

# Singita



Photo by Jenny Hishin

## **WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE**

For the month of May, Two Thousand and Twenty One

### Temperature

Average minimum: 14.0°C (57.2°F)  
Minimum recorded: 09.7°C (49.4°F)  
Average maximum: 28.2°C (82.7°F)  
Maximum recorded: 33.2°C (91.7°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 9 mm  
Season to date: 782.9 mm

### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:24  
Sunset: 17:19

It's a superb time of year for wildlife viewing and photography – the light is more flattering, the colour palette is richer, and the vegetation is thinner. There's a nip in the air too which makes for long comfortable safaris. But it's not all peace and harmony – the impala rut is in full swing and the silence is shattered by the growling, rumbling, snorting roars of rams fighting for dominance and chasing off rivals. There's never a dull moment here in the wilds, so on that note here's a snapshot of May's sightings:

**Lions:**

- The Southern Pride is growing! Last month two cubs were glimpsed with them, but this month three were spotted! They are now a pride of ten with one adult male, five lionesses, a sub-adult male and the three cubs. All were sleeping in the shade east of Chiloveka Dam. Members of the pride were seen feeding on zebra and giraffe kills during the month, in the Goto area of the far south east.
- Quality time was spent viewing five members of the River Pride comprising two adult males and three females in the Chikokovele River area.
- Two adult male lions were observed, in true cat style, drinking water from the dripping pump in Nyamsaan Paddock area.

**Leopards:**

- The leopard sightings have started to pick up again this month, thanks to the vegetation thinning and more guides and their guests being out and about to spot them.
- A female leopard had a young impala carcass hoisted in a thorn tree.
- After a sundowner stop at Sosigi Dam a leopard graced guests with her appearance.
- A brief sighting of a female leopard was had on West Valley Road before she melted away into the bush.

**Rhinos:**

- Excellent rhino sightings have been enjoyed, as always.
- Highlights were watching four white rhino bulls challenging each other; a crash of eight white rhinos grazing, with sporadic commotions and challenges from the males among them; and seven white and two black rhinos feeding south of Banyini.
- The Malilangwe Trust is busy with the biannual rhino ops that includes notching calves to identify and monitor them throughout their lives, and occasionally Singita Pamushana guests are able to witness this first-hand which is a priceless experience.

**Elephants:**

- With all the lush grazing from the extended wet season the elephant population is in excellent condition and many of the younger males are playing and pushing each other about, more than ever. A couple of mature hefty bulls are in musth, and it's best to give them a wide berth at this time.
- Highlights for the month include a breeding herd of about 30 elephants that engulfed the game viewer on their relaxed feeding journey, to the extent that the playful young ones were only a trunk's length away! Other guests on a safari boat cruise marvelled at seven elephant bulls that were swimming in the Nyamasikana River.

**Buffalo:**

- There have been estimations of different herds seen numbering 300, 500 and even 700! Like the elephants these bulk feeders are in prime condition, and watching them make their daily pilgrimage to water is an incredible spectacle.

**Wild dogs:**

- Guests had the safari experience of a lifetime with a pack of eight wild dogs, west of the airstrip. As they were watching them a clan of 13 hyenas burst onto the scene and a right royal rumble ensued as the dogs and hyenas went at each other, jaws snapping! The commotion went on for close to an hour and ended with the dogs taking off at high speed towards the hills to avoid the hyenas.

### **Hyenas**

- A wide range of hyena behaviour has been observed this month, ranging from a mother nursing her two cubs, hyenas hunting a zebra foal (unsuccessfully), hyenas harassing wild dogs and hyenas gobbling up the remains of a leopard's hoisted impala kill when it dropped from the tree.

### **Plains game**

- The water flow to the Banyini Pan was restored after being temporarily unavailable, and along with its return came the plains game of impala, wildebeest, zebra, giraffe and more.
- A herd of ten Lichtenstein's hartebeest with calves were seen feeding below Malevula Hill.
- Sable have been seen feeding on the selective diet they prefer, and drinking at Hwata Pan.

### **Other wildlife sightings**

- The audio sounds of rhinos drinking and interacting at a pan, in the black of night, while the stars twinkle overhead is possibly more powerful than seeing them.
- Watching hippos frolic and snort and 'laugh' is very entertaining.
- Our guides always include the little wonders in their drives – be it a chameleon on a branch, a dung beetle pushing his load or a firefly performing a seductive dance.
- Guests also enjoyed a safe sighting, from the confines of the vehicle, of a black mamba snake basking in the middle of a road.

### **Bush walks and rock art**

- We love to conduct bush walks at Singita Pamushana. Be it to look specifically at trees, or general game, or approach larger animals like white rhinos without them detecting us. Many of the walks incorporate a rock art site where guests can rest in the shelter of a rocky overhang and learn all about our ancestors and their ancient paintings.

### **Fishing:**

- The water is cooling but there have still been some good catches of tilapia and adrenalin-inducing tigerfish.

### **Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft**

- The living museum welcomed guests back to its humble stand where bushcraft skills are demonstrated that have enabled the local Shangaan people to sustain themselves in their natural environment for centuries.

### **Day trips to Gonarezhou National Park**

- Guests and their guide enter at Chipinda Gate. As they wind their way to the magnificent Chilojo Cliffs different breeding herds of elephants keep the adrenalin pumping. More sedate sightings of kudu, waterbuck, impala, bushbuck and warthogs can be enjoyed. The day trip is always long and always enjoyable!

**Some bush reflections and articles follow, as well as the May Gallery of images.**



On patrol



The Southern Pride surveying their kingdom.



We'd seen members of the Southern Pride the previous afternoon, and they were lazing about without any inclination to move, whatsoever. They were making out that even moving their eyeballs in their sockets to look at us was too much of an effort.

The next morning we drove to Chiloveka Dam in the south, hoping to relocate them. Their resting place of the previous afternoon was deserted, so we enjoyed a coffee stop on the dam wall (see photo in Gallery). We then trundled off, heading north. A few kilometres away we spied two bull elephants in a dense mopane forest, and one of them had an enormous tusk – the other tusk had broken off. The big bull was very shy and there was no way into the forest to photograph him from the vehicle, and his askari was doing a very good job of staying by his side and shadowing him.

We gave up trying to watch and photograph them, drove a few metres, and out of nowhere the Southern Pride appeared. They were very much on the move, patrolling and looking for hunting opportunities. The lionesses heard the elephants and waited to see if any prey species were flushed from the forest. In due course they made their way down an open track, sniffing, watching, assessing. Three of them lay down at the roadside for a rest, while the lead lioness continued hunting and the male followed her and announced his presence to the world with a terrific roar. What a way to start the morning!

### **Is a fright as good as a holiday?**

I swear I once heard the saying, "A fright is as good as a holiday!" and I would trot this out to my long-suffering husband after occasionally leaping out at him from behind a wall and scaring him witless. I'm convinced it was something to do with the adrenalin surge being as rejuvenating for your body as a holiday is. He never found the frights remotely funny, unlike me, and claimed no sense of rejuvenation at all. I've just Googled, "A fright is as good as a holiday" and it comes up with absolutely nothing. So perhaps I invented it. Who knows?

I did have a good chuckle at this sighting though: We were silently waiting in the sunken hide at Hwata Pan and could hear sable antelope snorting with concern and caution at wanting to come and drink. The sun went down and the sable edged closer, parading up and down and snorting all the while. There was nothing else drinking at the time, but they really are highly strung animals. They sometimes drop to their knees when drinking so this does make them very vulnerable should something be hiding in the grass waiting to ambush them – like lions.

Eventually, well after dark, they gathered at the water's edge and drank. We could barely see them. Then, in the distance we noticed two white rhinos making their way to the water. Adult rhinos without young calves are far more bold in their approach, having vast bulk on their side, and they only really give way to elephants. I'm probably imagining this but it seemed as if the two rhinos had a glint in their eye and were up for a bit of mischief. They snuck up in complete silence, directly behind the herd of sable, then loudly announced their arrival with a snort! The poor sable got such a fright, flew into the air and galloped off. I suspect they also didn't think the fright was as good as a holiday.

At least the sable had a long drink before it happened. Scientific research carried out on sable antelope, here on the Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve, found that sable drink only every three days or so, often moving up to seven kilometres away from a water source.

Sable are reported to be quite aggressive towards other species at waterholes and are able to displace other antelope, zebra and even buffalo cows – so maybe the rhinos were just getting their own back on behalf of other animals.





The rhinos silently sneak up behind the sable.  
Adrenalin surges through the sable as they bound away.





## Buffalo horns



The more time you spend in the company of African/cape buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) the more you notice how each one's horns are a unique shape and size. Their curved horns add to their imposing stature and can help us distinguish age and sex. From the base, the horns diverge downwards, then smoothly curve upwards and outwards and then inwards or backwards.

Buffalo horns are permanent pointed projections on the head that consist of a covering of keratin and other proteins surrounding a core of live bone. Horns are distinct from antlers, which are not permanent.

The horns start to grow up and out and are fully formed when the buffalo reaches the age of 5 or 6 years. In bulls the horns meet in the middle of their heads forming a continuous bone shield referred to as a "boss". In large bulls, the distance between the ends of

the horns can reach upwards of one metre. The bosses do not become "hard" until they reach the age of 8 to 9 years. In cows the horns are, on average, 10–20% narrower and smaller, and they do not have a boss.

We spent some time watching this breeding herd of buffalo that had been washed in the rain from the night before. They were looking exceptionally clean and shiny, and had some individuals sporting impressively large and dramatic horn formations.

Above: A young calf with its upward pointing horns.

Below: A mature cow (left) and bull (right).



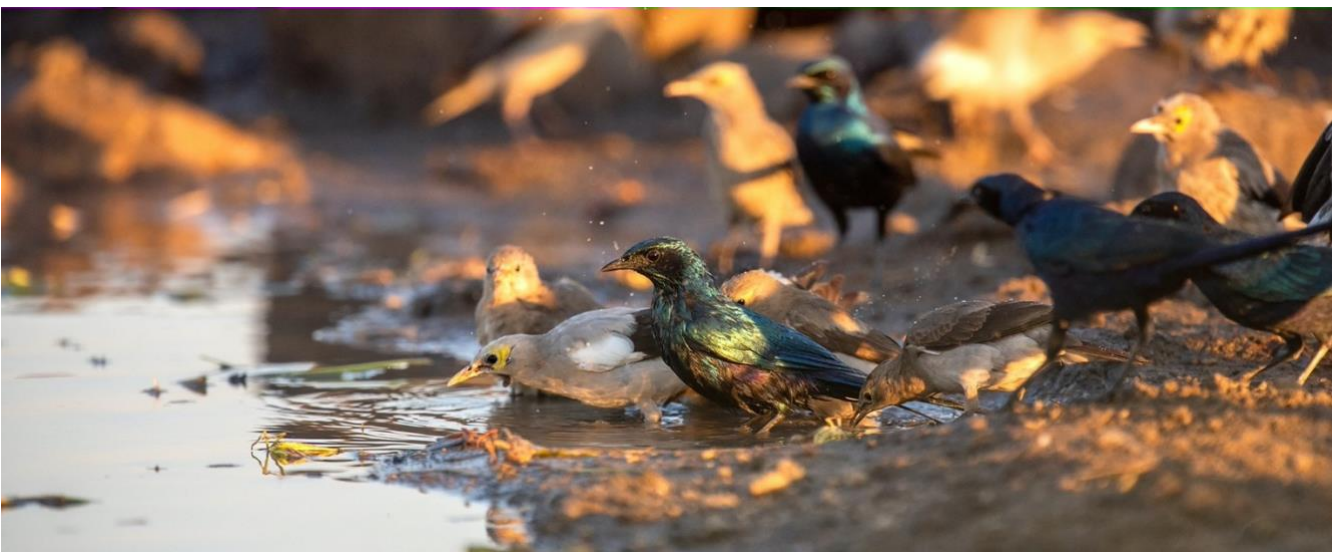
## Scrub hares



This was such a sweet sighting – two little scrub hares hopping about with their mother in the evening. Scrub hares are born after a quick 42 day gestation period, and up to four litters can be produced in a year. They are active from dusk to dawn as they go in search of their diet of grass.

## Twitter

We've had some keen birding guests this month who were delighted to see African hawk eagle, bateleur, shikra, pale chanting goshawk, burnt-necked eremomela, chinspot batis, Wahlberg's eagle and pearl spotted owl amongst many others.



Here two different species of starlings have a drink, a bath and a snack on the drowning grasshoppers. Wattled starlings (the lighter ones), and Meve's starlings (the darker, iridescent blue/green and black ones).



## May Gallery



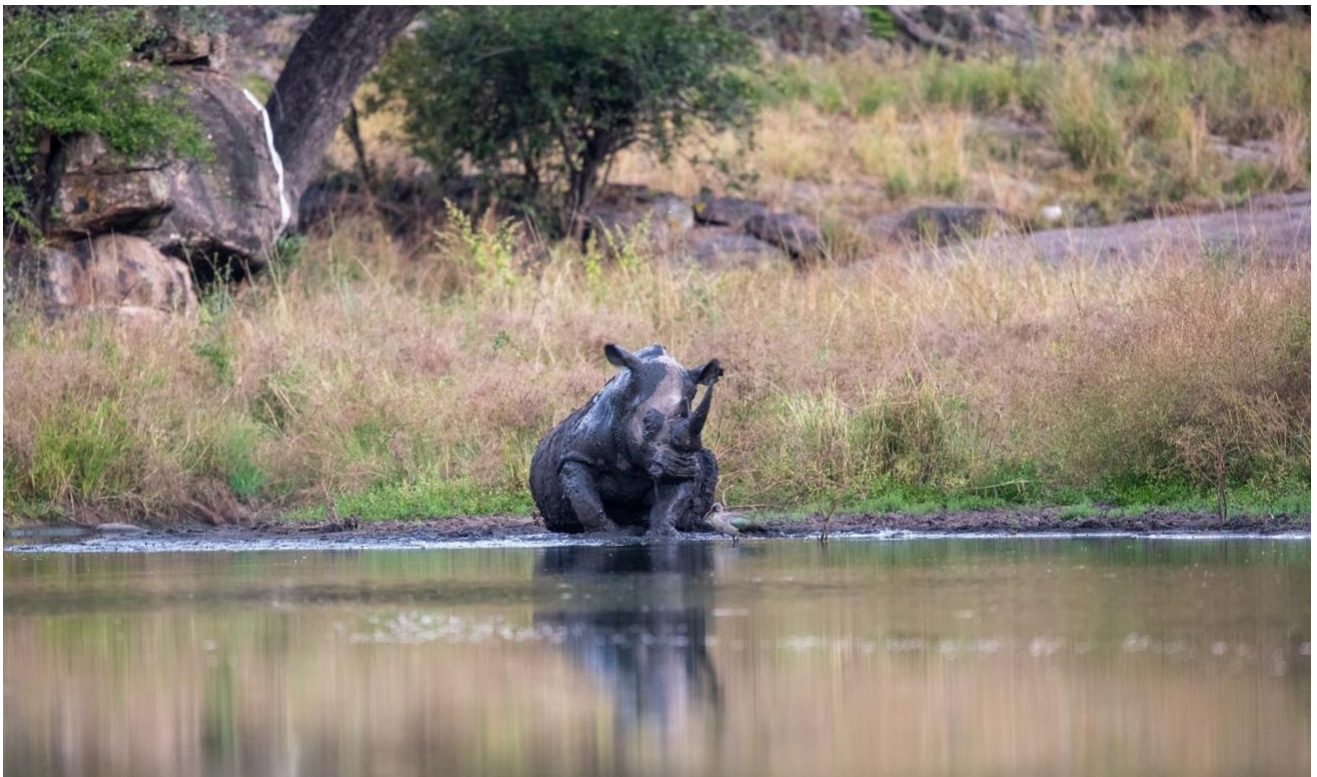
The dew on an orb web spider's web clings like tiny diamonds, and the zebras are reluctant to move out of the road into the wet foliage on a crisp and chilly autumn morning.







A family of waterbuck hug the Sosigi Dam shores, ready to flee into the water's protection from predators. A white rhino bull enjoys a splendid mudbath, while an unflappable hadeda ignores him.

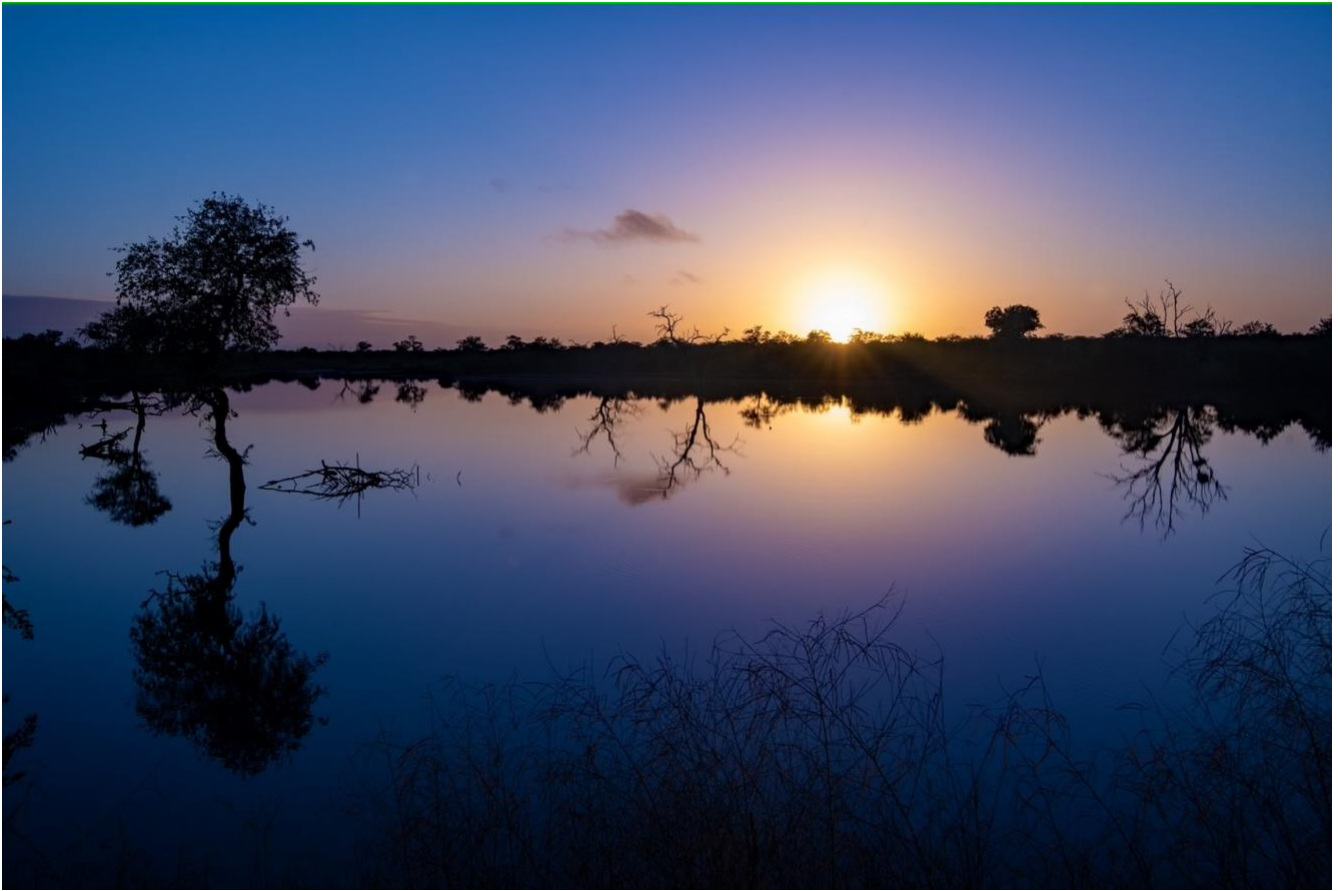






The colour palette is at its most varied in autumn – every shade of green, all the metallics, with pops of vibrant unexpected colours. Hippos, sabi star flowers and *Dicoma tormentosa*.





Chiloveka Dam at “blue hour” sunrise – the perfect place to have a steaming mug of coffee, watch the sunrise, and listen for lions roaring before setting out to track them.

In photographic terms blue hour occurs twice each day. It’s the time just before sunrise when the sky turns from a deep twilight to dark blue and then to light blue, just before the sun peeks above the horizon. It’s the reverse in the evening – once the sun dips a certain amount below the horizon the sky picks up a cool, crisp blue colour before it goes completely dark. Blue hour actually lasts around 20 to 40 minutes.