

Singita



Photo by Garry Bruce

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

Temperature

Average minimum: 14°C (57.2°F)
Minimum recorded: 11°C (51.8°F)
Average maximum: 28°C (82.4°F)
Maximum recorded: 32°C (89.6°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0 mm
Season to date: 739 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:31
Sunset: 17:17

Autumn / fall is at an end now. The temperatures have started dropping in anticipation of the winter months. We have already had a few cold fronts passing through where we have had to bundle up in jackets and fleeces on the morning drives. Most of the trees still have their leaves and the grass is still long and lush in places. It

has now changed colour from the verdant green of summer to the golden shade of winter. In the valleys there are still a few patches that are still bright emerald in colour. There have been a few windy days where the browner leaves have blown across the landscape. The N'wanetsi River is still flowing, although the mountain streams have now dried up and only the deeper pans hold water. Gudzani Dam, in the western half of the concession, is still full and with all the grass and the amount of water in the area we are expecting a great winter.

Elsewhere in the Kruger Park the officials have been doing controlled burns in order to reduce the fuel load so that when the lightning returns (possibly in November) there are no break-away blazes. This has given us the impression that the concession may attract a lot of general game to the area as the dry season progresses. We are looking forward to seeing the large herds of zebras, elephants and buffalos returning.

The Palearctic and intra-African avian migrants are all gone now and the few altitudinal migrants have started arriving from the upper reaches of the escarpment where the temperatures are really low at night. We have still seen a few snakes moving around the area although most have already settled in their hidey-holes to hibernate. The majority of the bugs and creepy-crawlies have also disappeared.

Although there have still been a few clouds in the sky the air is starting to get crisp and dry. The clearer night skies have allowed for some amazing star viewing. We are very fortunate here to have very little light-pollution in the area and it often amazes the guests how wonderfully visible the stars are. The Milky Way stretches like a highway across the sky.

As winter arrives we are expecting the bushes to thin out and the grass to start flattening as the animals walk over it and eat it. The visibility should start getting better and better and it will be easier to spot animals. Already the standing water is concentrated in the dams, the rivers and the deeper pools and soon the animals will have to travel to these areas in order to drink. We will soon start seeing concentrations of game coming to these areas in the late mornings and the movements of the water-dependent animals will become more predictable. The lack of moisture in the air has also meant that the roads are becoming more dusty and it will therefore become easier to see the tracks of the nocturnal animals. Come winter, come! We are ready for you!

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for May:

Lions

- The Mountain Pride has been seen a few times this last month. We seem to be missing one lioness. At present there are four youngsters, six lionesses and one sub-adult male. This pride has mainly been moving in the central-northern reaches of the concession. Towards the middle of the month this pride managed to kill and feed on a Cape buffalo.
- We have been seeing the Shish Pride regularly this month. During the summer months we did not have many sightings of them as they moved out and to the south-west of the concession. During the drier months Shish Pride tend to like the area between the camp and Dumbana Pools, close to the N'wanetsi River. They have returned to this area again. They are often seen in the company of the Kumana Male. For a period this last month this pride was in the area of Ostrich Open Areas, where they took advantage of the lack of concentration of the male impalas, who were pre-occupied with the rut. A few of these male impalas ended up in the bellies of these lions. Shish Pride presently consist of five adult females and four youngsters. One of the lionesses has a damaged back leg and is limping, but still managing to keep up with the rest of the pride.
- The Mananga Pride have been seen a few times this month, mainly in the far western side of the concession, north of Gudzani Dam. They have, on occasion, been seen with Xihamham (one of the Shish Males). One of the Mananga lionesses has two small cubs.

- At the beginning of the month we saw the pride from the north. They were in the far northern reaches of the concession and were seen in the company of one of the Shish Males.
- The Kumana Male has been seen regularly in the area near the lodges. He is often seen in the company of the Shish Pride and was seen mating with one of the lionesses this month. May was a difficult month for the Kumana Male. He is getting old now and other males (from outside the area) have started challenging him for his territory. He is looking a little worse for wear after these encounters. He has a new gash across his nose, his lip is drooping a bit more and his left front paw was injured, causing him to limp. It will not be long now before he gets challenged by males that are stronger than he is.
- The two remaining Shish Males have been seen a few times, mainly in the company of the Mananga Pride. These two male lions are getting old too and it is only a matter of time before they get challenged by other males.
- Other lions: Two unknown young males were seen close to the camp (deep inside the territory of the Kumana Male) towards the end of the month. Towards the middle of the month there was a clash between the Kumana Male and an adult male lion who we believe might have come from Mozambique. Fortunately, although the Kumana Male was injured in the fight, he did manage to chase the intruder back towards the east.

Leopards

- The Nhlangueni female was seen on at least two occasions with her youngster (who is now almost the same size as her). She has been moving around the areas of Three-tree, Nhlangueni Valley and towards Stream Shortcut.
- The Mbiri Mbiri male is possibly the most relaxed leopard in the concession at present and has been seen a few times this month. He has been travelling large distances and has been seen from the far northern areas all the way to the centre of the concession. On one occasion he was even seen in the far western area. He is obviously exploring now as he becomes a mature male.
- The Dumbana female was seen on one occasion this last month with her three small cubs. She and her cubs spend a lot of time in the hills, where she is difficult to find.
- The relaxed young male leopard near camp has been seen on a few occasions this month. We will soon have to give him a name as we are seeing him fairly regularly. He was seen feeding on an impala towards the middle of the month.
- A large male leopard has been seen on at least two occasions in the central area of the concession. He is a fairly old male and has tattered ear-tips and a large dewlap. He was seen stalking a small herd of waterbuck on one occasion, but probably realised that they were a bit big for him. He seems to be fairly relaxed with the vehicles.

Cheetahs

- Cheetahs have been scarce these last few months. We attribute this to the fact that the grass has been very long and therefore unsuitable for cheetahs to chase down their prey. Towards the middle of the month we were surprised to see a female cheetah and her two youngsters in a burnt area near our western boundary. They were fairly shy and moved away from the vehicles. A few days later they were seen again, this time deeper into the concession. At the end of the month we found the footprints of two adult male cheetahs in the far north-west corner of the concession. We did not see the cats themselves as they had headed out of our area but it has made us excited that we might see more of these spectacular cats in the coming months.

Spotted hyenas

- We have had quite a few sightings of these intriguing and misunderstood creatures this last month. Most of these sightings have been of individuals walking along the roads at night. Hyenas tend to walk long distances at night as they search for food. One morning we were sitting on top of the rocks near Ngumi, looking at the beautiful scenery, when we noticed an adult female walking across the rocks on

the other side of the valley. She was followed by a young cub. A few days later one of our trackers was walking in the area when he came across two females and two small cubs that ran into the shelter of a small cave.

Elephants

- The elephants are returning to the concession! We have been surprised by the low numbers of elephants in the area (even though we have seen elephants most days). We were assuming that after the marulas finished fruiting in the western half of the park that these great, grey creatures would return to eat the lush grass in the area. Although we did still see elephants we were expecting to see them in greater numbers. Towards the end of the month we noticed that more and more elephants had returned and, particularly in the afternoons, were coming to the river to drink and feed. We are expecting to see greater numbers of elephants in the area in the next few months as the water elsewhere continues to dry up.
- A small herd has been seen entering the camp at night to feed on the green vegetation there. One night they were even seen near the large baobab tree in between the Culinary School and the dining area. This small patch of garden is enclosed by buildings and it was surprising to see them there.
- A mature bull with large tusks was seen in the area on a few occasions.

Buffalos

- We have had a good month for buffalo viewing. There have been quite a few sightings of dagha boys (old males who are not in the company of the herds) along the drainage lines where the grass is still lush and green.
- There has been a small herd of between ten and fifteen individuals that have been seen regularly in the central and northern part of the concession.
- A large herd of approximately 150 individuals has been seen moving around the northern grasslands.

Plains game

- The general game has been fairly good this last month with regular sightings of kudu, giraffes, blue wildebeest, common waterbuck, klipspringers, chacma baboons, vervet monkeys, steenbok and warthogs.
- Impalas, which are the most common large mammals seen in the area, have been in full rut this last month. The males have been fighting and chasing other males and the lucky ones have had good mating opportunities. Unfortunately for some they were too involved in the excitement of the rut to notice lions and leopards hiding in the grass nearby. Most of the adult female impalas are now pregnant and we should be seeing lots of new lambs in December.
- Now that the grass is thinning out we have been seeing more Sharpe's Grysbok sightings in the hilly areas.

Rare animals and other sightings

- We have had a few good sightings of nocturnal creatures such as African civet, large and small-spotted genets and even Cape porcupine.
- A large python (as thick as my thigh) was seen in the central part of the concession. This particular creature created a bit of amusement when the guides and guests got out of the vehicles to get a closer look. The snake's head was hidden in the grass and as everyone approached it, it reared up causing everybody to scatter quickly.
- Four honey badgers were seen outside the guides' office and near the kitchen one night. We are expecting to see more of them as winter progresses.

Birds

- We recorded 166 species of birds this last month.
- Some of the rare and threatened birds (as listed by the I.U.C.N. and E.W.T.) seen in the concession this last month include southern ground-hornbills, bateleur eagles, white-backed vultures, hooded vultures, white-headed vultures, lappet-faced vultures, saddle-billed storks, black storks, tawny eagles, martial eagles and kori bustards. We were even lucky enough to see a Cape vulture feeding on an impala carcass on one occasion, with other vultures. Cape vultures are near-endemic to South Africa (meaning that their population occurs almost entirely within a specified area). Although there is a breeding colony that nests on the cliffs of the escarpment to the west of the Kruger National Park sightings of this species is quite rare in the area.
- We also had a single sighting of two black saw-wing swallows along the N'wanetsi River upstream from Lebombo Lodge. This species is not often seen in the area.

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



Lebombo candelabra silhouettes

Singita Lebombo is situated on the central-eastern part of the famous Kruger National Park. Lebombo Lodge is positioned on a ridge of the famous Lebombo mountains (this ridge of hills forms the eastern boundary of South Africa with Mozambique). The Lebombo mountains are the home of numerous different trees species. Many of the tree species only occur here.

We feel blessed as we are operating on a 15 000 hectare concession, which we do not share with any other lodges around. This concession is private, allowing only Singita vehicles. Our concession is the biggest among all other concession within the Kruger National Park. A unique aspect of our beautiful concession is that we have a large variety and diversity of tree species, some of which only occur in the Lebombo ridge and nowhere else.

The Lebombo mountains stretch from Kwazulu Natal until they end in Zimbabwe. Characteristic trees on this range of hills include the Lebombo cluster leaf (*Terminalia phanerophlebia*), Lebombo euphorbia, (*Euphorbia confinalis*), large-leaved rock fig (*Ficus abutifolia*), Cape teak (*Strychnos decussata*) and lavender croton (*Croton gratissimus*). Some of these trees give this range of hills (particularly within the concession) their specific character. One of the easily identifiable and characteristic trees that occurs on this range of hills is the Lebombo euphorbia (*Euphorbia confinalis*). It is a tall, slender, single-stemmed tree with a candelabra -shaped crown. In the area there is another species of large, succulent euphorbia which has a similar look to the Lebombo euphorbia. It is called the bushveld candelabra (*Euphorbia cooperi*), and differs from the Lebombo

euphorbia by having broader, more triangular segments to the branches. The euphorbias are usually leafless spiny trees, with succulent stems and a milky latex. There are approximately two thousand euphorbia species worldwide and some three hundred in southern Africa.

When you drive along the road in the concession that follows the N'wanetsi River and look to the east you will notice the stands of Lebombo euphorbia growing on the cliffs. One of the most interesting facts about the Lebombo euphorbia is that it usually grows on rocky outcrops.

Most euphorbia species have a white, milky latex that may pour out of the branches when they are damaged. This sap is very toxic and it is not advisable to touch it as it can cause your skin to blister (it is highly caustic) and if it gets into your eyes it could cause blindness. In the past people sometimes used the latex as an arrow-poison for hunting purposes. Traditionally, it is believed that this latex could be used as a remedy for tooth-ache (you just put a drop on the tooth to relieve pain). Although very few animals are known to feed on Euphorbia trees porcupines are known to eat the bark and may even eventually ring-bark the tree which will cause the tree to die. The local people (Shangani) also use the branches of Lebombo euphorbia to catch fishes by dropping it into ponds of water to paralyze the fishes. The fish heads and gills need to be cut off and discarded before eating the fish.

The Lebombo candelabras and bushveld euphorbias both flower from September to December and tend to attract numerous butterflies and other insects to the strange-looking flowers (known as cyathiums). Squirrels and birds have been seen to feed on the seeds of these trees.



African monarch butterfly feeding on the flowers (cyathiums) of a bushveld candelabra tree.



On the night of the 12th of May, we could hear the Kumana Male roaring from within the heart of his territory. His territory currently runs from south of the N'wanetsi River and stretches to the west and south of our concession. He has fathered a few cubs to the Shishangaan Pride, who hold a territory within his range. It was just past midnight, and we could still hear his familiar roar from the lodge, but this time, something was different. His roar was answered by another male lion, that we could hear calling from the east. I decided to leave my warm bed and venture outside into the chilly autumn evening. I sat waiting on my porch, and listened as the intruder male's roars got closer and closer.

The next morning, we found the Shishangaan Pride just north of the lodge. The Kumana male was still roaring, and moving closer to where we were sitting watching the pride. The cubs were playful, climbing and falling out of low branches, whilst the females were soaking up the morning sun.

We could see the Kumana male approaching the pride, and were anticipating a greeting ritual that most lions display when one of their members return to the pride. He stopped just short of where they were sleeping, and started roaring again. Shortly thereafter, we could hear the intruder male answering. The cubs settled down quickly, and moved towards where the females were resting. The Kumana male did not settle down with the rest of the pride, and started walking towards the N'wanetsi cliffs to meet the intruder. We decided to follow him and left the rest of the pride.

He was walking at a rapid pace, and continued roaring. We could hear the intruder male answering directly above us on top of the cliffs. The Kumana male crossed the N'wanetsi River quickly, and started moving up the cliffs on a well-used game trail. We managed to catch a glimpse of him between the riverine trees, as he stopped halfway up the trail to roar. His breath caused a cloud of vapour, as his roar bounced off the surrounding cliffs, and it looked like he was standing in amongst the clouds, as mist had gathered in the riverbed below. It was a sight to behold! We managed to drive around to the top of the cliffs, to see if we could find the two males confronting one another. The area was extremely mountainous, and we only managed to hear as they clashed and fought.

Shortly thereafter, they started roaring again, and it seemed as if they were moving north. We decided to take a break, and stopped for a cup of coffee on top of the hill, where we could scan and listen for any sign of them. Just as we finished our coffee, one of the other guides called us on the radio to announce that he had found the two males again. We quickly drove down the mountain, and found them lying a few feet apart. The intruder male started walking away, possibly due to him not being used to being in close proximity to vehicles. The Kumana Male started roaring again, as if to intimidate the intruder out of his area. We had a close look at both males, and found that the Kumana male had a big gaping wound across his face and lip. He was also limping badly, leaving a blood trail caused by an injury to his front left paw. The intruder male managed to get away with a couple of claw marks below his eye. We sat with the lions until mid-morning, to see if they would have another go at each other, but instead they settled down licking their wounds a mere ten metres apart. The next morning, we followed the Kumana's trail, still bloody, heading south, back towards the pride. The intruder male's tracks were found heading south-east – back towards from where he had come.





Big bull elephant walking in the golden grasslands



Tawny eagle



Buffalo bull



Male waterbuck



Banded groundling dragonfly



Mother cheetah and youngster walking through a burnt area.



Giraffe staring at a possible predator in the grass



Male leopard stalking a waterbuck



Buffalo breeding herd



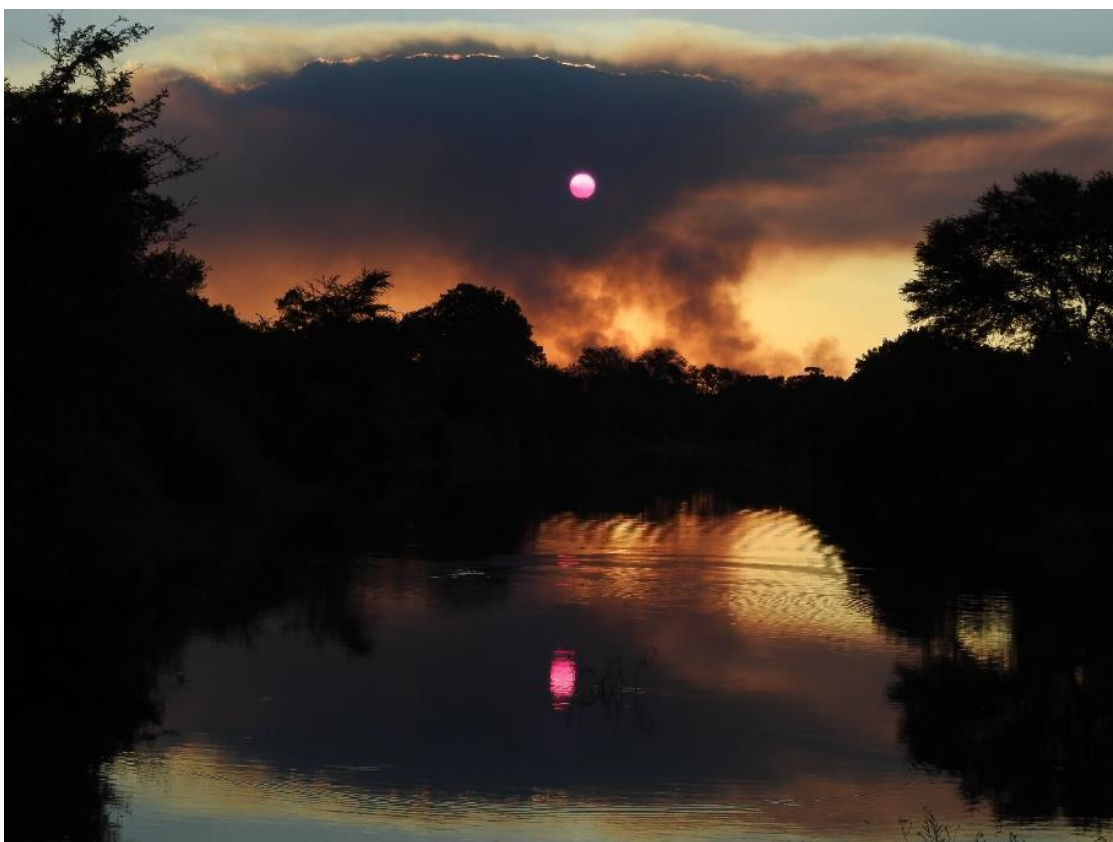
The young Mbiri Mbiri male leopard



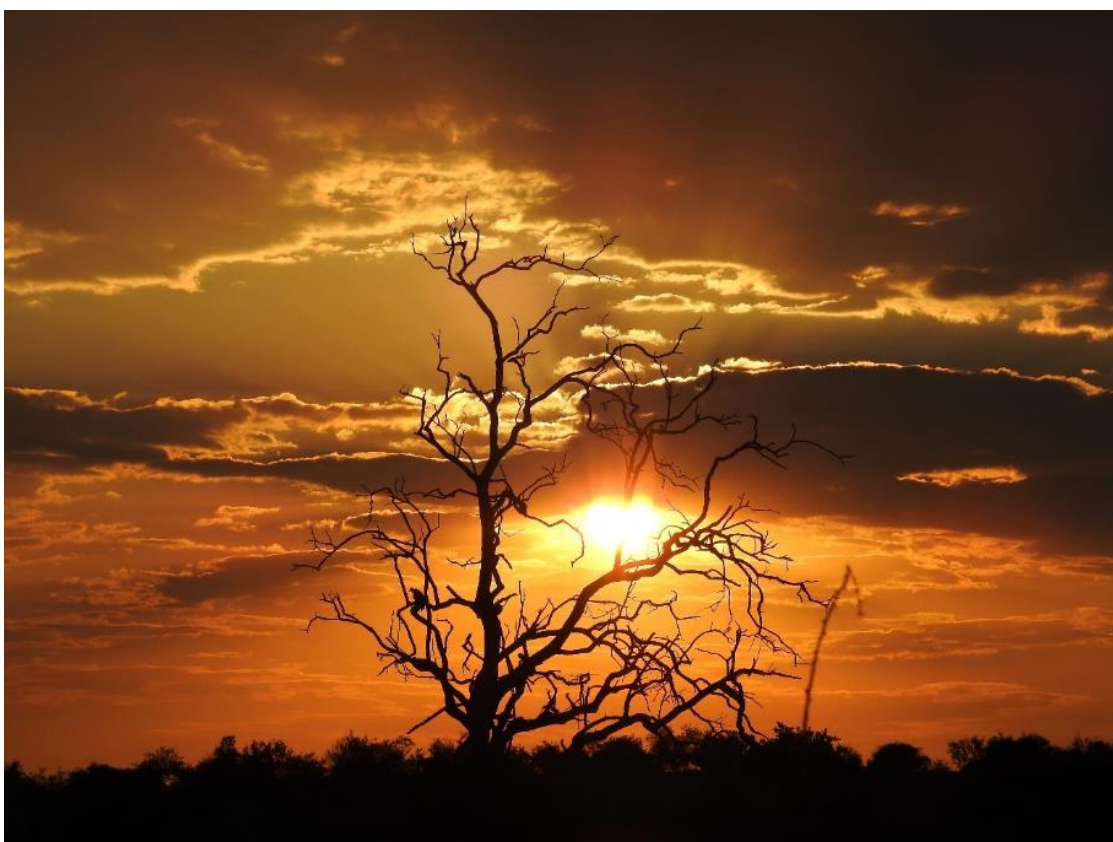
Mountain Pride youngsters playing on a fallen tree



Pearl-spotted owl



Sunset through the smoke



Another glorious African sunset