

Singita

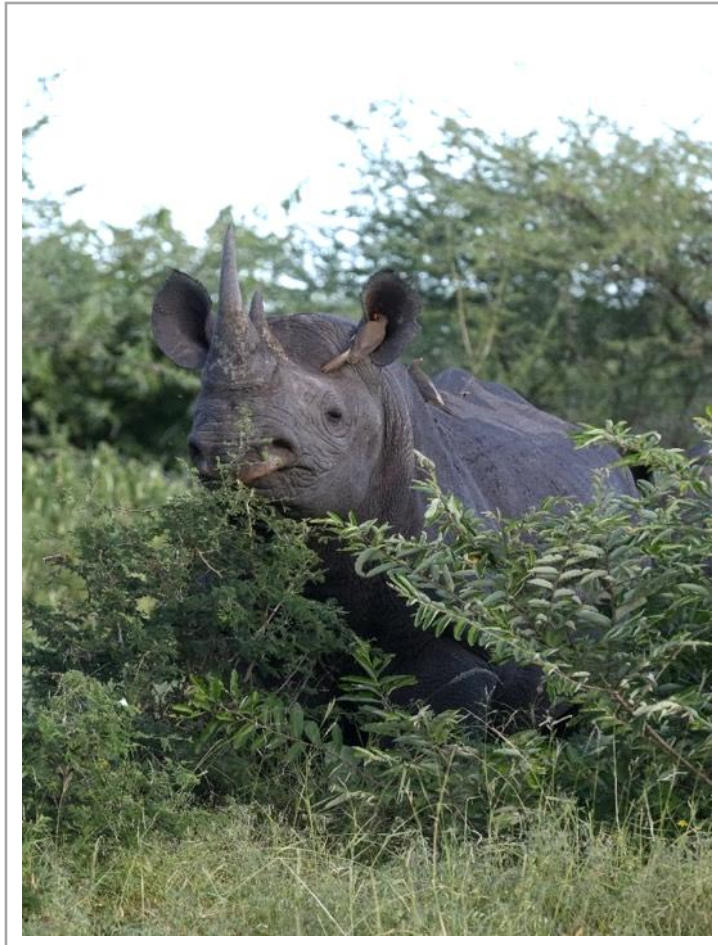


Photo by Daffwell Marumahoko

WILDLIFE REPORT **SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE** **For the month of February, Two Thousand and Twenty-Six**

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.0°C (69.8°F)
Minimum recorded: 19.0°C (66.2°F)
Average maximum: 34.0°C (93.2°F)
Maximum recorded: 39.0°C (102.2°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 26.0 mm
Season to date: 454 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:50
Sunset: 18:21

As we move towards the end of the rainy season, grasses and forbs will begin to wilt. Bushes will follow later, gradually opening the landscape and giving us a clear vista to view game. There is plenty of food available for all herbivores and birds now, contributing to healthy and active wildlife on the reserve, and hopefully the forage will sustain them for the rest of the year until the next rainy season. The promise of winter approaches as we feel the slight drop in temperature now.

An overview of the month's sightings follows:

Lions

- Three sub-adult lions, two males and one female, that split from the Nduna Pride have been moving between Hwata and Banyini. Banyini has become an ideal hunting ground for them due to the abundance of plains game.

Leopards

- We had a remarkable eye-to-eye encounter with a female leopard drinking from a small water body right beside the road.
- Leopards continue to appear at permanent water points, where they take advantage of prey species that frequently come to drink.

African wild dogs

- Wild dogs have been seen three times this month. The packs remain stable and in excellent condition, with all individuals appearing healthy and active. Their movements have been concentrated around areas with water points, likely due to the excessive availability of water during this period, which influences both prey distribution and their hunting patterns. With the extreme heat they have been seen sitting in the water to cool down, while also taking the opportunity to quench their thirst whenever possible.

Elephants

- Breeding herds of elephants were particularly active around Chikwete and Mubangweni. Their presence is evident from scattered broken trees and branches left across the area, a clear sign of their feeding movement patterns.
- Additional sightings from other game drives reported the herds crossing Binya Road, heading toward Chikwete, an area well-known for its abundance of acacia trees. The groups included small calves, indicating healthy breeding activity and strong family structure within the herds.

Buffalos

- Big herds of buffalo are still frequenting Hwata Pan and Nduna Dam. Their presence is helping to open up thick grass areas, as the large numbers continuously trample the grass, creating clearer paths and improving visibility.

Rhinos

- White rhinos are currently less exposed compared to the dry season when the bush is more open. With the vegetation still thick, they tend to remain within cover for most of the day. Sightings are most likely around waterholes, particularly during the heat of the day and again in the evening when they come to drink.
- Black rhinos are predominantly concentrated around Banyini, where they are taking advantage of sprouting wild cucumber plants and a variety of seasonal forbs. Most sightings have occurred in the morning and again in the early evening.

Spotted hyenas

- Twenty hyenas were sighted at a buffalo carcass along Orphan Road - an impressive and uncommon number for a single feeding site. The clan was fully active, mingling among themselves as they fed, accompanied by their characteristic giggling and whooping vocalisations. The interaction showcased the complex social behaviour of hyenas, with constant movement, shifting ranks, and competitive yet coordinated feeding.

Brown hyenas

- Later on a brown hyena was likely moving within the radius of the buffalo carcass when it picked up the scent and tracked it down with precision. After locating the carcass, it remained on the periphery as lions were now feeding, keeping a cautious distance yet fully alert. This rare and

solitary visitor added a special highlight to the day, offering an excellent contrast to the earlier activity of the spotted hyena clan.

Plains game

- Banyini is thriving with plains game! The open and seemingly-safe environment, together with the abundance of wild cucumber plants, is inviting a wide range of species into the area.

Unusual sightings

- Between Buffalo Fence Road and Hwata Pan there is a breeding colony of quelea birds. Birds of prey have been observed congregating in large numbers in this area. This includes both migratory and endemic species, taking advantage of the abundance of chicks as a food source.

Birds

- The Narina trogon mentioned in last month's journal has still been seen around Malilangwe House and Paumushana Lodge, which is quite remarkable. Normally elusive and confined to dense riverine woodland, this individual has remained within the area, likely due to stable food availability and suitable roosting spots.

Photographic hide

- The photographic hide is not used during heavy rainfall periods. But as the rains are coming to an end, natural water points begin to dry up, and wildlife activity will shift. All major game species will soon return to our prominent and well-known waterholes, increasing viewing opportunities – especially from within the hide.

Rock art

- Rock art carries an endless and fascinating history. People find it hard to believe the level of skill and detail in the ancient artwork. It is such a privilege to be able to share the abundance of rock art on the reserve with our guests.

Boat cruises

- The boat cruise is a relaxing activity where guests enjoy their drinks from the comfort of their cruising couches while watching game along the shoreline. Several hippo pods have been observed, including the formation of new territories due to the high-water levels.

Fishing

- Water levels are high, and efforts have been made to find new hotspots. Tigers are biting among dead trees, possibly because small fish are feeding on algae in those areas, attracting the predators.

Gone frogging!

Story by Daffwell Marumahoko

One of The Malilangwe Trust's priorities is to make a meaningful contribution to conservation science through dedicated research. As such, herpetologist and PhD student Kurt van Wyk, has been conducting fieldwork on the reserve since 2021. He has recently been back to complete the final chapter of his thesis.

Following the recent heavy rains that have affected large parts of the region, Kurt has also been assessing frog diversity at permanent and temporary water points across the reserve. Malilangwe's frogs were last assessed as part of an MSc project in 1994, which investigated post-drought frog diversity on reserve and the surrounding communal lands. Over the past few weeks, Kurt has recorded 23 frog species. One of these, the water lily reed frog (*Hyperolius pusillus*) had never been recorded on Malilangwe before, bringing the reserve's total to 25 species. Another, the red-legged wot-wot (*Hylambates maculatus*), had not been recorded since the previous survey in 1994.

Our guiding department was fortunate enough to accompany Kurt on a two-hour frogging excursion in February. We met at Kwali at 18:00 and shortly thereafter arrived at the first waterpoint in Banyini, where the night chorus slowly began to unfold. Frogs are such interesting creatures, and have such descriptive common names too! The first call we heard was from a dwarf puddle frog, which sounds much like a cricket. This was followed by the call of the mottled shovel-nosed frog, a species with fascinating breeding behaviour. They lay their eggs away from the water, and when it rains the flooding water carries the tadpoles into the pools. If the rainwater doesn't reach the nest, the mother can help in a couple of ways – one being to transport her tadpoles on her back to the water - an incredible adaptation!

As darkness deepened, more species joined the chorus. At Chekwa Pan, we located numerous plain grass frogs, adults hidden in the grass along the water's edge and their tiny juveniles close by.

We later returned toward the Banyini area where we recorded bullfrogs, foam-nest frogs, and finally the highlight of the evening - the Zimbabwe leaf-folding frog (*Afrixalus crotalus*), a stunning golden-yellow species perched delicately on a blade of grass.



Zimbabwe leaf-folding frog

Malilangwe previously had 24 confirmed frog species. However, Kurt made a discovery of the water lily reed frog (*Hyperolius pusillus*) at Chikwete, which now brings our total to 25!



Water lily reed frog

It was such an engaging and memorable outing. Everyone participated, learned something new, and thoroughly enjoyed the experience.



Edible bullfrog



We set out on an afternoon game drive, cameras ready for anything Mother Nature would offer. Everyone on board carried different expectations, but there was a shared sense that something amazing was waiting for us. One guest kept talking about leopards - seeing one was her only wish. I assured her that I would keep a careful eye on every bush and tree, the places where leopards love to hide.



Along the way, we located white rhinos and black rhinos, plus a variety of other wildlife species. Still, we didn't abandon our leopard search, even as the daylight slowly slipped away.

Then, as we rounded a bend, there was a rosetted cat, freshly finished marking its territory. It stood for a few moments, as if deciding what to do next, then crossed to the other side of the road and walked along the edge, opposite our vehicle. It paused, looked up, then melted into the bush. A dream came true!

Moments later, the thick vegetation swallowed the cat completely, and all we heard were the loud calls of francolins, startled by the magnificent leopard's silent approach.

All about impala

Story by Steve Chinhoi

Impala (*Aepyceros melampus*) are one of the most ubiquitous antelope in Southern Africa. They prefer open savanna woodland and are selective grazers and browsers that depend on surface water. A typical herd is made up of ewes, lambs and rams. During the breeding season, rams are territorial, while outside of the breeding season males often form bachelor herds.

Territorial males mark their areas using dung middens, urine and secretions from their metatarsal glands. These scent markings are important for communication and territorial boundaries. Herd size depends largely on the availability of food and water.

Vigilance within the herd is essential for detecting predators - there is safety in numbers. At any given time, one or two members of the herd remain alert rather than feeding or drinking. When danger is spotted, an alarm call alerts the others. As a predator approaches, impalas perform spectacular escape leaps - high jumps of roughly three metres and long bounds of up to ten metres - allowing them to flee quickly. Impalas are prey for lions, leopards and wild dogs.

Sexual dimorphism is clear in adult animals: males carry lyre-shaped horns, while females do not.

The rut occurs from March to April and is characterised by chasing, horn clashing and guttural, nasal calls. These activities establish dominance and ranking among males in preparation for mating. The gestation period is about six months, after which a single lamb is born - usually at the onset of the summer rains, around early December in the south-eastern parts of Zimbabwe. The synchronised birth of many lambs within a short period provides a survival advantage, as predators cannot catch them all - this "predator swamping" creates a dilution effect.

Lambs rely initially on their mother's milk. About half survive their first year, with predation being the main cause of mortality. Ewes give birth annually, timing lambing to coincide with the rainy season when food is plentiful, increasing the chances of survival. Shortly after birth, mothers encourage their lambs to stand and move, and they clean away afterbirth to avoid attracting predators.

The impala's ability to both graze and browse allows it to thrive in large numbers due to a reliable and varied food supply. As a result, impala populations remain stable and abundant across protected private lands and national parks.

It's wonderful to have the privilege of time on your hands when you are on safari to stop and spend time observing a herd of impala. So often we rush by in pursuit of less common species, but impala are precious jewels in this kingdom's crown.

Spotted hyena

Story by Time Mutema

The air is thick, and the mopane woodlands of Zimbabwe's Lowveld glow a vibrant, almost suffocating green. The wet season brings abundance, but it also makes the hunt more difficult. The ground is soft, turning to deep mud, slowing predators before they can reach top speed - yet prey is plentiful. The impala have dropped their young; the air carries the scent of milk, and eastern clouds are brewing, promising rain.

We were nearing the end of a morning game drive, heading back to the lodge in the late morning light. Along the Chiredzi River, flowing bank to bank, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye within the mixed thickets along the brush line. It was a massive spotted hyena—a female—moving with a deceptive, rolling gait. Instead of hiding, she trotted with purpose.

From the Land Cruiser, we watched as she showed none of the panicked fear often associated with daytime encounters. She was methodical, ears swivelling, powerful shoulders driving her forward. In this part of the Lowveld where lions, leopards and wild dogs are efficient hunters - the hyena is always listening, looking and smelling for scavenging opportunities - the true master of opportunism.

She slowed, turning her head toward a dense thorn thicket. Her eyes, a striking intelligent amber, seemed to lock onto something unseen by us. She paused, scenting the air - her so-called "laughing" reputation nowhere in sight. This was a focused, formidable predator.

Then she did something remarkable. She did not bolt. Instead, she sat down in the sparse cover of a thorn tree and looked directly at us with a gaze that held neither fear nor malice, only a kind of wild indifference. She was in her realm; we were merely temporary guests.

A moment later, she rose, gave a low grunt, and melted back into the dense bush, likely heading toward the river - leaving us with a lasting image of the Lowveld's misunderstood and deeply intelligent hunter and scavenger.



Photo by Daffwell Marumahoko

February Gallery

All photos by Daffwell Marumahoko.



Black rhinos on Banyini.
Wild dog in a nest of green.





Prey. Predator.





Being framed – by a giraffe!
Pups at play

