

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL

SINGITA PAMUSHANA / MALILANGWE, ZIMBABWE

For the month of October, Two Thousand and Twenty-Three

Temperature

Average minimum: 19.2°C (66.5°F)

Minimum recorded: 13.4°C (56.1°F)

Average maximum: 31.6°C (88.8°F)

Maximum recorded: 42.8°C (109°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 38.1 mm

*For the season to date: 52.1 mm

*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:08

Sunset: 18:06

Many people ask what the best time of year to visit is, and the answer varies so, but there can be no time more beautiful than two weeks after the first rains when the first flush of grass appears like lawn, the mopane trees are a luminous pink and lime, and the gardenias are flowering. Going out on game drive in the morning is like stepping into a perfumery – the 'scent bathing' equivalent of 'forest bathing'. It's a time when the scents and sounds and scenes vie for your attention.

We rejoiced with the arrival of the first rains for many reasons, one of them being that it brought reprieve from some of the sizzling days we've had. It has been soaked up by the parched earth quickly, so much of the wildlife still relies on the permanent water sources. At one sighting we had three of the "Big Five" close together - buffalos, a black rhino and a pride of four lions. The lions were stalking the buffaloes and at the same time the rhino walked towards the lions, however no blood was shed on that occasion!

Here's a snapshot of October's sightings:

Lions

The lion sightings have been plentiful and different prides have been seen almost daily.

- Lions have been seen feeding on buffalo, giraffe, zebra, impala and wildebeest carcasses this month.
- The Nduna old male is still alive! This old lion is remarkable as he is still fighting tooth and claw, but in a very strategic way. He is, however, sporting a large open wound on his head, and who knows how much longer he'll be around. Every sighting of him is a relief. He and other members of the Nduna Pride were seen with two wildebeest kills on the Banyini one morning.
- Lions killed a giraffe and fed on the carcass for days at Sosigi Dam, leaving only the unbreakable bones for the hyenas to gnaw on.
- Two lionesses made a very opportune impala kill, right in front of guests.
- Two male lions killed a zebra which a crocodile then tried to hijack unsuccessfully. Nearby to this two lionesses had killed a wildebeest.
- Another lion sighting highlight was of four members of the River Pride trying to take down a buffalo within a herd of over 100 retaliating bovines. The buffalos kept charging the lions creating a commotion and stampede.
- The pride dynamics and coalitions seem fluid at the moment. Possibly males from the north have joined the Nduna Pride, the Nduna Pride has split, and the River and Southern Prides have at least three territorial males moving between them.

Rhinos

Excellent crashes of both white and black rhinos have been seen this month. Multiple white rhinos are a daily occurrence. Highlights include:

- There are a few white rhino mothers with young calves drinking at a pan regularly. They are very protective of the babies and will react aggressively to any other male rhino that comes near them. Watching the youngsters interact with others and the big wide world is an absolute delight.
- A bull black rhino gave a safari vehicle a few revs, but then calmed down enough for guests to view him for over 20 minutes.
- A newborn black rhino, less than a week old, and still hairy, was seen with its mother.
- Eight black rhinos were seen on a morning game drive by a guide and his guest.

Buffalos

Breeding herds of buffalos are also a daily occurrence, and on some drives more than one herd is seen.

- A herd of more than five hundred came to drink at Hwata Pan, while guests were inside the photographic hide. It was incredible to see the kicked up dust as they arrived, and then the crowding and drinking at the pan as they converged.

Elephants

- The bull with the largest tusks on the property has been seen several times this month, as well as several other impressive tuskers.
- Guests out on safari boat cruises have had amazing sightings of elephants drinking and swimming in the dam.
- The breeding herds are keeping along the river, and north of the Malilangwe Dam. It is astonishing how secretive and ghostly vast groups of these grey giants can be.

Wild dogs

- Two packs have been viewed – the pack of 13 and the much smaller pack that has two pups.

- The pack of 13 has been seen often, either resting in the shade during the day, or flying through the air like bullets as they hunt at dawn and dusk.

Leopards

- Leopard viewing from the safari boat cruises has been good as a couple of individuals have been drinking from the water's edge. One was seen stalking a crocodile!
- A highlight was a mother leopard with a cub that had been hiding in a baobab tree.

Hyenas

- The different hyena clans have been feeding on the bounty of carcasses left by the lions.
- Individuals have been seen trailing the wild dogs hoping to bully their way into a free meal.
- Hyenas were observed trying to hunt impalas.



Unusual/other

- Daffwell Marumahoko is a new guide who has joined the team. On a morning game drive, getting to know the area, he came across two brown hyena cubs! They were trying to hide away beneath a log in the area between Nduna and Lojaan Dams. We get reports of brown hyenas in this area, but sightings of them are so rare. What an extraordinary sighting for a new guide in a new area, when so many of us who have spent many years here have never seen one! Fortunately he took this photo as proof!
- Other unusual sightings include a hippo grazing far from the water during the afternoon; an African Wild cat hunting; a python feeding; and a genet enjoying a free meal.

Birds

- It's a delight to see many of the migrant birds arriving.
- A large flock of house martins took shelter from a storm under the eaves of the lodge bar.
- There is a martial eagle chick in a nest close to Nduna.
- A crowned eagle has been seen on its nest near Meso.

Boat cruise

- Such relaxing and incomparable cruises have taken place this month, highlighted with sightings of hippos, crocodiles, abundant birdlife, and the occasional leopard, elephants, and black and white rhinos.

Fishing

- The fish are starting to bite in the warmer waters.
- A highlight was teaching a young girl how to fish for the first time, and being rewarded with a good size tilapia being landed.

Walks and rock art

- It's still a lovely time to walk as the grass has only just begun to grow and visibility is still good.
- Various walks have taken place where smaller details are observed, and occasionally large animals too.
- Walking to the caves that contain rock art is an incredible experience. One new scene has recently been revealed after elephants removed a bush that had screened off the artwork hidden for hundreds of years.

Photographic hide

- The hide has still been in use in October as animals still converge at the pan to drink from the permanent water supply.
- An array of plains game, rhinos, elephants and lions have been observed at close quarters.

Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft

- One visit to the bushcraft museum just beyond our boundary offered up 12 white rhinos on the way!
- Our guests, especially the children, have revelled in seeing bushcraft skills demonstrated by Julius and his family.

Gonarezhou Day Trips

- These full day trips are a must if you have the time. Two things that are absolutely guaranteed are Chilojo Cliffs and breeding herds of elephants.



Moonrise over Malilangwe dam.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as an October Gallery of images.

Playful pups

It's the most wonderful experience to see this pack of 13 African wild dogs, each with unique camouflage, and observe how the pups are growing and prospering. If you know where they've spent the day resting after their morning hunt you can spend an entertaining afternoon returning to the same spot and watching them wake up, get restless, start playing, and then harassing and nagging the adults to go hunting.





The agile alpha female dogtrots down a fallen tree, and the pack rallies for the hunt after a quick sip of water.



Being Butch

We're able to identify some of the large tuskers on the reserve, not only by their tusks but also tears on their ear edges, scars and overall size and shape. This calm old soul is a bull we call 'Butch' named after the man who first saw him on the reserve back in 2018 /19. Butch moved on his own accord from Gonarezhou National Park in the south, to retire at Malilangwe.

He has lost a lot of condition in the past six months and has recently recovered from a huge wound on the one side of his upper hip close to his tail. We don't know how it happened, but at least he is on the mend.

We estimate that he must be on the last part of molar six which would put him around 58-60 years of age. Their lifespan is 60 to 70 years. Elephants grind their way through six sets of molars in a lifetime. As one set wears out, another moves up from the back of the mouth to replace it until the final set wears out and the elephant is no longer able to chew.



Right place, right time, but not for the impala

We'd been watching a pack of African wild dogs wake from their afternoon snooze, chase each other in circles, and then set off in a line to go and hunt along the river banks. Unable to follow them we headed towards the river for a sundowner, only to pass our ecology team returning from their research on the other side of the river. They happened to mention to look out for two lionesses sleeping on the river bank. We found them soon enough, an adult and sub-adult, and indeed they were fast asleep, not facing us – just flat strips of gold in the red late afternoon light. With the light so exquisite I set up my camera and fired off a few shots, just because. But then, for no apparent reason, the adult lioness sat bolt upright, took a step forward, every muscle loaded, her eyes and ears zeroed in. What happened next was over in a millisecond. An impala, no doubt flushed by the hunting wild dogs and sprinting away for its life, raced directly into the claws and jaws of the two lions. I don't think the sub-adult lioness had even stood up yet. They both had the impala in a deadly neck hold quickly asphyxiating the life from it, before the adult let go to give us a warning snarl while the sub-adult guaranteed death.



After that they opened up the carcass and fed, repositioning themselves to get to the meal that had all but landed in their laps. You could see the sub-adult almost wondering what had just happened, and then being delighted and rubbing up against the adult – probably its mother, and then settling in for the shared feast.

It's very rare for us to see a kill, start to finish, right in front of our eyes, and it is actually very emotionally draining. We left them to finish off the impala and we retired to a peaceful spot to gather our wits and review what we'd just seen over a calming sundowner.

These lions are two members of the River Pride, a pride that usually targets buffalo or much bigger plains game than an impala, but this poor ram impala, fleeing from hunting wild dogs, had run blindly on target into the sleeping lions.





Rite of passage



One of the many privileges of working here for an extended period of time is seeing the gradual changes that take place. At Hwata Pan there is a smooth shiny stump that once was angular and tall. (Before that it had been a tree which grew for decades before an elephant bull pushed it down.) Adult white rhinos would spend ages

scratching their hard-to-reach itches against this rubbing post, grinding off ticks and scabs and whatever caused them discomfort. It was a delight to watch them soothe themselves and contort their enormous bodies to reach the right itchy spot. These days the stump has worn down too low for some adults, and has actually been sanded to a polished shine in some areas – and this now makes it the perfect rubbing post for baby rhinos. It is the most wonderful delight to see a little rhino being introduced to the stump by its looming mother, and then see it discover this bushveld version of a spa exfoliation!





Twitter

We are delighted to see that a crowned eagle is on the enormous nest that has been used for decades to raise chicks. The breeding pair don't choose this nest every year, so this was great birding news for October.



A white-crowned lapwing with the most striking yellow wattles.

Flower power



There are so many beautiful flowers and blossoms out at the moment, and it's especially good to appreciate them on a walk. The blooms don't seem to last too long out here though, they make quick work of flowering and getting pollinated to avoid being eaten by browsers. Some use flashy colours to attract colours and ward off hungry mouths, others use the strategy of scent. For a brief few days the jasmines give way to the gardenias and driving at dawn and dusk when they give off the most scent is a heady affair of intoxicating sweet seduction. There's no manufactured perfume in the world that can come close to compare it.

Baobab flower.
Gardenias that change from white to yellow.







Fireball lilies (*Scadoxus multiflorus*) demand everyone's attention, and warn that they are poisonous to eat. The 'fireball' (see photo on the first page) is an explosion of up to 150 little flowers that attract pollinators such as butterflies. You find them in the shade of trees where there is a good water supply and well-drained rich soil.



Blossoms shower the trees and ground around them like bridal confetti.

October Gallery



These two wildebeest were transfixed while the world went mad around them. Precisely the shock and horror I feel after returning to the city after safari and hearing the onslaught of leaf blowers, beeping trucks reversing and security alarms! Just take a closer look at those expressions:





A rather white black rhino amid the verdant colours of October.



The colours are so saturated at present after the first soaking rains – a palette this kudu bull accepts for a pose.



A gold-rimmed giraffe backlit by sunrise awakes to a new day and its constant oxpecker companions.



A male lion rests below the umbrellaed shade in the late morning heat.

All stories and photographs by Jenny Hishin, unless otherwise indicated.