

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL

SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA

For the month of May, Two Thousand and Twenty One

Temperature

Average minimum: 13.7°C (56.6°F)
Average maximum: 27.0°C (80.6°F)
Minimum recorded: 11.0°C (51.8°F)
Maximum recorded: 35.0°C (95.0°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 2mm
For the season to date: 847.9mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:23
Sunset: 17:18

The cycle of nature can be that of intense emotion. Birth bursts with curiosity and innocence, but with every beginning there must always be an end and the most powerful and ultimate finale is death. May is a month of change. Leaves begin to yellow and descend from their canopy coverings. Patches of land emerge through the jigsaw of plant growth, as the green jacket of summer falls away to expose the dry dull landscape of winter. Mirroring the shifting landscape, this month brought another big change within our resident lion pride. Towards the beginning of the month, the dramatic discovery of the deceased Othawa male lion was found. Advancing too far into forbidden territory, it appears that his confident adventure into new land was met with a fatal ending. Death symbolises the end and although this was the end of the Othawa male's saga, his legacy continues in the amazing discovery of seven new lion cubs introduced into the Mhangeni Pride.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for May:

Lions

- At the beginning of May, the Othawa male ventured east of Singita towards Mala Mala. For an adult male, it's common to expand territory range, testing new areas for potential growth and eyeing out competitors. Unfortunately though, for the six-year-old male, this adventure was a fatal one. One of our guides found the carcass of an adult lion close to the boundary to Mala Mala and with dental examination it has been confirmed that the carcass belongs to the Othawa male. Presumably this male ran into the two Birmingham males (these males were last seen around the same area). Although the latter are much older than the Othawa male, they hold much more experience and this potentially cost the Othawa male his life.



- The Mhangeni Pride are unaware of the fate of their dominant male figure – the Othawa male, and have been seen frequently throughout the central and southern regions of the reserve. On one misty May morning, the pride were seen stalking buffalo and successfully brought down a fully grown buffalo bull. A few hours later, upon revisiting the scene something incredible happened. Not only were the six lionesses and 10-month-old cub present, but also seven new cubs! Four cubs are aged about three months

old, and three cubs are about two months old. We knew of four cubs from last month but since the sighting on 8 April, these haven't been seen since. With lionesses typically hiding newborn cubs away until about six weeks old, it's unsurprising that these youngsters haven't yet made their debut. We are so excited to follow their progress and we hope they survive! (Photograph by Nick Du Plessis)

- The Othawa Break-away Pride, comprising of three sub-adult males and one female have been seen on a number of occasions this month. One particularly exciting sighting started with following their movements through the central/western section, when they suddenly bumped into the Tamba male leopard. The leopard had made an impala kill and had hoisted it into a marula tree but upon seeing the lions, he sprinted away, leaving the kill to the lions to stare at. Although lions don't typically climb trees to retrieve carcasses, when a free meal is available why not give it a go? It was with complete astonishment that with some determination and hard work, the impala kill was retrieved from the branches of the marula tree and consumed by the pride members.
- The Plains Camp males (two males) made an appearance on our property for the first time. They were seen in the very far north.

Elephants

- With mud wallows drying up and water sources becoming more and more limited, elephants have been seen more frequently along the Sand River. Herds congregate at exclusive meeting points, such as Castleton Dam and other larger waterholes.

Wild dogs

- An amazing month of wild dog viewing with a couple of different packs having been seen on the reserve. A particularly exciting sighting was viewed in the Sand River, where a pack of wild dogs chased the Nkuwa female leopard into a river bushwillow tree. The dogs persisted to jump up around the branches for several minutes before leaving her and heading off to hunt.

Leopards



- The Thamba male leopard has continued to deliver incredible sightings this month. We've watched him patrol and scent mark into areas that we've never seen him in before. It's clear that he is pushing his boundaries and may even take over more and more of the Nyeleti male's territory. (Left – The Thamba male photographed by Gareth Poole.)

- The Misava male has been viewed regularly this month, making a few successful kills. On one occasion, this male killed and hoisted an impala ewe in a marula

tree to the southern end of the Singita airstrip. The commotion drew the attention of several leopards in the vicinity and the Nyeleti male shortly appeared and stole the young leopard's kill, chasing him off the scene... but this was not the end. Minutes later, after the dominant male started feeding, another leopard arrived - the Thamba male leopard. He is a large male with a big dewlap and easily recognised with his pink nose and cut right ear. The Nyeleti male took one look at the new arrival and descended the tree; swiftly moving away and submitting to the larger male. A very interesting display of governance. The Nyeleti male leopard used to frequent this part, however in his older age it's clear that his territory is shifting, becoming smaller and smaller.

- Sightings of the Schotia female have dropped this month compared to April. She is spending less and less time with her son and potentially could be ready to mate again.
- Nearing independency, the Schotia young male leopard continues to be seen more and more on his own. He's been viewed on the northern bank alone, exploring, as well as to the west of the lodges. In the next few months we expect he will become completely independent from his mother and with this in mind, as a tracker and guiding team, we've decided to call him the Kangela male meaning 'to look at you with curious eyes' in Zulu. We feel this is a very fitting name given his inquisitive and confident nature.
- The Thamba male leopard has continued to deliver incredible sightings this month. We've watched him patrol and scent mark into areas that we've never seen him in before. It's clear that he is pushing his boundaries and may even take over more and more of the Nyeleti males territory.

Cheetahs

- There have been several sightings of a male cheetah across our property, as well as a female with her two sub-adult sons. As the yellowing grass begins to die, we look forward to increased sightings throughout the winter.



Pangolin

- We have been totally spoilt with two pangolin sightings this month, a first for many and an incredible species to find.

(Left – photograph by Joffers Mc Cormick.)

Bird List

The bird list for May includes four new bird species, bringing our yearly total to 275 so far.

Special bird species include: Cape vulture



Secretary birds by Gareth Poole.

“If you have infinite patience and perseverance, success is bound to come. No mistake in that.”

Swami Vivekananda

Something I always try and communicate to my guests, is that patience and perseverance are two of the best weapons in your arsenal when it comes to working or spending time in the bush. Nature always works on its own time and in order for us to reap its rewards, we must learn to practice and master these two particular qualities. When it comes to finding leopards, this becomes even more apparent, as we experienced recently with a wonderful group of guests who had been on many safaris and understood the method.

It all started before our morning game drive, as Ruel and I drove through to Boulders Lodge in the dark, we came across the Schotia young male leopard (now named the ‘Kangela’ male - which means to look at you with curious eyes). He made his way further into the darkness and into an inaccessible area, thus we left him to go and meet our guests.

We took a deep breath of fresh, early morning, crisp air, filled with promise as we headed out before the sunrise hoping to come across one of these magnificent cats, little did we know that our morning would turn into a test of our patience and perseverance. Stopping to listen to the calls of the bush is a very important step. It is often in the moments when we slow down that so much around us comes alive... We listened for a few moments, watching as the sun began to peak over the horizon, however it was quiet, no alarm calls and no vocalisation from the spotted cats we were in search of.



It didn't take long before we came across a perfect set of tracks, imprinted into the soft sand of Pangolin Road, south of the lodges. We noticed that the tracks belonged to not one, but two leopards who had been walking along the road together. We got out of the vehicle and inspected further, beginning to piece together the imaginative visuals of what appeared to have been a female leopard and her cub moving along the sandy road.

These tracks began to move toward the lodges and in the back of our minds, Ruel and I knew we had seen the young male in the early hours of the morning. Now with a time frame to work with, we continued to follow the

tracks, knowing that we must be able to find the mother if she had left the cub and continued on her way just before we had seen him. This made perfect sense and we all revved up with excitement, all working together to now use our senses and watch for any little clue that might help us find her. Exactly as we imagined, we found her footprints, moving away from the cubs, toward an open clearing.

It was here that again, Ruel and I got off the vehicle, trying our best to make sense of the movement made by this female leopard. A leopard can be very light on its feet so one can quickly lose the tracks if the substrate isn't smooth or clear. It was here that our patience began to be tested, the tracks disappeared... While the guests scanned for any movement or sounds made around us, I walked in one direction, whilst Ruel walked in the other... nothing. That was until I came across a mess of helmeted guinea fowl feathers, splayed all over the ground with a single leopard track close by. "She was here"! I called out to Ruel and the guests, it was another clue, however there was no leopard or carcass of the unfortunate bird in sight. We all looked together as Ruel showed us where she ate the guinea fowl and then moved off.

More than an hour of tracking had passed, as we followed, got off the vehicle, walked, investigated and continued downstream along the eastern part of the Sand River still doing our best to find this fast becoming 'myth' of a leopard. Typically, many of our guests would become quite agitated and want to continue the drive, looking for something else. It almost seemed as if all hope was lost. However, not for this group - we were intent on working out the rest of the story, walking in the past of this female leopard's movements and edging closer to her whereabouts. Perseverance was at play.

It was then, that we noticed a seemingly unsettled herd of impala. Our first thought was that perhaps she had attempted to hunt or had made her way through the area, making the impala very wary of any other movement. This was in fact true and we realised this when we spotted both scat as well as another set of tracks moving past the area of the nervous antelope. As I drove along listening to the guides' radio comms, I could hear, via my earpiece, that other guides had found and observed two other leopards much further south of us. The frustration was beginning to build, but we continued...

The tracks became clearer and clearer and a new rush of motivation swirled through the vehicle. We were now further away from the river and had almost made an entire loop back toward the original tracks when we spotted her, the Schotia female leopard, relaxing on the side of the road!

One can't quite explain the utter feeling of relief and success in what was more than two hours of tracking this beautiful female. It is one of those moments where tears could quite easily drop from the eyes, however we just gazed in complete bliss as we watched the Schotia female enjoying the shade. We did it!

Just as Swami Vivekananda had said, "Success is bound to come. No mistake in that". After working so hard that morning, testing both Ruel and I as well as our guests' patience and perseverance, we were rewarded.

That afternoon we were again with the Kangel male, who had moved away from where his mother left him in the morning. He was out exploring his independence, when we heard his mother's calls from the exact place, she left him. His ears pricked up, looking directly towards where we heard the rasping call of a female leopard and began to run, calling softly as he went, letting his mother know he could hear her. They met in a loving embrace as they rubbed heads and curled their tails around each other. It was completely and absolutely beautiful, however the rewards didn't stop there. Schotia female continued to lead her youngster toward an impala ram carcass which she had killed during the day.

Darkness was falling quickly and we knew that it was only a matter of time before a hyena would locate the unhoisted carcass. The two of them fed as quickly as possible but the inevitable happened and we watched into the later hours of the evening as a clan of hyenas moved in and stole the carcass from the leopards. It was an

unbelievable end to our day as we headed back to the lodge, feeling extremely privileged and fulfilled after a brilliant day in the bush.

If you thought the story ends there, then you are mistaken... there was one more cherry to be added to the top of these incredible few days.

We started our morning game drive, yet again on the search for Schotia female and her youngster to complete our story. Of course, this time we had an idea of where we had left them the night before and decided to make our way into that area in order to see what the rest of the night's happenings were. As I drove up the eastern road along our airstrip, we all noticed a herd of elephants to our right, I continued a bit further and as I drove, I quickly had a glimpse to the left, LEOPARD! In that moment we all turned our gaze to the left and watched in amazement as the Schotia female ran up the side of our terminal building roof, all the way to the top!



Image by, Ross Couper

We couldn't believe our eyes! This was something I don't believe any of our guides had witnessed and so I quickly called Ross and Gareth who were working the area close-by to come and have a look. Two leopards, now both on top of the Singita Sabi Sand terminal building, beginning to be cast in the golden light of the sun rising behind them. This was completely unexpected but undoubtedly the best ending to an incredible few days on safari.

Our patience and perseverance rewarded us with unforgettable leopard viewing experiences. From hours of tracking, to listening, taking our time, finding and finally spending quality time in the presence of these exquisite big cats - it was all worth it! The next time you are on safari, remember - Patience and perseverance are the best weapons in your arsenal and there is no mistake... success is bound to come!

It is with a heavy heart that we have all but confirmed the passing of the infamous Othawa male lion.



Coming from Lebombo and Sweni where I spent over five years in arguably the best lion viewing area in southern Africa I never imagined I would enjoy seeing and watching a lion develop as much as I did the Othawa male over the past three and a half years. It has been nothing short of amazing to watch him from a young male just venturing out on his own really trying not to draw too much attention to himself, to a completely confident and dominant male lion on patrol.

I have always been under the belief that a dominant male lion should have a huge scar across his face, be missing half an ear and wear a scuffed up mane... simply mementos of what it takes to be the king out here. But the Othawa male was, to put it simply, PRIME! He was probably one of the best looking lions that I have ever seen.

The unfortunate thing for him is the fact that he has come from a 'smaller' pride and that he missed a brother or two to help him on his journey. But as it turned out he did more than alright all by himself. He actually, by chance, became the dominant male with the Mhangeni Pride from a very young age (roughly four years old) and fathered two different sets of cubs with these females over the past few years.

Unfortunately for him, he was venturing further and further east in what was an attempt to grow his territory and potentially challenge others lions, venturing a little too far into an area controlled by the two Birmingham males. We always knew some sort of confrontation would take place but honestly had no idea how it would turn out. Although they would be considered past their prime, with their combination of experience and

numbers he didn't really stand a fair chance by himself. We will never know what exactly happened, but with both prides having new cubs at the moment this could have heightened the tension and upped the ante for both sides.

His carcass was only discovered three days after the attack and was initially thought to be one of the Birmingham males, but after closer inspection of the dental structure (and the Birmingham males have been seen since) it has been confirmed as him.



As sad as it is I feel very fortunate to have spent as much time with him as I did. From my first sighting directly in front of the lodges as a young male, to my last with his most recent cubs at his side.

He will be sadly missed by all of us here.



Female leopards have an incredibly tough task when it comes to raising cubs. Not only are they constantly having to provide meals for them, but also having to move them around regularly to locations that provide enough cover and trees for the cubs to take refuge from dangerous enemies.

Lions, hyena and even African rock pythons when the cubs are still very small are constant threats. What also sometimes occurs is infanticide. Infanticide is a widespread but seldom observed behaviour that has been shown to convey strong selection forces on some social mammals. However, infanticide in non-social species is less clearly understood, particularly the evolutionary function of infanticide. Further study of leopards in the Sabi Sand Wildtuin, where Singita is located, revealed that male leopards typically improved their fitness by accelerating their opportunity to father offspring, which extended their reproductive lifespans. Cannibalism may provide further incentive for infanticide but this is likely to be an added benefit rather than the primary driver for the behaviour. Something which was also revealed from the study is that infanticide was more often occurring when new young male leopards, around the ages of four to five years, were beginning to take over a new territory (G. Balme et al 2013). Currently at Singita we have several new young males that are beginning to push into the territory of the Nyeleti male leopard, the current dominant male along the Sand River here at Singita Sabi Sand.

We recently had a sighting of the Schotia female leopard, her male cub and the father of the cub, Nyeleti male. Male leopards often rob females of their kills (clearly seen in this image) which is a perk of being both dominant and much larger than their female counterparts. This is a dangerous time for the cub as I have on one particular occasion witnessed a male leopard inadvertently kill its own offspring that tried to approach the carcass recently stolen. This does not occur very often but the risk is certainly still there.



This particular male leopard was also once seen killing a female leopard which in a similar scenario, tried to defend her cub trapped in a tree where the male had ascended to take over a carcass. The female successfully protected that cub but lost her own life in the process. In that scenario the Nyeleti male leopard was not the father of the cub and almost certainly would have killed a cub he had not sired.

Female leopards are better off just abandoning their prized kill to the dominant male, and making another kill at a later stage. There is an abundance of prey for leopards on the Singita property and this is one of the reasons leopards thrive so well here.

A bird in the hand

Being one of the fortunate few people in the world who get to work in a wildlife environment every day, I often get asked if I ever get tired of doing what I do...

My answer is always the same, you just never know if something amazing might happen today, and such a day happened just recently whilst out on drive and viewing a large herd of around 500 Cape buffalo. These large herds are always accompanied by large amounts of oxpeckers, mostly the red-billed variety, but also in more growing numbers, the less common yellow-billed oxpecker.

Yellow-billed oxpeckers are also sometimes revered to as tick birds because of the service they provide of removing ticks from the hides of (mostly) larger animals like Cape buffalo and both rhino species. The species suffered near extinction because of cattle dip that was used in the pioneer days of ranching in the lowveld. Fortunately, policies and pesticides have changed and these charismatic birds are making a comeback and their numbers are increasing, and they seem to be breeding further south into their historic breeding areas.

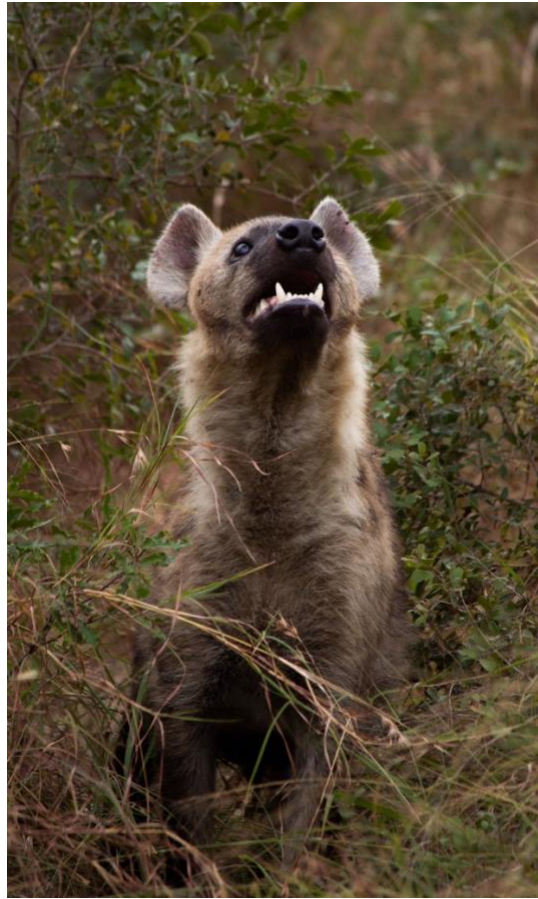
Whilst observing the herd I suddenly noticed a juvenile bird approach the vehicle and land on top of George, my tracker's head. It proceeded to hop onto my head as well as one of the guests on the vehicle. It proceeded to hop and peck our heads as if to try and remove ticks... an interesting, if rather painful experience!

I shared this experience with Guy Hausler who is running the yellow-billed oxpecker research project in the greater Kruger National Park, and according to his knowledge this is the first time such behaviour has occurred and been reported. Very exciting indeed! And so, my story ends with my answer ... You just never know if something amazing will happen today!

Article by Quentin Swanevelder



Gallery for May



Spotted hyena by Marc Bowes-Taylor



Rhino bull by Marc Bowes-Taylor



Lion cubs photographed by Nick Du Plessis



Lion cub and mother photographed by Gareth Poole



The Tamba male leopard drinking by Gareth Poole



Tamba male leopard stalking a herd of wildebeest by Marc Bowes-Taylor



Dust bathing by Nick Du Plessis