

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT

SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE

For the month of January, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.3°C (70.3°F)
Minimum recorded: 18.0°C (64.4°F)
Average maximum: 32.9°C (91.2°F)
Maximum recorded: 38.2°C (100.7°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 44 mm
Season to date: 265.6 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:35
Sunset: 18:38

It's so beautiful to visit Singita Pamushana in the green season and see a typically dry landscape transformed into a saturated vibrant 'jungle'. The air and land heave with life – during the daytime a rainbow of birds sing, insects buzz and bulk feeders munch, while at night frogs trill, hyenas call and lions roar. Cumulonimbus clouds grow heavy in the afternoons but often break their promise of rain, but when they keep it it's obvious to observe breeding herds of elephants, and other animals, rejoicing in the cooler weather, soft wet vegetation, muddy pans and deeper swimming pools. White string-of-stars flowers grace the meadows where impala lambs play, and yellow *tribulus* carpet sandier areas, hiding the fact that each bloom will turn into a spiky thorn.

2024 got off to a spectacular start on New Year's Day for guide, John Zvinashe, and his guests. They saw all of the "Big Five" and some extra-special sightings: in addition to lions, elephants, buffalos and white rhinos they also saw four black rhinos and two leopards, as well as two porcupines, and a brown hyena!

Here's a sightings snapshot for January:

Lions

- Two territorial male lions have had us transfixed with their beguiling power. They travel vast distances in the night, patrolling their pride lands. The third that is sometimes seen with them has not shown himself.
- The Nduna Pride seems to have split in two. Five of them (the two lionesses, the full grown male with the kinked tail, and the two cubs) were seen in the central areas as far west as Hunyugwe Hill near the lodge, Ultimate Drive and Banyini.
- Four members of the Southern Pride were seen in the northern reaches of their territory, east of Hwata Pan.
- Members of the River Pride were seen slinking about in the reedbeds of the river.

Leopards

- There have been some brief sightings of a female leopard in the valley below the lodge, as well as a male leopard on the shoreline of the dam. It is thrilling to hear leopards roaring their rasping calls at night, and know that they are out there, somewhere. Singita Pamushana Lodge and Malilangwe House are situated on the Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve – "Malilangwe" meaning "Call of the Leopard."

Wild dogs

- The pack of 12 African wild dogs have been in awesome evidence! They spent many days around the Banyini and airstrip in the latter part of the month. Their usually well-camouflaged coats are now set off strikingly against the lush green vegetation.

Hyenas

- A formidable clan has been spotted returning from hunting forays, in the early mornings.
- Some delightful daytime sightings were of hyenas wallowing in mud and happily cooling off in shallow water.

Rhinos

Many of our guests have been to other reserves on their safari journeys, where there are no rhinos. Here we can guarantee sightings of free-roaming rhinos, complete with their horns. Daily sightings of white rhinos always take place, and this month we have had prolific sightings of the usually shyer black rhinos.

- White rhinos are still converging on their favourite waterholes despite the temporary pans that have filled with rainwater.
- A lovely sighting was of three white rhinos sleeping in the shade of a tree.
- A far more intimidating sighting was of two white rhino bulls fighting at Hwata Pan.
- Three black rhinos have been spending most of the month in the area between Banyini, the airstrip and Hlamba Mlonga. They are a mother and her calf, and a bull. It's been so exciting to see them out in the open crossing the airstrip where the grass is kept low.

Elephants

- The breeding herds are having a whale of a time with all the lush foliage and grass on offer. They can be found hugging the river and in grassy meadows and swamps.
- There are quite a few stropky bull elephants in musth at the moment, and they are best given a wide berth. There seems to be a peak in their breeding state, when testosterone runs high, when the feeding conditions are so favourable and all are in peak condition.
- Some bulls have found great contentment at muddy pans, splashing trunkloads of mud over their vast bodies in an effort to cool down and soothe their skin.

Buffalo

Make hay while the sun shines – or eat grass while the rain pours, could be the buffalos' motto of the month.

- Sometimes you find them lying down in the shade, simply chewing the cud.
- Other times they are blissfully wallowing in mud.
- And at other times they can be found generously sharing a waterpoint with elephants or rhinos.
- Herds of up to 500 animals have been seen this month.

Plains game

- Plains game abound. In fact there seem to be zebras around every corner! Giraffe are in abundance, as are wildebeest with their outrageously cute calves, and impala and their lambs. In the past I would have categorised eland among the shy species that we don't see often, but of late generous herds of them are regularly seen around the central areas.
- The sable and hartebeest are well hidden in the dense bush at this time, and sightings of them are rare.

Unusual sightings

- Two of the month's unusual sightings involved birds – one was of a martial eagle catching a monitor lizard, and the other was of the courtship and mating of hamerkops.
- There once stood an ancient baobab in the central open areas, that was revered by all. Some years ago it eventually died and rotted away. Once all the decay had gone a large dish-shaped hole was left in the landscape. It was delightful to see this crater, filled with soft red sand, being used by zebras to roll in and dust bathe.

Boat cruise

Our boat cruises are a firm favourite with guests, and are repeatedly requested.

- One of the guaranteed delights are hippos, but an added bonus this month was seeing a newborn hippo calf, only a few days old.

Fishing

- Fishing for tilapia and tigerfish has been good, with some excellent catches of both.

Rock art

It's especially beautiful to visit a rock art site after it has been raining, as the colours of the rocks and the paintings themselves are at their most vibrant.

Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft

There is always something new to see and learn at Kambako.

- This month our guests were taught about how to gather edible tubers, make fire, craft tools and extract salt from mineral salt soil.

Walks

Some visitors arrive fearful of the wilds and the wildlife, and for them even driving in an open vehicle is brave and adventurous. Others arrive keen to try a bush walk and that ends up becoming their favourite activity. We choose our routes to avoid the dense vegetation at this time, and a lovely walk to do for exercise is from the lodge to Sosigi Dam, where refreshments are waiting.

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

Making magic

Wildlife photography is challenging for many reasons - invariably there is a branch or piece of grass obscuring your subject that you can't just remove or reposition, and there are never any 'take-twos' because you didn't get what you should have and your subject has now moved on. But every now and again magic happens, as it did with this shot – the wild dogs almost look staged, as do the giraffe, guineafowl and lighting.

The sun was setting and we were called to the sighting of sleeping African wild dogs from a distance away, where we'd been in search of a breeding herd of elephants. Arriving at the airstrip I could hardly believe the sight. Firstly, there was a private aircraft to the right of this photo, wanting to take off, but the pilot had to wait as the African wild dogs were now up and in hunting mode. They'd spotted a herd of impala at the far end of the airstrip, and were walking arrow-like, heads down, straight towards the herd. They were trying to be as low-key and inconspicuous as possible. The giraffes couldn't quite believe their audacity either and looked on perplexed. (Wild dogs are no threat to adult giraffe.) The guineafowl were in their usual dizzy state, and a zebra grazed unfazed in the background. It was a few freckles before sunset and the light couldn't have been more beautiful as it lit the giraffe and wild dogs with studio quality perfection.



The dogs continued their single-file pursuit, then one broke rank and the chase began, scattering impala in every direction. The pack gave chase into the thick bush but success was not immediately theirs.

With the runway now clear the pilot could quickly start the engines and take-off just as the sun was setting. As it happens a black rhino had also delayed his take-off earlier before the wild dogs, so it seems some of the best sightings of the month have been had on the airstrip – it's a high traffic area for wildlife!

We relocated the dogs as they rested between hunting forays, and then left when it was dark. In the following days we saw them – all appearing fed and sprightly. It is estimated that African wild dogs have a success rate of around 80% when hunting, which is higher than other predators like lions and leopards. This is largely due to their teamwork. A pack will hunt together to capture prey. They often approach their prey silently and then chase it in pursuit at high speeds of up to 65 kilometres per hour (41 mph) for about 5 kilometres (3 miles).

Midday hunting in the rain



This nest of wet cats looked like they weren't going anywhere for a while, when we saw them in the rain in the morning. However, returning to the scene that afternoon they were not where we'd left them, and following their tracks over the road we found them with full bellies surrounding a dead buffalo.



It's unusual for lions to hunt in the day, but a herd of buffalo must have moved through the area and been unaware of their presence. The lions must have heard the prey advancing, and with the slippery muddy conditions, and the rain subduing their scent, they took advantage of the situation.

Adult buffalo can weigh anywhere between 400 and 800 kg (880 – 1700 lb) are the preferred, yet most dangerous prey for lions, one carcass providing enough meat to feed a growing pride.

Rain starts play

After searching for breeding herds of elephants for a few days one herd took it upon themselves to emerge out in the open right below the lodge. It had been raining solidly the day before and everything was clean and muddy at the same time.

You could hear the trumpets, squeals, rumbles and crumpling of vegetation from the lodge. Parking out in the open, near a calm(ish) female who raised her trunk to scent and assess us before settling back down to relax, some distance away from the herd, we sat quietly and watched the shenanigans.

You might expect a breeding herd of elephants, made up mainly of females and their calves, to be disciplined, controlled and quiet – but it is anything but! It seemed this herd was invigorated after the rain, taking delight in the cooler weather and reenergised with all the food and water available. They ran around chasing each other, pushing and shoving, and stomping on everything.

Some of the young mothers seemed to have invented a game of stealing another mother's baby and herding it off which then, of course, elicited a volley of shrieks and indignation and hot pursuit – the little calves running helter-skelter and not too sure of the rules but having a blast all the same.



Two young mothers in a titanic battle of pushing and shoving.

At one point the whole herd came charging straight towards us full of bluster and bravado, but then suddenly slammed on breaks with the matriarch quickly calling for order. Little calves were ushered away between their mothers and big sisters – although some still thought it was game-on and made a break for it. The adults kept a wary eye on us and led the herd around our vehicle before settling and then continuing their wild sports day. They stayed in the area for about three days before moving to greener pastures.



A baby makes a break for it, but sisters and aunts keep it in line.



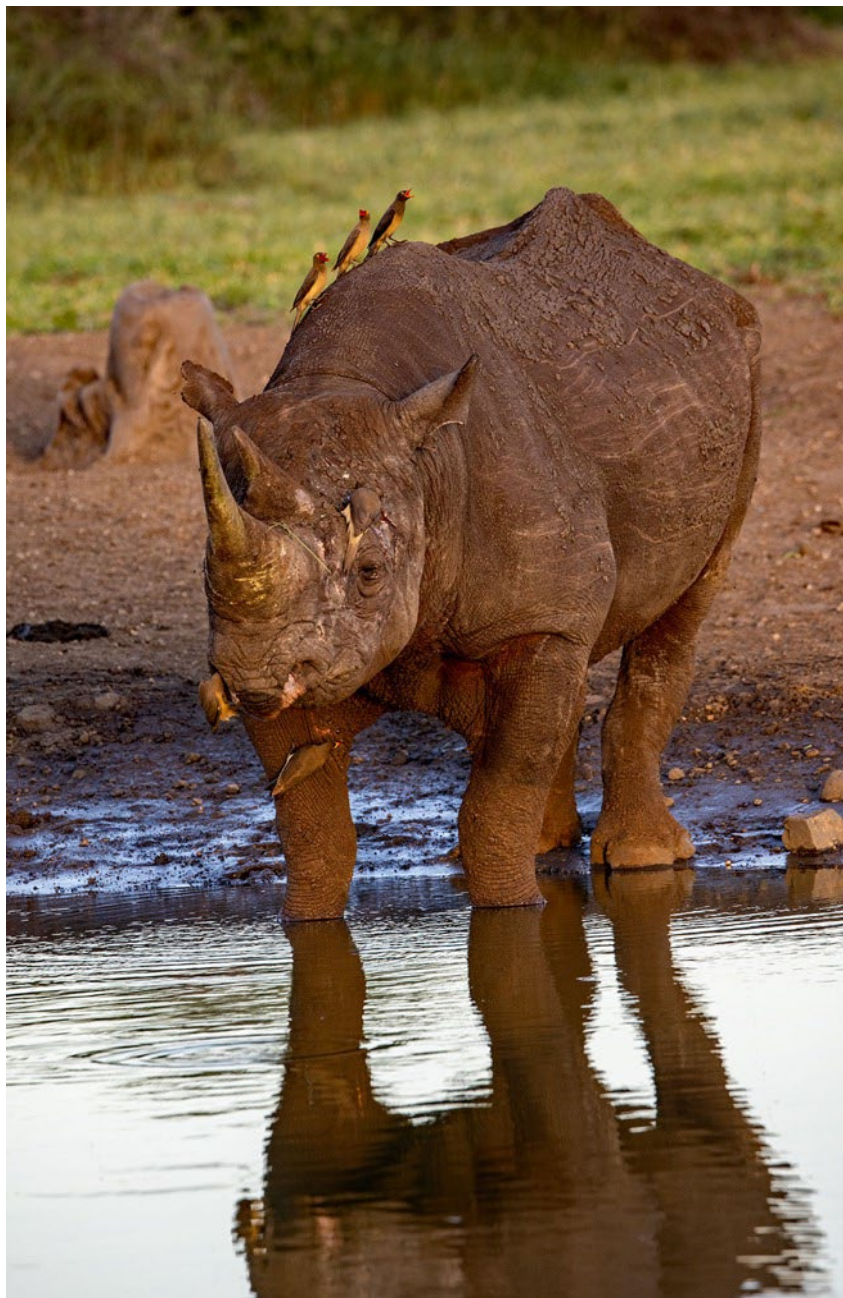
Note this tuskless female matriarch and youngsters.

Female elephants can be naturally tuskless. However, studies have shown that tuskless females that have survived after periods of intense poaching elsewhere in Africa have passed on their genes with expected, as well as surprising, results. About half their daughters were tuskless. More perplexing, two-thirds of their offspring were female.

Researchers focused on the X chromosome. (Females have two X chromosomes; males have one X and one Y chromosome.) They suspected that the relevant gene was dominant – meaning that a female needs only one altered gene to become tuskless — and that when passed to male embryos, it may short-circuit their development. It is thought that when mothers pass it on the male embryos likely die early in development, resulting in a miscarriage. This dramatic selection for tusklessness impacts the flora because tuskless females eat mostly grass, whereas tusked elephants eat more legumes and tough woody plants.

Battleship

It's surprising to see a black rhino during the day and out in the open, but sure enough our binos revealed that the rhino approaching the pan was indeed a black rhino. He paid us no attention at all, which is also most unusual, and walked straight to the water and drank.



He had a generous supply of oxpeckers with him, and the reason soon became clear - he had been in a fight and was covered in small bloody wounds around his face. Fortunately his wounds were minor, but males can die from the wounds inflicted by another's horn – that sharp dagger penetrating vital organs is lethal.

All creatures great and small



Did you notice all three insects in the photo? The colourful grasshopper, the little green cricket, and the fly? Oh, and the incidental lion blurred in the background, licking his chops? Let's focus on the little ones:

Insects make up over two-thirds of all known organisms on Earth, outnumbering humans and other animals by a massive margin. They are often overlooked, especially here where the "Big 5" can steal the show, but they play a vital role in maintaining ecological balance and sustaining the ecosystem. They thrive in diverse environments, adapting to niches ranging from pollination and decomposition to pest control and nutrient recycling.

Pollination is a vital ecological service provided by insects, and their most celebrated contribution to world ecosystems. Bees, butterflies, moths, and other pollinators facilitate the reproduction of numerous plant species, including many essential crops and various fruits and vegetables. In doing so, they sustain biodiversity, foster genetic diversity, and bolster agricultural productivity.

Less light is shone on the fact that they play a fundamental role in nutrient cycling and decomposition, processes essential for maintaining soil fertility and ecosystem health. Through their feeding activities, insects break down organic matter, facilitating the release of nutrients, via their frass/droppings, that nourish plant life. This decomposition process not only sustains primary productivity but also reduces the accumulation of organic waste.

Indigenous knowledge systems have recognized the value of insects as a source of food, medicine, and material resources. Insects such as termites, mopane worms, and grasshoppers feature prominently in traditional diets, providing valuable protein and nutrients. I wonder how long it will be before we adopt insects into our "western" diet due to the unsustainability of farming animal protein?

Insects are fascinating and it seems we know so little about them. For instance:

- Most animals show signs of aging, but some insects, like certain species of cicadas, exhibit a phenomenon known as "neoteny," where they retain juvenile characteristics throughout their lives.
- Insects showcase remarkable feats of strength and agility. The rhinoceros beetle can lift objects over 850 times its body weight, equivalent to a human lifting nearly 80 tons!
- Insects are masters of deception, employing a variety of camouflage and mimicry techniques to evade predators and capture prey. Some insects, like stick insects, resemble twigs so closely that they are nearly indistinguishable from their surroundings. On the subject of stick insects did you know that they can produce young without mating? Parthenogenesis is a form of reproduction in which an egg can develop into an embryo without being fertilized by a sperm.
- Many insects undergo metamorphosis, an almost magical process that involves dramatic changes in body form as they transition from larva to adult.
- Insects communicate using a variety of methods, including pheromones, vibrations, and sound. Bees perform intricate "waggle dances" to communicate the location of food sources to other members of the colony.

Insects I find particularly interesting are gall wasps. These tiny wasps lay their eggs on specific plant tissues, triggering the plant to produce a protective structure around the developing larvae. The resulting gall provides a safe environment for the young wasps to develop, offering shelter from predators and environmental stressors. Especially fascinating is the level of specificity involved. Different species of gall wasps induce the formation of distinct gall shapes, sizes, and textures on different plant species. The morphology of the gall often reflects the unique adaptations of the wasp species and the host plant's response to the wasp's chemical signals. Some gall wasps even manipulate the chemistry of the plant tissues to create a nutrient-rich environment suitable for their offspring.

However, despite their undeniable importance, insect populations worldwide face unprecedented challenges, including habitat loss, climate change, pesticide use, and invasive species. These threats are compounded by rapid human population growth, urbanization, and unsustainable land-use practices, placing immense pressure on world insect populations and the ecosystems they support.

Pest control

I, like many of you, am not a big fan of snakes. However, when they are discretely and respectfully going about their business and not trying to trip you up, I am able to admire them – from a safe distance. In this case the serpent was a non-venomous southern African rock python (*Python natalensis*) that was in the process of constricting a dassie/rock hyrax. It was macabre yet mesmerizing watching the reptile consume its prey.



In these two photos the python has coiled itself around the dassie and is in the process of clamping the coils tighter and tighter, asphyxiating the dassie. It would have ambushed the dassie, biting it quickly before starting to immobilise it by coiling around it. See how it tests the air with its forked black tongue, trying to assess if we were a threat to it. Pythons are very vulnerable to attack from predators like

leopards when they are in the process of killing and consuming their prey. If threatened or disturbed they will abandon the prey by uncoiling themselves and slithering away, so it's really important for us as spectators to let it consume its meal – especially as one dassie will feed a python for a few months.

In this sequence you can see it has released the dead dassie and started the long process of swallowing it. Contrary to popular belief pythons don't unhinge their jaws to swallow their food. Instead a stretchy connective tissue between their cranium and lower jaw allows them to open their mouths four times wider than their skulls. We watched as it then twisted and turned in order to move its body over the dassie, inch by inch, until it had covered the whole carcass and could close its mouth and swallow it down.

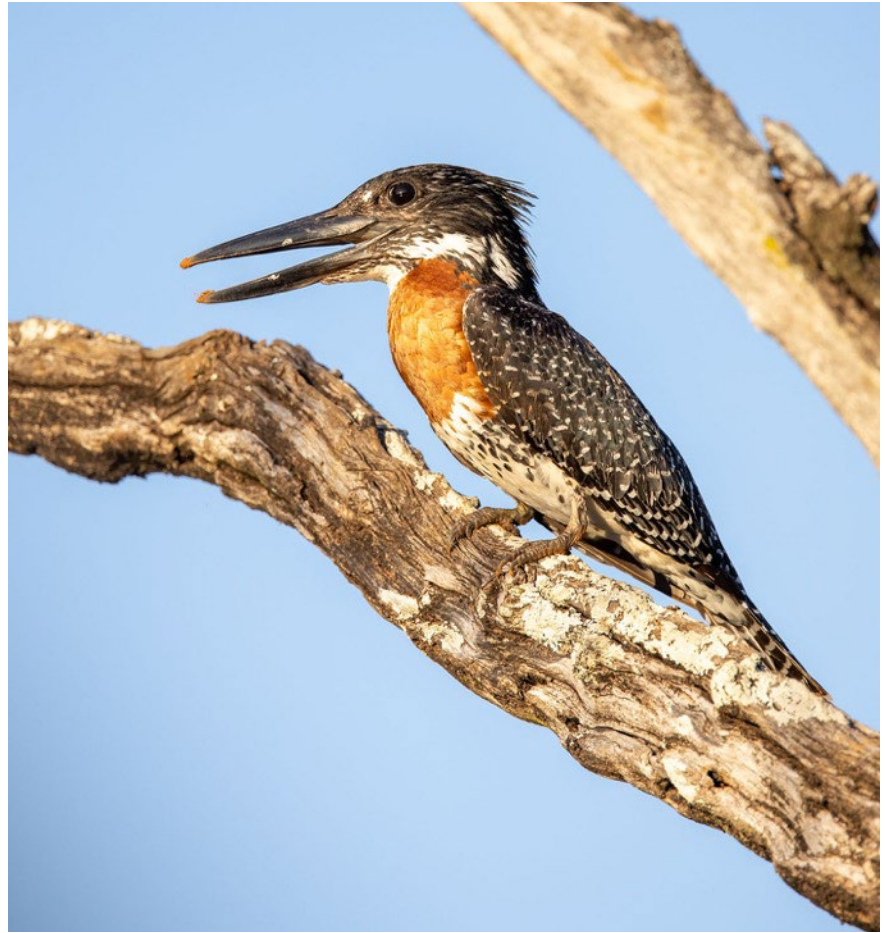


Twitter

There are several kingfishers found in this region – the African pygmy, brown-hooded, giant, grey-headed, malachite, pied, striped and woodland, but not all of them prey on fish.

However, three that most certainly do, and were spotted in action recently, were the giant, malachite and pied.

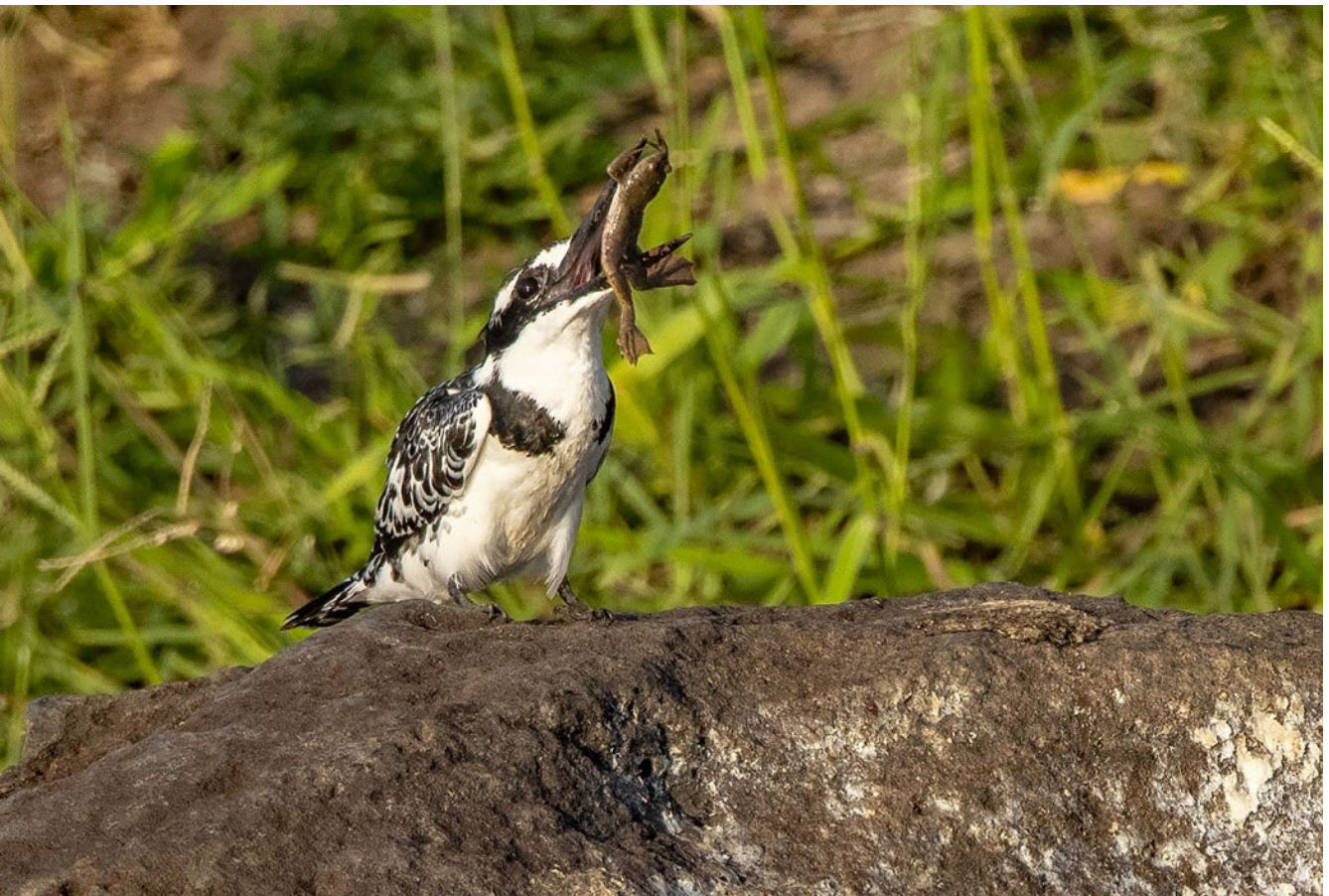
In this photo alongside the giant kingfisher has red soil on the tip of his beak and feet, from excavating a tunnel in the bank of the river to make a nesting chamber. They are monogamous and solitary breeders, and the nest is made by both sexes using their feet and bills.



This tiny malachite kingfisher allowed us such a close viewing as it sat motionless scanning for prey. They are tiny and weigh about 15 grams – which is what a tablespoon of butter or three grapes weigh!



We found this pied kingfisher far from its comfort zone of the dam or river, but it was fishing for frogs that were captive in a pan. The strategy was most successful as the aerial hunter caught three in the time we watched, smashing the frogs to death on a rock before tossing them up and gulping them down.



January Gallery



A Lichtenstein hartebeest pauses momentarily, as an impala jumps away.
Bulky eland trot across the road.





We only just saw this chameleon crossing the road in time - it was hardly moving, just rocking back and forth like a leaf in the breeze. This being our main road we waited until it was safely across to the other side, and camouflaged in a branch – because you never know what may be around the corner...



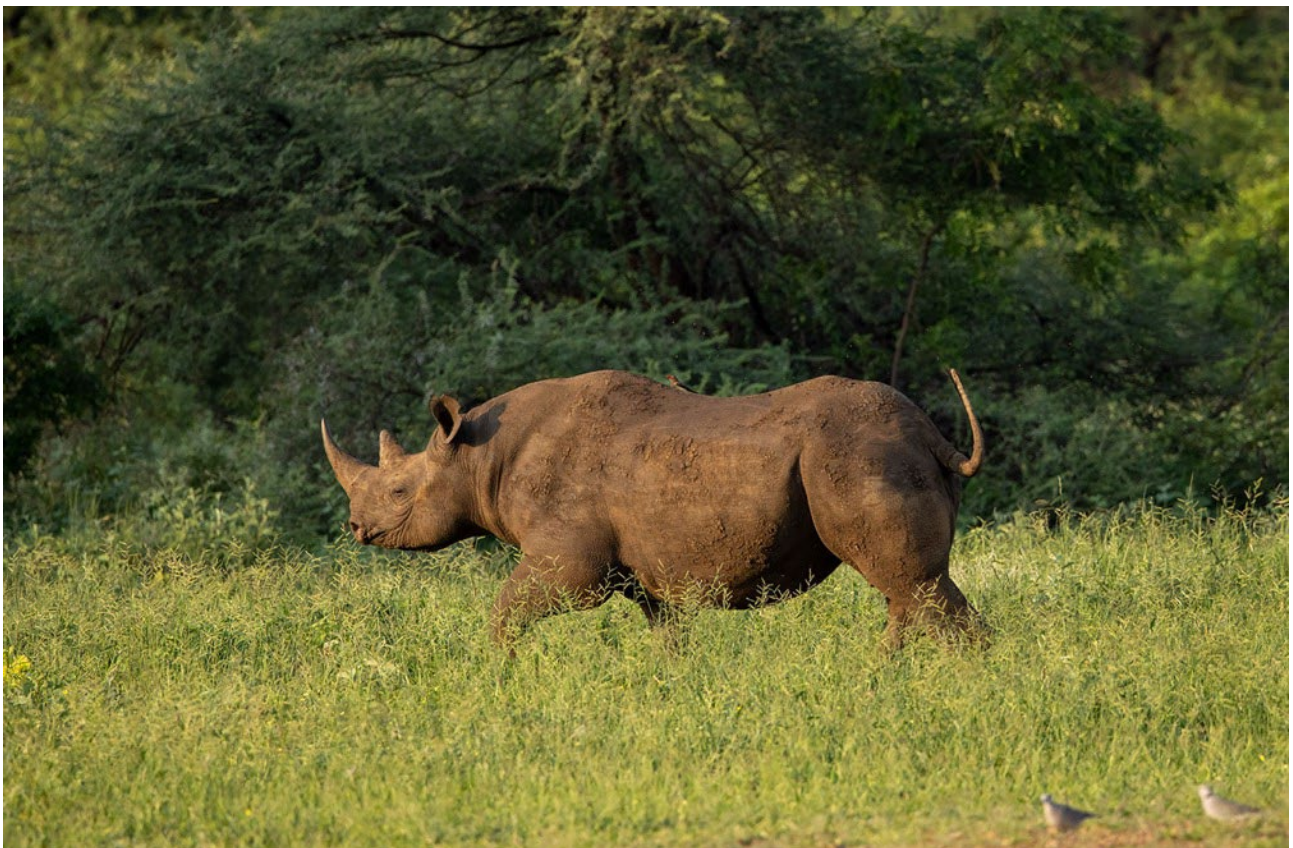


Impala lambs pre-dawn and zebras playing on the airstrip at sunrise.





A 4+ months-old wet and muddy white rhino calf has a momentary altercation with a fallen branch.
A black rhino trots across the outskirts of the airstrip, in belly-high grass.





A klipspringer statuesque upon a rock.

Lion tracks after the rain, and in dry soft sand – the three-lobed back pad immediately telling you, “cat”.



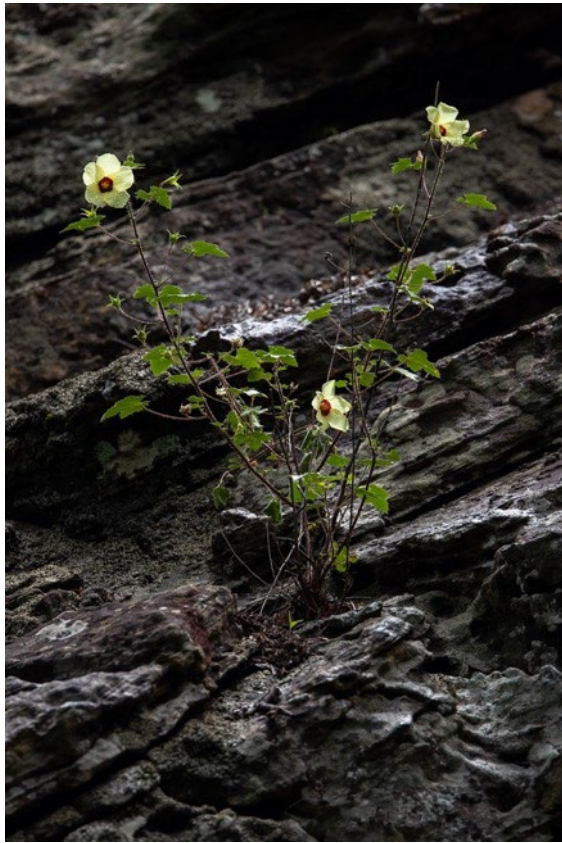


A big buffalo bull wades in Hwata Pan.



We spotted this mother carefully casting her shadow on her newborn calf, in order to keep the little one cool as it napped. Later when the herd left we watched it totter along after its mum.





Bushveld *hibiscus* are blooming all over the reserve this month.

There's only one thing better than finding a leopard orchid in a tree...

