

# Singita



Photo by Solomon Ndlovu

## WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For the month of February, Two Thousand and Twenty-one

### Temperature

Average minimum: 23.0°C (73.4°F)  
Minimum recorded: 19.0°C (66.2°F)  
Average maximum: 29.9°C (85.92°F)  
Maximum recorded: 36.0°C (96.8°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 167mm  
For the year to date: 341mm

### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05h46  
Sunset: 18:23

With the current La Niña system, we've been experiencing above average rainfall, with a total of 167 mm recorded for this month. All of the rain has caused the N'wanetsi River to come down in flood again. Water is also streaming out of the mountains, in some places even resulting in small waterfalls cascading over the rhyolite rock formations. Small seasonal pools and pans are also dotted throughout the concession, and with the abundance of water everywhere, several Nile crocodiles have been sighted many miles away from the rivers, where they lie in ambush of unsuspecting prey that might be coming down to the smaller pans to drink.

With all of the rains, the grass cover has increased exponentially, especially in the areas where fires had raged through during the dry winter periods. In some areas the grass stalks are so high, that even zebras disappear in

the sea of green. This is affecting the visibility tremendously, especially for the prey animals which are avoiding the long grass where potential danger could lurk.

### **Here's a Sightings Snapshot for February:**

#### **Lions**

- During the month of February, a total of 24 sightings of lions were recorded.
- The Shishangaan Pride were predominantly sighted towards the south and west of the lodge, with their roars serenading the guests during most evenings.
- The remaining Kumana male with the droopy lip was found in attendance of the Shishangaan Pride, and early one morning he was seen mating with one of the lionesses. Although old and haggard looking, he is still maintaining his territory towards the southern section of the concession.
- The Mountain Pride was the pride most often viewed during the month. After spending the first part of the month towards the northern reaches of the concession, they moved towards Pelajambu and Monzo area. All 14 members still appear to be fit and healthy.
- The Mananga Pride was seen towards north west of the concession, and although there haven't been any visuals yet, tiny lion cub tracks were found amongst the pride's tracks. Exciting times ahead!
- Xihamham, the grumpy Shishangaan male, was found in the company of the Mananga Pride around Gudzani Dam.
- A Northern Pride female was found mating with a Northern Pride male around Cassia Open Areas.

#### **Leopards**

- We had a few sightings of a large male leopard in south of the concession.
- A young male has been seen in the area of Nwanetsi Gumba Crossing and Dumbana Puff Adder Crossing. He is very relaxed with the presence of the vehicles and we are hoping for him to stay longer in the concession.
- A skittish leopardess was found with a fresh impala carcass on Sisal Line, and the following evening a big leopard tom was found feeding on her stolen carcass.
- The Mhlangulene female and a young male leopard were found around the Basalt/ Leadwood junction. Some of the guides believe that this young male leopard could be her son that has been pushed away now. She was clearly annoyed with this young male, who was seen playing around grabbing branches and pouncing in the long grass. After lots of growling and teeth barring the female walked off towards where she had a hidden impala carcass. Maybe this young male thought that he would receive a free meal from her?

#### **Cheetahs**

- A sopping wet cheetah was found on the H6 as it strolled down the main road in an attempt to avoid the tall wet grass. It took the opportunity to stop and scent mark some of the prominent logs and trees, but it was obvious that the animal had enough of all of the rain!
- A female cheetah and four cubs were seen on the open plains just to the west of the concession. We are hoping she will move her small family to the east, and hopefully we will have more sightings of them.

#### **Spotted hyenas**

- We had a couple of sighting of lone hyenas along N'wanetsi near Croc View on the open areas. We suspect they might have a den-site on Nyala Ridge.
- A solitary animal was found underneath a hoisted impala carcass, where a big male leopard was feeding. The hyena was patiently waiting for any fallen scraps.

- Several sightings of hyenas have also been recorded in the daytime, where most of the animals were seen either resting in the shade of trees, or lying in mud wallows. Spotted hyenas are known to cool off in pools of water, and it is believed that by doing so it might also aid in digestion.

### Elephants

- At the end of January, and throughout February we noticed that large numbers of elephants were moving from the basalt plains towards the southwestern parts of the Kruger, which is an annual occurrence when the marula trees come into fruit. Towards the end of the month, the trees ended fruiting, and we have seen an increase in the number of elephants returning to the open basalt plains that provide excellent grazing.
- Several sightings of solitary bulls have been recorded throughout the concession, and a big musth bull was found towards Monzo four-ways.

### Buffalos

- We had sightings of a few groups of breeding herds coming in from the western boundary, with the biggest herd numbering about 400+ buffalos together.
- Two buffalo bulls were seen around Xikova. These animals seem very skittish and aggressive - most likely because of the fact that they don't have the safety of the herd.

### Plains game

- With the open basalt plains becoming waterlogged, and with the grass cover standing more than a metre tall in some areas, we have noticed that most of the general game has moved east to the rocky Granophyre's where they are looking for big open areas for their safety. Grass is very tall in the depression where we usually find them. Regardless of their movement, we are still seeing abundant sightings of giraffe, zebras, wildebeest and large herds of impala.

### Rare animals and other sightings

- A pair of porcupines were found during a night drive as they were walking together down the road. They ended up causing a bit of a traffic jam, as they refused to move off the road, as they were obviously avoiding the long, wet grass. They strolled in front of the vehicle for more than 10 minutes!
- A mating pair of Sharpe's grysbok were found towards Maputo Pan. These elusive small antelopes are usually solitary, and therefore the honeymoon couple was a special find.
- A pack of African wild dogs was seen close to the lodge on the last day of the month.

### Birds

- A corn crane was found below Green-apple Hill. This is a very rare Palearctic migrant that is seldom seen, not only in this part of South Africa, but also because of its elusive nature.
- Marsh owls have also been seen towards the basalt plains.
- A peregrine falcon was seen towards the Nwanetsi Gorge where it was calling for its mate.



Corn crane Photo by Brian Rode

## The tracker, my friend

Tribute by Margaux le Roux, photo by guest Kelly Fogel

I love symbiotic relationships in nature, especially mutualistic 'friendship' relationships. From the red-billed oxpeckers that remove ticks from the various mammals' skins, to the tiniest blue waxbill birds that build their dainty nests next to those of feisty wasps that will sting any nest-marauding critters.

There is one relationship in the bush however that is even more moving and inspiring than any symbiotic relationship found in nature: the relationship between the safari guide and tracker. When on safari, it is beautiful to see how an experienced guide and tracker can work together. It's like watching a married couple... without saying a word, the partner knows what the other is feeling or thinking, often leading the guests to see amazing sightings, and helping to make lifetime memories.



Over the last five years, I have been fortunate enough to work with Lawrence Mkansi. He is the kindest and most humble individual I have ever had the privilege with whom to work. He is a man of very few words, but when he speaks, pearls of wisdom get shared with all who are willing to listen. Did I mention he is an exceptionally skilled tracker and bush connoisseur?

We've shared in many rare finds, sightings and adventures. I recall the day where our guests decided to sleep in for the morning, and I asked Lawrence if he would be kind enough to mentor me as I practiced my tracking skills. We found lion tracks, and from the age of the tracks I soon realised Lawrence was deliberate in the sense that he decided I should follow tracks that were already more than two days old.

Slowly I tried to follow the pugmarks left behind by the giant cats, and I would lose them where the cats would veer off the main game trail. Lawrence, ever so patient, would explain animal behaviour: "Think like a lion", and through his guidance I would find the track again. He was so encouraging and patient throughout the exercise.

I started to let my guard down, as I was getting tired from concentrating so much on the hard soils and rocks, but Lawrence, the ever-alert bush companion, suddenly became aware of the subtle alarm call of a scrub robin. He gently paused and started to stare, and that's when we saw them. Not one, but two leopards that were courting each other. Fortunately for us these elusive cats were so occupied with each other that they did not even notice us, and we managed to slip away undetected.

Its memories like this, and the day we had the white lion crawl underneath our fully loaded safari vehicle after a very irate herd of 200 buffalo had decided that they had had enough of the big cats presence, that will stay with me. It's memories of watching three male lions kill a fully grown hippo cow during the severe draught of 2015. It's memories of watching an impala give birth in torrential rains, of a giraffe calf taking its first wobbly steps, the sudden adrenaline rush of being charged by an elephant bull in musth, with Lawrence clinging on to the tracker seat as I navigated off the beaten track in an attempt to get away from the irritated pachyderm. It's memories of watching flood waters rushing down the N'wanetsi River, and sharing and watching countless sunrises and sunsets over the Lebombo plains that will always stay with me. Memories of seeing the smiles and hearing the excited chatter and laughter of guests after a successful safari experience.

I wish every person on this planet could have such a friendship and share experiences with another human being like the bond and adventures shared between a guide and tracker.

Thank you, Lawrence, the tracker, my friend.

### Shangaan bird names and their meaning

Article by Bernard Stiglingh, photo by Margaux le Roux

Working with Shangaan people in the Kruger National Park for almost a decade now has been a grand opportunity to research their culture, language and history. I have had the fortune to work with a myriad of trackers from a variety of localised villages with their own unique dialects and traditional names for the fauna and flora, learning about and writing most of this information down. The Kruger National Park boasts with almost 500 species of birds; that is astonishing seeing as the total count for South Africa is about 850! In this article I would like to bring to light the names of a few of these birds in Xitsonga, the language of the Shangaan people. Some are funny, some are beautiful and all are interesting.

If you are from South Africa the hadeda ibis is probably not your favourite bird. They scream blue murder and take it upon themselves to decorate your car with their huge droppings! Big was my consternation when I moved to the bush only to find my noisy friends already there. One of the names for the hadeda in Xitsonga is *Xikohlwahidyambu*, meaning “it forgets the sun”, a reference to these birds sometimes calling/screaming in the middle of the night like they are being slaughtered by an unseen foe. Then there are the very long tongue twisting names like *Ximintantsengeleatshembankolo*. Yes, that’s one name, and it’s what the Vatsonga people call the long-necked marabou stork. Translated it means “it swallows a whole sour plum, trusting it’s throat”. There are also, as is to be expected, a host of onomatopoeic names like *nghuthuthu* for southern ground hornbill, *phuphuphu* for African hoopoe, *mcivovo* for red-faced mousebird and - my favourite - *tshukutshukuruna* for southern white-faced scops-owl. Some birds are simply named according to their colour or appearance. *Sekwa* is a generic name for a goose, and to differentiate between the Egyptian and spur-winged goose, the word for impala and buffalo is simply added as a suffix to *sekwa* with reference to the similar colouration, thereby becoming *sekwamhala* and *sekwanyarhi* respectively.

Some birds are even historically named to help keep track of seasons, thereby making due preparations in time. The name for both the Levillant’s – and Jacobin cuckoo is *tihunyi*, meaning firewood. These birds being migratory usually arrive in the lowveld just before the first summer rains, an early reminder for the people to start collecting dry firewood before the rains come and drench everything.

It’s always refreshing to learn about the natural world as viewed by people whose culture has developed around it for hundreds of years, before the arrival of a Western perspective and its influences.



Southern ground hornbill in flight



Summer mornings are the best in Singita Kruger National Park, as we can watch the sun rise behind the Lebombo mountain ridges, with a silhouette of euphorbia trees and lots of birds calling all over the place. Due to the rains we've had in the past few months, the vegetation is thick and the grass is long and makes it difficult to see lots of game, but the drives are still very productive when it comes to birding and for looking for some of the smaller aspects of nature.

The conditions makes it interesting to be the first vehicle to drive down a road. The wet grass and the beautiful golden-orb web spiders' webs that stretch over the road force trackers sitting on the front tracker seat to carry a small stick to swished around and remove webs that can't be avoided. At times the stick ends up looking like it has been used to spin candyfloss at a fair.



Photo by Margaux le Roux

The golden orb-web spider is an attractive spider with its fat black, yellow and white abdomen and long, elegant legs. It is made more noticeable by the female's habit of constructing giant-sized (up to 1 m across) three-dimensional webs between bushveld trees in summer. The threads of silk have a golden colour to them, especially the main rope-like bridge line. She sits head-down in the middle of her web amidst bundled debris from old prey. Despite her conspicuousness, she is a shy spider and will rush off her web into vegetation if disturbed.

The obvious golden colour of the main strands of the orb-web are believed to act as a 'household insurance policy' to the spider by advertising its presence to large creatures such as birds so that they do not damage the web by flying through it inadvertently. Building such elaborate webs is energy expensive and so preventing large-scale damage to the web is important. Some theories suggest that the UV properties of the silk attract insects in the same way that the UV pathways leading to nectar in flowers do.

The male golden orb-web spider is considerably smaller and less impressive than the female and lives cautiously on the 'outskirts' of the web to avoid being eaten. When he wishes to mate with the female, he will wait until she is distracted with feeding and then very swiftly move in to deposit sperm from his sperm-laden pedipalps into her oviducts before making a hasty retreat. The female will store the sperm until she needs it and she can produce four egg sacs in a season. Once the spiderlings hatch, the female has nothing further to do with them and they disperse by a process known as 'ballooning' whereby they float away on an extended piece of silk.





















