Singita



Flap-neck chameleon – Photo by Graeme Stuart

WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA
For the month of October, Two Thousand and Twenty-Six

Temperature		**Rainfall Recorded**	**Sunrise & Sunset**
Average minimum:	˚20.4°C (68.7˚°F)	For the month: 45 mm	Sunrise: 05h10
Minimum recorded:	˚14.0°C (57.2°F)	Season to date: 45 mm	Sunset: 18h00
Average maximum:	˚34.2°C (93.5°F)	(*Season = Oct to Sept)	
Maximum recorded:	42.0°C (107.6°F)		

October has arrived with a fierce intensity, bringing a rush of heat and humidity that feels as though spring has been skipped altogether. Temperatures have soared beyond 40°C, the air hangs heavy and still, and the sun beats down on the landscape. Yet, amid the heat, there is colour everywhere as the wildflowers brighten the bushveld. The N'wanetsi River is slowly receding, its waters retreating as the dry season tightens its grip. Thankfully, the marshes in the central depression are still holding on, their shimmering pools offering a welcome refuge for wildlife and a glimmer of hope as we look towards the months ahead. With the looming threat of a "super El Niño", which can bring prolonged drought to this part of the world, every remaining drop of water feels, and is, precious.

A Sightings Snapshot for October follows:

Lions

- The month of October brought with it a fascinating series of lion encounters, with shifting territories and a few bruised egos along the way. Over the span of just a few days, one of the subadult Shish males was seen moving through the southern areas before being chased off by the Granophyre male. The Granophyre male was then found one morning lying up beneath the shade of a beautiful jackalberry tree, having spent much of the morning roaring. Little did he know that his calls had attracted the attention of the four Sweni males, who were initially positioned on the opposite side of the river. Finding a rocky section to leap across, the four brothers made their way over and chased the Granophyre male all the way to the first ridge of the Lebombo Mountains. With their egos seemingly uplifted by the encounter, the Sweni males lingered in the concession for the next few days. However, their stay took an unexpected turn one morning when four considerably larger, unfamiliar males wandered into the area and came across the Sweni males resting in the grass. A chase soon ensued, but the Sweni males managed to outmanoeuvre their larger challengers by running up a ridge before doubling back and evading them. The four unknown males have not been seen again since, leaving us wondering whether this was simply a brief territorial visit or the beginning of another chapter in the ever-changing dynamics of the region's lion population.
- The Karingani males appear to have settled comfortably into the north-eastern reaches of the concession, and their behaviour around vehicles has become considerably more relaxed, although they still remind us from time to time that they are very much in charge, with the occasional charge keeping everyone on their toes. They have also been seen with the Mananga lionesses, an interesting development given that these sightings have been taking place in an area occupied by the Chava Pride for the past year and a half. This raises the question of whether the Chava Pride has shifted its range further north or west, or whether we are simply seeing a temporary overlap in territories. As always with lions, their movements and territorial dynamics remain unpredictable, and it will be interesting to see how these patterns unfold over the coming weeks.
- Midway through the month, three members of the larger Mananga Pride were found resting in the shade of a few magnificent, towering leadwood trees. The trio consisted of two adult females and one subadult female, enjoying a quiet moment away from the heat of the day. With all the turmoil surrounding the male lions and ongoing territorial takeovers, sightings of the pride have been few and far between. Could the pride be splitting into smaller groups, or are they simply keeping a low profile while things settle? For now, we can only speculate, as the ever-changing dynamics of the lion world continue to keep us guessing.

Leopards

- Leopard sightings were limited to Dumbana, her 10-month-old cub, and her two offspring from a previous litter: the Khandziya female and her still-unnamed brother. There is a bit of a superstition among us that once we give a young male leopard a name, he soon seems to disappear into the wilderness, dispersing in search of a territory of his own, as young males naturally do. For now, we are making the most of every opportunity to spend time with him before that inevitable day arrives. At the beginning of the month, the Khandziya female treated us to a wonderful sighting as she fed on an impala, offering a glimpse into the quiet efficiency of these elusive cats. We also spent time following Dumbana as she led her young cub northwards, and for a while, it seemed as though she might be taking us towards a meal. Instead, she eventually veered off the road and disappeared into the mountains, heading into a rugged, rocky landscape inaccessible to our game-drive vehicles. Although our leopard sightings may have been a little elusive this month, these encounters offered some special moments and a reminder that, with leopards, the most rewarding sightings often come when we least expect them.

Cheetahs

- We had a brief encounter with three cheetahs along the H6.

- The month began with a lovely sighting of two male cheetah brothers in the Central Depression, offering us a glimpse of these elegant hunters.

African wild dogs

- October brought some exciting wild dog activity, with a pack of four seen moving through the northern areas of the concession.
- Our resident pack with pups made an appearance near the western boundary. The six pups are still doing well and growing rapidly, becoming increasingly robust with each sighting. It is always a pleasure to see them thriving as they develop under the watchful eyes of the adults. On one occasion, the adult members of the pack were found actively hunting impala, and their coordinated efforts soon paid off when they successfully brought one down. What followed was a remarkable display of efficiency, as the pack devoured the entire meal in just 15 minutes flat! For these highly specialised hunters, every successful hunt is essential, particularly with six hungry pups to feed, and this sighting offered a fascinating glimpse into the relentless pace of life for one of Africa's most efficient predators.

Elephants

- Elephants have continued to grace us with their presence across the concession, much as they did last month, although the herds have become more scattered. The combination of recent light rains and a water table still saturated from the floods has encouraged trees and grasses to flourish earlier and more vigorously than in previous years, leaving food and water plentiful throughout the bush.
- Sadly, a young elephant calf was found deceased west of the N'wanetsi River, with the cause of death unknown. That afternoon, spotted hyenas, as well as Dumbana's young male cub, were seen feeding on the carcass, and by the following morning, nothing remained.
- On a brighter note, the Camp Herd was spotted near Dave's Crossing. Traditionally, this herd makes regular appearances within the camp grounds, earning them their familiar name. This year, however, has been quite different. With the floods providing an abundance of water and fresh vegetation across the landscape, the elephants have had little reason to venture into camp to browse on the lush bushes between the suites.

Spotted hyenas

- Hyenas provided us with a rather entertaining encounter this month. A lone spotted hyena was wandering through the bush, going about its usual business, when it unknowingly caught the attention of three wild dogs resting in the shade. Noticing the movement, the dogs rose and began stalking closer, their curiosity quickly turning into action. Before long, they gave chase, catching the unsuspecting hyena completely off guard. The poor fellow wasted no time making his escape, tail tucked firmly between his legs, leaving us with a wonderful reminder that even one of the bush's most confident scavengers can find himself on the wrong side of a surprise encounter.

Buffalos

- Buffalo sightings have been on the rise this month, with impressive herds of 100 to 300 individuals roaming the grasslands in the northwestern parts of the concession. With the fresh green flush growing taller by the day, these large herds have been making the most of the lush grazing, spreading out across the open plains. It's a wonderful time to watch these formidable animals as they move through the landscape, their dark silhouettes contrasting beautifully against the vibrant green.

Plains game

- The plains have continued to buzz with life this month, as vast herds of zebra and wildebeest make the most of the fresh green grazing spreading across the reserve. The zebra remains a familiar sight wherever

we go, their bold stripes scattered across the open grasslands, riverbanks and previously burnt areas. Many of the females are now beginning to look noticeably round, their growing bellies hinting at the new arrivals that will soon join these ever-moving herds. The impala ewes are showing similar signs, with their bellies becoming increasingly distended as they approach the final stretch of their pregnancies. With only a few weeks to go, we look forward to the arrival of hundreds of tiny impala lambs, bringing a wonderful new wave of life and energy to the bush.

Birds

- The effects of the floods earlier this year are still evident across the concession, with scattered marshes transforming areas of what were once open grasslands. Reed beds, dwarf sedges, papyrus and other aquatic plants have taken hold in these low-lying areas, creating new habitats and attracting some rather interesting, feathered visitors. Among the highlights has been the rare red-chested flufftail, a special sighting in these newly formed wetlands. Blacksmith lapwings have also made the most of the dense reeds, successfully raising their chicks amongst the vegetation. Perhaps most surprising of all was a lone lesser flamingo spotted wandering through one of the marshes. Flamingos are not entirely unfamiliar to us, but our encounters are usually limited to watching them pass overhead on their way towards Mozambique, making this grounded visitor an especially memorable sighting.

Rare animals and other sightings

- This month has brought some particularly special and unexpected sightings, including, for the first time in what is likely close to a decade, a handful of encounters with the lesser galago, more affectionately known as the bush baby. These tiny nocturnal primates, with their enormous eyes and remarkable ability to leap between trees, have long been a rare sight in this part of Kruger, especially when compared to the further western regions. What has kept them so elusive here remains a mystery, making these recent sightings all the more exciting.
- Adding to the month's highlights, we were also fortunate enough to spot both a caracal and a serval, along with a wonderfully relaxed African wild cat.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as the October Gallery.

Symbiosis **Article by Sean Surtees**

What is “symbiosis”? What does it actually mean? Simply put, it is the close relationship or interaction between two different organisms. Symbiosis has Greek origin and basically means “living together”. Being the primary driving engine for all complex life on Earth, symbiosis is what has shaped the Earth’s oceans, landmasses and atmosphere.

Whether in your garden at home, a local nature reserve or on safari in the African plains, there are countless examples of symbiosis all around you. Bees and birds feed on nectar from multiple species of plants, where the bees and birds get a meal. While doing so, they inadvertently collect pollen from the male part of the flower (anther) and transfer it to the female part of another flower (stigma) of the same species - essentially cross-pollination in play.

This symbiotic relationship between plants and insects in general is vitally important in so many ways. Just imagine that an insecticide is discovered and then mass-produced with the sole purpose of eradicating all insects throughout Africa. Some people might be led to believe that this is a good thing, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. The consequences would be devastating and would lead to mass extinction. If all insects were eradicated, it is estimated that all life would be extinct in just a few decades. All life on Earth, not only the human race, is fully dependent on this one single mutualistic symbiotic relationship.

Our very survival, well-being and progress are dependent on interdependence rather than isolation. It is incredible that the human body is one big walking ecosystem, with billions upon billions of microbial bacteria residing inside our bodies. Each of these bacteria has a huge role in keeping our immune system healthy by helping to digest the food that we consume daily. These tiny bacteria also help build up our immune system as well as regulate many other critical human functions. Symbiosis within our bodies is essentially what keeps us healthy and ensures our very survival.



While on safari in the Singita Kruger National Park concession, one of the most obvious and prevalent examples of symbiosis is the red-billed and yellow-billed oxpeckers and their multiple hosts. The oxpeckers spend most of their day actively searching for ticks and other ectoparasites that are found on the bodies of many of the four-legged animals such as white and black rhinos, buffalos, giraffes, zebras, and most of the antelope species. Oxpeckers are targeting the blood that the ticks gorge themselves on from the host animal. These concentrated “blood parcels” are packed with vital energy and nutrients. This form of symbiosis is known as “mutualism”, whereby both organisms benefit from the interaction, and neither is harmed in any way. Basically, the host animal gets a “cleanse”, and the oxpecker gets a nutrient-dense meal.

Giraffe with oxpecker on her neck – Photo by Damin Dallas

Symbiosis abounds throughout the Singita Lebombo Concession – below are three unique and interesting examples:

Tineidae moth and the skin of a dead African elephant's foot:
There is a type of moth that relies exclusively on the skin from a dead elephant's foot for its survival. As a result, this particular kind of moth only occurs in regions where elephants are found, as they specialise in nesting in the sole of a dead elephant's foot. The hard, curled-up sole lasts for an extended period and provides a safe sanctuary for the moth's developing eggs. Once the eggs hatch, the larvae consume the dried leather skin before burrowing into the ground. They then pupate into adults, mate and lay their eggs once again in the foot of a dead elephant, completing their metamorphic lifecycle.

Recently, one afternoon, we viewed the Dumbana young male leopard feeding on the foot of an unfortunate deceased elephant calf. While sad for the elephant calf, I couldn't help but think about the Tineidae moth, as it is solely reliant on dead elephants for its very survival. In the event elephants become extinct, the moth will more than likely also go extinct.

Rhinoceros bot fly and black and white rhinoceros:
This is another example of where one organism is totally reliant on another organism for its survival. The largest fly found on the African continent, the rhinoceros bot fly has a very strict obligate relationship with both the black and white rhinoceros. An obligate parasite, in this relationship being the fly, is basically defined as an organism that can't reproduce, survive or grow without exploiting a suitable living host, in this case both rhino species. The fly has a holometabolic (complete) metamorphosis, which comprises four very distinct stages: egg -> larva -> pupa -> adult. The female fly will lay its eggs on the skin of the rhino host predominantly around the head (face, horn or near the nostrils). The eggs hatch into tiny larvae (maggots), and they then move into the rhino's mouth and continue through to the stomach. Here they attach to the stomach and/or gut lining. The larvae feed on the host's blood and tissue and go through three larval stages while inside the stomach. Once they have reached this stage of their metamorphosis, they migrate into the intestinal tract of the rhino host and are passed out with the dung/faeces. The larva then burrows into the soil beneath the rhino dung and develops into a pupa. After about six weeks, the adult rhino bot fly emerges from the pupa and makes its way to the surface where it will look for a mate to reproduce and repeat the cycle. The adult rhino beetle fly is limited in time, though, as they only live between three and five days.

Aardvarks and the common warthog
Warthogs are an everyday sight on the open short grasslands that are dotted around the Singita Lebombo concession. Strictly diurnal, they can be seen for most parts of the day as they go about their daily feeding and wallowing activities. Nighttime for warthogs is a different story, though – as they lack a thick layer of insulating fur, they need to look for cover to insulate themselves from the cooler evenings. Aardvarks, on the other hand, are mainly nocturnal and have the reputation of being incredible diggers. Aardvarks, due to their nocturnal activities, are rarely seen. Having massive and powerful claws, they dig holes looking for their preferred prey of ants and termites. They also excavate underground burrows to sleep in to escape the heat of the day. Warthogs, while capable of performing small diggings and burrow excavations, tend to prefer to make use of abandoned aardvark burrows which they "renovate" to suit. In many places, warthogs have come to be completely reliant on aardvarks for their nightly dwelling homes and, in essence, their very survival.

In areas where there are healthy populations of warthogs, there might also be aardvarks. While aardvarks are not often physically seen on the Singita Lebombo concession, their fresh tracks and nightly diggings are seen on some mornings while out on safari.

Spring and all kinds of things **Article by Bernard Stiglingh**



Spring is a feeling before it's anything else. It's a distant and single firefly flickering over a stream where there were none the nights before. It's a droning in the sourplum shrubs that reveal small yellow blooms and a host of iridescent amethyst scarabs scrambling and buzzing and mating and fighting over flowers and females, and my shadow flushing a bush scarlet butterfly hidden among the colourful chaos of beetles and other flying things.

The days get warmer, and the vultures and eagles are soaring the thermals earlier in the mornings. Here and there flowers are coming up, and there are large blackened swathes of burnt veld from the late winter fires with a few clumps of short greenery and many ashy skeletons of whole branches that will be washed away by the rain or blown away by the winds of the Lebombo plains, thereby erasing the remnant memory of an entire tree from this earth forever, perhaps even the last remaining limb of an ancient hardwood already large and shady and scarred when the first white people moved through this area not two hundred years ago.

The middle of September is two weeks into spring and warm and dry but still green along the riverbanks from all the rainfall this past year, until early storms come seemingly from all sides and I see the lightning flashes and hear the thunder, muted and distant like artillery fire at first, then frighteningly close. The rain falls from the slaty mantle that now blots out the sun and the sky entirely. When the short storm has passed, and the sound of the rain is gone, I can hear leaves dripping and water flowing in small streams downhill, feeding the already full river and creating puddles, and the clouds carry on away with the now distant rumble of thunder accompanying it to parts unknown. The rain awakens hundreds of giant burrowing crickets who break the silence with their seismic buzzing and make my ears ring, and rightly so, as they are said to be the largest and loudest crickets in the world, and the bird calls return but slowly and staggered, as if coming out of hiding. "Wa xi twa xinana?" I ask Mr T, who is my tracker and my friend, and he says yes; he also hears the rain frog whistles and then also the trilling tremolo of the rubber frogs and also the grass frogs that told us days before that there was rain coming and call now still. There are short rain showers and drizzle over the next few days.



The rainy days change the landscape seemingly overnight, and a verdant cloak has covered the land. Now there are fields full of flowers: strings of stars, meadows of fresh wild basil growing like some abandoned feral herb garden, creeping purple hibiscus trumpets and bi-coloured sicklebush garlands. I stick my nose in as many flowers as I can. The trees bloom like some fabled orchard, and the black burnt veld has erupted in green grass and floral sway. Thousands of caper white butterflies blow across the plains like pretty scraps of paper caught up in the wind, alighting on a flowery bush here and there.

Scanning from high ground, the distant valleys and crests and everything in between show many creamy tops of flowering knobthorns and the still and moving patterned shapes of giraffes weaving through the woodland from one tree to the next. In a land of all shades of green below and the bluest sky above, the boer-beans are replete with red bell flowers that drip with nectar and birdlife, and I stare at them overwhelmed by their shocking beauty, unable to describe the feeling then nor put it into words now. In a shady glade penetrated by beams of light, a raintree with a mauve carpet of fallen flowers around it makes a perfect arbour straight out of some old folk tale wedding, with cuckoos singing and darting into the tops of the evergreens and the summertime sound of the whirring cicadas all around.

Driving around at night, the moon is a crescent like the horns of the painted savanna cattle that followed farming man into these lands long ago, and new constellations are revealed, the carnelian-hearted scorpion hanging big and bright overhead. The lovely smell of warm wildflowers hangs around in hazy pockets: jasmine, gardenia and that sweet, heady scent of the stickythorns. We drive through the river and stop in midstream and switch off the engine and kill the lights, and hundreds of green fireflies are revealed, their lights switching on and off as they float all around, and the reeds on the banks are alive with the calls of painted reed frogs and the familiar peeping of a mystery insect that plagued my curiosity for twenty odd years and was only recently revealed to me as the bell cricket, though I know not if I will ever lay my eyes on *Homoeogryllus* as they are said to be nearly impossible to find and that is fine, for are not some of life's sweetest secrets those that remain just so?



A familiar mournful but beautiful and unmistakenly aquiline wail echoes over the N'wanetsi River where it runs along the steep red cliffs of the mountains, and after searching for some seconds I see a single and pallid Wahlberg's eagle sitting on the limb of a five-hundred-year-old leadwood, the tryst where it meets its mate every year around this time. The mate is also a pale morph, which is bizarre since most of these eagles are brown in colour. Squadrons of large yellow and black ringed cascader dragonflies hang suspended in the golden late afternoon sky, hovering to-and-fro as they sight and lose their prey above a small lily-clad stream. Attached to the square stems near the tops of the sedges are the discarded and otherworldly hollow vestiges of their former selves, the aquatic and wingless nymph that finally crawled from its hidden and silent underwater world to cease and then transform from this frozen chrysalis into the aerial terrors of the insect world.

As the days spill into the month of October, it gets intensely hot, and everything starts to dry out. It may be a long time before the big rains come, but maybe not, as we have been hearing the phuphula or rain locust, calling in the warm nights and the grass frogs in the day. A mother leopard with her almost year-old cub - a little female with large mouse-like ears, hungry and lean and delicate like a veld flower - walk together at last light close to where the mother had recently fetched it in hiding while she had been hunting. The cub is excited and trots every few paces with its tail up to keep up with the fast pace. A sadness and pity for this vulnerability - that has no place in this harsh wilderness - comes over me, and I say a prayer asking that the mother had indeed found something to eat for her and the little mite. The full moon is rising orange and bright like a second sun over the Lebombo mountains to the east, and this powerful twilight scene with nightjars singing in an electric and trance-like choir aroused by the changing seasons and bright lunar light gives me a knot in my stomach like when you meet with true love - but it is also bittersweet - tumbling my emotions and stirring things up in my heart that I don't quite understand, nor probably shouldn't.

The ecological importance of hyena dung **Article by Walter Mabilane**



Hyenas, often misunderstood and painted as the villains of the African savannah, play a crucial role in their ecosystems, not only as predators but also as providers. One often-overlooked aspect of their ecological contribution is their dung. While hyenas are primarily known for their scavenging tendencies and opportunistic feeding habits, the effects of their droppings extend far beyond mere waste. In this article, we will explore the significance of hyena dung and how it benefits various organisms in their habitat.

Hyena dung is a rich source of nutrients, particularly calcium, nitrogen and phosphorus, which are essential for plant growth. When hyenas consume their prey, they tend to ingest a significant amount of bone, fur, and other organic matter. This food composition contributes to the nutrient density of their faeces. When deposited on the ground, the dung decomposes, enriching the soil and enhancing its fertility.
This nutrient recycling supports a variety of plant species, particularly forbs and grasses, which in turn thrive and contribute to a more productive ecosystem. Healthy plant life is fundamental for a balanced habitat and supports other herbivores, thus sustaining the food chain.

Hyena dung acts as a magnet for numerous insects, particularly dung beetles. These beetles play an essential role in nutrient recycling by breaking down and burying dung, which further enhances soil health. In fact, some studies suggest that dung beetle activity can improve plant growth and promote biodiversity within the grasslands. In addition to insects, hyena dung can create a habitat for various microorganisms that help decompose organic material. This microbial activity is vital for the breakdown of nutrients and contributes to the overall health of the ecosystem.



For many scavenging species, hyena dung serves as a direct food source. Creatures like jackals, vultures, and various bird species often take advantage of the leftovers found in hyena dung. The remaining bits of bone, fur, and flesh can provide vital nutrients for these animals. In addition to scavengers, even smaller predators can benefit from the rich nutrient source present in the dung, which attracts insects that they can feast on. This interconnectedness demonstrates the essential role that hyenas play in maintaining the ecological balance by supporting a diverse range of fauna.

By fostering an ecosystem rich in nutrients, hyena dung contributes to biodiversity. The increased availability of resources helps to support a wider range of plant and animal life, creating a complex web of interactions that can enhance the stability and resilience of the ecosystem. Biodiversity itself leads to increased productivity and improved ecosystem functions, which are crucial for adapting to environmental changes.

The decomposition of hyena dung improves soil structure and composition. As it breaks down, it adds organic matter that can enhance soil aeration and water retention—two key components for robust plant life. Healthier soils lead to more productive ecosystems that can withstand droughts and other environmental stresses, contributing to the sustainability of the habitat.

If you are a gardener, you'll know the benefit of adding bone meal to the soil when planting new plants to help develop their roots and stimulate healthy growth. Bone meal bought at city nurseries is made from finely ground, sterilised animal bones. While far safer and more reliable to use bone meal than having a hyena lurking around your city garden, it is essentially doing the exact same job as a hyena in the wild!

October Gallery



Moonrise over the *Euphorbias* around the Lebombo boma – Photo by Damin Dallas



Elephants below the Lebombo mountains – Photo by Damin Dallas

Herd of African buffalo – Photo by Damin Dallas

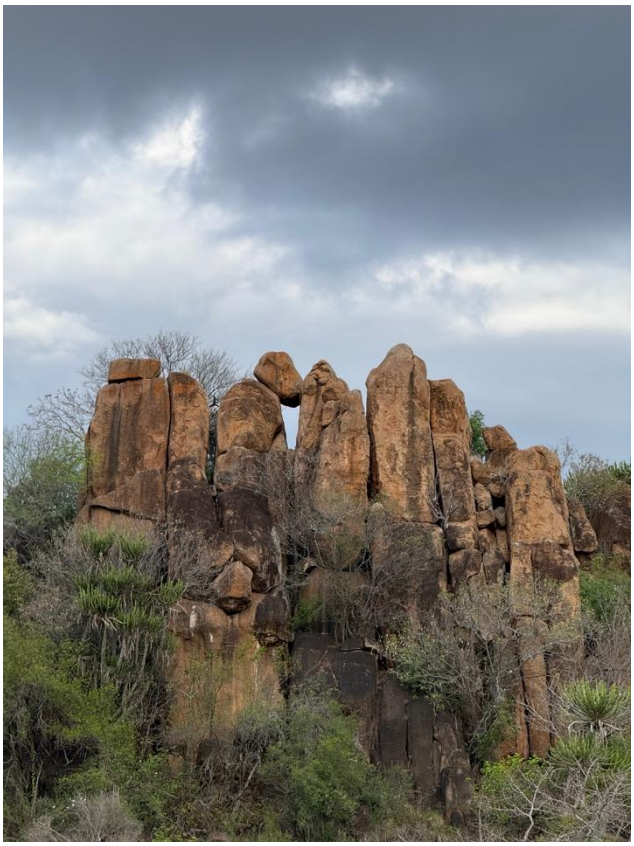




Elephant bull drinking – Photo by Damin Dallas

Sweni male lion – Photo by Damin Dallas





Granophyre ridge – Photo by Damin Dallas



Baboons and giraffe – Photo by Damin Dallas

Cape glossy starling – Photo by Damin Dallas



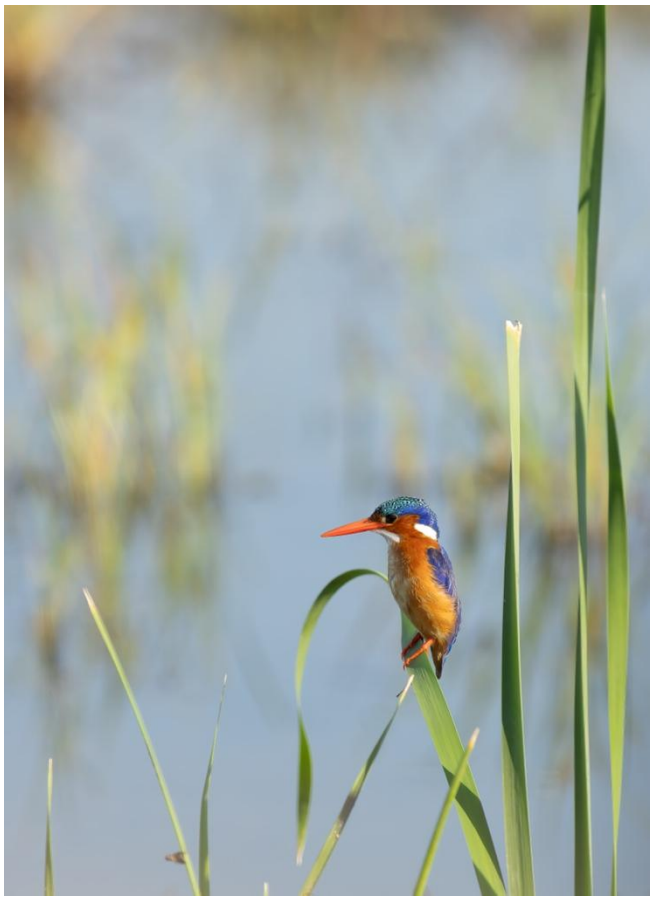


Zebra and giraffe – Photo by Graeme Stuart

African scops owl – Photo by Graeme Stuart



Malachite kingfisher - Photo by Graeme Stuart





Dumbana female leopard – Photo by Matt Sussens

Dumbana's cub – Photo by Graeme Stuart



Compiled by Monika Dallas