

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA
For the month of January, Two Thousand and Twenty Three

Temperature

Average minimum: 20.4°C (68.70°F)

Average maximum: 30.4°C (86.70°F)

Minimum recorded: 16.0°C (60.80°F)

Maximum recorded: 35.0°C (95°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 34.2 mm

For the season to date: 148.2 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:18

Sunset: 18:49

An unusual scene surrounds us as we set out to explore Singita in the Sabi Sand. Grasses have changed from a vibrant green to a straw yellow, leaves have wilted and flowers are turning to seed. Seasonal pans are now nothing more than cracked mud wallows while prominent game paths bisect the savanna leading to the last bit of standing water. This is a more typical environment for the shoulder seasons than that of the height of the lowveld summer. Sustained heat has consumed the reserve for the past month, with little rain. However, there is the feeling that something is brewing and it is only a matter of time before the heavens open and bless us with nature's life blood.

Here's an overview of January's sightings:

Lions

- It is fantastic to see the condition of the Talamati pride - five adult lionesses that seem to be finding a territory along the Sand River close to the lodges. They have had success in hunting a zebra close to Camp Pan and, on a few occasions, have been found in the open plains directly opposite Ebony Lodge. We look forward to their rise in dominance.
- The Mhangeni Pride is holding their own in the south as they trail the herds of buffalo that are still grazing in the gabbro-dominated grasslands. The lioness with the limp on her back left leg seems to be recovering well and her condition is far better than in previous months.
- The Plains Camp male lions are a sight to behold. Their manes are filling out and a beautiful dark tone can be seen growing throughout. With the fall of the older Birmingham male lion, the central and western part of the Sabi Sand is now theirs.
- From time to time, we encounter the Nsevu breakaway sub-adult lions - four males and one lioness. We savour each sighting with them as it is only a matter of time before they disperse. Or will they? To the north of the Sand River is a vast woodland that remains relatively unoccupied regarding male lions. This has often been a place where “new” lions to the region are found as they take refuge in this heavily vegetated part of the reserve. Perhaps they too will do the same and come into their own like so many before them.

Leopards

- The new kid on the block, the Tsutsuma female leopard has been seen on two occasions on the wrong side of the Mobeni female. The recently independent two-year-old has been sighted around Khoza Pan and the Mobeni female was not happy with her intruding on her shrinking territory.
- The Nkuwa female has prominent suckle marks on her lower belly. We only expect to see the cubs late next month, and we look forward to her hopefully raising these cubs in the eastern part of Singita. The rocky surroundings are perfect for denning and will hopefully play host to the development and well-being of the cubs.
- In the north the Kangelala male has taken a liking to the marula-dotted crest around Makalashi Lookout. This young leopard has recovered well from his altercation with the Thamba male and, clearly, he has received the message as he has not been sighted once this month south of the Sand River, the territory of Thamba.
- The Schotia female does not have cubs, and is looking in great condition.

Elephants

- We never tire of watching elephants and there has been no shortage of the pachyderms. Their presences is noticeable as mud wallows grow larger due to the regular mud baths, while at the base of the marula trees grasses have been trampled as the herds search for fallen fruits. Herds can be seen hastily moving from tree to tree in the hope of finding tasty seasonal delights.

Buffalo

- There have been frequent sightings of big herds of buffalo in the southern region. They have a major influence in grassland succession by churning the soil and encouraging new growth.

Plains game

- We have been spoiled by an abundance of zebra in the south. Large dazzles still graze in the south, something that is rarely seen at this time of the year. Often the herds move east into the basalt-rich soil of the eastern Greater Kruger. Perhaps the lack of rain in the region and the new grasses in the south have kept them here.

Bird List

- Specials for the month included the African finfoot, Kittlitz's plover, European nightjar and white-headed vulture. In total we saw 177 different species.



The river has been teeming with elephant herds. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor

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

Does a leopard's tail, when raised, imitate a snake?

Article by Matt Durell

Interesting question, but no. That is not the case. Glad I have got your attention, but I am not here to chat about the millions of interesting and funny questions we get asked as guides! Instead, this month I am going to write about what keeps us guides going behind the scenes when we are not on game drive.

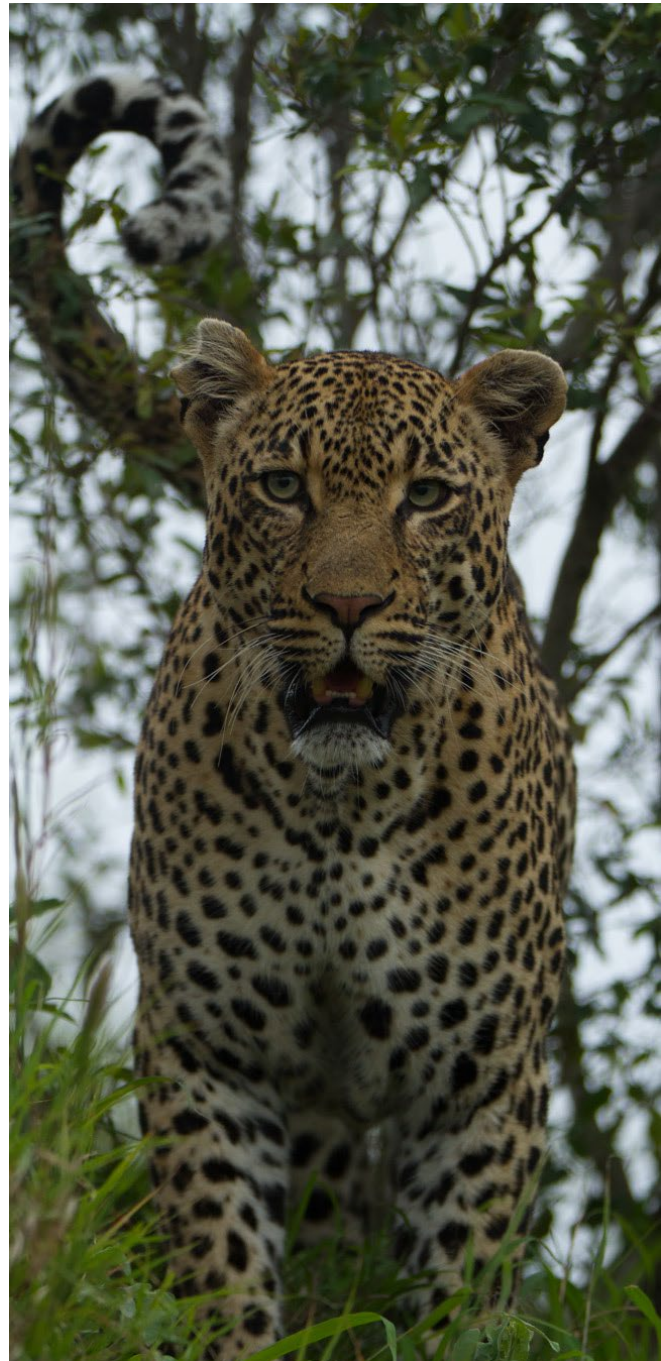
For me, my biggest motivation is talking to people who appreciate everything you tell them - big or small, any bit of information they are most grateful for. I also appreciate genuine questions with regards to work and us as individuals.

What keeps us busy, when the rifles are locked in the safe, is an array of different portfolios and tasks, from first aid to shooting practice, sightings reports, journal articles, vehicle viewing aids and everything in between. The end of the month is obviously a bit more chaotic with month-end and stocktake but many hands make light work!

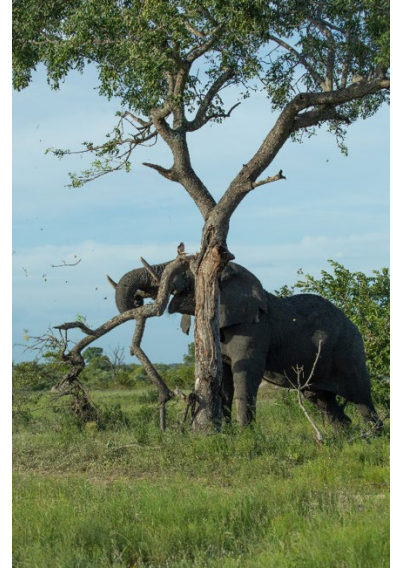
We also spend time rehabilitating the environment, often giving us the opportunity to follow some of the high-profile animals off road. Environmental rehabilitation involves repairing ruts that we have left behind, or 'brush packing' to protect areas. We are very fortunate to have an environmental team that works tirelessly to, among other things, remove the larger trees that have been pushed over the road by the usual suspects, elephants!

When we have finally wrapped up our responsibilities, we can take a bit of time for ourselves, in between game drives. It's enough time to go through and edit photos taken on drive, to go to gym or go for a 5km run. In summer, we are awake to get ready for drive around 04:00, and in the afternoon we leave later, to avoid the heat of midday. This usually gives us the ideal opportunity between drives to take a quintessential nap, which we enjoy just as much as guests, I think! In the winter months, there is a much shorter gap between drives because the sun is up later. We leave later in the mornings and it is darker earlier on in the afternoon, so we are back at the lodge earlier - less time for naps but it allows for a decent night's sleep.

Coming off a break now post the festive season, I am looking forward to getting back to the bush, which I am sure is looking green and lush, with my batteries fully charged! I certainly will not be missing the traffic in Johannesburg!



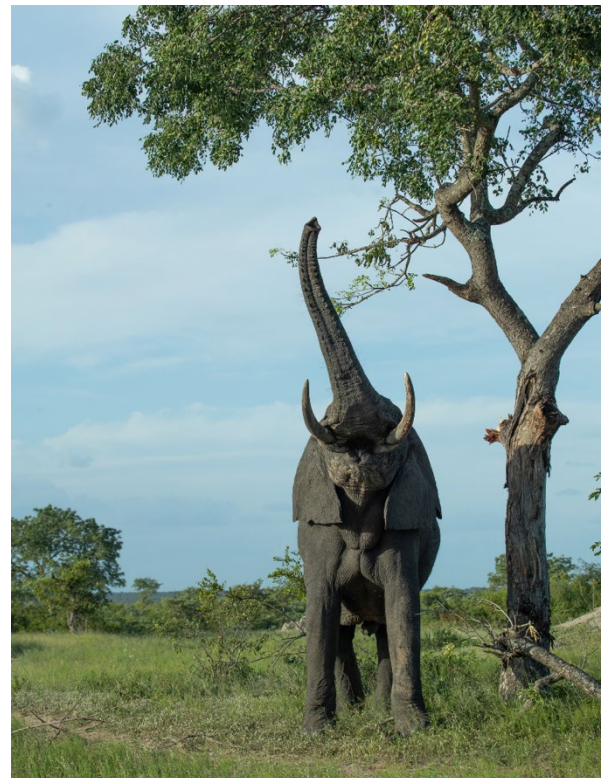
We have prepared for so long. Storing nutrients deep down below while having to shed our sun absorbing leaves during the short winter days. We watch as the giants pass by choosing others that are more appealing. We know that soon enough these pachyderms will want all that we have. In years gone by we watch how they break, strip and snap those around us, slowly shaping our aged surroundings.



While we rely on them for our own success, they seem to treat us like we have no right to life! To have your own bark stripped from base to canopy, it is a painful experience leaving deep scars, but with time it will heal if given a chance.

We are more than just fodder but provide shade and shelter to many in various shapes. We have witnessed some intimate moments and some close calls. Without us slowly but surely many will be impacted and life as we know it may not function. From the birds that require our sturdy limbs for a place to sleep or to raise their chicks, to the leopards that find refuge from the heat of the day in our leafy canopy.

Not all hope is lost as we know our success lies in the trunks of elephants. They take our seeds far and wide (they can transport seeds up to 65 kilometres) giving our species a chance to prosper, while enjoying the nutrients we have to offer. Also, our seeds are far more likely to germinate successfully having passed through the digestive system of an elephant and landed in a pile of ready-made compost!





A lilac breasted roller in flight. The colour blue that we see is produced by the structure of the feathers, made up of keratin that reflect specific wavelengths of light. Only yellow and red feathers get their colour from actual pigments, called carotenoids, that are found in the food of birds.

The title of a French song by Michel Fugain happened to play on my Apple playlist as I'm sat in front of my computer conceptualising my journal story, and inspired me to write about birds.

The opening verse goes like this :

Fais comme l'oiseau (Act like a bird)

Ca vit d'air pur et d'eau fraîche, un oiseau (It lives on pure air and fresh water, a bird)

D'un peu de chasse et de pêche, un oiseau (On a bit of hunting and fishing, a bird)

Mais jamais rien de l'empêche, l'oiseau (But nothing ever stops it, the bird)

D'aller plus haut (Of going higher)

I find telling stories so much easier than writing them. This year has been one of the most difficult of my life, as I lost my dear father on the 6th of January and have been dealing with the grief. Being in Nature and appreciating all the things that Papa loved about Africa has helped me a lot over these last three weeks.

In 2019, pushed by a friend, I started recording all the birds I would see in a year and it has given me much joy, exploring beautiful wilderness areas that have taken me off the beaten track in order to look for rare and elusive birds.

On the 1st of January the guiding team starts afresh to observe and record all species of birds we see at Singita Sabi Sand for the year, and so far for 2023 we are on 177 species. In previous years we had about 220 species for the month of January, but we still have plenty of time to try and reach our ultimate goal of 300 species. In order to make the list, birds can be recognized by sight or call.

It's funny how many guests I have met over the years mention that they are not interested in birds, but after seeing how beautiful they are start to appreciate watching them. What often happens when one is birding is that we tend to slow down, appreciate the little things and often get to see some great game by having the vehicle engine switch off and being more in tune with our surroundings.

We are blessed in southern Africa to have over 993 species recorded. In the Sabi Sand Nature Reserve we currently have 409 species.

Summer is a wonderful time for birding as we have an influx of birds from Africa, Asia and Europe that spend summer here. Some breed and others just enjoy the warmer weather and make full use of the abundance of food available. More than 100 migratory birds species have been recorded in southern Africa according to Birdlife South Africa, of which 44 are palearctic migrants from Europe, Asia, northern Africa and the northern and central parts of the Arabian peninsula) and 35 intra African migrant species have been recorded in South Africa.



A common sandpiper, a regular non-breeding palearctic migrant.

The variety of colours, shape, size is truly remarkable, ranging from the secretive grey penduline tit weighing in at 6,5 grams to the heaviest bird in the world the common ostrich weighing up to 100 kilos.

Along the Sand River beautiful kingfishers and bee-eaters can be seen perched on branches. There are 86 species of kingfishers worldwide, 18 species in Africa, and South Africa has 10 species. We are fortunate to see nine species at Singita, five of which are insectivorous whilst four feed mainly on fish, crabs, frogs and aquatic invertebrates.

Birding can also be frustrating at times as once you are able to identify a bird by sight a whole new set of skills is required to recognize the call. You can then spend time trying to identify tracks, nests and feathers – there are so many ways to keep growing and mastering a skill.



Left: A curious female common ostrich comes to have a look at us in our game viewer.
Right: A female bateleur eagle: A diurnal scavenger (70-85% of diet).



A female giant kingfisher



A resident species: White-fronted bee-eater

We also record vulture nests in collaboration with the Endangered Wildlife Trust, mapping the nest site and assisting in the collecting useful data. Vultures are sadly facing the threat of extinction - mass poisoning and the illegal wildlife trade are pushing all vultures species to the brink of extinction.



A beautiful male harlequin quail, a breeding intra African migrant.



A wake of white-backed vultures at sunset, waiting for a pride to finish a kill.

January Gallery



Southern carmine bee-eaters are brief summer visitors, arriving in December and leaving by March.
Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor



The Schotia female leopard takes a moment to clean herself in the rain. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor



A lion relaxing as only lions can!
Wherever there is a mud wallow you are likely to find buffalo, warthogs or hyenas.





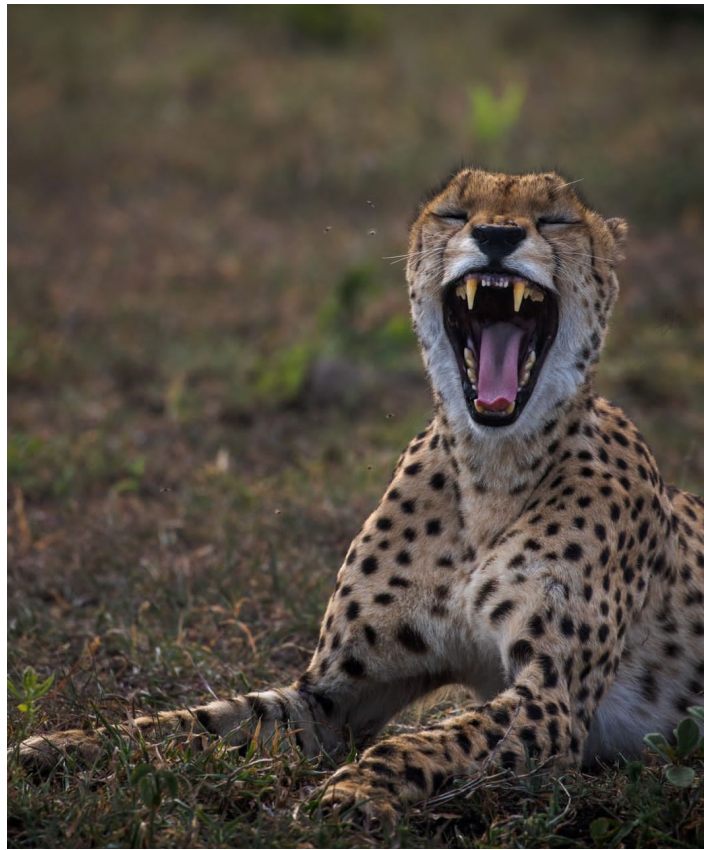
Moments of unimaginable Singita Sabi Sand beauty.





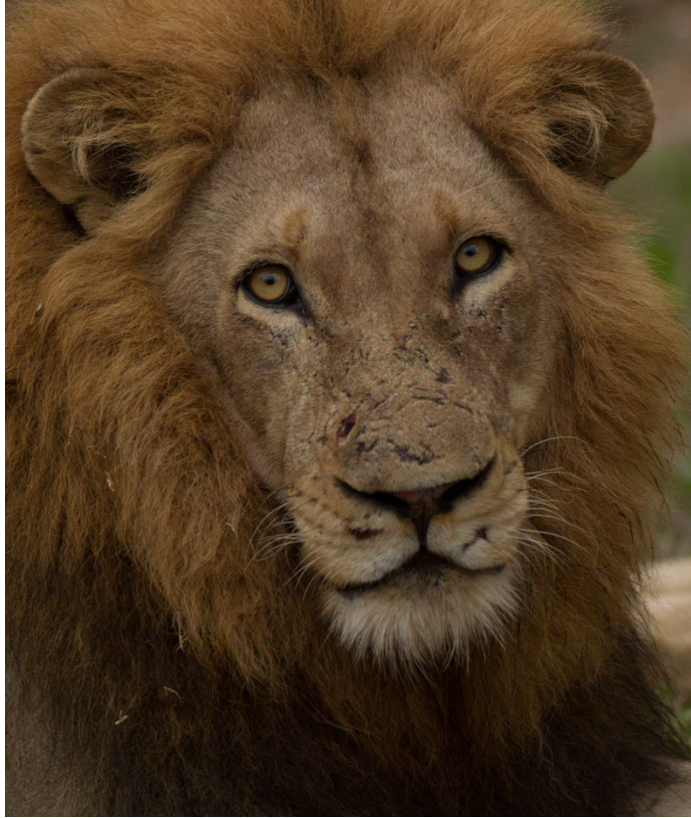
A starling haloed by the moon, while a leopard looks to the heavens, liking its lips.





A cheetah, exhausted from a sprint.
The lush landscape of lowveld summer.





The lion speaks tonight.

