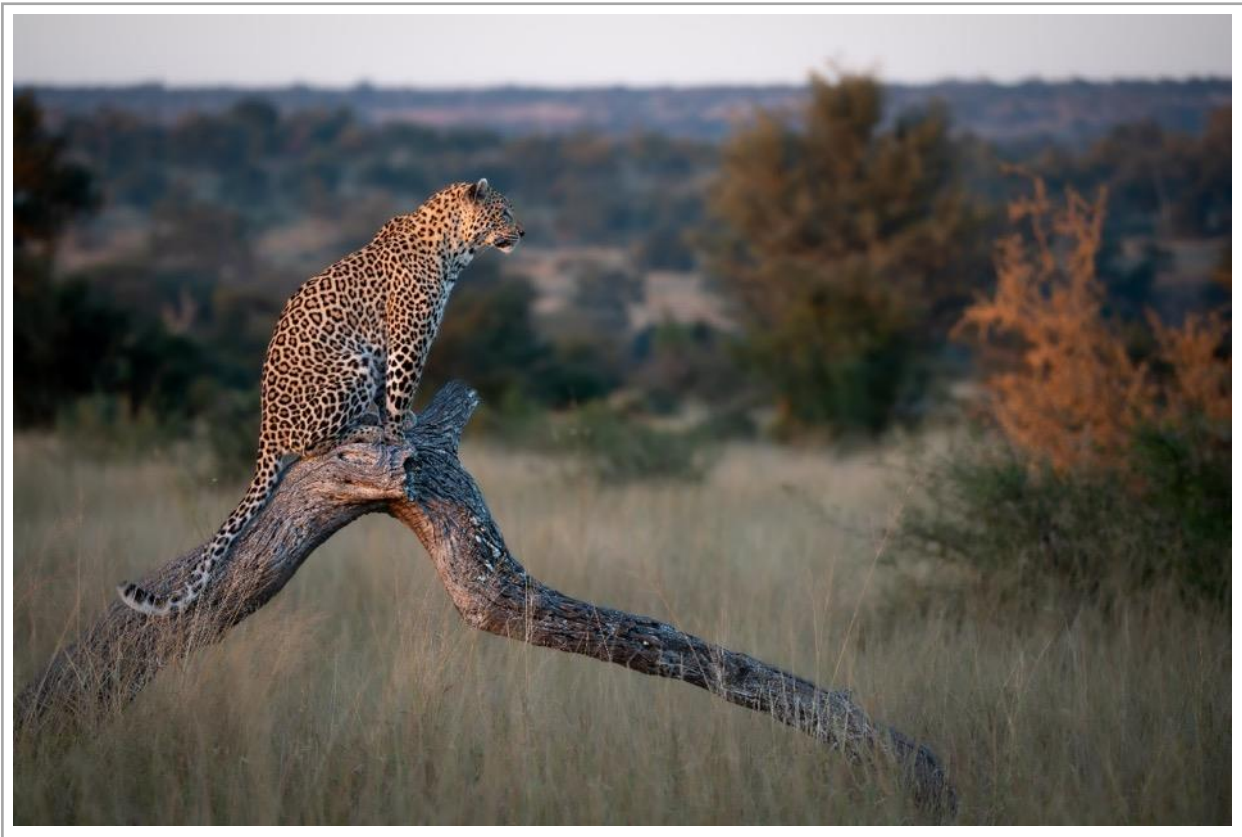


Singita



Dumbana female - Photo by Monika Malewski

WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For the month of May, Two Thousand and Twenty-Five

Temperature

Average minimum: 16°C (55°F)
Minimum recorded: 13°C (61°F)
Average maximum: 30°C (86°F)
Maximum recorded: 34°C (93°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 18 mm
Season to date: 444 mm
(*Season = Oct to Sept)

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06h25
Sunset: 17h10

May in the bushveld brings a quiet beauty that unfolds slowly. The red-bushwillows begin their seasonal shift, their leaves fading from rich green to soft tones of orange and yellow, painting the landscape with a gentle warmth. As elephants move through the dry grass, they stir up a fine layer of dust that lingers in the still air before settling into sharp, clean tracks - perfect markers of their passage. The sounds of the bush have softened too; the once-lively chorus of frogs has faded, replaced by the low, haunting calls of owls that drift through the night, ushering in some of the clearest, starriest skies of the year. In the cooler daylight hours, the

crisp calls of the chinspot batis and the southern black flycatcher rise clearly above the delicate chatter of waxbills. It's a time of subtle transitions, when every detail seems to slow down and deepen.

A Sightings Snapshot for May follows:

Lions

- After more than a month's disappearance, the Shish Pride was discovered in the Granophyre ridges. They looked content, in good condition, and had obviously recently eaten as they all had full bellies and were sleeping soundly in the shade of a few young umbrella-thorns.
- In the first week of May, the Chava Pride took centre stage in our lion sightings. The true stars, however, were the tiny new cubs, an enchanting sight that added a spark to every game drive. These little ones are not just adorable; they're incredibly vocal, their tiny growls and mews filling the air as they explore their world. More remarkably, they're far more relaxed and curious about the vehicles than their mothers were when they first arrived on our concession. It's as if they've inherited a sense of confidence and curiosity, embracing their surroundings with a boldness that belies their size.
- Mid-month, tracks of an unknown male lion were found in the southern part of the concession - a notable event, as no dominant male has held this area for some time. His presence quickly triggered a response: the Shish Pride retreated to the Mozambican border, while the Mananga Pride moved west into Kruger and hasn't been seen in weeks. The Chava Pride, which usually ranges through the north-west and into the public park, has also been absent for over a week. The southern region is unusually quiet, with signs of a possible shift in territorial dynamics underway.
- The Shish Pride spent about a week just west of our concession, between the lodges and our staff village. Early one morning on our way from the staff village to the lodge they were found sprawled out over the H6. We quickly gathered our guests and headed over to where they were last seen. To our surprise, instead of the pride, there was a male lion, we estimate to be around five or six years old. He could be the owner of the tracks we have been finding in the southern parts of our concession. He was roaring and scent marking, probably having realised there are currently no resident dominant males in this area. Midway through the month they returned for one day before vanishing into the Lebombo mountains.
- The white lion, known as Casper, and his brother appeared at the end of the month. Casper is a leucistic male born into the Shish Pride in 2014. He and his brothers dispersed from the pride in 2019 and later established a territory near Satara Rest Camp. In recent weeks, new and younger males have moved into the area and seem to have displaced the older Shish males. It's interesting to see that Casper and his brother have returned to the area where they were born.
- The Sonop males recently ventured out of their core territory, moving further south into our concession - likely in response to the calls of rival males south of our lodges. Their movements suggest they were investigating potential threats or opportunities in the area. After circling around for a brief period, they turned and headed straight back north, returning to familiar ground without engaging in any visible confrontation.
- The Mananga Pride spent most of this month west of our concession. Near the end of the month, we noticed a group of giraffes galloping frantically through the sticky-thorn thicket. They were clearly panicked, their legs crashing through branches as they tried to flee the area. As they broke into the grasslands adjacent to the thicket, we spotted a lioness in close pursuit. Moments later, two more lionesses appeared and darted back into the thicket. It seemed as though the Mananga lionesses were herding these towering giants. Suddenly, everything went silent. All we could see were the giraffes' long necks craning toward a small opening in the thicket. We sat quietly, listening - and then came the unmistakable sound of growling. The pride had successfully brought down a female giraffe. With all six lionesses and ten cubs feeding, by that afternoon, little remained of the carcass - just skin and bones.

Leopards

- One morning, we observed an intense interaction between two male leopards, Mbiri-biri and Masia, in a leadwood tree. Masia had clearly made the kill - a young kudu calf hoisted into the lower branches. However, Mbiri-biri, the larger and more dominant male, arrived shortly after and took control of the carcass without a physical confrontation. He now lay over it protectively. Masia, rather than attempting to reclaim the kill, showed clear submissive behaviour. As Mbiri growled intermittently to assert his dominance, Masia responded with soft, high-pitched purring vocalizations and slowly moved away through the upper branches. Eventually, he found an opportunity to jump down from the tree, leaving Mbiri-biri in sole possession of the carcass. The encounter was a clear display of how size and status influence access to food among territorial males. The same morning delivered an extraordinary run of leopard sightings across the reserve. While Mbiri-biri and Masia's dramatic encounter over a kudu calf played out in the north, the Dumbana female was found further south along the N'wanetsi River, feeding on an impala carcass in a leadwood tree. Her lively young daughter was up in the tree feeding on the last remaining scraps, while her son and her lay in the soft grass below. Adding to the morning's excitement, an unknown, skittish male was briefly seen along James' track, while the Gudzane female reappeared in the northern reaches. With seven individual leopards recorded before midday, it was a standout morning - one of those rare days where the bush truly delivers.
- Interestingly, it appears that the Dumbana youngsters are beginning to spend a considerable amount of time alone when not feeding with their mother. The young male has been seen exploring the western side of the N'wanetsi River, venturing deeper into his mother's territory, while the young female seems to be favouring the eastern side, particularly around the Ntsibistane drainage. This separation and increased independence could be an early sign of the gradual weaning process, as both cubs start to gain confidence and familiarity with the broader landscape around them.
- Dumbana, the resilient female leopard, has been covering remarkable ground across her mountainous territory. One evening, we spotted her tracks on the far eastern ridges, only to find signs of her presence on the opposite side by the next morning - a testament to her tireless patrols. On one such day, her tracks led us into a vast valley where a hooded vulture lingered nearby, hinting at a possible hidden carcass. As we prepared to investigate, fresh tracks showed she had moved on - likely to fetch her cub. We followed, and within thirty minutes, encountered Dumbana on the road with her impressive male cub, already larger than her but still heavily reliant on her for sustenance. The pair retraced her earlier path, leading us back to the valley. Slipping into a drainage line and beneath a dense knobthorn tree, mother and son quickly began feeding on a freshly killed, young impala ram.

Cheetahs

- A mother and two subadults lay resting on the H6 near the Sonop waterhole as we transferred a few guests to the Satara airstrip one morning.

African wild dogs

- Two wild dogs, we assume to be a mating pair, were found resting in the shade of a Guarri-bush in the far north.
- A pack of three individuals has been roaming the Lebombo Mountains in the eastern part of our concession this month. We were privileged to witness them on the hunt and successfully catch an impala. Most packs within Kruger National Park typically hunt one to two impalas per day to meet the demands of their fast metabolisms.

Elephants

- This month has brought an impressive presence of large elephant bulls, many of them in musth, moving through the area with purpose and intensity. On one memorable occasion, we followed a breeding herd that had three mature males trailing closely behind. The largest of the bulls soon singled out a receptive female, breaking into a determined chase - his temporal glands streaming and urine dribbling, clear signs of musth. This behaviour, while dramatic, is a typical part of elephant courtship, often preceding a mating attempt.

Spotted hyenas

- The den on the H6 is active with at least two cubs, one still with pitch black fur, providing much entertainment as they frolic around their patient mother. She is a female that was collared about six months ago by Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) to monitor hyena movements as well as being an indicator species to any poaching or poisoning incidents.
- The clan near the Ntsibistane drainage is still active, with the cub now fully covered in spots. Despite its growing independence, the young one continues to accompany its mother on their scavenging outings.

Buffalos

- The African buffalo have been frequenting the northern sections of our concession recently, largely due to the higher rainfall in that area compared to the drier south. This increased moisture has resulted in more abundant grazing and water sources, attracting large herds to the region. The largest herd, estimated at around 800 individuals, has been spread out across our northern boundary, making for impressive sightings. In addition to this main group, several smaller breakaway herds have begun their usual east-to-west movements, following the Dumbana drainage line as they head toward the N'wanetsi River in the afternoons - an age-old pattern dictated by the availability of water and forage.

Plains game

- The plains game have been thriving along the N'wanetsi and Gudzane Rivers, with a noticeable abundance of activity throughout the area. In the north, the tall, green grasses still dominate the landscape, attracting large herds of elephants that feed and move through the lush vegetation. Meanwhile, zebra and wildebeest have been more concentrated in the southern regions and open sodic patches, where the grass is shorter - more suited to their grazing preferences - and a few seasonal pans still hold the last remnants of water. With the grass now low in certain areas, sightings of elusive species like steenbuck and Sharpe's grysbok have increased, their long ears just visible above the vegetation. Giraffe continue to be a common and elegant presence across the terrain, and we've recently seen the return of impressive male kudus, once again gracing our concession with their stately horns and cautious movements.

Rare animals and other sightings

- The black-backed jackal pair have returned to the sodic area in the central depression. There is a dead leadwood trunk that over the years has slowly hollowed out. Each year the pair uses this as a den-site and we are hoping this year is no different.
- As the early mornings remain cooler for longer, some nocturnal animals are taking advantage of the extended twilight. An African civet was seen casually moving through the Xinkelegane drainage well after sunrise, foraging for food.
- A pair of honey badgers emerged snarling from the tall grass and confidently trotted across the road, treating the vehicle as little more than an inconvenient obstacle. It's always amusing to watch the swagger of these seemingly untouchable creatures.
- One evening, on our way back to the lodge, we rounded a corner and spotted a tiny Sharpe's grysbok lamb on the right side of the road. Its mother initially leapt into the tall grass but soon returned once

we dimmed our lights. Bathed in moonlight, we watched in awe as the newborn wobbled its way back into the long grass.

Birds

- We've been fortunate to record several rare and exciting bird sightings across the concession this month. Just north of Lebombo Lodge, a peregrine falcon - a species rarely seen in the area - was spotted, a thrilling moment for any bird enthusiast. Near the same time, we observed a martial eagle feeding on a monitor lizard, showcasing the raptor's power and precision. In the gorge, a pair of crowned hornbills made an unexpected appearance, adding to the diversity of our sightings. To top it off, a trumpeter hornbill was seen south of Xingwenyana Crossing, marking a rare encounter with this striking and vocal species. These sightings highlight the incredible avian diversity within the region and the importance of preserving these habitats.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as the May Gallery.



Blue water-lily – Photo by Monika Malewski

Anyone's first game drive is always exciting, whether it is on their first visit to Africa, or the first after having had to go home after the last visit. The Big Five looms on the horizon and excitement bubbles at the idea of spotting elephants, buffaloes, or maybe even a lion, leopard or rhino! But then, as the vehicle leaves the lodge, you are introduced by your guide and tracker to opening your senses and to appreciate the rest of what the wilderness has to offer.

A quick exercise explores breathing through your nose instead of through your mouth, noticing the different smells as the vehicle moves through various areas. The familiar scent of freshly trimmed grass may catch your attention, but this time it has been cut by a warthog feeding. New and unfamiliar smells stand out the most. A pile of elephant dung on the road has a surprisingly sweet smell and doesn't particularly stink. The faint musky odour is explained as being from impalas that had spent the night in the adjacent clearing.

An opportunity presents itself and you sit quietly, listening, and potentially even cupping your ears and noticing the silence, loud with the calls and chirps of creatures or whispers of the wind in the grass. An insect chirps in the thorn tree next to you, almost drowning out the distant repetitive call of the ring-necked dove in the background. The most noticeable sound is the lack thereof.

We, humans, have built a world for ourselves where everything revolves around what we see. Bright cities with large billboards and signposts litter the routines of our daily lives. When we do use our noses, we overshadow

the unwanted city smells by even more man-made spray bottles or incense of some sort. Most sounds we encounter are those that we prefer not to hear, and we often try to drown them out by loud music. We have taught ourselves to switch off our other senses and to rely on our sight alone.

All the smells and the noises we leave behind in civilisation - traffic, smog, dogs barking, chemicals, sirens and planes flying over, have left us trying to constantly block out white noise, trying to ignore what is around us. Yet here you are, in the middle of the African continent, somewhere in a place of paradise where life happens away from all the modern chaos, and where every sound, and every smell tell a story of what is around. A whole new world has opened up.



A grassland scene – Photo by Monika Malewski

During your visit, and if you are open to it, you may have the opportunity to engage and to reimagine what we as humans can experience if we open ourselves up. You may come across some of the distinctive sounds and smells, and for the adventurous, guiding teams may even introduce tastes of the African wilderness. You may hear an elephant flapping its ears before you see them, or even smell the potato bush (not a potato) in the evenings. The sound of a giraffe tail as it whips through the air to chase flies off becomes quite distinctive, and the smell of leopard urine resembles fresh buttered popcorn. Baboons pull up roots and bulbs of water lilies and the soil emits a strong smell of earth while the spider-hunting wasp flies past sounding like a mini helicopter.

Early evening and early mornings are sensory explosions. The air is still cold and dense, holding higher concentrations of aromatic particles as well as helping sound travel better. Scents are amplified and sounds travel significantly further and clearer than other times of the day. Do yourself a favour and try to notice. If you are successful, a calmness will engulf you and you will be part of nature, totally immersed.

Oxpeckers and their true role on herbivores: Symbiotic saviours or secret parasites? Article by Damin Dallas

Oxpeckers (genus *Buphagus*) are often celebrated as the ultimate example of mutualism in the African savanna, small birds riding atop large herbivores like rhinos, buffaloes, and giraffes, feasting on ticks and parasites while providing a grooming service in return. But recent studies and behavioural observations suggest that this relationship is more complicated. This article explores the dual nature of oxpeckers and challenges the simplistic view of them as harmless symbionts.

Few images are more iconic in African wildlife than a red or yellow-billed oxpecker perched on the back of many herbivore species. These birds are often seen hopping around their host's body, plucking off ticks and insects while the herbivore grazes unfazed. For decades, this behaviour was widely cited as a textbook example of mutualism, an interaction where both species benefit. But is the relationship really so harmonious?



Giraffe and red-billed oxpeckers – Photo by Damin Dallas

Historically, oxpeckers (*Buphagus erythrorhynchus* and *Buphagus africanus*) were lauded for their apparent health benefits to their hosts. Feeding primarily on ectoparasites like ticks, these birds were thought to reduce parasite loads on large mammals. This idea was reinforced by the birds' close association with herbivores and their apparent attentiveness to grooming. In this narrative, the herbivore benefits by getting rid of harmful parasites, while the oxpecker gets an easy meal, simple and symbiotic. However, recent research has complicated this view. Field observations and controlled studies have shown that oxpeckers often engage in behaviours that are detrimental to their hosts:

- Blood feeding: Oxpeckers don't just eat ticks, they also peck at wounds and feed on blood, sometimes keeping wounds open for days to prolong their access to this resource.
- Wound maintenance: Some oxpeckers show a preference for already open wounds, returning to them repeatedly, which increases the risk of infection and delays healing.
- Parasitic balance: Studies have shown that oxpeckers don't always reduce tick burdens significantly. In fact, they often prefer feeding on engorged ticks that are about to fall off anyway, offering minimal benefit to the host.

These behaviours place oxpeckers into a grey area between mutualism and parasitism. While they may still remove some parasites, the cost of their wound-exacerbating behaviours could outweigh the benefits. Interestingly, not all herbivores tolerate oxpeckers equally. Some species, such as buffalos and giraffes, seem more permissive, perhaps due to their thick skin or the difficulty of grooming themselves. Others, like zebras, often actively shoo away oxpeckers or avoid them altogether. This variability suggests that the relationship may be more opportunistic than obligate and that host species weigh the costs and benefits differently.

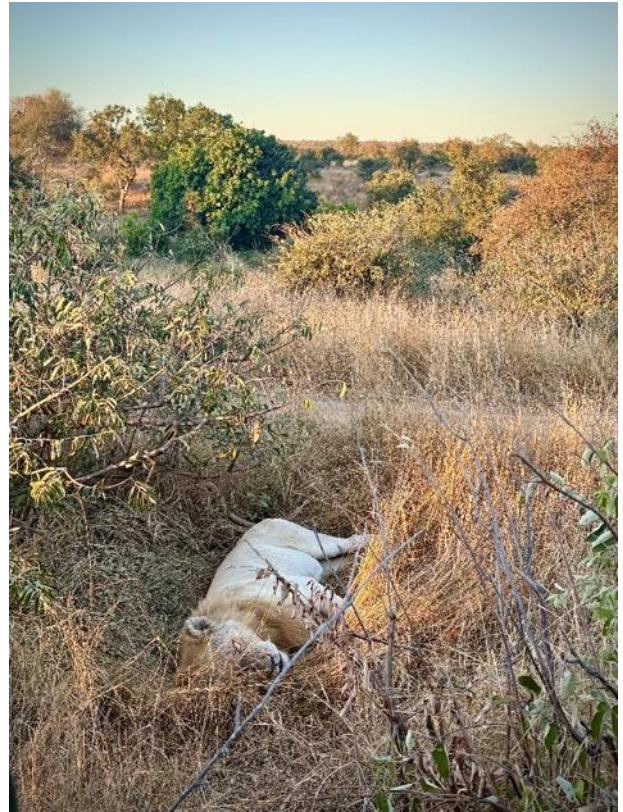
So, are oxpeckers friends or foes? The answer lies somewhere in between. Their role appears to shift depending on the context, species of host, parasite load, presence of wounds, and individual bird behaviour. In ecology, not all symbiotic relationships are black and white. The oxpecker-herbivore interaction is a prime example of a facultative mutualism with parasitic tendencies, a relationship that evolves along a continuum depending on ecological pressures and individual circumstances.

The story of the oxpecker reminds us that nature is rarely tidy. What once seemed like perfect mutualism now appears to be a more dynamic and nuanced interaction. Recognising this complexity is essential, not only for academic understanding but also for conservation efforts that aim to protect and manage these intricate ecological relationships.

May Gallery



Giraffe



The white lion - Photos by Monika Malewski

Klipspringer – Photo by Rudi Hulshof





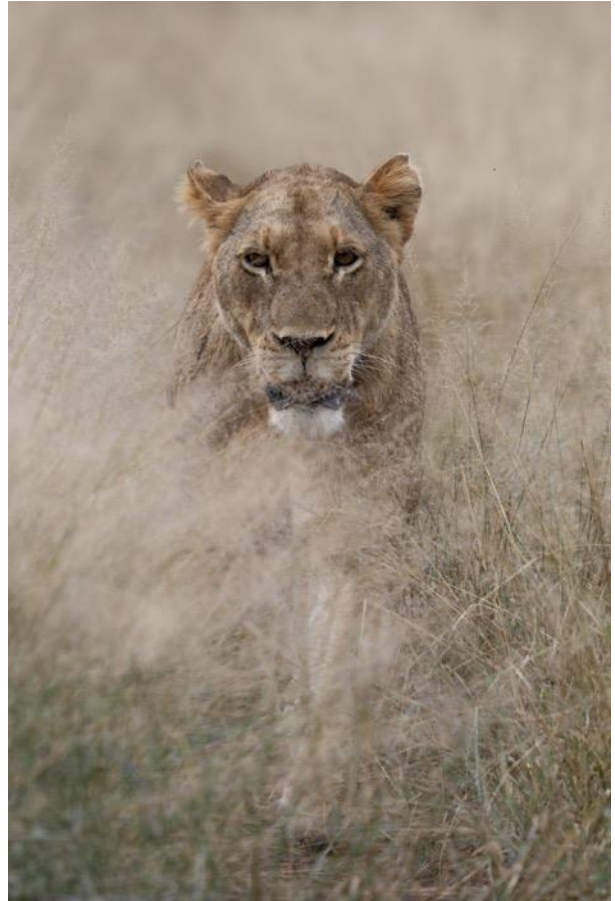
Spotted hyena cubs – Photo by Monika Malewski

African Buffalo bull – Photo by Rudi Hulshof





Martial eagle – Photo by Monika Malewski



Lioness – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

Elephant – Photo by Rudi Hulshof





Masia Male – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

Lioness reflection – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Sonop male lion – Photo by Monika Malewski





Elephant bulls sparring – Photo by Rudi Hulshof

Giraffe at sunset – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Geology training with John Roff

