

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL

SINGITA PAMUSHANA / MALILANGWE, ZIMBABWE

For the month of May, Two Thousand and Twenty-Three

Temperature

Average minimum: 16.6°C (61.8°F)

Minimum recorded: 14.1°C (57.3°F)

Average maximum: 29.7°C (85.4°F)

Maximum recorded: 33.6°C (92.4°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0 mm

*For the season to date: 686 mm

*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:22

Sunset: 17:19

May has been a brilliant month for wildlife sightings, and made all the more exquisite by some misty mornings, low clouds and cooler temperatures. The autumn light for photography is simply the best. The baobab trees are hanging heavy with fruit, and guests have enjoyed cracking open the oval velvety orbs and tasting the creamy tangy 'powder' covering the seeds inside.

Here's a sightings snapshot for May:

Lions

- Nduna Pride: This pride has spent much time west of their original territory again, so perhaps their new territory now includes the Nhangana Pan, West Valley Road and Ultimate Drive areas.
- Northern Pride: Interestingly this pride that we very seldom see was spotted in the Lojaan/Nduna area, so perhaps they have moved into that space now that the Nduna Pride are not spending as much time in the Lojaan/Nduna area.
- The Southern Pride have provided excellent sightings around Hwata Pan. Six members have been seen there, including a mating pair.
- A lioness and three cubs from the River Pride were seen east of Nyamasikana Bridge.

Leopards

- Most of the leopard sightings in May have been of the male that shows himself around Sosigi Dam and Pamushana Hill. Long may this relaxed male stay in the area!

Rhinos

The rhino sightings are truly incredible. Now that the temporary pans have dried up the rhinos gather to drink at the permanent sources, and we are treated to seeing them in large crashes.

- Ten white rhinos were seen drinking at Banyini Pan, alongside a bull elephant. Up to 20 individuals have been seen gathering at Hwata, not far from where there were a mating pair of lions. Two highlight sightings were seeing two bulls having a territorial clash; and watching a little month-old calf with its mother.
- To see six black rhinos in one morning drive is phenomenal, but happened this month. (On the same drive guests saw a lion on a buffalo kill.) Mother and calf duos have been seen, and an adult bull kept everyone's adrenalin pumping with a lot of mock charges.

Elephants

- It's been so good to see the return of elephant bulls to Hwata Pan, now that there is less water around.
- Mesmerising breeding herds, sometimes more than 60 individuals at a time, have been seen feeding along the river and drinking at Sosigi Dam.

Buffalo

- Cavalries march in and out on a regular basis at the main pans, often over 200 buffalo at a time.

Wild dogs

- The alpha female in the pack of 11 is heavily pregnant, and should start denning any minute now.
- The pack of 4 have been seen hunting on the Hippo Valley side.

Hyena

Hyena presence is starting to pick up again in the central region.

- Eight of them were seen walking along Pamushana Access and then trying to hunt warthogs.
- Four hyenas killed a young giraffe south of Nyari Pan.

Plains game

- Plains game abound – there really are an abundance of impala, zebras, giraffes and wildebeest. Sightings of sable antelope and Lichtenstein hartebeest have also increased this month.

Hwata hide

- One of the best things about the dry season means that the sunken photographic hide at Hwata Pan can be used regularly. Animals congregate to the area, and guests can view them undisturbed, from ground level as they drink. Highlights from the month include: elephant bulls, rhinos, buffalo, wildebeest, jackal and a mating pair of lions!

Boat cruises

- The sundowner safari boat cruises are a highlight of any stay, and a unique offering at this property. A very lucky bonus for guests this month was seeing two black rhinos drinking from the Nyamasikana River.

Unusual sightings

- It was bizarre to see a white rhino bull chasing a lion cub around a dead thorn tree.
- There is a crowned eagle nesting in the Lojaan area.
- A chameleon stole the show one morning and had all the guests off the vehicle taking photographs of the cryptic colourful little celebrity!

Walks

- Another great thing about the dry season is that it is the best time to do nature walks. These are often the highlight of guests' stays, as it was for two groups of guests this month who went on walks with their guide and tracker and, apart from studying the flora in more detail, were rewarded with observing white rhinos that were oblivious of the human presence.

Rock art

- Various walks have been conducted to the ancient rock art on the reserve.

Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft

- Guests enjoyed visits to Kambako, and participated in some of the demonstrations as well as sampling the traditional food.

Gonarezhou day trip

- One morning safari started with a game drive on our reserve before entering into neighbouring Gonarezhou National Park. A total of 12 white rhinos were spotted within the first hour of the drive, plus an elephant bull in musth that went on to push over a big mopani tree. Once in the park several herds of elephants were seen and the Chilojo Cliffs were as impressive as ever.

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

Hamerkops hammering platannas



I have OCD. I took close to 2 000 photographs over two days of these hamerkops (*Scopus umbretta*) feasting on frogs. It's been a mammoth effort whittling this selection down as it was such an incredible sighting.

Armed with my new mirrorless camera in hand I arrived at Hwata Pan to find nothing. There were only a few guineafowl about, and then I also noticed some hamerkops. I will admit that up to this point my interest in hamerkops was limited to their hammer-shaped heads after which they were named, the enormous nests they make, and the colourful folklore that surrounds them - yet I thought they were fairly drab, plain, brown birds. Having been unfairly sentenced to wearing an all brown uniform for a minimum of 12 years at a girls' school I have never worn nor been attracted to the colour since. But I hadn't seen these birds at this pan before, so wondered what the four of them were doing, just standing about in the shallows. After a while one of them took off, flew low over the water, plunged its head in and caught a frog in its beak, still on the fly! I dived into the sunken photographic hide that's eye-level with the water and proceeded to spend the next two hours making the most of this incredible sighting and the impressive auto-tracking focus capabilities of my camera.

As they hunted they would bank and turn and brake. I could scarcely believe how beautiful and colourful they were in their tones of brown when they revealed their outstretched wings and fanned their barred tail feathers. They had a couple of hunting techniques: the first was to stand in the shallows, very still, and hope a frog would pop its head out close enough for them to catch it. This had a very limited success rate. At one stage I also saw a hamerkop fly off, pick up a clump of grass in its beak, fly back and drop the grass at the edge of the water. I think it was trying to use the grass as a lure, although I didn't see any catches from this. By far the most successful technique was when they would fly from one side of the pan to the other and a frog would pop its head out to breathe – they'd brake, head-dive in, and snatch the slippery frog. I went back the next day too, and they were still at it although there were far fewer frogs left. I'd say their flight forays had a 1 in 8 success rate on day 1, and a 1 in 30 success rate on day 2. They were binge feeding and it's a wonder they could still fly with all those frogs wiggling and jiggling inside them!

The frogs were a species we call platannas, also known as African clawed frogs (*Xenopus laevis*) and they were at the stage of metamorphosis when they were taking their first gulps of air as lung breathing frogs instead of gill breathing tadpoles. There were so many of them and they were in a contained shallow pan. The hamerkops were taking maximum advantage of this set of circumstances, and the binge lasted a few days before the pan was too fished out to be worth their while anymore, and they flew off to find their next hunting opportunity.

During the two days I was able to photograph them from all angles – water level and higher, backlight, side-light and front on, and the way the sunlight hit the water allowed for some artistic effects too.

For birds in flight photography like this it's best to use a shutter speed of about 1/2000 sec to freeze the movement, a shallow depth of field of about f/5.6 to isolate the bird from the background, and auto ISO.





They'd use their spread wings and long primary feathers to suspend their body above the water as they plunged their head in, and their fanned tail feather as a brake and rudder system.

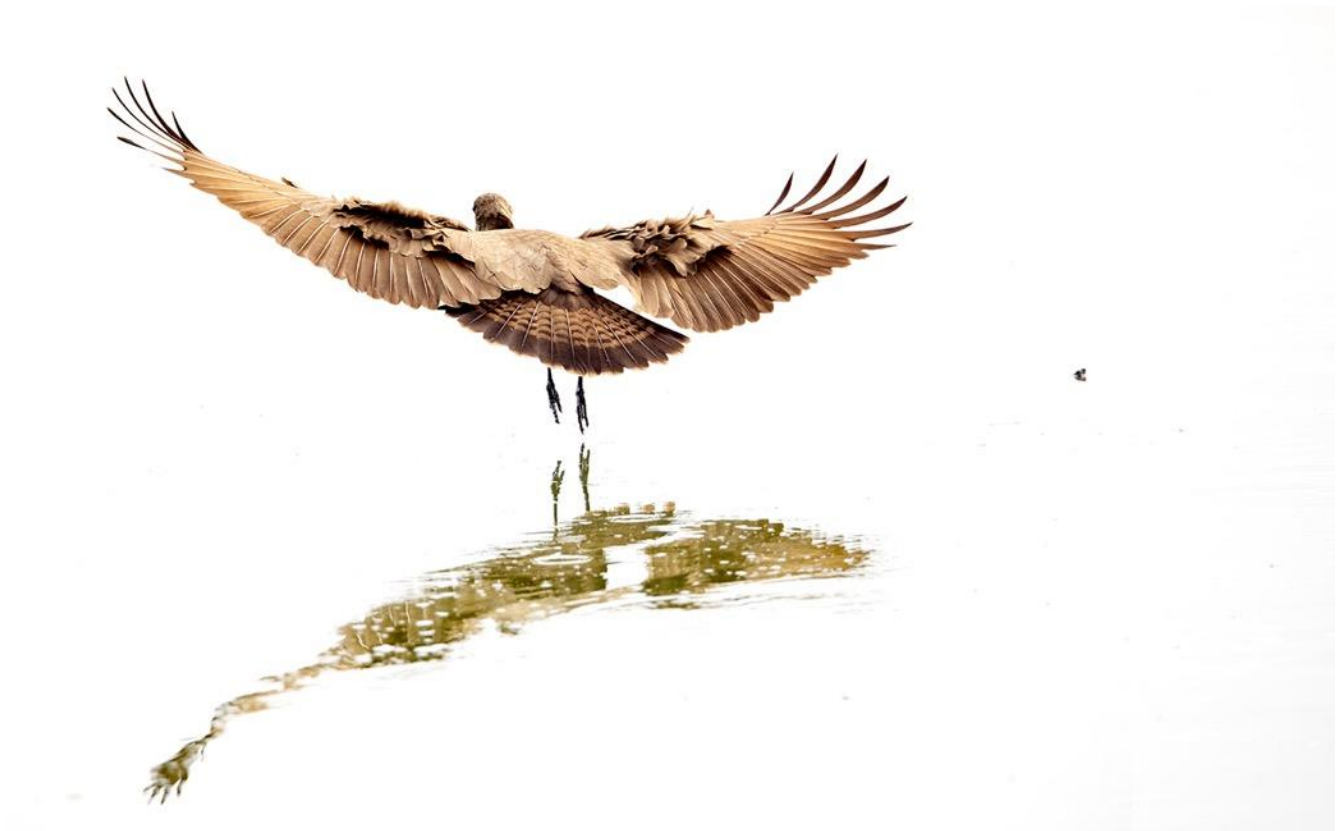
If the foray was a success they'd fly off with the frog, land at the water's edge and begin preparing their meal.





The birds were fastidious about cleaning the frog and their beaks before swallowing the meal. They would flip the frog into position to dip it into the water face down, then vigorously shake off the slime and mud before tossing and catching it again to swallow head first.





Notice the head of the little frog in the right of this photo, as it surfaces to gulp air.

Pushing the boundaries



One of the younger Nduna males feeding on the carcass.

This sighting was a revelation, in that it was the Nduna Pride who'd made this kill, in what we would have considered more of the River Pride's territory. They'd been strategic, hiding out in the dense foliage near Nhangá Pan and waiting for this lone buffalo bull to drink before ambushing him in the night.



We were delighted to see one of the two young cubs come to feed at the carcass while we were there – its belly was already so full and distended but the youngster was determined to pack in as much protein as it could.

Also interesting to see was that the old Nduna male was still with the pride – he really is hanging on tooth and claw! After this sighting we noted that one of the pride lionesses

was in oestrus, and it was one of the younger male lions courting her, while the old boy seemed to turn a blind eye. Probably a good strategy yet again to tolerate the big young males and pick your battles wisely.



In the photograph above showing the old Nduna male you can see from his expression how nervous and concerned he is about the movement he's detected (which was of one of the other lions walking through the bushes after returning from a drink). He's on guard at all times now.



We found other members of the pride at the nearby waterhole, and as you can see from the photo they had to almost drag their bellies through the mud to get to the water's edge. Drinking water facilitates with the digestion of meat and bone fragments.

A few days later, after the jackals, hyenas and vultures had had their fill and picked the carcass clean, this was all that remained of the once 800 kg (1 763 lbs) beast. A multitude of insects and tiny organisms will ensure that Nature knows no waste and eventually the calcium from the bones will be returned to the earth once more.



Golden moments



We'd chosen the most beautiful place on Earth for our sundowners – the wall of Lojaan Dam. Drinks were poured, snacks were offered and we sat soaking in the sunset and the scene while recharging our hearts and happiness. A giraffe strode into the clearing below the sun-kissed cliffs, stepped into a pool of gold and cast his shimmering reflection out to us. There can be no moment more perfect.

Time in the wilderness is a necessary antidote to the digital noise of everyday life. By breathing mindfully, staying calm and quiet, and observing all that is around you, you restore a sense of wellness to your entire being – body, mind and soul.

Across the river

On the western side of the Chiredzi River is an area that's not always accessible by safari vehicle, depending on the water level. It sports incredible trees in the riverine vegetation, open plains and a swamp that's rich with birdlife. Time spent exploring this area always has its rewards in terms of the scenery, and every so often a great sighting too – like these two white rhinos who trotted off before settling down again to graze near us.



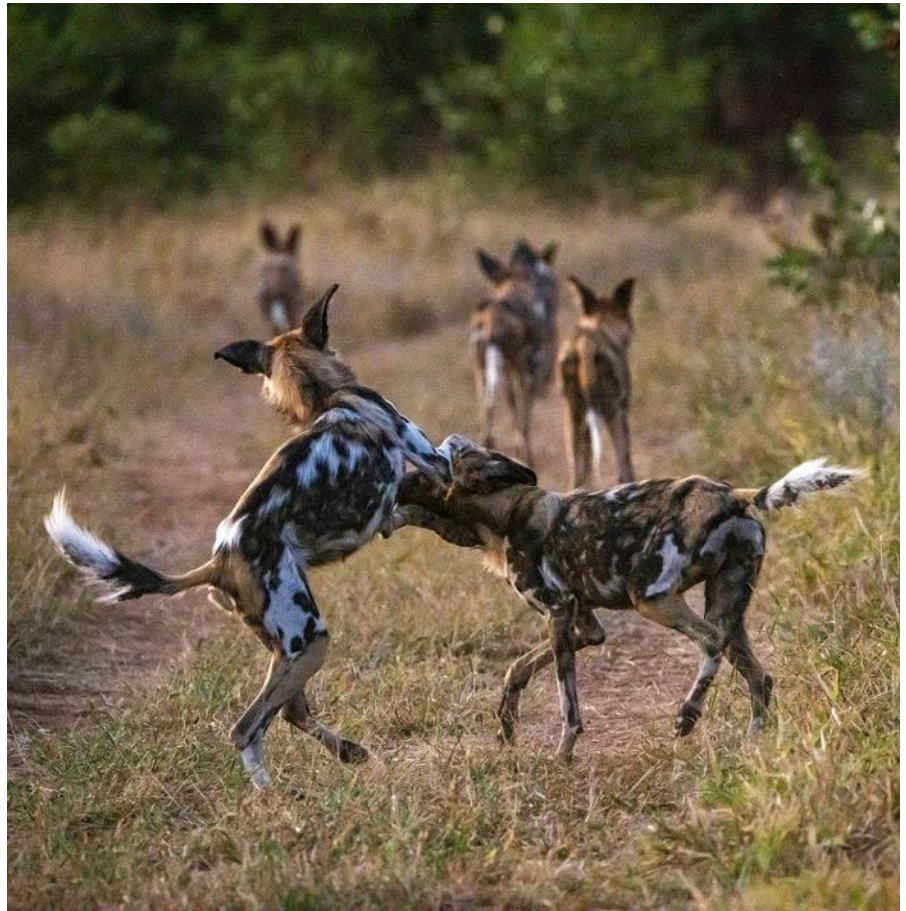
Wild dog ways



There's no better way to whittle away an afternoon, than spending it with a pack of wild dogs. We found this pack snoozing in the track close to Hwata Pan. They would occasionally get up and shift around to get more comfortable and move into the shade.

At one point they all jumped up and looked towards the pan – something must have gone to drink and they were assessing their chances of a hunt. They were like loaded arrows in archers' bows. But they decided against it – or the animal got wind of them and fled, and the dogs went back to resting.

I wondered if they would go and drink before hunting but as dusk drew near they got up, played some wild games, and then trotted off in the opposite direction to go on a hunting foray.



May Gallery



Misty mornings create the most beautiful effects for photography, such as this lacework tree shrouded in a billowy veil.

As the mist lifted it revealed a saturated giraffe still sitting in his bedding, while a dwarfed wildebeest grazed nearby.



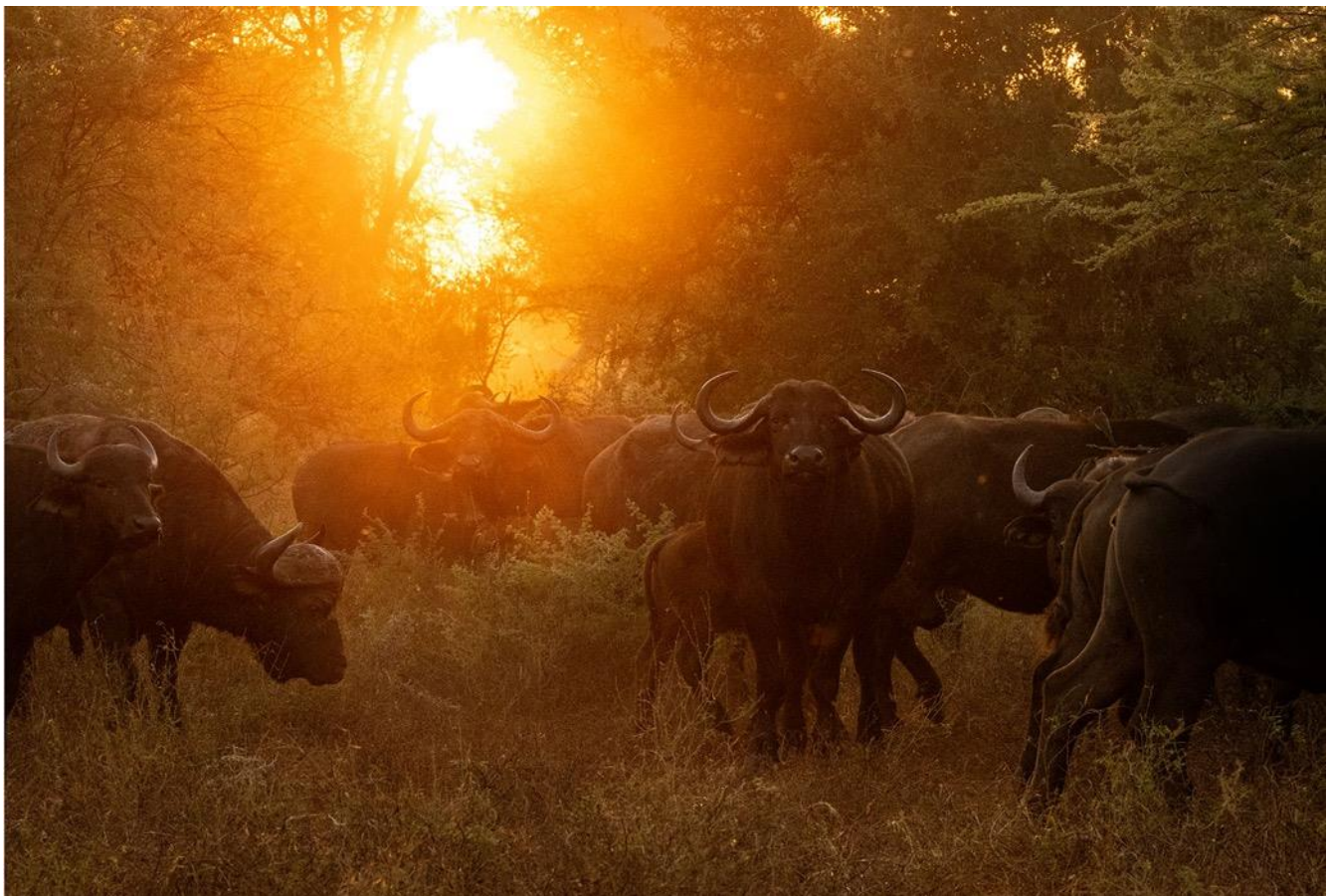


A mature bull elephant with good tusks calmly fed on his own.
This young bull showed less confidence and 'hid' behind the shadowy foliage before moving briskly past.





There's always at least one buffalo in a herd determined to stare you down. Knowing the rules, and better yet – knowing how to break them, makes them great photographic subjects.





This shy kudu bull has such magnificent wide sweeping horns, indicative of his mature status. He used to be a member of a group of bachelors, all with incredible horns, but some of them have fallen victim to lions of late. Long live this king wearing his armoured crown.