

Singita



Photo by Solomon Ndlovu

WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For June, Two Thousand, and Twenty-two

Temperature

Average minimum: 11.9°C (53.4°F)
Minimum recorded: 09.0°C (48.2°F)
Average maximum: 24.9°C (76.8°F)
Maximum recorded: 29.0°C (84.2°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0mm
Season to date: 500mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06h30
Sunset: 17h15

June marks the first month of winter and temperatures are telling with the morning drives as low as nine degrees Celsius. The natural air-conditioning provided by the breeze passing through the open vehicles, make for a frosty morning. However, the chilly mornings are counteracted with beanies, gloves, layers of clothes, hot water bottles and blankets, until the sun has warmed us up. The concession is still in fabulous condition with most of the vegetation still boasting rays of green and many of the pans and rivers still have enough water to evenly disperse the animal herds. Most herbivores are still glistening in their fur coats, in pristine condition.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for June:

Lions

- The Mananga Pride has been seen several times a week on our concession. Their territory is enlarging which could be a testament of their growing numbers. They have been seen as far north as Hatayi which is one of our most northern blocks, as far east as the northern fenceline, all while still maintaining their hold on the north-western and central part of our concession. A growing pride of lions like this needs enough land to hunt, and we have observed them covering much ground overnight depending on the amount of game in the area. We are still seeing them on occasion split into two factions, namely the two lionesses with their young six cubs and the other portion containing the rest of the Mananga Pride lionesses, subadults, cubs and young male. North factions have been seen with the Shish males, on one such occasion the entire pride was reunited and they were trailing a large herd of buffalos that were roaming from the northern part of the concession all the way south near Xingwenyana crossing. They successfully killed a buffalo around the sticky thorn thickets, after finishing the carcass they followed more buffalos to Nyeleti and managed to kill another buffalo. The pride has split again after that kill, into the two factions.
- The Maputo male and Kumana male were only spotted once this month, on the first of the month. With two members of the Trichardt coalition establishing themselves in their territory they seem to be keeping a low profile and not vocalizing, and scent marking. They could have been killed by these new males with only the vultures and hyenas who could retell their story, or they could have cut east into Mozambique, or further south, accepting their defeat. Only time will tell which of these scenarios have played out.
- The Trichardt males have pushed more north, they were seen around Ngume and Ma-four Pounds following the Shish lionesses, but it looks like they are not yet accepted by them because every time they hear them roaring they move away.
- The unrest has caused the Shish Pride to split up again as they did when the Maputo male came into this concession this time last year. The lionesses are separated into two factions, one lioness and three sub-adults together and the other three with the limping lioness are together.

Leopards

- We had an incredible sighting of the Nhlagulene female, where her cubs were up in a tree feeding on an impala carcass their mother had successfully managed to hoist. Exposure to the vehicles during this time has made the cubs more accustomed to the vehicles, and the sightings we've had of them thereafter have been more relaxed.
- Dumbana female and her two "cubs" continued to offer us magnificent sightings this month. They were seen in the central parts of our concession. On one such day we heard the impalas alarming and investigated. We spotted the Dumbana female moving east, and after a few minutes a spotted hyena arrived. We found that she had just killed an impala, and she was trying to distract the hyenas. Unfortunately, the hyenas managed to commandeer her carcass. However, a little later while the hyenas almost finished the carcass, she managed to grab the leftover head and neck to host in a nearby tree. She then went to fetch the cubs for them to feed and continued hunting.
- After that sighting, the Dumbana young males have also been seen around the Xidulu Pan area.
- The Mbiri-mbiri male come back south this month, and has been spotted around the Nuntlwa and Leadwood area. He was seen together with three Shish lionesses near Nuntlwa. We believe he killed a warthog and they came to scavenge. It was an interesting sighting because he did not want to give up his kill, and was about ten meters away from the lioness trying to get back the carcass, but they kept chasing him away and he would keep returning waiting and watching for an opportunity to get his meal back. We eventually left the area that night and when we got back the next morning there was not a single trace of the story that played out the night before.

Spotted hyenas

- A couple of hyena sightings have been recorded from all over the concession. Two adult hyenas were seen on the southern boundary, and we had a lot of their tracks moving all over the area. We suspect that they might have a den-site in that area. Three other hyena sightings were recorded around Border/Sisal junction coming from the south. This might be the same clan from the southern boundary.
- We had a sighting of two hyenas scavenging the impala from the Dumbana female leopard south of Ntsimbisane First Crossing on the drainage line.
- A single spotted hyena was seen feeding on a kudu carcass on the fenceline north of the rhino link. Two other hyena sightings were also recorded on Maputo and the fenceline.
- Multiple hyena sightings were recorded in the central depression. Three members of the Nkayanini clan were also seen lying up on the open areas between Ingwe and Ingwe link.

Elephants

- We have had incredible sightings of elephants this month. A number of breeding herds as well as bachelor herds have been sighted from the lodge all the way to the north.
- The southern section has also been a hotspot for elephants, with great sightings from Border/Sisal junction heading all the way south towards the Poort. It is always special to see breeding herds feeding along the Nwanetsi River with the Lebombo ridges as a dramatic backdrop.
- We have also had elephant herds browsing in and around the lodge.

Buffalos

- We had a wonderful sighting of a breeding herd of buffalo in the concession this month. About 1 000 buffalos entered the concession coming from our northern boundary, and they made their way all the way south towards the Nwanetsi River (Xingwenyana Crossing). Due to lions trailing and hunting them they split into smaller factions of about 400 buffalos, which were spread across the concession. They eventually regrouped after a few days.
- A couple of single bulls and smaller herds were seen around the rest of the concession.

Plains game

- The Nwanetsi concession is well known for its big herds of general game but this month they have exceeded the record. On Ntsimbisane open areas, we have seen hundreds of impalas, waterbuck, wildebeest, and zebras. It is always a highlight seeing all the different species feeding together in the central depression area.
- Giraffe sightings have been phenomenal this month with towers of up to 20 plus individuals roaming the concession. We have also seen several newborn calves amongst them, still learning to walk.

Rare animals and other sightings

- An African wild cat was spotted by one of the guides on the morning drive, hunting a scrub hare, but it was not successful.
- We had a very relaxed serval cat around Nwanetsi and Dumbana Junction.
- One of the resident honey badgers was seen exposed around Sweni Lodge, basking in the sun!

Birds

- Multiple pairs of white-backed vultures were spotted preparing their nests for breeding.
- A flock of yellow-throated longclaw was spotted a couple of times around Xingwenyana crossing and Sticky Thorn Road.
- A half-collared kingfisher was seen for the first time ever on the concession, around Dave's crossing.

Some bush reflections and articles follow, as well as the June Gallery of images

The sole surviving coalition member of the Kumana male coalition was last sighted on our concession on the 1 June, with the Maputo male (his newly formed coalition mate), at Green Apple Hill which is an incredible lookout spot that overlooks sections of what had been the Kumana male's territory. Today we pay homage to an astounding male lion that has persevered through many adversities and always came out on top. Let's start at the beginning of this lion's life.



Kumana male lion: Photo by Tovhi Mudau

The Kumana male was born into a pride called the Hilda's Rock Pride which was a pride that had established itself in the Kingston property. Kingston property is in the southern Sabi Sands, in Lion Sands Game Reserve. The pride was called Hilda's Rock Pride after an area that they were often seen in, in which there was a rocky outcrop named Hilda's Rock. Hilda's Rock got its name from Hilda Hamilton who was the wife of the first warden of the Kruger National Park, James Stevenson-Hamilton aka Skukuza. The rocky outcrop which has some resemblance to "pride rock" was one of Hilda Hamilton's favourite areas to frequent and paint at, and in her honour the area was named Hilda's Rock.

But let's get back to the Kumana male! Due to a territorial takeover his maternal pride was under attack by two males called the Charleston males, in a feat to defend her cub the Hilda's Rock lioness fought the intruding males and subsequently succumbed to her injuries. Her death was not in vain as the young Hilda's Rock male managed to escape. After some time of living out life alone, nomadically, he then met up with a lioness who had lost her pride and was only left with two young subadult males (Charleston Pride).

At this stage of the story, I was working at Lion Sands Game Reserve and the arrival of the slightly older Hilda's Rock male concerned us as we had observed in the past that when new males join a pride the cubs are often eliminated. However, for some reason the Hilda's Rock male spared them. This could have been that he himself was still fairly "young" (although he towered over the Charleston lioness in size) or this could have been that the cubs were old enough to allow the Charleston female to go into oestrus (although if my memory serves me correctly, I had never once seen him mate with the Charleston female) or alternatively, after being alone for a while he was just happy to be accepted into a pride. The Charleston lioness did not by any stretch of the imagination make it easy for him to join, as she understood the dangers that could arise from such a union.

However, eventually she let him into the circle after he persisted and gained her trust. During this period this male was shedding a lot of his mane due to the stress of trying to infiltrate a new pride and the stress of living a nomadic life alone for so long. Only after a couple of months did he begin to slowly regrow his mane, but it was patchy.

We watched him gain a very strong bond with the lioness and an even stronger bond with the two young males. The new pride had gained a powerful ally as he offered the muscle, but he was not the dominant male of this area as just to the north east the two Charleston males, who killed his mother, were beginning to extend their territory southwards. He was no match for these two older males, so he hardly roared or marked his territory while with the Charleston Pride. But he undoubtedly gave the pride some added protection as they themselves were facing threats from larger lion prides in all cardinal points. During his time with the Charleston Pride, we viewed them fighting the odds together, it was impressive to watch.



Hilda's Rock male, with the Charleston female, while at Lion Sands. Photo by Joe Van Zyl at Lion Sands.

Eventually the older Charleston males descended southwards to expand their territory and this expansion encroached on the territory that was being occupied by the Charleston Pride (Hilda's Rock male, lioness and two cubs), pushing this pride further south across the Sabi River. Bear with me as there is a lot of 'Charleston' being thrown around but one must separate the Charleston Pride from the Charleston males as they were not linked. They were enemies!

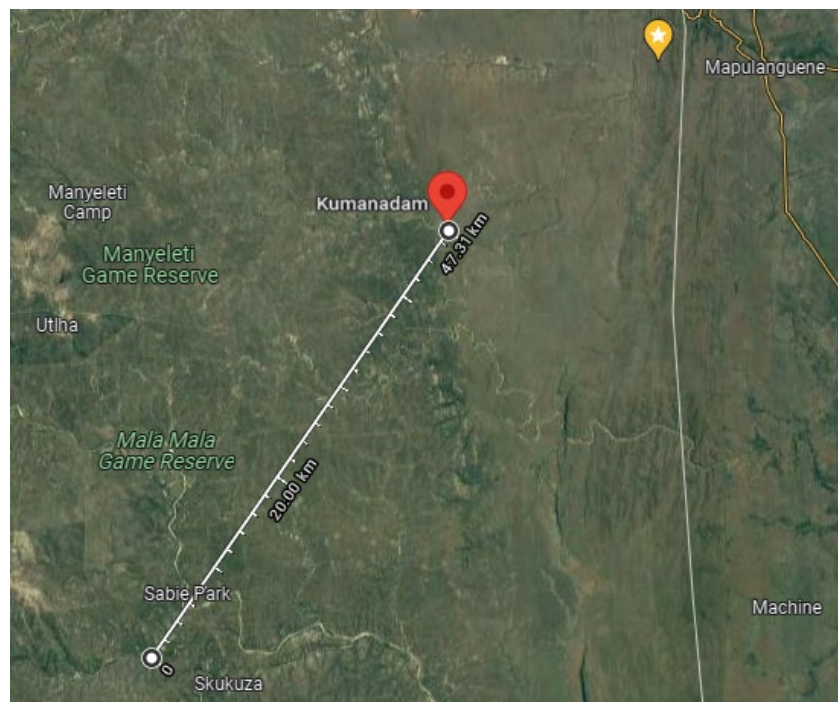
When the pride crossed the river heading south towards the Lion Sands Game Reserve in the Kruger National Park (I was still on the northern side of the river at Lion Sands Game Reserve in the Sabi Sands section) the guides across the river would at times call the quartet the Hilda's Rock Pride (Hilda's Rock male, Charleston lioness and two cubs). I will still be call them the Charleston Pride to make it easier to follow.

They continued to live their life below the radar, but no matter how discreet they were the older Charleston males kept pushing southwards as their territory expanded, and they eventually caught up with the Charleston Pride and a fight ensued. In this fight the Charleston lioness fought to the death to protect her cubs and the Hilda's Rock male. The Hilda's Rock male and the two young Charleston males separated after this incident and the two young Charleston males were surviving by themselves. At this stage the Hilda's Rock male was untraceable in my research, I believe he could have headed further south towards the Skukuza area. Alone after the death of their mother one of the young Charleston males got caught in a snare. We discovered it and

the Park tried to intervene to save him but it was too late, he succumbed to his injuries. This then left the remaining young Charleston male in a precarious position as navigating the wild alone at an impressionable age poses many challenges. As we were thinking the worst, out of nowhere the Hilda's Rock male returned to save the day and took the young male with him!

During his absenteeism he had somehow met another male roughly his age and they had formed a coalition, so when the younger Charleston male joined, he was to be the 3rd member of this coalition. There is a lot of speculation where the third member of the trio came from - some people called him the Dreadlock male, others called him Solo. The only constant was that they now called the trio the Hilda's Rock males or the Skukuza males.

This trio one day up and left the Skukuza region and headed north east. When they left, I did not see them again at Lion Sands, but years later I heard that they ended up at the Kumana Dam, around July of 2018. The adversity and trials they must have faced while navigating through territories inhabited by other prides and males is unknown to me, but I can say that it was not easy!



This is the journey the Hilda's Rock males took to Kumana dam area, they did not take a direct route there as the land between Lion Sands and Kumana Dam was occupied by territorial males, so they would of bob and weaved and fought their way through.

The Hilda's Rock males established themselves around the Kumana Dam, and locals to the area then called them the Kumana males as they were often seen around the Kumana Dam. They began moving further north and east of the Kumana Dam towards Singita, where they arrived in our concession at the end of October to the beginning of November. On the 10 November 2018, they were seen mating with one of the Shish Pride lionesses, and that is when the reign of the Kumana males began in the southern part of Singita's concession.



The Kumana males (Hilda's Rock male in the centre) on a territorial patrol around the Singita concession.
Photo by Brian Rode.

In December 2019 the three members of the Kumana male coalition left the concession and were not seen for the month of January. However, in February of 2020, two of the coalition members, one of which was believed to have been the dreadlock male (or Solo) and the other was the Hilda's Rock male, returned to our concession looking very weak and skinny. The third coalition member was nowhere to be seen, it is believed that during their escapade he was killed or died of natural causes.

I arrived at Singita in March 2020. On an exploratory game drive, we found the two members of the Kumana males, and my heart was overjoyed as I knew their history, and having arrived in a new area, the "Hilda's Rock male" was like having a little bit of home. Their physical appearance was heart-wrenching, as they had transformed from young powerful males to battered, old, thinning lions. A few weeks after I arrived the Dreadlock male (or Solo) followed suit and died of natural causes and there was only one male standing which was the Hilda's Rock male, my old friend. From his weakened state he slowly began gaining condition and strength and was then still able to successfully reign over the southern parts of our concession for over a year, and he sired more cubs.



The surviving members of the Kumana male coalition. Photo by Brian Rode.

At the end of May towards the beginning of June 2021 an unknown male came in from the east (Mozambique) began challenging the Kumana male for this territory. We later named the unknown male the Maputo male, as he came from Mozambique (Maputo is the capital of Mozambique). He fought for several weeks with the surviving Kumana male. Although he was younger, physically he was bigger than the Kumana male (he even gained the nickname, "The Beast from the East" from the guides). The Kumana male however, had more fights under his belt, which was his biggest advantage as he possessed the skill set and resilience to take on the Maputo male. The Maputo male was, at that time, fresh-faced with little to no scars on his face, which told us he had hardly fought against other male lions for territory because in territorial fights male lions take most of the blows on their heads and faces.

These territorial fights sent the Shish Pride into disarray with some cutting into Mozambique, others headed south and some remained incognito on the concession. After one of many fights, I found the Kumana male in a pool of his own blood, his face sliced open and streams of blood trickling from his eyes. In my mind I had written him off and believed that this was the last time I was going to see this remarkable lion. After several days one of my colleagues called in on the radio that they had located the Kumana male. In disbelief I had to ask them to repeat the message because I could not believe my ears, and sure enough, he said again, "The Kumana male had been located". I rushed to the sighting and sure enough there he lay with his injuries healed leaving only scars, that mapped all his battles. We began to see him more and more but strangely with the Maputo male never more than a couple of metres away, non-aggressive. These two males somehow had a gentleman's agreement and decided to put the boxing gloves down, as they were both equally matched and instead decide to reign together. They reigned together for a year, it would have been one full year in August. With both males siring a new litter of cubs. But in the bush there is no rest for kings.

A coalition of five male lions named the Trichardt males began coming further east towards our concession causing more tension for the new coalition. We kept seeing fresh wounds on the Kumana and Maputo male (who now has a substantial amount of war wounds on his face) in the mornings, which were retelling of encounters they have had with other males in the cover of the night. Three of the Trichardt males retreated west and have been seen on several occasions around the Satara region, which is the territory that the coalition of four (one of them being the white lion) who originally came from the Shish pride reign in. This left just two of them and they kept pushing well within the southern part of our concession. These males have been seen marking their territory in areas the Kumana and Maputo male used to mark, and announcing their presence with loud roars.

Now we go back to the beginning. The sole surviving coalition member of the Kumana male coalition was last sighted on our concession on the 1 June, with the Maputo male (his newly formed coalition mate) at Green Apple Hill, which is an incredible lookout spot that overlooks sections of what had been the Kumana male's territory when he and the other Kumana males first entered the Singita concession. We believe he has retreated further east into Mozambique, which is an area that the Maputo male is familiar with, with a portion of the Shish Pride. His current condition is unknown nor his exact whereabouts. However, on occasions the new Trichardt males are sporting fresh injuries that we can only assume have been given by the Kumana and Maputo coalition. However, these new males look like they are in no hurry to leave and are cementing their presence. The other portion of the Shish pride is yet to welcome them but I believe this is the beginning of a new reign.

Update: At the last hour of the month, like a phoenix rising from the flames, the Kumana male was sighted in great health in the centre of his territory. It seems he had only gone into hiding to regain his strength and he is back for now. The Maputo male is still MIA, however the Kumana male's track record has all but shown that he can stand alone.

The Changes I have seen By Ishmael Nyathi

Driving around Singita Lebombo concession is a great privilege especially to staff, guides, trackers and our respective guests. To experience the beautiful scenery and landscape of the Lebombo mountain range is awe inspiring.

Since joining Singita Lebombo concession in 2019 I've seen vagrant birds both aquatic and terrestrial species in different seasons of the year.

The major changes that I've witnessed in the past two years, have been to the three main river crossings in the concession, namely, Mbeki's, Gumba and Xingwenyana crossing. When I started there was no water flowing at all but for the past two years there's water flowing in these crossings. I have noticed major vegetation changes in these areas, namely the big bulrush and sedge grass that are now present and thriving. This will invite more elephant and aquatic birds to frequent these areas. Bulrushes are more common in areas with stagnant water or big dams which provides more shelter and breeding for aquatic life species. They tend to have long, rounded seed heads, and wide strong leaves that can be used for weaving.



During the time of initiation school which happens every winter season, where young males and females are taught values, principles and respect, the elders will go to the wetlands and harvest the strong leaves of the bulrush and weave them to make beautiful skirts so that the young girls and boys can wear them.

Many people also make a living of harvesting bulrushes by weaving mats and chair seats that they sell to the local markets. The sedge also has a value to the Shangani people, as they make traditional mats out of the plant material. The sedge and bulrushes are usually available except during periods of the dry season when elephants start to feed on them a lot.

It is so good to have such changes in nature now. When we drive through these crossings, we can stop and look for painted snipes which are a rare bird species in the concession, but the bulrushes and sedges make them ideal habitats.



Catch of the day



Leopard cub



Airborne



Elephant herd