

# Singita



**WILDLIFE JOURNAL**  
**SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA**  
**For the month of February, Two Thousand and Twenty Four**

**Temperature**

Average minimum: 21.3°C (70.4°F)  
Average maximum: 33.1°C (91.5°F)  
Minimum recorded: 17.0°C (62.6°F)  
Maximum recorded: 40.0°C (104.0°F)

**Rainfall Recorded**

For the month: 23.8 mm  
For the season: 426.5 mm

**Sunrise & Sunset**

Sunrise: 05:39  
Sunset: 18:36

This year the month of February was a stark contrast to the previous year when we experienced more than half the annual rainfall in just twenty-eight days. This February, with El Niño off the Indian Ocean, temperatures have soared like vultures riding the thermals and rain has been scarce. We have been shown just how fragile and unforgiving life can be with the death of the Nkuhuma lioness at the expense of the Mhangene Pride's desire for dominance. With this comes great opportunity for those smaller prides in the area to branch out where the Nkuhuma Breakaways once roamed. Our surroundings show a slow change in the direction of the onset of the drier times of the year as long, tanned grasses now boast their detail fluorescents which catch the

late afternoon glow in such spectacular fashion. Cracks now form in the mud on the edges of seasonal pans as their waters recede - not all life is lost, look closely and you will see amphibians taking shelter in these cool nooks. Small creepers stake their claim to the water-logged mud while funnel-web spiders build their web in hope for a meal.

Let's catch up with what has been happening with the wildlife:

### **Cheetahs**

- As the grasses thin out spotting cheetah has become more achievable when they are at rest. The mother cheetah and cubs has been spending a considerable amount of time on Singita of late and limiting her movements in order to assure their survival. Sadly, she has lost two cubs, we are not sure how but a good chance it was to larger predators that are in abundance on the reserve. In efforts to protect the remaining cubs she has been moving late in the morning when bigger cats are sleeping, and resting in small thickets of vegetation in the crests of the gabbro grasslands. It is remarkable that we view cheetah in the Sabi Sand so regularly, let alone a female and cub.

### **Elephants**

- With the last of the marula fruits still waiting to drop, this season's harvest has been exceptional. A healthy rainy season the year before has helped the trees and those that rely on them with a big bounty of fruit. The elephants have enjoyed the spoils and are now shifting their feeding habits to browse. A popular tree for them is that of the round-leafed teak. These evergreen trees have their branches stripped off with ease by the numerous herds that frequent the area. Although the elephants have stunted many of this tree species, their solid trunk remains defiant and holds them in place.

### **Lions**

- After what had felt like an eternity the Mhangene Pride has returned with force. In a very sad turn of events the pride was discovered feeding on another lioness. A highly unusual occurrence as they rarely eat other predators after killing them. This is due to a low-fat content in the body of other cats, including lion. The Nkuhuma lioness, much like her older relative one-and-a-half years back, has fallen victim to the ruthlessness of Mother Nature. Although this seems harsh and unnecessary, this is the path many lions have to take in order to ensure their pride's survival. The growing cubs are putting more and more pressure on the adults to provide bigger and more frequent meals.
- The two sub-adults that now remain from the Nkuhuma Breakaway Pride have a tough road ahead of them. Just older than two years of age they would have some experience in hunting and with prey plentiful in the region not all hope is lost. Lions are resilient, if given the chance, they will overcome challenges, after all there is a reason why they are so often the subjects of great stories and legends.
- The Tsalala lioness is an ideal figure for these two young lions to aspire to. She continues to thrive along the eastern stretch of the Sand River on Singita. One particular morning, while following her she caught sight of a leopard, the Senegal Bush male who just saw her in time and scampered up a tree to safety. A thrilling case witnessing two big cats play out the hierarchy of the African bush.

### **Leopards**

- The south-eastern part of Singita has been a hotspot for leopard activity over the past two months. As the two male cubs of the Nkuwa female grow older and bolder, sightings of them by themselves have become more stable as they show trust in the vehicles when by themselves. A most memorable moment of these three was when she led the cubs to a kill and was then joined by the Senegal Bush male leopard. Leopards are often described as loners, this sighting proves otherwise, and in an area with such a high density it is no surprise when individuals come together and kick the text book to the bin!

- The Ximobanyana female and her cub are doing well and crucial progress was made in getting the youngster accustomed to our safari vehicles when they were found feeding on an impala kill. This allows guides to cycle through the sighting knowing that the leopards will not leave the kill. These two leopards can be found in the surrounding vicinity of Castleton, a leopard's haven.
- Thamba male and the Hlambela male still hold their own in the south and the north respectively.
- We occasionally have come across a young female that may well have been born and brought up by either the Serengeti female or Nkangala female, both of which are shy leopards. These mysterious individuals are exciting to find as there is so much we do not know about them. Personal habits and traits are something each leopard has and we eagerly look forward learning more about this elusive female.

### Wild dogs

- The pack of three have been active around Castleton this month making the most of the impala lambs that were born late in the season. With all the activity of a wild dog hunt in the air it's no surprise that the draw in a lot of attention. One morning, a herd of elephant caught wind of the pack feeding and came rushing in a drove them away while trumpeting and crashing through the brush. The dogs scampered off and some opportunistic hyenas seized the moment and stole what was left of the unattended carcass.

### Buffaloes

- The herds are now traveling further and further each day. Seasonal pans are now merely muddy stagnant pools where terrapins and warthogs find respite from the heat. Grasses are losing their sweetness and finding enough for so many mouths mean more walking.

### Bird List

Another month sees one new species recorded for the Sabi Sand Nature Reserve, the broad-tailed warbler, as well as new species for the year, African openbill and black coucal, bringing our yearly total to 233 species.



Some bush reflections to follow, as well as the February Gallery of images.

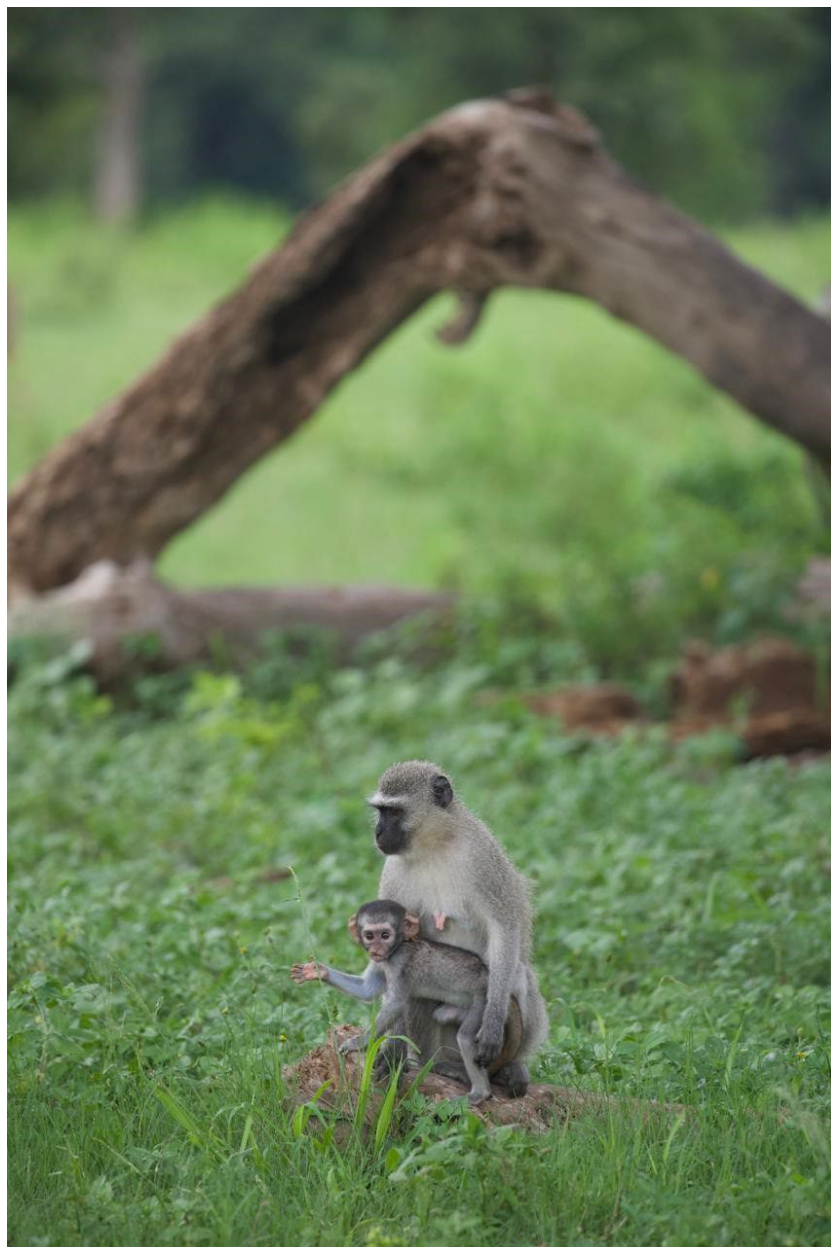
## The unexpected birth

Article by Greg Heasman

As our summer is coming to an end, I look back at all the incredible sightings we have enjoyed watching over this summer period which happens from November to March. Many call it our birth season or rainy season, and let's just say we have experienced both - good rains always bring new life.

Fresh new palatable grasses and new leaves on trees bring happiness to all animals after a dry and stressful winter. As a guide I have had the privilege of witnessing many births during this time of year, and this year I got to witness something that I have never heard of anyone seeing before – the birth of a vervet monkey!

I was out on an early morning game drive and our intentions were to go along the river in search of a leopard. As we approached the river we heard a few monkey distress calls, and we made our way in the direction to have a look at what was upsetting them. They have excellent eyesight so most of the time when you hear the monkeys' alarm call it's for a predator such as a lion, leopard, snake or bird of prey.



As we approached the area, we noticed the monkeys had all gone very quiet and were just feeding in the tree tops all looking in different directions (scouting). After sitting silently for a few minutes, we noticed one monkey not far off the road, sitting in the open on the ground. Within a second, we watched her grab a newborn from under her and bring it up to her chest. She immediately started cleaning this little one's head and tried to get it to latch onto her nipple to suckle. We sat in complete silence and awe. Within five minutes of birth the newborn had latched and was suckling, and holding on to the mother, finding its strength. Mom was now covered in blood and licking herself clean. As we were about to leave monkeys started alarming on the other side of the river, so we went and had a look but nothing to be found.

About twenty minutes later we went back to the mother and baby monkey to see their progress and when we returned they were still sitting on the ground and the mom was biting off the umbilical cord.

We all were overwhelmed with what we had just witnessed as generally monkeys hide away when giving birth, and are not out in the open. The mother regained her strength and made her way up into the tree tops with baby attached. All the other monkeys came and had a look and welcomed the new one into the family.

My tracker has been tracking for over 40 years and has never seen anything so special. It's truly amazing knowing you have never seen it all and there will always be something new to see and witness in this environment. It's so incredible watching new life being born and what joy it brings.



## Saddle-billed storks breeding along the Sand River

Article by Jono Harper

Along the banks of the Sand River, a pair of saddle-billed storks (*Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis*) established a nesting site amidst the riparian vegetation. The saddle-billed stork, distinguished by its striking black and white plumage, towering height of over five feet, and vibrant yellow and red bill, is a large wading bird found in Sub-Saharan Africa.



Male saddle-billed stork have dark eyes with two small yellow wattles at the base of the bill, while females have a yellow eye. The bill has large red and black stripes, and there is a bright-yellow leathery saddle of skin at the top of the bill.



Male



Female

The male stork undertook the responsibility of patrolling the vicinity to safeguard the nesting area from potential threats. Meanwhile, the female stork, slightly smaller in stature, diligently tended to the nest, reinforcing it with fresh twigs and soft grasses. The saddle-billed storks meticulously constructed their nest using a combination of sticks, grasses, and other plant materials, creating a platform elevated above the ground to protect their eggs from flooding and predators. The nest, often located in tall trees or amidst dense vegetation, provided a secure environment for incubation and rearing of offspring.

Incubation of the eggs fell primarily upon the female stork, who remained dedicated to the task despite exposure to the elements. The male stork supplemented her efforts by foraging for food, primarily consisting of fish, frogs, and other aquatic prey found in the shallow waters of the Sand River. Upon hatching, the three successful stork chicks emerged from their eggs, initially helpless and reliant on their parents for nourishment and protection. Over time, they grew stronger and more independent, venturing from the nest to explore their surroundings and develop their hunting skills.



Nest with chicks inside.

The Sand River, a vital water source in the region, provided ample opportunities for foraging and hunting as the storks navigated its shallow waters in search of sustenance. During the dry season, when water levels receded, the storks adapted their foraging strategies to capitalize on the exposed prey. As the seasons changed and the river swelled with the arrival of the rains, the storks' feeding opportunities expanded, allowing them to capitalize on the increased abundance of fish and other aquatic organisms. Despite the challenges posed by changing environmental conditions and potential predators, the storks demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability in ensuring the survival of their offspring.

The nesting and breeding behaviours of saddle-billed storks contribute to the ecological balance of the riparian ecosystem along the Sand River, playing a crucial role in nutrient cycling and maintaining biodiversity. Through their reproductive success and continued presence in the region, these magnificent birds contribute to the intricate web of life that sustains the African wilderness.

February Gallery



The Mhangene Pride quenching their thirst after an unsuccessful buffalo hunt. Image by Matt Durell.

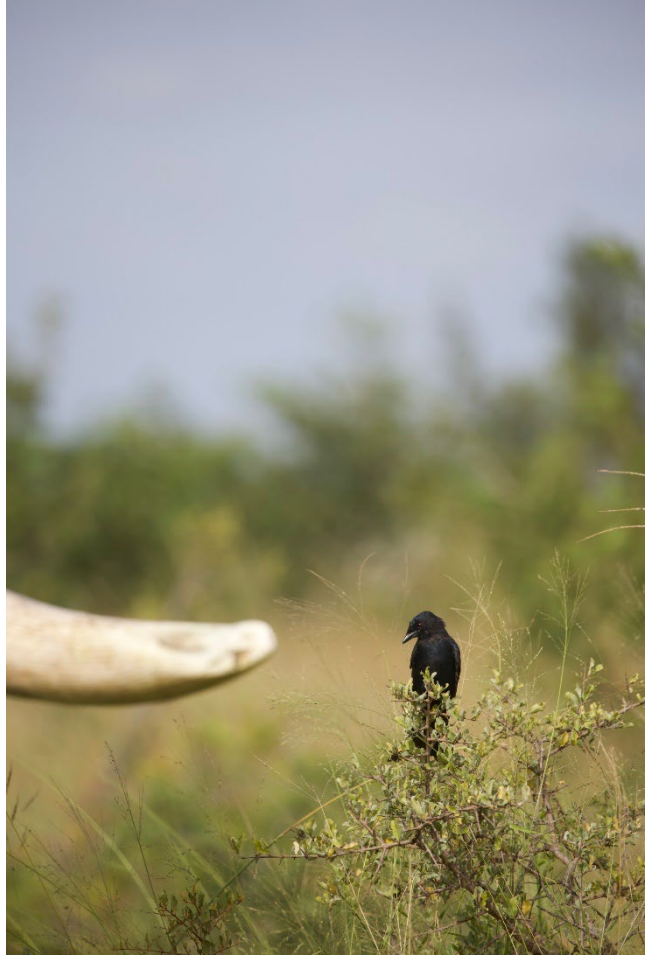


A Ntsevu young male. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.





Summer days at the local watering hole. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.



Fork-tailed drongo rarely let their diminutive size get them down. This bird often pesters larger birds, like the martial eagle, pictured on the left.

Images by Marc Bowes-Taylor and Matt Durell.

Cryptically marked double-banded sandgrouse, are often only spotted once they burst into flight at the last moment, from the road.

Image by Matt Durell.



One of the most idyllic spots on the reserve, Taylor's Crossing, at sunset. Image by Matt Durell.



A tender moment between a mother giraffe and her calf. Image by Marc Eschenlohr.



One of the Nkuwa female's cubs. Image by Marc Eschenlohr.



The Thamba male leopard locking eyes with a hyena strolling toward him. Image by Marc Eschenlohr.