

Singita



Lioness – Photo by Graeme Stuart

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

Temperature

Average minimum: °13.0°C° (55.4°F)
Minimum recorded: °10.0°C° (50.0°F)
Average maximum: °27.4°C° °(80.6°F)
Maximum recorded: 31.0°C° (87.8°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0 mm
Season to date: 1 361 mm
(*Season = Oct to Sept)

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:33
Sunset: 17:23

July has delivered the very best of winter in the bush, with crisp, bone-chilling mornings wrapped in dense blankets of fog that transformed the landscape into an almost mystical scene. As the month drew to a close, the first whispers of the familiar August winds began to make themselves known, carrying with them a subtle reminder that the seasons are beginning to shift. Adding to the intrigue, several tree species have already started producing fresh, vibrant leaves. Whether this is a response to the unusual weather patterns we've experienced or simply an early hint that spring is on its way remains anyone's guess. The wildlife has been just as captivating as the changing landscape. The ever-evolving lion dynamics have kept us constantly on our toes, with movements and interactions changing almost daily and ensuring that no two game drives have been the same.

Meanwhile, giraffe sightings have been nothing short of extraordinary. It has felt as though these gentle giants have been around every corner, their graceful silhouettes becoming a defining feature of the month and providing countless memorable encounters.

A Sightings Snapshot for July follows:

Lions

- It appears that word has finally spread that the southern half of our concession has been without a dominant, settled territorial male for quite some time. As a result, we have recorded sightings of several males exploring the areas around the lodges, along our western boundary, and south of the granophyre ridges. One of these was a particularly handsome male with a striking dark mane. He was observed mating with one of the Shish lionesses. The N'wanetsi male also spent the first week of the month mating with a Shish lioness. His companion, the one-eyed Chava male, was never far behind; however, he never had the opportunity to mate, as the larger male aggressively kept the lioness out of his reach. Another solitary, unidentified male was seen just north of the lodge for a single day, while a coalition of four impressive males was observed feeding on a giraffe carcass just south of the Sweni Bird Hide.
- As the month drew to a close, an unexpected development added to the area's unfolding lion story. Two unfamiliar adult males were seen mating with the same Shish females that had previously been with the N'wanetsi male. The first male spent a day on the outskirts of the lodge grounds, scent marking before mating with both lionesses along the lodge access road. By the following morning, a second unknown male had appeared, with one remaining near the lodge while the other was found slightly further north. We believe these could be two of the four males seen west of our concession earlier in the month, hinting at possible changes in the local territorial dynamics.
- The Mananga Pride spent the beginning of the month split into smaller groups before eventually reuniting near the quarry on the western boundary of our concession. Seeing all 13 pride members together is always an impressive sight. Without a dominant male to protect them, the pride remains cautious of unfamiliar males moving through the area, making the arrival of these new males an important development to monitor in the months ahead.
- The highlight of the month came during an unforgettable sighting involving the entire pride and a mature waterbuck bull. Completely unaware of the danger surrounding him, the bull stood calmly as the lions patiently and methodically positioned themselves. For nearly 30 minutes, the pride coordinated their movements, slowly tightening the circle while remaining concealed. When the waterbuck finally realised the threat and attempted to flee, a single lioness launched a perfectly timed attack, bringing the powerful bull crashing to the ground. Within seconds, the rest of the pride converged, overwhelming their prey. The efficiency of the hunt was remarkable. Within an hour, the lions had consumed almost the entire carcass, leaving only the skull and spine behind. It was an incredible demonstration of teamwork, patience, and the hunting prowess that makes lions such formidable predators.

Leopards

- The Dumbana female once again dominated leopard sightings this month. She would often appear unexpectedly on one of the roads bordering the ridges where she has been hiding her cub. At times, she would move slowly down the road, stopping every so often to listen for potential prey. At other times, she strode with purpose, clearly on her way to reunite with her daughter.
- One particularly memorable sighting was of the female and her cub playfully tackling each other over one of the rocky outcrops. Their playful antics came to an abrupt end when Dumbana spotted a herd of impala not far away. She immediately lowered herself into the grass and began circling to gain a better angle for an ambush. However, her young daughter, excited by the commotion, leapt onto one of the rocks, prompting the impala to snort in alarm and bringing the hunt to an end before it had even begun.

- The Lebombo male leopard has been slightly more elusive this month, although signs of his presence have remained consistent. His tracks have frequently been found moving through the lodge in the evenings, and on several occasions, he was located resting in the shade near the weir. An early morning sighting west of Sonop on the H6 suggests he may be extending his movements further west than usual, potentially exploring new areas within his territory.
- The Khandziya female made a welcome appearance at the end of the month along the N'wanetsi River, close to where it enters our concession. One of the most memorable sightings came as she attempted to stalk a herd of impala. Moving silently down the road, concealed by the long grass lining the verge, she was unexpectedly interrupted by a honey badger confidently ambling towards her. The leopard froze, crouching low as the unsuspecting badger approached to within just a few metres. Only at the last moment did it notice her. Its tail shot upright before it turned and bounded away, bringing the hunt to an abrupt and rather entertaining end.

African wild dogs

- The pack of seven African wild dogs continued to provide reliable sightings throughout the month, frequently seen moving purposefully through the concession in search of their next meal. Their energy and determination are always impressive to witness as they cover vast distances with remarkable efficiency. One of the month's highlights was discovering their den-site while on a walking safari in the granophyre hills. The den is exceptionally well concealed and inaccessible by vehicle. Wild dogs remain at a den for up to three months while raising their pups, so with the denning period well underway, we look forward to seeing the youngsters emerging to accompany the adults on their travels in the coming weeks.
- A second, much larger pack, consisting of at least 15 individuals, surprised us one morning as they lay sprawled across the road. Judging by their noticeably rounded bellies and the blood-stained fur around their necks and faces, they had clearly enjoyed a substantial meal not long before our arrival.

Elephants

- Elephant sightings have been excellent throughout the month, with both impressive breeding herds and large bulls encountered across the concession. Several breeding herds of more than 30 individuals were seen, many accompanied by tiny calves that remained close to their mothers as they navigated the bush. As the grasses begin to dry out, the elephants have gradually shifted their feeding habits, spending more time browsing on raisin bushes and stripping bark from a variety of trees. This seasonal change in diet is a familiar sign of the transition towards the drier months and has made for fascinating observations of their feeding behaviour.

Spotted hyenas

- Spotted hyena sightings this month have provided fascinating insights into the opportunistic and highly adaptable nature of these remarkable predators. One evening, while out on a drive, we were fortunate enough to witness a female leopard attempting to make a hunt. She moved with incredible stealth, carefully closing the distance on a herd of impala, but the sharp eyes of the prey quickly gave her away. Within moments, the impalas had spotted her and the entire herd erupted into alarm calls, snorting and warning one another of the danger nearby. The leopard immediately changed tactics, lowering herself into the cover of the long grass and waiting patiently for the herd to settle. Once the alarm calls had faded and the area became quiet again, she began to move slowly through the grass, carefully creeping forward as though making a long, wide circle to approach the impalas from the opposite side. With darkness quickly approaching, we decided to leave her to continue her hunt undisturbed, giving her the best possible chance of securing her next meal. Interestingly, not even half a kilometre away, we came across a spotted hyena moving directly towards the area where the impalas had been alarm calling. This was a perfect example of their opportunistic nature, as the hyena appeared to be investigating the

commotion in the hope of finding a possible free meal or an opportunity to steal a kill from another predator. Their ability to listen, follow, and take advantage of situations created by other animals is one of the many reasons they are such successful hunters and scavengers.

- Another memorable encounter occurred one evening while travelling back from a drive, when we heard the distant contact calls of African wild dogs echoing through the bush. The excitement of hearing these rare and social predators was soon followed by another surprise, as within less than five minutes a group of at least five spotted hyenas appeared and marched past us with purpose, seemingly following the sounds of the wild dogs. These sightings have highlighted the opportunistic behaviour of spotted hyenas, showing how closely connected they are to the movements and activities of other predators within the ecosystem.

Buffalos

- One memorable sighting came from a substantial breeding herd gathering to drink along the N'wanetsi River, in the area around Dumbana Pools. As the herd filtered down to the water's edge, the sounds of low grunts and splashing filled the riverbed, creating a classic Lowveld scene.
- Several impressive old buffalo bulls were also encountered throughout the month. Three particularly large bulls were seen in the Stickythorn area near the Park boundary, spending their days feeding and resting away from the breeding herds. These solitary bulls, often referred to as "dagga boys", are always a favourite sighting, their heavy bosses and battle-scarred appearance reflecting years of experience.
- The northern section of the concession also produced excellent buffalo sightings, with a herd of approximately 150 animals recorded moving through the area. Large herds such as these play a vital role in shaping the landscape, and their movements often attract the attention of the area's predators, making them an important species to keep track of throughout the seasons.

Plains game

- Midway through the month we were treated to one of the season's most spectacular wildlife movements as hundreds of plains zebra streamed into our concession from the recently burnt grasslands to the west. Long lines of black and white stretched across the landscape, interspersed with smaller groups of blue wildebeest and impala, creating an unforgettable scene. These impressive mixed herds have settled into a predictable daily pattern, moving down the centre of the concession during the late morning to graze before retreating to the open grasslands each evening.
- Giraffe have been a constant presence across the concession this month, with exceptional numbers recorded throughout the area. On one memorable morning drive alone, we counted more than 50 individuals spread across the landscape, browsing peacefully on the abundant new growth. Whether feeding among the knob-thorns or striding gracefully across the open plains, they have provided spectacular sightings and served as a reminder of just how productive the habitat has become following the summer rains.

Rare animals and other sightings

- Rare and unusual wildlife sightings continued to add excitement to the month. An armadillo was spotted along the H6 one evening as we made our way back from an afternoon game drive, a special sighting of one of the bushveld's most elusive nocturnal mammals.
- The three cheetahs first seen at the end of last month remained on the concession for one additional day before seemingly disappearing as quickly as they had arrived.



- Caracal sightings also continued, with this secretive feline being encountered at least once or twice each month along the eastern boundary and up to the granophyre ridges.
- African civets appeared to be far more active than usual, although this is likely a result of the shortening winter grass rather than an increase in their numbers. During the summer months, these nocturnal mammals are often concealed by dense vegetation and long grass, making sightings considerably less frequent. As winter takes hold and visibility improves, they become much easier to spot during evening game drives.

Birds

- The lingering water in the central depression following January's floods continued to attract an exciting variety of birdlife. Two notable additions to the concession's bird list were the red-chested flufftail and the fan-tailed grassbird, both recorded for the first time in the newly established marshy habitat. These sightings highlight the importance of seasonal wetlands and the diversity they can support.
- Purple rollers were once again seen on the concession, providing another welcome record of this striking intra-African migrant. Their vibrant plumage always makes for a memorable sighting and is a special treat for bird enthusiasts.
- Many of the resident birds of prey have now entered their breeding season, with several species observed occupying nests across the concession. This is an exciting time of year, and keen observers may soon be rewarded with sightings of newly fledged juveniles accompanying their parents.
- The flowering aloes around the lodge have become a hub of activity, attracting numerous sunbirds as they feed on the abundant nectar. Their brilliant colours and constant movement add a welcome splash of life around camp.
- Guests enjoying an early morning coffee before heading out on safari have also been treated to the cheerful chatter of mocking cliff chats around the lodge. These charismatic little birds are regular companions in camp during this time of the year.



Fan-tailed grassbird – Photo by Brian Rode

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as the July Gallery

The lion dynamics across Singita Kruger National Park are undergoing a fascinating period of change, with both the northern and southern regions showing signs of significant territorial reshuffling. As ageing males begin to lose their grip on long-held territories, new contenders are emerging, setting the stage for a new chapter in the lives of some of the reserve's most iconic prides.



One of the Sonop males – Photo by Monika Dallas

In the north, the dominant Sonop coalition appears to have reached a turning point. The three ageing males, who have successfully held territory for two years, seem to have been displaced at the beginning of the month by three impressive new males. While these newcomers possess the size and physical presence to challenge for dominance, they have proven to be exceptionally skittish, making sightings brief and often limited to fleeting glimpses before they melt back into the cover. Despite their elusive nature, their arrival has already altered the landscape, with the Sonop males notably absent from their former stronghold.

This territorial shift inevitably raises questions about the future of the Chava Pride. The pride currently has young cubs, and whenever unfamiliar males establish themselves in a new area, the risk of infanticide becomes a significant concern. By eliminating dependent cubs, incoming males can bring females back into oestrus sooner, increasing their own reproductive opportunities. While it is impossible to predict how events will unfold, the coming weeks will be critical in determining whether the Chava females can successfully keep their cubs hidden or whether the new coalition will fully assert control over the area.

Further south, the Shish Pride has become the focus of attention for not one, but two competing coalitions. The first consists of the N'wanetsi and Chava males, whose movements have increasingly centred around the pride. At the same time, a second coalition, two males from what's suspected to be a larger group of four, has also

begun showing considerable interest. Their repeated presence suggests that both coalitions recognise the opportunity presented by a pride that has lacked consistent male protection for an extended period.

For more than a year and a half, the Shish Pride has existed without the stability that a resident coalition can provide. During this time, the females have navigated the challenges of raising cubs while remaining vulnerable to transient males moving through the area. Although the arrival of competing coalitions creates uncertainty in the short term, it may ultimately offer the pride something it has been missing for many months: stability. A strong resident coalition plays a vital role in the success of a pride, defending territory from rival males, safeguarding cubs, and allowing females to invest more energy into raising their young rather than constantly avoiding conflict. Whether the N'wanetsi and Chava males establish themselves, or whether the rival coalition gains the upper hand, the eventual outcome could usher in a more secure future for the Shish Pride.

As always in the African bush, these changing dynamics remind us that lion society is anything but static. Territories are constantly contested, alliances evolve, and each new takeover shapes the future of generations to come. While uncertainty lies ahead, witnessing these natural processes unfold offers a remarkable glimpse into the resilience and complexity of one of Africa's greatest predators.



Two of the unknown males – Photos by Monika Dallas

The fragrance of renewal: Wild basil after the floods

Article by Monika Dallas

Every season leaves its mark on the African bush. Some years are remembered for spectacular wildflower displays, others for exceptional elephant breeding seasons or the arrival of migrant birds. This winter, however, the Lowveld is telling a quieter story, one that reveals itself not through the roar of a lion or the trumpet of an elephant, but in the delicate fragrance released with every passing breeze.



Across Singita Kruger National Park, wild basil (*Ocimum americanum*) has emerged in astonishing abundance. It carpets open floodplains, stretches across old river terraces and flourishes along roadsides and recently disturbed ground. Where one might once have noticed the occasional scattered plant, there are now seemingly endless fields of soft green foliage punctuated by tiny white flowers. Even those who have spent decades traversing these landscapes have remarked that they cannot remember seeing wild basil on such a remarkable scale. The reason for this botanical spectacle most likely lies in the extraordinary floods that swept through the Lowveld earlier this year. Although floods are often viewed as destructive forces, nature has evolved alongside

these disturbances for millennia. Rivers do far more than transport water, they reshape landscapes, redistribute nutrients and carry with them countless seeds. As floodwaters rise and recede, they scour riverbanks, deposit fresh layers of fertile silt and expose bare ground that becomes ideal for colonising plants. Wild basil is perfectly adapted to exploit these fleeting opportunities.

As an annual species, it relies entirely on seeds to ensure the next generation. Those tiny seeds are remarkably resilient, capable of remaining dormant in the soil until conditions become favourable. The prolonged moisture brought by the floods, combined with freshly deposited sediment and increased sunlight reaching newly opened areas, created ideal germination conditions. Seeds that may have lain hidden beneath the soil for years were awakened simultaneously, while others were transported across floodplains to entirely new locations. The result is the extraordinary flush of wild basil now transforming the winter landscape. Its presence is more than simply beautiful; it represents one of nature's most elegant demonstrations of resilience. What appeared, at first, to be a season of upheaval has instead become one of remarkable renewal.

For those walking through the bush, the experience is wonderfully sensory. Brush gently against the leaves and they release a sweet, spicy aroma carrying notes of clove, mint and citrus. During the warmth of the afternoon, the scent lingers in the still winter air, adding another subtle layer to the tapestry of sounds and smells that define a day on safari. The tiny white flowers are equally significant. Though easily overlooked, they provide an important nectar source for bees, butterflies and a variety of other pollinating insects at a time when many summer-flowering species have long since disappeared. Even a seemingly modest herb plays an important ecological role, quietly supporting countless smaller lives that, in turn, contribute to the health of the broader ecosystem.

Long before botanists formally described *Ocimum americanum*, its value was well understood by the people who lived alongside it. Within Shangaan and Tsonga traditions, wild basil has long been recognised as both a medicinal and aromatic plant. Leaves were commonly crushed and inhaled to help ease nasal congestion and headaches, while herbal infusions were prepared to assist with colds, mild fevers and stomach ailments. Fresh foliage was also rubbed onto the skin as a natural insect repellent, the fragrant essential oils helping to discourage mosquitoes and other biting insects. Like many indigenous medicinal plants, its value lay not only in its practical uses, but also in the generations of knowledge that guided when and how it should be harvested and prepared. The aromatic basils of southern Africa also attracted the attention of some of the region's earliest European naturalists and explorers. Although historical journals did not always distinguish between individual *Ocimum* species, botanical collectors travelling through the Lowveld during the nineteenth century frequently remarked upon the pleasant fragrance of these indigenous basils and documented their widespread use by local communities. Herbarium records from that era confirm that wild basil was already recognised as one of the characteristic herbs of the region's summer landscapes.

Perhaps the greatest lesson offered by this year's abundance is one of perspective. Floods often leave behind scenes of destruction such as fallen trees, reshaped riverbanks and displaced wildlife. Yet nature rarely regards disturbance as an ending. More often, it is simply the beginning of another chapter. The millions of wild basil plants now scenting the winter air are silent testimony to that remarkable capacity for renewal. Seeds that waited patiently beneath the soil for seasons, perhaps even years, responded the moment conditions became favourable. Together, they have transformed the landscape into something few could have predicted only months ago. Visitors naturally come to the Kruger hoping to encounter Africa's great mammals, but the bush has always rewarded those willing to notice its quieter stories. This July, one of those stories is written not in tracks or calls, but in fields of fragrant basil stretching towards the horizon, a reminder that even the smallest plants can become the defining character of an unforgettable season.



Photo by Monika Dallas

Winter in Singita Kruger National Park is a season of striking contrasts. Crisp, mist-covered mornings gradually give way to spectacular evenings, when the setting sun paints the horizon in deep shades of crimson and orange. One of the most memorable places to experience this transformation is from the crest of the Lebombo Mountains. Looking west across the vast wilderness of Kruger National Park, the sun slowly disappears behind distant mountain ranges, creating an unforgettable scene.

During the dry winter months, however, these sunsets often take on an even more dramatic appearance. A veil of smoke can soften the light and turn the sky an intense shade of red. While this may appear unusual, it is often the result of carefully planned controlled burns carried out by South African National Parks (SANParks). Far from being a cause for concern, these fires are an essential part of maintaining the health and resilience of this remarkable ecosystem.

Covering nearly 20 000 square kilometres in northeastern South Africa, Kruger National Park is one of Africa's most celebrated wildlife reserves. Within its boundaries, Singita manages approximately 15 000 hectares along the eastern border with Mozambique. Across this vast landscape, fire has shaped the savanna for thousands of years. Long before modern conservation practices, lightning strikes and the traditional use of fire by indigenous communities regularly burned grasslands and shrubs. Over time, plants and animals adapted to these natural fire cycles. Many grasses regenerate quickly after burning, while several tree species have evolved thick bark or seeds that germinate more successfully after exposure to fire. Without regular burning, dry grasses and leaf litter accumulate, creating large fuel loads that can lead to far more destructive wildfires. These intense fires pose greater risks to wildlife, tourism infrastructure, neighbouring communities, and the long-term health of the ecosystem.

Fire management in Kruger has changed considerably over the past century. In the park's early years, the goal was to suppress fires wherever possible to protect vegetation and wildlife. Over time, however, researchers and park managers recognised that excluding fire entirely created unintended consequences. Dense accumulations

of dry vegetation reduced grazing quality, influenced animal movements, and eventually fuelled larger, more intense wildfires. Decades of ecological research have since shaped a more adaptive approach known as Integrated Fire Management. Rather than attempting to eliminate fire, this strategy works with natural processes by creating a mosaic of burned and unburned areas across the landscape. Park managers continuously assess rainfall, vegetation growth, fuel loads, and previous burn patterns before deciding where and when fires should be introduced. Most controlled burns take place between June and October, when weather conditions allow fires to be managed safely. Following years of above-average summer rainfall, grass growth can be exceptionally dense, increasing the amount of combustible material available. Under these circumstances, more extensive controlled burns help reduce the likelihood of severe late-season wildfires.

Controlled burns are carefully planned operations rather than large-scale fires set across entire landscapes. One commonly used technique is point ignition, where fires are started at selected locations instead of igniting the perimeter of a large block. This allows the fire to spread naturally under changing wind, temperature, and humidity conditions, producing a varied pattern of lightly burned, heavily burned, and untouched areas. This diversity benefits many plant and animal species by creating a range of habitats and food sources.

In some situations, block or perimeter burns are used instead, particularly where specific management objectives require more uniform treatment. Different areas of the park receive different fire regimes depending on ecological needs. Some landscapes benefit from more frequent, hotter burns, while others require cooler, less frequent fires. Around camps, roads, and other infrastructure, burns are often used to establish protective firebreaks. Naturally occurring fires caused by lightning may also be allowed to burn if they pose no threat to people, infrastructure, or sensitive areas.

Safety remains the highest priority throughout every operation. Before any burn begins, rangers carefully evaluate weather conditions, including wind speed, humidity, and temperature. Fire teams remain on site throughout the process, using vehicles and specialised equipment to monitor and contain the flames. The objective is not to prevent fire altogether, but to manage it in a way that closely reflects natural ecological processes while safeguarding visitors, staff, wildlife, and infrastructure.

Smoke is perhaps the most visible consequence of prescribed burning, and it often prompts questions from visitors. In reality, it is an expected part of responsible fire management. Where possible, burns are timed to encourage smoke to disperse efficiently. Many are conducted earlier in the dry season, when grasses still retain some moisture. These cooler fires generally produce fewer emissions than the intense wildfires that can develop later in the season. Although smoke may temporarily affect visibility and local air quality, it is a far better alternative than the vast plumes generated by uncontrolled fires. Research has consistently shown that reducing fuel loads through well-planned early burns lowers the risk of severe wildfires later in the year, ultimately reducing both environmental damage and overall emissions.

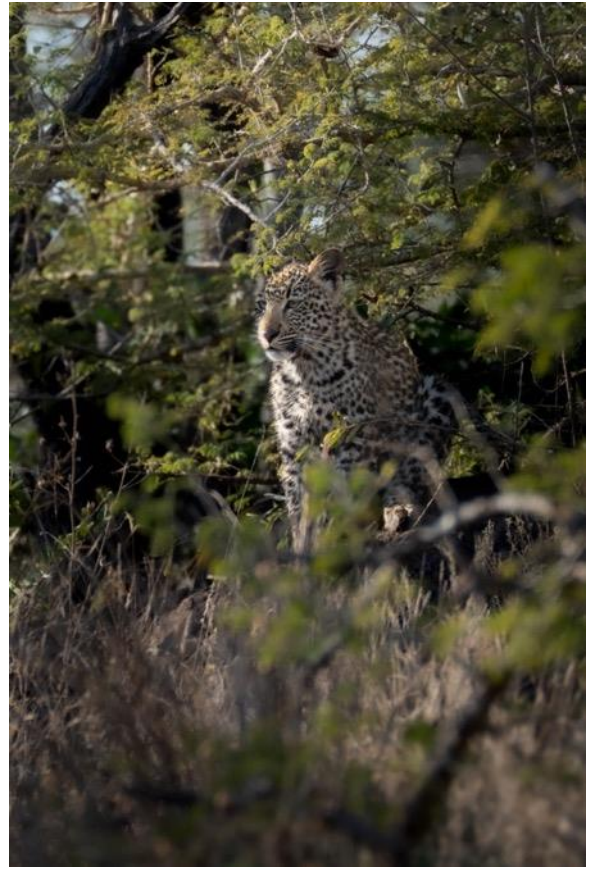
The value of controlled burning extends well beyond reducing wildfire risk. Fire returns valuable nutrients to the soil and stimulates the growth of fresh, nutritious grasses that support herbivores such as zebra, wildebeest, and buffalo. Healthy herbivore populations, in turn, sustain predators throughout the ecosystem. Recently burned areas also attract a wide variety of birdlife, many of which feed on insects and seeds exposed after the fire has passed. Controlled burning can suppress invasive plant species and helps maintain the open savanna landscapes that make Kruger one of Africa's finest wildlife-viewing destinations.

As visitors watch smoke drift across the grasslands and acacia woodlands during winter, it is worth remembering that these fires represent careful stewardship rather than destruction. They are part of an age-old natural cycle, guided by modern science and conservation expertise, helping to ensure that Kruger National Park remains a thriving wilderness for generations to come.

July Gallery



Mananga Pride lionesses – Photo by Monika Dallas



Dumbana's cub – Photo by Monika Dallas

N'wanetsi scene – Photo by Monika Dallas





African Fish Eagle – Photo by Monika Dallas

Giraffe in the mist – Photo by Monika Dallas





Tree squirrels sunning – Photo by Monika Dallas

Male double-banded sandgrouse - Photo by Monika Dallas



Verreaux's eagle-owl – Photo by Monika Dallas





Dwarf mongoose – Photo by Monika Dallas



African wild dogs – Photo by Monika Dallas

Water monitors mating – Photo by Monika Dallas





Dumbana's new cub – Photo by Evidence Nkuna



Male waterbuck – Photo by Evidence Nkuna

Juvenile white-backed vulture – Photo by Evidence Nkuna





Dumbana's daughter (Khandziya) – Photo by Graeme Stuart

Dumbana's son – Photo by Graeme Stuart



Compiled by Monika Dallas