

Singita



A violet-backed starling in a *Dovyalis longispina* tree.

WILDLIFE REPORT

SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE

For the month of December Two Thousand and Twenty-Four

Temperature

Average minimum: 23.1°C (73.5°F)

Minimum recorded: 18.3°C (64.9°F)

Average maximum: 38.3°C (100.9°F)

Maximum recorded: 44.8°C (112.6°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 83 mm

Season to date: 204 mm

*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:17

Sunset: 18:39

An African Christmas is a hot, bright, colourful and festive celebration, with much feasting and gifts to be grateful for at every turn.

If this month were to have a theme, it would be that of “green”. We’ve had some drenching downpours of rain, the vegetation is lush, water levels have risen, hippos have been able to disperse, and impala lambs abound. Like the rest of southern Africa we’ve experienced some heatwave days too, and these have resulted in very good sightings as animals have congregated near the water to stay cool and quench their thirst. We’ve even had occasions where all the Big Five have been seen on one drive.

A sightings snapshot for December follows:

Lions

Buffalo have featured high on the lions' feasting menu this month. Other highlights include:

- A mating pair within the Nduna Pride.
- Two lionesses as well as two white rhinos sharing a waterhole.
- A coalition of four male lions sleeping in the shade, south of Hwata Pan.

Leopards

- There have been excellent sightings of a mother leopard and her cub, on various occasions, along the West Valley Road near the lookout site and old hyena den-site. On one occasion a leopard jumped from a tree right next to the road, and as the game-viewer stopped the onlookers realised there was another leopard still in the tree.

Wild dogs

- Impala lambs feature high on the shopping list of the wild dog pack at this time, especially when it is so hot and hunting drains all energy.
- A highlight was finding 17 wild dogs relaxing just north of Ray's Drift, on an early sunrise drive, and a couple of yards away was a breeding herd of well over thirty elephants dust-bathing under a shady nyala tree.

Rhinos

We are renowned for our rhino sightings, and this month's bounty was brought on by the extreme heat. We noticed that even the usually solitary black rhinos congregated together in places of shade, mud and water.

- Two male white rhinos were seen challenging each other. They barged into each other with force, dragging their feet and leaving deep grooves in the earth.
- Seven black rhinos were seen together, and a breeding herd of elephants in the same area.
- An impressive moment was seeing a male black rhino amid sandstone boulders, standing like a profound statue.

Elephants

- Much mud-bathing activity has been happening as the breeding herds happily spend time cooling down.
- There are a couple of impressive tuskers on the reserve at the moment.
- Our guests loved having a sundowner at Banyini Pan while an elephant bull and white rhinos shared the water supply.

Hyenas

- The hyena highlight was watching seven of them steal an impala carcass from a leopard. They managed to fight for the feast as a team, but then turned on one another once they had it, each snatching as much of the meal away from the others.

Buffalos

- The buffalo are bulking up rapidly on all the new green growth, and enjoying the rain and mud wallows.

Plains game

- The joy on the plains is provided by the enchanting impala lambs, and the long-lashed wildebeest calves.
- Even though there is water in temporary pans deep in the thickets we have seen a diverse array of plains game, such as giraffe, zebra, wildebeest, impala and kudu, drinking at the central Banyini Pan.
- Another highlight was seeing over 14 sable antelope on Hunters Road.

Birding

- Birds abound and it is the best time of year to be birding, but eclipsing the show was a pair of Pel's fishing owls!

Boat cruises

- The first afternoon outing for a party of guests was a boat cruise on the dam, that included an epic sighting of a young female leopard drinking on the shoreline of the eastern bank, opposite the lodge!
- All other boat cruises enjoyed the idyllic scenery, hippos, crocodiles, and birdlife, with rhinos and elephants putting in an appearance now and again, too.

Fishing

- Enormous bream have been caught, and released. It's not the first time we've had guests getting hooked, so to speak, on this activity, and requesting it repeatedly thereafter. A few big tigers were outplayed too.

Rock art and walks

- Requesting a walk, be it short or long, to visit one of the numerous rock art sites is a must-do. Resting in the shade of a cave and hearing the history and interpretation of the rock art is an experience that touches the soul, and reminds one of what it is to be human.

Daytrips to Gonarezhou National Park

- Chilojo Cliffs are at their most impressive now with the river flowing at their base, and elephants spread out along the sandy bank.



Some bush stories follow, as well as the December Gallery.

Halo of green

Some photos are a real surprise in post-processing. I didn't think I'd captured much of a shot at the time because when we saw this mother black rhino with enormous horns, she was deeply concealed in thick bush. Black rhinos are particularly reactive and reluctant to come out into the open, but she took a few steps into a clearing, and moments later her calf emerged out of the bushes and stood at her side. There was only a tiny gap of space to point the lens through, and a canopy of leaves obscured the view. But I'm delighted with this soft halo of green and the effect of depth it gives.



Black rhinos and white rhinos have distinct differences in their lip structures, which influence their feeding habits and habitat preferences. Black rhinos, as you can see in this photo, possess a pointed, hooked upper lip, which is highly maneuverable, allowing them to grasp and manipulate individual twigs, leaves, and shrubs. This adaptation makes them well-suited for browsing in dense, woody vegetation such as thickets and forests, where they can feed on shrubs, trees, and other foliage.

In contrast, white rhinos have a broad, square-shaped upper lip, which is ideal for grazing. The wide lip structure allows them to efficiently graze on grasses, which are typically found in open grasslands and savannas.

The differences in lip morphology reflect their ecological niches—black rhinos are more specialized for browsing in dense, bushy environments, while white rhinos thrive in open, grassy habitats where they can graze on large quantities of grass.

Here at the Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve there is a mix of savanna, woodland, and forested areas. This vegetation diversity creates a dynamic ecosystem, supporting a wide array of wildlife, including both browsers and grazers. We are so fortunate to have this variety as many other reserves do not, and therefore don't have the wide range of wildlife that we enjoy seeing at Singita Pamushana.

A time for feasting

The photographs in this story were taken 10 days apart. In the first two you can see the elephants, of all ages, hurrying across the road, their skins hanging heavy on their frames. The first rains had arrived after the drought, and the new green growth had started pushing through, but it wasn't yet plentiful and easy to harvest.

The next three photos show the same herd of elephants feasting in a meadow of tribulus flowers. It was a far calmer sighting, all the adults were relaxed and content to stand and harvest as much as they could, while the youngsters were free to play and cavort.

Putting the complex issues of managing healthy elephant populations aside, it was a simple joy to watch the youngsters, two in particular, have some fun.



Play helps baby elephants develop the social skills necessary for life within their herds. Through it they practice communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution. It strengthens their muscles and coordination and an important part of this is learning how to control their unruly trunks.

These two were mock fighting and wrestling, and the goal seemed to be to chase and climb on one another. Neither of them had tusks showing yet – they first appear when a calf is about two years old. Play definitely gets a bit more rough when armed with two little daggers!

It was probably one of the first times in their young lives that they could relax and experience joy after the months of stress for the adults to find enough food and water.

Baby elephants form lasting bonds with other elephants in their family herd. Herds are led by a matriarch, and it's usually young bulls, in their teens, that leave the herd and start living independently while the females remain in the family herd.





The season of gift giving

Driving along a muddy track I noticed a lilac-breasted roller perched in a tree with something odd in its beak. I reversed back to see what it was, thinking it might be a little snake, and indeed it was. This was quite unusual, but as I watched him I was surprised that he didn't try to swallow it. Nearby was another lilac-breasted roller, and it soon dawned on me what was happening. It's the time of year when insects and other prey are abundant, and birds feast on the prey to bulk up, mate, lay eggs, incubate them, and feed the hungry chicks. This male roller was trying to woo a female to mate with him by bringing her what is known as a "nuptial gift".



Nuptial gift giving is when the male presents the female with a nutritious morsel during courtship and mating. Birds do it, as do many insects, including spiders, snails, earthworms and even squid. Mammals such as bonobos do it – and dare I say humans too. The nuptial gifts are to convince the female to mate with the male. It's most common that the gifts have a nutritional value, so the female benefits. Sometimes birds and animals have been known to give gifts just to please the recipient – like a crow giving his intended something that sparkles and shines.

But all was not going well for our character in his technicoloured dream coat. He jumped around, trying to squawk with the snake in his beak, and flapped around the female, desperately trying to entice her to accept and eat his gift. She was having none of it. The more he tried the more she rejected his advances and flew short distances away, ignoring him. It seemed that snakes were not her thing. If I were being anthropomorphic it was as if she were saying, "No, Joseph, I've told you a hundred times – I do not like snakes! Get it away from me!"

Eventually he got the message and flew off. My heart went out to him.

However, he flew back a few minutes later with the biggest spider I have ever seen. I held my breath.

He edged along the branch until he was next to the female, and then literally tried to stuff it down her throat. She remained closed-beaked. He persisted and tried every tack. He even rearranged the arachnid to try and improve his presentation. Her reaction was along the lines of, "What part of this do you not understand? I do not like snakes. I do not like spiders. Go away!" He was crestfallen. She was unflappable.



In the spider world of gift giving it has been observed that sometimes male spiders try to trick female spiders by wrapping up low-quality prey in silk, or even paltry half-consumed morsels. While the female is busy unwrapping what she thinks is a thoughtful gift, he'll mate with her and run off before she realises. One study found that as many as 70% of gifts given by a certain species of spider are fake. But this was not the case with our male lilac-breasted roller – these were generous gifts, well presented.

I left the scene in pursuit of a sundowner after he was rejected for the second time. I suspect he went by the mantra of, "Rejection isn't failure. Failure is giving up." It was too traumatic to watch and I worried he might return with a scorpion.

Following the packs

Our large pack of African wild dogs (17 members seen together this month) is doing well and are always a huge bonus to track and find. The smaller pack that bred a litter successfully headed south into Gonarezhou a couple of months ago, and a new third pack, that seemed to have a den-site in a culvert under our main Binya Road, were not successful in raising a litter this year. Pack sizes and their success is a subject of great interest, and historically packs of over 100 animals used to occur in Africa. Imagine what it must have been like to see 100 African wild dogs!

Historical texts offer a wealth of insight into wildlife numbers before human activities had such a profound impact. In the mid-20th century, wild dog packs in South Africa's Kruger National Park were documented to include 60 to 70 individuals. These accounts, frequently provided by hunters and game wardens, reflected a widespread belief that wild dogs were pests and a major factor in the decline of herbivore populations.

Records from the early colonial period in South Africa describe "bands" of wild dogs numbering in the hundreds. One such account, from the 1800s, recounts a hunter waking up to find himself surrounded by more than 100 wild dogs. Though the animals appeared curious, they did not show aggression, and after a brief observation, they disappeared into the early morning light.

In the late 20th century and even into the early 2000s, there were occasional reports of wild dog packs exceeding 50 individuals. Today, however, these packs are typically much smaller, generally consisting of around 5 to 20 dogs. Larger packs, sometimes reaching 30 or more, are rare and typically split up. These larger groups often consist of nearly half pups, and by the time the young dogs reach a year old, the pack has usually split.



Some of our pack members fanned out in a circle, resting in the shade.

The main reason why wild dog packs are so much smaller these days than compared to 200 or even 50 years back is that the herbivores of Africa do not exist in the numbers and unrestricted space that they used to. With most of the great migrations having gone, there is no longer a food source that is able to sustain large packs. Today, herds of herbivores are fragmented, often blocked by fences or human settlements, preventing them from moving freely to prime grazing areas. As a result, the available food sources cannot support the large packs of wild dogs that once thrived.

In well-protected reserves and ideal conditions, it's been recorded that sometimes both the Alpha and Beta females have raised litters, but once these packs grow big enough, and without any kind of mortality being recorded, they seem to be forced to split due to lack of prey availability to sustain that pack size.



Two of the almost fully grown pups from this year's litter.



Another of the pups, curious as to who we are.

Next page top:

Four members of the pack caught and devoured this impala, before racing off to the other members who were calling to announce they'd also had hunting success. Vultures quickly descended - they follow hunting wild dogs like drones in the sky - and finished off the remains.

Next page bottom:

Pack members set off at sunset, focused on hunting opportunities.



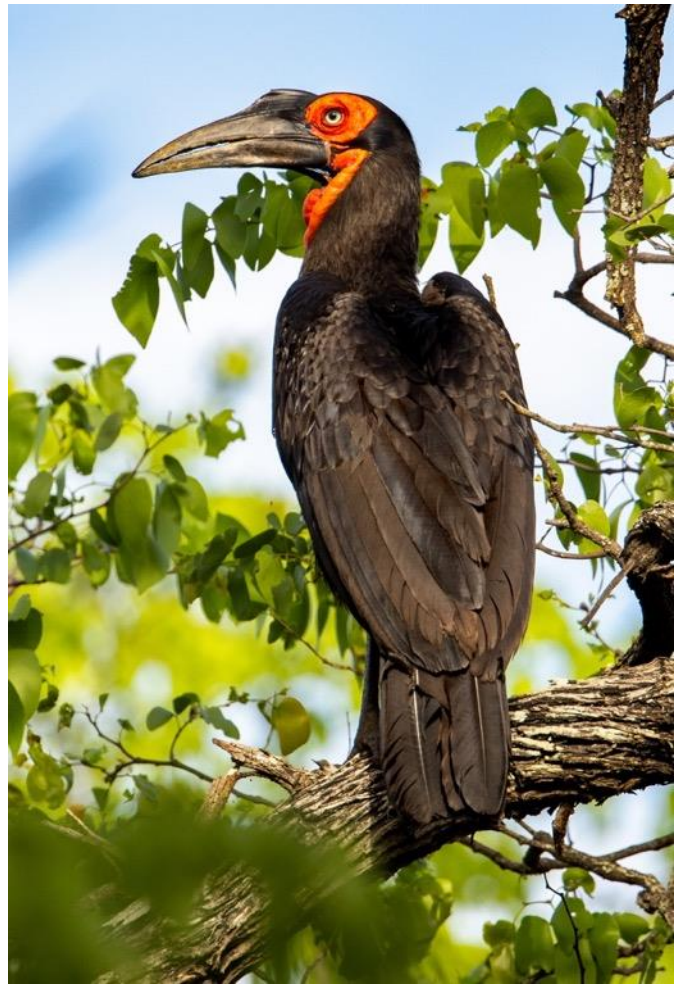
Twitter

The angels, stars and baubles decorating our trees this Christmas:

Right: An adult male southern ground hornbill.

Below right: Grey-headed kingfisher.

Below: Juvenile bateleur.

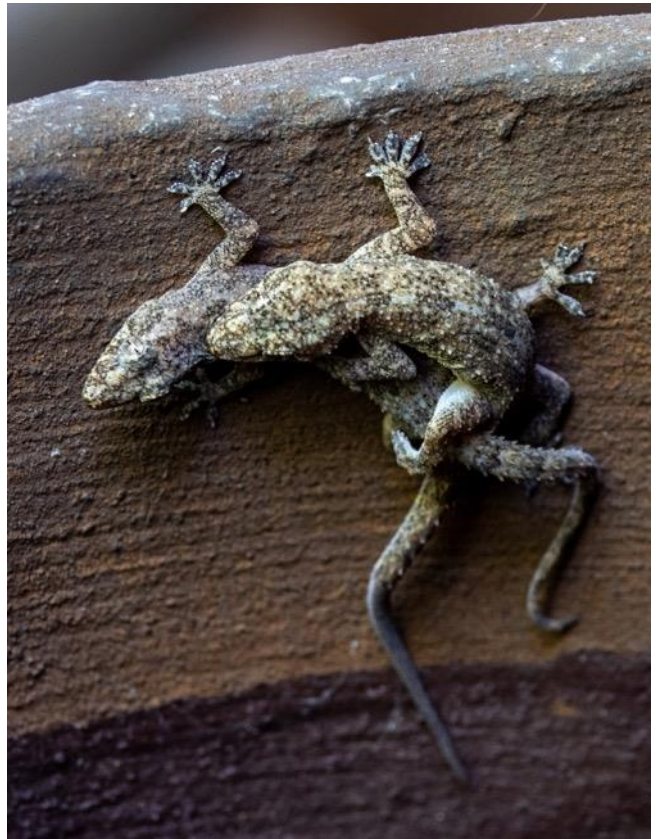


December Gallery



A buffalo lags behind to drink as a large herd leaves. The skull and horns to the left a stark reminder to watch your own back. Later in the month a buffalo bull stops to feast on the new green mopane leaves.

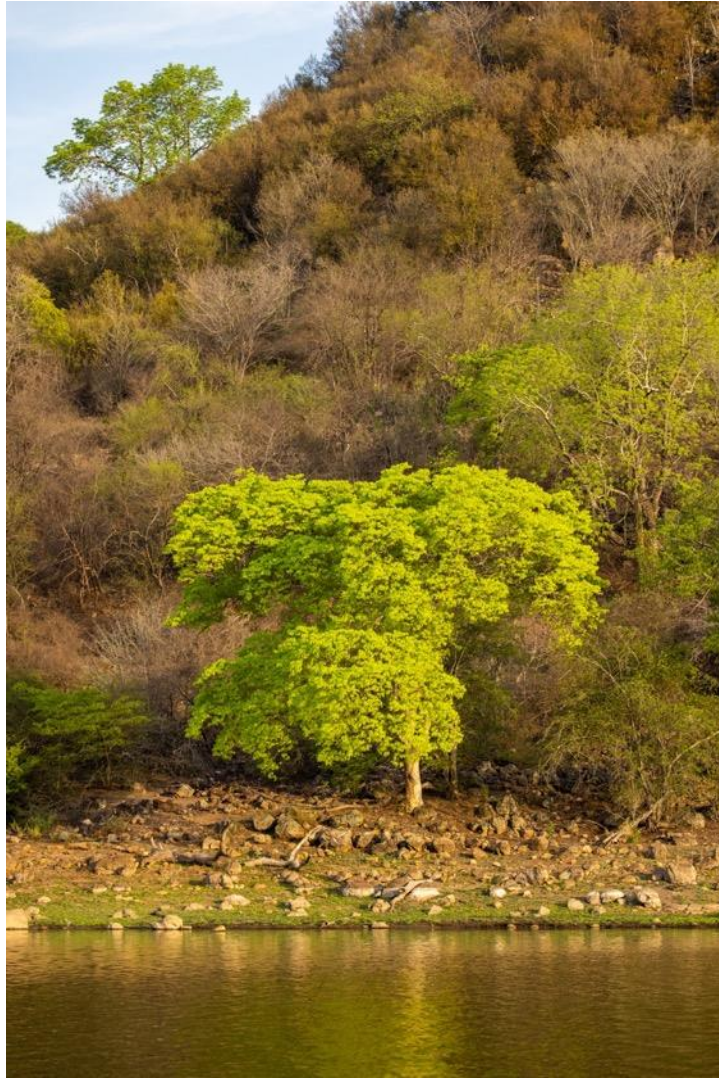




A tiny squirrel evicted or fallen from its nest, has been hand-raised by a kind soul,
and is now a thriving bundle of energy.

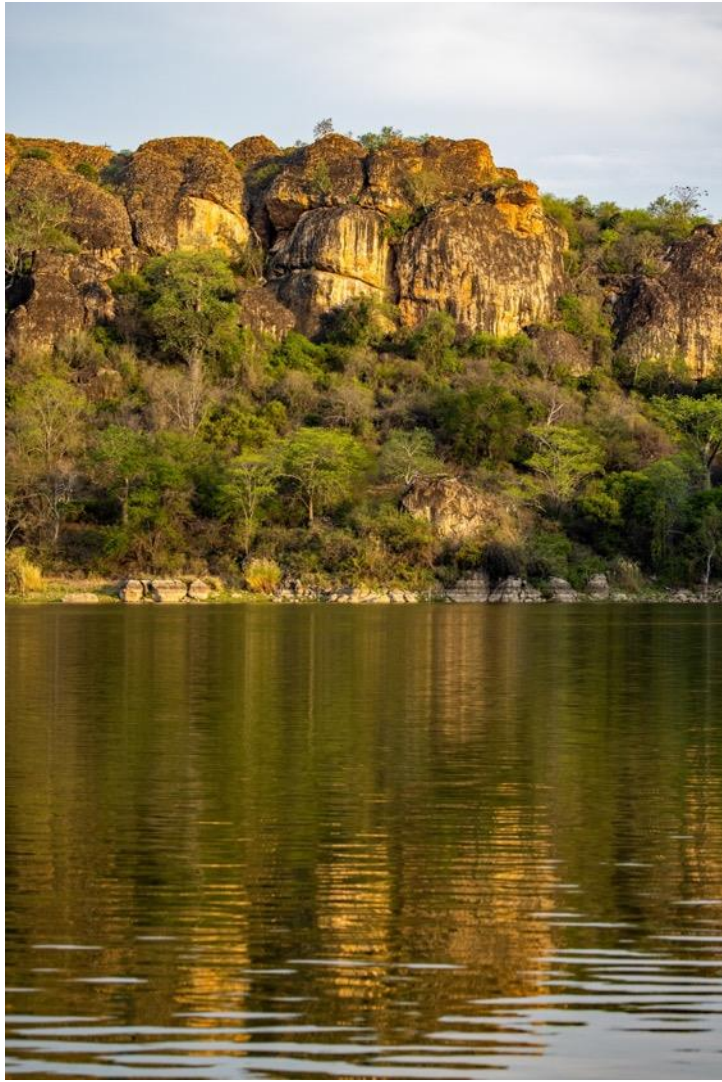
Distracted as they were we could get a closer view of these geckos and notice the camouflage of their eyes.
After an indulgent mudbath this warthog, that we've all come to admire, struts across the road and heads
in the direction of the staff village soccer pitch, that he fastidiously maintains.





Cloaks of luminous green are seen on the catwalk during fashion week.





Still waters and reflections are churned upstream, where a large pod of hippos reside, protecting their calf.





One of the lionesses from the pride of three on the Hippo Valley side, scans the banks of the Chiredzi River. White rhinos in fan formation in front of lala palm fronds at Nduna.





With temperatures at their zenith the animals have sought out the shade, and spend much time resting and processing their meals. These kudu spent the morning chewing the cud in the shade of a baobab.





There are thousands of different dung beetle species, be they rollers, tunnellers or dwellers. You can see three species in this first photo. Within eight hours the enormous dung pile was flattened, and these two green dung beetles sped off with a brood ball.

