

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA For the month of January, Two Thousand and Twenty-One

Temperature

Average minimum: 20.9°C (69.92°F)
Average maximum: 29.7°C (85.46°F)
Minimum recorded: 19.0°C (66.2°F)
Maximum recorded: 37.0°C (98.6°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 224.1 mm
For the season to date: 635.45 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:19
Sunset: 18:50

Melodies of crickets and locusts, cuckoo's and bush shrikes charge the atmosphere with a rich happiness. Our blue skies are filled with life, as barn swallows, European bee-eaters and Amur falcons swoop down, hawking the alates as they ascend from their termitaria turrets. Our night skies explode with celestial summer stars, twinkling back up in the deep blackness of the Sand River. This year has started off with a burst of growth, having over 120 mm of rain in 24 hours! With the land charged up, the beat of the bush is full of joy and optimism, a wonderful start to a brand-new year!

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for January:

Lions

- The Mhangene Pride have been a little hard to come by of late as they have explored the far reaches of their territory. Sadly, there are only three cubs, with the youngest suspected to have died within the month. On a positive note, we suspect that one of the older females is now denning, raising a brand-new litter somewhere within the central parts of our property.
- The Styx and Nkuhuma male lions have been a prominent sighting this month, having several successful hunts including another juvenile giraffe. Their bond is growing, although still nomadic it's an exciting time to witness their development.
- The Matimba male lion was seen several times, once on a giraffe kill (made by the Styx and Nkuhuma lions) and again mid-month at the base of a marula tree, clawing the trunk to reach a hoisted impala kill.

Elephants

- Elephants have been plentiful this month. With ripe marula fruits covering the land we find more and more elephants taking every opportunity to feed on these delicious sweet treats, thus making them an easier spot for a sighting!

Wild dogs

- Two wild dogs were briefly seen on the airstrip mid-month. These animals cover vast regions, especially at this time of the year. A fleeting sighting but we hope that February brings more viewing.

Leopards

- The Schotia female's youngster continues to delight us with his charm and curious nature and we've enjoyed some very special sightings of him playing with his mother, the Schotia female. This female leopard has made several successful kills this month and continues to provide well for her son.



- The Serengeti female (pictured above) hasn't been seen as often this month, however we enjoyed a long distance view of her relaxing in a sausage tree, bordering the northern side of the Sand River.
- The Xipuku male hoisted an impala ram kill in a marula tree in the middle of a clearing which allowed us to view him at a distance from the road. This was a special sighting as this male is usually only seen fleetingly.

- We had a familiar sighting of the Shangwa male leopard relaxing in a marula tree, limbs dangling and eyes closed. This male has been seen more this month – at one sighting we watched him stalking impala, although unsuccessful.
- The Shangwa male's mother, the Khokhovela female, has also been seen a few times and to much excitement, she seems to have suckle marks – therefore potentially denning with new cubs!



The Shangwa male leopard sleeping on a marula tree branch

Photo by Kirsten Tinkler

- On one very interesting morning we found the Hosana male leopard scent marking on the northern side of the plains in front of Ebony Lodge. This is an area dominated by the Nyeleti male leopard and with the latter approaching twelve years old this year, could we begin to see a shift in his territory? Will the younger Hosana male leopard push his region further south and even cross the river?

Cheetah

- The female cheetah and her two cubs have again showed themselves this month on a few occasions which is always a delightful rarity for us! We are glad to see her doing so well in motherhood, keeping both of her cubs healthy for over a year now!

Bird List

- The bird list for January kicked off with a bang, beginning our year with 235 species.
- An absolute special for the month/year was a male great frigatebird, a bird typically seen in coastal areas over Mozambique. He was blown into the reserve by cyclone Eloise.
- Other specials included: white-backed night heron, black stork, glossy ibis, pallid harrier, lesser kestrel, African crane, lesser moorhen, curlew sandpiper, Eurasian golden oriole and mocking cliff-chat.

The past three months we have had an astonishing amount of rainfall across the Lowveld region. It has been incredible to see most of the tributaries flowing, drainage lines wet with pools of water, ephemeral pans, mud wallows filled up, and of course the Sand River flowing with more vigour and much fuller than in recent years. Some of the seasonal pans in the south have been focused areas to look out for avian species regarded as 'specials' or rarities for our region. These birds are usually species that fly in over these pans at night, land to rest and feed and sometimes stay for a couple of days before disappearing again.

The likes of squacco heron, glossy ibis, greater painted snipe, wood sandpiper, common greenshank and knob-billed duck have all been regulars in and around these pans. Rarer species that have presented themselves include curlew sandpiper, lesser moorhen, African crane, white stork, pallid harrier, Montagu's harrier and dwarf bittern.



Lesser moorhen



Squacco heron



Dwarf bittern

The star of these pans comes in the form of a relatively small shy bird, called a striped crake. The crake was spotted by Quentin Swanevelder, Gareth Poole, and Bruce Lawson (my colleagues and visitor), when they stopped on the old Selati Railway to glance over Kwarimanyina Pan and spotted the crake moving through some grass. They luckily managed to snap a couple of photographs for identifying purposes before it ducked.

Already back at camp, I received the update of the crake and rounded up a few members of our team to try to connect with the crake. We made our way south as quickly as we could because 'dipping' on this species was very possible! Arriving at the pan, we all scanned along the sides, between the grasses and Marc even waded into the water to try and flush the crake. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful and left the pan.



Striped crake shows itself

Later, I decided to give it one last try and made my way south again. Approaching the pan slowly and finding two pairs of lesser moorhens still present, I switched off my Land Rover and waited. Looking all over the pan for about ten minutes, the crane made an appearance! Aware of my presence, it was skulking about between long grass and briefly showed itself for me to capture a few photographs.

I decided to get out my Land Rover and hid behind a Jackalberry tree as it approached my position. It stopped about three meters from me and then slowly started submerging underwater. It did not show itself again, so I decided to leave the area in the hope that it would hang around for a few days and that more members of my team would have a chance of finding it.

The rise of the Styx and Nkuhuma male lions

Article by Damin Dallas



The Styx male lion

One thing that intrigues most guides, and a topic that absolutely fascinates me, is the ever-changing lion dynamics within the Sabi Sand Wildtuin. I remember visiting the reserve for the first time as a young child back in 2000 and being introduced to the various prides and male coalitions that were in the area at the time. I was blown away and couldn't wait for every subsequent annual family trip so that I could sit and chat to the guides and find out what had happened with the lions in the year before. As the years rolled on and technology improved, social media made it easier to keep up to date with the lion population of the Sabi Sand. Fast forward almost 21 years and I now find myself in the fortunate position where I'm able to witness these animals living out their natural lives on a daily basis.

Two lions that are certainly peeking everyone's interest is the coalition consisting of the Styx and Nkuhuma male lions. These males, born in 2016, are now approaching five years in age and looking at previous coalitions and their successful takeovers, five years seems to be the age where males have built up the strength and confidence to lay down a challenge and take claim of territory and, with it, associated prides. With that in mind, these males are then approaching that stage in their lives in which they will start seeking out females and attempt to drive out existing dominant male lions. These males, like all young nomadic male lions, have

kept a low profile, steering well clear of the already established coalitions that surround Singita. Concentrating most of their movements between the Sand River and the central parts of Singita, this somewhat vacant patch of land will do them good in allowing them to get a lay of the land. This will also help them determine what potential competition they will one day face through the surrounding territorial roars.

Should these males be intent on staying in this area, they would need to oust at least one of four male coalitions. The already established males consist of the three Tumbela males to the west, the Othawa male to the south, the two Birmingham males to the far east and the three Avoca males to the north and east. The Tumbela coalition, being only a year older have the advantage of numbers with one extra coalition member. Coalition numbers is probably the true strength for any coalition and owes to the dominance success of the coalition. The two young males made a brief appearance in the west recently and were swiftly pushed back east by the Tumbela males and so the west is probably out of question for them.

Northern Singita has seen an increased number of appearances from the Avoca males in recent times and being three adult males in their prime, it almost immediately rules out this area for any attempted takeover.



One of the Avoca male lions

Looking east and the two Birmingham males still rule over a large tract of land. These males, now around 10 years in age are still a force to be reckoned with and any takeover attempt in this area would almost certainly require the Styx and Nkhumama males isolating one of the Birmingham males. It does, however, appear that the Avoca coalition are pushing further south into what is Birmingham territory so again this is probably an area ruled out for the two young males.

What's left and could be a viable option is central and southern Singita which is under the Othawa male lion's rule. The Othawa male, now at six years of age and in his prime, is probably one of the largest and most impressive male lions I have seen in recent years. Unfortunately for him though he is a male lion on his own and this will make it extremely difficult for him to defend himself and his territory from a coalition of two. It has happened before in the past where single male lions have fended off coalitions and the Othawa male may be able to do just that, but it will be no easy task. This would, in my opinion, probably be the Styx and Nkhumama males' best chance of taking over territory and with it the Mhangene Pride.



Othawa male lion

For the time being, they seem to be content within the area we are finding them in, taking advantage of the bountiful prey species on offer. Having killed three giraffes over the last month, these males are providing for excellent viewing and are certainly a coalition to watch in the near future, and one in which I'll follow with great interest.

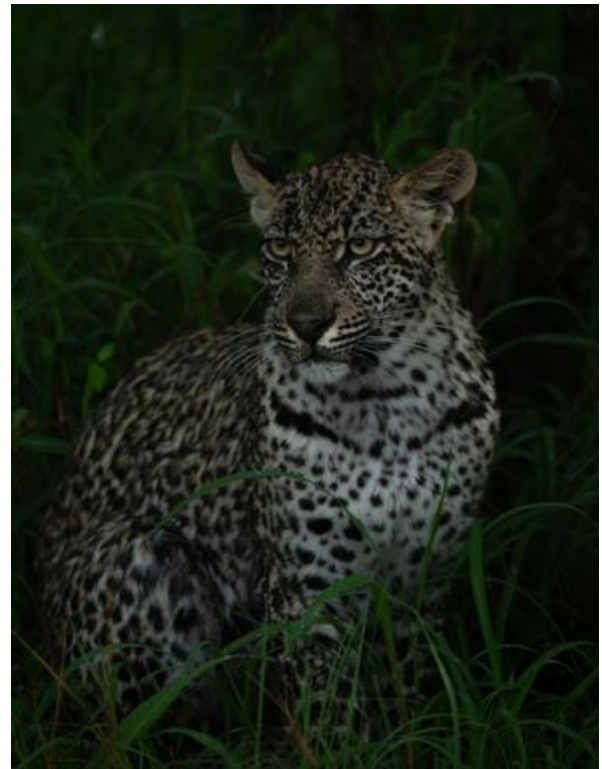
Let's talk photography and processing

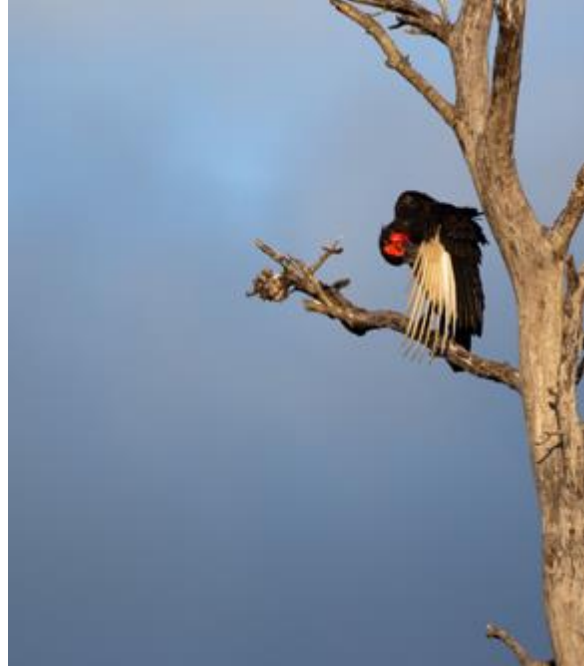
Article by Marc Bowes-Taylor

If the rain looks like it may settle in for a few days, don't let it dampen your creative spirit. Photography during the rain can be very rewarding in producing unique images. Often, they portray dramatic, moody scenes. After all it's not always sunshine and happy days in the bush!

Before the storm hits there is usually a big cloud build up in the east (well at least where we are in southern Africa that is the case), and with late afternoon sunlight this will illuminate your subject against a dark background.

Once the storm has moved in and sunlight is not available this is where post processing can be really fun. Remember photography is a form of art and you have all the right in the world to experiment with your editing program. I personally prefer Lightroom as it is easy to use and has plenty of editing options. I generally turn to monochrome or black and white options as colours become less vibrant when there is no sunlight. It also can turn a fairly ordinary image into





something more captivating. I like to have some focus in the sky by increasing my aperture on my camera (to show more detail surrounding the subject) and then in editing, darkening and lighting certain areas of the image. This will help lead the eye and create contrasts between the dark and light areas.



Going back to experimenting with the camera, overexposing some images will help bring out areas cast in shadow, like a leopard in a tree. Choosing the black and white editing option in Lightroom will give a satisfactory result.

Motion blur is another option during overcast days. To achieve this, slow your shutter speed down to say 1/6th of a second (you can play around until you find the setting you prefer). This requires plenty of trial and error, and a sturdy hand. Keep your focus on the head of the moving animal and snap away doing your best to pan your camera at the same pace your subject is moving at. You may find that the majority of your images are blurry and will be deleted but you may have one keeper where a certain part of your image is in focus and the rest all blurred, portraying movement.

Happy snapping!





If you have been fortunate enough to have been caught in one, or witnessed one, of Africa's welcoming, frightening but always beautiful thunderstorms, it might help you understand how wild these storms are. You most probably will also get drenched and soaking wet.

Our rainy season at Singita in the Sabi Sand usually (but not always) starts in October through until mid-April. This gives us the opportunity to witness one of Africa's most wonderful displays of power but also regeneration. The vegetation (or bush as we like to call it) transforms almost overnight from the barren, dusty winter landscape to a fresh vibrant green coat of new hope.

One of the first things you will notice is the smell of the earth after a rain shower. There is a term and scientific explanation for this. The smell is called 'petrichor'. The name is derived from the Greek words 'petra' meaning rock, and 'ichor' from Greek mythology meaning 'the fluid that flows like blood in the veins of the gods'. It is created by the oils exuded or released by certain plants during the dry season in soils and rocks. During rain these oils are released with another compound, geosmin, which is a by-product of certain bacteria that help decompose the organic matter of dead organisms to help the absorption of the nutrients into new plant cells. This combination when released into the air creates this very distinct earthy smell we get to enjoy after a rain or thunderstorm. That's a lot of science for something so simply enjoyable.

Stop and smell the rain the next time you're caught in a storm!

There is an African proverb that says, "The rain wets the leopard's spots, but it doesn't wash them off."

January Gallery



Schotia female leopard – Image by Chene Wales-Baillie



Nkuhuma young male lion – Image by Nick Du Plessis



Elephant bull in the rain – Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor



Southern Masked weaver – Image by Nick Du Plessis



Schotia female and youngster – Image by Damin Dallas



Matimba male lion – Image by Chene Wales-Baillie