

Singita

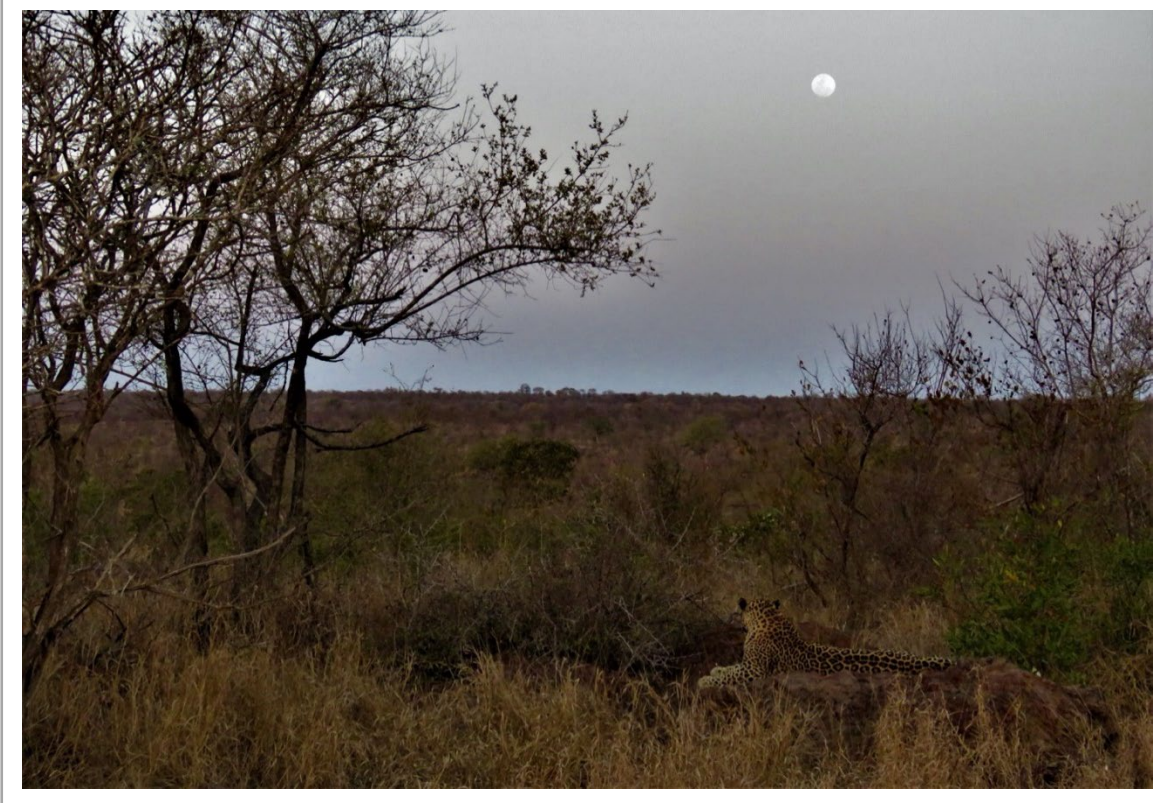


Photo by Garry Bruce

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

Temperature

Average minimum: 12°C (53.6°F)
Minimum recorded: 07°C (44.6°F)
Average maximum: 24°C (75.2°F)
Maximum recorded: 35°C (95.0°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0 mm
Season to date: 753 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:32
Sunset: 17:32

There is a noticeable change in the air as the sun is setting later and the days are generally punctuated with windy but increasingly hot conditions. The cold winter mornings are almost a thing of the past, although we have also experienced the tail-end of a few cold fronts that made their way across the country from the Atlantic Ocean earlier this month. The dry windy conditions are common during August in the lowveld and this year is no exception, they have kicked up dust and made for spectacular red skies during sunset. The knobthorn's (*Senegalia nigrescens*) creamy white flowers bloomed in the early part of the month, the blood red flowers of the flame creepers (*Combretum microphyllum*) are draping over the rhyolite cliffs that rise above the N'wanetsi River. The sjambok pod (*Cassia abbreviata*) are dotting the concession yellow with their

beautiful flowers. We have also been surprised by some of the migratory birds making their return, with the first yellow-billed kites and Wahlberg eagles already having made an appearance after their journey from central Africa. The N'wanetsi River is showing signs of drying but tributaries are still flowing. The water levels usually have dwindled down to a few motionless pools by spring. This supply of water has brought in many herds of elephants, but also dispersed the usually concentrated numbers of general game along the winding river, making the generally predictable lion movements ever more surprising.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for August:

Lions

- The two Shish lionesses (one is the limping female) have been seen more frequently together with the Maputo male, who has now become completely at ease in the presence of the vehicles. They have been spending most of their time along the N'wanetsi River and south of the lodge. Towards the end of the month a third lioness joined them.
- The Kumana male however, seems to be putting up more of a fight against the take-over of the Maputo male. We found him with two lionesses feeding on a waterbuck and kudu kill for a few days, and it was only once they had moved off that the Maputo male arrived to finish the remains of the carcass. This appeared to have given the Kumana male a confidence boost as he was seen the following day moving around his territory, roaring and scent marking, actively making his presence known once again. Towards the end of the month the Maputo male was found feeding on a large buffalo bull. On the second day the Kumana male arrived and there was a brief confrontation which included a lot of growling but no actual physical fighting. That evening the two males were seen feeding with their heads almost touching, and a few days later they were still together, lying around digesting their big meal.
- The Mananga pride has been sighted regularly around Gudzane Dam with all seven cubs still alive and growing fast. On one occasion early in the month they were found feeding on a zebra with Xihamham and his brother. We had the two males move far south-east in response to the Kumana males' territorial calls, but Kumana managed to elude them. Later in the month the Mananga pride were found feeding on a large buffalo bull quite far east into our concession, probably due to the lack of presence of the Shish pride.
- Mountain pride were sighted only a couple times this month, as they seem to be spending the majority of their time in Mozambique.

Leopards

- Nhlangueni female was seen on a few occasions in the central parts of our concession. She was seen one morning, scent marking and 'sawing', perhaps looking for a male?
- The Ndlovu male, during the first half of the month, was seen regularly around Puff Adder Crossing and then moved north towards Green Apple Hill.
- Mbiri-biri male was seen feeding on a large old warthog towards the end of the month with the Nhlangueni female even making an appearance at the sighting.

Cheetahs

- We have had a few sightings of cheetahs this month. Two males were seen in the grasslands on the H6 on the way to the airstrip and a single female on the road to the staff village.

Wild dogs

- We are awaiting sightings of the wild dogs that were thought to be denning to the south of our concession. The pups should be old enough now to be able to keep up with the pack and the number

of impalas in our concession is very inviting. We have seen tracks on the concession but no sightings of these incredible animals just yet...

Spotted hyenas

- We have had quite a few sightings of these interesting creatures this last month. We have also managed to locate a den-site that is now active, with cubs. Unfortunately for us this den is situated on top of a rocky ridge and we are not able to get close to it.
- There is another den that is being used that is on the public road between the camp and the airstrip. There are a few youngsters there, including at least one cub that is still very dark in colour (they are almost black in colour when first born and only start getting their spots when they are between two and three months old). Fortunately, many of our guests get to see these youngsters when they first arrive or when they depart the lodge. These hyenas are presently using a culvert under the road as a den-site.
- On one occasion we saw a group of hyenas chasing a young male leopard. We also saw a clan of hyenas, one morning, that were skulking around the base of a marula tree in which a leopard had hoisted her kill.
- Over the few days that the Kumana male lion was feeding on a zebra there were at least six hyenas that were seen in the close vicinity, hoping to scavenge from the carcass once the lion had finished.

Elephants

- Elephants have been unsurprisingly busy this month, with many sightings recorded and a large amount of those being breeding herds. With the drying conditions at this time of year and the concession is still holding a lot of water in comparison to the surrounding areas and there have been multiple sightings on a daily basis. There is still water along the N'wanetsi River, Gudzane Dam on the west, and Pony Pan in the middle of the concession.

Buffalos

- We have had good views of large herds of buffalo, as well as groups of dagga boys along the Xingkelengane Drainage and N'wanetsi River.

Plains game

- There are large herds of zebra, wildebeest and giraffe present at the moment, particularly in the central and northern areas of the concession. Large groups of waterbuck are present all along the N'wanetsi as well as the always-present large groups of impala.

Rare animals and other sightings

- A serval was seen on the H6 by the staff bus.
- Porcupines are seen on some of evening drives back to the lodge.
- A pair of honey badgers are becoming a common sight in and around the lodges at night.

Birds

- We have seen a total of 168 birds for the month. Birding has been good considering the dry conditions. A purple heron at the weir in front of the lodge was a great record for the area. We have started to see some of the migrant birds returning after wintering in the tropics.

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

Winds of change

Article and photos by Monika Malewski

We are finally on the home stretch of our journey from winter into the long-awaited spring. The grass is now a dry yellow and red mosaic, becoming ever thinner and not springing back up as it used to after the large bodies of buffalo have rested in the shade of the ancient leadwood trees dotted in the plains. Even the lions are leaving flattened patterns in the grass, after feeding on a kill caught the night before, in the windy August evening.

This wind, as unpleasant as it can be some days, is the necessary shake-up before spring. The last dry leaves are blown from the almost bare branches, and seeds are scattered from their mother plant, where they will wait in dusty soils for the summer rains. It was on one of these very windy August mornings that a fellow guide, Ishmael, located a large pride of lions known to us as the Mananga pride, named after the Mananga 4x4 trail to the west of our concession, where these lions are frequently found. They had used the dark and very windy conditions to their advantage and managed to bring down a zebra during what we estimated to be the early hours of the morning. Prey such as zebra and most other diurnal species do not have good night vision (essentially a high density of light sensitive rod cells in the retina) and rely on their sense of smell and hearing to be aware of their surroundings at night and to steer clear of nocturnal predators. A windy night thus provides the perfect hunting conditions for predators, as their scent is masked and they do not have to pay too much attention to making sure their every step is quiet, as the wind rustling through the leaves and whizzing past the ears of their prey is loud enough to drown out their movement through the bush. The zebra almost don't stand a chance against a pride of nine lionesses, one sub-adult male and two large dominant males. The pride which, including the cubs, is 19 strong, made quick work of the zebra. On our arrival one of the large males, Xihamham, was dominating the remains of the carcass, emitting low growls every time a member dare get too close.



Even the smallest of the young cubs couldn't resist the sight of a tasty zebra steak and attempted to sneak around the tree under which Xihamham was resting next to the carcass. What started out as a soft growl, quickly escalated into the big male lion swiping at the hungry cub with his large paw. The surprised cub let out

a croaky yelp and ran back towards the females, who already understood the hierarchy of the situation. They were going to have to wait for Xihamham to have his fill.



This is typical lion behaviour as the males are so much larger and stronger than the females. As the dominant males in this area, they also offer protection to the new cubs from any intruding males and so need to keep well fed and in good overall condition. The females have no choice but to remain submissive, but I am sure they enjoy the peace and quiet, as well as having the whole carcass to themselves whilst the males are out patrolling the boundaries of their territory.

The August winds have provided us with great sightings of not only lions, but also the elusive leopards, feeding on a number of different occasions. A few weeks later we found the Mananga pride feeding on a large buffalo bull, but this time Xihamham was able to satisfy his hunger and there was still enough meat for all the females and cubs to also feed - to the point of almost popping! We were treated to the moans and groans of very full cubs as they crawled around dragging their bellies underneath them.





Over the last two and a half months there has been an intense war that has been raging in the southern parts of the N'wanetsi concession and as of yet there has been no clear winner. The dominate male lion has been the Kumana male, who at the old age of 11 years old has managed to retain control of his territory after his two brothers nobly perished defending the same territory some seasons ago. But with the arrival of the late winter winds that are typical of this part of the year, change was in the air. In the early hours of the cold winter mornings, roaring could be heard coming from the east over the Lebombo Mountains. In Mozambique a larger, stronger male lion was pushing into his territory...

What commenced over the ensuing weeks was a back and forth battle of teeth and claws, as the male lions tried to wrestle dominance and control of the lower parts of the N'wanetsi concession from each other. In the end it seemed the younger, fitter male had taken the territory from the older, wiser but battle-weary male. Some guests managed to witness some of the clashes but all could see the injuries that both males had inflicted on each other. The shy male from Mozambique's confidence around vehicles increased with every passing day and he was anointed with the name, the Maputo male.

Over the weeks that followed the Kumana male was usually seen on the periphery of his territory and the conquering male was seen in the central core areas of the prime territory, often with the younger members of the Shishangaan pride. The adults with the cubs had long since disappeared due to the instability caused by the war between the males.

At the end of the month there was to be a twist in the tale that nobody expected. One evening while exploring the hills above the N'wanetsi River, one of the experienced trackers of the area, Solly Ndlovu spotted movement down one of the drainage lines. On investigation this turned out to be the Maputo male lion. He was feeding on a fully grown Cape buffalo bull estimated at between 600-800 kilograms in weight. He gorged

himself during the evening and into the morning. When the game drive vehicles arrived the next morning, he was still feeding on the large carcass. As vultures started to gather in the trees above another lion could be heard not far away. The Maputo male rose up from the half eaten carcass to meet the threat. On the hill above, the old male lion was roaring as he slowly came down the road to where the other lion stood, the Maputo male was very full and his belly looked three times its usual size. He growled and lay down staring at the impressive male lion walking to his position. It was the Kumana male and he was presenting himself to the Maputo male in an aggressive show of force and clearly marking the surrounding vegetation, scuffing the ground with his back feet and urine spraying. After lots of anticipation as to what was going to happen the male lions eventually kept a distance from each other growling and grinning warnings to one another for the rest of the morning.

To everyone's bewilderment that afternoon they were sharing the carcass side by side! This was completely unexpected and unprecedented behaviour considering the battles they have had. The only explanation could be that the amount of meat on the carcass, and having no females present, could have contributed to this behaviour. The males were seen on the carcass for a few days following and eventually remained together for a few days after.

Male lions in southern Africa and the Kruger National Park typically live in coalitions. Actual coalition sizes can vary from two males to seven males. These coalitions are normally made up of lions that are brothers, and often half-brothers or even cousins. They usually have their beginnings when these males are all still cubs, living in their natal pride. It has been recorded though that unrelated males may join up and form coalitions later in their lives, but these two males are far apart in terms of age. Only time will tell if they will remain together in the future, as this story has not yet ended.





Nhlaguleni female leopard



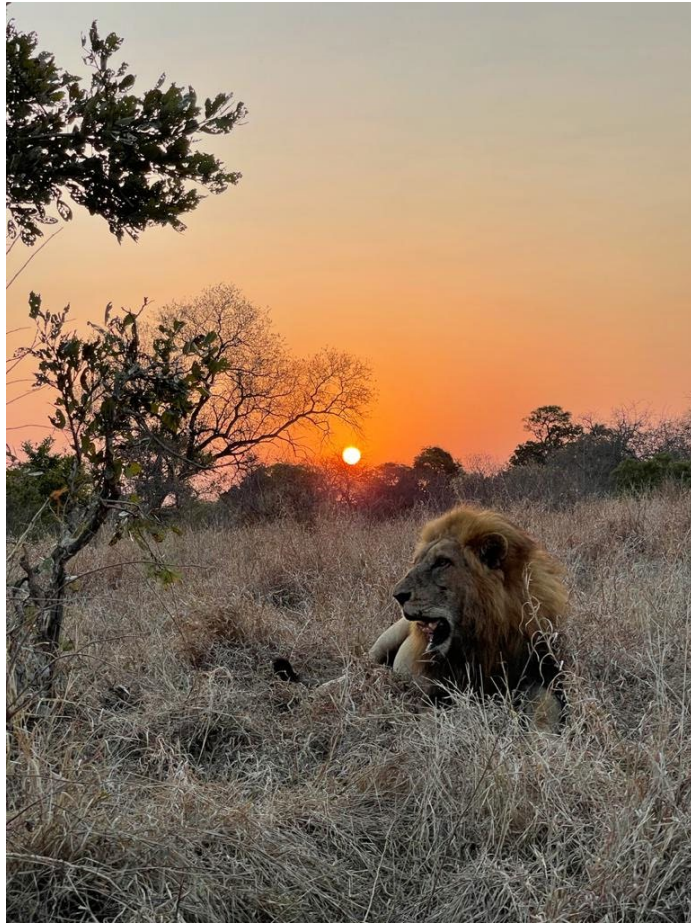
Sunset over the N'wanetsi river from Dave's crossing



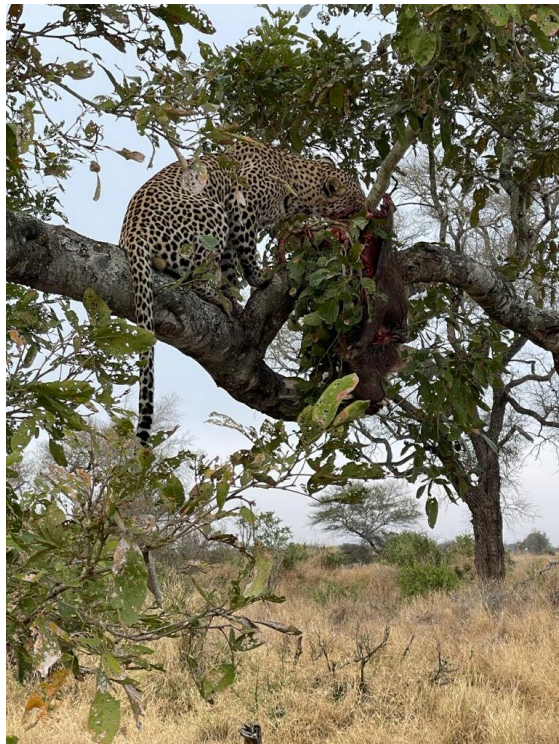
Plains zebra



Waterbuck bull next to the Xingkelengane drainage



The Kumana male at sunset



Mbir-Mbiri male leopard



Juvenile bateleur eagle



Pale morph Wahlberg's eagle



Yellow-throated longclaw