

# Singita



## WILDLIFE REPORT

### SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE

For the month of May, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four

#### Temperature

Average minimum: 15.5°C (59.9°F)

Minimum recorded: 12.7°C (54.8°F)

Average maximum: 29.9°C (85.8°F)

Maximum recorded: 35.1°C (95.1°F)

#### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0 mm

Season to date: 345.6 mm

\*Season = Sep to Aug

#### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:23

Sunset: 17:19

Autumn in May is arguably the most picturesque month on the reserve with the concentrated precious metal colours against the greens. There's also an early nip in the air which gives way to welcome warm sunny days by mid-morning. Another joyous welcome this month was seeing two guests return to us after more than a decade, catching up on their news and reminiscing about previous visits.

The Malilangwe Trust completed the first round of the annual Rhino Ops this month, which involves ear notching calves older than a year, as well as DNA sampling, body measurements and microchipping. It's a slick operation that's the result of extensive pre-planning logistics, air and ground support. Some of our guests, being in the right place at the right time, even got to witness the Rhino Ops - a lucky duo watched as the team darted a fifteen-month-old black rhino and performed the ear notching and data gathering.

## **A sightings snapshot for May follows:**

### **Lions**

- Coalitions: The three territorial males provided a meaty sighting having killed a buffalo on the Pamushana Access Road, where they finished off the huge meal in a couple of days. On the river banks two adult male lions were enjoying relaxing in splendid late afternoon light before a bull elephant came and chased them off in the direction of the riverbed.
- River Pride: members from this pride were seen around Ray's Drift and Chikwete. They successfully hunted a buffalo in the Chikwete drainage. There is currently a mating pair in this pride.
- Nduna Pride: Five members of this pride were seen at Nduna Dam, and thereafter relaxing close to the Mhangula Triangle. The splinter group of this pride (three males and three females) have been hunting in the central regions of West Valley Road, Binya Road near Pamushana Access, on the road to Nhangwa, and then heading into Nyamasikana riverbed towards Kwali.

### **Leopards**

- This month's journal focuses on a mother leopard and her cubs. Since then it is most likely that it is her that has been seen in the drainage line north of the airstrip, drinking at Simbiri Dam, and calling for her cubs at the old hyena den on West Valley.
- A quick sighting was had of a small female leopard when a single bull elephant unknowingly flushed the cat out from under a bush.

### **Wild dogs**

There are two very promising updates on African wild dogs.

- The pack of 11 that has been hunting in the central area and sparring with thieving hyenas, was seen heading back to the den that they used in 2022. This hopefully means that they'll successfully raise pups there and hunt in this well-frequented game drive area for the next few months.
- Across the Chiredzi River, on the far western side of Hippo Valley, a pack of seven wild dogs were seen relaxing close to the boundary. We hope and suspect that this growing pack is denning in that area too.

### **Hyenas**

- Hyenas have been seen feeding on an impala stolen from wild dogs, and the carcass of a giraffe.
- A clan of eight were spotted patrolling along Pamushana Access at the old boom gate.

### **Rhinos**

- White: It'll be the exception not to see at least one white rhino on every drive. Often the tally goes into the teens!
- Black: Sightings of black rhinos have been very good this month, and often these more solitary herbivores have been seen in small groups. Notable sightings have been of a male that had his face covered in dried blood. The blood had come from a few facial wounds which he must have received from another black rhino over a female or territorial dispute. Another was when the guide got out of the vehicle and tracked a black rhino after it had mock charged the vehicle, only to return to the vehicle and find that it had doubled back and returned to the vehicle before he had! Calmer sightings have been had of a characterful bull drinking at the lodge pan.

### **Elephants**

Elephant sightings are more prolific, especially as the vegetation dries out and visibility through the bush improves.

- Bulls: Several bachelor groups are found scattered about, but are more reliably seen at the pans.
- Breeding herds: The best place to see breeding herds this month has been around Chikwete Cliffs and the swamps on Hippo Valley. An indelible sundowner was had with a red setting sun and 70 elephants in the swamp area - young ones playing, pushing one another as well as checking their heights by lifting heads against each other.

## **Buffalos**

Two sightings in particular stand out:

- Two buffalo bulls, one with a newly broken horn still bleeding. They must have had a barbaric fight.
- A herd of more than 900 buffalo feeding north of Hwata Pan.

## **Plains game**

- Plains game abound as always, but it is really good to see the shyer species like sable and hartebeest more in evidence. A herd of eland mingled with a herd of wildebeest, and the wildebeest seemed to calm them because for once we were able to view them relaxed and at ease with the game viewer.

## **Hippos**

- We always see hippos in the dam when boat cruising, but there is a pod that stay in a pool in the Chiredzi River. We sat on the riverbank enjoying refreshments while watching 44 of them in the river and moving out of the reeds. It was spectacular.

## **Birds**

- The birding highlights for May was spotting a rare bat hawk hunting insect-eating bats in the fading light, and, on another occasion, seeing a peregrine falcon swoop down and hawk a bat, land in a nearby tree and begin to eat the bat.

## **Boat cruise**

- A description from one of the guides is as follows: "It was a relaxing boat excursion. The water was like glass so the dead trees standing in the water were clearly reflected. Hippos positioned themselves at every shallow area, grunting, leaping and blowing out their breaths. We spent much time around them as they popped up and down. Crocodiles lined the edge of the river, trying to absorb enough heat to facilitate digestion. Bushbuck, warthog and impala were spread out on the flood plain, and the landscape was second to none."
- One of the highlights was seeing a baby hippo standing on its mother's back.

## **Fishing**

- The fishing trips were great fun with a number of tilapias taking the bait.

## **Photographic hide**

- The sunken photographic hide that lies beneath a mound of earth next to Hwata Pan provided excellent close-up undetected views of animals, as always. But on one occasion the hide could not be accessed as two lions were using the mound as their throne!

## **Walks & rock art**

- Walking is an activity that our guides enjoy as much as any other – and there is no better time for it than in these winter months. It is entirely enjoyable to focus on the small details, and incredible to explore the rock art sites if they are on en route. Occasionally we will approach larger animals if the conditions are favourable, the goal always being that we remain undetected.

## **Daytrips to Gonarezhou National Park**

- Daytrips included brunch at Chilojo Cliffs with a parade of elephants in the riverbed below, as well as visiting Masasanya Dam and Sililijo Loop where impala, kudu, wildebeest, zebra, and breeding herds of elephants were seen.

**Some bush stories follow, as well as the May Gallery.**

## Striking gold

Leopard sightings at Singita Pamushana are usually elusive and swift, much like the predators themselves. It takes a long time and a lot of patience for a leopard to become accustomed to game viewer vehicles and the sound of people, without feeling too threatened. Two months ago we featured a story about a leopard sleeping in a marula tree on Ultimate Drive. It had occurred to me that possibly she was a mother, and that her cubs were at a den somewhere in the rocky ridges nearby, and she was enjoying some peace and quiet in the tree. A couple of fleeting glimpses of a leopard and two cubs were had after that sighting, in the same vicinity.

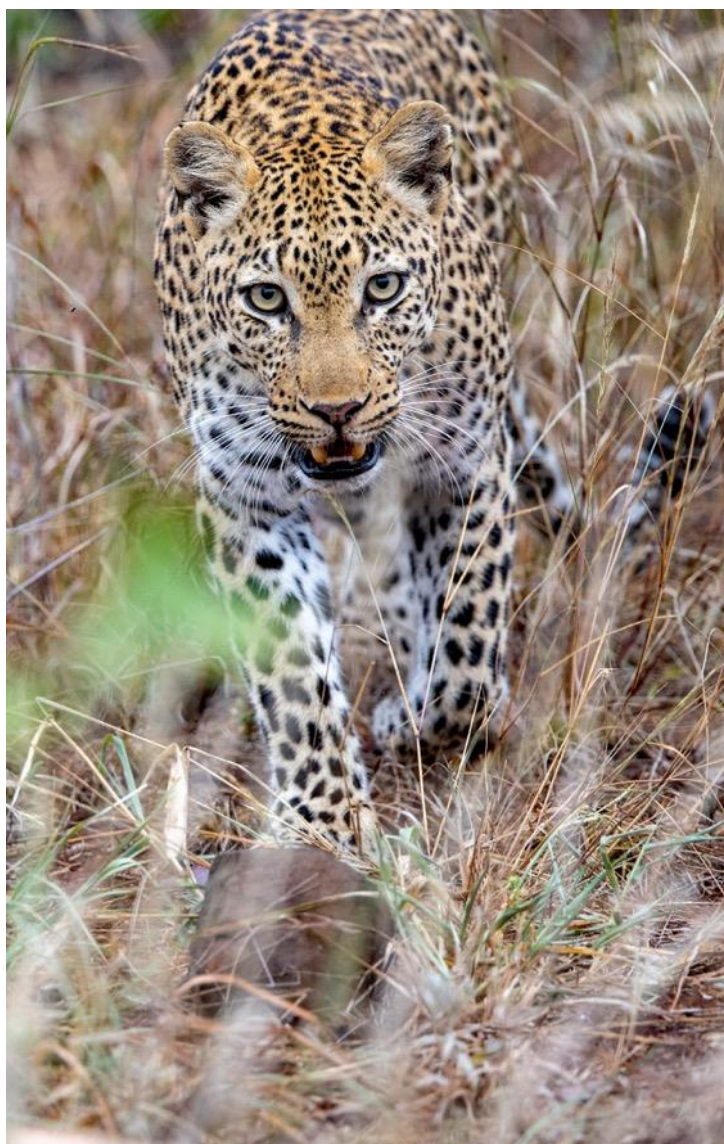
The day before this sighting I had found the drag marks left by a leopard carrying a small antelope of some sort, along Ultimate Drive and up into the rocky areas. It was far too dangerous to track on foot into those rocky areas where no vehicle can go, so I left it at that.



The next morning was overcast and drizzly. I was at Sosigi Dam alone on a scouting drive. Steve was guiding guests and happened to mention on the radio that he'd seen fresh drag marks across a road of a leopard and impala, but no cat was on site. Requesting more detail I established these were new drag marks on a different road to those of the day before, and the impala was actually lying abandoned in the bushes near the side of the road. Steve had carried on with his game drive but this was too good an opportunity for me to pass up, especially as I was alone and had time on my side. In due course I found the drag marks, tracked them into the vegetation, and found the dead impala. Then I drove back to the road, parked under a tree, got out my binos and flask of coffee and settled in for what could have been a long day and night with no reward. Either the leopard was incredibly wary and had abandoned the kill when it saw the first game viewer and would retrieve the kill when no one was there – but there had already been half an hour before Steve leaving and me arriving and the kill was still there; or the kill had been made by a mother leopard and she had gone to collect her cubs and lead them to this large kill for, possibly, the first time.

A few sips of coffee later a leopard just materialised out of the long grass, walking straight towards the kill. I could barely contain my elation when, leaping through the long grass like dolphins, along came two cubs as well. The mother had left the kill in a relatively open area – it was visible from the road if you knew where to look, and hyenas or lions or even wild dogs could have found it in a flash. She picked up the carcass and

started dragging it further into the dense bush with a set plan in mind. Every now and again she would drop it to regain her breath, even let the cubs have a bite or two, then come back and retrieve it. I was trying to follow at a respectful distance but not lose sight of her. There were two big marula trees in the area, and I was willing her to go and tree the kill in one of them, but she was making a beeline for a baobab in a technically tricky 4x4 area.



The mother leopard

Arriving at the baobab she tucked the heavy impala behind it and lay down on the other side of the tree to rest. One of the cubs was far more gregarious than the other and immediately began to feed on the carcass. I was so relieved and honoured that the mother was tolerating my presence. I think it helped significantly that I was alone and there was absolutely no talking or movement coming from the vehicle.

(The other cub is a female that looks exactly like her mother with distinctly white eyebrows and a 2:2 spot pattern; the mother also has a 2:2 spot pattern, while the gregarious cub has a 3:2 spot pattern.)

Seeing the young leopard tucking in and taking little mouthfuls of the impala, sticking its tongue out as it tasted the meat, and getting blood on its muzzle was truly incredible. It was raining, there weren't even flies about, the colours were saturated, and the leopards were okay with my presence.

In due course the one cub had enough and went to lie a metre or so away, and the mother came over and began to feed. It was extraordinary to see the detail of how she licked the fur off the impala in parts.



The cub acquiring the taste of impala.





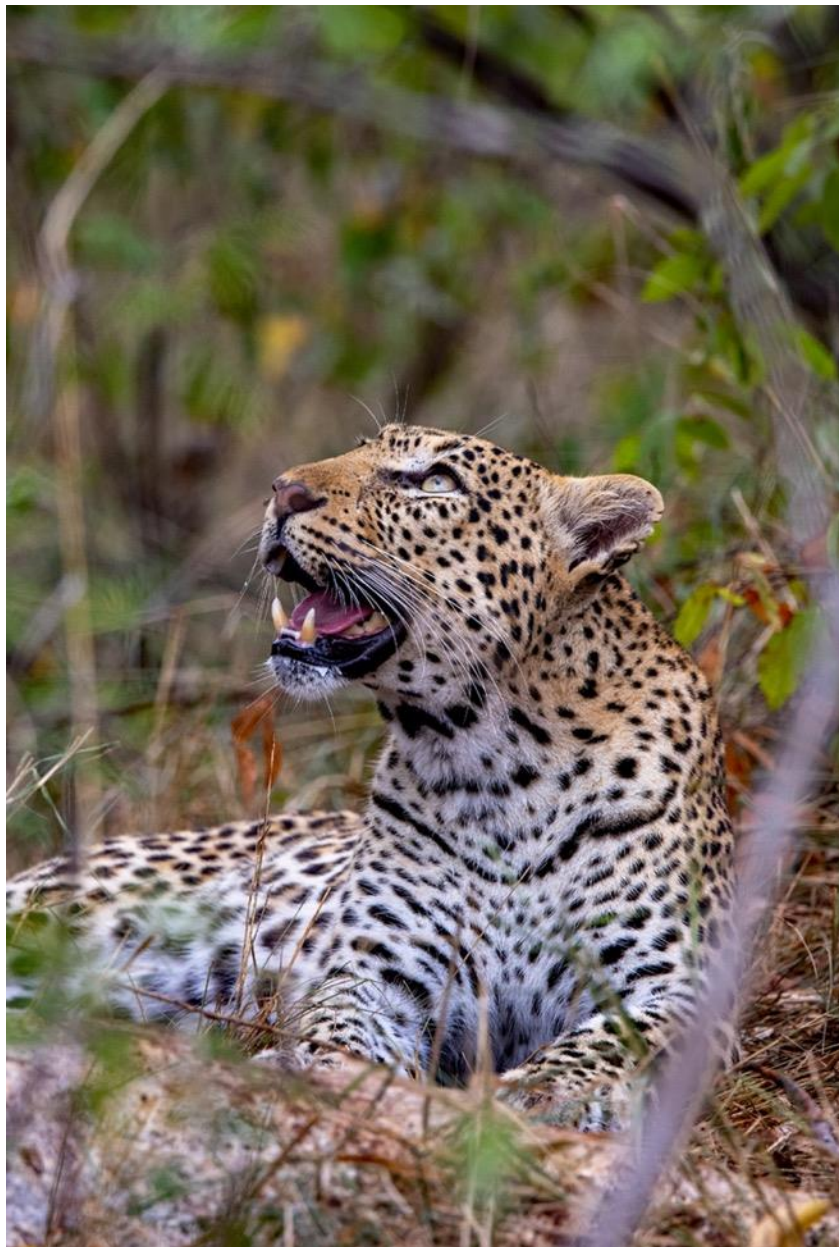
The mother feeding, then removing the stomach contents for the cub to feed on the nutritious meal.



The mother surgically bit into the impala and carefully removed the stomach contents, emptying them out on to the fur, as they were of no nutritional value to her and she didn't want to taint the meat.

I returned to the scene that afternoon and, despite the full cloud cover, vultures had spotted the carcass and descended into the baobab. The cubs were not in evidence, and you could see the mother was perturbed by the vultures. I didn't stay long, not wanting to add to her issues. When I checked again the next morning there was no sign of any of the leopards or the carcass, so I hope she had been able to move it in the night to a more concealed spot.

This is an extremely dangerous period in a cub's life – they are vulnerable to other predators that will see them as competition and kill them; their curiosity or anxiety can be the death of them, and even a male leopard that isn't their father could kill them.



Here the mother leopard is looking up at the vultures in the baobab.

What an extraordinary privilege to have witnessed this scene – one I will never forget and am delighted to be able to share with you via these photographs. How extremely lucky I was. It is impossible not to fall in love with these animals and then worry, like a mother, about their future. May they thrive in paradise.



## Two for the price of one

Seeing two of the Big Five in one scene is always a bonus. Here the elephant bull dominates the waterhole, satisfying his needs before the rhinos get the 'all clear' to make their way.



A scientific paper has recently been published that looks at something so much smaller – how elephant footprints create habitat for aquatic macroinvertebrate communities. (Aquatic macroinvertebrates are small organisms that have no internal skeletal system and live part or all of their lives in water.) The study gives an overview of the diversity and ecology within those mini-dam-like footprint habitats, and it's amazing how many tiny creatures they recorded living in them, and how quickly they colonise them.

## See it in black and white

Early one morning we had a great sighting of a black rhino and her calf browsing. Emerging cautiously from a dense thicket, they approached us. The mother, with her permanent sharpened daggers, led the way, while her young calf followed closely behind, almost hidden in her protective shadow. This behaviour is characteristic of black rhino calves, who stay behind their mothers to shield themselves from potential threats.

In contrast, white rhino calves exhibit a different behaviour. White rhinos prefer more open grassland areas as they are grazers, and their calves typically walk in front of the mothers, benefiting from the clear view as their mothers keep a watchful eye over them from behind. This difference in calf positioning is a fascinating adaptation to their respective habitats and behaviours.



When the mother was really close to us and could see we were no threat, the calf stepped out from behind her to give us the once-over too.

The mother then turned and both walked off nonchalantly to continue their browsing in the bushes. It was a brief but beautiful encounter with these sensitive and complex mega-herbivores.



### Pecking order

I'm pretty sure a male leopard killed this zebra, but then abandoned the carcass as it was next to a busy road, and intended to retrieve it later. But fortune favours the bold here, and unseen vultures quickly dropped from the sky and monopolised it. It was so good to see that a pair of lappet-faced vultures were at the feast too.

A distinct pecking order exists among vultures when they converge on a carcass. The hierarchical feeding process ideally begins with the powerful lappet-faced vultures. Their strong beaks and large size allow them to tear through tough hide and muscle, creating initial access points into a carcass. Following them, white-backed vultures move in, leveraging the openings made by the lappets to feed on softer tissues. Lastly, the smaller hooded vultures, with their slender beaks, pick at the remaining scraps and clean up the bones, ensuring nothing goes to waste.





A lappet-faced vulture stands proud as a white-backed vulture scurries behind it.  
A scrumage of white-backed vultures climb in for their turn at the carcass.



May Gallery

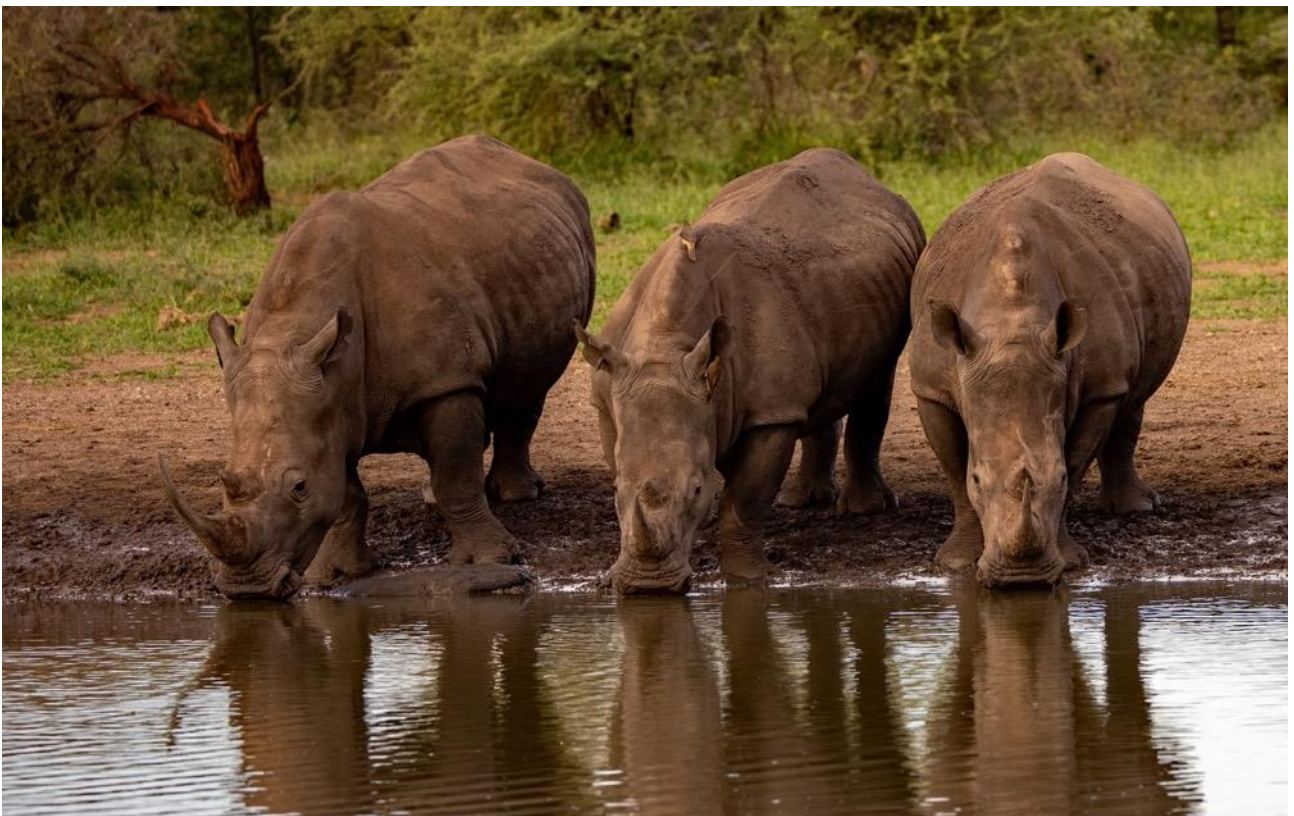


Above: A leopard peers out from behind a baobab. Below: A lone impala quenching its thirst.





Ripples and shadows casting beautiful patterns on a buffalo's coat.  
A trio of rhino with sword-sharp horns.





A zebra mare with her beautiful foal.  
A rare scene where a black rhino (far left) joined white rhinos to drink, after sunset.

