

Singita



Photo by: Brian Rode

WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For May, Two Thousand, and Twenty-two

Temperature

Average minimum: 15°C (60.0°F)
Minimum recorded: 14°C (57.2°F)
Average maximum: 27°C (80.9°F)
Maximum recorded: 33°C (91.4°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 64 mm
Season to date: 500 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06H30
Sunset: 17H15

We are now into our autumn months and the temperatures have started to drop in the early mornings. We have had some rain this month and there is still a fair amount of moisture in the air. These two factors have led to some beautiful misty dawns. It is really beautiful to see the sun rising over the ridges, shining through the mist and silhouetting the stunning candelabra trees. It is also lovely to see animals such as giraffe and elephants walking in the hazy mist. It is quite mysterious (pardon the pun). Within an hour or two after daybreak the sun has usually burnt the mist away. Autumn days are stunning; the temperatures are quite comfortable after the briskness of the early hours, and, just like Goldilocks, not too hot or too cold, just comfortable.

There is still a fair amount of grass in the area (some of which is still green, although most has changed to a golden hue) and most of the trees still have leaves. The migrant birds have felt the temperature changes and have realized that the insect-life is getting less and less. These birds have now all departed on their long journeys north again. During our winter months some of the birds that live in the mountains to the east of the Kruger National Park have started to descend from the peaks, where the temperatures are much lower. We are seeing some of these altitudinal migrants in the concession now. These include birds such as dusky flycatchers, red-capped robin-chats and African stone-chats. At the beginning of the month most of the seasonal waterholes had dried up, but with the rain that fell this month many of them have water again. The N'wanetsi and Sweni Rivers are still full and flowing. This is very unusual for this time of the year. Gudzani Dam, in the western side of the concession is still full. This means that there will be water available for the animals throughout the dry months. The general game has been great this last month and we have had some fantastic animal viewing.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for May:

Lions:

- There has been some chaos this month with the lion sightings (particularly with the males). There have been intrusions by foreign males into the area. In the south, near the lodge, we have had a few sightings of two new males (known to the Kruger Park lion communities – on social media – as the Trichardt males). We have heard them roaring around the lodge most mornings this last month. In the far north we have seen three new males pushing south, roaring and spray-marking. There is going to be trouble soon. Our dominant males are now getting old and a take-over is on the cards.
- The Maputo and Kumana males are still around. These two males are the dominant male lions in the area nearby the lodges. They are now in danger. The two Trichardt males have moved into their area, with the hopes of taking over the territory. Towards the beginning of the month the Maputo Male was seen mating with one of the Shish lionesses, close to camp. A few days later Maputo was seen again, this time sporting some injuries on his legs, back and inner thighs. He had obviously had a confrontation with the new males. After this he seemed to have lost condition and was looking very thin and was limping badly. Fortunately, he managed to find a carcass of a young buffalo that had been killed by a crocodile when it crossed the N'wanetsi River. One of our guides was lucky enough to witness him wrestling the carcass away from the crocodile. Kumana has also been seen a few times this last month. It appears that both he and Maputo are spending more time in the hills and possibly even in Mozambique as they are trying to avoid the new males.
- The Trichardt males used to be a coalition of five but, since they arrived on the concession, we have only seen two of them. They are both magnificent lions, with dark manes. One of the two is more impressive than the other with a full mane, while the other one's mane is more scraggly, with less body. The Trichardt males are named after the road which borders the south-west of the concession (Trichardt Rd / S37). This road was named after a Dutch Voortrekker who was one of the first recorded Europeans in the Kruger National Park area. He supposedly crossed the Kruger National Park in 1838 (this was long before the park was officially promulgated in 1898). Unfortunately for him and his party most succumbed to malaria during their journey. Towards the end of the month these two males came across one of the Shish lionesses with three subadults. The lioness tried to draw the attention of the males away from the youngsters, who quickly escaped into the hills. The two males then proceeded to attack the lioness who sustained wounds to both of her rear thighs and one of her front feet. She managed to escape from them as they turned their attention to finding the youngsters. Fortunately, they were unable to locate them. The lioness was seen again a few days later hiding in the sticky thorn thickets. Her wounds seem to be healing.
- Xihamham and the other Shish male have been seen regularly in the western half of the concession (often in the company of the Mananga Pride). On the 8th of May both of these males were found feeding on a zebra, with the Mananga Pride, in the basalt grasslands. The males hogged the carcass and the pride got very little of it, but the next morning the pride was seen and the members had full bellies which means that they had managed to kill something else during the night. On the 10th

of May the males and the pride were once again seen feeding. They had killed a buffalo in the central area of the concession.

- We have seen some of the Shish lionesses a few times this last month. Towards the beginning of May two of these lionesses were seen in the company of the Maputo Male. He was mating with one of the lionesses. The Shish lionesses seem to have been divided and we have been seeing two lionesses together and then another group of four. During the early half of March the two Shish lionesses had six cubs. By the end of March only two remained (we believe that the other four cubs could have been killed by the Trichardt males). Towards the beginning of May we did see one of the Shish lionesses with the two remaining cubs. They looked healthy and were playing with each other and jumping on their mom. Towards the end of the month one of the Shish lionesses was involved in an altercation with the Trichardt males and sustained some injuries. We believe that these injuries will heal.
- Mananga Pride have been seen on numerous occasions this last month. They have generally been seen on the western side of the concession, near Gudzani Dam. This pride is becoming very large now. There are approximately 26 members in the pride, including six young cubs. They are sometimes seen with the Shish males. The members of this pride were seen feeding on a zebra and on a buffalo this month.
- Mountain Pride were seen on two occasions this month. It appears that they have been spending most of their time inside Mozambique. Both times that we saw these lions there were only eight members. On one of these occasions, they were seen feeding on a buffalo near the Mozambique border.
- Two unknown, young, shy male lions were seen close to the camp on the 2nd. They obviously do not know cars and ran away as soon as they saw the game-drive vehicle. On the 4th two young males (possibly the same males) were seen heading out of the concession to the west. On the afternoon of the 4th, two more unknown male lions were seen near the granophyre ridge.

Leopards:

- We have had some great leopard sightings this last month.
- The Mbiri Mbiri male was seen on at least two occasions. He is one of the most relaxed leopards. He is just reaching adulthood and we are very happy to see that he is still frequenting the concession as we thought he would have moved out to establish his own territory by now. On the morning of the 6th he was seen hiding in a tree while a pack of African wild dogs was feeding on an impala nearby. We assume that the dogs stole the carcass from the young male leopard.
- The Dumbana leopardess and her two male youngsters have been seen regularly this month. The youngsters are getting to an age where the female is going to start getting antagonistic towards them. They are almost the same size as her now. They have mainly been seen in the area of Euphorbia and Dave's Crossings, although one morning we found one of the youngsters quite far north in the concession, near Name-Badge Hill. On one occasion the female and at least one of the youngsters were found feeding on an impala ram just north of the lodges. On the 16th we found the mom in a tree approximately 50 meters away from where the Kumana male lion was lying. She was staring at him. As she made her way down the tree the lion spotted her and started to follow in the direction that she had headed. He obviously did not find her as we saw her a few days afterwards much further north, stalking impalas.
- The Nhlangulene female has been seen a few times this month. This female is a very relaxed leopardess. She presently has two young cubs that she is hiding in the hills near the Nhlangulene Valley and in the region of Three-trees. We have only seen these young cubs on two or three occasions since they were born.
- A female leopard with an older cub has been seen a few times around Gudzani Dam. She seems to be fairly relaxed in the presence of one vehicle, but tends to hide away as soon as she sees or hears another vehicle.
- A few unidentified males have been seen wandering around the concession.

- A pair of leopards were seen mating near the Granophyre Ridge this last month. Unfortunately, this area is not accessible to vehicles due to the rocky topography and they soon disappeared amongst the boulders.

Spotted hyenas:

- Spotted hyenas were seen regularly this last month. We know of at least one den-site, although it is not accessible to vehicles (it is in a very rocky area, on top of one of the ridges). A single hyena with a broken back right leg has been seen a few times this month. He is able to get around on the other three legs and seems to be, otherwise, in good condition.

Elephants:

- We have seen elephants on most drives. There have been a few large herds of at least fifty individuals in the area. We are expecting the numbers of elephants to start increasing in the next few months as the seasonal pans dry up and more elephants come into the concession to drink water from the N'wanetsi River or at Gudzani Dam.

Buffalos:

- For most of the month the only sightings of buffalos were of single bulls / dagha boys. Two such bulls were seen on a few occasions resting in the water near Xinkwenyana Crossing. Towards the end of the month a large herd of up to 300 individuals came onto the concession.

Plains game:

- The general game sightings have been great this last month. Zebras have been seen in fairly large numbers, particularly in the area of Rhino Skull (particularly in the late mornings as they come down to drink at Pebble Pan and Pony Pan), and near Xinenene Grasslands. There have also been quite a few wildebeest seen in the same area. Giraffes are seen on most drives. We are starting to see more Klipspringers and Sharpe's Grysbok now that the grass is thinning out.

Rare animals and other sightings:

- We have had three sightings of African wild dogs / painted wolves this month. All three sightings were of a pack of seven dogs. One of these sightings was of the dogs feeding on an impala that we think was expropriated from a leopard.
- Caracals were seen on two occasions this month. One of these sightings was of a relaxed individual that was walking down the road towards the vehicle.
- A single sighting of a serval was recorded for the month.
- Porcupines were seen at least twice this month. One of these sightings was of a mating pair.
- We have started seeing Sharpe's grysbok and klipspringers again.
- Honey badgers have been seen a few times this month

Birds:

- We recorded sightings of at least 176 species of bird in the concession this last month.
- The intra-African and Palearctic migrants have now all left on their northward journeys.
- Rare birds seen in the concession this month include saddle-billed storks, white-backed vultures, hooded vultures, lappet-faced vultures, white-headed vultures, bateleurs, martial eagles, tawny eagles, black storks, yellow-billed storks, African open-billed storks, woolly-necked storks, kori bustards and southern ground-hornbills.
- We had a sighting of three southern pochards at Gudzani Dam this month. This was the first record of this species of duck in the concession in at least the last seven years.
- Pink-throated twinspots have been heard in various localities in the concession this month.
- Other unusual birds seen include eastern nicator and sombre greenbul.

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



Nyalas gathering at the Lebombo assembly point.

We work and live in an amazing wilderness area. Singita Lebombo and Sweni Lodges lie on the eastern side of the central part of Kruger National Park. Both lodges look onto rocky ridges that form part of the Lebombo “mountains”, which are a line of hills that run along the eastern border of South Africa (the border with Mozambique). It is an area of spectacular wild beauty. The two lodges are nestled between the N’wanetsi and Sweni Rivers. These two rivers meet at a confluence that lies between the two lodges.

Neither of the two lodges are fenced and animals are able to wander freely through the area. We often see nyalas, bushbuck, monkeys and squirrels in the lodge areas. At night we sometimes see thick-tailed bushbabies and large-spotted genets.

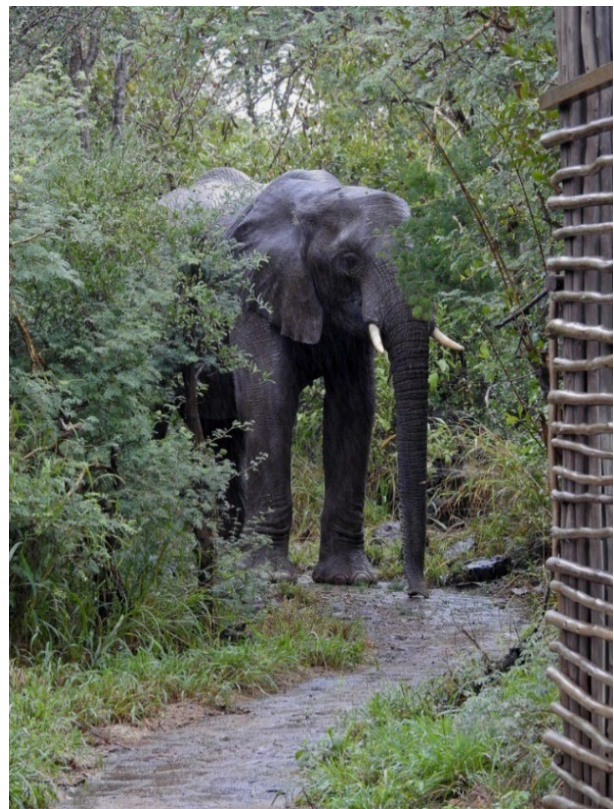
When guests arrive at either lodge, they are greeted by a signboard that explains that animals may be encountered in the lodge areas. The signboards warn guests that they need to pay attention as potentially dangerous animals may wander through the camps. Guests are also told, upon arrival, that they need to be accompanied by a lodge representative when moving from the main area to their rooms, after dark.

Fortunately, due to the positioning of the lodges (Lebombo is on top of a steep ridge and Sweni is bordered on one side by the Sweni River), we do not often have dangerous animals walking through the camps.

Every winter, when food resources become more limited, a pair of honey badgers make more frequent visits to the lodges hoping to find scraps to eat. During these months they are often seen, just before day-break or at night, behind the kitchen, trying to get into the refuse cages. Recently, they have also developed a taste for the sweet cordials at the bar!



Sign at Lebombo entrance.



Elephant at Lebombo Lodge.



Honey badger.



Tree squirrel.



The Maputo male lion and Shish lioness at the lodge entrance road.



Giraffe in the mist.

We left camp just before sunrise, and drove north along our western boundary towards the central depression area. As the sun peaked out from the Lebombo mountains, it quickly disappeared again behind a mist belt that formed a blanket over the concession. We spotted giraffe along the way and watched as they stood tall, reaching for the highest branches of the knob thorn trees that were covered in dew drops. As we took time to watch the giraffe feeding, the sun managed to peak out just long enough for us to notice the golden orb webs sparkling like diamond jewellery, as they too caught the moisture drifting along. It was difficult to leave such a sight, but we still needed to reach our destination from where we would start our walk.

After arriving in the central depression area, we disembarked from the vehicle, and did a final equipment check before heading off on foot. We started off by finding fresh impressions of spotted hyena tracks, and were hopeful that we still had a chance to see them on our walk due to the cooler morning temperature. We continued north, and spotted two male impala in the distance. Rather than being alert to our presence, and running away, they were engaged in trying to size one another up for an impending battle. While we stood watching the impala, we could hear a male wildebeest snorting, and decided to take in our surrounds for a moment. Less than a kilometre to our west, a very deep and powerful roar of a male lion started, shortly joined by his brother to form an awe-inspiring duet. We all looked at one another and could not believe how fortunate we were to experience such a display of raw power whilst on foot, when their calls were answered by their pride, merely a few hundred metres ahead of us. We used available cover and favourable wind conditions to get a closer look at the pride, and found a total of sixteen lions, lying in the clearing ahead of us. We left the pride, and had to change our route so that we did not disturb them.

Our new route took us through longer, wet grass, and soon our shoes and trousers were soaked through. We managed to push through until we found an area with shorter grass, where we came across herds of

zebra, wildebeest, impala and a family of warthog. We managed to spot a family of five elephants feeding on the outskirts of the riverine forest. We watched as they moved closer to us, and finally walked past us towards a pan where they most likely would quench their thirst. By this time, the sun had managed to burn away the mist, and the temperature was starting to rise rapidly.

We headed back towards the direction of the vehicle, and managed to find tracks of a small group of buffalo that had moved through the area the night before. We made sure to look out for them, but found another group of giraffe feeding close to where we had parked our vehicle instead. After such an eventful walk, we decided to stay off the vehicle a little longer, and enjoy a cup of tea while watching the giraffes slowly move away.

We finally decided that it was time to start driving back to camp. We were all engaged talking about the amazing morning we had, when we spotted a big bull elephant in the middle of the road. Before he moved off, he shook his head as a warning to us not to get any closer. We could see that he was displaying signs of "musth" and left him to pursue finding the herd he was trailing.

What an amazing morning we had!



Buffalos in the late afternoon light.



Elephant herd coming to Gudzani Dam to drink.



Dumbana leopardess.



Two of the three new males seen in the northern part of the concession.



Black-backed jackal.



Spotted hyena.



Male greater kudu.



Sunrise over the Lebombo hills on a misty morning.



Bushveld sunset.