Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT
SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE
For the month of October, Two Thousand and Twenty-Six

Temperature		**Rainfall Recorded**	**Sunrise & Sunset**
Average minimum:	19˚ C (66.2˚ F)	For the month: 44 mm	Sunrise: 05:12
Minimum recorded:	14˚ C (57.2˚ F)	Season to date: 54.5 mm	Sunset: 18:02
Average maximum:	33˚ C (91.4˚ F)	*Season = Sep to Aug	
Maximum recorded:	44˚ C (111.2˚ F)		

With 44 mm of rain and a maximum temperature of 44˚ C, it has been a wet, hot month! The palette transitioned from the dry earthy tones of winter to the new green growth of summer, as the white to pinkish-white blossoms of *Coffea racemosa* perfumed the air. I wish everyone could experience those warm pockets of air, reminiscent of jasmine and old-fashioned roses, as you set out on a safari drive! Pans are filling up, flowers are unfurling, grass is pushing through, insects are humming, and birds are nesting earnestly. October is such a beautiful month, and we've been treated to many wonderful wildlife encounters and sightings on the reserve.

Here's a summary of sightings and activities for October:

Lions

- The River Pride provided several memorable encounters, including a group of nine with four cubs, and then a sighting of two lionesses with the four cubs. Pride members were repeatedly seen around Ray's Drift on the Chiredzi River, and the swamps and Ngwenyeni Pan on the Hippo Valley side of the river. Highlights included six lions feeding on a buffalo carcass at Ray's Drift.
- The Nduna males were seen after killing a buffalo near Benji. They were also seen further northwest at Lojaan Dam.
- A coalition of three males was seen feeding on a buffalo carcass southwest of Hwata Pan.
- Herbivores outweighed carnivores at Hwata Pan when two white rhinos chased a lion away from the water.

Leopards

- Several good sightings included a male in a tree with an impala carcass, a female walking along the river near Hippo Pools, and leopards seen at Ray's Drift, Chikwete lookout, and east of Kwali Camp.
- A memorable older female seen at Ray's Drift has a missing left eye and a tattered ear. She was resting in the sand before she got up and slipped through the riverine vegetation, disappearing into the bush.

African wild dogs

- The large pack totalling 16 members was encountered at Banyini, Tsvuvuka boundary, Chipanguchi Pan and elsewhere on the reserve. A highlight was watching them rest in the shade at Banyini for almost an hour.
- There was exciting hunting activity - dogs were seen killing impalas, including a sighting of them taking two impalas south of Chipanguchi Pan. On another occasion, a kill was consumed in less than ten minutes.
- Other sightings included pack members hunting a kudu unsuccessfully, and dogs resting in the swamps on the Hippo Valley side.

Spotted hyenas

- Hyenas were frequently seen around carcasses, including clans feeding on buffalo remains at Ray's Drift and along Pamushana Access.
- A clan of 12 was reported feeding on a white rhino calf along Mahande Loop.
- Other sightings included seven hyenas resting and wallowing in water near Banyini, and an inquisitive individual investigating a vehicle at Hwata Pan.

Elephants

- Breeding herds were seen across the reserve, including a herd of more than 30 arriving at Nduna Dam to drink and swim.
- Large herds were also encountered on boat cruises, including elephants that had been swimming and crossing the dam near Meso.
- Several impressive bulls were seen at Hwata Pan, the swamps, Chikwete, and along the river.
- One particularly notable bull, seen during sundowners at the swamps, carried exceptionally large tusks.

Buffalo

- Large herds were a feature of the sightings, with more than 500 animals grazing in the swamps, over 400 moving from Mahande Loop towards Hwata, and approximately 200 resting in the shade near Banyini.
- Dagga boys were regularly encountered, including a group of 12 drinking at Mahiyani Pools.
- A dramatic fight between two bulls was witnessed at Banyini, where one was injured and subsequently followed by hyenas.

Rhinos

White rhinos

- White rhino sightings were so plentiful that they could be guaranteed on every drive.
- Rhinos were also encountered on foot, giving guests a memorable experience of these magnificent animals on their terms and turf.

Black rhinos

- Good sightings included four together along the river - two females and two sub-adult calves - and a crash of six at one of the dams. Three were seen resting in the shade west of a pan, and another three were browsing together, including a cow that approached the vehicle before catching the scent and moving off.
- Black and white rhinos were seen together on several occasions, including one memorable sighting with a lion in the same area.

Plains game

- A variety of plains game was seen throughout the reserve, including giraffes, zebras, kudus, impalas, wildebeest, nyalas, waterbuck and eland.
- Particularly noteworthy were a male sable amid a herd of eland, and sightings of Lichtenstein's hartebeest. Klipspringers, bushbuck and warthogs also featured.

Hwata photographic hide

- Hwata was especially productive, with white rhinos, black rhinos, and elephant bulls visiting the water. On one occasion, several white rhinos and six elephant bulls came to drink. Another visit produced white rhinos and a spotted hyena.
- Buffalo, zebra, warthogs and other plains game also made appearances.
- Hyenas used the water to drink and wallow.

Birds

- Birding was enjoyed on drives and boat cruises, with a good variety of species recorded, including several cuckoo species. Little egrets and black-crowned night herons were seen coming into breeding plumage.
- A Verreaux's eagle perched on a hill near Nduna was a notable sighting.

Bush walks

- Walking safaris produced excellent wildlife encounters, including white rhinos.
- One walk revealed three black rhinos, as well as giraffes, kudus and impalas.
- Other walks focused on smaller details of the bush and the surrounding landscape.

Rock art

- Guests visited the Chidumo and Mabhakweni paintings, as well as the rock art in the Chinzwini hills. The history and setting of the sites were highlights of these excursions.

Boat cruises

- Cruises offered relaxed sightings of hippos, crocodiles and a variety of birds, with several memorable encounters with elephants along the water's edge.

Fishing

- Fishing excursions were highly successful, producing tilapia (bream) and tigerfish.

Some bush stories follow, as well as the October Gallery.

Motherhood

There is something particularly special about finding a breeding herd of elephants, especially when it has been some time since the last encounter. We had been hoping to spend time with a family group, but rather than simply driving around in the hope of finding one, I began to think about where a mother elephant would want to be if she had young calves in tow. What would matter most to her? Food, water, shade, shelter and, above all, a sense of security. With these needs in mind, I drove to the area north of the Malilangwe Dam, an area that offers the right combination of resources and protection.

Intuition was rewarded when we discovered fresh elephant tracks. Rather than pursuing them, I decided to position ourselves at a likely destination. This also provided a good opportunity to do some birding while we waited. In due course, the herd appeared, which was a welcome reminder that sometimes the most rewarding part of guiding is not following the obvious route, but anticipating what animals might have in mind and allowing events to unfold in their own time.



We were treated to a fascinating demonstration of elephant family life. The younger calves were initially wary of our presence, full of bluster and uncertainty, with a few spirited head shakes to make their feelings known. The adult females, however, remained remarkably composed. Their calm demeanour and deliberate movements seemed to set the tone for the entire group. Rather than allowing the youngsters to scatter or charge about, they simply continued walking, encouraging the family herd to move past us in sensible single file. There was no drama, no unnecessary alarm – just a quiet demonstration of how to handle the situation.

The tiniest calves stayed tucked closely behind their mothers, sometimes walking so near that their little heads brushed against the tails of their moms in front, as though that familiar touch reassured them that all was well. The older calves took a little longer to settle, offering us a few more head shakes before eventually following the adults' example and walking past too.





What we were witnessing was more than simply a herd moving through the bush. It was an important lesson in social learning. Elephant calves are born not knowing how to navigate every situation; they learn by watching, listening and responding to the experienced females around them. The older cows provide guidance, discipline and reassurance, teaching the youngsters when to be cautious, when to stand their ground and when it is wiser simply to carry on. These lessons are not necessarily about humans or vehicles. They are part of learning how to behave appropriately within the herd and how to negotiate the many challenges of life in the wild.

Perhaps this is why it is so easy for us to feel an affinity with elephants. Their maternal instincts are immediately recognisable. We understand the protective positioning of a mother around her baby, the reassurance of a familiar touch and the instinctive desire to keep the young safe. In many ways, the care of their calves mirrors our own relationships with our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Although our worlds are very different, the emotional language of motherhood feels remarkably familiar.

That connection was brought into particularly poignant focus this month when Italian wildlife photographer Federico Veronesi was named the Grand Title Winner of the 2026 Wildlife Photographer of the Year (WPOTY) competition held by the Natural History Museum in London. The photograph depicted a female elephant carrying a dead newborn calf, believed not necessarily to be her own, wedged between her tusk and trunk. The image was deeply moving, capturing what appeared to be an expression of despair, loss and mourning. It reminded me that elephants, like humans, form powerful bonds with their young and that the

death of a baby is not simply another event in the natural cycle of life. It is a loss that resonates deeply within a family.

Our encounter with the herd offered a very different but equally meaningful glimpse into the bonds between mothers and their young. We had set out hoping to find elephants, but by trusting our intuition and allowing the animals to lead the experience, we found ourselves witnessing something much more profound: the quiet responsibility of motherhood, the passing of wisdom between generations and the extraordinary connections that bind families together. I find that when we recognise something of ourselves in another species, the distance between human and wild feels a little smaller.

A tale of two hogs

There is something rather fascinating about encountering two members of the pig family in the same day, particularly when one is a familiar warty face and the other an unfamiliar hairy one. Warthogs *(Phacochoerus africanus)* are a regular sight on the reserve, often spotted trotting across the open plains with their tails held bolt upright, kneeling to feed, or enjoying a drink at a waterhole. Their bushpig *(Potamochoerus larvatus)* relatives, however, are far more elusive, usually keeping to the cover of dense vegetation and emerging under the cloak of darkness.



The warthogs provided the first encounter, stopping at a pan in the heat of the day to quench their thirst. With their distinctive facial warts, mohawk manes, impressive curved tusks, and sparse bristly coats, they

are instantly recognisable. Their rather comical habit of kneeling on their calloused front knees to reach shorter grass is just one of the many adaptations that make them such entertaining animals to watch.

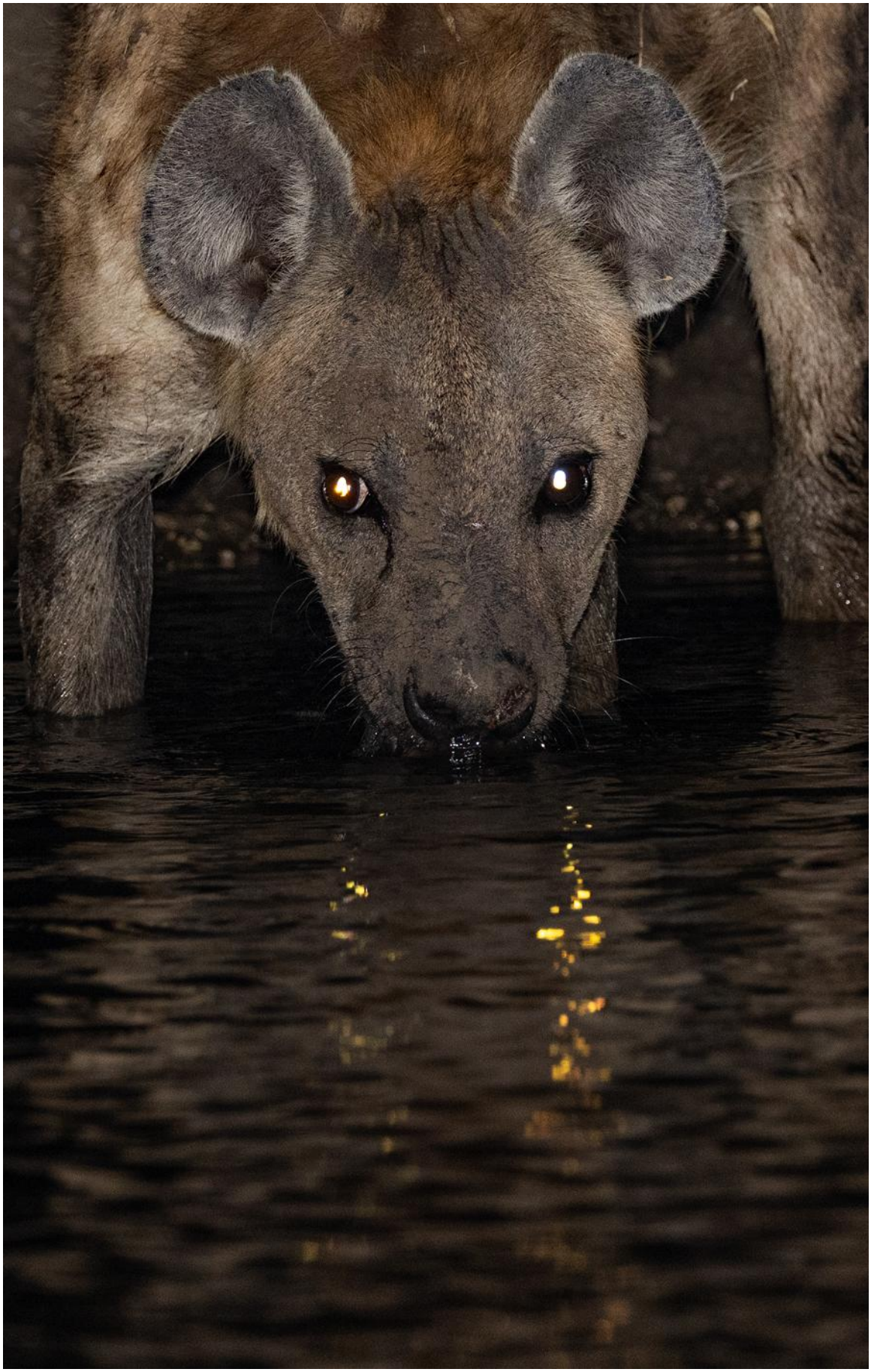
The surprise came later that evening, on returning from a game drive in the dark. There, grazing quietly on the helicopter landing site near the lodge, were two bushpigs. Unlike their more conspicuous relatives, bushpigs are predominantly nocturnal and secretive, making an encounter in the open all the more special. We inched closer to take a look at them, and luckily they didn't flee. Stockier and more heavily built than warthogs, they have shaggy coats, relatively short legs, pointed ears with enviable tufts of hair at the tips, and a distinctive facial profile. Their coats vary in colour from reddish-brown to dark grey, often with pale facial markings and a mane of longer hair along the back.

Although both species belong to the pig family *(Suidae)*, their lifestyles and preferred habitats differ considerably. Warthogs are adapted to open country, relying on speed and burrows for protection, while bushpigs favour dense woodland, thickets and riverine vegetation, where they forage for roots, bulbs, fallen fruit, insects and other food. Both have excellent senses of smell, powerful snouts for rooting around in the soil, and tusks that serve as formidable defensive weapons.



It was a reminder that sometimes the most rewarding encounters come from simply being curious about the familiar, while remaining open to the unexpected. Two species, sharing the same landscape but living rather different lives – and both offering us another reason to look a little closer at the diversity of wildlife.

Halloween hyena



The gang of young residents on the reserve had great fun celebrating Halloween on the last day of this month. Witches, wizards, goblins and monsters ran amok (and ate far too many sweets). Not intending to be quite so terrifying, and doing nothing to diminish its scary reputation and association with witchcraft, was this hyena having a drink at Hwata Pan. The quick flash of light bounced off the reflective layer behind its retinas and back towards my camera, creating the bright, ghoulish effect, known as *eyeshine,* that rippled across the water.



Few animals have suffered quite so badly from their association with superstition, witchcraft and folklore as the spotted hyena. In various African and other cultural traditions, hyenas were believed to be witches' familiars, ridden by witches under the cover of darkness or used to carry out their dark deeds. Their eerie, almost human-like whooping calls, haunting giggles and nocturnal habits have done little to improve their reputation. Even their unusual appearance, with their sloping backs, powerful jaws and distinctive gait, has contributed to their undeserved association with the macabre.

Yet, how unfair this reputation is! Spotted hyenas are among Africa's most intelligent, resourceful and socially sophisticated predators. Living in complex matriarchal clans, they have remarkably strong family bonds, intricate social relationships and a level of cooperation that rivals that of many primates. Females are dominant, and cubs are raised with considerable maternal investment. Their communication is equally impressive, with an extensive repertoire of vocalisations, body language and scent marking that helps maintain the intricate social structure of the clan. And anyway, who are we to judge?

They are also extraordinarily capable hunters, often catching their own prey rather than simply scavenging, as their reputation would have us believe. Their powerful jaws and digestive systems allow them to make use of almost every part of a carcass, playing an invaluable role in keeping the ecosystem clean and recycling nutrients back into the environment.

Spotted hyenas are intelligent, devoted, highly adaptable and essential members of Africa's wild communities. They are not the villains or witches’ accomplices; they are some of its most misunderstood and remarkable inhabitants.

Who goes there?

Sitting in the game drive vehicle at night, next to a pan, in total darkness after having set up my camera in the last light of sunset, was mildly terrifying and definitely exhilarating. It was so dark I couldn't see more than a metre in front of me.

After a while, I could hear that a big elephant bull had drifted into the scene and was coming to drink. Guessing his position, I took a few photos, bouncing the flash across the water in the hope of creating an image that patterned the elephant's hide with ripple reflections. Without moving the camera, as the focus was set manually on the water's edge, I reviewed the photos on the LCD monitor and noticed there was a mother and calf white rhino in the background. Now the challenge was on to try and get all three animals visible and composed in one shot!



It took many attempts to get the two photos that follow on the next page. What an incredible experience it was to be in the presence of both species at night, with none of them knowing I was there or being disturbed in any way. The lone elephant bull drank and then drifted off again, and the rhino mother with her young calf spent some time at the scratching post, then sniffed at piles of rhino dung to ascertain which other rhinos had been there, and then went and had a long drink at the pan.

I know I don't drink enough water and really have to remind myself to drink to get anywhere close to the recommended daily intake, and it made me wonder how much water a lactating female white rhino with a three-month-old calf needs to drink. The answer is approximately 85 to 115 litres of water every day! This is considerably more than the 70 to 100 litres required by an adult rhino that is not producing milk. At this age, the calf still relies almost entirely on its mother's milk for nourishment, drinking around 14 to 16 litres a day, although it will have started nibbling on soft grass. Rhino milk is about 90% water, so the mother needs an additional 13 to 15 litres of water each day just to produce enough milk for her calf. It is an impressive daily demand, highlighting just how important access to reliable water sources is for a mother raising a young calf.

The few pumped pans that we have on the reserve are an absolute lifeline to so many animals in the dry season. Even though the rains have arrived, some animals still prefer to drink from the pans they favour.





Home-course advantage

I cannot even begin to pretend I spotted this African scops owl myself. I had been reliably informed by the other guides and trackers that it could be seen during the day, roosting on a branch of one of the trees along the road down towards Ray's Drift. I had looked, scanned and peered but had decided I was just unlucky and it was never there when I was. Then one morning I happened to be driving back from the Ray's Drift area and came across another game drive vehicle parked on the track. I could see and hear the guide and tracker pointing and explaining to their guests about an owl that none of the guests could see initially.

So, after they left, I drove to the exact spot, sat there, and searched. Its perch is only about three metres off the road, but the little owl is so brilliantly camouflaged that unless you know it's there, you'll never see it. I don't know who the eagle-eyed, or should I say owl-eyed, first person was to spot it, but they possess superpowers. I wonder if they heard it making its frog-like "prrrup" call and that gave it away?



My feathers were slightly less ruffled when I consulted my Sasol Bird Guide, and it states the following: *Common resident of savanna and dry, open woodland; avoids forests. Typically roosts by day against a tree trunk; eyes closed to narrow slits and plumage render it nearly invisible against the background.*
Once these secrets are shared, you get your eye in and build up a home-court advantage, as I've spotted it on almost every drive since.

It goes on to say: *The smallest owl in the region. Most individuals are greyish, but some are more rufous. Smaller than the southern white-faced owl, with a grey (not white) face and yellow (not orange) eyes. Has prominent ear tufts, but these can lie flat on the head.*

This gorgeous little owl was absolutely motionless, but peeped at me for a second through the slit of one eye. Again, I have to declare something else that I absolutely did not see during the time it took me to take this photo (which was something of a photographic contortion act, trying to find the right angle through the intervening branches). It was the big black beetle on the bark, at 10 o'clock to the owl! It was only when I was processing and cropping this photo that I noticed it. I will console myself by assuming that the beetle didn't see the owl either, nor did the owl see the beetle, because further reading tells me that the *prey of the African scops owl is mainly insects such as grasshoppers, beetles, crickets, moths, etc.*



A magnificent kudu bull, with two and a half twists to his horns.
This indicates he is about 6 years old, which is considered a mature adult.



Impalas, a rhino, wildebeest, zebras and oxpeckers all take their turn to drink.
An elephant bull takes pole position at the waterhole, as a warthog trots off.





Standing out from the crowd, one buffalo drinks in the foreground,
while another drinks alone on the western rim of Banyini Pan.





Along one stretch of the Chiredzi River, hippos wallowed in the water, lions lay on the bank, and an elephant browsed in the reeds.







Fleeting glimpses:

A sable bull dashes across the path.

Dwarf mongooses engaged in a mutual grooming session. Look at the sharp canines visible on both of these – the smallest of carnivores.



Dawn breaks on the Banyini. What magic awaits?

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