

Singita



Vervet monkey – Photo by Jenny Hishin

WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA
For September, Two Thousand and Twenty-three

Temperature

Average Minimum: 18.7°C (65.6°F)
Minimum recorded: 11.0°C (51.8°F)
Average maximum: 32.8°C (91.0°F)
Maximum recorded: 42.0°C (107.6°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 61 mm
Season to date: 308.5 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:35
Sunset: 17:50

Spring has officially sprung, and with temperatures soaring to over 40 degrees Celsius, the vegetation is now a crispy dry yellow and grey. The last shallow pools in the N’wanetsi River are covered in mats of green and yellow algae, and the sunsets accompanied by a dusty red haze. The flame creepers and long-tailed cassias’ flamboyant red and yellow flowers are in full bloom and one can feel the energy of new life emerging. Vibrant butterflies fill the sky, while glowing fireflies dance in the moonlight. Towards the end of September the clouds started building and we knew that change was imminent. The heavens opened and we were blessed with the first rains of the season. All the natural pans are now full, and even the Xinkelengane drainage is flowing. The

cicadas are singing the sounds of summer while frogs echo in the valley as we return to the lodge from our evening drive.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for September:

Lions

- It has been a great month for lion viewing and we have had multiple sightings of at least four coalitions as well as our resident Shish Pride and Mananga Pride.
- The Satara/H6 male coalition was sighted once this month, but remain in the far northern reaches of our concession, not venturing further south than Gudzane North area.
- The Trichardt males have been well fed this month and were first sighted in the eastern hills with full bellies. The next day they were found feeding on the remains of a giraffe carcass in the N'wanetsi River. They spent a good portion of the beginning of the month around Ntsibistane first crossing with the Shish Pride.
- On the 10th the Shish female with the limp introduced us to her three new cubs, who we believe had been denning in the drainage line nearby. Just one week before we had brief sightings of another two new additions to the Shish Pride in a den-site amid a rocky ridge, bringing the total number of cubs up to 15. After feeding on a zebra carcass near Xingwenyana crossing, the Shish Pride headed west and the Trichardt males patrolled the northern reaches of their territory.
- Near the end of the month the Trichardt males encountered a portion of the Mananga Pride, and were seen mating with two of the females and chasing the two sub-adult males around the Central Depression.

Leopards

- The beginning of this month's leopard sightings were dominated by the Lebombo and Monzo males. They were both seen feeding on the giraffe carcass found in the N'wanetsi River. On one occasion, Monzo, an unnamed female and a sub-adult male, that we assume to be their offspring, were all in attendance of the giraffe carcass.
- An unnamed female and her daughter were seen around Euphorbia Crossing feeding on a baboon carcass which Monzo later stole.
- Dumbana 3:3 was sighted three times, first in the Central Depression near the Xinkelengane drainage and then finally moving west near an area known as Impala Lily. On the 23th of September we received news that he had been spotted 65 km west of our concession! Looks like he has followed his brother's footsteps and is exploring new areas looking for a territory of his own.
- Various other unidentified leopards have also been sighted this month, an unnamed female was sighted a few times near the N4/Gudzane Dam, and one shy male with an impala carcass in a tree south of Mangwa Pan.
- The Pelajambu male was also seen multiple times along the N'wanetsi River. Later in the month we noticed a slight limp, perhaps due to altercations with the Lebombo male who also looked as though he had been in a fight.
- By the end of the month the Nhlangueni female and her two, almost independent daughters, had made up the bulk of our sightings. One daughter seems to be keeping to the more northern reaches of her mother's territory while the other is still trailing her mother and even sharing a meal together.

Cheetahs

- There was one female cheetah seen in the north of the concession during the month, as well as a few sightings on the H6 near the Shishangaan junction.

Wild dogs

- Of the 14 sightings recorded this month, the Floppy-ear Pack was seen during the first half of the month around the eastern parts of the concession in the Lebombo Mountains. We suspect a den-site in Mozambique, as immediately after hunting, the pack runs straight east. Wild dogs need to keep active after feeding to delay digestion to be able to regurgitate meat for their pups back at the den-site.
- On the 7th of September we were introduced to the nine pups of another pack of seven wild dogs, south of the Poort on the Mozambican border. They have moved west and were last seen on the H6 near the S37 with all nine pups still alive.

Spotted hyenas

- Spotted hyena sightings have been prevalent this month, having been sighted 47 times in 30 days. The month started with a few individuals slinking around the giraffe carcass in the N'wanetsi River after the leopards and lions had had their share. Then a clan of six were feeding on a zebra in the northwest. For about a week we had a clan of seven hyenas and over 100 vultures scavenging on an old male giraffe that died near the lodge, and a clan with a few sub-adults were seen on the H6 on the way to the airstrip, mulling around an impala carcass that was later pulled up into an apple leaf tree by a leopard.

Buffalos

- A large herd of over 600 buffalos have been winding in and out of the concession around the S41 between the Sticky Thorns and Gudzane drainage, often with either the Trichardt coalition or Mananga Pride not too far behind.

Plains game

- General game viewing has been exceptional, especially near the last remaining waterpoints, with dazzles of up to 50 zebra not an uncommon sight.
- Due to the short grass and open burnt areas, the smaller antelope such as steenbuck, and even the rare Sharpe's grysbok seem plentiful.
- The impala ewes and a few other female antelope are beginning to show obvious signs of pregnancy as we look forward to the lambing season in the coming summer months.

Rare animals and other sightings

- A dead serval was found being fed on by a bateleur eagle.
- The very relaxed white-tailed mongoose was seen again, as well as more frequent sightings of honey badgers, genets and civets thanks to the short grass making visibility of these small nocturnal creatures easier.
- A caracal was seen at the end of the month walking along the western boundary of our concession.

Birds

- The pale morph Wahlberg's eagle and her partner have been seen mating and preparing their nest along the N'wanetsi River.
- The migrant cuckoos, especially Klaas's cuckoo are being heard more every day.
- A purple heron spent a few days in the Shishangaan drainage at a crossing point near Lebombo, as well as a common moorhen and greater painted snipe.
- The highlight however, was the sheer number of vultures observed feeding on the giraffe carcass across the river from Lebombo. All four species; white-backed, hooded, white headed and the mighty lappet-faced vulture were seen filling their crops until they were almost unable to fly.

Some articles and stories follow, as well as the September Gallery.

The importance of having trees in the ecosystem

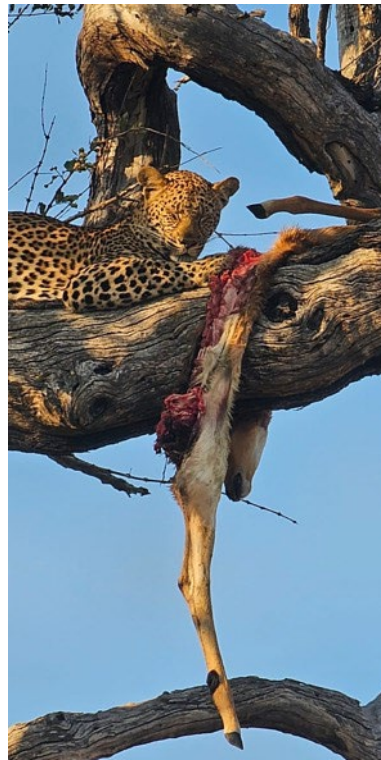
Article by Walter Mabilane

There are a plethora of creatures and other plants that use trees in many different ways. First of all, trees and plants help block the wind and prevent soil erosion. Trees provides shelter for a variety of animals such as snakes, squirrels and bushbabies, and many species of birds use trees for their nesting sites.

When the sun is high in the sky and temperatures become unbearable, many animals take shelter in the shade of trees and some even hide in the thick canopy for cover, particularly nocturnal and smaller animals seeking refuge from the ever opportunistic predators.



A leopard orchid in a tree.



A leopard with a hoisted impala kill.



A vulture on a safe perch.

Herbivorous animals such as elephants and porcupines, primates, antelope and birds eat various parts of the tree, for example the leaves, inner bark (cambium layer), roots, flowers, fruit and tree sap or gum.

Most of the plants that we have around us can be used as medicine. The red spike thorn (*Gymnosporia senegalensis*) is used by the Shangaan people to cure stomach aches and hiccups by making a decoction of the crushed leaves. The ash from the burnt seed pods of the sickle bush (*Dichrostachys cinerea*) are used for treating severe wounds or cuts.

There are a number of plants that grow on top of other trees in order to get enough sunlight and some of them are parasites like mistletoes and various species of strangler figs. Some of these plants are however not true parasites at all, but rather epiphytes like the beautiful leopard orchid that uses the host tree for structural support. There are also various species of creepers that use the trees for support and gain height to get the most sunshine.

Singita Kruger National Park has some of the most beautiful trees you could ever wish to see, and you can appreciate them even more when you delve into all their uses and importance.

Over the past few months there has been a shift in the male leopard population dynamics here at Singita Lebombo and Sweni Lodges in the Kruger National Park. The main changes that have happened revolve around the “disappearance” of the two Dumbana young male leopards from the concession.

This development prompted me to try, as best I can, to write and explain this natural migration of young male leopards from their maternal ranges when they reach a certain age and adopt a nomadic life for a few years before settling down in an area as a territorial male once they reach maturity.

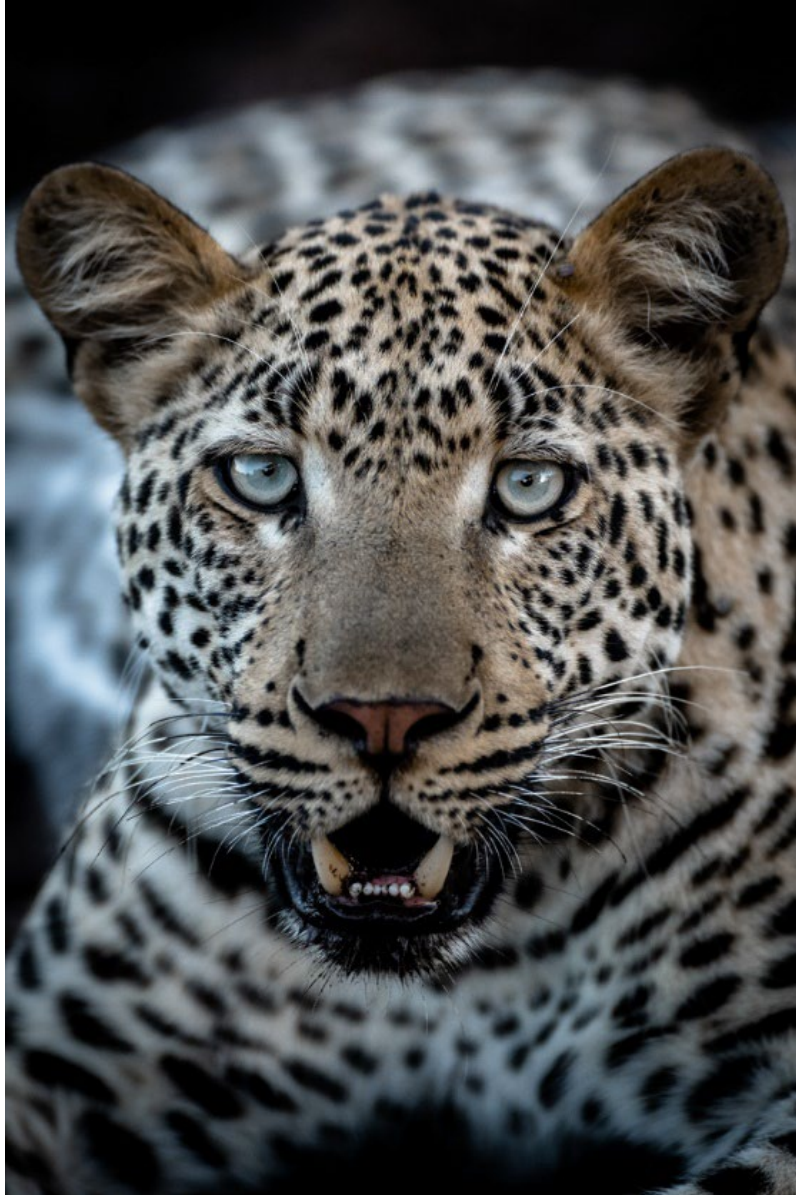
The Dumbana female leopard birthed a litter of three cubs near the end of January 2021. As is the norm with most large wild cats, it is rare that all cubs born will reach adulthood. Leopard cubs only have a 37% survival rate in the wild. Considering the above statistic, Dumbana did well to only lose one of her youngsters to nature, a female, who vanished pretty soon after she started moving her cubs between kills. The remaining two cubs were both males, and mom did a stellar job of raising them to independence.

On the 28th October 2022 Dumbana female leopard came into season, and over the next few days she mated with both the Lebombo male and the Monzo male leopards, who have overlapping areas in their respective territories that are constantly being disputed.

Mature and skilled female leopards will often instinctively mate with multiple males, to try and increase the survival rates of their litters. It is done to try and convince all males that have covered the female, into believing her offspring are their own, and subsequently will continue their own genetic lineage. The mating process that is adopted will, believing the cubs are their own, prevent the males that find the cubs from killing them, which will usually be done to eliminate a competitor’s gene pool, and also to force the female back into oestrous.



Dumbana 3:3



Dumbana 1:1

Currently we have at least five large territorial male leopards that utilize the concession here at Singita: Lebombo male in the south, Monzo male in the south and central west, Pelajambu male in the central and north-western areas, Mbiri Mbiri from the far north-east, and a large nervous male that we are recently seeing more of in the north western regions of the concession. This meant that there was hardly a minute that the young males were not running the gauntlet, trying to avoid confrontations with much larger streetwise males, by staying as submissive and inconspicuous as possible.

In July 2023 this pressure became too much for the male we had called Dumbana 1:1 young male. (1:1 refers to his unique spot pattern above the upper whisker line and is a method we use in the safari industry to identify individual leopards.) He left the concession early in the month.

From November 2022 the Dumbana female left her two sons to fend for themselves while she prepared for a new litter to be born. No longer was she leading them to kills, and no longer did she tolerate their presence when she encountered them while patrolling her territory.

Both males initially remained in their maternal territory, before starting to venture further away from their core activity areas that they were accustomed to over the first two years of their lives with mom. The brothers would, on occasion, be seen feeding together on kills, and provided us guides and guests with hundreds of hours of sightings over the course of the next few months.

As the youngsters continued growing, their testosterone levels would have slowly increased, and this would have been detected by the territorial mature males through who's territories they passed whilst eking out their respective independent survival in the wild.

After an absence of about a month from Singita, I received word from my safari network that a leopard had been spotted and photographed by an acquaintance in a private reserve neighbouring the Kruger National Park. The photograph was sent to me to identify, and it took all of a second to recognise that it was the same animal that had started his nomadic journey a month earlier. A straight line distance measurement of 59km between the last sighting we had of him here, and where he was photographed again, showing just how far these young males venture while nomads. Subsequent to this, Dumbana 1:1 again seemed to vanish, but, on the 28th of September I got sent his photograph by a different guide, this time a further 30km further north-west of his previous confirmed position.

Dumbana 3:3 male stayed on the concession for a few more months and we made the most of spending as much time with him out on safari, aware that he too would soon need to leave his mother's territory. On the 13th of September he was seen for the last time, moving west in the central areas of the concession. The relentless pressure of running away from the big males became too much, and he seemed to take the same route as his brother had, months before.

Out of the blue, on the 23rd of September, a friend sent me a photograph that he wanted confirmation on, and lo and behold, it was Dumbana 3:3 male, that had almost mirrored his brothers journey from months back. (We can only assume that they both followed the N'wanetsi straight west for the first 20 km of their journey before reaching the Timbavati River and continuing further west from there). He was photographed 65km from his last position at Singita, and he seemed to already be starting to display territorial tendencies by actively scent marking and following the trail of another male leopard seen by the guide earlier on his safari.

Although a temporary loss to the guides at Singita Kruger National park who watched these two young males growing up, their dispersal is essential to maintain leopard genetic diversity in the wild, by ensuring they do not mate with any female relatives that may have set up territories closer to their birthing home. We can only hope they get to spread their genes in about a year or two's time, when they will reach full sexual maturity and start challenging for a territory of their own to defend.

In the interim, we wait with baited breath for both the Dumbana female and Nhlangueni female leopards to give birth within the next few months, as both were seen to be mating over the past two months. The cycle, should male cubs be born, will then get repeated the same way it has since time began.

Scavengers

As you will have gleaned from the Sightings Snapshot there has been much activity around a giraffe carcass in the N'wanetsi River. We are not sure how the giraffe died – perhaps it was drinking and fell in? Or crocodiles dragged it in? Who knows? But it provided days of feasting to many predators and scavengers. Here's a photo essay of those feeding on the 'free' meal:



Monzo male with giraffe carcass – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.

The crocodiles were the first to monopolise the feast, but kept on being cautiously interrupted by land based predators. The Lebombo and Monzo male leopards were both seen feeding on the carcass. On one occasion, Monzo, an unnamed female and a sub-adult male, that we assume to be their offspring, were all at the carcass.



A few hyenas were at the carcass after the leopards, along with some huge crocs. Photo by Rudi Hulshof.



The Trichardt male lions pulled the carcass from the water with brute strength. Photo by Jenny Hishin.



A highlight was seeing all four species of vultures; white-backed, hooded, white-headed and the mighty lappet-faced vulture filling their crops until they were almost unable to fly. Photo by Jenny Hishin.

September Gallery



African wild dogs – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.



Giant kingfisher – Photo by Evidence Nkuna.



Blue water lily - Photo by Jenny Hishin.



Nhlanguleni's daughter – Photo by Bill Drew.



Shish Pride cubs feeding – Photo by Bill Drew.



Pelajambu male leopard with mongoose – Photo by Jenny Hishin.



Shish Pride with zebra carcass – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.



African buffalo – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.



Elephants drinking – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.



Trichardt male stalking one of the Mananga sub-adult males – Photo by Rudi Hulshof.