

Singita



Photo by Sarah Ball

WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE

For the month of December, Two Thousand and Twenty One

Temperature

Average minimum: 22.2°C (71.9°F)
Minimum recorded: 18.8°C (62.2°F)
Average maximum: 35.1°C (95.1°F)
Maximum recorded: 42.3°C (108.1°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 129 mm
*Season to date: 241.3 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:15
Sunset: 18:38

We've been enjoying some good consistent rain, and the wildlife is thriving. The landscape is abundant and some game drives have resulted in prolific sightings, like these two from the daily reports:

"We had a great afternoon on Banyini, a herd of about 30 elephants, eight white rhinos, and one dagga boy came to drink, while a pack of six wild dogs were hunting in the area and chased some impalas that were feeding west of Banyini."

"At Nduna Dam we had four of 'The Big Five' come to drink - a breeding herd of 12 elephants, ten white rhinos, five black rhinos, four dagga boys and one male lion."

We bid a sad but very fond farewell to three guides from our team this month. Mark Friend and Dharmesh Daya leave to pursue the next chapters in their lives, while Alex Naert moves across to the Malilangwe Wildlife Department. Their stories and accounts close out the year in this wildlife journal.

Here's a sightings snapshot for December:

Lions

- The Nduna Pride of two adult male lions, four lionesses, and six cubs of varying ages have provided the majority of sightings. They have been seen around the Nduna and Chitindigova areas, either napping, hunting or lurking.

Leopards

- With only a few game drives out, and thick bush, the leopard sightings have been scarce.

African wild dogs

- We've seen the wild dogs quite often, reports of between 12 and 14 of them including the pups. Unfortunately one of the adults has a severe injury to a front leg.

Hyenas

- The hyenas are prolific and nearly always brazen, but while one safari group had a brief view of four wild dogs hunting along the airstrip they also noticed a lone hyena hiding under a bush nearby, watching and listening.

Rhinos

- The rhinos are looking so healthy and are packing on weight thanks to the good grazing and browse. Excellent sightings of both black and white are still to be enjoyed at this time of the year, especially at the waterpoints where they prefer to drink.

Elephants

- There have been many brilliant sightings of breeding herds, which is just wonderful!
- On one afternoon a team followed up on lion tracks which led them to a dead elephant. No lion was on site but the vultures were feasting on the elephant carcass.

Buffalo

- The large herds are regularly seen drinking at Banyini Pan, and sometimes two herds converge simultaneously resulting in hundreds of buffalo drinking and churning up mud.

Plains game

- The plains game are at their best, especially with all their little ones gambolling alongside their mothers. A herd of 12 sable antelope drank at Nduna Dam while guests were enjoying a tea break.

Birding

- It's so refreshing to have enthusiastic birders on board. Leaving the lodge at 05:00, a group managed to see 71 species in a morning.

Photographic hide

- Here's an extract from a daily report after some excellent sightings at the venue of our photographic hide: *"We had a wonderful afternoon at Hwata Pan – 12 white rhinos and a pride of six lions (three lionesses and three sub-adults) came to drink. All the zebras, impalas and wildebeest that wanted to drink ran away when they saw the lions."*

Boating safaris

- Several lovely relaxed boat cruises have taken place, with lots of birds, hippos, crocodiles and other animals being seen on the shores.

Fishing

- Quite a few Mozambique and redbreast tilapia have been caught, as well as some tigerfish.

Bush walks

- Even though the bush is thick we have continued offering our bush walks, as it is what we love best – we just make sure we walk in the more open clearings. One was an epic 17 km walk starting at Malevula Hill and exploring the wilderness area all the way back to the lodge.

Rock art

- It's also a lovely time to explore some of the rock art sites on the reserve, especially if it is raining and you can take cover under the rocky shelters, enjoy a cup of coffee, and learn all about the history of the cave paintings. The rocks and the rock art look even more impressive when rain-saturated.



A Burchell's coucal dries its wings after a rain shower.

A selection of bush stories follow, as well as a December Gallery.

When working in the bush, and especially when living and working in one location, it doesn't take long before one starts to feel at home with the animals. Much like us humans, the wildlife in an area have their favourite hangouts and watering holes, sleeping zones, feeding areas etc. Before you know it, there is a sense of familiarity with certain individual animals that you see on a regular basis as you go on drives and walks in the bush. As a guide, we start to recognize their individual characters and traits coming through and all of a sudden, it's not just a wildebeest standing and ruminating under his favourite tree staring into the abyss as only a wildebeest seems to be able to do. No its, "Bob" the wildebeest who is such a gentleman that he lets other wildebeest come and drink their water before he sends them on their way with his horn so close to their posterior that they don't contemplate a sniff of his grass! Or the hyena with a scar around her neck that you pass each evening in the West Valley Road as you come back through the mountains from game drive. It's "Mummy" the hyena, who I have watched raising her cubs so diligently and lovingly that she changed how I now perceive hyenas.

This was the case for one particular white rhino called Njakeni who frequented the Hwata Pan to Benzi areas on the south side of Malilangwe Reserve. She had a huge horn and if you met her while out on a walk, you would be forgiven for feeling rather intimidated upon seeing that horn, but she was such a gentle soul. Her nickname that I called her by was, "Goggo" which translates to "Granny". She got this name as she was often in the company of younger adult rhinos which were her 'grandchildren' or young offspring of other rhinos.

She had such a gentle nature that we would be able to spend time with her on foot at close quarters, admiring and observing her feeding and going about her daily life. She was a huge rhino, with an impressively long horn and she made us all proud of the good work that the Malilangwe security and wildlife teams were doing to allow such a magnificent creature to be safe and to have an environment where she could reach her full potential, naturally.

If you had a camera, an iPhone or similar, it was impossible to not feel inspired to pick it up and start photographing. Goggo had one particular special quality, she loved to be in the company of the people that she encountered so often. From the scouts, the guides, to the wildlife team members, if she heard you talking in the bush, she would come over to say 'hello'.

For many years Goggo was accompanied by her one grandson called Rhulani who formed a close bond with his grandmother after she was seriously injured by another rhino. Rhulani grew to be a big male rhino but never left her side. He was very nervous when Goggo would try to approach me - he would bounce around the place, snorting and constantly pushing in between Goggo and me, using himself as a barricade. It was evident how much this huge male rhino cared for his grandmother. The bond was truly special. As time went on, Goggo's calming nature influenced Rhulani and he settled down allowing rhino and people to walk side by side out in the wild, with mutual respect for each other.

Many years have gone by and recently it started to show that Goggo was tiring. I noticed she was spending more time resting up and her gait wasn't as energetic. Having chatted with the wildlife department it was highlighted that she was one of Malilangwe's founding stock, indicating she was over 30 years old. That was enough for me to know that I may not have long left with her. So, whenever possible and as often as I could, I made time to find her and spend time with her. She had worked her way into a special place in my heart that it was almost like she had become my grandmother.

Then that fateful and dreaded day came on the 21st of November at 18:00. I was on a game drive on a dull and overcast day, when I came around a corner just east of Hwata Pan. At first I saw Rhulani and another grandson charging at hyenas. At first it seemed like they were 'playing' with the hyenas but then I saw Goggo, just lying

there. She was not lying in a manner that was her normal way of resting. Instantly my heart sunk. I did not want to believe it despite all the signs telling me the worst. In disbelief, I switched the engine off and walked over to her body whilst calling to her, hoping, just hoping she would miraculously respond. Hyenas ran around me, Rhulani upon recognizing me, greeted me in his rhino manner. Every time a hyena approached Goggo's lifeless body he would charge and see it off. He would come back and stand next to me calling and calling to Goggo. This went on into the night. It was so heart-breaking, but then as I stood next to her body, looking at her, whilst surrounded by hyena and some vultures in the trees, I realized three things....

The first is that death is normal. It happens and nothing can live forever, and looking at Goggo she lived a full and blessed life. Here, her grandson was running around guarding her body and calling to her, clearly she had impacted his life in a positive way.

Secondly, she lay in a manner that told me that she was on her way to water, likely got tired and lay down to never get up and, by the looks of things, she went peacefully. What a blessing.

And thirdly... this is how a rhino is supposed to go when its time is up. Naturally. How many rhinos get this privilege? I don't think that many do sadly, and here she got that benefit because of the great work of conservationists, because of the generosity of so many individuals and their donations that helped to allow these conservationists provide her and other generations with this privilege.



I won't lie, I will always miss her but I have some amazing memories of her as do so many of the guests who got to spend time with Goggo and me. In my wildest dreams I would not have guessed that a wild rhino could have such an influence on how I look at life. I'm honoured to have had the opportunity and time to spend with Njakeni... our Goggo. RIP old friend.



Njakeni with her unmistakable long pointed front horn.

As the seconds go by

By Dharmesh Daya

Just as the seconds tick by with regularity, forming minutes, which in turn form hours, hours into days and hence time as we know it, so too do the seasons come and go with the similar regularity of the ticking seconds. Upon us is the rainy season / green season / baby season and we watch the transformation of the bush from dry to lush shades of green.

The arrival of migratory birds add so much more variety to our natural environment in the form of colours and sounds. Enough time has lapsed since they left our beautiful lands that I find myself relearning some of the many calls they make, the different paths they have travelled to reach us and whether they are here for the food only or also to bring life onto the planet.

As I write this story a thick grey cloud hovers in the skies above, blocking what had become the familiar blue sky of pre-rainy season. Driving around, the evidence of this cloud is very visible, with many shallow waterholes filling up with life-giving water. On that note our sightings of tortoises have increased due to the available moisture to them.

In the same way that every second that goes by is different to every single second that has passed before it, so too every single rainy season that comes is different to the ones that have been. So, at the start of this rainy season I find myself marvelling at how different it will be: Which insects will be abundant? Will there be a forb, herb or weed that will dominate the landscapes? Or shall this be the year of grasses? With all these questions

of how the season will pan out and every single variable setting the tone for the future, so different to the past, the only certainty I can count on is that every passing second of time will bring with it changes in nature that will leave me in awe of its diversity, giving me that feeling of great fullness for every breath of beautiful air that Mother Nature grants me, to be part of her.

Blooming marvellous!

Story and photos by Alex Naert

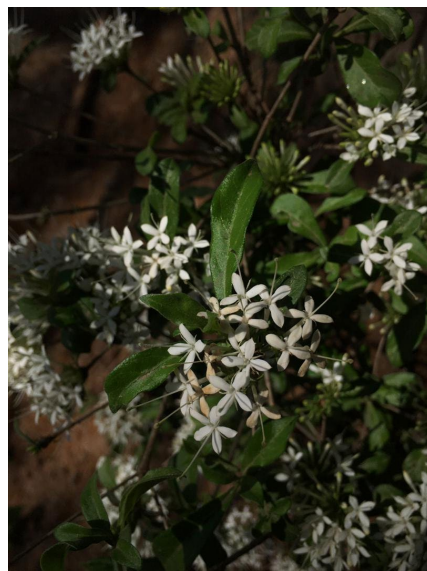
This time of the year is my favourite! In a short period the bush transforms from an arid dusty landscape into an ocean of green and colour. There is nothing better than coming across a *Pterocarpus* in full bloom, standing tall, full of big yellow drapes of flowers, or a *Millettia* with its purple ones. The delicate *Pavetta* and graceful *Crinums* are just as beautiful with their creamy white petals. The scent of the *Coffeas* is one you can never get enough of, but it only last a couple of days so you cherish it even more. It truly is the time when the bush comes to life!



Pterocarpus



Millettia



Pavetta



Crinums

Although the latest wave of Covid restrictions has limited our international guests we've greatly enjoyed having some Zimbabwean guests stay with us, most of whom were avid birders. A White-backed Night Heron was our rare bird sighting of the month.



A wood sandpiper looks for an aquatic snack.



Black-bellied bustard on the prowl.



A shikra gets buzzed by a bee while taking a bath.



White rhinos are grazers so they have been very merrily munching on all the green grass, forbs and herbs.



It's baby season! Here a wildebeest calf suckles enthusiastically.



A zebra foal without an umbrella.



An elephant bull bids farewell to 2021!

Compiled by Jenny Hishin