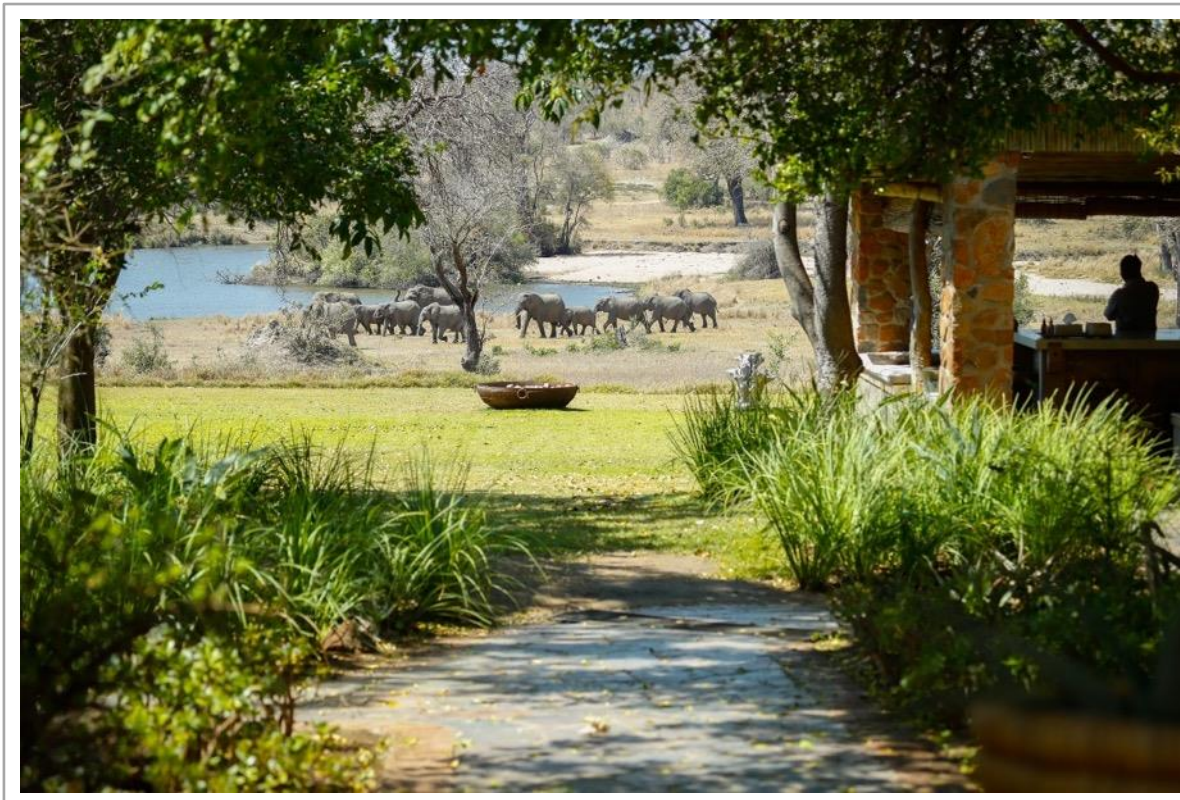


# Singita



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

**Temperature**

Average minimum: 16.8°C (62.1°F)  
Average maximum: 31.6°C (88.9°F)  
Minimum recorded: 12.0°C (53.6°F)  
Maximum recorded: 35.0°C (95.0°F)

**Rainfall Recorded**

For the month: 50 mm  
Season to date: 699.7 mm

**Sunrise & Sunset**

Sunrise: 05:51  
Sunset: 17:47

In the heart of the Sabi Sand Nature Reserve, September ushers in a symphony of life as migratory birds return to their ancestral grounds. With the dawn chorus birdsong resonates through the air - the brash notes of the lilac-breasted roller, the echoing call of the African fish eagle, and the cheerful chirping of red-billed queleas all contribute to the wilderness soundtrack. As the days lengthen and the sun's warmth envelops the landscape, the once-quiet wilderness transforms into a vibrant tapestry of sounds, sights, and scents. September's fragrant breeze carries hints of earthy petrichor, intermingled with the sweet scent of flowering marula trees, promising a rich harvest to come. At dusk, the fiery hues of a magnificent African sunset paint the sky, casting a warm, amber glow over the landscape, bidding farewell to another captivating day at Singita Sabi Sand.

## Elephants

Sightings with these majestic pachyderms are cherished, for soon some will embark on a journey eastward to the lush grasslands of Kruger Park's eastern reaches.

- In the heart of the wooded savanna, where the trumpets of elephants echo through the trees, we've been treated to awe-inspiring encounters. Even when these gentle giants are hidden from view, their resonant trumpeting reverberates, reminding us of their presence.
- As the ebony trees shed their tired leaves, vibrant red foliage emerges, enticing the elephants to browse.
- On scorching spring days, the Sand River undergoes a transformation, shifting from crystal clarity to a murky hue, as various elephant families converge to quench their thirst and bathe.

## Buffalos

- As the bushveld welcomes the gradual return of lush green grass, the buffalo heave a collective sigh of relief, their condition steadily improving with each mouthful.
- In this corner of the wilderness, the pressure they've endured from multiple lion prides has reached unprecedented levels.
- A herd roams along the seep lines in the north, while another massive gathering, numbering over 500 strong, grazes upon the abundant grasslands in the south.

## Cheetahs

- Amidst heightened lion activity in the region, the rare glimpses of a male cheetah in the south are nothing short of remarkable. A recent highlight unfolded as we watched this solitary cheetah, silhouetted against the setting sun, claim his hard-earned prize: an adult impala ram in the southern grasslands. In a rare turn of events, the cheetah devoured its prey without disturbance.
- Stable cheetah sightings like these allow our vehicles to linger, ensuring everyone has ample time to marvel at this magnificent feline without any time constraints. For the patient observer, there's even the tantalizing prospect of hyenas, lions, or leopards attempting to steal the speedster's meal.

## African wild dogs

This month has graced us not only with the presence of one but two packs of wild dogs. Adrenaline coursed through the air as these social predators traversed vast expanses, hoping to flush out elusive prey.

- The Toulon Pack, a formidable group of 17, made its debut, leaving us in awe of their remarkable teamwork. In one extraordinary sighting, the Toulon Pack united to repel three spotted hyenas that had pilfered an impala from three pack members in hot pursuit.

## Leopards

The month of September ushered in so many sightings of leopards that it felt straight out of a fable!

- A standout sighting was of the Hlambela male leopard feasting amidst the branches of a flowering sausage tree along the Sand River. These trees, adorned with appetizing flowers, draw impala to their base as the blossoms fall to the ground. It's suspected that the leopard lay in ambush among the bushman's fever tea bush before sealing the fate of an impala ewe.
- The Sand River unveiled another captivating leopard spectacle, downstream from Boulders Lodge. The Nkuhuma lioness and her sub-adult companions were spotted devouring a buffalo in the granite-riddled riverbed. It's believed they scavenged the already lifeless prey. But they weren't alone in seeking an easy meal. Three different leopards roamed the area throughout the day. The Schotia female seized her opportunity in a russet bushwillow tree, while the Hlambela male found himself perched high in a matumi tree, trapped in the middle of the river as two young lions waited below. He managed to escape unscathed. To the west, near the lodges, the rasping call of a leopard echoed, leading us to the Thamba male, who made a beeline for the buffalo carcass shortly after sunset.

- This wasn't the only time we witnessed the Thamba male's dramatic entrance. One evening, as we watched the Xmobonyana female hoisting a piece of impala she'd managed to steal back from a hyena, Thamba arrived on the scene. His interest lay not in the kill but in the young female. When she descended from the tree, he gave chase into the enveloping darkness of the night.

### **Lions**

With an abundance of large prey in the vicinity, the prides have been spoiled for choice.

- In the north, guests were treated to the thrilling sight of 11 members of the Nkuhuma Pride making relentless attempts to bring down a buffalo herd near Ingrid's Dam.
- The very next day, the Ntsevu sub-adults trailed the same herd at Tom's Dam. These five lions are in excellent condition, their manes gradually taking shape. Yet, they remain cautious about venturing further west after a run-in with the Plains Camp males, who chased them away from a buffalo kill earlier in the month. These two males have formed a close bond with the Ximungwe lionesses, who now have a litter of their own.
- Among the Mhangeni Pride, one of the five lionesses has been sporadically absent from the pride. She is one of the two older females, and it's suspected that she may have her own litter of cubs hidden away. This would mean that all five lionesses have cubs, marking a triumphant year for a pride that has roamed Singita for over 15 years. These lionesses have enjoyed remarkable hunting success, securing several buffalo and zebra kills this month alone.

### **Hyenas**

- We've located a new hyena den, where it appears only one adult and at least one very young cub reside. We exercise patience and give them space, especially since the cub couldn't be older than two weeks and remains shy.

### **Unusual sightings**

- During this time of year, it's not uncommon to encounter nocturnal animals active during daylight hours. Some of these rare daytime sightings include honey badgers and servals. We've recorded at least 12 honey badger sightings this month, a testament to the changing seasons.
- Another exceptional encounter worth mentioning is the discovery of a pangolin in the west during an afternoon drive.

### **Bird List**

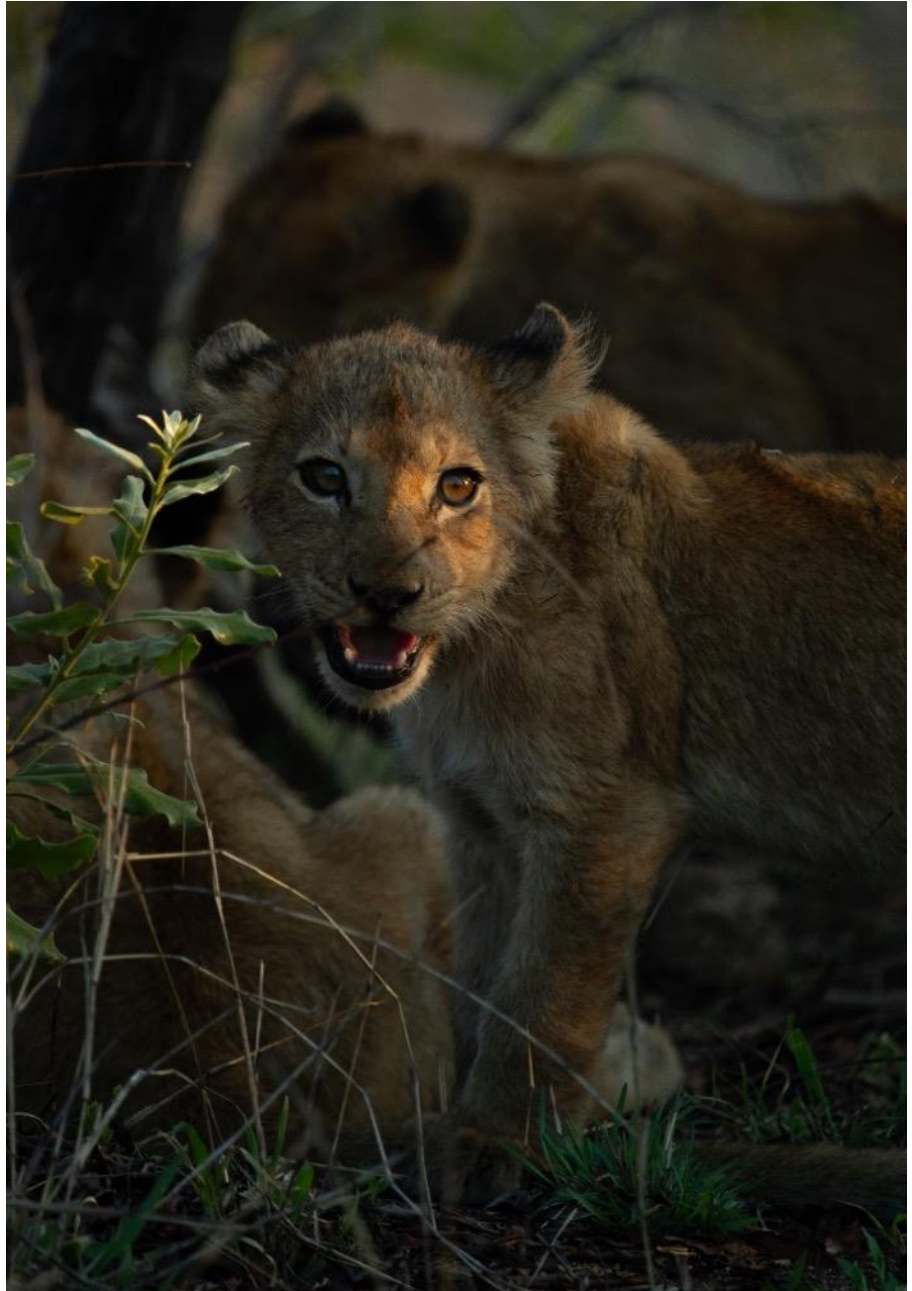
The bird list for September includes three new species, bringing our yearly total to 267.

**Some bush reflections to follow, as well as the September Gallery of images.**

In an environment like Singita Sabi Sands there have always been the ultimate predators which are lions. Lions are at the top of the predator hierarchy within this area. There is a territorial pride of lions that occupy the majority of the Singita property, and they are known as the Mhangeni Pride. The pride currently consists of five adult females, two adult males, and ten cubs of different ages - from six months to the newest member of two months.

The pride was seen feeding on a buffalo bull with all five females and nine cubs present. Lots of spotted hyena were in the area, as well as a pair of side-striped jackals. The next day we counted only eight cubs - one had gone missing overnight and we thought maybe a hyena took the opportunity of killing it. Spotted hyenas are ranked second in the predator hierarchy in this area, and will kill when it comes to competition over food sources. The next day the lions had moved off from the buffalo kill but we got reports that only seven cubs were now present so another cub had gone missing.

About five days went by and still only seven cubs were seen with all five females, and they had moved about two kilometres from the buffalo kill. The odds were against the cubs and survival on their own would be very rare. If they were lost and seen by another predator i.e. lions, leopards or hyenas they would be killed as they would pose a future threat when they are older and there is competition over food. Most predators compete and will kill young if found.



The pride had been seen steadily moving away from one of the main roads in the reserve. They were about one kilometre away from the main road when we got a call to say that two cubs had been seen moving around where the pride had come from. We were amazed at the fact they had survived six days on their own, but as they still hadn't reunited with the pride their survival chances were unknown.

A day later we set out on safari to find the pride. We tracked what looked to be just the females that may have been hunting. The tracks went in circles and we were very confused! In due course we found the freshest tracks and the suddenly a loud bark was heard in the distance. We stopped and listened and the bark continued. The sound was a distress call from a kudu. We quickly made our way to the area and found the five female lionesses and one male lion. They were moving with intent in the direct of where we thought they had left the cubs. They moved into an open area and the females started to contact call. While we waited for the cubs to pop out, we had a call from one of our guides on the radio stating that not far from our position there were two cubs drinking at a dam. Not being sure which cubs those were we waited, and soon after a few contact calls the seven cubs came out of hiding and started greeting their mothers! While this interaction was going on there was a lot of joyous noise from the cubs.

The mothers and cubs started moving and went down into a riverbed and left the male lion lying in the open area. We now realized that the two cubs seen not far from us were the missing two. With all the commotion of the greeting luckily the two cubs heard this and we got reports that they were now running our direction! We sat and waited patiently and soon the cubs came through the bush running for their lives. But then they saw the male lion out in the open and stopped immediately. Not knowing if this male was their father the cubs quickly went in the opposite direction and came towards our vehicles. They looked very stressed and couldn't hear or see their mothers.

Right next to us the bigger cub yelped very softly but got no response. Soon after the smaller one of the two yelped ten times louder, and I could feel the emotion. Then, sitting listening in silence, these two cubs heard one of the females contact call in the riverbed and they ran as fast as they could in that direction.

We followed the two cubs and luckily got to see them reunite with the mothers and siblings. There was lots of excitement and running around but these two were very hungry they just wanted to suckle from the mothers. Soon after watching them settle down we noticed a new member of the pride that was suckling.

It's not very often that we get to witness such events but it's heart-warming and such a relief to know that they are safe and managed to survive seven days without help. They just kept their ears pricked and their noses stuck to the ground sniffing out their mothers and siblings.



Today I want to talk about the owls and their interesting lifestyle, behaviour and superstitions that surround them.

Owls can be found in nearly every environment in the world, all of the roughly 250 owl species live above ground, except for one species, the burrowing owl and this species does not exist on the African continent but is found in North and South America.

Owls are divided into two families: *Tytonidae* which includes a few species of barn owls, and *Strigidae* which includes other owls' species. Species vary by size, pattern and coloration and every owl has two features distinct to raptors being sharp talons and hooked beaks - adaptations and others which help them hunt animals with incredible skills and efficiency like other birds of prey.

Most owls eat mainly small rodents as well as birds, fish, insects and larger creatures like young antelopes. Some owls hunt during the day or at dusk but the majority pursue prey in the evening helped by their ultra-sensitive hearing and excellent night vision.

Owls are toothless like other birds therefore they swallow their prey whole or in large chunks and later cough up pellets of indigestible hair and bones. Owls lay up to 14 eggs per brood depending on the species and availability of food. Parents work together to raise their young, and the male delivers food to the female who breaks it up for the little ones. The owlets begin exploring outside the nest after seven to twelve weeks, again depending on the species, and permanently go off on their own a few weeks later.

Owls' population have shrunk around the world as their habitat has been destroyed for agriculture and human development.



There are many superstitions about owls. In some cultures they are seen as wise birds that know everything, whereas in other cultures they are associated with death and witchcraft. As they are generally nocturnal birds they are often considered to be mysterious. Many people, especially African people, tend to associate owls with superstition, and many African folktales describe them as signs of evil. It is believed that if an owl lands on the roof or in a tree nearby your house and hoots, it is a sign that something really bad might happen to your family, such as illness or death. If this happens, the family has to consult a traditional healer to find out the possible repercussions and remedies.

But on a positive note, owls play an important role in our ecosystem as they control rodent populations, reducing the amount of food lost each year to rodents.

This is a picture of one of the common owls in our area of operation, being Sabi Sand Game Reserve, the Verreaux's eagle-owl. Notice its beautiful pink eyelids.

## The realm of reptiles

By Marc Bowes-Taylor

As the seasons turn and temperatures rise, the realm of reptiles awakens. For many guests, maintaining a respectful distance from creatures like snakes offers a sense of comfort. Nonetheless, these creatures are undeniably fascinating and marvels of evolution.

One morning, I spotted a southern African python, a colossal serpent exceeding 12 feet in length. Basking near an ancient burrow, she may be guarding her precious clutch of eggs. These pythons are among the few southern African snakes that incubate their eggs using their body heat and care for the hatchlings for several weeks after birth. They sunbathe together at the burrow's entrance before returning to its safety once warmed.



I'll be keeping a close eye out for the possibility of seeing her precious young once they've hatched. The babies shed their skin 12 to 14 days after hatching, and a few days later, they all disperse from the nest during the night.

These photos are of the female python emerging out of her burrow to bask in the early morning sun before returning to incubate her eggs.

Shallow pools can be found throughout the Sand River valley providing excellent hunting opportunities for a variety of bird species.



Left: a yellow-billed stork prepares a platanna to be swallowed. Right, a pied kingfisher with her fresh catch.



One man's trash, is another man's treasure. Or, in this case, a Burchell's starling with dry elephant dung used to line the inside of its nest which is usually inside the cavity of a tree.





The Sand River has been the ideal area to view two of the tallest birds in the world, above, the saddle-billed stork, and below, a goliath heron with its catfish meal.





A young lioness and her brother from the Ntsevu Breakaway Pride keeping an eye on a buffalo herd as they move off into the woodland to feed.



With day time temperatures soaring a daily wallowing in mud is a necessity for warthogs.



The sausage tree produce tasty flowers that are definitely worth going out of your way to feed on.  
One of the Ntsevu young male lions looking in mint condition.





A leopard brushes up against a fallen tree, while an elephant calf brushes up against its mother's trunk.



Singita Sabi Sand at its finest, as a pack of African wild dogs and pups stand in the riverbed below the lodge.