

Singita



Photo by Brian Rode

WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For the month of January, Two Thousand and Twenty-one

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.7°C (71.06°F)
Minimum recorded: 16.0°C (60.8°F)
Average maximum: 32.1°C (89.78°F)
Maximum recorded: 38.0°C (100.4°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 174mm
For the year to date: 174mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:33
Sunset: 18:44

The great rains that we have received this month have increased the water levels across our concession. The pans that once could only accommodate a wallowing warthog have swelled in width and depth and are now inviting the grey giants like rhino and elephants to step in for a wallow. The N'wanetsi and Sweni Rivers both came down in flood on the 25th of January, following three days of heavy rainfall.

The bush is radiantly green and lush, capable of concealing a herd of elephants. The fruiting trees are bearing the fruits of their awaited seeds, using the animals and some peckish humans to disperse the seeds across the

property. The white berry bush is doing particularly well looking like decorated Christmas trees in almost every corner, some of the marula trees have already begun fruiting and have even begun to drop their flavourful fruits on the ground. As a result of the provision of the rain to the thirsty grounds and vegetation, the herbivores are in pristine condition, sporting glowing healthy coats, that shimmer as the light falls on them.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for January:

Lions

- Two nomadic males have been seen wandering around our most northern border.
- The lone survivor of the coalition called the Kumana Males has been seen around the southern parts of our concession, sporting injuries around his face and legs, that could be from defending his territory from encroaching males or possibly from prey that put up a fight.
- Shish Pride has been seen slowly moving closer and closer to our western border.
- The Mountain Pride was by far the most viewed pride this month, and have been sighted in the central parts of the concession with their young cubs in good condition.
- A lioness was seen with a newly born cub on Park Road, we are not too sure of her pride.
- A lone nomadic male was seen on multiple occasions on our concession.
- Xihamham was seen in good condition on the concession, but his brothers were nowhere to be seen.

Leopards

- A possible mating pair of leopards were seen on the concession lying a few paws apart.
- A female leopard (possibly the Nhlanguene Female) and her cub were found near the Nhlanguene valley.
- The "Mbiri-mbiri" young male with two spots on both sides of his nose has been seen on several occasions in the region of Pony Pan and the Central Depression. He is very relaxed with the vehicles and we are hoping that he will establish his territory in our area.
- Late in the month two leopards were seen near the Quarry site close to our western border. They were seen in the same area for a few days and, although we did not find the kill, we assume that they had a carcass hidden there somewhere.
- A large male leopard was seen on at least two occasions near the camp. We have also heard antelope alarm calls coming from the riverine vegetation nearby Sweni Camp, and therefore assume that this male leopard has frequently been in the area this last month.

Cheetahs

- We have had one sighting of cheetahs in the concession this last month. Towards the end of the first week we located three cheetahs in the grasslands in the far north of the concession. It is not really surprising that we have not been seeing many cheetahs as the grass is very long now and is not conducive for cheetahs to hunt.

Spotted Hyenas

- We have seen spotted hyenas on a few occasions. They can be seen anywhere in the concession and wander long distances at night. We are not aware of any active den sites in the area at present.
- Towards the end of the month a leopard was found with a carcass of an impala cached in a leadwood tree. Three Spotted Hyenas then appeared, hoping to get some scraps or hoping that the carcass would fall down. A second leopard appeared at the scene and the hyenas thought that they might get lucky and that the impala might get knocked down. The original leopard harassed the hyenas on a few occasions, but it got dark and the sighting was left with the leopards in the tree and the hyenas at the base.

Elephants

- Elephants have been seen regularly this last month, although the numbers have not been high. At this time of the year the marula trees are coming in to fruit and the elephants love to feed on these delicious treats. Since marula trees are much more common in the western half of the Kruger National Park (where the soil is more sandy) the elephants tend to move towards those areas. We will expect to see more elephants in the concession again when the marula fruiting season is over.

Buffalos

- The lush green grass has attracted quite a few buffalos into the area. In the northern part of the concession, where we have extensive grassland areas, we have been seeing a large herd of over three hundred individuals.
- We have also seen various groups of dagga boys (bachelor herds) throughout the concession. A particular group of four bulls has been seen on a few occasions between James Road and Dave's Crossing, fairly close to camp. Another group of bulls has been seen on a few occasions enjoying the cool, muddy water at Schotia Pan. Warthog Pan, in the central Depression, has also attracted a few bulls to come and drink and wallow.

Plains game

- Although the bush is thick and the grass is long we have still been seeing good numbers of general game including wildebeest, zebras, giraffe, kudus, impalas, and waterbuck. There are a few areas in the concession that have been consistently attracting large accumulations of these animals this last month. Some of these areas include the "N4 open area", "Ostrich Open Area", "Gudzani Loop", "Border 4-ways" and "Milkberry Ridge".
- We have noticed that the numbers of warthogs have increased in the concession, in comparison to the numbers that we saw during the years of drought that we recently experienced. These animals are very comical and are a guest favourite (particularly since Pumba was such an important character in the Lion King movies and plays).



Rare animals and other sightings

- We have been very fortunate to have had a few sightings of African wild dogs / painted wolves in the concession this last month. There appears to be a pack of six dogs that seem to have taken up a home-range in the area to the south of the lodges and they have been seen hunting in the area close to the lodges on at least four occasions. This is very exciting for us as this area is not an area that is generally known for wild dog sightings. These creatures are extremely rare and are listed as 'Critically Endangered' as a species by the I.U.C.N. (International Union for the Conservation of Nature). We are hoping that this pack will take up permanent residence in the area.
- We have had a few sightings of the diminutive Sharpe's grysbok in the hilly areas of the concession this last month. These are uncommon antelopes. We generally see these antelope more often in the winter months when the grass is not as long.
- We had a sighting of a serval in the grasslands near Basalt Road. Serval are long-legged, spotted cats that look similar to smaller versions of cheetahs. They tend to be nocturnal.
- We also had a sighting of an African wild cat near Basalt Road this last month.
- One afternoon we were lucky enough to see a caracal. As it saw us it quickly hid in some bushes at the side of the road. We turned off the car engine and after a short while the caracal came strolling out onto the road in front of us and then crossed, giving us some amazing views of a typically very secretive cat.

Birds

- Summer is in full swing now and all the palearctic and intra-African migrants are all back. It is at this time of the year that we have the greatest diversity of species in the area. This last month we saw 218 species of birds in the concession.
- Some of the special birds seen this last month include: dwarf bittern, lappet-faced vulture, white-headed vulture, long-crested eagle, martial eagle, African crake, lesser moorhen, kori bustard, greater painted-snipe, African pygmy-kingfisher, southern ground-hornbill, eastern nicator and yellow-billed oxpecker.



Dwarf bittern

Photo by Brian Rode

Summer is here and the rains have arrived. The bush is lush and the grass is long. There are flowers scattered all over the concession, not in large stands, but often individually, like shy fairies hiding in the grass. Although it may be difficult to see some of the animals (particularly the shy, elusive, smaller mammals) because of the thick vegetation and long grass, it is the time of the greatest biodiversity and abundance. The reptiles have come out from their hibernation hidey-holes and the migrant birds have arrived back from where they were during our winter months. They have come back to take advantage of the feast of insects that now abound. Dragonflies dart through the air at every pan (temporary water pool) and above the grasslands, chasing other insects and finding partners to with which to mate. Butterflies flutter by above the bushes and hillsides, adding colour to the bush. Ants march in columns, like soldiers, across the roads as they search for food and go on raiding parties. There is so much activity going on for us to watch if we pay attention to the smaller things.



One of the most interesting creatures that we get to see at this time of the year, in my opinion, is the humble dung beetle. Guests are often fascinated to see them rolling their dung balls along the road, pushing the ball along, trying to get it over the ridge at the side, often only to have it roll back down the way they have come from. The dung beetles never seem to give up and do not seem to be defeated by this, but just start all over again and carry on trying to push it over the side. They are certainly persistent creatures and do not just abandon the task because it seems difficult.

Dung beetles feed on faeces. The adults feed on the liquefied form and the larvae feed on the solid matter. The male dung beetle finds a fresh dung deposit and then uses his flat disc-like head to manipulate the dung and pat it to form a ball. Dung beetles heads are shaped like spades in order to be able to manipulate the dung into balls.



Brood balls - dung balls that were buried by the beetle and dug up by a predator (e.g. honey badger) to eat the larvae.

Whilst creating this artistic masterpiece the male dung beetle also has to fend off other male dung beetles who want to steal his treasure. Female beetles are also attracted to the dung (it is unbelievable how quickly dung beetles are able to locate fresh droppings) and once the male has formed his ball satisfactorily the female may climb onto it and the male then rolls his ball away from the dung heap. He has to do this fairly quickly before another male comes to try and fight him for his dung and his mate. The dung beetle rolls his ball using his legs, with his head turned downwards facing towards the ground while the female rides on top. Dung beetles are extremely strong creatures and it is thought that they are able to roll balls more than fifty times their own weight. He rolls the ball backwards, pushing it blindly. When he is a fair distance away from the dung heap he needs to find a spot where the soil is of a consistency that he can dig a hole and bury the ball.

The two beetles mate and the female lays her eggs inside the dung ball. They then bury the ball deep enough under the ground to try and avoid predators and scavengers (such as honey badgers and mongooses) from digging them up and eating the larvae. When the eggs hatch the larvae then feed on the dung until they mature and metamorphosise into their adult beetle forms, when they dig their way up through the soil and exit the surface to start the whole lifecycle process again.

Not all dung beetles make a ball and roll their dung away from the midden. Scientists have divided dung beetles into four groups according to how they dispose of the dung. Some are what are known as 'rollers' (also known as Telocoprids) who roll the dung into balls and then burying the balls in soft soil as previously described. Others are 'tunnellers / burrowers' (also known as Paracoprids), taking the dung into tunnels directly under the main heap. A third category are known as 'dwellers' (or Endocoprids) which actually live and breed directly in the dung heap. The fourth category are 'stealers / thieves' (Kleptocoprids) who are those beetles that steal the dung away from other beetles or those that lay their eggs in the dung balls made by other beetles. There are many different species of dung beetles in the world (it is estimated that there may be up to 800 species of dung beetles in

southern Africa alone) and we often see many varied species of dung beetles in a single pile of manure. Some are particularly pretty with shiny, iridescent ruby-red or emerald-green colouration.

Dung beetles play an important role in the ecology. They not only remove the majority of dung (which attract other pests such as flies) through the summer seasons, but also destroy the eggs of internal parasites that are in the dung thus reducing animal parasite populations. Furthermore, dung beetles also move the seeds of various plants around (that the herbivore originally ate) and even plant them by burying them beneath the soil. Dung beetles also play a role in returning nutrients to the soil and by digging the soil they also aerate the ground and bring top-soil to the surface.



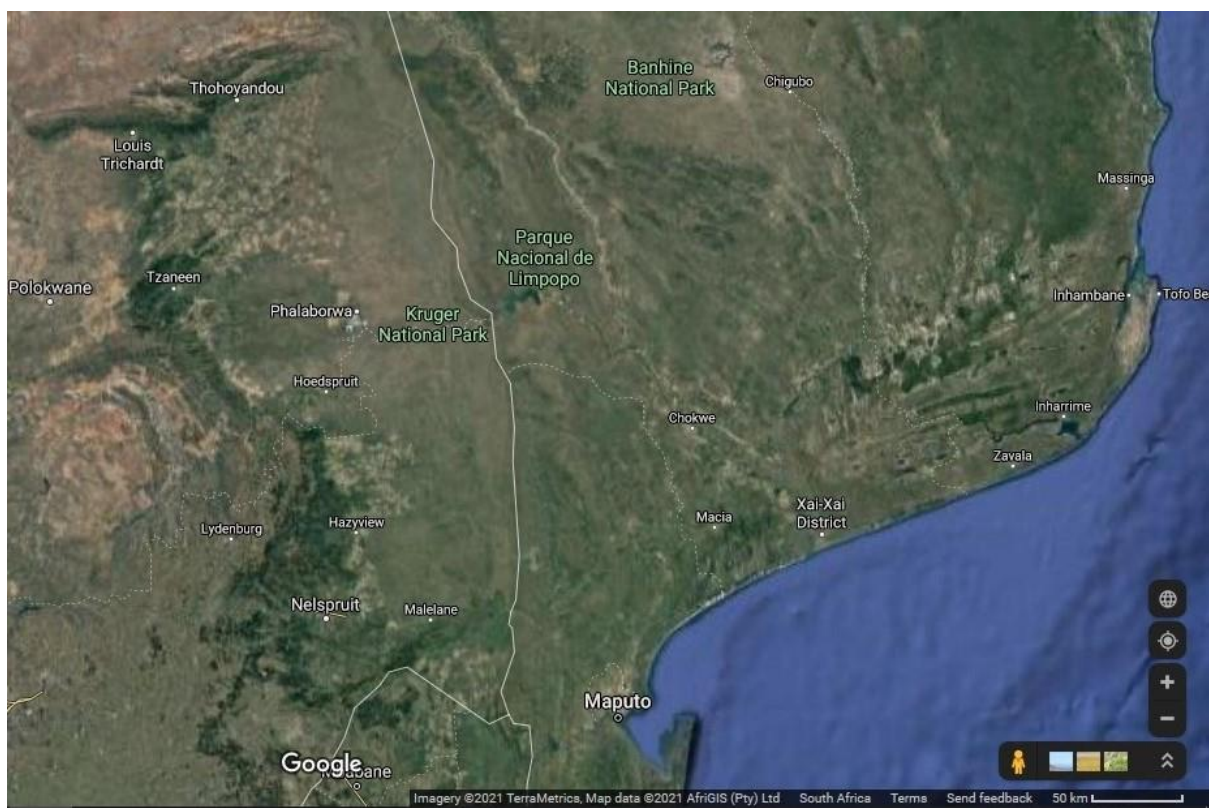
Three different species of dung beetles

An interesting account of the ecological value of dung beetles occurred in Australia in the mid nineteenth-hundreds. The dung beetles that occurred naturally in Australia at the time concentrated on marsupial droppings. When cattle were brought onto the continent the dung beetles continued to utilize the marsupial droppings and not the foreign cattle droppings. This led to large amounts of cattle faeces lying around and attracting flies and forming good breeding grounds for them. This led to a major increase in fly numbers (now you might understand why Australian hats were depicted to have corks hanging from the brims to keep the flies from landing on their faces). Furthermore, much of the cow-patties just dried up in the hot Australian sunlight and therefore the nutrients that they contained did not recycle back into the soils. The way the Australians tackled and eventually eased the problem was to import various species of dung-beetles from other countries (specifically South Africa and Hawaii), which then utilized the cattle droppings and actually made the grasslands and pastures more productive again.

Climate and weather patterns of the Lebombo Concession, with reference to Tropical Cyclone Eloise

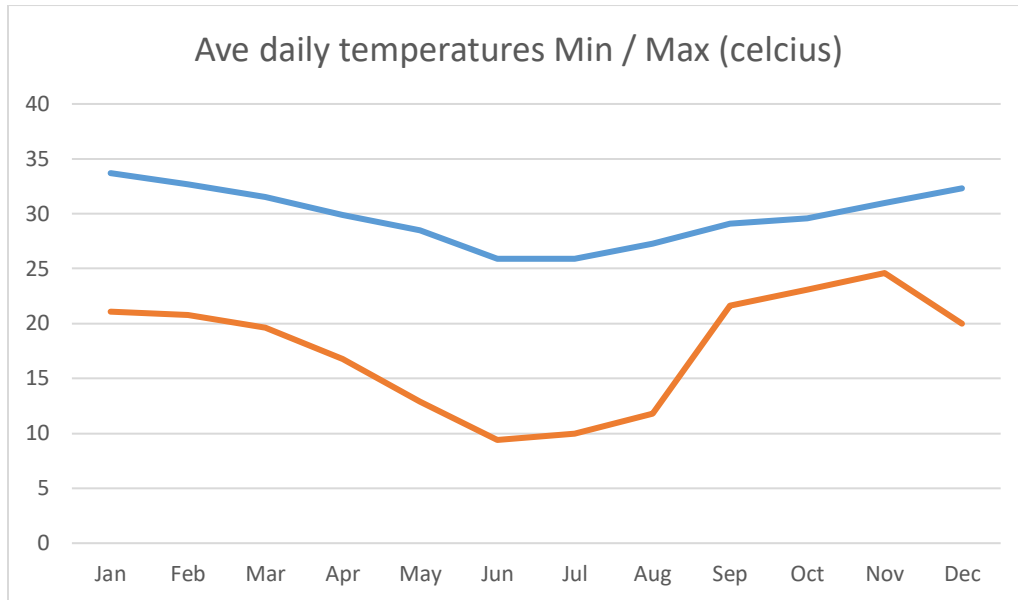
Article and photos by Brian Rode

The Singita Lebombo Concession lies in the central area of the Kruger National Park, on the eastern boundary of the park where South Africa borders with Mozambique. This international border runs along the top of a ridge of hills known as the Lebombo Mountains (although they are not mountains, but rather a ridge of hills), which run from north to south. The Kruger National Park lies in an area of South Africa known as the 'Lowveld'. It is called the Lowveld due to its low altitude, ranging from around 300 – 600 m above sea level. To the west of the Lowveld is the Transvaal Escarpment or the Transvaal Drakensberg Mountains. These are actual mountains, as opposed to hills (the peak known as Mariepskop lies at 1 945 m above sea level). To the west of the escarpment lies the great central plateau of South Africa (Johannesburg and Pretoria are located on the so-called 'Highveld'. Johannesburg lies at an altitude of 1 750 m and Pretoria at 1 300 m). On the eastern side of Mozambique lies the warm Indian Ocean. The southern-most part of the Kruger National Park lies approximately 85 km / 52,6 miles from the ocean, whereas at the northern point of the Kruger National Park the ocean lies 420 km / 260 miles away (in a straight line to the east). Therefore, the further north one goes in the Kruger National Park the further one is from the ocean. The Kruger National Park is approximately 350 km from north to south and is on average 60 km / 37 miles wide. It covers 2,2 million hectares (excluding the private game reserves and other wild areas to the east and west of the park). The Tropic of Capricorn runs across the park approximately two-thirds of the way up the park.



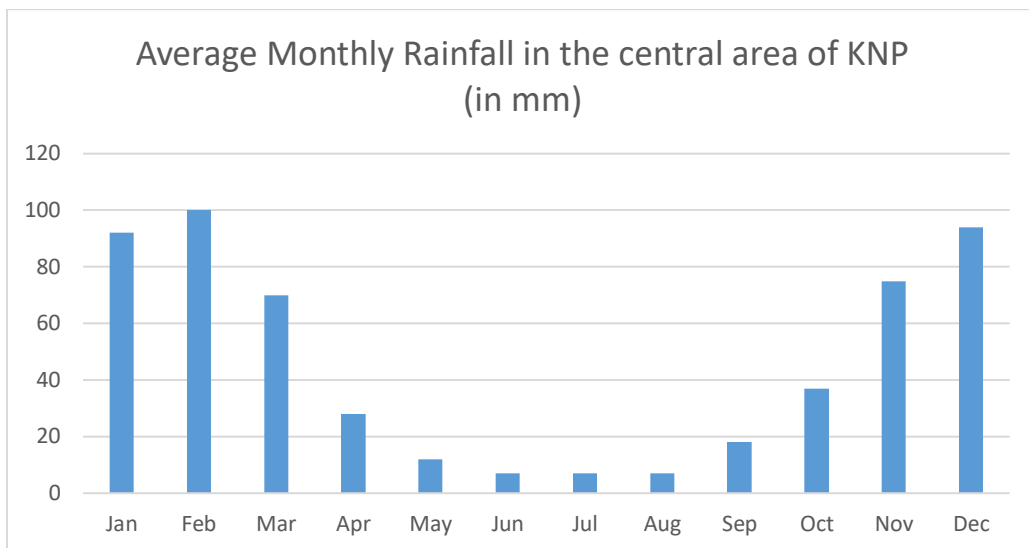
In the satellite image above one can see the Kruger National Park, with the international border with Mozambique. Singita Lebombo lies in the eastern centre of the Kruger National Park between the wording "Kruger National Park" and "Park Nacional de Limpopo". The warm Indian Ocean can be seen to the east of Mozambique. To the west of the Kruger National Park one can see a green patch extending northwards near the areas listed as 'Nelspruit', 'Hazyview', 'Tzaneen' and 'Louis Trichard'. This green patch is caused by the forests that grow on the eastern side of the escarpment. To the west of this lies the great Central Plateau of South Africa / the Highveld. – screengrab from www.google.com/earth.

The Lowveld has subtropical climate with hot, humid summers and mild, dry winters. During summer midday temperatures can exceed 40 degrees Celsius / 104 degrees Fahrenheit. At night, in summer, temperatures seldom drop below 20 degrees Celsius / 68 degrees Fahrenheit. During the winter months midday temperatures average around 26 degrees Celsius / 79 degrees Fahrenheit and at night temperatures seldom drop below 5 degrees Celsius / 41 degrees Fahrenheit.



The Lowveld does not receive a lot of rain each year and the rainfall can be erratic, varying greatly from year to year. Based on its latitude position, the park falls into a high pressure area known as the Horse Latitudes. (The Horse Latitudes occur just south of the Tropic of Capricorn in the southern hemisphere and just north of the Tropic of Cancer in the northern hemisphere). According to Wikipedia, “the horse latitudes are an area of high pressure at about 30° to 35° latitude where winds diverge into the adjacent zones of Hadley or Ferrel cells, and which typically have light winds, sunny skies, and little precipitation”. These latitudes coincide with a zone of dry, descending air (particularly during our winter months). High pressure cells do not generally allow for rain to form. The majority of the deserts in the world, including the Kalahari and Sahara Deserts are found in the horse latitudes. During our summer months these high pressure cells lift and move south allowing moist air to move into the area from the ocean and even allow the moisture to reach the interior plateau of South Africa.

The Kruger National Park therefore falls in a summer rainfall area and receives very little precipitation during the winter (June, July, August) months. The average rainfall for the Kruger National Park is approximately 500 mm per year. The south western corner of the park receives the most rain as it lies closest to the escarpment. Moist air is blown in from the warm Indian Ocean (the Agulhas Current). When it hits the escarpment the rising air (going over the mountains) causes precipitation to form (as the air rises it cools and the moisture condenses). As one moves further north in the park one gets further away from the escarpment (and further away from the ocean) and therefore the further north one goes the less rain can be expected. The far north of the park receives the least amount of annual rain. The majority of rain that we receive in the park is not orographic rain (rain caused by moist air moving up and over mountains) though, but rather convectional rainfall.



Based on figures by compiled N Zambatis, Scientific Services, Kruger National Park (1961-1990)

Convictional rainfall occurs when the earth and water bodies are heated causing rising thermals. These thermals carry moisture in the form of water vapour. As the water vapour rises it starts to cool until it condenses (in the same way that orographic rain forms). Clouds then form and rainfall may occur. Convictional rainfall often occurs in the form of thundershowers, which may be accompanied by thunder and lightning. During our summer months we do, on occasion, experience storms with massive cumulonimbus clouds and fantastic lightning displays. If we receive lightning storms in late spring (November), when the grass is still dry and the rains have not properly fallen yet, the bolts of lightning can cause veld fires to spring up and burn the bush.



Another form of rainfall that we receive here in the Lebombo concession and in the Kruger National Park is Frontal Rainfall, which occurs when a cold front moves up along the coast (usually from Cape Town) and rarely reaches KwaZulu-Natal and the Lowveld. The cold air pushes underneath the warmer air as it moves up along the coast causing the warmer air to rise and therefore cool and condense to form rain. This type of rain generally occurs as cold, light rain that may last a day or two. We sometimes receive this type of rain during our winter months, although it is not common for the cold fronts to travel all the way up the east coast and affect areas as deep inland as the Kruger National Park.

Research on the rainfall patterns in the Kruger National Park over the last 100 years indicates a cyclical tendency in rainfall volumes, with 10 years of above average rainfall typically followed by ten years of below average rainfall. The past 10 years are regarded by many as one of the most intense droughts experienced in the history of the Kruger National Park. Are we now likely to experience ten years of above-average rainfall? Perhaps... on the 22nd of January Cyclone Eloise made landfall in Mozambique.

South Africa is not a country known for hurricanes, typhoons or tropical cyclones (as they are known in this part of the world). It is very seldom that we experience these intense storms. Fortunately, our eastern coastline, where the ocean-current is warm, is fairly well protected by the island of Madagascar and the Atlantic Ocean on the western side of the country is a cold ocean and therefore not conducive to the forming of large low-pressure cells and cyclonic activity. Tropical cyclones only affect South Africa during the summer months (and usually only in January or February). Only tropical cyclones that move into the Mozambique / Agulhas Channel (i.e. the channel between Madagascar and Africa) influence South Africa's weather. Very few cyclones manage to go around Madagascar and come close enough to South Africa to cause problems or destruction, and then usually only north of the 25°S latitude. Where cyclones do manage to affect South Africa only the areas such as the Limpopo Province, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal may experience destructive winds and the risk of flooding.



Cyclone Eloise as it hit Mozambique on the 22nd / 23rd of January 2021. – Screenshot from www.windy.com

In January and February of 1984 Cyclones Domoina and Imboa respectively caused largescale flooding and human deaths (Cyclone Domoina caused deadly flooding in south-eastern Africa that killed 242 people and

caused an estimated \$199 million in damage). In the year 2000 a Tropical Cyclone Leon-Eline came over Madagascar and crashed into the coast of Mozambique. Shortly after hitting Madagascar another tropical storm Gloria also hit the island. Together the two storms caused an estimated \$9 million worth of damage in Madagascar, killing at least 205 people and causing another 10 000 people to become homeless. When Eline hit Mozambique it caused more damage. It was estimated that 329 000 people were displaced, at least 700 people were killed, more than 250 000 hectares of crop fields were destroyed and the economic damage was estimated to be more than \$500 million in total. In 2019 Cyclone Idai hit Madagascar and southern Africa. It was estimated that more than 1 000 people died in Mozambique alone and that the total damages from Idai across Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Madagascar, and Malawi were estimated to be at least \$2.2 billion, making Idai the costliest tropical cyclone in the South-West Indian Ocean basin (Figures from Wikipedia).

On the 22nd of this last month Cyclone Eloise made landfall in Mozambique, after hitting Madagascar. Although it was nowhere near as destructive as the cyclones mentioned previously it did bring with it huge amounts of rainfall. Here at Lebombo we only experienced the southern-most tip of the cyclone. On the 25th of January a front travelling up the coast of South Africa started pushing even more moisture into the interior and towards the Kruger National Park and we were expecting heavy rain to fall in the concession. This did not happen though. The cyclone veered northwards affecting the northern part of the park and the cold front that came up the coast caused heavy rain to fall in the south of the park. In the central area, where we are located we were spared the heavy rains.

With all the rain from the cyclone and the front both the N'wanetsi and Sweni Rivers started flowing. The water in the N'wanetsi pushed over the weir and causing the river in front of Lebombo Lodge to flood its banks. Fortunately, the lodges were safe. What an amazing sight!



Chasing rainbows

By Garry Bruce

One afternoon heading out on game drive it really felt like something was brewing. Ominous storm clouds were building over the Lebombo Mountains and far into Mozambique to our east. The sun was slowly setting through clear skies in the west and gave promise that we would remain dry until at least nightfall. The plan for the afternoon was to head up towards the central depression area of our concession to see if we could find the lions of the Mountain Pride that had been seen in the area earlier in the day.

We were enjoying the journey up the N'wanetsi River, which at this time of the year is absolutely teeming with a variety of game and birdlife. By the time we arrived in the area where we assumed the lions could be, the clouds had reached us and were looming threateningly over us and it looked like it could rain at any moment. We then spotted some giraffes in the distance that seemed to be looking at something. Giraffes have excellent vision and due to their large size, they often spot lions and stare at them which is a behaviour we can use to our advantage, to successfully find the lions or any other predators for that matter. As luck would have it, that is exactly what happened. The lions were stretching and yawning in the open plains and almost comically three giraffes had surrounded them and stood dead still, looking at them with an almost morbid fascination. As we got in to position to watch the spectacle the most incredible rainbow was arcing over the Lebombo Mountains. The radio chatter which is usually focused on finding animals was replaced by everybody's amazement at the rainbow on display.

But what is a rainbow really? It is a phenomenon that is caused by the reflection or refraction of light in water droplets which results in the spectrum of light appearing in the sky. Rainbows caused by sunlight always appear in the section of sky directly opposite the sun. We were in the perfect position with the sun setting behind our backs to the west and we were looking towards the storm clouds in the east. Each raindrop acts as a tiny, imperfect mirror which reflects the light. The seven colours of the rainbow are said to be red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

At around the same time, at the Lebombo lodge, a photo was taken of an almost perfect double rainbow. When a double rainbow forms, a second arc is seen outside the primary arc, the order of its colours are also reversed, with red on the inside of the arc. This is caused by the light being reflected twice on the inside of the droplet before leaving it.

The sky was truly a remarkable sight on that afternoon and one that will live long in my memory.

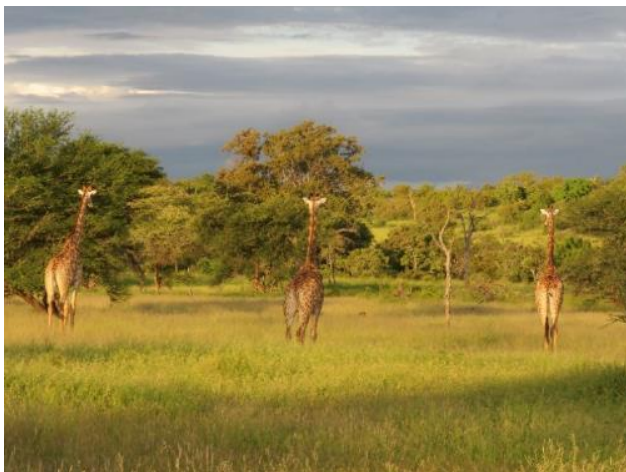




Photo by Guy Tatham at Lebombo Lodge

Some amazing times

Article and photos by Michael Kirby

As a field guide we are treated, every single day, to watching completely wild animals in their habitat going about their business as they have for millennia. A common question we are asked is, “What’s the best thing you’ve seen out here?” A question that is extremely difficult to answer, especially defining one distinct moment.

Being fortunate enough to work and spend most days exploring our incredible private concession, in the extreme east of the Kruger National Park, we have the ability to spend meaningful time with animals, meaning if we find lions in the morning, we have the ability to follow them around literally all day, wherever they decide to go.

To try condense a handful of these moments is no easy task, but here lie a few that have been etched into my memory:

Witnessing a kill first-hand is an amazing display of nature, not only is it exciting and provides heart-racing viewing, but it also shows the ancient nature of these predators, and how naturally this behaviour comes to them, it also shows how these animals fit into the ecosystem. Despite sometimes being gruesome and difficult to watch, on occasion a spectacle unfolds where the result lies in the balance. One occasion stands out in particular. It was a chilly winter’s morning as we heading up the N’wanetsi River, as we approached a bend we saw in the distance a great dust cloud. A cloud that could have only been thrown this high into the air by one thing, buffalo, lots of buffalo.

As we approached the herd that were clearly moving towards the river, we noticed some curious giraffe craning their outstretched necks to look at something at the rear of the herd. Lions! Seventeen members of the

once “super-pride” called Shishangaan, named after the drainage system that they liked to frequent. As the young males and most of the females stalked from the rear, a handful of lionesses started to flank the herd of around 800 buffalo. We chose to follow the leading lioness where she came up in front of the herd and started to run, in a deliberate and obvious gait, heading straight at the herd. Upon sight of her the herd doubled back and ran towards the remainder of the pride who were now waiting in ambush.

The dust settled and the pride was on top of a fully-grown cow. As she struggled and the moans started to fade we looped around and found the shade of a tree from which to watch the lions as they would inevitably start to feed, paying no notice to the vehicle and our presence. They fed violently together, growling and scratching one another as seventeen mouths started to make quick work of the buffalo.



In the distance, we heard vegetation breaking and a faint rumble start, followed by a big dust cloud. The buffalo were coming back! The herd who were now missing a member had come back from the river and ran straight back towards the lions. The black, angry wall surrounded the now-timid cats and one by one they began to lose their nerve. Until only one lioness was brave enough to stand her ground at the carcass. Eventually even she ran and the big buffalo bulls at the front started to chase. Every lion in the pride was now running in circles as a handful of bulls tried to vent their frustration. The lions being slightly quicker and more agile seemed to be just out of reach as the massive bovines swung their horns menacingly at the retreating cats. At one stage a young male lion even ‘leopard crawled’ underneath one of the game viewers to hide away from the raging bulls.

As the bulls kept the lions at bay, the herd nervously approached the dead cow, and almost ritualistically one-by-one smelled her and tried to help her up. This to me was a very touching moment, to see the anguish and emotional connection within the herd, a connection I had up until this point, overlooked in buffalo social dynamics.

Slowly the cows and the young calves moved off safely away from the scene while the big bulls kept the lions’ attention. This standoff lasted for about 45 minutes and it was exhilarating throughout. Eventually the old bulls moved off, finally allowing the lions to return to their meal.





Another heart-stopping moment was watching three male lions (now recognised as the Kumana Males) try to take over the remaining member of Shish Pride, mentioned above. The males surrounded an injured female, and just when I thought she was in big trouble as two of the males approached her, she swung around and dished out one of the most impressive beatings I've witnessed out here. She fended off two much bigger lions single handily, swiping at their faces and biting any limb that came within range. At the end of the scrap, the males began calling and moving away before licking their wounds!

Eventually the newcomers managed to suitably impress the Shish lionesses, and not long after, the Kumana Males took full control of the pride and territory. Taking over as such old lions had its disadvantages however. Two of the three Kumana males have subsequently died, and only one of these old boys is around today. He still frequents the same area and has sired cubs with the Shish Pride females, but the nature of the game dictates that soon his vulnerability will be discovered by new younger, stronger males and he will be forced to concede power and territory over to them.





Another memorable moment in a very different sense was watching an elephant cow, just after giving birth, trying to help her calf to its feet. The newborn, still wobbling and covered in blood, tried to stand and instinctively nurse and follow its mother. The tenderness shown by the mother and the clumsy, trunk-waving calf walking side by side was so touching.

Suddenly the mother stopped and looked rather uncomfortable. She then released her afterbirth in a massive torrent followed by her placental sack. Being a very large animal it was substantial in size, and what amazed us was what she did next. After giving birth elephants usually move away from, or try to bury their afterbirth. They do this in order to remove the scent away from predators, thus giving her brand-new and very vulnerable calf a chance. Many people fail to witness this as elephants usually move off into a thick, secretive area to birth, or are completely surrounded by the herd. However, this elephant stopped with her hour-old calf and began to feed on her placenta. Behaviour that I'd never even heard of, let alone seen. She carefully worked the umbilical cord into her mouth before working on the placenta. It was fascinating, especially seeing her blood-stained tusks and watching an animal I've only seen feed on vegetation, consume something on the other end of the spectrum. After she'd consumed all of it, she made her way into the woodland, and completely relaxed with her wobbly little calf trotting at her side. Truly magical!





Elegant grasshopper (BR)



Mozambique spitting cobra (BR)



Golden orb-web spider (BR)



Painted wolf / African wild dog (BR)



African Hoopoe (BR)



African Elephant (BR)



Giraffes (BR)



Eurasian golden oriole (GB)



Mountain Pride drinking (GB)



Young male leopard (GB)



Mountain lionesses hunting (GB)



Bushveld sunset (BR)