

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE
For the month of November, Two Thousand and Twenty-Two

Temperature

Average minimum: 20.6°C (69.0°F)
Minimum recorded: 17.1°C (62.7°F)
Average maximum: 32.3°C (90.1°F)
Maximum recorded: 39.9°C (103.8°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 237.5 mm
*For the year to date: 249.5 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:03
Sunset: 18:22

The heavens opened on 1 November with 48 mm of rain recorded overnight, and throughout the month the landscape has transformed into an emerald paradise. Flying termites are erupting from their mounds like volcanic smoke, little red velvet mites are dancing up a storm, and the cicadas are performing a stridulating serenade. It's a little cooler and a wonderful time to be here and see the new growth and life. There's always an eagerness to see the first impala lambs of the season, and two newborns were spotted on 23 November.

Here's a sightings snapshot for November:

Lions

- **Southern:** Two males from the pride were patrolling between Chiloveka and Hwata, and relaxing at Hwata providing good views for our guests.
- **River:** It was lovely to see nine members of this pride near O2 pan, just relaxing after the rain.
- **Nduna:** Twelve members of this pride have been spending much of their time in the far eastern area of the reserve. At one stage they were feasting on a buffalo that they'd killed in the night.
- An adult male lion was seen on a zebra foal kill, in the central areas.

Leopards

Leopard viewing has been excellent for us this November. Fleeting glimpses are usually the norm, but this month there were several enduring sightings that included:

- Driving back along the Pamushana Access was a young male leopard, lying relaxed in the open area.
- A great sighting of a leopard in a tree, south of Sosigi Dam.
- A young female leopard, seen from the boat, sitting close to a log below Malilangwe House.
- A female leopard walking down Croc Creek near the lodge, on the first drive for guests on their 11th visit in 11 years! This leopard was seen hunting in this region a couple of times. She has a juvenile cub which has been seen along Ultimate Drive just beyond the big baobab.

Rhinos

White: Excellent sightings, as always. Often several white rhinos are seen together, and on multiple times during a drive.

Black: Several enduring sightings of black rhinos were had, including:

- Two black rhinos were lying under a sickle bush tree, south of Banyini.
- Early on morning drive a black rhino came walking up the road towards the vehicle. It had no idea we were there and got a big fright and ran off when it eventually picked up our scent at about 10 metres.
- A mother and sub-adult calf north of Hwata kept our adrenalin pumping by repeatedly mock charging the vehicle, much to the delight of the guests.

Elephants

- The best sightings of breeding herds has been of them swimming and playing in the water, viewed from one of our safari cruise boats. On one occasion there must have been 90 elephants in total, edged along the shoreline.
- The most remarkable sighting of a bull elephant this month was also from a safari cruise boat. The elephant siphoned up water from one side of the narrow river, while a leopard lapped from the other side.

Plains game

- We expect a baby boom in the plains game, now that the green season has arrived.

Photographic hide

- The photographic hide, being underground, is not always accessible during heavy rains, and the animals tend to be more dispersed at this time rather than drawn to it, as pools of drinking water are plentiful.

Wild dogs

- The pack of 12 were seen several times this month, often hunting, and often without much success. But that will change with the arrival of impala lambs. A great sighting was of all 12 walking on the track in front of the safari vehicle, scent marking and sniffing. This went on for a good one kilometre.

Hyena

- Hyenas have been seen patrolling all over, and they are especially fond of wallowing in the scattered muddy pools on hot days.

Buffalo

- A herd of well over 1 000 were seen!

Unusual sightings

- There was the biggest sighting of dung beetles rolling dung balls along the road that our Head Guide had ever seen in his life.
- Quality time was spent with a family group of dwarf mongooses.
- Spotted in the spotlight on night drive was a very good sighting of a honey badger.

Walks

- It's a lovely time to walk, be it to see the smaller creatures and plants, track some of the bigger animals which is easier in the wet substrate when muddy footprints are clearly seen, view the rock art in the caves, connect with Nature by stopping to meditate in a tranquil wilderness setting, or going to give a baobab a bear-hug.

Boat cruise

- The safari sundowner boat cruises are so enjoyable and relaxing. Guaranteed is excellent birding and seeing the water-dwelling animals, and often these excursions are peppered with wonderful wildlife sightings on the shores.

Fishing

- The bite is back on – especially as the winged alates are flying above or flailing on the surface, attracting the snappy tigers and hungry tilapia.

Birds

- Particularly remarkable avian sightings this month were of a pair of osprey, pair of Verreaux's eagles, crowned eagle, regular morph and the dark morph tawny eagles perched together, a bateleur eagle eating leftover placenta from an impala that had given birth, spurwing goose, squacco heron, black-crowned night heron, green-backed heron's nest with two blue eggs in it, racket-tailed roller, and Narina trogon.

Gonarezhou day trip

- Guests had a splendid time on day trips to neighbouring Gonarezhou National Park, particularly enjoying the vast scenery, elephant herds, plains game and the ever-majestic Chilojo Cliffs.

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

Pups at play

The wild dog pack of 12, which includes the four pups, are doing well and should continue to thrive now that the new season's impala lambs are abundant. Spending a whole afternoon with them has to be one of life's greatest privileges, and when this takes place in open terrain with golden backlight it presents one of life's greatest problems, "Which photos do I select for this journal out, of more than 350 images?" I narrowed it down to 16 of the pack and handed the problem of the pups over to Facebook, asking friends to choose their favourites. What's really interesting in processing and studying the final selection is the smaller details that you miss at the sighting due to their speed and camouflage. A few observations accompany the photos:



Here the adults engage in a pre-hunt ritual of bonding, rallying and generating excitement - tails are up, heads are low with much nuzzling and soft biting around the face, and notice the submissive urination of this dog in the front. He hasn't lifted his leg and is letting the other know he is excited but also submissive to the other's rank. Another of the dogs is defecating in the pack's midst - and it doesn't move off! The dogs will even roll in each other's

urine and excrement! The reason is that one combined common scent gives these canines a sense of closeness with each other and helps in establishing a strong bond between the members of the pack. (When tracking wild dogs you can often smell them before you see them!)

The pups run in to join the pre-hunt ritual - notice how low to the ground they go, almost crawling along in the most submissive and deferential way. Being a member of a pack and respectful of rank is crucial to each dog's survival.







The pups played and played before the whole pack grouped together and trotted off at dusk on a hunting foray. The most beautiful backlight rimmed their little long-limbed bodies in gold and the dust glittered in the shafts of light.

The one pup who appears in every photo that contains pups in this journal was a female – slightly bigger than her brothers and with more white markings. She was the instigator of all fun, games and teasing. She has a beige saddle on the left hand side of her back, some white markings on the other side, distinctive “J” marking on her right rear leg and a propeller pattern on her front right leg. See if you can spot this mischief-maker...

Before they left the pups walked right up to the vehicle and had a good look at the entire package with a heartbeat rhythm of curiosity and indifference, bravery and vulnerability.



On closer inspection



This was an exhilarating and unexpected sighting as it took place at about 09:45 on a hot morning and one usually hopes to see black rhinos at dawn or dusk when they are more active. But this mother rhino had chosen to sleep under a tree near a roadside and neither of us expected the other to be there. Driving along I registered a commotion out of the corner of my eye as she jumped up with her little calf. I stopped immediately and silently grabbed my camera with 400mm fixed lens. My internal dialog was hoping and pleading; “Would she come? Please come over. Please don’t run away!” She ran forward with her calf. Then stood still contemplating us. The signs were good! I could tell she was more curious than scared. She stalked forward confidently, then made a little rush and bluff. Then she edged closer, one step at a time, rocking back and forth, sniffing, looking, thinking. Almost touching the front of the vehicle on closer inspection. Then she would spin around and canter off, only to stop and repeat the whole process. She did this several times and I had to use my back-up camera and smaller lens to fit her into frame, also quickly taking a cellphone video of her too. It was such an incredible encounter with a critically endangered animal that is extremely curious, sensitive and anxious.

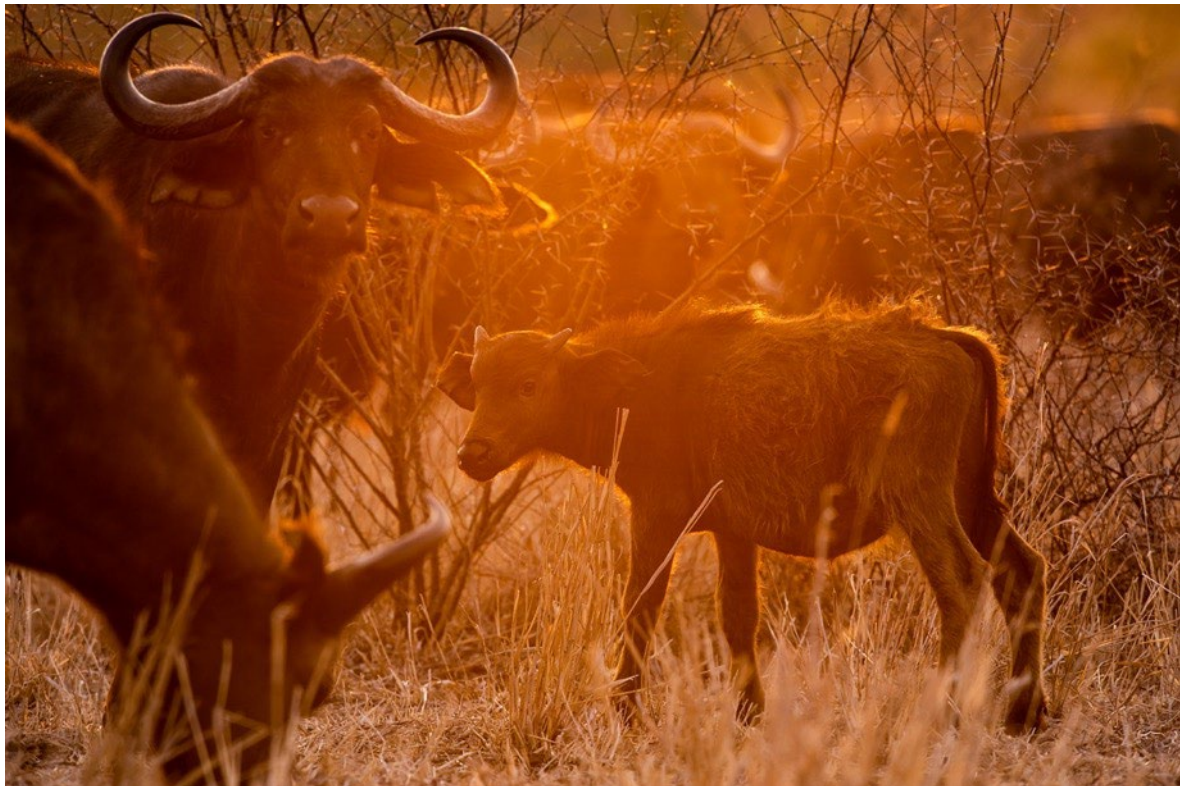
On closer inspection of the footage and photos The Malilangwe Trust’s researchers confirmed that it was a cow called ‘Manyuchi’, being a founder animal of the rhino conservation programme, and that her calf was a male, born in Dec 2021. This is the sixth calf she has had.

Rhino conservation is complex to manage. Understanding the dynamics of rhino populations is key, and each rhino’s movements, behaviour and, for the females, reproductive success is monitored. Over 20 years of detailed records have been kept and are used in the scientific management of the black and white rhino populations.



Backlit buffalo

The collective sigh of relief could be heard on buffalo bellows as the new season's rain arrived this month.



Family gathering



An incredible sighting from the safari cruise boat this month was a scene stretched across the shoreline of about 90 elephants swimming, drinking, mud bathing, sand bathing, feeding and interacting with one another as breeding herds do.



Picking fights

A bull white rhino arrived at the pan with a few oxpeckers riding shotgun. He had obviously had a skirmish with another male and had a few tell-tale wounds on his face inflicted by the horn of his adversary. The oxpeckers were feasting on the blood of the wounds, the little scabs and parasites. The rhino was getting annoyed. He wanted to have a peaceful drink without their sharp beaks and scratchy claws irritating him. They would not let up. Every now and again they even had the audacity to hang upside down from his muzzle and sip the water.

He started to shake his head to unseat them. They persisted. Then he got really annoyed and began splashing and stamping. You could almost see the birds realising they'd pushed him too far. Thereafter each time he took a sip he caused a mini tsunami for the oxpeckers and all they could do was hold on for dear life!

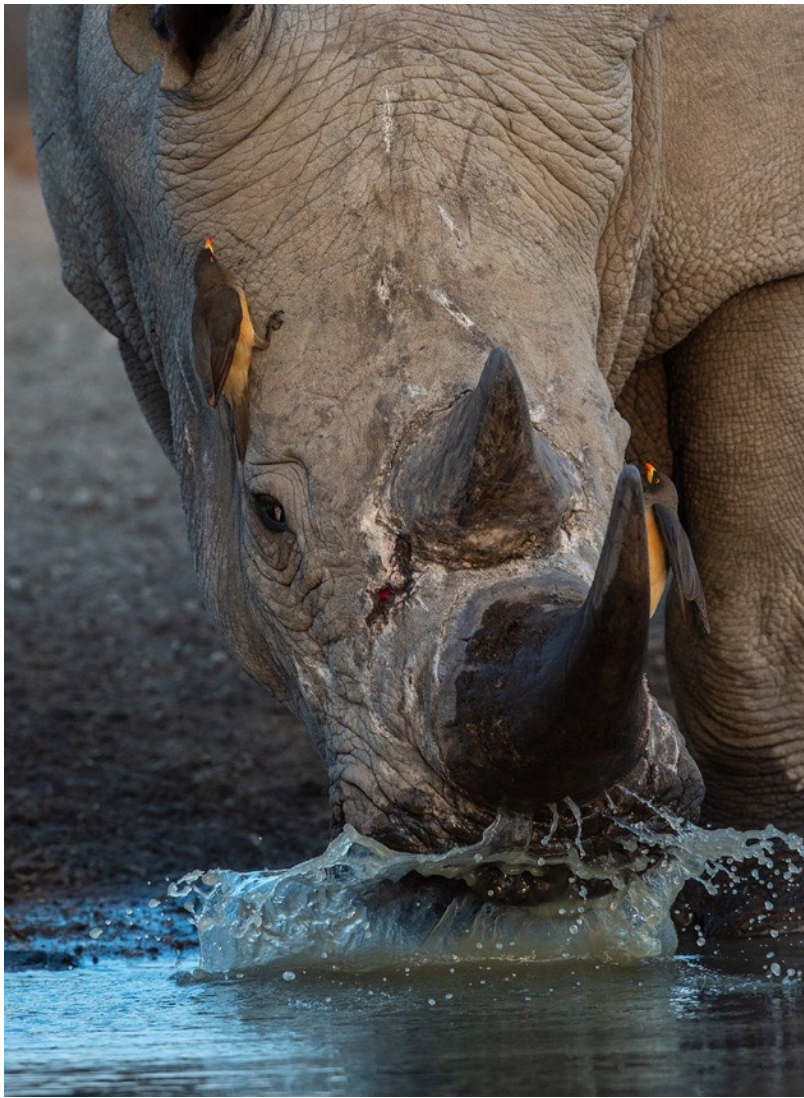
Some time after he left with his entourage another bull white rhino arrived, and his facial wounds were even more severe. He must have been the adversary and he had come off second best. But he was planning revenge! He spent most of the time filing and sharpening his horn by sanding it in the gritty mud.

Bull rhinos fight for territorial dominance and mating rights to the females within that territory. While most altercations are settled with a few scars the fights can lead to the death. If a rhino stabs another with his horn, in the body, it can cause fatal internal injuries.



Above: The rhino tries to drink in peace. Below: The oxpeckers get the message that trouble is brewing.





Left: The oxpeckers concentrate on clinging on and keeping dry.

Below: The adversary prepares for a revenge match by vigorously sharpening his horn in the abrasive mud.



There's gold in them there hills



It is such a thrill when you catch something out of the corner of your eye, and it turns out to be an epic sighting. Trundling along towards Nduna Dam in pursuit of black rhinos very early one overcast morning, I spotted these nuggets of gold on top of the colourful cliffs. Having seen the pride the night before at the water's edge I didn't expect them to be this far away and on top of a ridge. They presented the perfect opportunity to photograph them in their landscape showing how their golden coats contrasted against the lichen-rich rocks, but also blended in perfectly where the sandstone colours held court.



Amphibians, reptiles and rain

Article and photos by Kurt van Wyk

Kurt van Wyk is an MSc student from the University of the Western Cape, with experience in both entomology and herpetology. Passionate about overlooked creatures, his research on the Malilangwe Reserve focuses on understanding how reptiles respond to changes in habitat structure, while documenting the frog and reptile species that occur in the region.

In a water-limited landscape, rain brings relief from the harsh dry season. Almost immediately, the bush snaps back into action with new creatures emerging against a backdrop of fresh green. Otherwise secretive, frogs fill the evening air with their calls. Of the 25 species recorded on Malilangwe, two have a particularly interesting relationship with rainfall.

The edible bullfrog (so-called because they are a delicacy in some parts of their range) spends ten months of the year buried underground in a cocoon formed from layers of old skin, which reduces water loss

considerably. After the first heavy rains of the season, the bullfrogs emerge simultaneously and form breeding aggregations at the deeper pans. These aggregations are noisy but generally peaceful, with mating taking place in open water. The tadpoles form dense swarms that are protected by their fathers, who ensure that their offspring do not become trapped in drying sections of the pan. Once metamorphosis is complete, the frogs disperse to feed before burying themselves once again.

The brown-backed tree frog is another amphibian whose activity strongly depends on rain, but with a bit more flexibility than the bullfrog. Despite being a "tree frog", this species also spends much of the year underground. After heavy rain, males emerge and spread out evenly in shrubs around dams and pans, perching at about chest height. Should one male encroach on another's space, intense fighting ensues. From their elevated position, the males announce their strange, quacking call to the females below. As their habitat is prone to quickly evaporating, the female brown-backed tree frog deposits her eggs in a shallow burrow beneath grass or leaf litter at the water's edge. The tadpoles complete most of their development within the eggs. When the next rain falls and moistens the eggs, the tadpoles emerge immediately and wriggle into the freshly refilled pan. Thanks to their head start underground, they develop into tiny frogs fairly quickly. This ability to capitalise on briefly available water means the species can continue to breed where other species would quickly dry out.

Reptiles also rejoice in the arrival of the wet season. Swarms of winged termites floating up from the wet earth conjure a classic bushveld image. These termites are food for a plethora of predators, such as sandveld lizards. Otherwise secretive, these lightning fast reptiles have recently been observed waiting in front of termite burrows, gorging themselves on the seemingly endless stream of insects.



Edible bullfrog (*Pyxicephalus edulis*)



Brown-backed tree frog (*Leptopelis mossambicus*)



Ornate sandveld lizard (*Nucras ornata*)

Twitter

This bird is as secretive and vexing as its common name: Narina trogon (*Apaloderma narina*). The name commemorates Narina, mistress of French ornithologist François Levaillant, whose name he derived from a Khoikhoi word for "flower", as her given name was too difficult for him to pronounce!

I did not take this flattering photo as I, after all these years, have still not seen one. I live in hope.

Photo by Scott Wenham.

Below an abundant flock of helmeted guineafowl (*Numida meleagris*) gather at dawn to wet their whistles.



November Gallery



A klipspringer surveys the scene, with her mate nearby, while a vervet monkey ponders life's complexities from atop a termite mound.





Bare trees are so arrestingly beautiful, especially against a patterned sky.
By the end of the month all these trees were once again covered in new green leaves.





This rock monitor crawled out of a hole in the ground and quickly moved off. They sleep in burrows of all sorts such as hollow trees, termite mounds and rock cracks. Just look at how absolutely flat its head is! It's likely that the head structure has something to do with optimising their bite force. They have been recorded eating just about everything including tortoises, but despite their large size they tend to favour crunchy invertebrates such as millipedes, snails, beetles, grasshoppers and scorpions.



A high ISO and slow shutter speeds reveal double-banded sandgrouse drinking alongside white rhinos, and a youngster sporting a tide mark after lying down in the shallow water

All stories and photographs by Jenny Hishin, unless otherwise indicated.