

Singita



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

Temperature

Average minimum: 19.1°C (66.38°F)
Average maximum: 29.8°C (85.70°F)
Minimum recorded: 16.0°C (60.80°F)
Maximum recorded: 38.0°C (85.70°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 67 mm
Season to date: 114 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 04:59
Sunset: 18:18

As we look back on 2022, December was the perfect way to round up the year as there was something for everyone. From the buzz of the cicadas to bellows of big buffalo herds, the reserve is truly teeming with life. With the gentle rise in temperatures so comes the increase in rain which breathes rejuvenation back into our surroundings. Long days offer us the chance to explore this beautiful environment without rushing the journey and still having time to sit back and relax. This is the month of self-reflection and healing.

Here's a sightings snapshot for December:

Elephants

The sweetveld to our east becomes attractive to the pachyderms during the summer months, however we have already started to see some marula fruits turning from green to yellow which will prove too hard to resist in the months to come.

Cheetahs

- Frequent sightings of the territorial male cheetah in the southern grasslands continues to be a major highlight for many guests, although he has been seen limping of late, he has often been found with a plump belly (like many of us after Christmas dinner) suggesting it is not hampering his hunting ability.

Leopards

Last month lions stole the show on the big cat front but this month, in true Sabi Sand fashion, it was all about leopards. There has been regular viewing of familiar individuals, as well as some new faces.

- To the north of the Sand River a new leopard to Singita is the Hlambela male, a four-year-old male who was fathered by the legendary Singita old boy, the Ravenscourt male. Hlambela has been sighted on a few occasions now, and this part of the reserve seems to still be mostly unoccupied when it comes to one dominant male.
- The Kangela male leopard and Misava male have been another two males that have found refuge across the river from our lodges. The Kangela male leopard has been licking his wounds after a brutal encounter with the Thamba male south of the river close to Tavangumi Koppies, a clear message to the young tom of who is in charge in that section. What was surprising about this sighting is that Kangela did not take the abuse lying down but stood up to Thamba and did his best to fight back. Thamba's massive stature gave him the upper hand and now Kangela is left scarred but still surviving.
- There may be some new leopard cubs coming soon. The Nkuwa female leopard has been offering us great viewing, often sighted up a tree, giving us a chance to see her swelling mammary glands. We really hope she chooses the rocky Mobeni riverbed as one of her denning sites. This leopardess is simply mesmerising!
- The Schotia female leopard looks to be in great condition and there is a strong possibility she may have a new litter of cubs somewhere close to camp. If so they will have been fathered by the Thamba male. We will be watching her closely to hopefully confirm our speculations..

Lions

- The single mother, the Nkuhuma lioness, has been thriving along the Sand River and surrounds. She successfully hunted a massive waterbuck bull that fed her and her two one-year-old offspring for three days, and surprisingly managed to keep a large clan of hyena at bay. This sighting was sensational, taking place in the Hukumuri drainage, we not only witnessed hyenas, vultures, and lions but two different leopards hoping to scavenge a piece of the kill.
- The Mhangene Pride and the Plains Camp male lions trail the large herd of buffalo that are currently grazing in the south. The condition of the lioness with the limp seems to be improving and she is now moving at the front of the pride showing how resilient these big cats are. This environment can be harsh even for the most feared predators. We are anticipating the pride to grow in numbers in the weeks to come.
- In the beginning of December there were a few sightings of two new male lions, the Black Dam male lions in Othawa. This part of the reserve has been a frequent hunting ground for the Talamati Pride which still seems nomadic in their movement, wandering from the far north all the way to the deep south of the Sabi Sand in just a few days.

Bird List

The bird list for November includes four new species, bringing our yearly total to 286.

- Special bird species include: broad billed roller and Steppe eagle.

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



It comes with seasonal changes that animals practice different feeding behaviour. Elephants are one of the animals that have a variety of feeding styles from being grazers to browsers.

In the dry winter season we see a unique feeding behaviour that is only done by elephants, whereby they peel or strip off the bark on trees. By completely ring barking a tree the nutrients cannot get to the top of the tree from the roots.

In the Sabi Sand area it is mostly the marula trees (*Sclerocarya birrea*) that elephants focus on for food during the winter season. They target the cambium layer inside the bark, roots, foliage and fruit in their demand for nutrients. About 45% of marula trees in Sabi Sand have been damaged or destroyed by the behaviour of being ringbarked, uprooted or being broken off half way down the trunk..

I have heard many times when we go out on game drive that guests notice the dead trees, and they are surprised when we explain to them that it is as a result of elephant damage.



This behaviour can be seen in a positive way in that once the tree dies it remains standing for more than 20 years which means birds with a big wingspan can perch properly on dead trees. Also, when elephants push the whole tree down it results in a lot of grasses being able to grow under the protection of the branches, and small animals such as genet, civets and mongooses can use those protected places for shelter. The decaying wood also provides a food source for a host of insect grubs, fungi and enzymes.

Most often Nature has a way of controlling or balancing herself!

Skeletons and ancestors

Article by Sipho Sibuyi

My guests asked about the “skeleton tree” as we were driving from the airstrip to the lodge. It was a dead leadwood (*Combretum imberbe*). I invited them off the vehicle to stretch their legs and walk to the tree. They touched its satin-smooth bark and tried to pick up the stump, feeling how heavy it was. As the name leadwood implies is exceptionally hard and, as such, is put to good use in construction and for long-burning firewood.

We greatly respect this tree because it can live many years, up to 1 000, and some believe it has the history of their ancestors, and they can come and consult their ancestors via this tree during dark days. The white ash of this tree can be used in a paste to clean teeth, and combined with a toothbrush fashioned from a magic guarri branch, is very effective. Also, the ash can be used to make white paint when mixed with water and salt to paint the wall of a home.

The warthog hunt

Article by Coleman Mnisi

One afternoon we drove south-west on the propriety looking for a male leopard that had been seen in that area by others, on morning game drive. We found him at one of the dams, called July Dam. He was lying down next to the water as it was a very hot day, but within five minutes of our arrival he got up and went for a drink of water.

After that we followed him along the road going east, and we have stayed with him a long time. He looked to be in hunting mode so I checked with my guests if they were happy to continue following him to see what he was going to do. Everyone was very happy to do so.

Unbeknown to us, about two hundred metres off the road, were two warthogs inside a hole. Our tracker, Nkosinathi Sibuyi, said to me he thought the leopard had seen something, so we stopped and waited.



It did not take long before the leopard jumped and ran to the hole - the first warthog ran out, the second one did not make it out safely. The leopard caught it, suffocated it, and then dragged it up a tree. It was amazing to see how the leopard hunted his prey! It is not as easy as we think - as humans we think it takes a minute, but often we forget about all the hours of hard work and planning, all the patience and skill and strength that goes into each hunt.

New beginnings

Article by Dan Hartman

With the onset of new life, young births, new smells, new shoots and new growth, the rain season could not have come any sooner. With the morning calls of migratory birds to daily new additions, morning drives have been offering us guides and our guests here at Singita Sabi Sand a plethora of exciting and interesting journeys, spectacles, and to simply put it... downright entertaining views!

It is well known to those guests that have been to stay with us here, that our southernmost section host a widely diverse and alternate landscape. With the falling away of red bushwillows that comb the central and northern parts of Singita, the southern section becomes dominated by beautiful lush grassland with rich dark cotton soils. This attracts the large herds of buffalo we have become well known for, and seen from afar they litter the landscape like little ants.

With a much-needed controlled fire having moved through the southern grasslands prior to our rainy season (from November), there are now defined animal pathways spreading through the vast area like veins, also providing walkable routes for the smaller species to navigate. These areas having being burnt have not only replicated a natural fire that would have covered a large area, seasonally in some cases, but have brought a new flush of vegetation that's perfectly in sync with the newborns of many of our antelope species and insect species alike. This has provided the best nutrient kickstart and optimal chance of survival.

It does also however, bring with it a new seasonal opportunity for the predators to capitalize on.

The southern portion of Singita holds promise for ever changing dynamics. It is a section that the guiding and tracking team here have been thoroughly enjoying. The new shift has incredible biodiversity offerings, not just amazing sunsets!



December Gallery



Two giraffe bulls fight for dominance. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.



The Nkuwa female leopard descending a marula tree. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.



Large numbers of impala lambs can now be seen throughout the reserve. Image By Marc Bowes-Taylor.



Three wild dogs part take in a greeting ceremony in preparation to hunt. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.



Three rhinos find shade before the heat of the midday sun creeps up. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.



A cunning side-striped jackal at sunset. Image by Marc Eschenlohr.



A hooded vulture waits in anticipation for scraps from a kill. Image by Marc Eschenlohr.



A spotted hyena feeds on the leftovers after a lion's kill. Image by Marc Eschenlohr.



The Thamba male leopard and Schotia female after an act of mating. Image by Marc Eschenlohr.