional sighting of eland, which has been interesting because it is mostly one or two individuals seen, in conjunction with other herbivores for the safety in numbers.
- A handful of resident klipspringer pairs have been seen, but with the vegetation on the steep banks starting to thicken, you have to look very hard to spot them on their impressive perches.

Birds:

- With the many impala lambs in the area, we have had several sightings of martial eagles, scanning the plains below for any opportunity to take an unsuspecting lamb.
- The migratory birds have come out in full swing, with the most recent arrival being the European rollers, with their beautiful blue plumage adding yet another splash of colour to the green backdrop of the vegetation, in addition to the woodland kingfishers which have been here for a while now.
- Several bird species have gone through their yearly moult - the pin-tailed and long-tailed paradise whydahs changing from their usual dull tones of brown to their beautiful breeding plumage to attract the attention of the females.



Eland – Photo by Marc Eschenlohr



Malachite kingfisher – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as a December Gallery of images.

At Singita Kruger National Park we are fortunate to have two rather large rivers flowing through the concession, the N'wanetsi and the Sweni. During wet years these rivers have water throughout the year, but during dry years they can dry up almost completely, leaving only a few deeper pools - especially the N'wanetsi River like the famous Dumbana pools. These rivers are the lifeblood of many species of animals, and I'd like to share some insight on one very interesting reptile: the Nile monitor.



Photo by Bill Drew

This fierce predator can be seen anywhere on the concession where there is permanent water. Quite often one of the first animals that guests at Singita Kruger National Park see on safari is a Nile monitor, when driving through Mbeki's Crossing just after leaving camp. Mbeki's Crossing – named after former South African president Thabo Mbeki - is a point on the Shishangaan River just west of its confluence with the N'wanetsi. It is usually a shallow lily-clad stream with dense reedbeds on the sides; perfect hunting grounds for this lizard!

They are completely carnivorous and will eat almost anything that they can catch, including fish, small mammals, birds, giant land snails, crabs, beetles and crocodile eggs. Female crocodiles will vigorously defend their nests against predators, but the monitors sometimes work together to achieve success, with one lizard drawing the crocodile away from the nest while the other sneaks in to dig up the eggs. They have also been observed cooperatively herding fish in pools of water, using their tails and bodies to form a fishing kraal of sorts, making catching the fish easier.

Nesting takes place in excavated burrows and also active termite mounds, which often takes place after the first spring rains when the wall of the termite mounds will be soft and easier to break open, after which between 20 and 60 eggs will be laid. The termites will then repair their nest, safely sealing the eggs inside the closed mound. It may take up to a year for the young to hatch, after which they may need to wait for rain to soften the mound allowing them to exit by breaking through to the outside. The mother monitor has also been recorded to return to the nest breaking it open for the young.

When threatened, this mostly solitary lizard will arch its back, standing on stiff extended legs and hiss, keeping its tail cocked to the side like a spring to whip its aggressor with a mighty lash. They are also capable of a powerful bite and can eject foul-smelling liquid from their backsides. They will however try and escape first where possible, diving into water or running up trees.

Monitor lizards have been hunted by humans for a very long time. They have developed a very clever camouflage on their underside - the belly is a light colour with black horizontal stripes, so that when the lizard is lying up in a tree and viewed from below, it blends in perfectly with its surrounds, the black stripes resembling the branches and the light colour of the belly blending in with the sky above. The hostile and wild 'mananga' or wilderness that is traditionally the home of the Shangaan people has made them survivors par excellence, having learned how to obtain sustenance from any source available. These lizards are considered a valuable source of food for the hunter and they also feature prominently in many beliefs and the folklore of the Shangaan people. The skins of monitors have been used in the making of the 'macomani' drums used in the Ndzawu spirit possession cult, and also for making a small satchel containing protective medicines worn around a traditional healer's neck, usually suspended on a string of red and white beads. When a monitor has been hunted, great caution is used to remove all the bones from the flesh after cooking as it's believed that if people eat the bones, they'll become slow of mind and if the hunting dogs do, that they'll lose their prowess. It's also considered very bad luck when one of these lizards enters a home as it's believed that this indicates the presence of a ghost. There is an interesting proverb that says "Mahlo ya nkwahle, mativa hi muyevuri", which translates to, "Only the skinner of the monitor lizard will know its eyes". This is a reference to the surprisingly large eyes of a monitor which can only be seen after it's been skinned as only a small portion of the eye is visible while it's alive, the rest being covered by the eyelids. The proverb means that you can only really know something when you've experienced it.



Photo by Bill Drew

The Nile monitor is but one role-player in the waterway dramas of the bush, and any aquatic habitat is always a good place to spend time just observing the unbelievable diversity of life and how they all interact together.

The Shish Pride has no doubt been one of the most resilient prides I have come across in my guiding career. Over the years, these lionesses and their cubs endured a series of challenges that tested their strength, adaptability, and determination. At their peak, the Shish were a super pride of over 40 lions and every corner of our Singita property was their territory, all the way north of Hatayi, to the south past the spring. The pride of so many members became unsustainable due to the many mouths to feed, so they later split into two distinct prides, while the OG Shish Pride remained in the south. From that split their numbers have been up and down like a boat in the deep ocean! In the winter of 2022, the pride had another breakaway when their territorial male (the last surviving Kumana male) was challenged by the Maputo male. In the chaos of the battle (which ended in both males raising their white flags and being allies instead of enemies) a few of the females escaped into Mozambique, and the entirety of the pride has yet to be seen together again as they were before the split.



Shish cubs – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

However, short-lived stability allowed us to start viewing five lionesses with their nine cubs but the numbers of the cubs began dropping dramatically from nine to a mere four cubs, and a few months later it dropped down to two, and as sarcoptic mange grappled some of these cubs, they fought to survive. Just when things began to look up for the pride another wind of change whirled their way when the Trichardt males came to challenge the Kumana and Maputo males, and yet again their world was turned upside down and fear of the unknown surged through them.

The Kumana male and Maputo male were eventually pushed out by the Trichardt males and the Shish Pride began mating with their new kings, the Trichardt males, and sired four cubs, one of which was a white lion cub. But, yet again, the wheel of fortune was not in their favour as the entire litter was lost and for a while so were the Trichardt males as, yet again, the kingship of the south and of the Shish Pride was up in the air as new males were in and out of the region, including a coalition of five males. For months the kingship of the south was up for grabs, awaiting males brave enough to fight for it.

The Trichardt males then returned a little stronger and braver and were ready to fight for the lionesses, and even managed to push back all other chancers, including the coalition of five males. When the Trichardt males took the place of the territorial males with no retreat, then the current rise of the Shish Pride began! The Shish Pride was at five adult females, and two subadult females, with the Trichardt males a permanent fixture. Over

the months you could almost see the confidence grow in the males and the lionesses, as they began to move through their territory with grace and power. Their unity and strength became more and more evident.



Trichardt males – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

Each lioness played a vital role, cooperating and coordinating to secure successful hunts. Two females then added five cubs to the pride, then another two lionesses contributed to the cub numbers a few months later, and another, and another, and they currently have 15 cubs ranging in age from roughly three months to ten months. Even one of the younger members of the pride produced her first litter.

During the early stages, the lionesses faced the task of integrating their cubs into the pride because initially, the lioness that gave birth would keep her cubs secluded, some using previous den-sites and some were discovered in new uncharted den-sites. Once the cubs reached a certain age, they would be gradually introduced to the rest of the pride under the watchful eyes of the other lionesses, except the limping lioness's cubs, which were introduced and began following the pride much earlier than one would expect, possibly attributed to the fact that she may not be able to hunt sufficiently and provide for them alone, so she fast-tracked their progress (adapt or die). All 15 of the cubs are now familiarized with the social dynamics and hierarchies within the pride, ensuring their eventual integration.



Shish Pride cub – Photo by Graeme Stewart

The sightings of the lion cubs fill the air with joy, excitement and a new hope for the pride as these bundles of energy embody the future of the pride. Watching them explore, play, and learn essential life skills has been heart-warming. From their clumsy attempts at stalking imaginary prey to their amusing sibling squabbles, every moment reveals their growing curiosity and determination to become skilled hunters and confident members of the pride.



Shish cubs suckling – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

The Shish lionesses' dedication and nurturing instincts have truly been remarkable, even after all the loss they have had to endure. They tirelessly care for their cubs collectively, teaching them valuable hunting techniques and ensuring their protection and survival. The bonds formed between the lionesses are filled with unconditional support and an unwavering commitment to their pride and well-being. Overcoming challenge upon challenge, the lionesses and their cubs demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability, walking through adversity with their heads held high, protecting and nurturing their young, and maintaining the functionality of their pride is a testament to the unwavering dedication and strength of these lionesses.



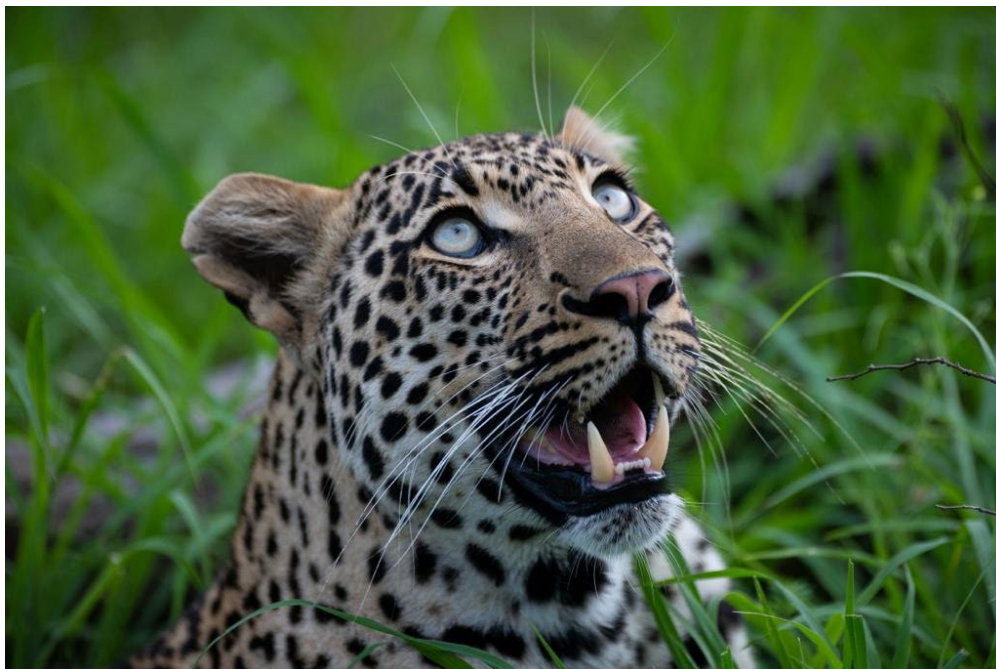
Shish pride – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

Witnessing this journey and the tale of the ever-changing dynamics of the Shish Pride has truly been a privilege and an emotional one. I am excited to see what the future holds for the 22 members of the Shish Pride. This could be the remaking of a dynasty!

December Gallery



Elephant bull – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



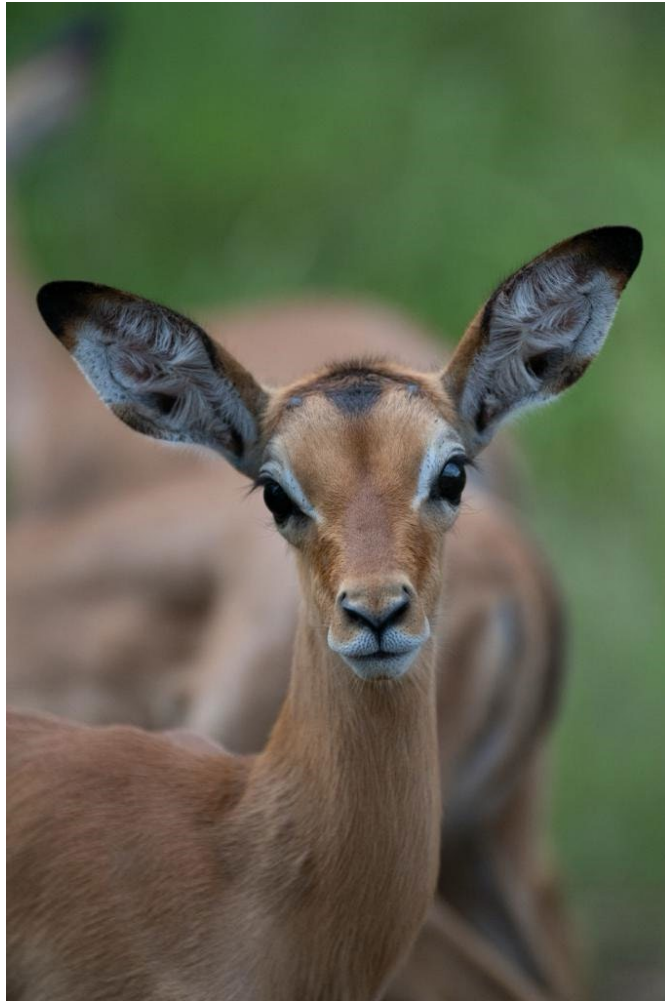
Dumbana 3:3 male leopard – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Spotted hyena – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Kudu bull – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Impala lamb – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Dumbana 1:1 – Photo by Marc Eschenlohr



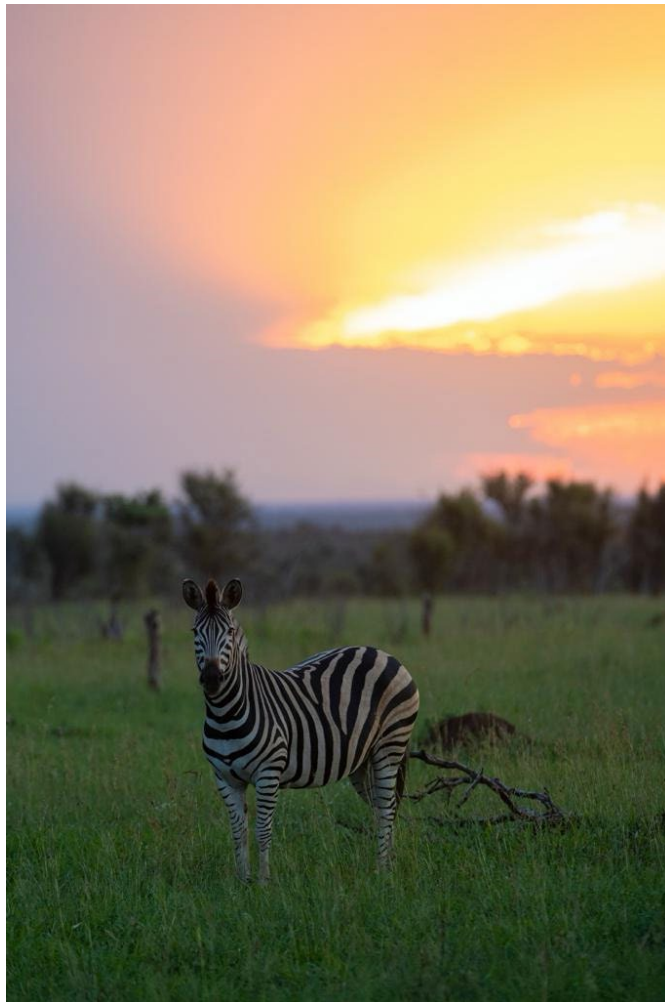
Swainson's spurfowl – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Pink-banded weevil – Photo by Marc Eschenlohr



Mating pair of lions (Trichardt male with Mananga lioness) – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Zebra in the sunset – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Giraffe lying down – Marc Eschenlohr



Dumbana 1:1 with a wildebeest calf kill – Photo by Rudi Hulshof