

Singita



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

Temperature

Average minimum: 14.4°C (57.9°F)
Average maximum: 24.7°C (76.4°F)
Minimum recorded: 10.0°C (50.0°F)
Maximum recorded: 30.0°C (86.0°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 77 mm
For the season to date: 766.1 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:31
Sunset: 17:12

As hot water bottles and warm seats become the norm, summer hues still linger with plenty of green grass and lush vegetation throughout the reserve. Once again, the reserve was saturated in unusually late rain during the last ten days of the month, and this has filled seasonal pans and topped up watering holes. We welcome the abundance of zebra that have made their annual pilgrimage to the western parts of this area bringing a dash of colour among the other plains game species. It sure looks like we are in for another lively winter season!

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for May:

Lions

- Lion activity has once again centred around the Plains Camp male lions with them being seen mating with a Mangheni lioness well as a Nkuhuma lioness. Exciting times lie ahead with hopefully some more lion cubs to come in the not-so-distant future.
- The Nkuhuma lioness and her two cubs are still using a rocky drainage as their temporary den. Sightings of them have been few but they are showing some positive signs around the vehicles, making for some memorable moments.
- We also had an encounter with two lionesses which turned out to be the Ximungwe lioness and an Othawa lioness - will this turnout to be the start of a new pride? Time will tell.
- The last week of the month saw the return of the Talamati Pride and one Avoca male lion. They were seen hunting zebra one evening on Othawa only to be caught out by a watchful impala who gave away their position. The following afternoon, after a few hours of tracking, we found them lying up full-bellied. On closer inspection we noticed a hoof of a zebra foal lying nearby. One foal would definitely not feed seven lions, so they must have continued hunting into the evening.

Elephants

- The elephants are here in their numbers! Big to small, we have them all. Sightings of a large herd numbering well over 50 have been a major highlight for our guests. We have noticed lots of feeding activity along the seep lines as they make the most of some seasonal shrubs and grasses shooting up after the late rain. On most drives guides have had multiple sightings of elephant herds, however, one sighting in particular caught our attention as there was a calf seen with a snare around its leg. Vets were notified and in no time the calf was darted, snare removed and wound treated. We were relieved to see it moving with its mother and herd that afternoon.

Leopards

- Picking up where we left off last month, the Nyeleti male and Schotia female we seen mating in the Sand River in front of Boulders Lodge, which indicated the certainty that Schotia's cub is dead. Sad as it is, Nature will take its course. Will Schotia manage to protect her future cubs from the advancing Tamba male leopard? It will be a tough task.
- Tamba male has been relentless in his pursuit for territory, showing battle wounds on his paws and upper body. We are assuming these were from the Ravenscourt male who holds territory to his west or the aging Nyeleti male who persists in his patrols along the Sand River.
- We have had a few sightings of the Mobeni female leopard but one stood out the most: A female cheetah was seen feeding on the remains of an impala ram close to Castleton Camp. Vultures gathered in the surrounding trees; we knew a four-legged scavenger arriving on the scene was imminent. What we were not prepared for was the Mobeni female rushing out at the cheetah, chasing her and claiming the kill for herself! This left us all speechless at what we had just witnessed.
- Kangela male is a regular feature close to Ebony and Boulders Lodge. For how long will his father, the Nyeleti male tolerate him? As Kangela grows physically, he becomes a future threat to his father's territory and success.
- On the last day of the month the Nkuwa female made an appearance, and she wasn't alone. After analysing the tracks, we eventually noticed a leopard's tail dangling from the canopy of a jackalberry tree. We were all excited to see her as we had not had many sightings of her over the last month. As we positioned the vehicle, something odd stood out of the top of a long-tailed cassia tree close by, it was her cub! Bundled up and soaking up the sun was the little fur ball. Our emotions went from joy to nerve-racking as a male lion was sighted at the base of the tree. Hoping the cub would stay put we watched anxiously. Fortunately, the male lion was too preoccupied with an impala kill we presume

Nkuwa made and was then robbed of. Luckily for the leopards the lion moved off with the kill and no cats were harmed in the process.

Buffalo

- Large herds still roam the southern grasslands, and with a number of lions on their trail they need to be cautious. The abundance of green grass means herd members should be in a top condition going into the dry season. Sightings of large buffalo herds offer not only a visual feast but the sounds associated with them are amazing - from the bellowing bulls to the trill of the ox-peckers there is always something to keep us entertained. One memorable moment from our time with a large herd was to witness the first steps of a newly born buffalo calf. It took the little one about 20 minutes before it got to its feet, with mom's assistance, of course. This was a super special sighting for our guests who had been doing safaris for over 40 years, but a buffalo birth this was a first for them.

Cheetah

- Cheetah cubs! Yes, you read that right. A female was discovered with four cubs, aged about seven weeks, just south of Castleton Camp. We had our suspicions that she may have cubs as she had been sighted in the same area a number of times over a few weeks, which is unusual for a female cheetah without cubs.



Bird List

The bird list for May included ten new bird species with a sighting of a jackal buzzard and secretarybird being the highlight. This brings our yearly total to 264.

Some bush reflections and articles follow, as well as the May Gallery of images.

Today I want to tell you all about the hippopotamus. On a beautiful May afternoon I met with my guest, ready to head out on drive from Castleton Lodge. While having pre-drive snacks a very large herd of elephants approached the dam in front of the lodge, which really was exciting. Soon after snacks we set off for a game drive wanting to follow up on a cheetah that had been seen in the area previously. Unfortunately we could not find her and were a bit disappointed. But, I will be making huge mistake if I forget to remind you that Mother Nature is unpredictable! After the disappointment of having not found the spotted speedster we came across a male hippopotamus lying down in a very shallow pan. We spent the rest of the afternoon having real quality time watching that male hippo, and taking pictures of it with the sunset in the background.

During the course of that late afternoon we discussed the many interesting facts about hippos. These are some of those:

1. *Hippopotamus amphibious*, as the scientific name suggests (*amphibius*), are able to live both on land and in water.
2. A fully grown male hippo weighs, on average, 1.5 tonnes, and female weighs a little less at around 1.3 tonnes. They are selective grazers and use their broad muscular lips to pluck short grass, which they mow repeatedly. Typically hippos come out of the water at night to feed, and they follow well used paths.
3. Generally they do not stray further than 1 to 2 km from water, returning to it before sunrise.
4. Hippos practice a harem system where bulls occupy well-defended territories that contain nursery herds of females and their young.
5. The fact that hippo defecate near the water has an important ecological benefit, they are adding nutrients to the system which can then be utilized by members of the food chain, like fish etc.
6. Hippos walk on the bottom of the river or dams, and do not swim. They can remain submerged for up to 6 minutes.
7. Hippos run to the water if threatened. They are clumsy on land and cannot jump or navigate over obstacles.



A memorable morning

Article by Chene Wales-Baillie

It has always been a lifelong guiding dream of mine to start a game drive on a winter's morning with the sun beaming through the mist, as a coalition of male lions roar and move across the land. Everything had to be right, the perfect golden light, the fresh cool winter's air, the steam of a male lion's breathe back-lit by the sun as he roars... One can just imagine the picture I had in mind.



Heading out into one of the coldest and yet most misty and incredibly beautiful mornings, myself and two other guides set out to look for any sign of the Plains Camp males who had been heard vocalizing from the northern bank of the river in front of Boulders Lodge, throughout the night, by the night porters. We could hear them from a distance however it was difficult to pinpoint where they were exactly. This is where tracking became a key component in finding these males. The three of us guide and tracker teams spread out to check different areas and at last we managed to narrow it down. Next minute over the radio we heard guide Sipho Sibuye call, "Stations, we have managed to locate the two Plains Camp males, mobile east on Mveve."

Now this may not mean anything to you, unless you know this area well. However, Mveve is a road which is located on a spectacular high point on the property where the backdrop can only be described as a magnificent vista of views across the reserve for miles in each direction, it is honestly one of the most stunning roads on the property (in my opinion). So with that in mind you can only imagine my excitement in explaining to the guests that the lions had been found, and where they were moving, and how incredible the light was, etc.

We made our way around to see the males with enormous amounts of excitement, only to get there and find them moving straight into a thicket where they were barely visible. That feeling where your heart just sinks is awful. Complete disappointment. The idea of the most amazing sight completely changed within moments.

However, I always tell my guests that, "Patience is the best weapon in our arsenal." "Something good will come!" So we waited... and waited... and waited. Then when everyone was at the point of leaving the two lions, from the east, a distance away, we all heard another lion vocalizing! Instantly the ears of the two Plains Camp males pricked up.

It was then that the dream sighting started to become a reality. The older, more dominant of the two males got up and began to move in the direction of the other lion roaring with purpose. Through the golden-pierced mist, he began to roar and so too did his brother from behind him. It was beyond magnificent! Two large male lions on the move, announcing their ownership of the land and walking with great strides through the dew-laden grasses.

Eventually we found that the other lions heard the reply of the Plains Camp males and had moved off swiftly, so to end off the morning we continued to follow the males as they strode between herds of impala and wildebeest, roaring continuously, and making sure that their territory was secure. In the vehicle we were left with adrenaline-exuding-excitement and a loss for words at how truly incredible the entire morning had turned out. And with that, we returned to camp with an absolutely memorable story to tell. (Which I'm sure I will tell many more times to come!)



Although nothing is forever as the saying goes, the dynamics surrounding the leopards of Singita Sabi Sand are particularly unstable at the moment and are going through some very drastic changes! It has a lot to do with the rapidly ageing Nyelethi male. Born in 2009, this impressive male has the reign over an incredibly large stretch of land, along the sought-after Sand River, however it feels like his time is coming to an end. Although he rose to prominence as a rogue young male when he notoriously killed the Ravenscourt female in 2013, he has been the dominant male ever since. He is especially known in the area around the lodge where he has become famous for strolling through the lodges.

The rapid ageing of the Nyelethi male and, with that, the steep decline of his territory, will have a great effect on two leopards in particular: The Thamba male and Schotia female.

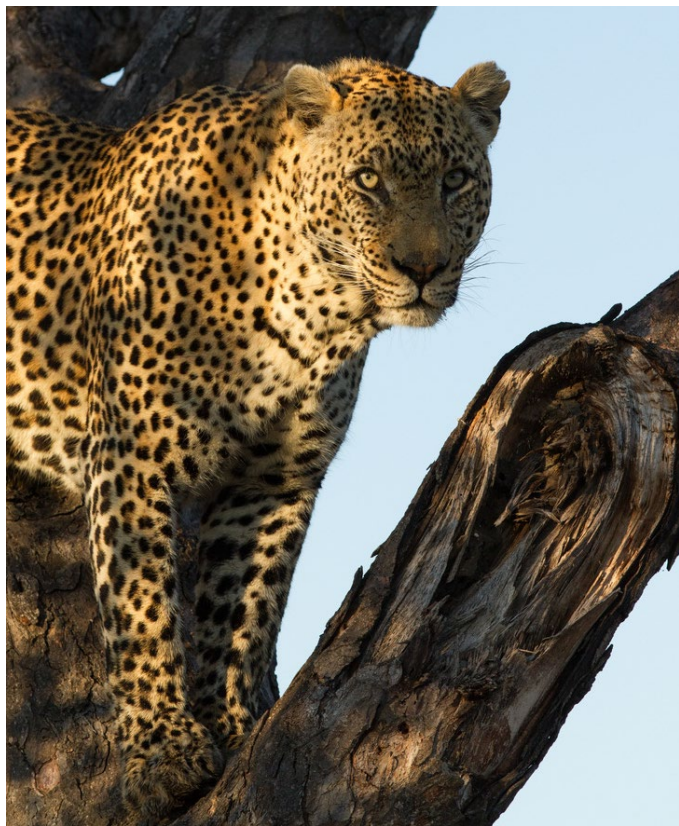
The Thamba male is gaining territory quickly, as he is a strong upcoming young male, seen as the main competitor and biggest threat to Nyelethi.

The Schotia female's territory, on the other hand, has always overlapped with the territory of the Nyelethi male. Her last set of cubs were also fathered by him. With Thamba moving in closer, he is believed to have killed Schotia's last litter. She was then seen mating again with Nyelethi again. Of course with Thamba's territory only growing, we are concerned the story will repeat itself soon.

It will be very interesting to see how these dynamics play out going forward. Stay tuned for more updates as the quest for dominance plays out.



Right: Schotia female



Left: Nyelethi male



Below: Thamba male

Gallery for May



Kudu calf nursing. Photo by Marc Bowes-Taylor.



The four cheetah cubs. Photo by Marc Bowes-Taylor.