

Singita



Photo by Liam Henderson

WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For April, Two Thousand and Twenty-three

Temperature

Average minimum: 19°C (66°F)
Minimum recorded: 15°C (59°F)
Average maximum: 30°C (86°F)
Maximum recorded: 34°C (93°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 16mm
Season to date: 402.5 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:16
Sunset: 17:29

The second month of autumn brought with it an unpredicted storm that swept in from the south east over the Lebombo mountains. Ominous looking thunder clouds darkened the southern sky and rumbling thunder echoed across the dry western grasslands. A single flash of bright light brought with it an expansive crack as the charged particles within the air created an electrical discharge seeking the path of least resistance towards the ground. The bolt of tremendous heat and energy ignited the dry grass and parched earth thus ensuing the beginnings of the first wild “veld” fire of the winter season. The fire burnt for five days aided by the south westerly winds that fuelled the inferno as it devoured moribund vegetation in its path. Creatures great and

small fled the conflagrated area with many bird species such as the lilac-breasted rollers, fork-tailed drongos and many species of starlings gathering to take advantage of the updrafts of the fire forcing all flying insects into the insectivorous flying hunters' killing zone.

The fire eventually died out due to the cooler temperatures and the remaining lush vegetation that starved it for fuel. The desolate, barren earth has now had a flush of green shoots emerge from the ash-strewn earth, enticing large herds of zebras to these blackened areas in search of nutrition and sustenance that is now in abundance.

A Sightings Snapshot for April follows:

Lions

- The Shish Pride has been seen on a regular basis in the granophyre ridges. The five young cubs are from two different litters, the split being three and two. The cubs were seen getting their first taste of meat in the early days of April as their mothers managed to take down an impala. A few days later they were seen feeding on a kudu at the bush dinner site, appropriately. We have deduced that another female has given birth but we have yet to confirm where the den-site is, although most likely in a concealed cave or rocky outcrop in the granophyre ridge. Two of the younger females have kept the Trichardt coalition busy as they have been in oestrus simultaneously leaving the males competing for mating rights and lengthy mating sessions. At the end of the month, we heard at least one cub and so can finally confirm that another Shish female has introduced her cubs to the rest of the pride. This brings the total number of confirmed mothers to four.
- The Trichardt male coalition has laid claim to the southern and central region following the death of Xihamham. They have been seen consistently with the Shish Pride and patrolling the Lebombo Mountains. Their territorial calls can be heard most early mornings echoing down the N'wanetsi River.
- Following the demise of his brother, the lone Shish male has rarely been seen. Sighted on only a few occasions with the larger portion of the Mananga Pride as they venture further north. Should he be able to maintain his association with the pride, there should be no cause for concern. However, being a lone male lion in this area, having one of the highest densities of lions in the park, it is uncommon to have the opportunity to lay claim to a whole pride by himself. Rival coalitions will be impending on his shrinking territory as he will be unable to patrol and seek the advantages of the security and hunting escapades of the Mananga Pride.
- The Maputo male has been spotted stalking a herd of large buffalo in the northern region. The Maputo male is an experienced hunter and known for his stealthy approach to prey. He has been seen trailing the buffalo herd for several days now, studying their movements and waiting for the opportune moment to strike. The Maputo male is a dominant force in the area, known for his impressive size and strength. The buffalo are aware of his presence and are on high alert, staying close together for protection. It remains to be seen whether he will be successful in his hunt or if the buffalo will manage to evade him.
- The Mananga Pride had always called the savannahs of the central depression their home and the heart of their territory, but when their dominant male lion, Xihamham was killed by the rival Trichardt coalition, everything changed. The loss of the dominant male has left the pride vulnerable and exposed, and with the sub-adults to protect, the pride has acted fast. The adult lionesses have moved further north, away from their old territory and into new and unknown territory that may be infringed upon by neighbouring prides.

Leopards

- Two of the large male leopards that we view were named this month. One male, which holds territory from the sticky-thorns northwards to Double Crossing and then from Basalt and further west, was named the 'Pelajambu male' which roughly means 'where the sun sets' owing to this male's territory

being in the west. The other male is a very relaxed individual who has been viewed on the concession for some time but was never named for recording purposes. This male's territory is large and stretches from west of the concession to as far east as Nyokene. He has been called the 'Monzo male', the Xitsonga word for leadwood tree as he has been seen resting in leadwood trees on a few occasions and has been sighted moving along Monzo Road.

- The Nhlangueni female is doing an incredible job at providing meals for her two cubs, and the trio were located on three separate kills throughout the month. The cubs are becoming more habituated to vehicles and are extremely relaxed when mom is around.
- The Dumbana young males are continuing to spend time within their natal area and are still often found along Ntsibitsane and Ostrich-link. The Dumbana 3:3 young male was seen more than his paler brother, and he was even seen as far north as Ingwe/Two-tegwaan where he spent a few days moving along the Xinkelengane drainage before returning back south. The brothers were seen together one day where they lay in close proximity to each other around a small pan of water. Their mother was seen once this month and is looking heavily pregnant. She was seen exploring the ridgeline to the north of Madagha Crossing, potentially looking for a den-site.
- An unknown skittish female and her cub were seen on Park Road south of James Road. Tracks of these two have been seen on the concession and this was the first sighting of the pair.

Wild dogs

- The floppy ear pack of nine has been seen ten times this month. At the beginning of the month, two of the adult males were successfully collared. One of the older males has been following a female very closely, and we believe she is likely in oestrus and there is a chance they are looking for a den-site around Nyokene Ridge.
- The pack of three was seen on one occasion near our eastern boundary.

Spotted hyenas

- The three clans have been seen this month with the majority of sightings being of the clan around Xinenene Poort.
- There has been increased activity around the Xinkelegane fly camp with two adults spotted near the old den-site at the end of this month.

Elephants

- Several herds of elephants have been spotted in two locations recently - the Xinkelengane drainage line and the Dumbana pools. These sightings have been fairly regular as the diminishing surface water starts to recede in the north and elephants look to congregate towards the perpetual waterholes. The Xinkelengane drainage line is known for its rich vegetation and is a popular grazing spot for elephants. The Dumbana pools, on the other hand, are a series of waterholes that attract a variety of wildlife to quench their thirst.

Buffalos

- Several herds of Cape buffalo have been recently spotted in the northern parts of the Singita concession. These majestic animals are on a quest for grazing areas and available surface water, as the dry season sets in.
- As the herd moves through the concession, they leave a trail of dust and create a truly remarkable sight.
- Solitary old bulls have been seen moving along the N'wanetsi River, since the temporary pans have now almost all dried up.

Plains game

- Vast herds of zebra, wildebeest and giraffe gather in the central depression area and the old game paths are being worn in once again as animals need to move further in search of water, returning to more permanent water sources such as the N'wanetsi River and Gudzane Dam.

Rare animals and other sightings

- On 9th April a cheetah female with two young cubs was seen in our central grasslands, near an area known as Impala Lily. We estimate the cubs to be around two to three months old and look forward to more sightings of the new family.
- A beautiful African wild cat that appears to be very relaxed around our vehicles has gifted us with many long sightings around Dave's Crossing and Ostrich-Link open area. During one of which we were fortunate enough to see her stalk and pounce on what we assumed to be an unsuspecting rodent in the long grass right next to the road.
- Multiple sets of tracks of the elusive pangolin were seen this month. We tracked two individuals from Dumbana pools towards a rocky ridge north of Monzo and Ma4pounds junction, and another set of tracks were seen along Central Road to Nhlangueni. We are hoping this may lead to actual sightings of this small rare animal as the grass is cropped and thinned out by hungry grazers.

Birds

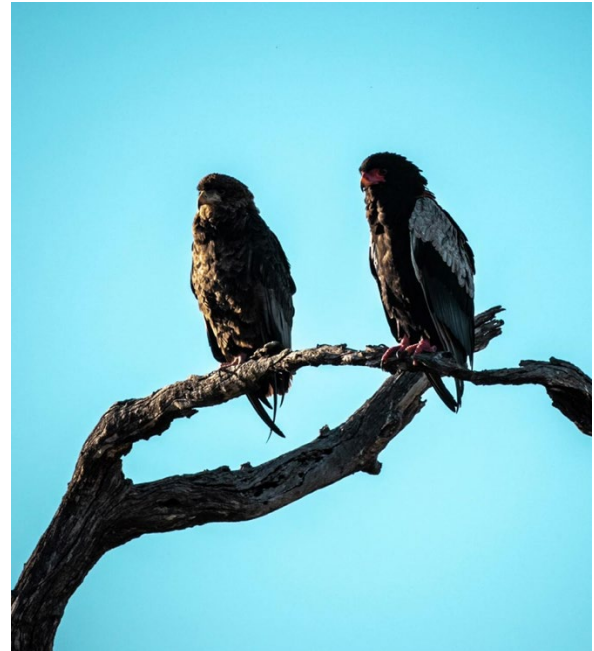
- Most of the migrant birds have officially left for warmer climates, the call of the Woodland Kingfisher gone with the long hot days.
- Red-billed queleas are however still present in the Sticky Thorn thickets on our eastern boundary, perhaps some having had enough resources for a second brood thanks to the abundance of grass seeds after a very wet rainy season.
- A long-crested eagle was seen for a few days perched near the Ostrich-link fly camp and a melanistic Gabar goshawk was spotted near Border-fourways.
- A European honey buzzard was spotted near Gudzane Dam.
- The vultures have begun preparing their large canopy nests on the tops of the tallest knobthorn trees. At least three different flocks of southern ground hornbills have been sighted around our concession this month.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as an April Gallery of images.

Bateleur eagles are magnificent raptors that are found throughout sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in savannas and open woodlands. These birds are known for their striking appearance, aerial acrobatics, and impressive hunting abilities. They can be commonly seen dipping their wings from side to side as they search for carrion.

Physical characteristics:

Bateleur eagles are medium-sized birds of prey, with a body length of approximately 55-70cm (22-28in) and a wingspan of up to 180cm (71in). They are sexually dimorphic, with males being slightly smaller than females. These birds are easily recognizable by their striking plumage, which is mostly black, with some white and reddish-brown on the wings, legs and head. The name "bateleur" comes from the French word "bateleur," which means "tightrope walker" or "acrobat." This name is a reference to the bird's impressive aerial acrobatics, which we will explore in more detail later.



One of the most distinctive physical features of the bateleur eagle is its short, wedge-shaped tail. This is why they are sometimes referred to as "tailless" eagles. The tail is black with white bars, and it is held in a distinctive V-shape in flight. The legs and feet are bright yellow, with sharp talons for catching prey. The eyes of bateleur eagles are large and bright yellow, providing excellent vision for hunting.

Behaviour and ecology

Bateleur eagles are diurnal, which means they are active during the day. They are primarily solitary birds, although they may form small groups when roosting or feeding. These eagles are territorial and defend their nesting and feeding areas aggressively against other bateleur eagles and other raptors.

Bateleur eagles are skilled fliers and hunters, using their keen eyesight and impressive aerial agility to catch prey. They are known for their aerial acrobatics, which include swooping, rolling and diving in flight. These manoeuvres allow them to catch prey on the ground or in the air. Bateleur eagles have been observed catching snakes, lizards, rodents, birds and insects.

One of the most interesting behaviours of bateleur eagles is their ability to fly low to the ground while scanning for prey. This behaviour is called "contour-hugging flight" and it allows the eagles to search for food more efficiently. Bateleur eagles are also known to steal food from other raptors, such as vultures and kites. Bateleur eagles are monogamous and mate for life. They usually breed once a year, typically laying a single egg in a nest built in the fork of a tree. Both the male and female take turns incubating the egg and caring for the chick. The chick hatches after approximately 45 days, and it is fed regurgitated food by both parents. The chick fledges after approximately three months, but it may remain with its parents for up to a year.

Conservation status

Bateleur eagles are listed as "Near Threatened" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The main threats are habitat loss and fragmentation, hunting, and poisoning. These birds require large areas of savanna and open woodland habitat to thrive, but much of this habitat has been lost to agriculture, logging, and human settlement. Bateleur eagles are also sometimes hunted for their feathers or body parts, which are used in traditional medicine.

The rise of the painted dogs

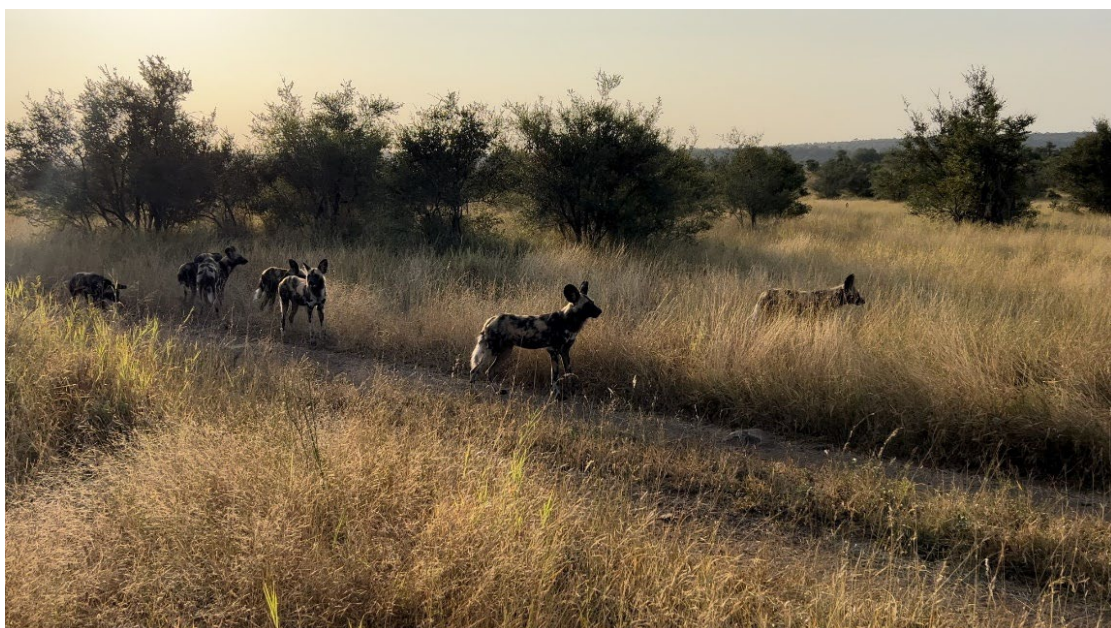
Article by Monika Malewski

The scientific name, *Lycaon pictus*, directly translates to painted wolf, and their beautifully mottled fur coat with splashes of brown, black and white, and large round ears give them a unique appearance. Known by many names, including Cape hunting dog, and painted hunting dog, some conservation organisations are promoting the name painted dog, as wild dog has several negative connotations that could be detrimental to its image.

They are believed to have diverged from the other canid species around 1.7 million years ago and although once found throughout the African continent, they have disappeared from most of their geographic range. The largest populations can be found in southern and east Africa, although the total population of painted dogs is thought to be only around 6 600 individuals. Given that they are pack animals, this means that roughly 1 400 breeding animals remain.

The African painted dog has very strong social bonds, stronger than those of sympatric lions and spotted hyenas. They live in permanent packs of two to 27 adults and yearling pups. There is a separate dominance hierarchy for males and females, the oldest of the sex being dominant over the rest. Males may be led by the oldest male, but these can be replaced by younger individuals and so some packs may contain elderly male former pack leaders.

Painted dogs differ from other social species as the males typically remain within the natal pack and the females disperse. The males also usually outnumber the females 3:1 as a result, and interestingly this is supported by a changing sex-ratio in consecutive litters. The first litter from a female contains a higher proportion of males, second litters are half and half and the following litters are biased towards females with this trend increasing as females get older. This means that the earlier litters provide stable hunters and the higher ratio of dispersals amongst the females stops a pack from getting too big. Dispersing females join other packs and evict some of the resident females related to the other pack members, and in doing so, prevent inbreeding and allow the evicted individuals to find new packs of their own and breed. The dominant pair monopolises breeding and a single alpha female may have up to sixteen pups. The amount of food needed to feed more than two litters would be impossible to acquire by the average pack, and so breeding is strictly limited to the dominant female, which may kill the pups of subordinates. After giving birth, the mother stays close to the pups in the den, while the rest of the pack hunts.



The painted dog is a specialised and primarily diurnal pack hunter of medium-sized antelope. They approach prey silently, and then chase at speeds of up to 66 km/h (41 mph) for 10–60 minutes. The average chase covers some 2 km (1.2 mi), during which the prey animal, if large, is repeatedly bitten on the legs, belly, and rump until it stops running, while smaller prey is simply pulled down and torn apart. This feat of stamina hunting has proven to be successful with more than 60% of their chases ending in a kill, sometimes up to 90%. In comparison, lions average at around 27-30% and hyenas 25-30%, although due to the smaller size of the dogs (18-36 kg), they commonly lose their kills to these two large predators.

Painted dogs are an endangered species, with populations declining due to various factors. The primary threat is habitat loss from human activities such as agriculture and urbanisation. Another factor contributing to the decline of painted dogs is hunting and poisoning due to their perceived threat to livestock. Finally, the spread of diseases such as rabies and distemper have also contributed to the decline of painted dog populations. Kruger National Park is home to over three hundred of these canids, making it one of the largest populations in Africa. Singita has a partnership with Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and Kruger National Park to collaborate on conservation. EWT is a South African Non-Governmental Organisation that works towards conserving threatened species and ecosystems in southern Africa. The EWT works with various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and communities, to develop and implement conservation programmes. The African Wild Dogs conservation project is one of EWT's programmes, aimed towards ensuring the survival of these carnivores in the wild. This collaboration has resulted in the collaring and monitoring of painted dogs, providing data to help conservationists understand their behaviour and better protect them. Ultimately, the survival of the species depends on a collective effort to address the factors contributing to their decline and to continue to implement measures to ensure their long-term viability.

At the beginning of this month a pack of nine painted dogs was found on our concession. It was a pack we had encountered before and had previously attempted to collar with the help of EWT. As luck would have it, my guests at the time were very passionate about painted dogs and conservation, having previously sponsored collars for painted dogs. We immediately notified EWT of the reappearance of this pack. Painted dogs have a uniquely patterned coat, similar to our own fingerprints, and so we are able to identify individuals and by



studying pack behaviour we can determine the alpha. That afternoon, accompanied by EWT, collar in hand, and a large speaker to play a recording of the unique call of the dogs, we set off in search of the pack. Painted dogs have a massive home range, some records are over 2 000 km², but most are restricted to areas of less than 200 km². We knew our odds, and so were not too disappointed when the pack eluded us. Nonetheless, it had been an interesting afternoon, discussing research, new stats and methods of darting, capturing and collaring the pack. The plan was to collar only the alpha male with a collar that had both VHF which is a line-of-sight radio repeater, as well as satellite tracking device that updates twice a day every day. Two days later the “floppy ear pack”, so called because of the oldest male's distinctive floppy ear, reappeared in an open grassland in the centre of our concession, an ideal spot to be able to follow and dart the dogs safely. The Kruger National Park vet was closest and available, and in a matter of hours we had successfully collared one of the male dogs. EWT's goal is to collar and monitor every pack within the Kruger Park's metapopulation, and with the help of Singita we are one pack closer to this goal.

April Gallery



Nhlanguleni cub. Photo by Rudi Hulshof.
Wildebeest and zebra. Photo by Liam Henderson.





Hippo at the weir. Photo by Rudi Hulshof.
African wild cat. Photo by Liam Henderson.





Shish lioness and cub. Photo by Rudi Hulshof.
Trichardt male. Photo by Henry Parsons.

