

Singita



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

Temperature

Average minimum: 18.5°C (65.3°F)
Minimum recorded: 13.8°C (56.8°F)
Average maximum: 32.9°C (91.2°F)
Maximum recorded: 39.9°C (103.8°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 14.5 mm
Season to date: 33.5 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:08
Sunset: 18:06

After three consecutive days of rain at the end of September the landscape is showing signs of life again with new green shoots appearing. Thankfully we've also had some good rainfall in October – and long may it last.

The sightings have been phenomenal, and an abundance of wildlife has had no choice but to gather at the permanent waterholes, as the rain has quickly been absorbed into the ground by the parched, bone-dry earth. On one occasion at Hwata Pan we had three elephant bulls, five white rhinos, warthogs, more than 100 zebras, lots of wildebeest, kudu, hartebeest and impalas come to drink. It was so crowded that some of the animals had to defer to others and wait for a turn to drink. On one occasion guests managed to photograph three of the Big Five in one frame. On another occasion, over at the swamps on the Hippo Valley side, guests were treated to four of the Big Five in one area – lions, rhinos, elephants and buffalos.

A sightings snapshot for October follows:

Lions

Most of the kills this month were of buffalos, but we also witnessed lions feeding on a male waterbuck carcass and an eland.

- Southern Pride: Members of this pride have been in the Hwata area for most of the month, and are now moving off to the south-east.
- Nduna Pride: Two males and three lionesses, a mating pair among them, have been viewed drinking at Nduna Dam, and hunting buffalo in the area. At one point one of the males sat close to the water's edge, stopping wise animals from coming to drink. However, a white rhino came along and was not interested in his hogging the scene, so just drank calmly from the opposite bank, without any drama.
- River/Hippo Pride: The sighting with the most members present was of 11 lions – two males, four lionesses and five cubs. The adults were sleeping in the shade, while the cubs played with one another.
- Two scar-free, strong males had a feeding frenzy when they were found amid three buffalo kills. Each male was guarding his own kill, and the third kill was unattended. We suspected the third, a calf, was killed in a stampede.

Leopards

Very good leopard sightings this month, for this region:

- A female leopard and her sub-adult cub have been seen on numerous occasions in the Croc Creek area.
- A male leopard was marking his territory along the shoreline of the Malilangwe Dam.
- A leopard missed an impala two metres away from one of the safari vehicles. Impalas shot out in all directions, snorting alarm calls which warned other animals about the hunting leopard.
- In some light drizzling rain a leopard was seen sitting on top of some rocks near the side of the road. The cat curled itself in a circle to keep warm, and then after some time jumped down behind the rocks and disappeared. The guide and his guests followed cautiously on foot and, concealed by a bush in front of them, watched as the leopard caught a dassie!
- Another highlight was finding a leopard in a baobab tree, and then seeing it descend to hunt and kill an impala in full view of our guests.

Wild dogs

The large pack have been seen with up to 19 members present. The pups are doing well, but are not involved in hunts yet.

- An exhilarating sighting was finding the pack consuming an impala. An elephant was trumpeting and kicking up a huge fuss, alerting the guide to the fact that something extraordinary was happening. Upon investigation they found the wild dogs eating the impala, and at the same time a white rhino appeared on the scene.

Rhinos

- Large crashes of white rhinos are guaranteed at this time, as they congregate at waterholes, and graze the new green shoots of grass.
- We've seen quite a few crashes of black rhinos together this month. They are usually solitary but we are seeing family groups browsing together.

Elephants

- Delightful breeding herds are to be found along the river, and drinking from the Malilangwe Dam. Elephants provide arguably the best viewing – watching their family dynamics and behaviour provides endless hours of fascination.
- Bulls have been trundling in to drink at Hwata Pan which is an unforgettable experience should you be inside the photographic hide when they arrive.

Hyenas

- A highlight was seeing three hyenas submerged in water, cooling themselves off.

Buffalos

- A standout sighting was when hundreds of buffalo were drinking at Nduna Dam. After watching them for a long time guide and guests noticed that one buffalo was struggling in the mud. Upon closer investigation they realised a lioness had it trapped in the mud and was busy killing it. She immediately began feeding once it was dead.

Plains game

- We've enjoyed such good sightings of plains game like giraffes, zebras and wildebeest, and been treated to the shyer species of eland, sable and hartebeest too. Once the seasonal pans fill the shyer species will be far more challenging for us to view.

Unusual sightings

- Two honey badgers were seen cruising the 'street' at Croc Creek.
- On three separate occasions brown hyenas have been seen this month. It is so exciting that we are catching glimpses of these rare animals.

Birding

- Malilangwe is a birding mecca at the moment. All the migrants are arriving, and it has been a joy to have keen birders in camp to view the visitors as well as the homebodies.

Boat cruise

- It's impossible to describe how idyllic our boat cruises are, especially as sunset golden ripples reflect on the water. You just have to come and experience it for yourself! One set of guests even got treated to a breeding herd of over 40 elephants drinking on the shores of the east bank of the dam, and later an adult male leopard coming to drink on the west bank.

Fishing

- The fishing is on! After catching her first fish, a 3kg bream, our guest became hooked! She and her husband thoroughly enjoyed being out on the water, and her husband landed a 2kg tigerfish!

Photographic hide

- The photographic hide at Hwata Pan has offered guests the unforgettable experience of a lifetime. Soon the rains will come and render this opportunity less rewarding, but for now it has been superb with elephant bulls, rhinos, buffalos, lions and an abundance of plains game and other creatures coming to drink. A standout moment was when a courageous white rhino boldly charged an elephant, twice its size, away from the water.

Rock art & Walks

- Some of the walks conducted during this prime time have been to track big game on foot; others to experience the landscape at ground level; and others to view the rock art sites. One couple were so enthralled by the rock art they requested to visit different rock art sites on consecutive days.

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

In the land of giants

On the western side of the Chiredzi River is an area known as Hippo Valley. It has some stately old riverine trees, a forest of umbrella thorn acacias (*Vachellia tortilis*), a swamp area, and more diverse bushveld. The breeding herds of elephants love it as there is a good supply of food, water, shade and protection.

In the latter part of a morning drive when the temperatures were soaring, we found a breeding herd among the riverine trees, moving slowly towards the umbrella thorn forest looking for a cool place to rest. There are a couple of open spaces where you can get a game-viewing vehicle in so we parked and waited there hoping they'd drift our way, wishing for a scene where the world's largest land animals would be dwarfed by the umbrella tree canopy.



Elephants are able to keep themselves and their young calves cool in many ways. They'll seek shade as they did on this day, insisting the young calves follow them and then settle down. They'll bathe in rivers or squirt water or mud on themselves. They'll flap their large vascular ears to help dissipate heat, and this fanning helps to cool a calf too. A mother will often position herself so that her calf is in her shadow, especially when it needs to lie down for a nap.

In due course our wish was granted. We were treated to an extraordinary sighting of an extended family, some dusty from sand baths, others still wet from spraying water on themselves, congregating in the shade to relax out of the midday heat.

Elephants generally sleep for about four to six hours a day, which is significantly less than most mammals. They tend to take short naps rather than long periods of sleep, and they can sleep both standing up and lying down. When standing, they often use their legs to support themselves, or the trunk of a tree to lean against. They do lie down to sleep deeply, which is important for their overall health.





With the high contrast of light and shade the opportunity presented itself for the high-key image below where the shadows are blown out somewhat and the colours desaturated.



Unsung heroes

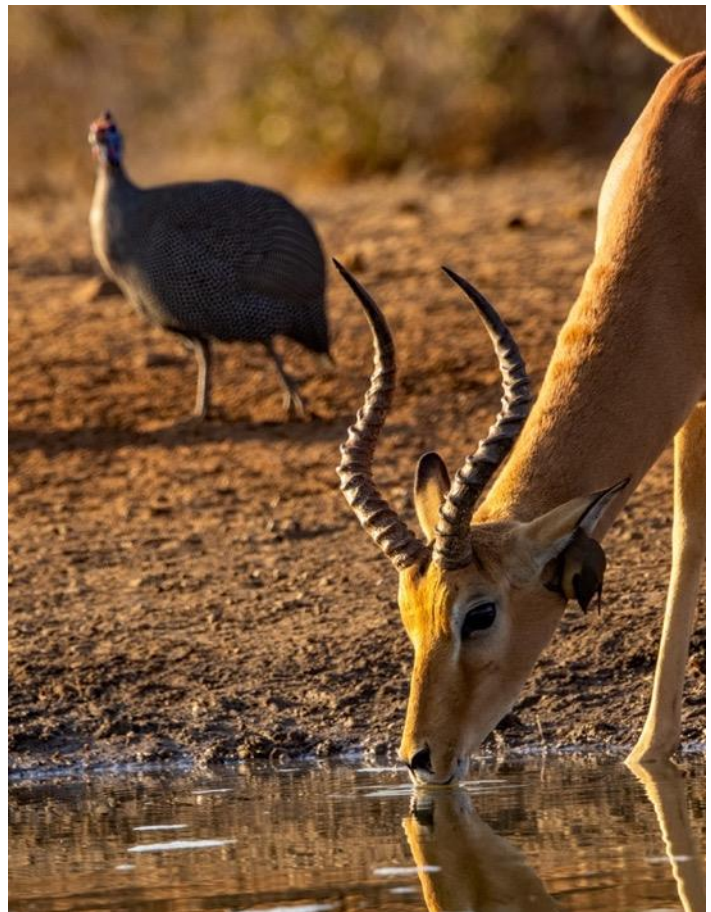
Impalas are such graceful and agile antelopes, yet often overlooked because they are plentiful. They are incredible athletes – and they need to be to evade lions, leopards, and hyenas. They can leap distances of up to 10 meters (33 feet) and jump as high as 3 metres (nearly 10 feet) in a single bound.



Impalas are social animals, often found in herds that can range from a few individuals to several hundred. Their social structure is characterized by a dominance hierarchy among males, especially during the breeding season when they compete for females through displays of strength and agility. If you've never heard male impalas roar during the rutting season it will come as quite a surprise.

While impalas are well-adapted to their environment, they require a consistent source of water to thrive. They are known to drink daily, especially during the dry season which has been at its zenith. Impalas typically graze early in the morning and late in the afternoon, and they often travel to nearby water sources, such as rivers or pans, to quench their thirst.

Notice this impala has an opportunistic oxpecker in his ear! The oxpecker seizes the moment when the impala's head is still to harvest earwax. Earwax is rich in fats and nutrients, making it a good food source for oxpeckers.





If you're hunting for light it's a good idea to position yourself at a scenic spot near water and wait for both the light and animals to appear. Often the subject to appear is impalas, as it was with this series of photos.



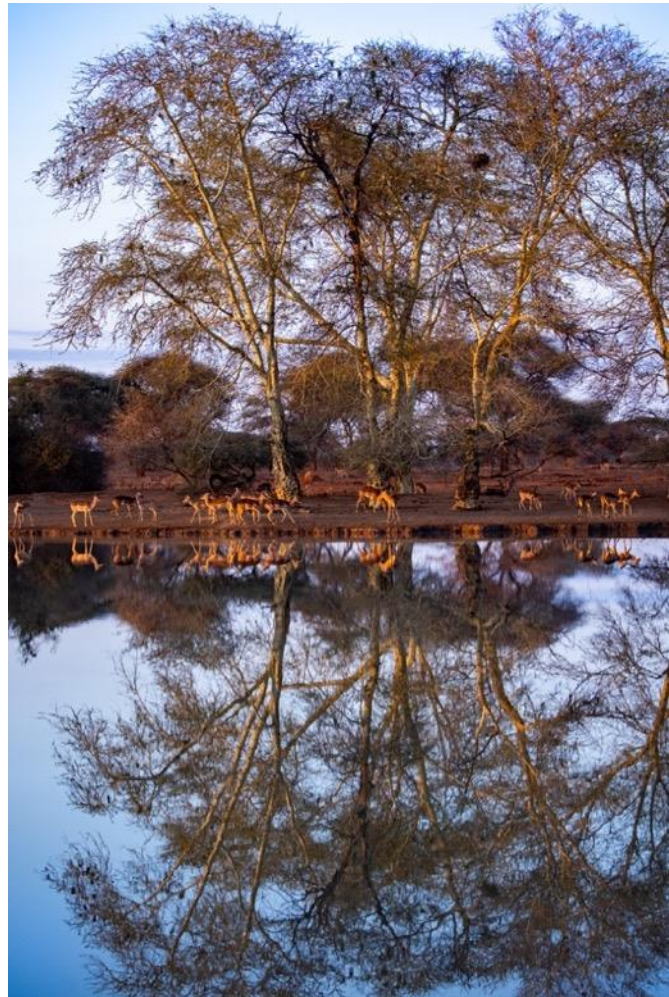
November is usually when the first of the season's impala lambs are born, an event that we eagerly anticipate and rejoice in.

During the lambing season, which typically runs to January, impala ewes often gather to create nurseries for their young. We'll fill you in on their antics in the coming months.

Although impala lambs are common targets for predators, about 50% manage to survive until they reach breeding age, which is relatively good for such vulnerable animals.

Contributing to their success story is the fact that they have a versatile diet, allowing them to thrive in their environment. Unlike some other antelope species that are more selective, impalas eat a mix of grass, leaves, fruits, and pods, depending on seasonal availability.

In essence these darlings of the bush are not only remarkable for their beauty and agility but also for their adaptability to the challenges of the environment.



Pride of place

Just like domestic cats, lions are fussy. They like to be warm when it's cold, and cool when it's hot, and will go to great lengths to find the spots that suit them best. We were delighted to find the Nduna Split Pride near Simbiri Dam, with one of the lionesses lying on the warm rocks that overlooks the currently dry dam. She was in full shade at the time as the sun had only just begun sending out tendrils of light, but I knew that in a short while it would cast her in golden light and make a beautiful photograph.



The rest of the members had found their preferred spots – one lioness in a sandy nest in the middle of the track, and this cub on top of the dam wall.

In due course it became too hot and glary for them, so they slowly rose, stretched and went in search of a cooler place to spend the rest of the day.

We can all take a lesson from lions in stretching upon waking, before any form of exercise. They are the masters at it and it's no wonder the arched back stretch we should do is called the "cat stretch", although I suspect lions would be disdainful of the "downward dog" name although they are great proponents of this stretch too.

They set off, the males casting a few furtive glances around, although they were still full from a successful hunt, and then crossed the airstrip to go and settle in the shady area that surrounds a natural pan.







Above: A few days later we found members of the HQ Pride on the rocks in the same area, and it's just as well they didn't meet up as lion prides are fiercely territorial.

Below: During this time members of the Southern Pride chose to drink at Hwata Pan and then rest in the dappled shade nearby.



Twitter

As with wildlife a wonderful way to birdwatch is to sit at a waterhole, or take a cruise on one of our sundowner boats. It's a delight to observe birds drink and bathe.



Right: A tiny golden-breasted bunting.

Far right: Turtle dove, laughing dove, Meves's starlings and a red-billed buffalo weaver.



Below: African wattled lapwing.





The backlit glory of the abundant commoners - doves and starlings.





Once the golden light had dimmed the helmeted guineafowl bustled in to wet their whistles.



October Gallery



The living and immortalised trees of the Malilangwe Reserve.



Photos of black rhinos tend to be of them looking at you, approaching, or charging you. Their hearing is so sensitive, and their sense of smell acute leading to them invariably detecting you. It was a treat to see this bull delicately scratching himself on this tree stump, before he detected us.



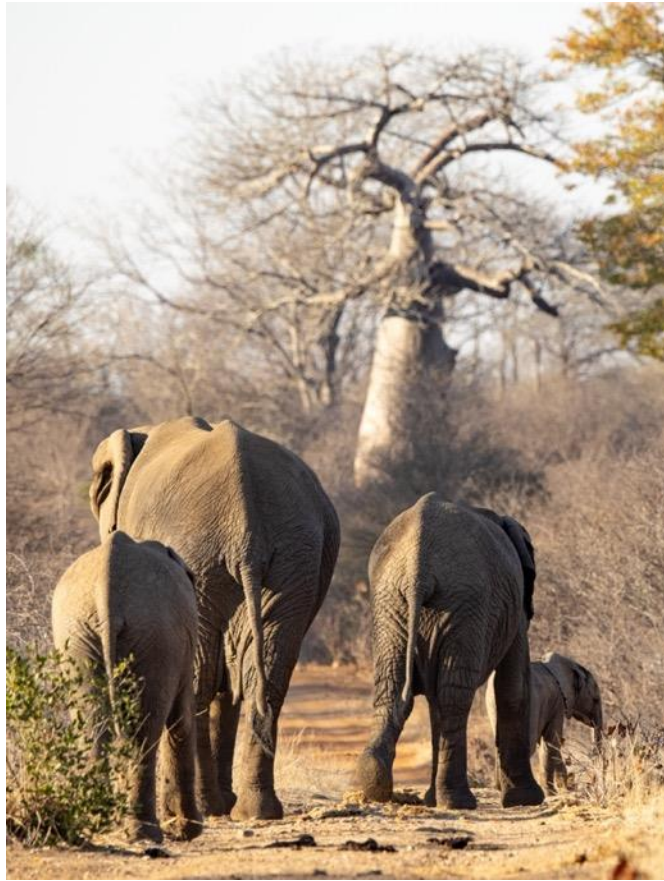


A backlit lion giving off tiger vibes...

I was fortunate enough to visit a tiger conservation project this month in South Africa (the tigers are wild, roam free and hunt for themselves), and was surprised to learn in my pre-trip research that a recent study concludes that the closest living relatives of tigers are snow leopards, not lions. It appears that lions are closer to the jaguars of the New World than they are to tigers.

A bold little crocodile basking in the sun.





Newborn elephants stay right at their mothers' sides, but as soon as they're a little older feel they are brave enough to take on the world – before darting back to their moms!





Kicked up dust is a photographer's delight when the sunlight is still low – as it was when these buffalo and rhinos made their way to permanent water sources.





About 1 400kg (3 000lbs) of flying hippo.
When they run at full tilt all four feet are in the air simultaneously for brief moments.