

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT
SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE
For the month of July, Two Thousand and Twenty-Five

Temperature

Average minimum: 12.5°C (54.5°F)
Minimum recorded: 08.3°C (46.9°F)
Average maximum: 26.5°C (79.7°F)
Maximum recorded: 32.2°C (89.9°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0.5 mm
Season to date: 715 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:25
Sunset: 17:35

Many of our guests this month have been first time safari goers, and it's such a joy to be able to show visitors their very first wild lion or rhino – or whatever their personal favourite and wish is. June is one of the best months to visit in terms of wildlife sightings as the bush is dry and sparse which makes visibility that much better. On several occasions this month we've seen three or more species gathered around a waterhole – such as the scene at Banyini Pan where there was a crash of five white rhinos, three adult bull buffalos and a lone hyena all sharing the same space, but slightly apart from one another. An additional advantage of the dry sparse months is that it means we can conduct bush walks, which are always such a special way to appreciate the wilderness and immerse yourself in it.

Here's an overview of the month's sightings:

Lions

- Buffalo and zebra were on the menu for lions this month.
- The Nduna Pride were seen regularly, and with the three dominant males in attendance.
- The prides on the Hippo Valley side, and along the Chiredzi River provided excellent viewing, especially when on one occasion 11 of them were seen together.

Leopards

- There's lovely news about another set of leopard cubs. The story of our first sighting of them follows in this journal.

African wild dogs

- Pups abound! We are delighted to announce that the pack of eight that denned in the Hippo Valley south area have ten pups! We are yet to ascertain how many pups the larger pack in the north has had, but they should be leaving their den-site in the next few weeks.
- Opportunistic hyenas have been trailing the wild dog adults, especially now as they need to hunt more than ever and make more kills in order to feed the pups.

Hyenas

- A bizarre sight was seeing an elephant enjoying a scratch at a waterhole, while a hyena rested its chin on an old buffalo skull - like a pillow!

Elephants

- There was a beautiful sighting at the river crossing point of a relaxed breeding herd of elephants drinking and walking in front of the vehicle.
- At the Chiredzi/Nyamasikana confluence, over 50 elephants walked along the dry riverbed heading towards the water, while at the same time an adult male leopard walked along the upper bank, heading south.
- Bull elephants have been spending a lot of time at Banyini Pan. One bull elephant was seen breaking down an umbrella tree, and another in full musth gave the vehicle a few mock charges, adding excitement to the sighting.

Buffalos

- A herd of over 200 buffalos trundled along from the Nyamasikana Bridge towards the Chiredzi River. When they arrived at a natural pan along the way that only had mud in it, some decided to have a mudbath before making their way to the river for a drink. Buffalos have such character – you tend to view them as one unit but each individual is unique!
- It is delightful to see quite a few calves amid the large herds.

Rhinos

- White rhino sightings are incredible, as always. One morning drive notched up eight individuals, which impressed our guests immensely.
- Black rhinos have been providing good viewing too. Four individuals were seen near the Chiredzi River – the first two were a cow and calf that didn't hang around, but the next two black rhinos were very relaxed and our guests got to observe them for almost an hour.
- A curious black rhino bull approached a game-viewing vehicle three times in a row, in the Nyari area, giving guests indelible memories, incredible photos, and accelerated heartbeats!

Plains game

- It's good to see sable, eland and hartebeest in these drier times, as well as the daily sightings of giraffes (including calves), zebras, wildebeest, and impala. A crowd favourite are the shaggy-coated waterbuck seen closer to the permanent natural water sources.

Unusual sightings

- Brief sighting of two honey badgers along Chiredzi River.
- At last we have good photographic evidence of a brown hyena, thanks to Head Guide, Brad Fouché, seeing one close to Hwata Pan:



Photographic hide

- During the course of the month a diverse array of animals have been seen utilising the water source in front of our sunken photographic hide. They include: white rhinos, a black rhino bull, elephants, zebras, breeding herds of buffalo, buffalo bulls, warthogs, impala, Lichtenstein hartebeest, eland, and black-backed jackals. It's also an excellent place for birding.
- In one sighting 60 buffalo joined several white rhinos and one elephant bull, creating an intense scene.

Rock art

- Guests loved taking the short walk to the Chinzwini rock art site, to admire the paintings that offer a glimpse into the past, and the culture of those who came before us.

Walks

- On one walk north of a life-sustaining spring two curious white rhino bulls were observed at close (but safe) range. However, everyone, including the porcupine, was startled when it surprised the party from among the roots of a fig tree.

Boat cruises and fishing

- Tranquil sunrise and sunset cruises have been enjoyed with good bird sightings, hippos, a lone elephant bull and an injured buffalo bull. Not as many crocodiles have been seen basking due to the cooler temperatures. The fish are also not as active at this time, so fewer bream and tigerfish have been biting.

Gonarezhou National Park

- Day trips to the national park have been thoroughly enjoyed, with exceptional sightings of elephant herds, as well as good buffalo viewing, and, of course, the guaranteed impressiveness of the striated Chilojo Cliffs.

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

Hiding in plain sight

After a quiet morning, we decided to have a coffee stop at Simbiri Dam - a picturesque spot nestled below sandstone cliffs, in the central area close to staff homes and the property's headquarters. When we arrived all was still and the only movement came from a flock of helmeted guineafowl bustling about along the shoreline. Their soft clucking and sudden bursts of running were the only sounds in the warm, hushed air.

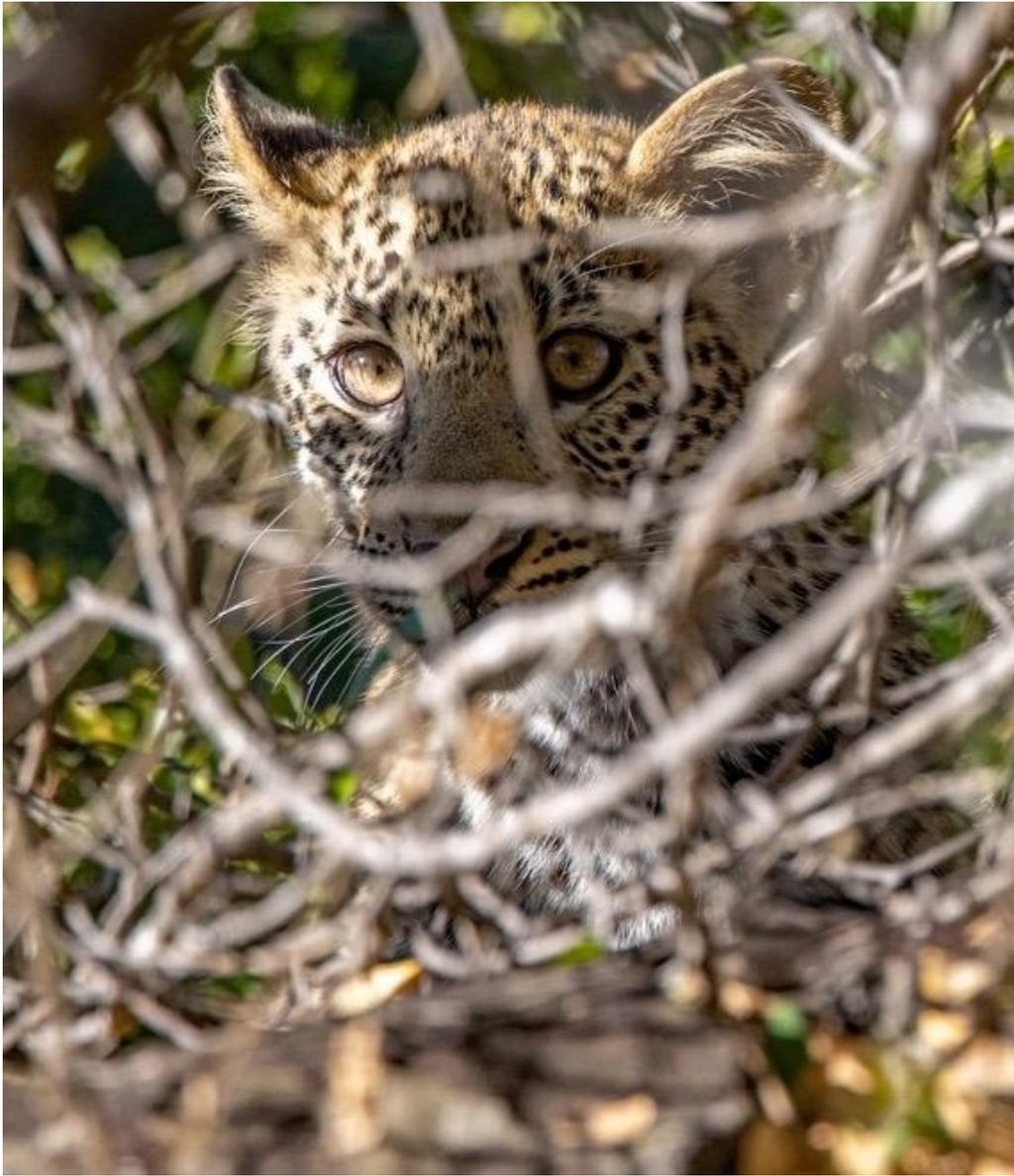
For a while, it seemed as though no other animals were around. But then, quite by chance, I glanced up toward the massive boulders overlooking the water. There, just for a second, I caught sight of what was unmistakably the curve of a leopard's tail disappearing behind the rocks. My heart raced! Leopards are famously elusive - they are masters of camouflage and often rest during the heat of the day, hidden in trees or among rocks.

We sat perfectly still, hoping the leopard would reappear. Ten minutes felt like an hour, but the rocks remained silent and empty. We decided to move on. As I started the vehicle and drove around to the road in front of the dam wall, I glanced back, and caught my breath. There, framed in an archway of bushes were not one, but two young leopard cubs.

The tail I'd seen earlier must have belonged to one of these cubs or their mother - it was so fleeting and all I'd seen was the unmistakable curve and black and white markings at the tip. Eager yet cautious, we stopped and watched. The cubs were clearly curious. They peered at us with wide, unblinking eyes, their spotted coats blending beautifully with the dappled shadows. They had likely never seen people before, and had not had people see them, and their wide-eyed curiosity made the encounter even more special.



After a few moments, they turned and padded quietly, low to the ground, towards the bushes below a large strangler fig tree. I followed slowly, careful not to startle them. Peering through the branches, we could still see them: two young leopards peering at us with a mixture of caution and wonder. I managed to capture a few photographs of their inquisitive golden-eyed faces.

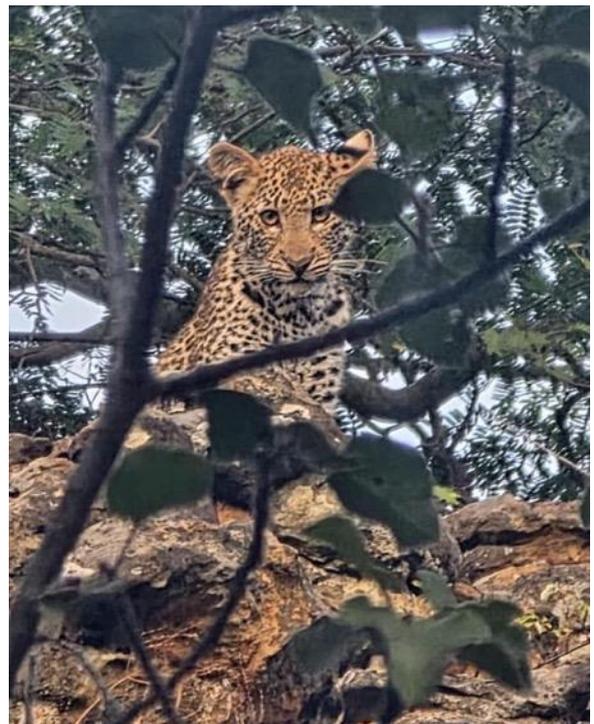


I now realized their mother wasn't nearby, and we'd "caught them" spying on the scatter-brained guinea fowl that must have been an irresistible attraction for the young cats. They'd probably been left tucked away in the thickets but had crept out to see the guineas. We discreetly left them in peace, but were buzzing with excitement!

Moments like this remind us why leopards are so very special - rarely seen, always unforgettable.

Since this initial sighting these two cubs and their mother have been seen a couple of times in the area, healthy and thriving - a comforting thought.

A few weeks later, Malilangwe Trust's Executive Director, Mark Saunders, managed to get a photo of one of the cubs on the rocks near their home. (Photo right.)



Processing a kill

The vultures led us to this kill site, but they weren't the only ones that could pin-point where lions were. Researchers are in the final stage of a long-term study on lion behaviour. Earlier in the year they selected lionesses from different prides and collared them for monitoring purposes.

A buffalo can weigh about 800 kg and is a tremendous brute force when fighting for its life. Indeed, it was the most feared in the days of "Big Five" hunters and probably accounted for the most injuries and deaths. For lions to hunt and kill a buffalo they need to be experienced, strong and preferably collaborative as a pride of females and males, or as a coalition of males. We cannot be exactly sure which female or male lions killed this buffalo, because we didn't see the kill, but what was absolutely fascinating was how protective this male was over the kill, and how the two other lionesses had to creep up to him submissively, and then kowtow around him, before they dared approach the kill to feed, after he had eaten his absolute fill. He was so bloated he could barely move!



These lionesses are experienced brutes in their own right – you can see their musculature form, ripped and broken ears, torn tongues, cracked and missing teeth, and scarred bodies. Yet still they both kowtowed to that male! I'm always amazed by the huge size of lionesses, but they are dwarfed by male lions that have a longer body length, taller shoulder height and are typically about 30 to 50% heavier than lionesses.





There's not much love lost between lions when they are feeding, and both these lionesses kept trying to bite chunks of flesh from the same area of the expansive carcass. One even dragged the carcass on her own to expose more flesh. However, they both kept an eye on the approaching vultures that were eager to get in on the act, but had to do with the stomach contents of the buffalo before the lions abandoned the carcass.



Here's a brief summary of the lion study to date, from Dr. Allan Tarugara:

In order to understand lion predation at Malilangwe, the property procured three GPS/satellite collars which were fitted onto three adult lionesses from prides with spatially independent home ranges (Nduna Pride, n=9; Chiloveka Pride, n=5; Hippo Valley Pride, n=13 individuals). This research is ongoing and has been running from January to date, with a study period of one year.

The collars are programmed to fix a GPS location every 30 minutes and locations for each consecutive three-day period are downloaded. A cluster of ≥ 3 points is considered as a potential kill site, and identified clusters are visited in the field for physical inspection. At each site, evidence of kills, if any, is recorded. Kill remains (skull, bones, hide, horns, fur etc.) are used to identify prey species and estimate age.

Preliminary results show that buffalo constitute most kills (31%) made by lions at Malilangwe, followed by zebra (19%), wildebeest (13%) and impala (12%). Buffalo and zebra alone constitute 50% of all kills made. In terms of biomass, buffalo contribute 61% of the meat consumed by lions, followed by zebra (15%) and wildebeest (8%). Combined, these three species make up >80% of the biomass consumed by lions at Malilangwe. Excluding unknown species, other prey items recorded include kudu, nyala, bushpig, sable, eland, warthog and giraffe.





The wake of vultures standing around provided a brilliant opportunity to see the differences between a Cape vulture (*Gyps coprotheres*) and a white-backed vulture (*Gyps africanus*). The Cape vulture (on the left) is larger and paler, with creamy buff plumage, pale bluish-grey neck skin, and a distinctive fluffy light ruff, while the white-backed vulture (on the right) is smaller and darker brown, with a narrow light ruff and a characteristic patch of pale feathers on its lower back that's visible when perched. Cape vultures also show more contrast on their underwings and have yellowish eyes, whereas white-backed vultures have darker underwings and brown eyes.

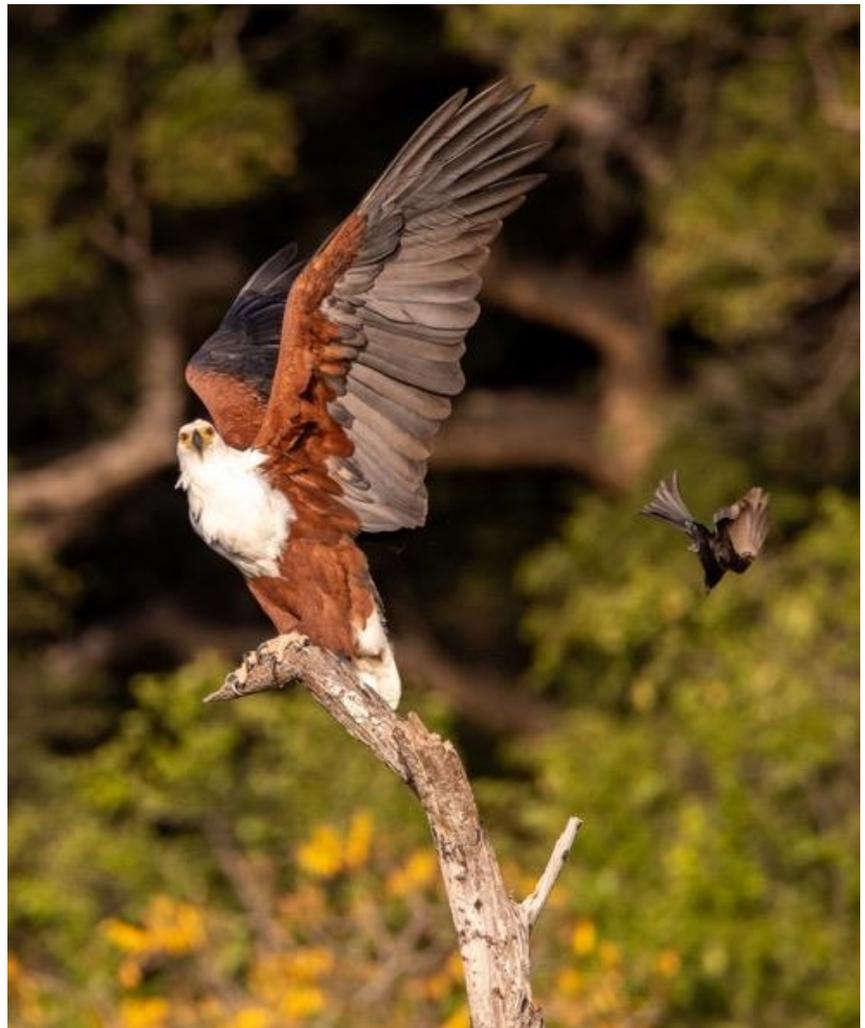
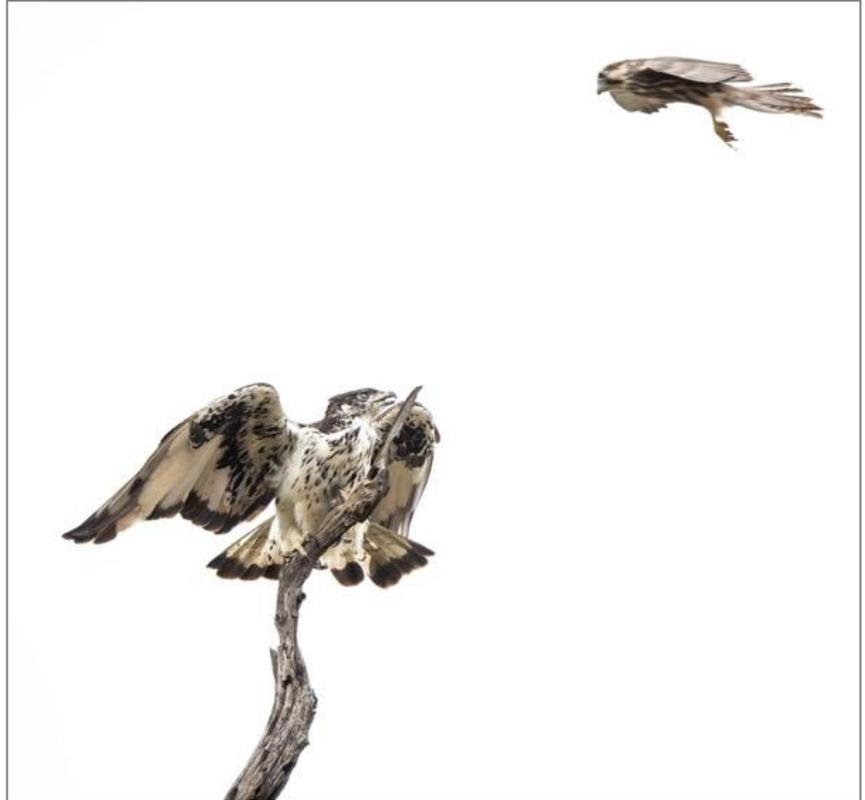


The clean-up crew ensured nothing went to waste, and two days later this was all that remained.

Twitter

Photo bombing:

On both these occasions we were trying to photograph the large raptors, when a smaller bird flew in and dive-bombed them. It's hard to say what bird was mobbing the African hawk-eagle in the top photo, but it is definitely a fork-tailed drongo harassing the African fish-eagle in the bottom photo.



Even when taking a portrait of a perched bird it is good to choose a high shutter speed – just in case it flies off or is mobbed and you can therefore freeze the action.



Sharing is caring:
These Meve's starlings were content to share this tree with a juvenile bateleur, as were the wattled starlings sharing with a greater blue-eared starling in the photo below.

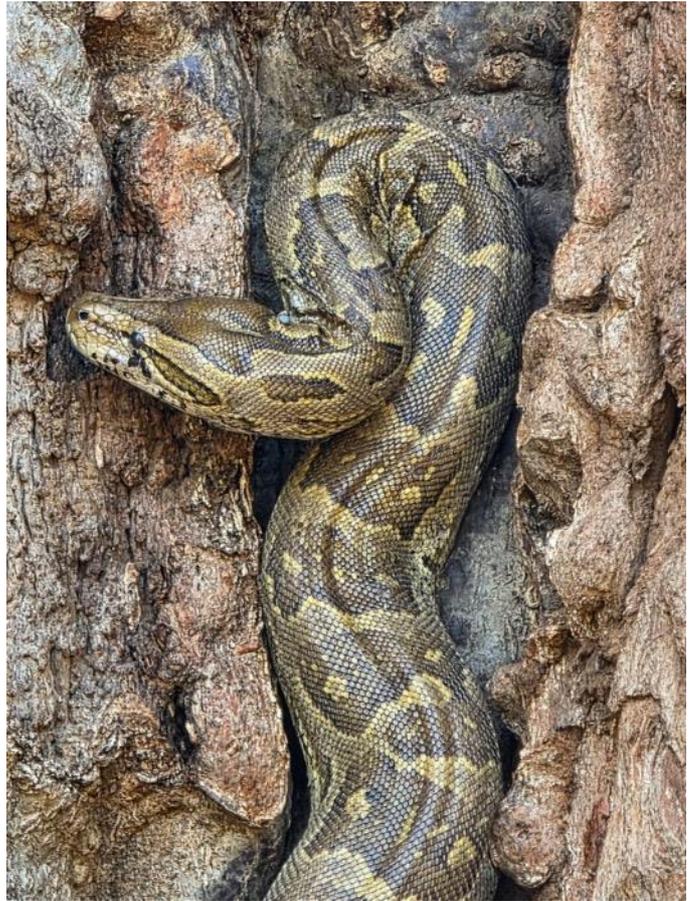


The spearfishermen:

A dwarf bittern, and a grey heron, wait patiently for a meal to swim by.



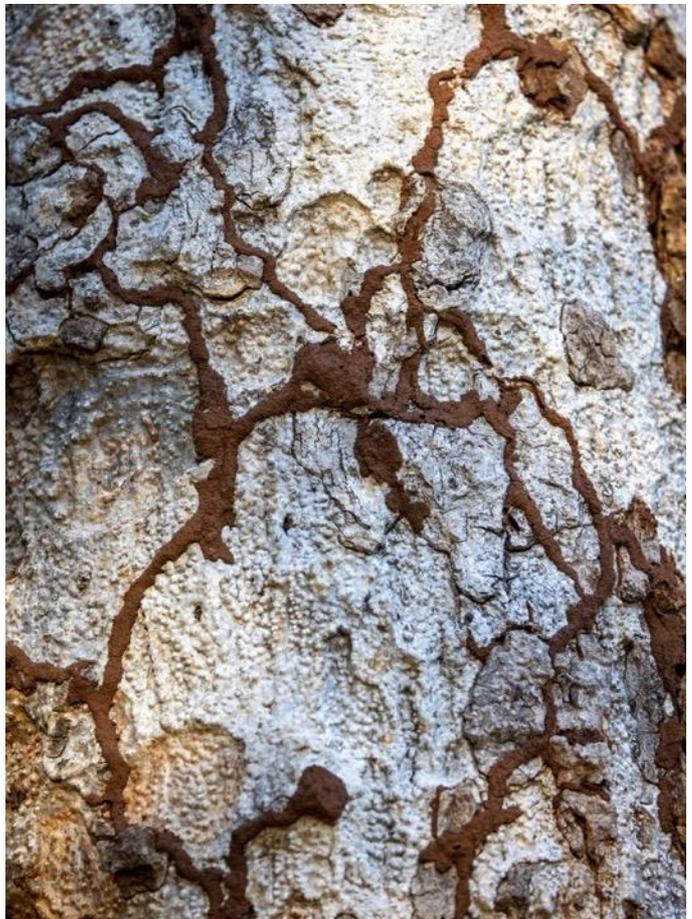
July Gallery



Above and above right:
An extraordinary sight greeted a visitor to the biggest baobab on the property – that of a python hiding in the crevice of the trunk. Just look at the length of that snake! And the perfect camouflage!

Images by Mark Saunders.

Right:
The mud patterns on this tree trunk are created by termites – they are known as shelter tubes. The termites build the tunnels from mud to protect themselves from sunlight and predators while foraging on the tree.





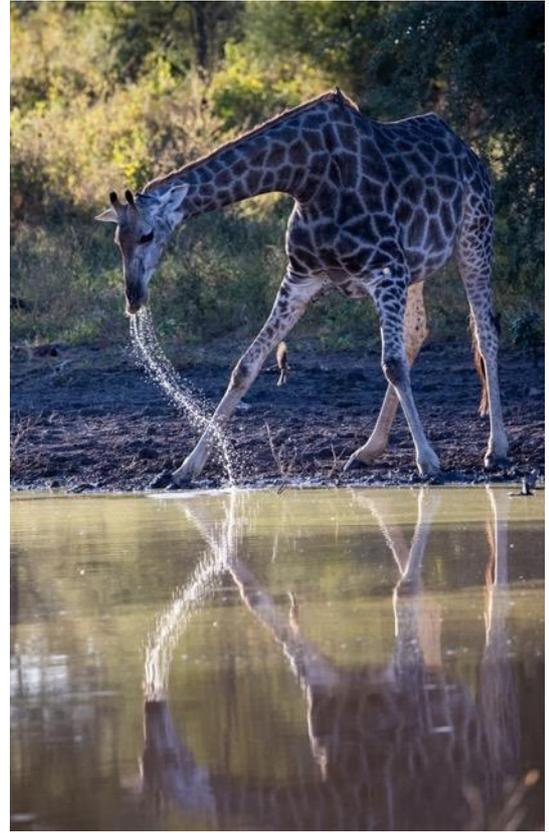
We are delighted to announce that ten pups were counted during a den-site assessment for the Hippo Valley pack of wild dogs. It is so wonderful to see this pack of eight adults establishing and growing each year as they become more accomplished.

Pup photo by Brad Fouché.



All creatures great and small – and equally as delightful, be it three little mopane squirrels sunning themselves on a branch, or a great tusker having a drink of water.



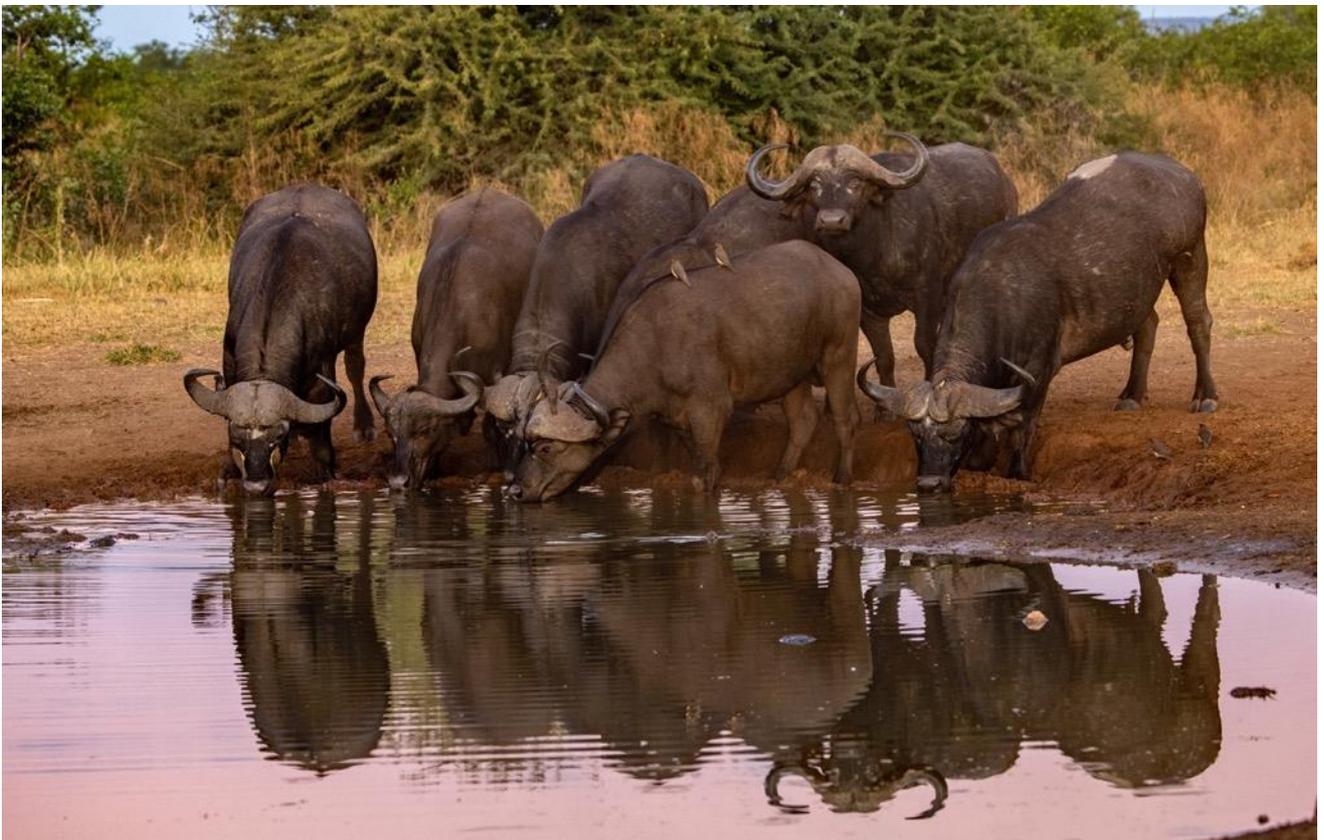


The patterns of water streams as a giraffe lifts her head from the awkward position for drinking.
An elephant cow enjoys a soothing dust powdering on a hot day.





The soft blue green tones of early morning, with waterbuck calves curled up and fluffed out, and two impala rams nearby.



The warm golds and pinks as a herd of buffalo drink just after sunset.

Elephants – peaceful and playful.





A young hyena in a pensive moment.
A white rhino calf, simultaneously cautious and curious.





Such special, unimaginably beautiful moments as two elephant bulls greet one another, and a herd of zebras approach the water during golden hour.





On the lighter side of wild life – a hamerkop narrowly avoids being syphoned up...

After spending ages summoning the courage to kneel down and drink, another impala takes the opportunity to head-butt his buddy...

