

Singita



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

Temperature

Average minimum: 19.8°C (67.64°F)

Average maximum: 30.1°C (86.18°F)

Minimum recorded: 16.0°C (60.8°F)

Maximum recorded: 36.0°C (96.8°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 62.8mm

For the season to date: 845.95mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:57

Sunset: 18:11

A blanket of mist covers the Sand River as the sun begins to illuminate the bush from the darkness. Bursts of golden light begin to pierce through the murky haze as the distant call of a territorial male leopard echoes across the river bank. A chill, drifts through the air, but with it we take a deep, cool, breath of excitement as we set out on our morning game drives. Autumn has set into motion and with the vast amounts of rain received this season, we move into the colder months with a much greener landscape than previous years. Although we have begun to notice the transition in temperature and vegetation, we too have noticed a slight change in predator dynamics. Last month we saw the brief arrival of the N'waswitshaka male lions, however this month has been one for the leopards...

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for March:

Lions

- After a difficult month during February, with the loss of their cubs (except one) during a run in with the N'waswitshaka males, the Mhangene Pride has once again bounced back and to our surprise have been seen with another new pride member! Although one of the older females has begun to truly show the signs of her age, the addition of a new cub into the pride has brought new hope for the lionesses and that too for the Othawa male's lineage.
- The Othawa sub-adults (one female and three males) have again been seen a number of times on the property this month. With greater presence from the Tumbela males in the west, these youngsters are seemingly pushing further east onto Singita and are doing well for themselves. The last weeks of March saw them feeding on a giraffe kill for close to a week, with no interruptions.
- There have been no further sightings of the N'waswitshaka male lions on the property, however distant roars can sometimes be heard further in the south east. Only time will tell if this coalition pushes further into Othawa / Birmingham male territory.
- The Styx and Nkuhuma young males too have been viewed a few times this month, with one occasion having been chased by one of their fathers (the Birmingham males) further west and away from their territory. The two young males, although nomadic, are still thriving together.

Elephants

- With incredibly high rainfall this year, grasses have been abundant and thus have served to be the main source of food for many of the elephants. This comes with a price in that many more marula trees have been stripped of their bark than we have observed before in previous years. The cambium layer of a marula tree holds medicinal value of which helps (even in humans) the stomach when it is faced with diarrhoea or cramps. This may be a theory but it seems as though the elephants are using the bark to combat the upset stomachs they have, caused by large consumption of green grass.
- Many herds of elephants have graced our presence this month, however one herd in particular has stood out to us, always with intrigue when viewing them. This herd includes a female known as "Rhandzekile" a large cow with a prominent hole in her face.

Wild dogs

- Wild dog sightings have been an exciting spectacle this month. With only a few sightings of them from time to time, these animals are one of the more rare and special to see. These are typically the months where alpha females are pregnant and until May/June they move long distances in search of good hunting grounds and a perfect den-site to have their pups. With the merging of the alpha and beta females from the Pungwe Pack and our Othawa Pack, we are excited to see what changes will come from this group of painted wolves. Will they den with us again this year?

Leopards

- Always a favourite, the beautiful Schotia female continues to perfect her motherhood. With a strong young male as a son who seems to be increasingly more curious and confident as the months progress, this sort of attitude will ensure that he will move out into independence with a strong will and the precise skills in order to hunt and survive.
- The Misava male, although small for his age, still continues to survive and tends to move around in his mother's old territory. From time to time we find him further spread from these areas however, his father the Nyeleti male, continues to tolerate him and therefore is able to stick around. This is due to the fact that he doesn't make too much of an attempt to mark territory and exude his presence - he seems to keep more of a low profile.
- Our excitement this month has been focussed on the movements and behaviour shown by the Nyeleti and Hosana male leopards. With a high flowing Sand River for extended amounts of time and

potentially less presence from Nyeleti male on the northern bank due to difficulty in crossing, it seems as though Hosana male has made his mark all the way down toward the northern bank of the Sand River in front of Boulders and Ebony Lodges thus holding an even larger territory than ever before. Recently, both males displayed fight wounds on their bodies and this could only be speculation, however a few of us believe these two males have already come face to face. With the Nyeleti male beginning to age out of his prime years as a dominant male leopard, the prospect of the Hosana male moving further into his territory is becoming more evident. We hold our breath as this story continues to unfold. The next few weeks and months are going to get interesting!

Bird List

The bird list for March includes 14 new bird species, bringing our yearly total to 267 so far.

Special bird species include: Cape sparrow, booted eagle, African finfoot, Kittlitz's plover, red-throated wryneck, river warbler and marsh warbler.

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

The Devil's thorn

Article by Sipho Sibuyi

As March is the last month for our summer, we were doing a walking safari with our guests and we came across the pink flower that you can see in the photo. The plant is a devil's thorn, with a beautiful flower. The seeds have two sharp horns (hence devil) as the plant wants to keep spreading its seeds and it does this by the horns/thorns pricking on to whatever they touch. Animals have little protection against the thorns and are therefore excellent distributors of the seeds.



My tracker Musa asked our guests what they thought the people that lived here in the bush, before civilization, were using to wash their hair.

The guests guessed that it was probably just the river water. Musa then showed them that by rubbing the devil thorn leaves, mixed with a drop of water, a rich foaming natural shampoo resulted. One guest volunteered to wash her hair with the slippery liquid and was amazed by how clean, soft and shiny it was afterwards!

It's great to know that you actually don't need a chemical-filled shampoo in a polluting plastic container to keep your hair looking beautiful; all you need do is grow some devil thorn – Nature's natural bush shampoo.

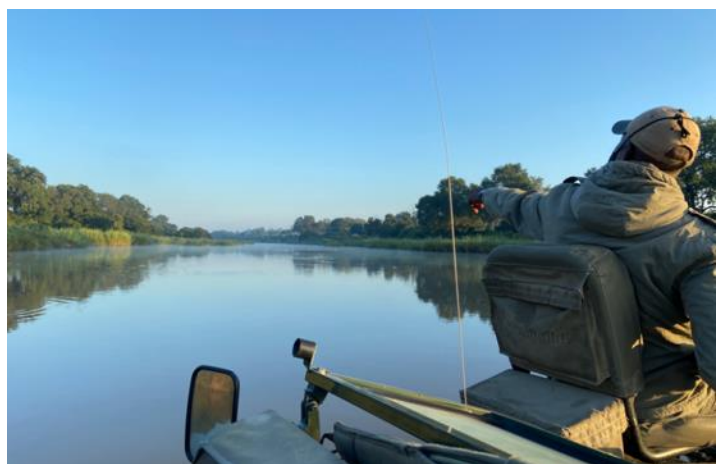


Daybreak wistfully filtered into view at Boulders Lodge. A dense low lying blanket of mist gave the morning a dream-like feel. Rebel (my tracker) and I decided to start at the river crossing west of Ebony Lodge as it's one of our favourite places to be at sunrise.



Water crashing through the rocks and reeds; sunlight pouring through the yellowy green canopies of the Cape ash and mahogany trees. We spent some time absorbing the sensations around us, listening to the delicate bird songs amongst the turbulent current.

Our initial plan was to work alongside the river on the southern bank, hoping to see some hippo or even find fresh predator tracks from the night. However, Rebel and I both had a strong feeling to cross the river and explore the northern bank and when your gut tells you something, I've learnt to trust that feeling as you can never be sure what you may come across...



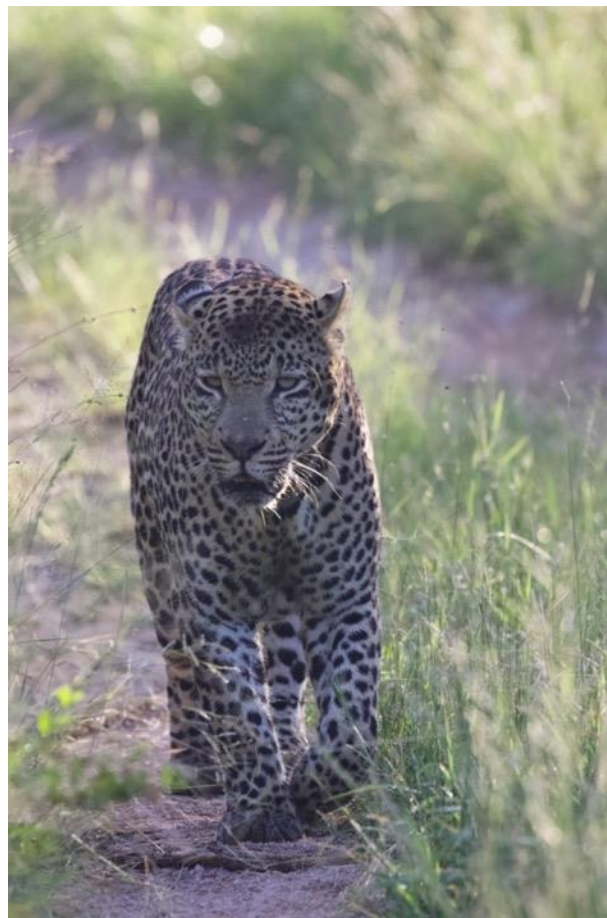
We tumbled over the pebbles and splashed our way to the northern bank where we turned to head west along the river. We'd driven about 20 metres when Rebel suddenly exclaimed, "LEOPARD!" and sure enough, walking straight towards us with a strict purpose and confidence was the Hosana male leopard.

Our hearts pounding, we clambered for our cameras to capture this magnificent moment as he continued his determined stride, paws wet from the dew-soaked grass, whiskers highlighted gold in the sunlight. As he passed us we all held our breath.

Silence, except for the drum of heartbeats.

Rebel broke the silence with words I was not expecting, "Kirst, there's another leopard!". Mouths dropped open and we all looked up for visual confirmation. Sure enough, around 50 metres down the road, the slim silhouette of a female leopard came into view.

The Hosana male leopard – photographed by Kirsten Tinkler.



Totally frozen, we watched as the slender figure of the Serengeti female leopard idly moved down the pathway, her paws imprinting the damp soil, trailing the larger prints of her leader. It was a great surprise to see the Hosana male in this location as we know this territory along the northern bank to belong to the Nyelethi male leopard. Eagerness and curiosity clouded the vehicle and we watched Hosana scent mark with urine a few times against some magic guarri bushes and walk all the way to the Cape ash tree at the north of the river crossing. With Ebony Lodge in the background and the river a few feet away, this is the furthest south I've ever seen this dominant male leopard.



The Serengeti female leopard – photographed by guest Chad Fellies.



The Hosana male leopard peering into the long grass, his tail swishing left to right
- photographed by Kirsten Tinkler.

Vigilant but guarded, the Serengeti female leopard moved through the shadows to follow the male, a clear determination and wariness surrounding her. She followed him into the combretum thickets along the river's edge, still heading east, and we lost their visual. We now sat with many questions, why is she following him? Are they mating? Is Hosana pushing Nyelethi out of his territory? Is there aggression from the Serengeti female towards the Hosana male, and if so, why?

Determined to see if some of our questions could be answered, we looped around to pause at Ebony Pan (a waterhole opposite Ebony Lodge). Rustling of leaves and panicked alarm calls from francolins signalled the leopards were making their approach. Sure enough, a heartbeat later, through the broken sunlight came the Hosana male. He peered behind himself before settling in the matted grass. Soft growling and snarls came from the bushes behind us. An unsettling and troubled look shone from the leopardess's eyes as she glared at the Hosana male. One thing was for sure... she did not seem pleased at Hosana's presence. She continued towards him, focused on his every move. Seemingly unfazed, the male simply shuffled around in the grass to face the distressed female. Why was this leopard so upset? Was she trying to lead Hosana away from something or someone? Did she have a cub? There were no suckle marks that I could see...

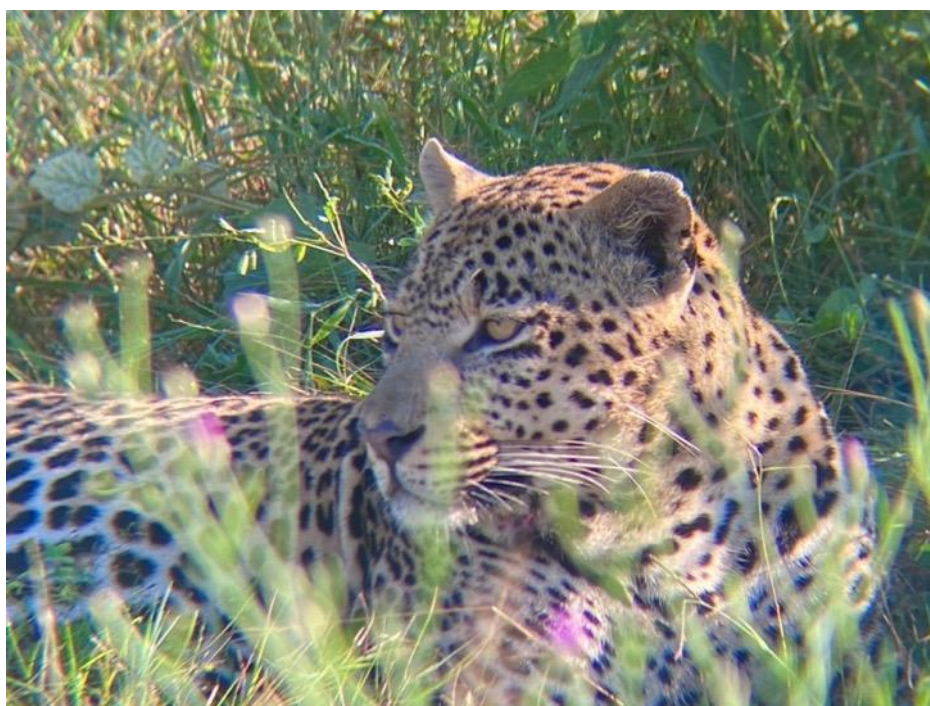
Stopping under ten metres away, the Serengeti female continued her growls, unfazed by the audience around her. It's such a delight to view this female leopard in her natural environment. From only seeing her for a few fleeting seconds about a year ago, we've watched her gain confidence and become less shy around vehicles in the bush. Tension built between the animals and I was sure there may be a fight. Remaining unmoved however, the Hosana male gave an almost blasé glance at the rasping female before getting up and walking away again. We followed for another minute, watching as the leopard settled amongst some purple ironweed wildflowers on the shady banks in front of the lodges.



The Hosana male sits on the left under the shade of an ebony tree with the Serengeti female leopard positioned to the right – photographed by guest Chad Fellies.

With the morning heat pouring down on us, Rebel and I looked at each other and smiled. We'd been rewarded with such an incredible sighting this morning, which we'd only been a part of based on our joint gut feeling and intuition.

Guiding at Singita is such a privilege. Being immersed in nature and untying the developing and dramatic stories within is an exciting and endless ride, but most of all it's awesome to explore with my good friend and tracker Rebel.



The Hosana male leopard, lying amongst purple ironweed – photographed by Kirsten Tinkler.

There is not much that can beat the symphony of nature, from hearing the dawn chorus to the distinctive sound of a lion's roar - this is what the African sounds are all about. There is nothing better than waking up and hearing the bush come to life as one listens to the bird's chirp announcing they have made it through the night and ready to take on a new day as well as hearing the distinctive sounds of lions, leopards and hyenas doing their territorial calls.

As we all meet for a warm drink and a snack in the cool mornings at the lodge we start to hear the symphony of Nature. This is when the excitement kicks in and we all ask the question what does the bush have in store for us today? We climb on the vehicle in the turning circle of the lodge and can hear in the distance, the bush starting to wake up as the sounds of surround us. Not only is this something special to hear but as many guides and trackers will tell you, the sounds are what help us put the puzzle pieces together when we are looking for particular species. It is most often the case that when we are following up on predators we first listen for the distinctive sound of an alarm call to point us in the right direction. Hearing a prey species such as antelope definitely gets the heart pumping as you know that there is a predator in the area and that it is time to begin the search.

An unbelievable example of this happened Louis and I while we were out on game drive. We set out when it was still dark on a cooler morning - we could not see the tracks too well so we knew we had to rely on our senses. We had a goal to find a leopard for that morning and little did we know that we were in for a treat. As we got to the river we could hear the ever so distinctive sound of monkeys alarm calling, this was then followed by a bark from a nyala. As we heard all of this commotion we knew that our target species for the morning must be nearby. After listening for a few minutes, the first rays of light started to break through the canopy of trees that blanket the river. It was now game on and we were on a mission with our guests. Louis sitting on the front of the vehicle in his "office" raised his hand and looked back and said, "Here we go, there are tracks of a female leopard going east". We started following the tracks and heard a guineafowl alarm calling further down the road and then the francolins and squirrels started - these were the puzzle pieces slotting together. We then got sight of a guineafowl and saw that it was perched high up in a tree, this was good news as we then knew that it was sitting in the tree because it felt safe as there was a predator down below. A few seconds later Louis looked back and said, "Leopard!" What a sense of achievement that was! We proceeded to have an unreal sighting of the Scotia female leopard, her cub and the Nyeleti male. The Scotia female had first contact called for her cub that then joined her and this was obviously overheard by the Nyeleti male who was close by.

The sounds of Nature are what connects the bush together and allows for all types of communication between species. It truly is a privilege to be able to experience this on a daily basis.

I have always said that it is the smaller aspects that make up the bigger picture!

I remember a very enthusiast guests from the USA a number a years ago talking about a University basketball competition taking place in March involving about 68 teams called March Madness! The term was first coined in 1982 by Brent Musburger and now has been synonymous with the NCAA Division I men's basketball tournament. I returned from leave at the beginning of March, and on our first morning drive it felt like the month was going to live up to the March Madness expectations of USA basketball fans...

Well, it certainly did! There were so many amazing and unique sightings:

Firstly, a female leopard nearly falling out of a marula tree whilst trying to descend after being chased by a male leopard, possibly defending his kill that was hoisted in a tree nearby.



Male leopard giving chase...

This month also involved an incredible sighting of a young male leopard, intrigued by something moving in the grass at night and using our red filter not to blind him we realized he was taunting a puff adder, one of Africa's most dangerous and fast-striking snakes! The nail biting face off lasted about ten minutes and twice the snake nearly made contact with him!

Along the Sand River we were fortunate to hear, see and photograph a very rare and near-mythical bird, the river warbler. It only calls for a number of weeks in March before it departs to its breeding ground in Europe. It's an elusive bird with an insect like call that can easily be missed. We were fortunate to have two great views and will be looking forward to next year March to hopefully spot this little gem again.



Towards the end of the month whilst searching for a cheetah with two very keen guests who were on their first safari in South Africa, with a keen interest in every aspect of Nature, we were very lucky to see a red-throated wryneck, a bird very rarely seen in the Sabi Sand.

We have also had great views of buffalos in the southern parts of the reserve and witnessed a number of buffalo bulls fighting for dominance amongst the herd. Above was the victorious bull that managed to toss an older bull to the ground after an epic battle using their imposing horns!



Curious buffalos in long grass.



Above, possibly the largest horns I've seen on a buffalo, to date.



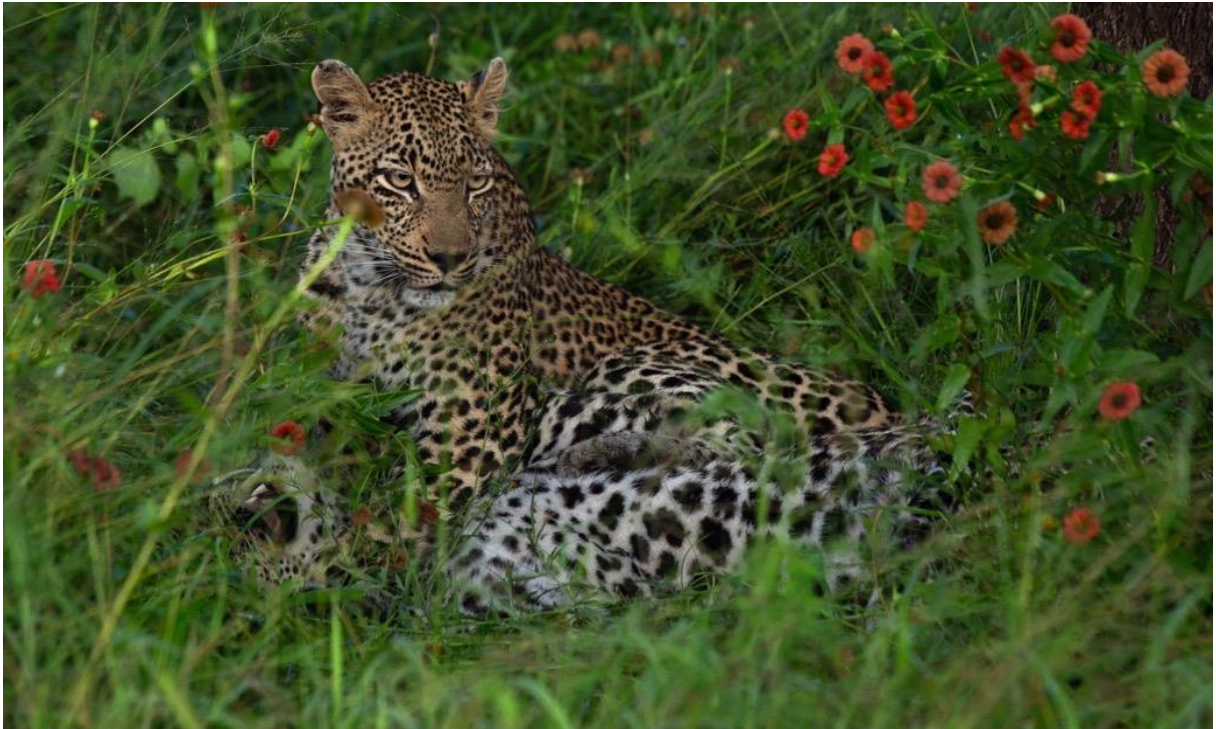
Finally, to conclude this March Madness we were very fortunate to see a breeding herd of elephants with a distinctive female with a hole just below her forehead. She was first seen as a sub-adult in 2009 further north of the Sabi Sand and was treated by wildlife vets in December 2019. Rhandzekile, meaning 'loved' in Shangaan, is in great health now and the hole is believed to be congenital. (In humans this would be similar to having a mid-bone, cleft pallet).

Although the hole looks bad, the female continues life as normal and has even given birth to a new female calf in the last week of February. On two occasion I have seen her suckling her tiny calf as well as her previous female calf that must be just over two years old. Every moment spent with this herd brings joy to our guests, especially the playful nature of Rhandzekile's daughter as she explores the new world around her.



Rhandzekile female elephant Photo by Ross Couper

March Gallery



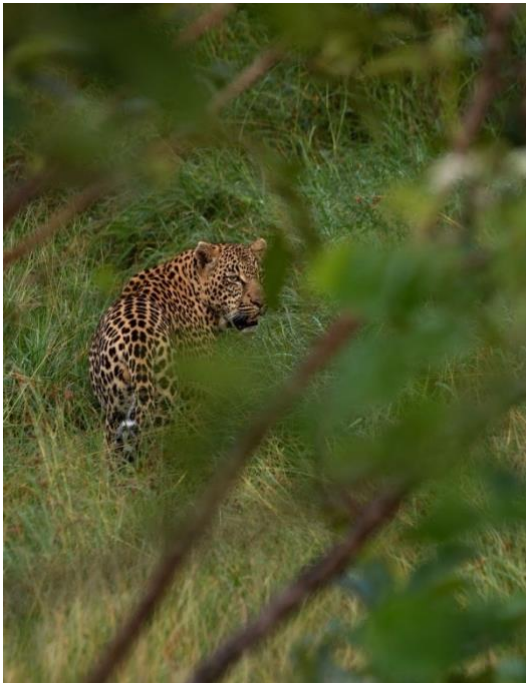
Schotia female leopard and cub lying amongst the red-star zinnias – Photograph by Marc Bowes-Taylor.



Elephant on a misty morning – Photograph by Marc Eschchenlohr.



Little grebe with its chick keeping warm – Photograph by Marc Bowes-Taylor.



Thamba male leopard and a very fat hyena after a large meal – Photography by Marc Bowes-Taylor.