

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT
SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE
For the month of August, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four

Temperature

Average minimum: 11.5°C (52.7°F)
Minimum recorded: 12.7°C (54.8°F)
Average maximum: 30.4°C (86.7°F)
Maximum recorded: 37.8°C (100.0°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 1.5 mm
Season to date: 352.1 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:00
Sunset: 17:45

What a month it has been! The sightings during this dry time have been incredible, especially towards the end of the month. On the 31st of August, Guide Time Mutema and his guests set a record of seeing three different kills. Their safari started in the morning following wild dogs that killed an impala near Nyari. Then, on their way to Hwata Pan they came across a lioness feeding on a zebra. After arriving at Hwata they found another lioness off to the east that was in the process of killing a buffalo calf! Quite a few groups of guests have had “Big-Five-One-Drive” occasions and one of these was within the first hour of a drive.

The weather has been beautiful with cool morning drives leading to warm poolside weather by midday. August also had a seasonal Blue Moon - the traditional definition refers to the third full moon in a season that has four full moons. These only come around once every 19 years!

A sightings snapshot for August follows:

Lions

- Nduna Pride: Six members of this pride feasted on a giraffe they killed near the dam wall. There is a mating pair within this pride, but both the male and female are sporting deep gashes from a fight with the other two males.
- River/Hippo Pride: This pride have been seen regularly in the Chiredzi riverbed, and two territorial males have been with them. The riverbed is a popular spot though – on one occasion three lionesses watched as a black rhino departed at high speed after drinking at Ray's Drift, and later in the month eight members were chased out of their comfort zone when a breeding herd of trumpeting elephants careened down the banks to come and drink.
- Northern/Hlamba Mlonga Pride: These lions have been a welcome sight as they are not viewed that often. One adult male and three adult females relaxed around Simbiri Dam, even though there was no water there. A few days before members that have split from the Nduna Pride were seen in the exact same area, so it is just as well they weren't all in the same place at the same time.
- Southern Pride: Because Chiloveka Dam in the south has also run dry this pride has pushed north and is drinking at Hwata Pan, making use of the plentiful hunting opportunities in the area.

Leopards

- Earlier in the month a morning walk to look for a Pel's fishing owl around Kim's Crossing resulted in finding and following a drag mark left by a leopard lugging a kill. The victim, an impala, had been hoisted into a tree. That afternoon the party returned to the spot and waited until the leopard materialised and started to feed on its kill.
- There has been a lot of leopard activity around the Nyamasikana and Chiredzi confluence area. A mating pair was seen in the riverbed, and drag marks from kills have been seen for long distances along the riverbank.
- Incredible sightings were had at the end of the month near the Malilangwe Dam. They started with a male leopard about to cross the road towards the dam. Not far from the first sighting a second leopard was spotted. That afternoon, during a boat cruise, a leopard was seen drinking from the dam, below Malilangwe House, and a second one seen after dark when driving back to the lodge. However, the best was yet to come. The next day, during a boat cruise, while calmly watching a pied kingfisher, the party heard the sounds of predators fighting over something in the bushes. It turned out to be four leopards feeding on a nyala antelope! One cub climbed up a tree and everyone got a good view of it. The other three leopards moved to a slightly open space that also provided a view. The guides who witnessed this agreed it was one of the best leopard sightings of their lives.

Wild dogs

- The smaller pack seem to have unfortunately lost their puppies. They had them stashed in a drainage area beneath a road, and hyenas were seen raiding the area.
- The larger pack, 18 in total, are doing very well. It is luck of the draw in seeing them as the pups are now running with the pack, and not confined to a den area. The adults have been seen hunting far and wide, and killing a Sharpe's grysbok and impalas. If the pups aren't nearby the adults wolf down the kill, then run back to where the pups are and regurgitate meat for them to eat.

Hyenas

- A mother giraffe and a less than one-year-old calf were surrounded by a pack of five hyenas, including a fluffy hyena cub. The hyenas were circling the giraffes, whooping and laughing, trying to force the mother and calf to panic and part, but when the strategy didn't work they left the duo in peace and went to look for hunting opportunities elsewhere.
- Vultures were seen coming down to land, indicating a kill. A lone hyena was located with an impala carcass that was still bleeding, and the hyena was covered in blood on the face and chest. The vulture numbers kept building and the uneasy hyena kept dragging the kill away. Eventually the vultures won, and drove off the hyena. On investigating the scene it was evident the kill had been stolen by the hyena from a leopard.

- Hyenas had a bounty when they spent about a week consuming the carcass of an old black rhino cow, that had died from natural causes.

Rhinos

- White rhinos: you simply cannot miss them. Every game drive is rewarded with the sighting of white rhinos. Highlights for the month include seeing a bouncy newborn calf, and lions sharing a water source with white rhinos.
- In these dry dusty times black rhino sightings have been very good, and even better is when they give the game-viewer an investigative mock charge, sending dust billowing to great photographic effect.

Elephants

- Breeding herds of elephants have been seen along the Chiredzi River and never far from there at the Hippo Swamps, O2 Pan and Sosigi Dam. It is a delight to watch them, especially the exuberant youngsters that defy decorum and discipline.
- Bulls, and some big tuskers among them, have turned their attention to the *tortilis* trees that are hanging heavy with nutritious pods. The trees have been shaken for all they are worth in order for the pods to fall, but fortunately not too much damage has been caused.

Buffalos

- Before you see buffalos you see great clouds of dust, and when positioned accordingly the backlight is dramatic.
- An amazing sighting was when about 200 buffalo wanted to cross the Chiredzi. They were atop a cliff and descended down it, bumping and bellowing - it was like wildebeest migrating across the Mara River!

Plains game

- The usual plains game abound, but now is the best time to see eland, sable, and Lichtenstein's hartebeest. They are forced out of hiding to the permanent waterpoints.

Boat cruise

- There's nothing more relaxing than floating along, sundowner in hand, and watching the scenery. Hippos and birds abound, crocs slip into the water after a day's sunbathing, and there's always the chance of seeing other animals on the shoreline that have come to drink. Predator highlights this month were leopards and lions. Birding highlights were an osprey and a bat hawk.

Fishing

- The water has warmed up and the fish are biting! Lucky anglers have landed catfish, tilapia and tigerfish this month. One fishing trip was upstaged by five lions drinking from the dam, with our guests choosing to watch the cats instead of fish.

Photographic hide

- The hide is worth visiting early morning, midday, late afternoon, and evening. A multitude of animals have been drinking there this month including elephants, rhinos, zebra, sable, wildebeest, impala, warthogs, lions and a host of fluttering birds. The seasonal blue moon cast silvery light as a jaw-dropping procession of animals continued to arrive late into the night.

Walks & rock art

- It's prime time for walking safaris – and our guides love to offer these. They can take in sights of the largest baobab on the property, rock art in the cliffs or a pod of hippos that bask and bathe in a deep pool in the Chiredzi. White rhinos, elephant bulls and lions have also been tracked on foot.

Unusual sightings

- Some poignant baboon behaviour has been witnessed this month: a mother baboon carrying the dead body of her infant baby, and a male baboon with a baby on his back – it's possible the mother might have been killed.
- A clear sighting of a brown hyena in the middle of the track was had one morning on the access road to Nduna.

Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft, and other excursions

- Guests are always amazed by the bushcraft skills demonstrated at Kambako. Other community outings this month included visits to a nearby school for young learners, and an extensive vegetable garden tended by women.

Daytrips to Gonarezhou National Park

- With these full day trips you are guaranteed to see elephants and the Chilojo Cliffs. Some of the bonuses on a drive this month including seeing a honey badger and 91 bird species.



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

A new little charge

After being off the property for a period of time each of us likes to go on a short drive, as soon as possible, to reacquaint ourselves with this wild world. This usually takes the form of having a sundowner on the Banyini or at one of the nearby pans. I did exactly that on the 15th of August, and was delighting in the company of a couple of white rhinos that had come to drink. In the distance another rhino was making her way to the water, but then I noticed a little smudge of grey behind her.



The mother arrives with her newborn calf, and wards off the nosy neighbours.





She ushers her son to safety, and drinks thirstily while he suckles.





The little one tries to copy mom and is bewildered as his feet get wet.



The smudge was her newborn calf, still sporting a little stump of umbilical cord. The mother was extremely protective of her little boy and warded off the other rhinos that tried to inspect the newcomer. With ears flattened and aggressive displays she made sure the overbearing relatives were kept at bay. She directed her baby safely to the water's edge, and there she drank for a long time.

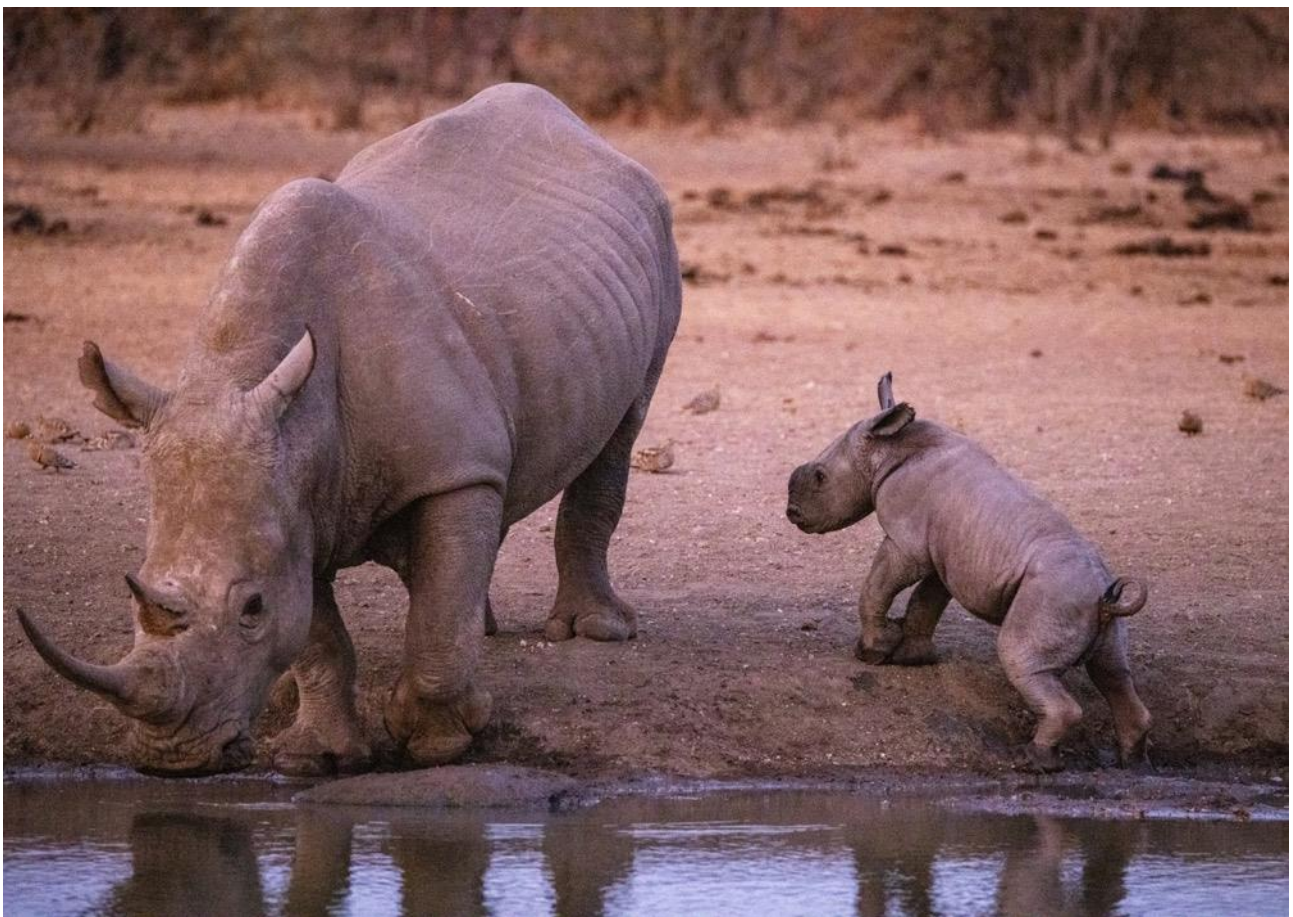
After the baby settled amid this exciting new environment it began to suckle, and he too enjoyed a long drink.

But then it was time for the little one to explore his surroundings... It was adorable to see how he tried to copy his mom and echo her moves. Of course he was far too young to drink water but he tottered over to the water's edge and wet his lips. But then his feet, that looked way too big for his body, got wet for the first time and he didn't know what to do about this dilemma. He stood there waving one foreleg about in the air not daring to put it down in the wet stuff again. It was absolutely adorable and endearing.

A heart stopping moment (for me) was when the calf scrambled up from the edge of the water and tottered over to an adult rhino that had been inching over all the while. The mom was caught off guard for a moment as the adult sniffed the baby and laid the lethal weapon of its horn on the baby's forehead. But in a flash mom swung round and charged at the intruder, sending it and the other rhinos scattering in a cloud of dust.

We can tell from the notches on the mother's ears that this white rhino is a cow named Kateko, and this is her 10th calf.

I was further delighted to learn that I was the first to see this bouncy little boy – what an incredible honour to have.



Even the edge of this pan proved a big hurdle to climb – his tail is curled with the maximum effort required.



The curious relative places its long pointed horn on the baby's forehead, before his mother sends it swiftly away.



Looking for trouble

We weren't far from the airstrip when our dedicated Lion Tracking Team called on the radio to say they'd found members of the Nduna Pride resting nearby. The pre-dawn light was low and the lions were sleeping. But a short while later one of the big young males woke up, yawned and stretched, and decided it was time to pester the rest of the pride. He strode over to where his brother lay and began wrestling with him. He quickly realised that this probably wasn't in his best interests, so decided to pick on the smallest member



of the pride – a napping cub. The big oaf just threw himself on top of the cub and pinned him to the ground in a semi-toothless/clawless hold. The little cub wailed and flailed until executing a cunning ninja move that sent his big brother dancing backwards.



Having not quite finished harassing his family he stalked his sister that was lying to the right of us. With the annoyance of a shrieking alarm clock he leapt on the lioness – a foolhardy move at the best of times. She side-stepped him and with a few swift moves batted him into place.



Of course all this action happened before there was any good sunrise light, so I used an ISO of 4 000 which gives the images a grainy look but was required in order to try and freeze some of the movement with a fast enough shutter speed. By the time the sun appeared above the horizon the pride had relocated for the day by crossing the airstrip and seeking a shady spot in shaded woodland area.

What a treat to see these lions being so active and playful for that short window of time. Lions are known to spend up to 20 hours a day resting to conserve their precious energy that is required for hunting or protecting territories – so to see them being playful for the fun of it is a rare treat.

Sable strategy



We spotted this handsome jet-black sable antelope on his own, not far from a waterhole, nibbling some grass. Some might think he was an outcast or lonely, but he is actually a clever strategist. The reason is that sable antelope need to drink daily, so by establishing his territory near a waterhole he will force receptive females to pass through his domain, and thus stand a chance of breeding with them.

As he turned his head his sweep of horns were shown off to maximum effect. Stallions will establish and defend territories through displays and, if necessary, fights, aiming to keep herds of females and their young within their range for mating opportunities. Seeing them fight is terrifying – they drop onto their knees and slash their horns in a double-barrelled sword fight.

Males unable to secure a territory often join small bachelor groups. Both bachelor and breeding groups have strict hierarchies, generally determined by age, with older individuals holding higher rank.

Sable will also defend themselves fiercely against predators. When cornered, they may back into dense bushes and face attackers head-on, using their sharp horns to deliver stabbing blows - occasionally even to the extent of killing predators like lions.

The good citizen



We spotted this bull elephant shake, and rattle a precious umbrella tree, (*Vachellia tortilis*) and my first thought was he was trying to roll it over. Thankfully he was not, because we then realised he was just shaking it vigorously to make all its pods fall to the ground (see photo 2) so that he could hoover them up and eat them.

What was even more amazing was that he didn't eat the pods from each tree all at once. He walked in a circle, going from tree to tree and gave each one a jolly good shake-up. Then, when back where he started, he began delicately gathering them up with the finger-like ends on his trunk, and popping them into his mouth. Then he would wander over to the next tree, pick up its bounty and do the same. It was much like watching those extremely patient among us - people who first crack open all the shells of a bag of pistachio nuts before gobbling them!

However, he didn't polish all the pods off – there were lots of leftovers for other animals to come and feed on. In this time of sparse flora this good citizen was supplying many other animals with a nutritious treat.



Horn size

As you can see from these photos the horn size on black rhinos (and other rhinos) can differ dramatically in size. The horns are made



of compressed keratin fibres, the same material that is found in fingernails and hair. The larger front horn is typically about 50 cm long (20 inches), but can sometimes be over a metre long.

The second horn on the rhino mother photographed below is also a tremendous size, and unusual shape. Her calf is also showing great horn growth for its age.



Angels & Hope

That is the title for the next two photographs that were taken at dawn, from our sunken photographic hide. There's a window of about an hour when, just as the sun rises, it casts the most glorious backlight on whatever is drinking at the waterhole. In this case it was delicate doves that would flutter down from the heavens, like earthbound angels.

We were mesmerised by the beauty and trying to capture these fleeting moments, but could hardly believe our luck when a rhino mother, sporting an incredible horn, ambled out of the bushes with her calf. As they cautiously approached the water they kicked up dust that billowed about them in a breath-taking scene.

In the first photo the colours are warmed a little, while in the second they are cooled:



August Gallery



We refer to this characterful tusker as “Kalakata”, a Shangani word meaning enormous and impressive. Doing their best not to be intimidated were this elephant and lioness in the riverbed.





Taking a brief reprieve from the midday heat was this wallowing warthog. Once the water had settled a family of nyala came to drink, cautiously sipping from the same spot.





A young female leopard obliges for her photograph before disappearing into the night.
Morning sunshine toasts these two young giraffes.





The crack of dawn revealed this smug lion between bellowing roars that rocked the valley as he called to his pride on the far side of the dam. Also illuminated were these hyenas and vultures making quick work of an old black rhino that died of natural causes.



Wildlife photography outtakes...

Animal behaviour can sometimes be admirable, ridiculous or outrageous. Here are three such moments from this month:



A male warthog has bent the fence (“bend it like Beckham”) around our staff soccer field, crawled underneath, and spent every day mowing the grass. He is dedicated, determined and dependable. He has also stolen hearts and is now affectionately known as Beckham.



This normally shy wild dog made a point of walking right next to the game-viewer and overmarking a hyena midden. Wild dogs and hyenas are constantly vying for one-upmanship, just like male domestic dogs.

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