

# Singita



Photo by Brian Rode

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

### Temperature

Average minimum: 20°C (68°F)  
Minimum recorded: 15°C (59°F)  
Average maximum: 33°C (91°F)  
Maximum recorded: 40°C (104°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 60 mm  
Season to date: 94 mm

### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 04h59  
Sunset: 18h29

November is generally considered to be the last month of spring in the southern hemisphere. Summer is now approaching fast. We have already had a few drops of rain and the last week was quite wet. A tropical cyclone formed over the ocean to the east of us and although it veered off east and did not directly hit us it did push a lot of moisture into the area. With the rain that we received it has allowed the green grass shoots to push

through the soil. The northern parts of the concession, in particular, started greening up quite nicely and large herds of grazers such as plains zebras, blue wildebeest and Cape buffalos started gathering to take advantage of the green forage. Although there are emerald shoots appearing at the base of the tufts of grass the long grass is still golden in colour. We also had a few days where the temperatures soared and reached 41 degrees Celsius (106 degrees Fahrenheit). It was quite uncomfortable on those days (fortunately the guest rooms have air-conditioners in them) and I felt quite sorry for the many pregnant animals out there. With the temperatures increasing we have started seeing quite a few snakes and creepy crawlies that have come out of hiding. One morning the guides found two different southern African pythons (one of which had already consumed a baby impala and we could see the large bulge in its body. We knew that it had killed and swallowed a young impala as the mother impala was standing nearby giving alarm calls and staring at the snake). We have also seen a few boomslang (tree snakes). This is one of the very few snakes in southern Africa that is sexually dimorphic. The males are a beautiful emerald-green colour, whereas the females tend to be brown. We have also seen a few thick-tailed scorpions wandering across the roads at night (particularly on windy evenings). Many of the migrant birds have started to return and we have just heard the first calls of the woodland kingfisher that herald the return of summer. Next month we will see and hear a lot of them in the area. The N'wanetsi River is still flowing in front of camp and the weir is full of water. This has been the first year in quite a few where the river has flowed throughout the winter and spring seasons (the dry months). The Mbeki drainage line, just as we leave camp, is also still flowing and is looking stunning at the moment with water-lilies flowering beautifully in the late mornings. There are even a few bulrushes that are starting to grow there. Many of the trees have green leaves now and the bush is starting to thicken up again. The summer months are the months with the greatest diversity of life and we are looking forward to see all the creatures and birds that disappeared during winter.

### **Here's a Sightings Snapshot for November:**

#### **Lions**

- The Mountain Pride have been seen regularly this last month. They have been seen all over the central and northern regions of the concession and may also have gone into Mozambique a few times. At present the Mountain Pride consist of 11 individuals (including a sub-adult male). On one occasion some of the members of this pride were seen stalking a blue wildebeest, although they were not successful.
- The Kumana and Maputo males have both been seen regularly in the area around the lodge. It is great to hear them roaring at night. At the beginning of the month the Maputo male was seen mating with the limping lioness from the Shishangaan Pride. The Kumana male was looking quite skinny for a while, but has recovered since then. The coalition still seems to be strong. Towards the end of the month the Xhirombe male lion had caught a male waterbuck near our border with Mozambique. The next morning, we found the Kumana and Maputo males, with two Shish lionesses, feeding on the remains of the waterbuck. They had obviously driven the Xhirombe male off and stolen the carcass from him.
- The Shishangaan Pride have been pretty scarce this last month, although we have on a few occasions seen three of the females (including the limping female). These lionesses have been seen in the company of the Maputo and Kumana males and the limping female was seen mating with the Maputo male towards the beginning of the month.
- The Mananga Pride is getting to be a large pride now. There are now twenty individuals, including six cubs and one sub-adult male. The two Shish male lions are regularly seen with this pride. The pride often splits into two separate groups (one of the groups consists of the sub-adult male and four lionesses). Towards the end of the month a single female was seen near Mangwa Road. She was lactating and seemed as though she could be pregnant and may be looking for a place to give birth. We will have to see in the next few weeks if this is so or not. The smaller group (the sub-adult male and the four females were seen on one occasion feeding on a zebra and on a few occasions the rest of the

pride were also seen hunting zebras, but on each occasion, they were unsuccessful. At one point a few members of the Mananga Pride were seen feeding on a baby impala.

- The Shish male coalition (Xihamham and his brother) has been seen fairly regularly. They have mainly been seen near Gudzani Dam or on the S41 (our western boundary road). They did however, at one point venture further east into the concession. They are often seen in the company of the Mananga Pride. Xihamham is still grumpy but does tolerate the vehicles more, occasionally giving us a warning growl if he thinks we are coming too close to him.
- The Xhirombe male was seen feeding on an adult male waterbuck that he had killed near the Mozambique border. That evening he was challenged by six spotted hyenas, but managed to drive them away. The next morning, though, he had lost the carcass to the Kumana and Maputo males (and two Shish lionesses). It is possible that these lions had heard the commotion between Xhirombe and the hyenas and were attracted there by the sounds.

### Leopards

- The Mbiri Mbiri male leopard was seen a few times this last month. He mainly moves around in the area of the Central Depression and near Double-Crossing, although he does go as far north as Golf-Course Clearing. This male is one of the most relaxed leopards in the concession and is very photogenic.
- The Dumbana female and her two cubs have been the leopards that we have seen the most of this last month. The two cubs are doing well and are growing up fast. The Dumbana leopardess and her two youngsters seem to like the Ntsibitsane Valley. These three leopards were seen feeding on an adult impala which they had stashed up in a tree to the east of Xinenene Poort. One afternoon we found one of the youngsters walking over a ridge near Milkberry. It seems to be getting quite adventurous and straying away from the area that its mom left it in. While we were watching this young leopard moving over the rocks, we spotted some movement in the grass behind the leopard and then two adult wild dogs came running past. Fortunately, they did not see the leopard, otherwise they would have certainly chased after the youngster.
- Although we have not seen the Hlanguleni leopardess, we have seen a shy young male a few times who we believe could be her son. He has always been shy of the cars and although we were not able to get a conclusive identification of the shy cat, we surmise that it was most likely the Hlanguleni youngster (because of the area that we saw it in – in the territorial area of the Hlanguleni female - and the skittish behaviour). The young Hlanguleni male is now of the age that he will probably be leaving the area to find his own patch.
- The large N'wanetsi male leopard was seen on one occasion this last month. He was moving from Gumba Crossing towards our western boundary.
- We had at least three sightings of leopards that we do not know or could not identify, including a large tom who was seen while one of our guides was on a walk with guests. The leopard was on the granophyre ridge opposite Lebombo Lodge. By the time they managed to get back to the car the leopard had disappeared and they were unable to re-locate it.

### Cheetahs

- We were lucky enough to see a single female cheetah on at least five occasions this last month. She is quite distinctive as she is missing the tip of her tail and has a small wound on her back left leg, which seemed to be healing during the month. She was mainly seen in the western half of the concession, in the basalt plains. On two occasions we watched her hunting and catching baby impalas.

### Wild dogs

- Mid-way through the month we found a pack of African wild dogs in the northern part of the concession. We think that they may have come from Mozambique. The pack consisted of four adults and nine pups. We were lucky enough to get sightings of them on a daily basis over the next week as

they moved south through the concession. On quite a few occasions we watched them catch and feed on baby impalas and once on a Sharpe's grysbok.

### **Spotted hyenas**

- We have had regular sightings of these interesting animals this last month. Most of these sightings have been of individual animals.
- The Xinkelengane Fly Camp den-site has been active this last month. There are six cubs at the den. They are now just starting to change from their black coats to the spotted pattern.
- One evening the Xhirombe male lion was feeding on a male waterbuck that he had killed near the Mozambique border. One of our guides was heading towards the area to go and see the lion when he came across six hyenas, two of which were feeding on a baby impala just inside Mozambique. When the hyenas had finished feeding on the antelope they headed north and eventually came across the lion feeding on the waterbuck carcass. They tried to harass him and steal some meat, but the lion eventually managed to drive them away.
- On a few occasions we found hyenas following behind the pack of wild dogs, hoping to get some scraps from their kills.

### **Elephants**

- We have had sightings of elephants almost every drive. Both breeding herds and bulls have been present all over the concession. We have had sightings of tiny calves in some of these herds. On a few occasions we have seen babies that could only have been a few days old.
- During the drier months the elephants often start pushing over trees to get to the roots and leaves. This month has been no exception and many knobthorns and Delagoa thorns have been broken or toppled in the area.
- When the green grass started growing in the northern part of the concession the herds were seen to gather in that area to feast on the fresh green leaves. We have noticed that the few marula trees in the area have started to show fruit and since the western half of the Kruger National Park tends to have more marula trees than the east, we are expecting most of the elephants to start to move away from the area to take advantage of the banquet in the east as the fruit ripens.
- Sadly, we have also found at least two young elephants on their own without the presence of females or a herd nearby. We are not sure how or why the youngsters were separated from the rest of the herd. Unfortunately, one of these two calves did not survive and we found its carcass quite close to camp a few days after seeing it. A short while later it was found by the vultures, which then attracted some of the lionesses from the Shishangaan Pride, who consumed it.

### **Buffalos**

- We have had numerous sightings of buffalos (both bachelor herds and mixed herds) this last month.
- There have also been small groups of dagha boys seen near the river and in the valleys in the hills, where there are patches of green grass.
- The new grass growth in the northern part of the concession has also attracted a few large herds. One of our guides reported seeing a massive herd of almost a thousand buffalos in the north-west corner of the concession one morning.

### **Plains game**

- The plains game has been plentiful this last month. Common species seen on the drives include impalas, waterbuck, greater kudus, warthogs, steenbok, plains zebras and blue wildebeest (brindled gnus).
- We have had regular sightings of large journeys of giraffe (over ten individuals). Giraffes are fairly common in our area and we see them most drives.

- There have been large dazzles of zebras in the area, particularly in the northern parts of the concession. On at least two occasions guides reported seeing gatherings of a few hundred of the striped equids. Many of the mares are visibly pregnant and we have found a few young foals. We are expecting more foals to be born in the next few weeks.
- Some of the wildebeest have also got new calves in their herds. The calves are a completely different colour to the adults. The adults are a dark bluish-brown whereas the new calves are golden. This is probably so that they blend into the golden grass.

#### **Rare animals and other sightings**

- We have been very lucky to have a pack of thirteen African wild dogs (four adults and nine pups) moving through the concession this month. These animals are considered to be endangered (by the I.U.C.N) and it is estimated that there are only 450 to 500 hundred individuals in the entire Kruger National Park. The entire population of wild dogs in the world is estimated to be just over 6 000 individuals.
- We have had a few sightings of Sharpe's grysbok this last month. These are tiny antelope that tend to inhabit the rocky areas in the concession. We are expecting to see fewer of them as summer approaches and the grass starts growing.
- Night drives have been fairly productive this last month and we have had at least three sightings of caracal (African red lynx), five sightings of serval (a small cat that looks similar to a cheetah), a few sightings of African civet and regular sightings of large and small-spotted genets. We have also had a few sightings of Cape / African porcupines and thick-tailed bushbabies.
- Two honey badgers have been causing trouble at the lodge (raiding the rubbish cages behind the kitchen) and even raiding the bar at night (going after the sweet cordials). As summer progresses and more snakes, scorpions and insects appear the honey badgers will probably move away from the lodges. Quite a few guests have been lucky enough to see these tough animals running around the lodge at night.

#### **Birds**

- The bird diversity is getting better now as many of the migrants have already started returning. Some of the intra-African migrants that we have seen so far include various cuckoos (Levaillant's, Jacobin, great-spotted, Klaas's, Diederik's, red-chested and even African cuckoos), Wahlberg's eagles, yellow-billed kites and broad-billed rollers. Palaearctic migrants (those that travel from Europe) that have started returning include European rollers, red-backed shrikes, barn swallows, Eurasian golden orioles and willow warblers.
- Some of the threatened and uncommon birds seen this last month include crested guineafowls, greater painted snipes, lappet-faced vultures, hooded vultures, white-backed vultures, white-headed vultures, martial eagles, tawny eagles, a single European honey buzzard, bateleur eagles, saddle-billed storks, kori bustards, black storks, yellow-billed storks, marabou storks, African openbills and even a green sandpiper.

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





Mocking cliff chat (male)

Singita Kruger National Park is well-known for the fantastic food that is served. We have incredible chefs. The food served to the staff, is also great. We tend to eat more home-style meals. These are usually accompanied by various vegetables or salads and the food is healthy and wholesome. The canteen is often a festive place where people gather at meal times and chat while they eat.

Recently we were sitting at one of the tables chatting to each other and eating our lunch when we heard the call of a white-faced whistling duck emanating from under the eaves of the roof. This was strange as ducks do not generally perch under the eaves of buildings. We looked carefully where the sound was coming from, but could not see anything. Next thing we could hear the call of a red-faced mousebird coming from the same area. Mousebirds are often seen in the area, but they also do not frequent buildings. The mousebird calls were then followed by the beautiful liquid sounds of a black-headed oriole and then the call of a dark-capped bulbul. We looked carefully where the sounds were coming from and then we saw it. The bird making the sounds was a male mocking cliff chat! He had just hopped out of the shadows of the eaves and we could see him nicely with his beautiful black, white and russet plumage. We watched him as he started calling again. This time he was calling like a tree squirrel.

We were amazed at how accurately he could mimic all the sounds of the other birds and the squirrels in the area. Mocking cliff chats are not the only birds in the area that mimic the sounds of other birds. Sabota larks

are also very accomplished mimics (it is said that this species has been recorded to mimic up to 60 other bird calls), as are the red-capped robin-chats that visit Lebombo and Sweni Lodges during the winter months. Another bird that also mimics other birds is the fork-tailed drongo.

This got me thinking as to why these birds would copy the calls of other birds and animals. One possible reason could be to impress mates. Perhaps by learning all the calls from other birds they are trying to show the females that they are either well-travelled or that they are obviously experienced and mature (as it would take time to learn all these other calls). Another reason could be to be socially accepted by the rest of their family or flock. This would be similar to humans having an accent or local jargon that other people from the same area would recognise. Some birds, like fork-tailed drongos are known to mimic the alarm calls of other birds or mammals in order to get them to drop their food and run for cover (thinking that another bird has seen something dangerous like a predator nearby). This type of behaviour has been documented in the drier western side of country where drongos that are following suricates / meerkats give alarm calls when they see that the small carnivores have caught something that looks tasty to the birds. The meerkats, hearing the alarm call think that a predatory bird of prey might be flying over and they quickly dash for the safety of a nearby burrow, often dropping the food in their haste. This tasty morsel is quickly picked up by the cheeky drongo! Mimicry may also help to protect nesting sites. By mimicking a bird of prey, a bird may be able to give the impression that a dangerous foe lives in the area, thus causing other predatory birds and nesting competitors to avoid the area. Fork-tailed drongos often mimic the calls of pearl-spotted owlets or African goshawks.

Perhaps learning the calls of other birds might just be accidental. Young nestlings learning the parent's calls may hear other birds calling in the area close by the nest and accidentally incorporate these sounds into their own repertoire.

For whatever reason these mimics imitate other species it is still really impressive to hear how accurately they copy these sounds and it just reminds me to be careful when identifying birds in the area by their calls. It could possibly just be one of the mimics copying the sounds of another species!



Sabota lark



Fork-tailed drongo



November has been a month of contrasts, with it being the birthing time for many of the antelope species. We have been fortunate enough to share in the joy of baby impala and wildebeest taking their first wobbly steps. We have also witnessed a variety of predators taking advantage of hunting the new arrivals who are still unfamiliar with all the dangers their environment can bring. Many of the prey species have evolved to try and minimize the loss of their young to predators while they are still at a vulnerable age.



In late summer, adult impala males start to leave their bachelor herds in response to the shorter day lengths. Their testosterone levels start to increase, and they set up territories which they actively defend against intruders. This is in anticipation of the breeding season, also referred to as the “rut” that starts around the month of April. After a gestation period of around 200 days, the females give birth. We are generally able to spot the new arrivals easily (even though the lambs stay hidden for a day or two before joining the herd), by searching for females who have separated from the herd to give birth. The afterbirth attracts a lot of attention from raptors and vultures, and can in turn attract large predators to investigate a potential meal. Once the lambs join the herd, they tend to form nursery herds within the group, and herd vigilance manages to alert the group of any potential danger.

Due to all of the pregnant females lambing within a relatively short period of time, it also decreases the odds of their young being singled out by potential predators like southern African pythons, wild dogs, cheetah, leopard, lions, spotted hyenas and even adult male chacma baboons.





Although plains zebra foals can be born at any time of the year, in Kruger National Park approximately 85% of births will occur in late spring or summer (October to March). The foals are able to stand within ten minutes of birth, and are able to walk and run within the hour. Predators are more successful if they are able to separate the young foals from the herd, as the stallion will defend the herd by running at the rear, and will kick or bite any attackers. Mares will also defend their foals in a similar manner.



Blue wildebeest calves are similar to the plains zebra foals and are also known to be “followers”. They are able to stand within five minutes of birth, and are able to keep up with the rest of the herd within a day. In the



Kruger National Park, blue wildebeest start mating in April until June, with births occurring from November-December. Females are also known to actively defend their calves against predator.



Even though elephants breed throughout the year, the birth rate is generally higher in late spring and early summer. We have been fortunate enough to see little calves weaving in amongst the adults, as large breeding herds have crossed our concession in the past month. The calves entertain themselves with swinging their little trunks around in circles and investigating anything that crosses their path. We have watched them frolicking in the mud and waterholes, and just having fun exploring. Elephant mothers fiercely protect their young, but on occasion they can be separated and become prey to lions or spotted hyena. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of November, we found the remains of an elephant calf being fed on by vultures. The cause of death was unknown.

Lions also give birth at any time of the year. We are very fortunate to have some young cubs in the Mananga Pride at present. It is always a joy to view these cute balls of fluff. Young animals are often active as they need to build up their muscles either in order to chase prey or to be able to avoid predators. They are also very curious and inquisitive, often chasing each other around or play-fighting amongst each other. These cubs are at the age now where they are starting to eat meat, but are not completely weaned yet and so we are still seeing them suckle from the adult females.





The queen



Southern banded groundling dragonfly



Eastern tiger snake





Common waterbuck



African jacana

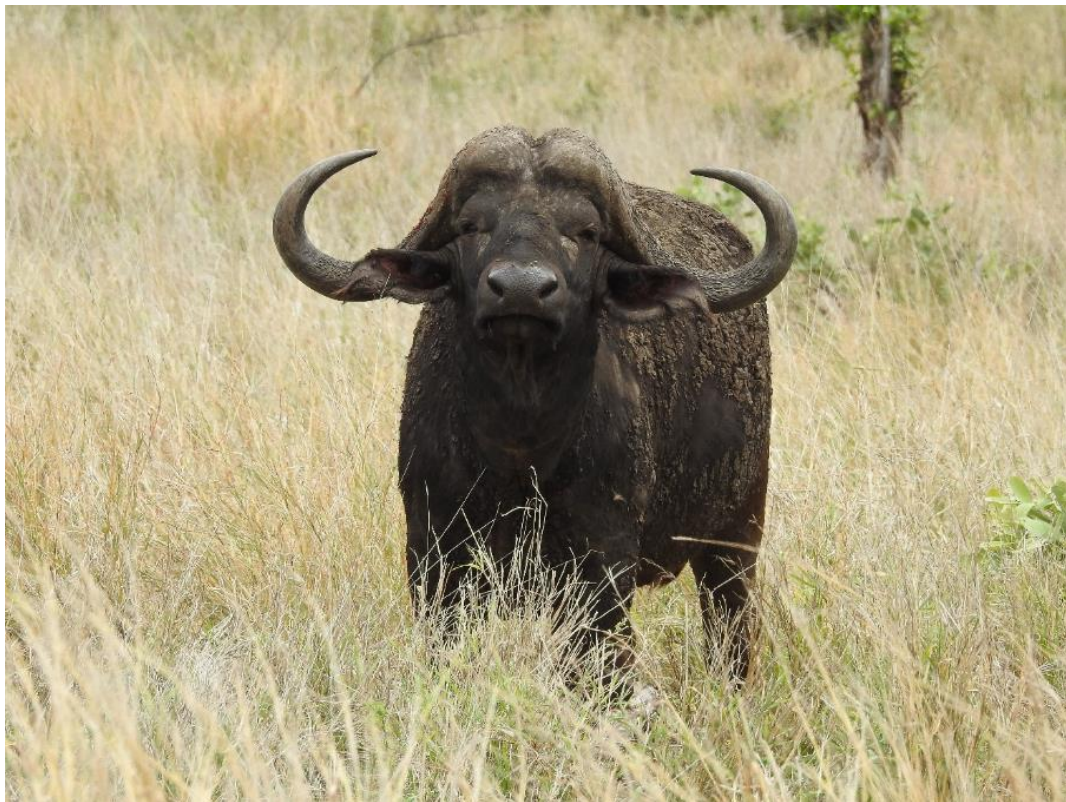


Young bull elephant



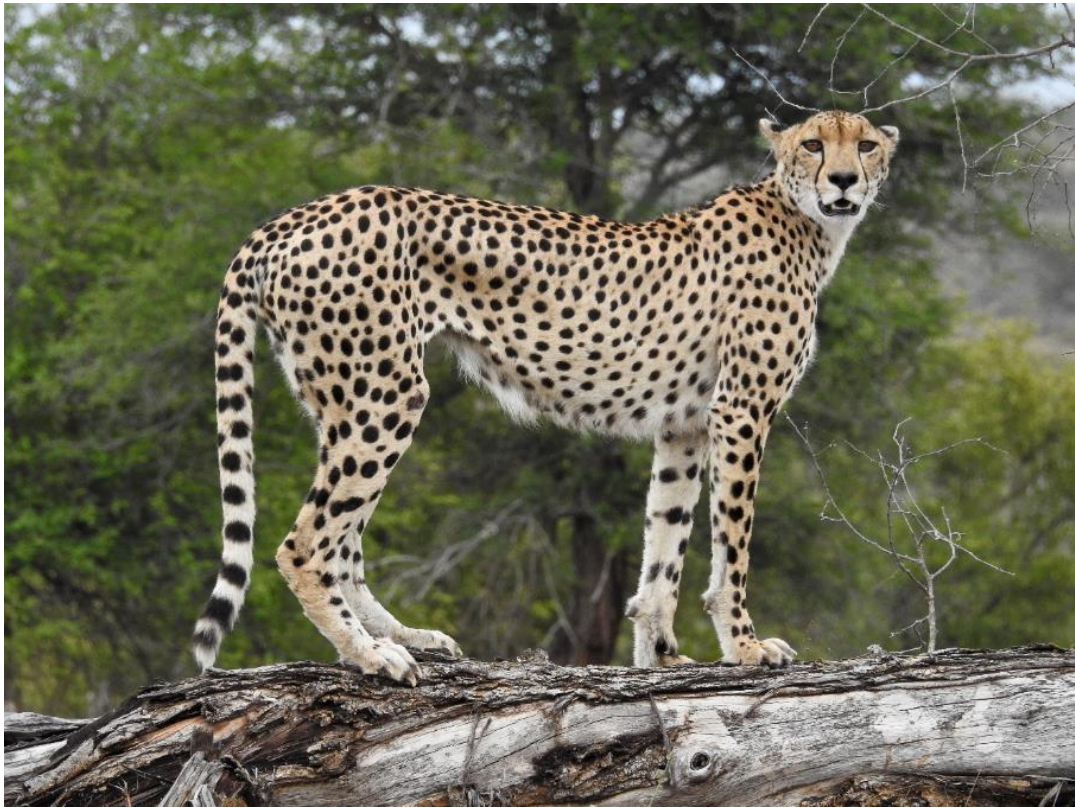


Maputo male lion



Dagha Boy / Cape Buffalo





Cheetah



Mananga lion cub





African wild dog / Painted wolf pups



Another glorious bushveld sunset