

Singita



Female leopard, Nyala – Photo by Monika Malewski

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

Temperature

Average minimum: 13.9°C (57.1°F)
Minimum recorded: 09.0°C (48.2°F)
Average maximum: 30.1°C (86.1°F)
Maximum recorded: 36.0°C (96.8°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0 mm
Season to date: 452 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:28
Sunset: 17:28

Winter is in full swing. This year however, is different. It is the coldest it's been in almost a decade. Our warm breath creating white steam in front of our faces as we sip on hot coffee at the lodge, eagerly awaiting the sunrise. We wrap up in blankets and beanies, hot water bottles on our laps, and set out in the now dry and dusty concession. Water is scarce, and congregations of animals around the river and last remaining waterholes are a common site. As a result we have seen more predators than ever, with at least one leopard being seen almost every day this month.

A Sightings Snapshot for July follows:

Lions

- The Shish Pride eluded us for almost a week after sneaking through the southern part of our concession and then turning east, disappearing into the Lebombo Mountains. A week went by with only a few tracks until finally one of our guides found them lazing around on Nyokene ridge with full bellies. They had most likely had a successful hunt and left their sanctuary in the mountains to head to the N'wanetsi River, the only source of water in this area now.
- In the middle of the month Shish Pride took down an old female giraffe, on which they fed for three days until there was nothing left but bones for the poor hyenas and patiently perching vultures.
- Chava Pride was also successful in taking down a large wildebeest in the first week of July. Our team had watched patiently as they stalked a group of giraffes that morning, before moving on to a few waterbuck. They were unlucky and it was not until the next day we found them fighting over the wildebeest carcass. By this time Maputo and Xai-Xai had heard the commotion and made sure they got the "lions' share".
- Maputo and Xai-Xai have been moving about the northern half of our concession quite a bit. They were seen early in the month near Ingwe link, where our team found them vocalising in unison with the Chava Pride.
- The Mananga Pride at the beginning of the month introduced us to three brand new cubs. We had had our suspicions when a single lioness was seen moving in and around Dumbana rocks for the last two months without the rest of her pride. This brings the current cub count to 11! The previous eight are still small but growing in confidence with every encounter. Towards the end of the month the pride was seen feeding on a buffalo cow in the N'wanetsi River before heading west out of our concession near the sticky-thorn thickets.
- On the morning of the 20th, one very lucky guide and tracker with their guests, came across the Chava Pride as well as a few tiny cubs. This would explain why we have only been seeing four of the five females recently. The Maputo male and Xai-Xai have officially sired their first offspring on our concession.
- The oldest female in the Shish Pride was seen sleeping alone on a rocky outcrop in the N'wanetsi River. We have not seen her since and believe she has passed on. She was roughly nineteen years old, the mother of the famous white lion cub (now nine years old with his own territory near Satara Rest Camp), and the saviour of the Shish Pride. Without her, we probably wouldn't have such a strong and thriving pride that we see today.

Leopards

- Nyala female was seen right in the beginning of the month, looking for any remains of her impala carcass which she unfortunately lost, we suspect, to hyenas. Luckily, she had managed to eat some of her hard-earned meal the previous evening before the hyenas came past. On the 13th July the guiding team found her with another impala carcass stashed underneath a knobthorn tree. We were certain she was going to lose it to hyenas again, but she managed to feed on it for a few days before moving north again along N'wanetsi. She is proving to be a successful and independent young female, and I'm sure we will start seeing her hoist her kills into trees as soon as she gets a bit bigger.
- Towards the middle of the month, we believe Nyala female and Dumbana female had a small altercation over a carcass Dumbana had left unattended when she went to fetch her cubs. As a result, Nyala female has a small wound on her side. We are not too worried, as these animals are resilient and this is merely "growing pains".
- Nhlanguleni female was seen dragging an impala carcass across the Central Depression Road towards the Xinkelegane drainage. We were all surprised when for the next two days she did not attempt to hoist it into a nearby tree but rather stashed it under a conveniently fallen branch on the bank of the

Xinkelegane. She appeared to have fed previously and so probably was not too concerned about losing this opportunistic meal.

- On the 6th July one of our trackers spotted an impala ram wedged into the fork of a giant sycamore fig tree on the banks of the N'wanetsi River. On further investigation we found the beautiful Confluence male leopard perched on one of the ancient branches and a spotted hyena sleeping below. He was seen again regularly in the N'wanetsi River between Euphorbia Crossing and Wahlberg's Nest.
- Dumbana female was located late one morning near Xingwenyana Crossing. One of our guiding teams were lucky enough to catch a quick glimpse as she sped through the bush to catch an impala that had been unaware of her presence. She pulled the animal under a thick clump of bushes and set off to get her two cubs. The next morning, there was no sign of the impala, but her and one of her cubs were sleeping in a large apple-leaf tree nearby. The Mananga Pride walked right past the Dumbana leap without realising it and settled down about 200 metres away. She had probably hidden the impala carcass very well in some thick brush because the next day we found her and her cubs feeding on it in a small apple-leaf tree. The tree was so small however that they had to take turns feeding.
- Lebombo male made his first appearance this month near Fig-In-The-Lead.
- Nhlanguleni's previous female cub, now known as Nungu female, was seen hunting spurfowl in Xinanene Poort. The next day Khalanga male was found with a kudu carcass just west of this. Unfortunately for him however it was stolen by the single Mananga lioness.

Cheetahs

- Near the end of the month a female cheetah was seen chasing impala around the Central Depression.
- A few days later a lucky guide and guests witnessed her opportunistically hunt an old impala ram that was moving alone through an open clearing. She managed to feed for a few hours before hundreds of vultures descending eventually led her to leave the carcass and go find water in the Xinkelegane drainage.

African wild dogs

- There were two packs seen this month. One pack of eight near Shidulu Pan and another pack of nine with a collared individual on Three-Trees.

Spotted hyenas

- Six individuals, including two cubs were seen moving over the ridge north of Milkberry Road. They are believed to be part of the clan that was denning north of Hyena Crossing. The cubs are old enough now to leave the den in the evenings but young enough that they are not yet wandering alone but rather following close behind mum.
- A clan of seven adults were seen one evening calling and greeting as more and more individuals joined the group. It appeared as if they were trying to get a large group together to drive the Shish Pride from the remains of the giraffe carcass.
- Many individuals have been spotted near the sticky-thorn thicket, we believe something large must have died as the Mananga Pride and the Trichardt male have been spending much of their time in the sticky-thorn thickets and the Loop Road west of that when they need to get a drink from the N'wanetsi River.

Elephants

- With Kruger National Park boasting over 25 000 elephants (according to 2021 census), we are blessed to be able to see elephants every single day. Many herds have tiny calves with them and a small bachelor herd of three bulls with very impressive tusks was seen near Shidulu Pan.

Buffalos

- At the end of last month, a massive herd of almost one thousand animals divided into two groups, some went west, and the rest headed straight for our concession where they have been drinking from the N'wanetsi River near the Dumbana drainage. At the end of the first week a group of guests were sipping G&Ts from a high ridge line on the edge of the Lebombo Mountains when the sun started setting behind this huge herd as they slowly marched south leaving dust clouds in front of the crimson red and glowing sky.
- The very dry conditions elsewhere have translated to this herd frequenting our concession for the last remaining water in the N'wanetsi River. The Mananga Pride took advantage of this and managed to bring down a buffalo cow on the 25th of this month.

Plains game

- With the unfortunate accidental spread of a wildfire in the northern parts of our concession, we have noticed a plethora of game moving south towards the Gudzane Dam and N'wanetsi River. The zebras are always the first to reclaim the burnt areas and seek out the new green flush that follows after a few days.
- Hippos are congregating in the last deep pools, specifically Dumbana Pools, where a few guides and their guests have been treated to over 40 hippos stampeding from one end of the river to the deeper section.

Rare animals and other sightings

- Two caracals have been seen on the H6 on the way to and from the Shishangaan Staff Village on more than one occasion this month.
- A serval has been spending time near Green-apple Hill, and to the delight of our guests, was seen twice in one day this month.

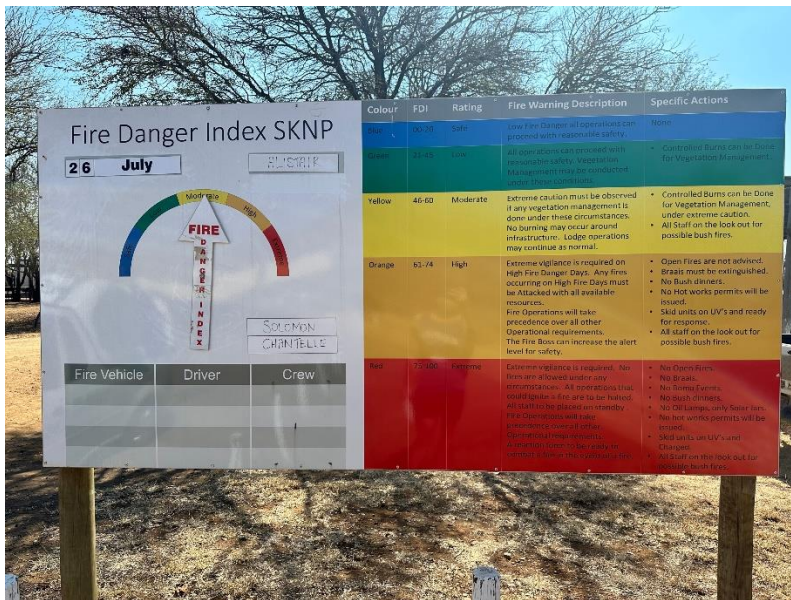
Birds

- A flock of four ostrich, two male and two female, as well as a pair of secretary birds have been seen a few times on the H6 this month.
- The African stonechats are perched on dead tree stumps in the basalt plains, a common site only in our winter months.
- Different species of vulture, including the critically endangered, white-headed vulture, have led the guiding team to more than one predator on a carcass this month.
- A violet-eared waxbill and pale flycatcher were seen near the Poort and the common moorhen has been seen darting between the reeds at the weir quite regularly this month.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as a July Gallery of images

Controlled burning, or basically fire, is a vitally important part of many ecosystems. This is in particular to the African Savanna Biome, of which Singita Kruger National Park is a part. It has mainly two functions – helps to maintain wildlife habitat and at the same time prevent fuel overload which can lessen the severity and frequency of wildfires. Controlled burning is the planned use of fire to achieve these specific outcomes. Understanding how it works and the effect it has on the vegetation is vital for any management plan.

Singita Kruger National Park is no different and controlled burning takes place each and every year around the dryer winter months – May to August. Meticulous planning goes into every planned controlled burn with many factors taken into account. The Fire Index must be low and, while you need wind, it must not be too windy. The chosen area/s to be burnt are also not just selected randomly but are burnt on a rotational basis, similar to crop rotation in agriculture. Continuously burn an area and this can lead to soil erosion; not burning an area for a long period of time leads to fuel build up which could result in a catastrophic wild fire, threatening human and animal life and even the possibility of a lodge or lodges burning down.



Picture 1 - Singita KNP Fire Danger Index Board

Benefits of controlled burning?

For thousands of years, fire has been a naturally occurring phenomenon of the environment which has shaped and transformed the savanna landscape as it is today. The open and wooded savanna actually needs fire to remain healthy and thrive. In fact, not burning is actually detrimental and can lead to a number of negative consequences.

Controlled burning mimics low-intensity fires that would have naturally occurred. In fire adapted ecosystems, it eliminates species that can't tolerate fire, essentially reducing competition and stopping the prevalence of bush encroachment. It encourages new growth of indigenous grasses, while eliminating the saplings of bush encroaching plant species, and recycles nutrients back into the soil. Bush encroachment can eventually take over entire grasslands, destroying the food source required by specialist and bulk grazers, namely blue wildebeest and plains zebra. This in turn can directly affect the prevalence and survival of cheetah for example, who require the large open spaces to use their incredible speed when actively hunting. Controlled burning doesn't eliminate all of the trees in a grassland – trees that are above the height of the tallest grasses often

survive, ensuring an adequate food supply for the browsers such as kudu and giraffe. However, any tree shorter than the grass will burn and die along with any new tree saplings.

It also prevents moribund grasses. Moribund is the concept of grass basically “growing itself to death”. Years and years of dead grasses collect and pile up on top of each other. Any new grass growth below the moribund layer goes dormant as it is unable to grow due to a lack of space and the absence of sunlight which is vital for the process of photosynthesis. Without fire, grasses become unhealthy, resulting in the woody community being unchallenged, as it is now easy to outcompete the grass which is no longer active. “Breathing room” is created when burning the moribund and this leads to new grass to grow and flourish.

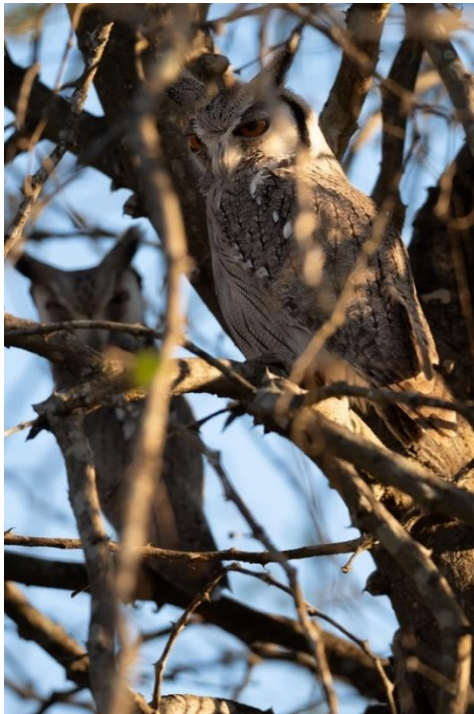
Animals generally have enough time to escape a controlled burn as they can hear, feel and smell the fire when it is still far away. Smaller animals like snakes and tortoises, as well many insects for example, move underground where they are safe. This is because heat from the fire hardly ever penetrates deeper than 5 cm (2 inches) beneath the soil surface.



Pictures 2, 3, 4 and 5 – A recent wildfire which made its way into the northern parts of the Singita Kruger National Park concession. Picture 4 shows Singita KNP personnel putting back burns in place which stopped the wildfire from advancing further south. Picture 5 shows an aerial view of the wildfire - note the trees which were taller than the grass which have resulted in them not being burnt. Even though this was not a planned controlled burn, the fire has done its purpose. Once the summer rains arrive, this area will come alive with new lush and nutritious grass growth that will attract grazes and browsers alike and, in turn, attract the abundance of predators which prey upon them.

It was a cool winter's afternoon, and our mission was to explore the roads less taken in the eastern part of our concession, hoping to come across tracks of the Shish Pride who had been MIA for the last week. We knew their last tracks headed towards the Lebombo Mountains, but an unexpected rain shower had dissolved all their tracks since then. What's worse all the soil had gone from a fine dusty layer to an almost cement like texture, making it challenging to see when even an animal as heavy as an elephant has walked along it, let alone a lion with soft fur between her toes. But you never stop looking, as there is always some magic to be seen out...

Heading north on Sisal Line, a road named after the attempt to grow sisal plants as a natural boundary between South Africa and Mozambique, Sunday suddenly put up his hand and looked left. I tried to stop as smoothly, and as quickly as I could because I had seen what Sunday had spotted. Somehow, despite the speed I was driving at and how dense the vegetation was, Sunday had managed to locate a pair of southern white-faced owls roosting in a small knobthorn tree. I successfully stopped next to this tree, and the two small owls peered down at us over their feather faces.



Southern white-faced owls - Photo by Monika Malewski

These owls are famous for their remarkable ability to change their appearance. When they are startled, they can stretch their bodies and tighten their feathers, becoming taller and thinner to blend in with branches. Simultaneously, they narrow their bright eyes into slits and raise their "ear" tufts, reducing the visibility of their faces. To give the impression of being larger and more intimidating, they extend and elevate their wings in a broad semicircle around their bodies and puff up their feathers to enhance their apparent size.

Being predominantly nocturnal, these birds are not regularly encountered and so have an air of mystery around them. The local Shangaan/Tsonga people tend to associate owls with superstition and many African folktales see them as witches or bringers of evil. Some tribes use spikes on the roofs of their houses to deter

owls from landing on them as it is seen as a negative omen. For other cultures the owl is sacred and often viewed as a symbol of wisdom. Many people believe that seeing an owl is a profoundly good thing, as it indicates the start of a new phase in life. And for those who are less superstitious, owls are just as fascinating due to their many adaptations for hunting under the cover of darkness.



African scops owl – Photo by Monika Malewski

Hunting at night means that owls need to be able see under very low-light conditions. To aid this their eyeballs are comparatively much bigger than ours, taking up 75% of their skull vs the 5% ours takes up. They have a higher density of light sensitive cells called rods, and lower density of colour sensing receptors and so are basically colour-blind. Their eyeballs are so big and lack the ocular muscles to move the eyeballs and therefore are always looking forward. Their incredibly flexible necks allow them to turn 270 degrees left or right to see what is happening around them.



All species of owl have a facial disk. This stiff ring of feathers around the face acts like a large outer ear, while asymmetrical ear openings pinpoint the exact source of a sound with deadly accuracy.

In order to minimise the noise made while flying, they have tiny fringe feathers which look similar to eyelashes. They are found on the leading edge of an owl's wing to disrupt the air moving over and under the wing making them inaudible for even the most sensitive microphones to hear, as was demonstrated in one experiment by BBC sound engineers.

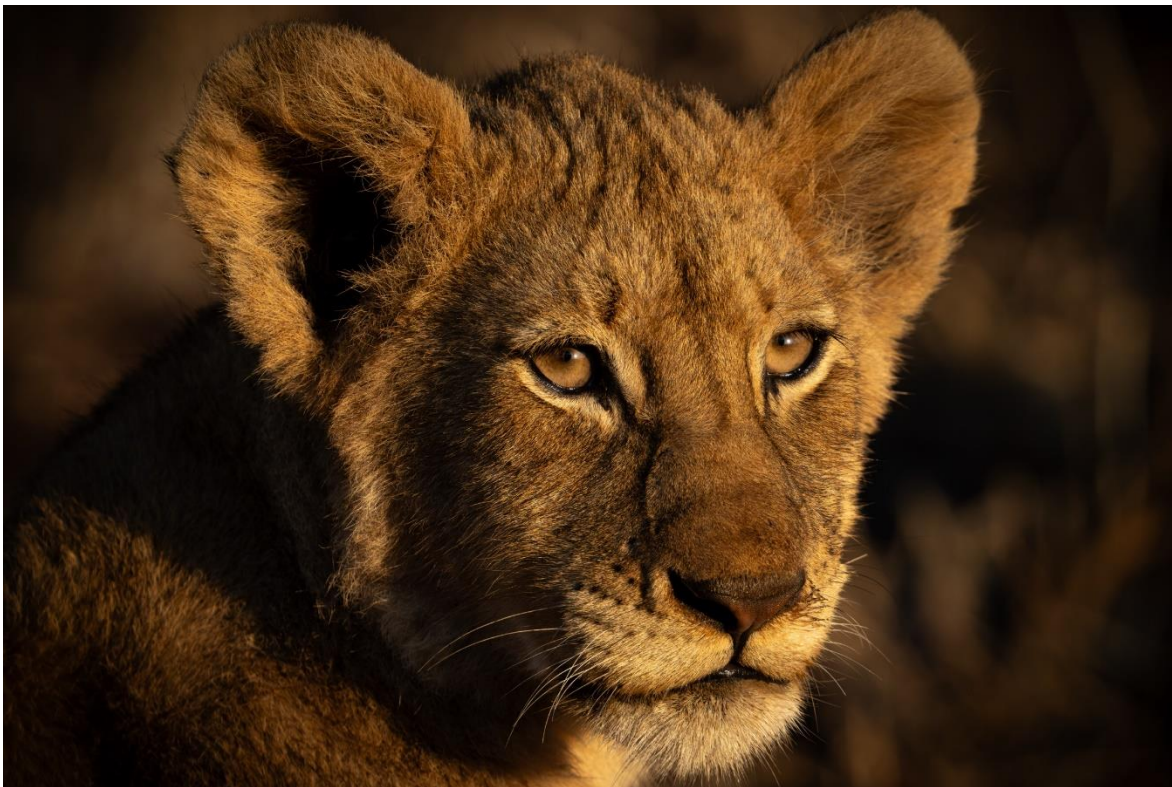
When they do vocalise however, owls make some of the most unique sounds. The deep grunting of the Verreux's eagle owl and the repetitive almost insect like chirp of the African scops owl is a distinctive sound of the lowveld at night.

Verreux's Eagle Owl – Photo by Monika Malewski

July Gallery



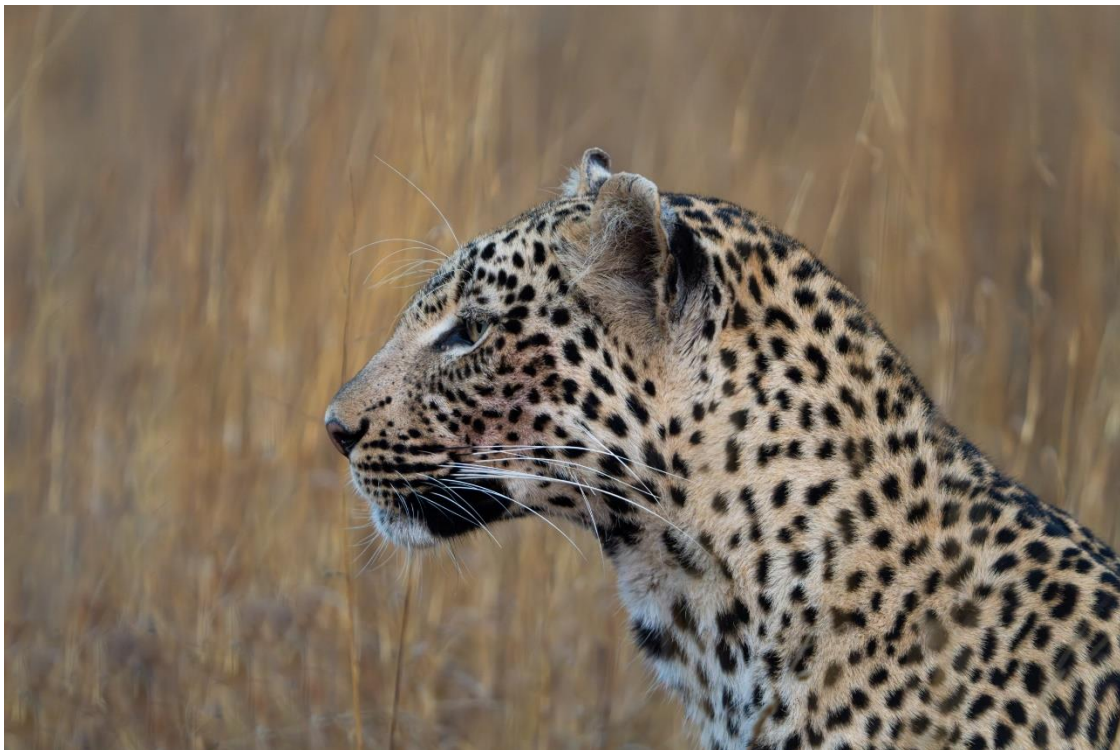
Trichardt male – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Mananga cub – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Sunset over the basalt plains – Photo by Chantelle Venter



Nyala female leopard – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Shish Pride – Photo by Chantelle Venter



Trichardt male – Photo by Monika Malewski



African buffalo – Photo by Chantelle Venter



Confluence male leopard - Photo by Monika Malewski



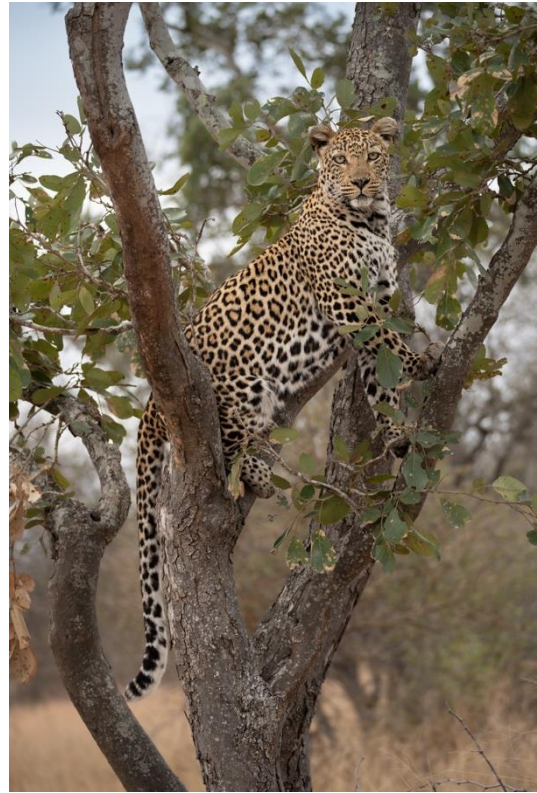
The granophyre's – Photo by Chantelle Venter



Female cheetah with impala – Photo by Monika Malewski



Spotted hyena track – Photo by Chantelle Venter



Dumbana female leopard - Photo by Monika Malewski



Elephant calves playing – Photo by Monika Malewski