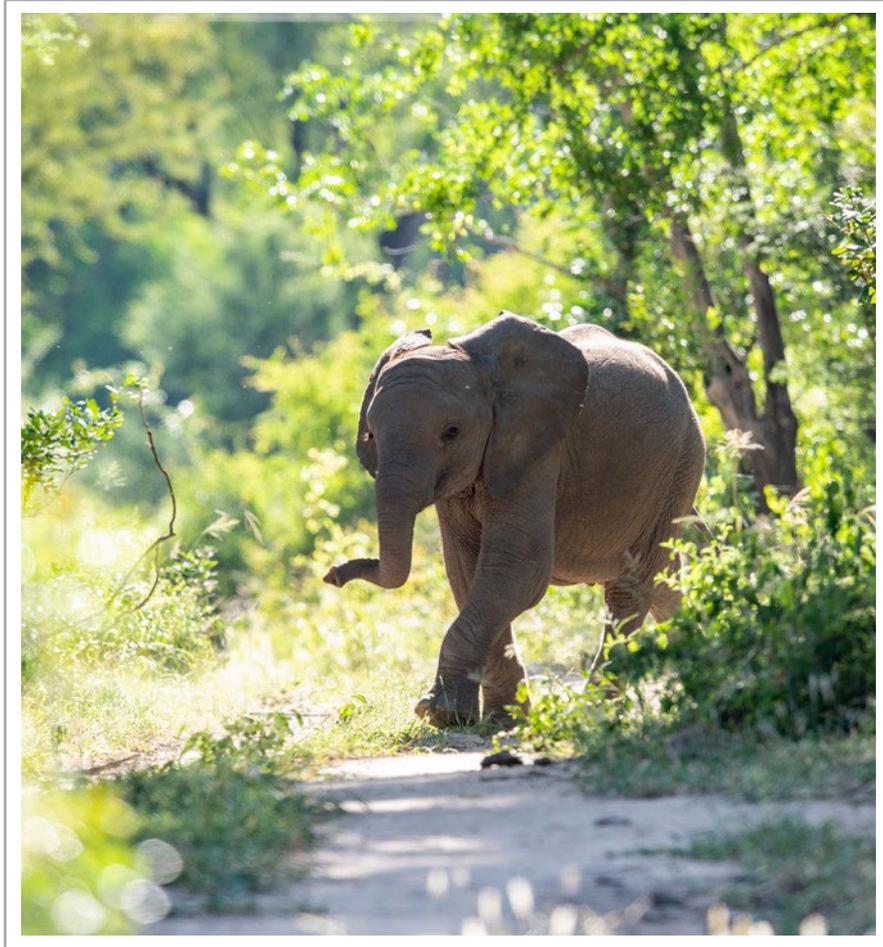


# Singita



## WILDLIFE JOURNAL

### SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE

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

#### Temperature

Average minimum: 19.8°C (67.6°F)

Minimum recorded: 15.4°C (59.7°F)

Average maximum: 30.5°C (86.9°F)

Maximum recorded: 34.6°C (94.2°F)

#### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 45.2 mm

\*For the season to date: 619.7 mm

\*Season = Sep to Aug

#### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:01

Sunset: 17:55

March has been a great month with slightly cooler temperatures, some forever-welcome rain, and a string of standout sightings. Our guests have thoroughly enjoyed their game drives, safari boat cruises, wilderness walks, and one guest even managed to fit his morning runs into a wellness regime by jogging from the lodge to Sosigi Hill, with an armed guard and back-up vehicle in the form of his guide and tracker following closely behind him in the game-viewer.

Here's a sightings snapshot for March:

#### Lions:

- The Southern Pride were seen looking well and relaxing in their territory.
- The Nduna Pride were seen mainly in the Lojaan area. They spent one afternoon trying to hunt baboons which was incredible to watch. A mating pair was also seen in this area.
- The Nduna Pride males killed a giraffe south of Chivi which provided a feast of meat.
- The River Pride have been in the Chikwete area. Eleven of them were seen together near Chikwete Pan, and they brought down a buffalo bull in the area.

#### Leopards:

- Luck plays a huge part in spotting leopards, but a give-away on one occasion was the sounds of growling, snarling, fighting and laughing coming from the riverbed. It was a leopard on a kill with hyenas trying to steal it. Another lucky sighting was of an adult male leopard at the base of the Pamushana Hill, just relaxing on the side of the road.

#### Wild dogs:

Two packs were seen on the property this month, which is very encouraging as their denning season is soon, and hopefully they are looking for suitable den-sites on the Malilangwe Reserve.

- A pack of four were seen hunting in the Sosigi area.
- Elsewhere, at the same time, a pack of 13 were seen.

#### Hyenas:

- The best hyena sighting in March was of three clan members relaxing on top of the rocks south-west of the old hyena den on West Valley Road.

#### Elephants:

- A couple of bull elephants have been seen near the lodge bulldozing some of the trees. Also in the area are a breeding herd of about 30 elephants with some of the females showing signs of oestrus and the bulls in heavyweight courtship.
- One of the best sightings was of three elephant bulls enjoying a mud bath. Guests watched the whole process from the bulls splashing water on their backs, mixing water and mud to the desired consistency using their feet, then rubbing their mud-spattered bodies on rubbing posts.

#### Rhinos:

- **White:** There've been excellent white rhino sightings as always. An unusual sighting was of a mother and a calf white rhino with a black rhino male nearby.
- **Black:** Black rhino are solitary, usually, so it has been lovely to see groups together: three were seen in the riverbed, two were seen near each other – the cow being very curious and giving the game-viewer a close inspection, and a mother and infant were seen making their way to the natural pan north of the Old Binya Road. On one exceptional drive five black rhinos were spotted.

#### Buffalo:

- The standout sighting was of about 900 buffalo at Hwata Pan, moving together with a young elephant bull.

#### Fishing:

- The water level in the dam is high thankfully, and this does make the fishing a splash more challenging, but the reels have been singing loud and clear.

**Boat cruise:**

- The boat cruises are idyllic. Guests often request another after they've been on one. What's guaranteed are hippos, prolific birdlife, epic sunsets and refreshing sundowners.

**Rock art:**

- Guests have been enthralled by the rock art. It's always an incredible scene to see, but especially if it starts to drizzle and you can shelter in the caves, have a cup of coffee, and listen to the guide's interpretation of these ancient and fascinating scenes, which aren't as literal as one might expect.

**Gonarezhou day trips:**

- One of our day trips to Gonarezhou got off to an excellent start with a very good sighting of a mother and sub-adult black rhino on the open plains in our central area, then in Gonarezhou great sightings were had of elephants and buffalo, before arriving at the jewel in the crown being the multi-layered Chilojo Cliffs.



This is white rhino Makwavo's first calf, and it is eight months old. It will be notched and named towards the end of 2023. Makwavo, the mother, is Chimizie's 10th of 12 calves. Chimizie, this calf's grandmother, is an original Lone Star Ranch rhino, and has been on the property since before the formation of The Malilangwe Trust in 1994! We don't know exactly how old she is but she was at least four years old in 1994, putting her in her 30's today.

**Some Bush Stories follow, as well as a March Gallery of images.**

## The devils in the details

Even on safari we can default to rushing from one thing to the next, but when time is generous it's astonishing what can be revealed. This is a story about just that.

A male southern masked-weaver (*Ploceus velatus*) was tirelessly building a nest hanging from the outer limbs of a thorn tree, growing near the lodge. A thorn tree is a great real estate site as the thorns deter predators such as snakes that might slither into the nest and eat the eggs, chicks or nesting female. He'd built a cluster of others but they had been rejected during construction by a female. He was so bright and busy, earnest and enthusiastic, and sang out his advertising jingle as he worked. While a weaver building a nest is an incredible but fairly common occurrence, time was on my side, and he was worthy of a photo shoot:



During this initial shoot I kept noticing a blur through my viewfinder that caught my attention. Later, zooming in on the blur, I realized it was a paper wasps' (*Polistes sp.*) nest! Now things started to get really interesting:

This is a phenomenon whereby weaver birds receive protection, indirectly, from the wasps' powerful repetitive stings. If a predator, such as an agile genet, tries to reach the weaver's nest and eat the precious contents, the wasps become agitated, and in order to defend their own nest from damage they attack and sting the potential threat. This is brilliant for weaver birds as the wasps act as an armed-response burglar protection unit. As the real estate mantra states, "position, position, position" not only do the birds have their nests protected by being elevated, and there being thorns along the only arboreal access route, they also have a security company nearby offering 24/7 protection. What great neighbours! It's not clear if the wasps benefit from this relationship, but it is possible that the birds also provide early warning of approaching predators to the wasps.

Paper wasps feed mainly on nectar and larvae in the form of caterpillars. Many adult wasps feed their own larvae on these chewed caterpillars.



In the top left section of this photo you can see the blurry blob that caught my eye.



This is a close-up of the paper wasps' nest. You can see wasps attending to the incubation chambers, developing larvae and individual eggs in the outer cells. The detail also shows the hexagonal cells that the wasps make from wood fibre mixed with saliva.

The following day I watched as the male weaver was nearing completion of his masterpiece. He would fly off, harvest a piece of grass with his beak, fly back, and then weave it in, in the most masterful way. Watching the weaving process you can hardly believe what you are seeing. And then, out of the blue, a female fluttered in to inspect the nest. I think I was as excited as the male! He was the most enthusiastic estate agent imaginable and encouraged her loudly to accept the nest while hovering about singing its praises. I sat there silently with finger's crossed pleading that she would. And she did! But she had a snag list...

While she was doing her final inspection another female appeared from the shadows and tried to get a look in. The three of us were outraged and the weaver couple drove the intruder off.

The male made the final touches to the nest, and it was a triumph to then witness both the male and female flying to the nest with much softer grass and going inside the nest to line it with insulating material. Most of the literature I've read states the female lines the nest with soft material, but this male was definitely flying in with softer seeded grass. At one point both birds were in the nest together, and there seemed to be much activity within, which I presume was them mating.





Here the second female flies in to intrude on the courting couple, and the male takes off to drive her away.



The male adds the final touches weaving in strong green grass.



The softer seeds and grass being brought in by the male and the female for the inside incubation area.

Here are some more facts about southern masked-weaver breeding: A male can attract two or three females to his territory simultaneously. In Zimbabwe they breed between August and March. The nest is woven by the male. (It has been recorded that one male apparently built 52 nests during a single breeding season!) The female lays 2-4 eggs that can be white, pink, pale green or blue, either plain or speckled, spotted and blotched with grey, brown, red or purple. She incubates them for a swift 14 days. The chicks are usually fed by only the female, and their nestling period is about 16 days.

But now back to our wasps. I had also noticed, over the days, that big black beetles seemed to be crawling over the wasps' nest. At first there was one but by the time the weaver female was inside the nest laying her eggs, there were three. I had to research what they could be and to my horror realised they were predatory hive chafers (*Hoplostomus fuliginus*). These chafers target and eat the wasp larvae. The adult wasps' stings are ineffective against the thick-shelled hive chafers, and the chafers can devour the complete brood of wasp larvae and destroy the nest.

I'm afraid this story does not end well for the weavers or their good neighbours the wasps. I had become so invested in their success that it was devastating to see what happened. After a week of watching them so closely I drove past their tree and found the weaver nest destroyed and broken egg shells on the ground. I can only guess that a genet shimmied up the tree and tore open the nest to get the eggs. The wasp nest had also been completely destroyed by the chafers. Little shreds of the papery nest clung to the tree but the wasps and the chafers were gone.

Nature has a way of balancing and controlling, and further research revealed that the paper wasps have close relatives, parasitic wasps, that are able to control the raiders. These wasps feed on the larvae of chafer beetles and ultimately ecological balance is achieved. The weavers are prolific breeders too, and one failure doesn't mean the entire breeding season is a failure as they will go on to make more nests, lay more eggs and successfully raise chicks.



Above: The black hive chafers crawling on the wasps' nest and eating the developing larvae.



Left: The remnants of the weaver's pretty brown-speckled blue eggs.

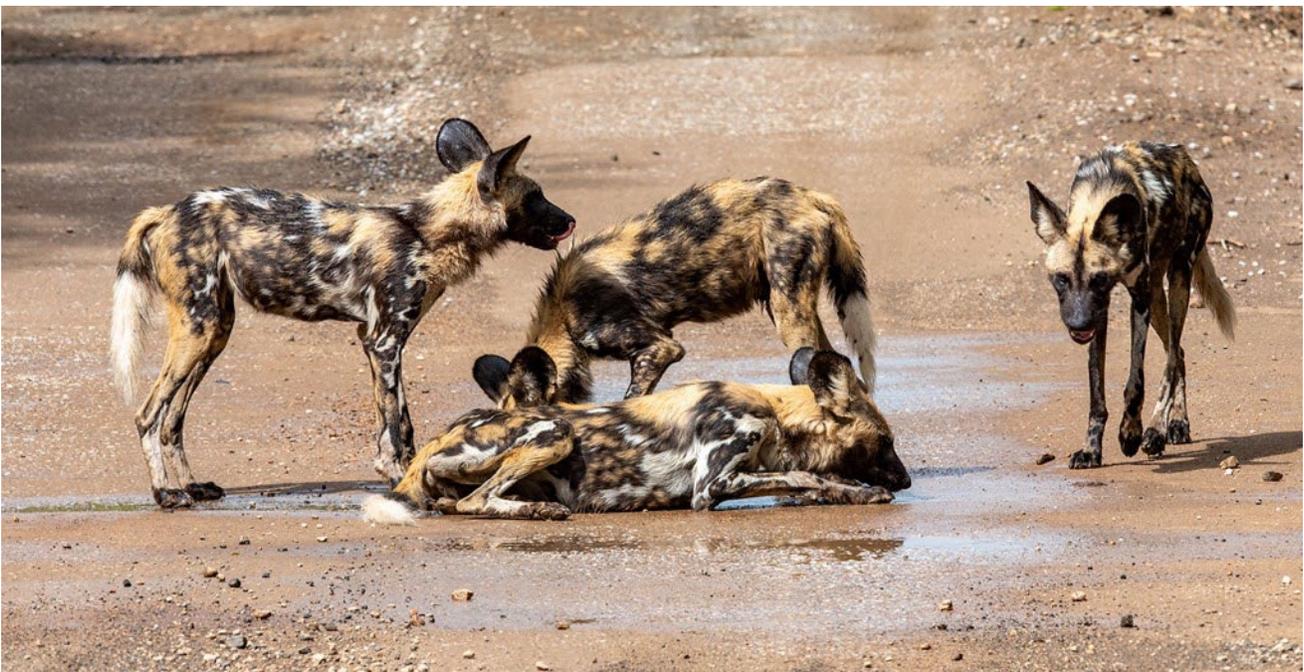


### African wild dog ways

It had just rained when we came across crisply fresh wild dog tracks in the road. It was like a gift but wild dogs move like the wind when they're hunting, which they were. We followed them but they cut through a drainage where we couldn't go, but their direction was clear, and we asked the lion tracking team to wait and watch at the airstrip which gives a good vantage from where roads meet, to spot them.

Sure enough we found them and caught glimpses of them hunting as they spread out in shotgun formation, but they were unsuccessful and disappeared. Then we luckily managed to relocate them resting on the side of the road.

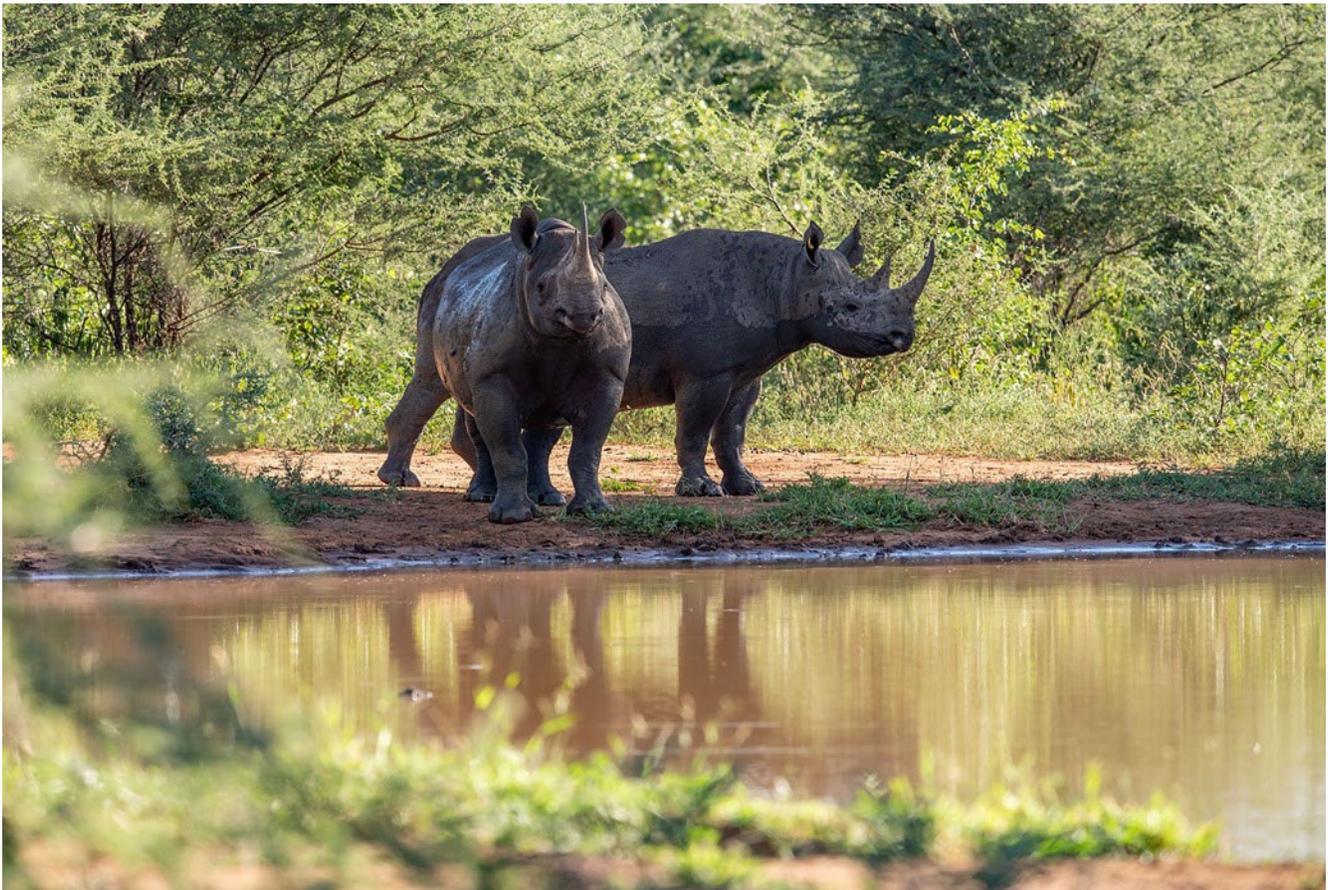
It's fascinating to watch them, and to see some behaviour reminiscent of domestic dogs. One wild dog picked up a stick, and a sibling absolutely needed that same stick too. Then one lay down to drink from a clean puddle of rainwater that had pooled on a concrete causeway, in the same way that my pet dog insists that rainwater pooled on the deck is superior to the water in his bowl, and the others needed to drink from that water too.



## Black rhinos relationship with water

Black rhinos drink mainly at night, but their relationship with water extends beyond being only for liquid intake. I've seen them wallowing in water with much of their bodies submerged, wading into deeper water to drink and relax, wading in water at the edge of the dam while feeding on foliage at its perimeter, running into deep water as refuge from an aggressive encounter with another black rhino, and standing in water when wounded for the water to help soothe their wounds.

A lot of water had collected in a seasonal pan on the edge of the central open areas. I'd taken note of this on our morning drive because it was likely that the shyer wildlife species might prefer to drink from this pan that has more protective bush surrounding it than the central pan out in the open. Luck was definitely on our side because that afternoon, making a very slow approach to the seasonal pan, we were rewarded with two black rhinos chilling in the muddy water.



These Critically Endangered black rhinos (that's one step away from Extinct in the Wild) are very reactive and shy, so it was wonderful that they didn't run away but instead cautiously regarded us, settled down, spent another half hour there and then both had a long drink before moving off. You can see the water-level marks on them from when they'd been wallowing.

Not long after that, as the sun was setting, three white rhinos bustled into the scene (see the photo in the March Gallery) and happily went about their business of having a quick drink before moving off to continue grazing. Where else in the world does the opportunity exist to see both black and white wild rhinos, horns intact, on the same afternoon? Devastatingly few is the answer, but here at Singita Pamushana, Malilangwe, Zimbabwe, it is a definite possibility, thanks to the protection and conservation these animals receive.

Twitter



The Meves's starling (*Lamprotornis mevesii*) is monogamous unless its mate dies.  
African spoonbills (*Platalea alba*) sweeping their partly opened bills from side to side to feed in the water.





A short tail and long, narrow wings with four long, finger-like feathers, and a shorter fifth, give ospreys a very distinctive appearance.

We were lucky to spot and snap off a quick photo of this osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) while on a safari boat cruise on the Malilangwe Dam. Ospreys are diurnal, fish-eating birds of prey. They possess specialised physical characteristics for hunting their prey that are particularly helpful when they grab slippery fish:

- Reversible outer toes
- Sharp spicules on the underside of the toes
- Closable nostrils to keep out water during dives
- Backward-facing scales on the talons which act as barbs to help hold the catch
- Dense plumage which is oily and prevents feathers from getting waterlogged

These piscivorous have vision that is well adapted to detecting fish underwater from the air. Prey is first sighted when the osprey is 10 - 40 m (33 - 131 ft) above the water, after which the bird hovers momentarily and then plunges feet-first into the water. As an osprey dives it adjusts the angle of its flight to account for the distortion of the fish's image caused by refraction. Ospreys will typically eat on a nearby perch.

Ospreys are the second most widely distributed raptor species, after the peregrine falcon, and is one of only six land-birds with a cosmopolitan distribution.

## March Gallery



The blissful scenes seen on a sunset safari cruise.  
Buffalo relaxing in shallows and feeding on the lush grass.





Curious elephant calves having a sneak peek at their admirers.





Warthog piglets mowing the grass at our HQ centre.  
Three white rhinos enjoying a sundowner at the same pan where the black rhinos had spent the afternoon.





Spotted hyena in a meadow, waiting for wild dogs to hunt.  
A terrapin practising yoga – it's tricky doing a cat stretch when you're saddled with a downward-dog shell!





Skittish wildebeest charge out of the water as the zebras look on, nonplussed.  
A territorial male lion, confident in his position as apex predator, looks lazily at us before drifting off to sleep.

