

Singita



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

Temperature

Average minimum: 12.2°C (53.96°F)

Average maximum: 26.2°C (79.16°F)

Minimum recorded: 09.0°C (48.2°F)

Maximum recorded: 33.0°C (91.4°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 22 mm

For the season to date: 872.95 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:36

Sunset: 17:13

The golden globe sun is setting on the mountainous horizon and it's with a steep suddenness that the temperature plummets. The lowveld winter has a clear crispness to it. Skies are a deep glassy cobalt and the dry earth depicts expressions of creams, light yellows and dusty browns. Water sources are diminishing, drawing large herds of elephants to unite at the few refuges of water. A splendour to watch as with every step closer to water, the excitement and joy radiates from these huge land mammals. Trumpeting, splashing and squelching fills our ears as we watch with warm hearts and wonder. June is a month of coolness, of shorter days and beautiful sunsets.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for June:

Lions

- The Mhangene pride have barely been seen this month as they have shifted further west in an attempt to avoid the multiple coalitions that are moving around the property.
- The Styx and Nkuhuma males have been seen regularly in the south and central parts of the property. These males look likely to be the successors to the Othawa males' territory on Singita. An altercation occurred between these two males and the Plains Camp males in the central parts of Singita one morning. Whilst brief, the Styx and Nkuhuma males looked to be the victors in the disagreement, driving off the two Plains Camp males.
- The two Plains Camp males have been seen regularly this month and mostly to the north of the river. They too look set in establishing themselves, and their roars can be heard almost every night north of the lodges.

Elephants

- With winter in full swing and the bushveld drying up, water sources have become elephant hot spots. From the far north to the vast south, huge numbers of these animals have been recorded.



Wild dogs

- A pack of wild dogs have been seen regularly in the central and south eastern parts of our property, often hunting around Castleton camp. One particularly exciting morning, the pack spread out, chasing impala through autumnal red bushwillow trees and marula groves. Through the chaos a grey duiker got caught in the wrong place and wrong time, falling victim to the pack.

Leopards

- The Kangela male continues to thrive and independence is almost upon him. He's been seen far less with his mother, exploring the western reaches and parts of the norther bank of the Sand River.
- The Misava male seems to be taking up residence towards the more central areas of Singita, having been seen only a few times this month.
- The Hosana male had a hoisted impala kill next to one of the dams in the north which made for some exciting game viewing. This magnificent male continues to explore the majority of the north, with his territory being the largest of all leopards around Singita.
- The Nyeleti male leopard hasn't been seen as often this month. It does appear that he is starting to lose ground to his younger adversaries. This male was seen at a particularly exciting sighting, where he located the Kangela male leopard, chasing him off a hoisted impala kill, to steal the remains from his son. A thrilling encounter with dramatic cackling and screeching from excited hyena waiting at the base of the tree.



- The Thamba male leopard has been pushing his territory more and more into the southern parts of the Nyeleti male's grounds. His scent marking and sawing has increased with his exploring and could potentially take over this part of the property.
- Although the Scotia female continues to be our most viewed individual, sightings of her have been more elusive this month. With her son now on the brink of independence, her movements have become far more erratic and we expect she could be mating soon.



Photographed by Gareth Poole

Cheetah

- Cheetah are always very exciting to find as they are a rarity in the Sabi Sand and vulnerable globally. A male cheetah was spotted a few times, once hunting warthog. The male was successful in his capture, however a protective warthog mother was close on hand to chase the predator away.

Pangolin

- A very exciting month with two pangolins found on Singita!

Bird List

The bird list for June includes four new bird species, bringing our yearly total to 277 so far. The four birds sighted and added were the African crowned eagle, greater painted-snipe, greater honeyguide and Cape wagtail.



Hukumuri female taking a well-deserved break before heading back to her two cubs. Photo from April 2018.

“There is something about safari life that makes you forget all of your sorrows and feel as if you had just drunk half a bottle of champagne—bubbling over with heartfelt gratitude for being alive” - Karen Blixen

One of the most satisfying feelings of a safari, apart from being out in Nature, enjoying the smells, sounds and beauty all around, is the element of surprise that the wilderness provides.

The anticipation of our guests, energy and excitement is always something special, whether it's their first safari or not. I remember vividly how I felt during my first safari, with my parents and sisters, when we visited le Parc National du Niokolo Koba, in Senegal, in the early 80's. Now I love spending time with Musa, who is a great friend and tracker - when he spots an animal there is a sense of pure joy and excitement. We get to spend more time together during our six weeks work cycle than our respective better halves!

Depending on where we head out on our drives or walks we normally have a good idea of what species we could expect to find depending on the habitat, but there is always a part of luck and, as mentioned before, the element of surprise - good or bad depending of the day. I recall Musa getting a proper fright when he spotted a three metre black mamba basking on the side of the track recently. That can definitely spike the adrenalin levels in your bloodstream!

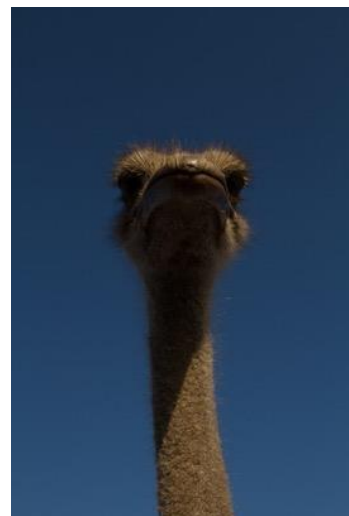
There are a number of animals, some territorial and others with distinctive features, that we get to recognize and, like an old friend, give us joy and happiness when we meet again.

This is a collection of photographs depicting some unmistakable animals:



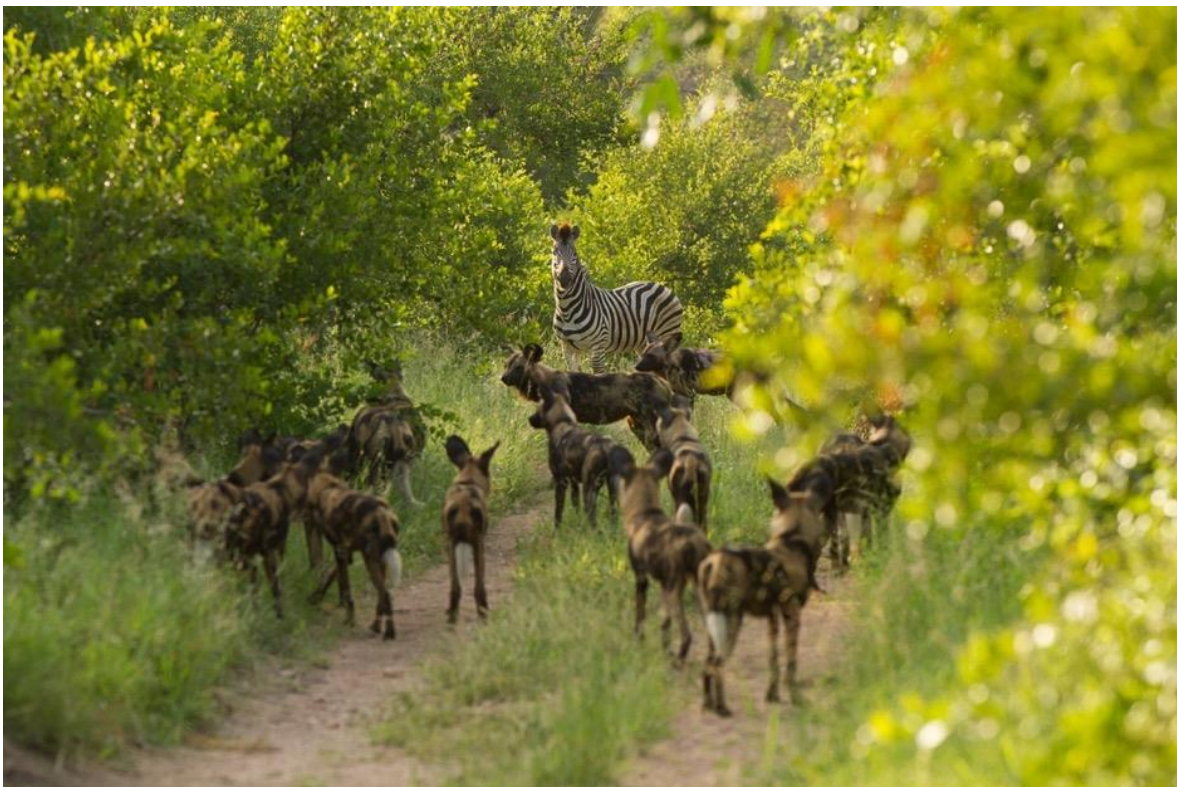
This male kudu was very easy to recognize with only one horn. I'll never forget the day we saw him during a Super Blue Moon in Jan 2018, close to Boulders Lodge. He would often be seen along the Sand River close to Ebony and Boulders Lodges. Sadly he was killed by the Othawa Pride earlier this year.

When we first saw this female ostrich she was north of the Sand River and Mishack jumped out of the tracker seat to have a look at her tracks. He hadn't seen an ostrich in the Sabi Sand in over 15 years! She was on her own for many years and would often walk up to us, in the southern parts of the reserve which has ideal habitat for ostriches. More recently she met a mate and her family has grown which makes it hard to identify her unless she comes up to the vehicle for a close inspection.





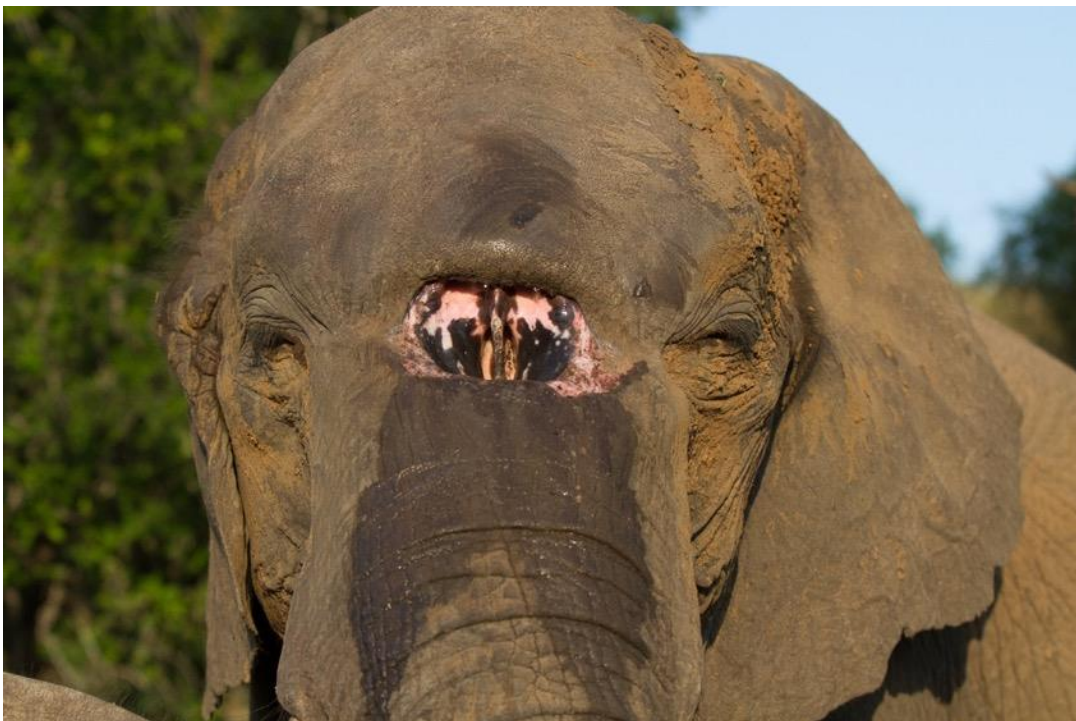
This is the typical colouration of a wild dog tail (left), but the male in the photo (right) has a very distinctive tail that makes him stand out and be easily recognizable. Instead of the white tip of the tail notice the prominent black patch – a unique and easy way to recognize him.



The Othawa pack during the summer of 2020, having a face-off with a zebra. The Othawa pack are currently denning some distance away after losing the alpha female in December 2020 to lions.



The black tail-tip male regurgitating and greeting pups at a den-site, Aug 2019.



A unique and very distinctive feature on this adult elephant cow. She was first seen further north of the Sabi Sand and vets believe it's a congenital condition. She has been treated in the past as the cavity had got infected. We have seen her often this year on Singita, and she has been seen suckling both her calves of different ages.



We have a number of distinctive elephants that we view during the year. They do wander off for a good couple of months, sometimes towards the Kruger National Park.



This female has lost the end of her trunk, a definite handicap as she is missing the two prehensile tips that would allow her to be much more efficient during feeding. But she seems to have managed and overcome! She also has a unique way of drinking where she will squirt water that she has sucked up into her mouth. We can also recognize her as she has two different shaped tusks.



This female has no tusks even though she is fully grown - not common in our region.



The Hukumuri leopard and her female cub on 22 May 2020. We haven't seen either of them since December 2020. The mother could have moved further north east which would explain why we don't see her anymore.

Imagine an ancient animal covered in hard armour-like scales, with long pincer-like claws at the end of strong forearms capable of breaking open the concrete-like fortresses of termite mounds. The pangolin is one of the most unique and elusive creatures. With no teeth, they use their long sticky tongue to collect ants and termites, digesting them in their specially adapted spiny stomachs. A pangolin can digest around 70 million insects a year - talk about pest control! Just like birds, they swallow stones to help with the digestive process in their stomach.

There are eight different types of pangolin in the world, four in Africa and four in Asia.

African species: Black-bellied pangolin (*Phataginus tetradactyla*), white-bellied pangolin (*Phataginus tricuspis*), giant ground pangolin (*Smutsia gigantea*) and Temminck's ground pangolin (*Smutsia temminckii*).

Asian species: Indian pangolin (*Manis crassicaudata*), Philippine pangolin (*Manis culionensis*), Sunda pangolin (*Manis javanica*) and the Chinese pangolin (*Manis pentadactyla*).

Pangolins are extremely rare to see and I was very privileged to see my first ever pangolin this year at Singita.



The earliest fossil for the pangolin dates back shortly after the extinction of the dinosaurs, during the Eocene epoch. Although pangolins are covered in scales, they are actually mammals and use their scales for defence and protection. The ground pangolin's name originates from the Malay word 'pengguling' meaning 'rolling over', referring to its practice of curling up into a ball. When threatened, this terrestrial traveller will quickly curl up, protecting its soft underparts and exposing a virtually impenetrable armoured shell. Any predator would need to watch out for the sharp cutting scales that may catch a muzzle or paw if met between them.

It is heart breaking to think that the tough overlapping scales protecting these extraordinary creatures is what they are captured and killed for. All pangolins in the world are now either vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered. "More than one million pangolins were poached over ten years, with an estimated 195,000 trafficked in 2019 for their scales alone." (WWF). This figure is extremely scary, and it's not only their scales that are being trafficked. Pangolin skin is also used to make leather products and their meat eaten as a delicacy. With these in such high demand, the reality is that it is inevitable that the pangolin species will be brought to the brink of extinction. To make a difference and to find out more, visit the World Wildlife Fund website at: <https://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/save-the-pangolins>.



The spotted hyena is an intelligent carnivore with massive jaws, powerful shoulders and front legs perfectly designed for ripping flesh and crushing bones. Females are noticeably larger than males and are more dominant than males. Only breeding males are tolerated near the dens and higher ranking females rear more cubs than subordinate females. Together though, they take care of the next generation.

Leaving the den-site which is usually a termite mound dug up by an aardvark, hyena may travel up to 70km for food. Hyenas are opportunistic hunters, catching larger prey, and smaller prey such as hares, birds and reptiles. They eat carrion which they detect by smell and the sound of predators feeding or prey alarm calls. Their senses of smell and hearing are acute. Spotted hyena scent mark their territory through smearing a grass stem with a strong smelling liquid that is yellow and turns black over time. This shows how strong hyena are.

Winter in the bush

Article by Joffers McCormick

This year, winter has been a chilly one thus far. During our previous summer we received close on double what our annual rainfall should be therefore the water tables are still fairly high. With the rivers and the dams still looking beautiful as they hold the much-needed water for the fauna and flora, it is something special to have the bush drying up but still having available water sources that make all the difference.

Strangely enough we have had some rainfall in the winter months and this is something that is quite unusual for us but in saying that, it has actually benefited us in the bush from many perspectives. The winter rainfall has kept the Sand River flowing and ensured that the dam water levels do not drop. The biggest impact that the winter rain has had for us is that of “watering” the burnt areas and the fire breaks. By doing these burns it takes away a fair amount of food sources for the various animals and may put some pressure on the specific species but after having these burnt areas receive some rain, they are now flourishing with life, with everything from large herds of buffalo to the ever so graceful impala.



Photographed by Gareth Poole

The mere fact that the burnt areas have gone from a saddened look of despair to having a beautiful blanket of greenery seems to be two worlds apart. One could look at these areas of new growth as a starting point for the circle of life in the bush. The new fresh grass will attract multiple different species such as zebra, buffalo, impala and many more. Due to these prey species being attracted to the fresh vegetation, this then in turn will attract a variety of different predators due to the availability of food sources. A predator will hang around in the area waiting for the right opportunity to pounce and make its move. If it is lucky, it will get a meal and the process will continue. If a predator has successfully made a kill, this will result in scavengers being attracted to the area. Once the carcass is finished and seems to be over, there is still a lot more that will take place to complete the circle. The bones that were not consumed will now start to disintegrate and decompose to fill the soils with valuable nutrients that will then result in lush palatable vegetation. Some species will also practice osteophagy, this is when herbivores will consume bones in order to get a calcium supplement, and without the predators making kills this would not be possible. This can all be related back to where the new vegetation started to grow and create multiple opportunities for the various species. This all also just shows how in tune Nature is and how all of the different aspects fall into place and have a direct impact on one another no matter how big or small.

In the coming months we are in for an adventure and it is going to be interesting to see how the rest of the year develops with the changing environment.

For the longest time in history the Burchell's zebra and the blue wildebeest (gnu) have been known to live together. For more than a thousand game drives under my belt as a guide, in almost all the cases on the safari I'm bound to find them together. The biggest question is Why?



Before diving into their relationship let's get a greater insight on both these animal species and their characteristics. Both these magnificent creatures have behaviours which are so different yet so important for the safety of the other due to the others lack of such a trait.

Burchell's zebra

The Burchell's zebra (*Equus quagga burchellii*) is a stunning animal with unmistakable black and white stripes. This magnificent creature is equipped with vast features which help protect it from enemies both large and small. The stripes work as a camouflage rather known as colour confusion. This is noted when a group of zebras get chased by lions - the stripes confuse the lion and suddenly they lose their targets. The zebras are well equipped with hooves which are strong enough to break a lion's jaw.

Blue wildebeest

Blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*) are a part of the antelope family, even though they have really heavy bodies with bovine features. It is also known as a gnu and got the Afrikaans name Wildebeest from its unappealing looks from its disproportionate head and shaggy mane. They are different from their cousins the black wildebeest mainly by horn shape - the blue have an outward curve and the black have a forward curve. They shouldn't be found in the same area because they can crossbreed.

Zebras and wildebeest have developed a great relationship and can benefit one another. From feeding, the zebra normally feeds on the top parts of the grass or the tall grasses. This allows the wildebeest to easily access their preferred grass which is the short grass. With their compensating features the zebra have great eyesight which helps spot predators from afar, and wildebeest have a great sense of hearing allowing them to hear predators from afar. It means both species have an ally to help warn them of danger. Since they like a more plain open grassy area this makes them more vulnerable and that is why they need the numbers (advantage) for safety from predators.

It is always an interesting sighting to see their great symbiosis which always give an immensely beautiful perspective. When you spot a group of zebras you will have a great chance, almost a guarantee, of seeing wildebeest close by.

Gallery for June

All photographs by Field Guide, Gareth Poole



