

# Singita



## WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE

For the month of February, Two Thousand and Twenty-Three

### Temperature

Average minimum: 22.6°C (72.6°F)

Minimum recorded: 19.4°C (66.9°F)

Average maximum: 33.1°C (91.5°F)

Maximum recorded: 37.5°C (99.5°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 190.3 mm

\*For the season to date: 574.5 mm

\*Season = Sep to Aug

### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:50

Sunset: 18:22

We delighted in the rain we received this month, just what the doctor (or ecologist in this case) ordered to revitalise the landscape. Guests often let the weather dictate the game drives, and this gave them the perfect excuse to really enjoy the lodge, the spa, the dining experiences and the wilderness wellness initiatives we so encourage.

February is the month of marulas, a date which no elephant ever forgets. If you're quick enough to grab a few of the fallen green fruits, and allow them to ripen on your dashboard over a few days, you're in for a warm, soft distinctive scent and a sherbetty, vitamin C-ingy, fruity taste. Failing this you could always add a splash of Amarula to your morning coffee, or on the rocks for a truly African sundowner.

Here's a sightings snapshot for February:

### Lions

- The River Pride have provided the lion's share of the sightings. Twelve of them were seen sleeping in the shade south of Nyari Pan, and then again west of Banyini. One male, five lionesses and six cubs. On another occasion the two little cubs were seen with them.
- A magnificent male lion was spotted drinking at Nduna Dam.

### Leopards

- Guests heading off for a day in Gonarezhou saw a male leopard sauntering down Ultimate Drive, before it took off into the bush.
- On a fishing excursion guests got more than they bargained for when their guide spotted a leopard on a termite mound.
- One family of guests was extremely fortunate to see two leopards in one drive - one on Pamushana Access unsuccessfully hunting impala, and another drinking at O2 Pan.



A leopard whose camouflage is not as effective during the green season. Photo by Fahd Mumtaz.

### Rhinos

- White: Wonderful sightings as always, and the rhinos are so well fed and thriving right now. Five white rhinos were seen grazing along the Mahande Stream. Sightings like this are almost every drive occurrences.
- Black: Various lone black rhino bulls have been seen, also enjoying all the available flora this month. A great sighting was of three black rhinos browsing along Old Binya Road.

### Elephants

- The only thing more enticing for a bull than ripe marula fruits are females in oestrus, and there are more bulls in musth this month than usual, thanks to all the nutrient-rich food.

- There was a wonderful sighting of more than 60 elephants and three white rhinos at Chikwete Pan, the elephants were having a mudbath and the rhinos were sleeping in the shade.

#### **Buffalo**

- Large herds with between 400 and 600 individuals are seen congregating at the various waterholes spread across the property, now that the grazing can take them far and wide.
- We noticed a lot of buffalo had fresh injuries, suggesting attempted hunts from lions.

#### **Wild dogs**

- The pack of 12 wild dogs, and three hyenas, were sleeping in the shade north west of Ray's Drift.

#### **Plains game**

- Plains game abound – especially on the plains, but a great place to see lone kudu bulls is from one of the boats during an afternoon cruise, as the bulls nibble off the riverbank foliage.

#### **Boat cruise**

- A boat cruise is an idyllic way to do a safari – and you are guaranteed a vast array of birds and hippos. It's mesmerising to watch and listen to African fish eagles, darters, pied wagtails, yellow-billed storks, spoonbills and so many more.

#### **Fishing**

- The fishing has been good, with many bream and a few tigers brought on board.

#### **Rock art**

- Some of the rock art is just a few steps from the road, so there's no need to hike through thick bush to take in these sacred sites. No guest's visit is complete without appreciating these paintings and early human habitation sites.

#### **Gonarezhou day trip**

- There have been various trips to Gonarezhou this month, with an abundance of game seen both in Malilangwe (particularly rhinos) and in Gonarezhou (particularly elephants). Chilojo Cliffs are a must-see, and another highlight was elephants swimming and crossing the Lundi River.

#### **Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft**

- What can be more important than learning how to survive out in the wilderness, on your own? At Kambako the vanishing bushcraft skills of Shangaan people are demonstrated and guests get a glimpse of skills such as knowing the medicinal uses of plants, divining water, making fire by friction, weaving grasses, trapping food and making clay vessels. Bushcraft is a most fascinating subject.

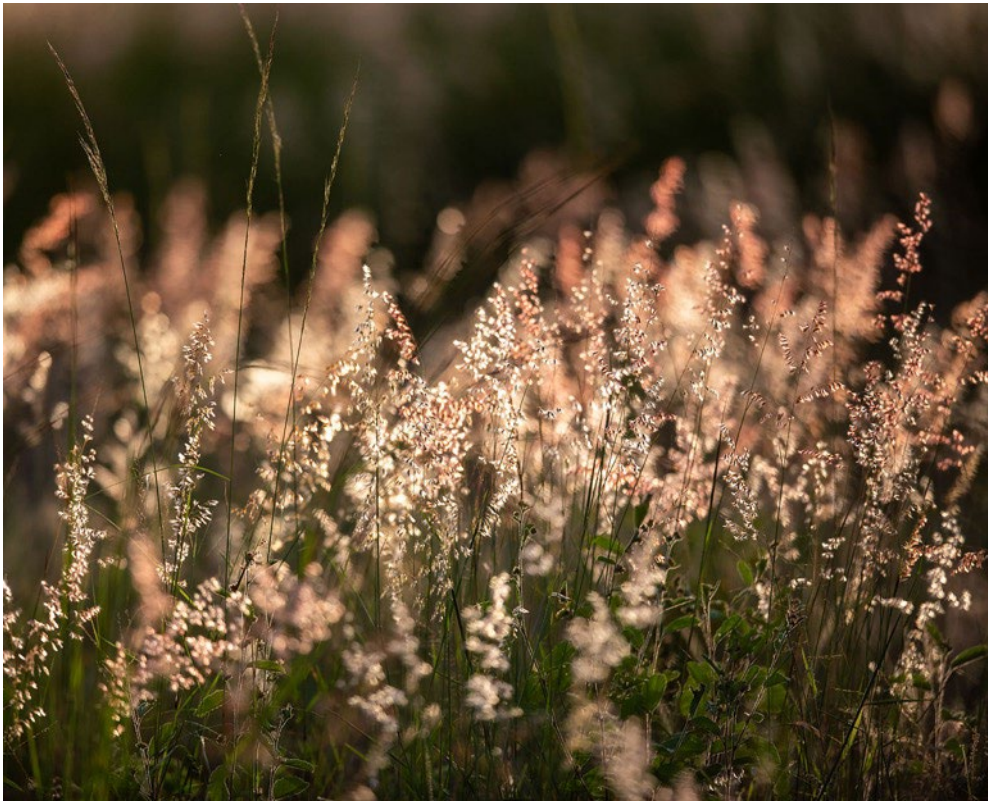
#### **Community visits**

- Singita Pamushana guests often express an interest in the lives of people living in the communities around Malilangwe Reserve and we enjoy taking them to visit a community. This month we've visited a nearby primary school and learnt about their teaching system, syllabus, Malilangwe Trust's feeding scheme, and even enjoyed an exuberant game of soccer with the youngsters.

**Some Bush Stories follow, as well as a February Gallery of images.**



## Grass obsession



I must admit to being mesmerised by this Natal red top grass (*Melinis repens*). It grows in disturbed soil and has velvety red-pink spikelets that fade to white as they mature. When the rising sun backlights them for about an hour each morning, the rose gold beauty is unsurpassed. Every morning, for two weeks, I sat in this field willing an animal to walk through the grass, but nothing did. However, while sitting there I was led to one of the most extraordinary sightings of my guiding career. It's the story that follows...





## A family to feed

While watching nothing more than the light highlight the pink grass I became aware of a bird flying back and forth behind my right side. Giving up on the grass I turned to see what was going on, and realised I had stumbled upon that rare occurrence – a red-billed hornbill (*Tockus erythrorhynchus*) feeding his family.

The male hornbill had an insect in his long red bill, and he landed on the branch of a mopane tree and stuffed the insect into an almost invisible narrow hole in the tree. If I could have seen inside that tree trunk I would have found a naked, captive female hornbill and her chicks!

The behaviour behind this is that the female finds a natural tree hole and seals herself in with mud provided by the male, and strengthened with a mixture of her faeces, nest debris and insect remains. The resultant hard plug prevents any dangerous creature from getting to her or her eggs and chicks. The female lays and incubates her eggs, and depends on the male to feed her during the whole process. She also undergoes a moult during the time she is sealed in, leaving her temporarily featherless. Once the chicks are old enough to accept food she breaks out of the nest and it is re-sealed by the chicks. Then both adults feed the chicks through the slit until they are big enough to break out and fly off on their own.

A few days after this sighting I was sitting at an intersection waiting for a pack of wild dogs to burst through the bush, as they were playing in the area and it was most likely that I would see them from that point. Yet again, while sitting and waiting, I noticed avian activity in another tall mopane tree. It was the same scene once again! It was like these hornbills had won a trolley dash through a supermarket and were allowed to take one item at a time through the checkout. I can tell from the time on my photos that the first hornbill caught and delivered 6 insects in a swift 17 minutes. The second sighting was even faster - 6 insects plus removing faeces from the nest in only 14 minutes!





The array of prey was vast – all kinds of insects and even some snails too. They must have phenomenal eyesight to spot these prey items so quickly, and are able to use their large bills with such dextrous effect.



The first hornbill with a green insect, about to deposit it into the narrow aperture of the plug inside the hole.  
The second hornbill with a protein-packed bug for the hungry chicks inside.







Here “Mr Delivery” has caught a snail, and it was a bit tricky to stuff it through the narrow opening. In this second photo you can see the beak of the female inside claspng the snail in the transfer.







Grasping prey, flying and landing are all a tricky business, but never was there a more determined bird 'to bring home the bacon'. The female lays three to six eggs, so that's a lot of beaks to feed.







In this second photo the male is removing faeces from the nest, that the female has passed to him from inside. It's important to keep the cramped space as clean as possible. He takes the droppings and throws them out.





## A fast feast

We came across this breeding herd of elephants “binging” on grass on the banks of the Chiredzi River. I say binging because it looked like they couldn't stuff the next trunkload of grass into their mouths fast enough. The grass was at its zenith, and the mothers and their calves were fervently foraging and feasting.

Elephants are not fussy eaters and they utilize all parts of vegetation from roots and tubers to stems, bark, twigs, leaves, flowers and fruits. They are hindgut fermenters which allows them to extract more nutrients from fibrous plant materials, but it also means that a significant portion of the food they eat passes through their system undigested.

Elephants do have favourite foods but they are not always about taste as one might assume. Vegetation is abundant during the rainy season, and this month's treats are marula fruits. However, elephants need to maximize their rate of eating food that is easily found, harvested, chewed and digested. Their dexterous trunks allow them to harvest another mouthful of food while the prior one is still being chewed. Handling times are short for trunkloads of soft forbs and green grass, especially now as they don't need to thrash them against their chest or legs to remove senescent material.



Grass is a good source of fibre, protein, and minerals such as calcium and phosphorus. By selecting grass which is not as fibrous as other food types it can be chewed quickly before another mouthful is taken, and this is why it looked like there was a sense of urgency to their feeding behaviour. Adult female elephants have half the body mass of adult males and are not nearly as strong. Bulls can use their strength to push over a tree



and leisurely feed from it, whereas cows need to eat as much as they can, as fast as possible, and with minimum energy expenditure.

It was so satisfying to see these mothers and calves carbo-loading, and a delight to watch how the little ones tried to control their unwieldy trunks and copy the adults.



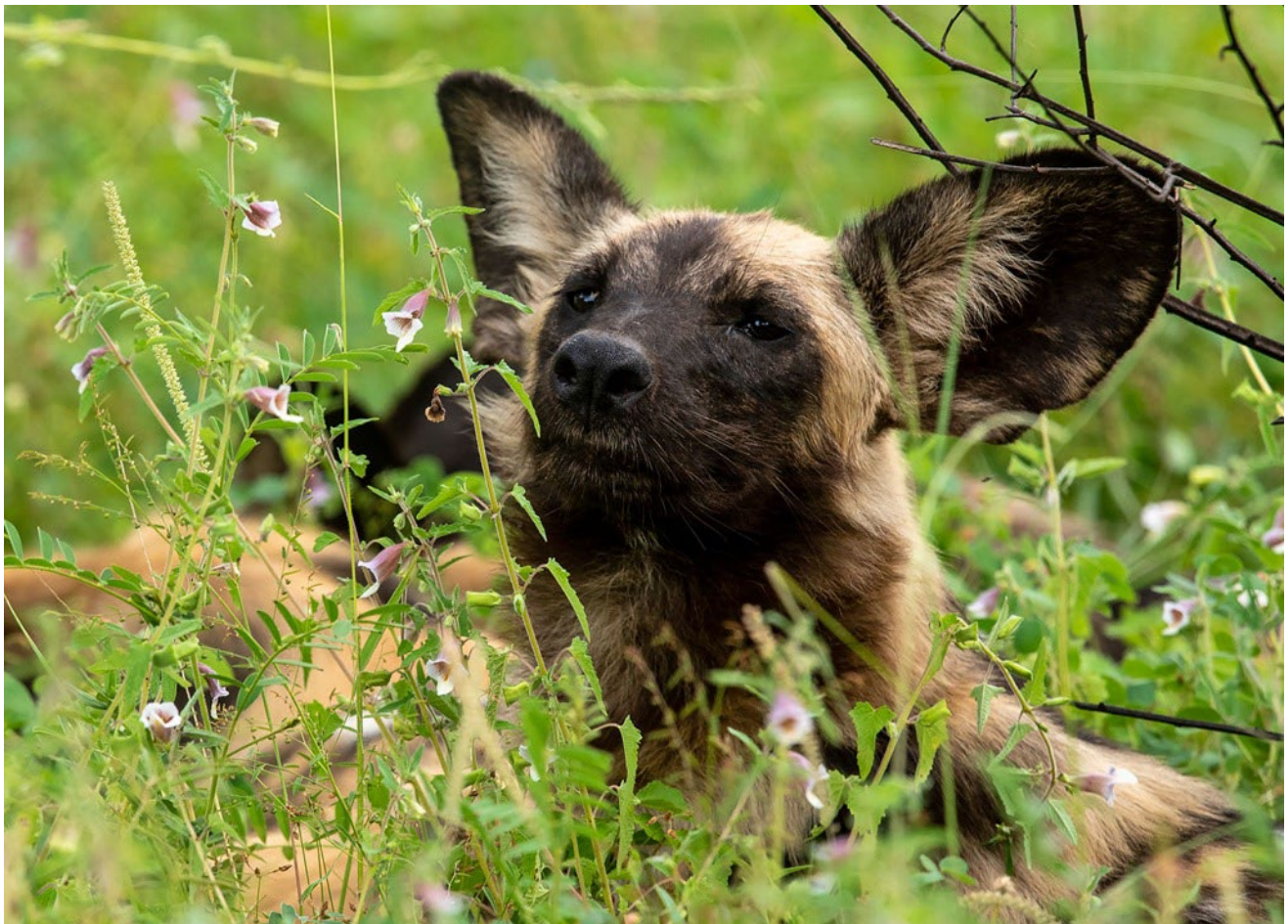


## Sighting of the season

I cannot adequately describe the beauty, the luck, the rarity of this sighting – but I will forever remember it. Getting a call on the radio that an African wild dog pack had been sighted near our workshop in the north of the property. Getting to the area, receiving tip-offs from staff there, and then finding the pack trotting along a road briefly as they were looking for hunting opportunities. But then, as swiftly, they dashed off into the vegetation and disappeared.

Scouting around and determined to relocate them imagine my delight when they decided they were done hunting for the day and settled in a field of foxgloves and ipomoeas among the various grasses. It could not have been more fortuitous or pretty.

These photos can do the talking...













## Twitter

Right: African fish eagle – surveying for fish in the dam below.

Below: African hoopoe – with its crest raised in alarm as its mate flew away.

Below right: Great spotted cuckoo – an intra-African summer migrant. Brood hosts are crows and starlings.







A malachite kingfisher with its catch of the day.  
Not to be outdone a pied kingfisher impressed guests with a bream in its bill, later this month.



## February Gallery



Juvenile oxpeckers are swished off the bloody wound on a buffalo bull's face as he tries to soothe himself. What can be more irritating than two red-billed oxpeckers screeching in your ears as you try to nap?







I'm still always amazed by the dramatic seasons we have in the Zimbabwean lowveld. The above photo of a black rhino taken in February, and the photo below of a black rhino mother and calf was taken in October last year, a week before the rains arrived. Each season holds its own attractions and charms.







A young giraffe calf with a yellow-billed oxpecker in attendance.





Curious impala lambs amid a meadow of flowers.  
Zebras contrasting dramatically against the thorns of a fallen tree.







Lions squabble and feast on a zebra kill.

This two-year-old black rhino with no right ear is known as Kasandra. She is her mother Hanyani's 8<sup>th</sup> calf.







A jackal calls to his partner as dusk falls, before trotting off in the direction of her response.  
A lioness ignoring three rhinos as she searches for her cubs at nightfall.

