

Singita



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

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.7°C (71.0°F)
Minimum recorded: 19.2°C (66.5°F)
Average maximum: 35.4°C (95.7°F)
Maximum recorded: 37.9°C (100.2°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 20.5 mm
*Season to date: 461 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:00
Sunset: 17:54

It's wonderful to have guests filling up the villas at Singita Pamushana, and there's no greater compliment than when repeat guests return with their nearest and dearest friends, wanting nothing more than for them to fall in love with this part of Africa too.

I describe this as a more "advanced safari" destination – one where you spend a longer time out on drives and take in all diverse creatures great and small, as well as the rock art, bush walks, photographic hide and luxury safari cruises on the Malilangwe Dam. That said, this week one group of guests described seeing the Big Five in two hours when they returned from their evening drive - a herd of thirty elephants feeding below Chikwete Cliffs, a lion and a lioness in the same area, five white rhinos and one buffalo bull sharing the water at O2 Pan, and a male leopard walking along the Binya Road marking its territory between Sosigi Hill and Sosigi Dam.

The weather has been autumn hot but we had a cold snap with some heavy downpours – late but welcome for this time of year.

A sightings snapshot for March follows:

Lions

- The majority of sightings have been of the Nduna Pride, numbering up to 11 lions together at one time. They've been attempting to hunt buffaloes in the Nduna and Lojaan areas. Towards the end of the month we heard a commotion of lions fighting over something. We drove to the noise and found that lions had killed a buffalo calf and dragged it into a rocky area and were fighting over it. The males were feeding while the lionesses lay on the rocks waiting, and the cubs tried to feed with the males. The males were not willing to share – hence all the growling. The next afternoon one of the lionesses ambushed a sub-adult buffalo calf, and sprung onto its back! More than twenty buffalo came charging towards the lion and the calf, and the lion ran away leaving the bleeding calf with its life saved.
- Five lions were seen at Mabhakweni Pan, where a young male put on a show by climbing up a tree.
- The River Pride with 12 members were seen along the Chiredzi River trying to hunt a dazzle of zebra, but the element of surprise was lost when the wind changed direction and their scent gave them away.
- At the end of the month the two Nduna males were seen in the south-east corner of Banyini feeding on a buffalo calf they'd caught.

Rhinos

- Excellent rhino sightings, as always. Often both black and white rhinos were seen together at waterholes.
- One afternoon an elephant bull was drinking alone at a pan, then it was joined by one male white rhino, one young female black rhino and three dagga boy buffalos. After sunset when driving back past a central waterhole there was a breeding herd of buffaloes drinking, while four white rhinos, one elephant bull and one black rhino waited for their turn to drink.
- Guest saw a total of 14 white rhinos in groups of twos and threes one morning. One afternoon, while sitting in the photographic hide, a total of 12 white rhinos came to drink and wallow at different intervals, with nine being counted together all drinking at the same time.
- On one epic evening more than 15 white rhinos came to drink, plus a phenomenal six black rhinos. What an unforgettable sundowner evening that was!
- A mother white rhino is shepherding a brand new baby. They have been seen alone with the mother drinking at quieter times from the central and south-eastern pans.

African wild dogs

- We are seeing two packs of wild dogs at the moment – a group of six, mainly males, and another group of 11 that includes one dog with a broken leg. (It is possible they are all members of one larger pack.)
- The pack of six have been hunting in the central areas, and are all looking fit and strong. An epic sighting with them was when they were seen chasing a lioness around Hwata Pan.
- The pack of 11 were seen at Chikwete Pan, very relaxed, and having a social interaction showing dominance amongst themselves over a female that was in oestrus. The dog with the broken left front leg was calling and whining, begging for regurgitated food from the other dogs, but unfortunately they had come back from a hunt without results. It is simply amazing that this dog has survived for so long thanks to its family regularly feeding it and staying with it.

Buffaloes

- Herds in their hundreds congregate daily to drink at the larger water sources like Banyini Pan or Nduna Dam. The dagga boys have been having a fine time wallowing in the muddy quagmires.

Elephants

- There have been lovely sightings of breeding herds near the river, and one herd has been drinking regularly at Sosigi Dam in the late afternoons. They've been very relaxed and completely surround the game viewers much to the delight of the guests.
- The bulls have been in evidence during the heat of the day, at the waterholes. Some guests inside the sunken photographic hide had a muddy shower when a bull aimed his trunk into the hide and sprayed them from head to toe!

Leopards

- Most of the leopard sightings have been after dark – like the relaxed adult female walking along the Binya Road, stopping every now and again to groom herself.
- Guests on an afternoon fishing expedition were lucky enough to spot a male leopard sleeping on top of a rock.

Hyenas

- A terribly difficult situation to witness one morning was when a zebra mare had complications giving birth to her foal. She was lying in the open area at the airstrip but couldn't move. Of course every compassionate person wanted to help, but in a situation like this we have to let Nature take its course. By the afternoon we found hyenas busy finishing off the carcass. The next morning revealed one hyena and many vultures feeding on the remains, while the hyenas digested their meal at a nearby pan. In a way we must be thankful that these very necessary scavengers were able to end the trauma more swiftly for the mare, and that a newborn foal wasn't left to suffer a slow death of starvation.

Plains game

- One of the guides described the Banyini area being like a little Serengeti, such is the prevalence of plains game in that area currently.

Rock art

- The bush is still quite thick to do long exploratory bush walks, but shorter walks to the rock art sites are ideal. Our guests were so impressed with state the paintings are in – pristine sites and clearly distinguishable art.

Safari boat cruises

- This unique offering within the Singita stable is a must do! Inevitably after guests experience one they request another! Sightings of hippos, crocodiles and water birds are guaranteed, as are the best gin and tonics you could ever dream of, and every now and again guests are also treated with a sighting of elephants, a black rhino or a leopard on the shoreline.

Fishing

- The water is getting cooler, but there fishing for bream and tigerfish has still been good.

Gonarezhou Day Trips

- Guests have enjoyed these long day outings, and the more reactive breeding herds of elephants prevalent in Gonarezhou ensure you are jolted out of your hypnotic reverie every so often.

Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft

- Julius has been showcasing the vanishing culture and skills of the Shangaan people, much to our guests' delight.

There are many bush stories to tell this month, and we close with a March Gallery.

Dwarf mongoose grooming session



I spent an enchanting hour with dwarf mongooses last week. I'd been looking for two territorial lions, and as I drove through a particularly rocky section between the Lojaan and Nduna area I heard the chirrups of

several dwarf mongooses dashing for cover. It had rained that morning and the rocks were vibrant in their damp saturated colours and lichens. I decided to sit silently – a real luxury when you are on your own, and see if they would settle and go about their business once more. (The collective noun for a group of mongooses is, aptly, a ‘business’ of mongooses.)

After a few minutes a tiny head peeped out from behind a crevice, and inquisitive eyes stared at me. A little vocalisation was given, and then another head popped out from a cranny. And so it went for about 20 minutes until all these adorable little faces were peering at me, and making a collective decision about if my big zoom lens and I were dangerous or not. Fortunately they made the correct decision, and I was then treated to some behaviour that is rather rare to see. Two mongooses began grooming themselves, and then one another. After a while a third darted in for a little grooming session. Then a fourth, but that one didn’t stay long. They were so relaxed, but also so busy! I was fascinated by all this intense grooming, much of it being given and received.

Dwarf mongooses are highly social living in cohesive groups of about three to 30 individuals that collectively engage in cooperative breeding, territory defence, sentry duties to look out for predators, babysitting and grooming. Within each group there is a rigid hierarchy, with a single breeding pair being dominant and reproduction of all other group members suppressed. Dwarf mongooses are active during the day in relatively open habitats where they mainly feed on insects but are also known to prey on small snakes, lizards and little mammals.

Back at my desk I looked up the latest research on dwarf mongoose behaviour, and found out about the Dwarf Mongoose Research Project. This project was set up in 2011 to investigate a free-living population of cooperatively breeding dwarf mongooses. Supported by the University of Bristol, UK, and the University of Pretoria, South Africa, their research explores the interactions of animals in social groups, with particular emphasis on the use of communication to coordinate cooperative behaviour and to mediate conflict within and between groups.

The researchers recorded all the grooming that individuals engaged in with their groupmates. We know that being groomed helps with hygiene, reduces anxiety and is an enjoyable treat. It also underpins social relationships – the higher up in the hierarchy the more grooming attention a mongoose receives, so it is important for their social lives.

But, the researchers have also observed some very interesting behaviour that is news to us all. For instance dwarf mongooses reward those who performed good behaviour, like sentinel watching in the day, by grooming them more in the evening, back at their safe den. Those that didn’t pull their weight or were aggressive and bullying were given less attention, even ignored, back at the den. So, there is this delayed reward system. This shows that the mongooses keep tabs on conflict occurring between their groupmates. They can identify bullies just from the vocalisations given during disputes, store this information and implement a delayed conflict-management strategy. The findings are important because it is often suggested that it is difficult for animals to remember past altercations between groupmates, only to act on them later, particularly when the individual was not involved in the interaction and with everyday life continuing in the interim. It proves that it is not only the elephant that doesn’t forget!

Another fascinating finding about grooming was that it played a role in peaceful hierarchy takeover. In the event that an alpha male or female dies, the mongoose that is next in the hierarchy takes over the role. If this position is disputed, a kind of “grooming contest” ensues, where two mongooses will groom one another constantly until one eventually gives up, covered in saliva. So, when too much of a good thing becomes unbearable and one mongoose cannot endure it any longer it gives up and relinquishes the alpha role to the other.

While I was researching this my newsfeed was abuzz with the latest about the wars, violence and conflict that’s taking place around the world. The absurd differences in conflict-management between our “most advanced” “intelligent” human species and these smallest of carnivores did not go unnoticed.

The painted wolves of Africa



I'd set out early to catch the worm – in this case hoping for African wild dogs or painted wolves as they are also known. Glimpses of them had been reported days before, and you can try and predict their future location based on the direction they were traveling, the nearest water source, and the most prolific areas

for their preferred prey species being impala. Other than that they are notoriously difficult to find or follow. I had an inkling they'd be hunting that morning in the vicinity of Simbiri/Airstrip/Banyini...

In 2019, thankfully before Covid hit, my husband and I embarked on my bucket-list-of-a-lifetime holiday, being a trip to Alaska to see coastal brown bears. I had never been able to justify to myself the exorbitant price tag of a pair of Swarovski binoculars, but just before we were about to leave Swarovski had a 70th anniversary promotion and I couldn't resist the offer. While out on a small bear-viewing boat along the coast of Katmai National Park I picked up my Swarovskis yet again, just for the sheer joy of using such a quality pair of binoculars. We had seen many bears by this stage, but as I scanned the coastline I heard myself shriek, "dog-like creatures!" Well, they turned out to be a pack of Alaskan wolves! I was beside myself with delight, never dreaming we'd see real wild wolves, and it was all thanks to the joy of owning a pair of Swarovskis.

Back to my early morning drive... I headed past the airstrip where a few animals were scattered about, and some 'impala' far away, right at the other end. Then I told myself to not be so quick and dismiss them, but to stop, switch off, and use my Swarvs which are always close at hand. I scanned the distant impala and, like Little Red Riding Hood to her 'granny', exclaimed, "My, what big ears you have!" It was three painted wolves, just standing on the airstrip, listening to the sounds of the morning as they tried to locate their packmates or a hunting opportunity. Once again my Swarvs had found me wolves!

I was on the edge of my seat and spellbound as they caught up with three other members of their pack, and together the six of them made their way to the Banyini for a quick drink and to see what hunting opportunities lay ahead. By this stage I was able to radio the other guide who was out with guests to Ferrari safari down to the Banyini and join me, which they did, resulting in the first photograph as a lovely memory for the guests and a classic Singita safari shot.

We followed the pack for some time as they tried to flush prey, but then they dispersed like shotgun shrapnel through the mopane thickets and it was game over for us. What a very special morning indeed!

Four-toed elephant-shrew / sengi



I've been longing to photograph one of these cute speedy little animals for ages, and at last (with astronomical ISO and shutter speed) managed to do so early one morning as the little beast was momentarily nosing about a dung pile. They are the "elephant representative" of the Little Five. (The others being the ant lion, rhinoceros beetle, buffalo weaver and leopard tortoise.)

Few mammals have had a more colourful history of misunderstood ancestry than the elephant-shrews, or sengis. Their common name "elephant shrew" comes from a perceived resemblance between their long noses and the trunk of an elephant, and their superficial similarity with shrews. Elephant shrews are not, in fact, shrews. Recent evidence suggests that they are more closely related to a group of African mammals that includes elephants, sea cows, and armadillos.



Here are a few more fun facts about them:

- This species, as its name suggests, has only four toes on its hind feet.
- Compared to other sengis that have small ears and eyes, a four-toed elephant sengi has broad, upstanding ears and large eyes.
- They have a long, pointed, flexible and sensitive snout, which they use when foraging.
- They have rather long legs for their size, and move in a hopping fashion like rabbits.
- They are extremely fast, and can reach speeds of 28.8 kilometres per hour (17.9 mph).
- Compared to other mammalian insectivores, sengis have relatively large brains.
- They are small insectivorous mammals native to Africa. The four-toed elephant sengi weigh between 160 and 280 g (5.6 and 9.9 oz).
- Their diets include termites, plant matter, centipedes, ants, crickets, millipedes and spiders.
- The young are born in a highly developed state and are weaned by their mothers soon thereafter.
- They have glands that produce a strong scent used to mark territories and deter predators.
- They foot drum or tail slap the ground in stressful situations.

Habituating the Nduna pride

Our dedicated lion scouts have spent most of this month furthering the habituation of the Nduna pride. This involves trying to find their tracks in the morning, then often tracking them on foot through thick bushveld, and if they find them then spending time in a vehicle a comfortable distance away until the lions get used to their presence. This then allows for quality safari viewing because lions, by nature, are actually quite scared of the human form – during the day that is. At night it is a different story completely.



When this photo was taken I was on foot with the lion scouts, and you can see they are quite interested in us, even though we were quite far away. Even so, they decided shortly after this to slink away into denser undergrowth.

The Nduna pride have been quite difficult to habituate because much of their territory is over the high, inaccessible rocky areas of Nduna and Lojaan Dams. They enjoy lying on top of large rocks to sunbathe and survey their land, and retire into the cool gullies and thick vegetation when it's too hot. They have used this rocky terrain to their hunting advantage too. South of Lojaan Dam is a rock system channel that is wide on one end and narrow at the other closest to the water. Buffalo making their way to the water gather in a bottleneck at the narrow end and the lions use this to stage an ambush, sometimes killing more than one buffalo in the ensuing chaos. It is similar on the eastern side of Nduna Dam too – another rocky section forces buffalo to go through a narrow gorge at only one or two at a time, when the herds are often over 500 strong. Again the lions have learnt to trigger this trap and spring out from behind these rocks, leaping onto the buffaloes.

The Nduna pride males, two scarred old males who have been around the block several times, are far more relaxed in the presence of humans in vehicles. In fact just before I took this photo they had been lying flat out in the grass, and were actually snoring. The sound of the vehicle did not even cause them to flick an ear, never mind interrupt their noisy nap. It was only when they heard the sound of what possibly could have been another lion did they look up with interest.



Nduna pride male 002

With a face full of street-cred scars I could check who he was against our ID database and confirm that he was the Nduna pride male 002. The database was compiled during the Covid pandemic, and since then I see he has lost a chunk out of his left ear giving it a ragged edge.

These IDs help us gain an understanding of pride dynamics, as well as the individual animals. These two males are an uncompromising coalition, having earned their place as territorial males the hard way. The day before this photo they were with the Nduna lionesses and cubs and devoured a buffalo calf without letting the lionesses feed. The cubs and sub-adults had tried to get a share but the males spent the whole time growling ferociously and keeping them at bay. We couldn't see the males or the kill, but you could hear their growling and fighting from a great distance away as their reprimanding roars reverberated off the rocks.



1: Frontal 2: Left hand side 3: Right hand side (note very big scar under eye)
4: Scarring on shoulder and body

Hwata hide at dawn

Spending time in the Hwata photographic hide is a popular activity, and like a sunset cruise should be on your wish list when you visit Singita Pamushana. The hide faces east, so the most popular time to be there is late afternoon when the setting sun gives the most pleasing golden hour results. It's also the time you can expect harder to find wildlife and view them for longer, like elephants and white and black rhinos.

However, for the fleeting moments before sunrise the lighting is unparalleled for rim-lit backlight.

This image was taken with my cell phone because a cell phone has a wide angle lens and it processes difficult lighting situations in very pleasing ways compared to DSLR cameras. No filter has been added, and you can see that the view out of the hide, even with no animals around, is sensational.



Slowly the diurnal plains game made their way to the water's edge, for an early morning drink to hydrate themselves for the hot day that lay ahead. Wildebeest, zebra, kudu, and even a lone eland arrived so I switched to my DSLR with a zoom lens. The colours went from kaleidoscopic, to gold, to white-out within the hour, and to capture the magic you constantly have to override your DSLR camera's automatic exposure settings as it valiantly tries to achieve an overall middle-ground exposure.

The morning spent in the hide reminded me of the poem, *The Magic Plains*, by Cullen Gouldsbury, that follows the photographs on the next page. Poetry is such an evocative medium that often helps one to understand and appreciate the world around us. It could be said that poetry casts a backlight on the world, highlighting its golden edges, making the stark truth of beauty all the more visible. As a dear old friend, since departed, reminded me, poetry tugs at one's heart-strings.

Photos overleaf:

A lone wildebeest bravely strode up to the water's edge, giving zebras the courage to do the same. Four zebras drink, while a kudu waits his turn, and a shy eland in the background cautiously assesses the scene.



The Magic Plains

When the world is out of gear,
When our Gods have gone astray,
When the ghosts of yester-year
Rise to taunt the coming day,
In the lull before the rains
Hie we to the Magic Plains.

Tapestries of tender green,
Screens of grass like cloth of gold,
Belts of bushland in between
Where the pinky buds unfold,
Whisps of smoke from heathen fires
On the Plain of our Desires.

Red-rimmed sun and lacy cloud,
Hazy mists that hover low,
Russet trees with branches bowed,
Silent, sluggish streams that flow,
Almost halt, yet never tire,
Through the Plain of my Desire.

Shadow shapes with sweeping horns
Glinting in the level rays,
Shapes that through a thousand dawns
Feed along the meadow ways,
Roan and eland and the rest
Grazing toward the golden West.

Or, when twilight shadows fall,
And the catlike creatures prowl,
Blending with hyaena call
Come the cries of waterfowl-
Thus the shadows creep again
Out across the magic plain.

By Cullen Gouldsbury

Twitter



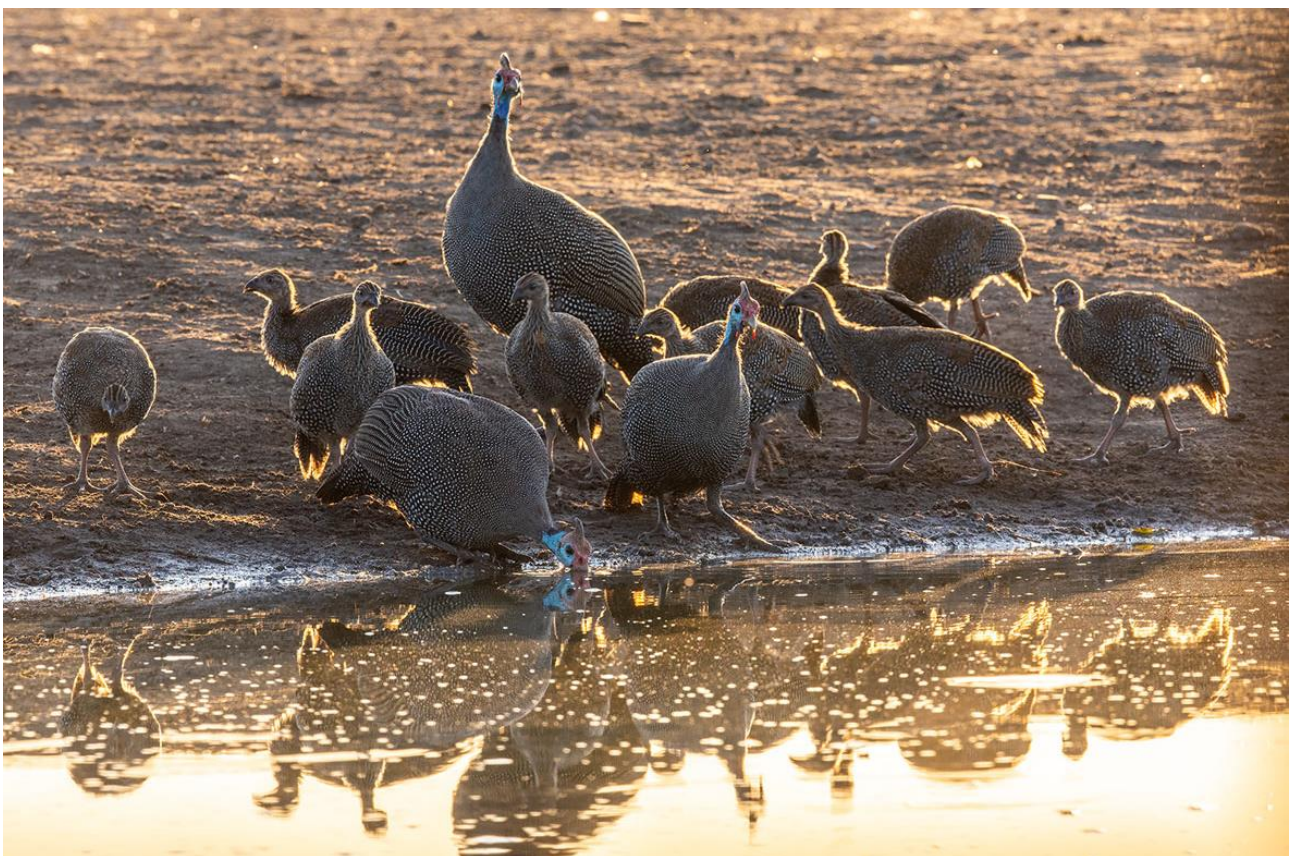
We saw this brown snake eagle (*Circaetus cinereus*) hunting in the same area over several days. Each time I hoped it would have a nice juicy snake in its talons, but I suppose catching a snake is like ordering fast food, and eating it is like slurping spaghetti!

What a special moment this was – two white-fronted bee-eaters (*Merops bullockoides*) perched on the wisp of a branch, right in front of our vehicle.





I was hoping to see and photograph a black rhino after sunset, but these white-breasted cormorants (*Phalacrocorax lucidus*) were the only wildlife in evidence, bickering over where to perch for the night. This large family of golden-outlined guinea fowl (*Numida meleagris*) enjoyed an early morning drink.



March Gallery



A black rhino with mud-wallow-high-tide-markings leaves the plains. Photo by Sarah Ball.
A white rhino poses with spiky horns, spiky horn shadows and spiky palm fronds.





A young bull elephant raises his trunk in acknowledgement of the onlookers.
White rhinos having enjoyed a mud wallow after a baking hot day.





A young nyala nibbles on the succulent growth around Simbiri Dam wall.

Two young leopard tortoises scamper (in tortoise terms) out of the soft sandy track.



A journey of giraffe gallop through Lojaan Dam.
The awkward way of drinking when you have stilt legs and a ladder neck.

