

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT

SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE

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

Temperature

Average minimum: 17.6°C (63.6°F)

Minimum recorded: 11.0°C (51.8°F)

Average maximum: 32.2°C (89.9°F)

Maximum recorded: 42.1°C (107.7°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 19 mm

Season to date: 19 mm

*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:32

Sunset: 17:32

There are pockets on the reserve where the air is delicious with the candied, slightly earthy fragrance of *Coffea racemosa* flowers, permeating the dry, rugged landscape. The heat is often intense, with temperatures soaring, yet there have been one or two days when cold air and light rains break through, offering a respite. Around the waterholes and dams the predator activity has been frequent, with the constant, tense anticipation of an easy meal.

A sightings snapshot for September follows:

Lions

- Southern Pride: The pride was scattered at the start of the month. We first saw two males and one female, and one of the males was mating with the lioness. Then after much vocalising they found

other members of the pride. Five members (three males and two females) killed a buffalo bull in the Mahande area and feasted on that for a couple of days.

- Nduna Pride: Five Nduna lions (two males and three females) also made swift work of a young buffalo.
- River/Hippo Pride: Great news revealed near month end was that this pride have another set of cubs. Eleven lions were viewed at the swamps, consisting of two males, four females and two sets of cubs. It was such a joy to see the cubs suckling and playing.

Leopards

Two of the highlights this month are of leopards seen up trees:

- Assistant Head Guide, Tengwe Siabwanda, heard a leopard calling whilst waiting for his guests at the coffee station that overlooks the dam. Scanning with binoculars he spotted a large male leopard marking territory along the shoreline below. With his guests gathered he quickly drove to the harbour and jumped into one of the cruising boats. They spotted the leopard still marking his territory, but then he disappeared into the thick bush. A few minutes later they heard noise coming from the bush and saw five lions chasing the leopard! Luckily the leopard managed to climb up to the top of a false marula tree. One of the lionesses climbed up halfway but failed to reach the leopard, and some of the lions lay down below the tree. Fortunately the other guests could also stop their game drive and come out on the other boats to see the scene, which lasted for over an hour, before the lions lost interest and moved off, and the leopard executed his escape plan.
- A female leopard was seen up a tree at Croc Creek, possibly scanning the area for danger or hunting opportunities.

Far more secretive for both the leopard and the viewers was this sighting:

- A very wary female leopard had killed an impala one morning and left a drag mark near the banks of the Chiredzi River. The leopard was not on site so Head Guide, Brad Fouché, put up a camera trap nearby focusing on the impala carcass. By that afternoon when they returned to the site the leopard had not been back. But the next morning they checked again and found three photos of her. Hopefully this leopard will become less skittish over time and we can eventually view her in person.

Wild dogs

- The pack with seven pups was seen near Nduna, resting in the shade one morning. Then the pups decided it was playtime and started their sports much to the delight of all. That afternoon they were still there, so again guests got to witness them relaxing, then rallying for a hunt, then disappearing into the sunset.
- On one occasion the adults left the seven pups on their own right on the main Binya Road as they hunted nearby. It was terrifying when suddenly a hyena appeared and started circling them. Then the hyena chased them and the pups ran for their lives up the road where, thankfully, they were joined by the adults. The hyena gave up its chase and the adults led the pups away.
- A fascinating experience was being with the pack when nine of the adults, with the seven pups, were contact calling for the two missing adults. Such eerie hooting calls.
- The pack lost an impala kill to a clan of ten hyenas that descended on them from every direction, and they had to concede the loss.



Hyenas

Notable hyena highlights include:

- Seeing three hyenas escort a female leopard along the road at Croc Creek.
- Two hyenas stashing parts of a wildebeest in the muddy waters of Banyini Pan.
- Seeing seven hyenas fighting over a kudu kill, while on a walk.

Rhinos

- White rhinos: Because of the extremely dry conditions at the moment we are seeing record numbers of rhinos together as they congregate at the permanent waterpoints to drink. We've also witnessed fighting between two bulls.
- Black rhinos: There've been some epic sightings of black rhinos, particularly in family groups. The most was four of them drinking together on the shoreline of the dam. There has also been a black rhino drinking at the little pan at the base of Pamushana hill.

Elephants

- There have been bulls dotted all over the reserve, including one of our favourite big tuskers, Mapunzawiya.
- The breeding herds have joined in on feeding on the fallen acacia pods.
- A breeding herd has also been drinking at the little pan at the base of the Pamushana hill, and it has been a delight to be detained by this road block while watching the little ones play.

Buffalos

- The water sources are churned to mud after vast herds congregate to drink and cool down. The biggest congregation must have been a herd of about 600 buffalo drinking at Banyini Pan.

Plains game

- It's the best time of the year to look for the more reclusive antelope such as sable, Lichtenstein's hartebeest and eland. Good sightings have been had.

Unusual sightings

- A highlight this month was discovering a Verreaux's eagle eating a dassie/hyrax at the base of a hill.

Boat cruise

- The ultimate way to relax and unwind – just cruising along, sipping a sundowner, and drinking in the wild splendour while watching the birds, hippos and crocs. Making the cruises extra special were five lions that spent a lot of time on the shoreline this month. Also, a breeding herd of elephants drinking from the dam - they weren't disturbed by the boat at all and guests could take stunning photos with their phones.

Fishing

- The tigers are biting! Fishing has been very good this month and quite a few fish have been landed. Distractions have included an elephant herd drinking and a leopard on the shoreline.

Photographic hide

- The hide is at its zenith right now. This will change when the rains come. We've had bull elephants visit, buffalo and white rhino drinking together. There was one afternoon that attracted multiple white rhinos, six wild dogs, two lions, an elephant bull, and five buffalo bulls. A morning session resulted in multiple white rhinos, zebras, kudu bulls and cows, two herds of wildebeest, herds of impala, eland, a jackal, a slender mongoose and a sable bull. In addition 22 species of birds were seen, the highlight being a secretarybird.

Walks & rock art

- It is also the best time of year to walk because the low vegetation gives high visibility. Exploring can be done and new areas accessed. One group of guests was particularly keen on seeing lions and spent several mornings tracking them on foot, before viewing them safely. Some of these walks lasted for about three hours, and other animals, such as rhinos, were seen on the way.

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

The ammo is in the camo

There are some incredible examples of camouflage to be seen (or not) at the moment while the terrain is so dry and barren. Remaining inconspicuous is such a clever evolutionary strategy to evade predators or ambush prey.

Had the crowned lapwing (*Vanellus coronatus*) not been sitting on the eggs at the time, we would never have known they were there. These birds lay their eggs on open ground, often in gravelly or sandy areas. The three eggs were speckled with various shades of brown, grey, and black, mimicking the appearance of the ground, grass, seeds, bark and burnt grass tufts. This cryptic coloration protects the eggs from predators by making them almost indistinguishable from the terrain, significantly increasing their chances of survival. Egg-laying is timed to precede the rainy season and most incubating is done by the female. In addition to this crowned lapwings have been known to do false-brooding and other distraction displays to lure terrestrial predators away from the nest.



We heard the chirruping of a busy family of dwarf mongooses (*Helogale parvula*) before spotting them. Their fur is a reddish-brown or greyish colour, which blends well with the dry grasses and sandy soils of their habitat. This coloration serves as a form of background matching camouflage, allowing them to remain inconspicuous while foraging or resting. It was amazing to notice that even their noses matched the colour of the dried mopane leaves. Camouflage is particularly important for dwarf mongooses because they are diurnal and spend much of their time out in the open, searching for insects, small reptiles, and other prey. While foraging they are vulnerable to predators, such as birds of prey, snakes, and larger mammals, so blending into their environment is crucial for minimizing the risk of detection.



African wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*), with their mottled coats of black, brown, white, and gold, use a different type of camouflage. Their unique fur patterns help them blend into the dappled light of the bush and woodland areas where they hunt. This form of disruptive coloration breaks up their outline, making it harder for both prey and predators to distinguish individual dogs from their surroundings, especially when

they are in motion. The wild dog in this photograph had finished a successful hunt that morning. Standing out in the open amid the rocks, dark soil and dried grass it was almost indistinguishable from the background.



One of the most recognized examples of camouflage is the lion (*Panthera leo*). Although not as striking as the patterns of other animals, the lion's tawny coat provides excellent camouflage in the savannas and grasslands area of Malilangwe. Their coat colour blends seamlessly with the dry grasses, particularly now during the dry season when vegetation is sparse and yellowish. This disguise allows lions to approach their prey stealthily, remaining undetected until they are close enough to attack with a short burst of speed.



A daytrip to Gonarezhou National Park

We set out to explore Gonarezhou National Park with Head Guide, Brad Fouché.

We'd barely got going from our dawn meeting point on the Malilangwe Reserve (where Singita Pamushana is situated) when we spotted a black rhino mother and her calf. Both animals were overcome with curiosity and came right up to the vehicle to inspect us – an incredible sighting and great start to the day.



When we got to the gate of Gonarezhou, our southern neighbour, we decided to keep a bird list for the day of all species seen within the Park. Little did we know that we'd exit that afternoon with a fantastic tally of 92 species observed! Here it is:

Egyptian goose
Spur-winged goose
Helmeted guineafowl
Natal spurfowl
Swainson's spurfowl
Cape turtle (ring-necked) dove
Laughing dove
Emerald-spotted wood dove
Namaqua dove
Kori bustard
Grey go-away-bird
Senegal coucal
Water thick-knee
Black-winged stilt
Three-banded plover
Blacksmith lapwing
White-crowned lapwing
Crowned lapwing
African jacana
African skimmer
African openbill
Saddle-billed stork
Marabou stork
Yellow-billed stork
African darter
Reed cormorant
Hamerkop
Little egret (western)
Western cattle egret
Great egret
Yellow-billed egret
Grey heron

Goliath heron
Hadedia ibis
African spoonbill
African harrier-hawk
Hooded vulture
White-backed vulture
Bateleur
Brown snake eagle
Martial eagle
Tawny eagle
African hawk-eagle
Speckled mousebird
Green wood-hoopoe
Southern ground hornbill
African grey hornbill
Southern yellow-billed hornbill
Southern red-billed hornbill
Malachite kingfisher
Giant kingfisher
Pied kingfisher
White-fronted bee-eater
Lilac-breasted roller
Crested barbet
Bennett's woodpecker
Brown-headed parrot
Chinspot batis
White-crested helmetshrike
Black-backed puffback
Black-crowned tchagra
Brown-crowned tchagra
Tropical boubou

Fork-tailed drongo
Magpie shrike
Flappet lark
Long-billed crombec
Tawny-flanked prinia
Rattling cisticola
Zitting cisticola
Wire-tailed swallow
Dark-capped bulbul
Southern yellow white-eye
Arrow-marked babbler
Red-winged starling
Meves's starling
Greater blue-eared starling
Bearded scrub robin
Capped wheatear
Scarlet-chested sunbird
White-bellied sunbird
Red-billed buffalo weaver
Red-headed weaver
Spectacled weaver
Village weaver
Blue waxbill
Green-winged pytilia
Jameson's firefinch
Southern grey-headed sparrow
African pied wagtail
Golden-breasted bunting
Cinnamon-breasted bunting

African skimmers, spur-winged geese, Egyptian goose, giant kingfisher...



Kori bustard, Namaqua dove...



With over 5 000 kilometres of pristine wilderness Gonarezhou is home to over 450 species of birds, making it a prime birdwatching destination. The varied habitats, including riverine forests, mopane woodlands, and open savannas, attract a diverse array of birds including many raptors. The Runde and Save Rivers create ideal environments for waterfowl, waders, and other aquatic species.

Gonaz, as we affectionately call our neighbours, has a rich biodiversity and is a vast peaceful wilderness. Most of our daytrips aim to arrive at Chilojo Cliffs for a picnic lunch, however there is so much more to see and it's lovely to potter around and take the time to see the smaller wonders – like the little birds bathing in the pool of an elephant's footprint.

Dark-capped bulbuls and a female red-headed weaver bathe in the pond left by an elephant's footprint.



Red-headed weaver (see the male far left), dark-capped bulbuls and southern grey-headed sparrows cool down in the heat of the day. Temperatures can reach over 40°C (104°F) at midday.



No trip to Gonaz is complete without seeing elephants. It is extremely dry at this time, and there is not a lot of food about, so breeding herds of elephants can be seen along the river banks where they are trying to survive off the scarce nutrients.



What we didn't expect to see, and it was such a bonus, was a honey badger! The busy mustelid was snuffling around on a termite mound before swiftly scampering off into the undergrowth. I barely had time to grab my camera and fire off this shot.



Honey badgers have fearless and tenacious natures, making them one of the most formidable animals despite their relatively small size. Their character is often described as bold and aggressive - they will fiercely defend themselves against much larger animals, such as lions or leopards, and have an extraordinary appetite for challenging prey. Fortunately this one had no truck with us or our game viewer! Honey badgers are incredibly resourceful and clever and are known for their ability to adapt to various environments, from deserts to forests.

What a brilliant day we had birding and badgering! We offer daytrips into the Gonarezhou National Park to all our Singita Pamushana guests.

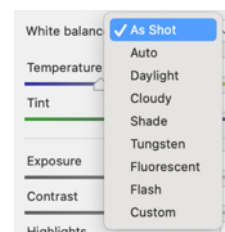
Wildlife photography at sunrise

The airstrip is a great place to be just before sunrise. It's right in the centre of the reserve, and close to the Banyini which is also an open area and has a well-frequented waterhole. Upon arriving at the airstrip I always switch off the vehicle and spend a while listening carefully to the sounds, many of which are amplified off the sandstone ridge to the north. If there are lions roaring, or a leopard sawing, hyenas whooping or wild dogs hoo-calling then you can get a good idea of the sound's direction and follow up in that way. I also always scan the airstrip with binoculars, especially if there's 'nothing' there. Plains game choose to spend the night on the airstrip as it's open and they have a better chance of spotting predators approaching, but it's also a favourite place for predators to lurk on the periphery and ambush prey.

On this morning there was a herd of wildebeest that had spent an uneventful night on the airstrip, and they were just starting to amble off to graze, kicking up dust as they went. While I was still keeping an ear out for any sounds, the wildebeest, not known for their incredible good looks, provided a creative opportunity to work with the rising sun, backlight and creeping colour.

For these photographs I used the Manual setting on my camera, because Auto would have tried to negotiate an average exposure for the dark twilight foreground and bright sunrise background resulting in the wildebeest still being too dark, too much colour detail in the sky and a grainy high ISO. I wanted the wildebeest correctly exposed to see the detail on their coats, and the sunrise slightly blown out but still giving off colour warmth.

Then in post-production in Photoshop I had some fun by adjusting the white balance. White balance is the adjustment of a digital photograph to make its colours appear more realistic. It's a way to set a photograph to neutral, to make the whites look white. When you shoot in RAW each photographic file contain a high amount of detail. (JPEGs compress details into a much smaller file size with less space to store image data.) The white balance options you can choose from are: As Shot, Auto, Daylight, Cloudy, Shade, Tungsten, Fluorescent, Flash and Custom.



Here are the results from manipulating the white balance, and a few other options such as increasing or reducing shadows and highlights, and pushing or pulling vibrance: The first photo is with the white balance as As Shot, the second with Fluorescent and the third with Shade plus Vibrance reduced by 50%.



White balance - As Shot



White balance - Flourescent



White balance - Shade plus Vibrance reduced by 50%.

Eat, drink, rest

We got an excited call from our Lion Tracking Team to say there were lions drinking at Hwata Pan. We were quite far away but we high-tailed it there hoping to catch them. Fortunately one male, not yet a territorial male but a full-grown adult, was still drinking, while the lionesses had retired to the shade nearby. A pride drinking is a far more calm and civilised affair than when they're on a kill bullying and bickering with one another for the best access to the meat. Drinking after eating helps the digestion and absorption of food.



This pride must have been feeding on a large kill some way off, probably a buffalo, because they were as full as ticks. They can feast on up to 15% of their body weight, and this male lion had certainly had his maximum quota – which would have been about 35 kg (77 lbs) of meat.



Twitter



An evangelistic fork-tailed drongo on a pulpit amid a cathedral arch of trees with stained glass colours.
A rare look into the gape of a tawny eagle. A juvenile dark chanting goshawk rests on one leg.





A white rhino calf, accompanied by red-billed oxpeckers, arrives at the waterhole.
A white rhino cow with an incredibly long and sharp horn, casts an imposing reflection.





A female nyala (left) feeds alongside a female bushbuck (right) on the banks of the Chiredzi River.
A majestic baobab, dotted by the moon, amid the metallic dry season palette.





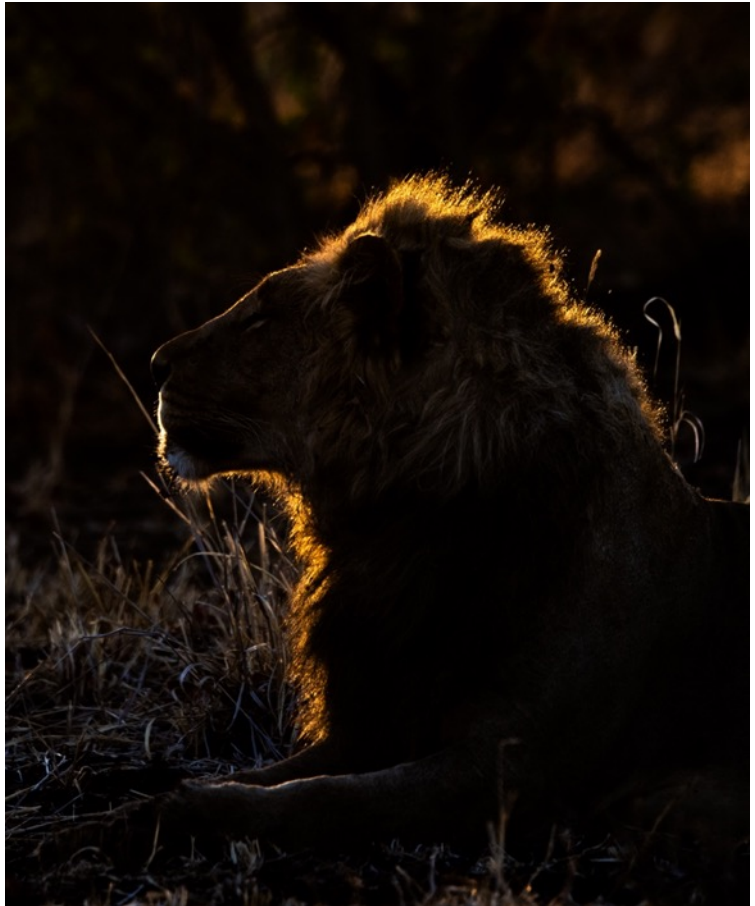
Zebras and giraffe gather to drink, and in doing so showcase just how tall a giraffe is!





A nugget of lioness catches the last light of day atop a warm rocky outcrop.

The very first rays of sunshine rim light this lion, then backlight him and a powerful pride lioness.



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