

# Singita



Photo by Jenny Hishin

## WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE For the month of April, Two Thousand and Twenty One

### Temperature

Average minimum:	16.5°C (61.7°F)
Minimum recorded:	12.8°C (55.0°F)
Average maximum:	31.8°C (89.2°F)
Maximum recorded:	35.4°C (95.7°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the month:	61 mm
Season to date:	773.9 mm

### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise:	06:10
Sunset:	17:31

The bush is still really thick for this time of year, thanks to great rains, and the grasshoppers are making the most of this abundance, as are ground-nesting birds and little rodents like elephant shrews. Stepping up the food chain the insectivores are having an absolute feast and many birds and raptors can be spotted flying off with crunchy bugs in their beaks. Most of the baobabs have lost their leaves, and many are hanging heavy with round or oval fruit. Finding a baobab fruit, cracking it open and sharing the sherbety seeds with guests is a tasty treat. The serenity of the wilderness is punctuated with loud roaring rutting calls from male impalas advertising their virility, but at the same time alerting the concealed predators to their whereabouts.

We thought we'd had the last of the season's rain, and all the natural pans were drying to muddy wallows, but then a spectacular storm at the end of the month astonished and delighted us with thunder, lightning and up to 85 mm of rain in some areas. It was so intense it flung branches off trees and turned the reserve into a soggy quagmire!

Guests flying in on Federal Air now land at Buffalo Range to clear customs, and then re-board the aircraft and hop over to the Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve to land at our Lone Star airstrip. They are picked up in a game viewer and enjoy a short game drive to Singita Pamushana Lodge. Imagine the delight of the guests who stepped off the plane, onto the game viewer, and immediately saw two male lions en route to the lodge.

### **Here is a snapshot of April's sightings:**

#### **Lions:**

- We are delighted that the Southern Pride has two new little cubs, that are about four weeks old.
- A pride in the north caught a buffalo and fed on it for a few days, providing great sightings.
- The two River Pride males have been in evidence, patrolling the Banyini, Hwata, Buffalo Fence area.

#### **Rhinos:**

- The rhino viewing is extraordinary, as always. A delight was a newborn white rhino calf seen with its mother who was drinking at a pan. It's so little it looks like a warthog! In the cover photo of white rhinos drinking at night it is hidden behind its mother's legs, making the total of nine white rhino in one frame.
- The full moon created a priceless scene softly illuminating numerous white rhinos while they drank.
- At one afternoon/evening session at the photo hide guests were mesmerised by a total of 11 white rhinos, as well as a lone buffalo bull, an elephant and a black-backed jackal trying to catch birds.
- Several sightings of black rhinos have been had. A great way to see them is on a boat cruise, and on one water safari guests saw two black rhinos browsing on the banks of the Nyamasikana River while others could be heard in the area, vocalising with their high-pitched squeals.

#### **Elephants:**

- We've enjoyed excellent sightings of a relaxed, large, breeding herd of elephants, with many youngsters, feeding along the river and between the river and the dam.
- Hefty old bulls, some currently in musth, have been seen with the breeding herd, or on their own, or with their askaris. They've been leaving deep round wells in the muddy soil!

#### **Buffalo:**

- There are large herds of buffalo (some numbering over 100) that have been seen in the central and northern areas. They are looking great – grass-fed heftiness, with glossy black coats and shining horns.
- The dagga boys are in their element rolling in the sloshy mud pans.

#### **Wild dogs:**

- The highlight was a sighting of 15 wild dogs, relaxing in the middle of the airstrip. It's time for them to start denning, so we hope the alpha female will choose a safe spot on the reserve and raise her little pups there, away from prying eyes.

#### **Leopards:**

- With the grass still so long and the bush so thick leopard viewing has been scarce.

- Glimpses of the spotted cats can be had here and there – the highlight of the month being a leopard hiding at the side of the road trying to hunt (unsuccessfully) impala.

#### **Cheetahs:**

- We haven't recorded any cheetah sightings for the month – we normally see them hunting in open grasslands, and no doubt we will when the plains open up again in the dry season.

#### **Hyenas**

- The hyenas still have the monopoly around the central areas, and all our guests this month have enjoyed sightings of them.
- A highlight was a mother hyena with three curious juveniles near the Nyamasikana River crossing on West Valley. One cub was carrying a baobab fruit in its mouth as a play toy, which was very entertaining.
- On one drive we followed a hyena with two sub-adult cubs, who were tracking the scent of a leopard which led to them meeting a black rhino. There were great interactions between the hyena and rhino!

#### **Plains game:**

- Plains game like impala, zebra, wildebeest and giraffe abound, and are in excellent condition.
- The less abundant and secretive plains game have been seen too – six Lichtenstein hartebeest were observed and a herd of ten sable antelope made their stately appearance.

#### **Birds**

- It's a great time for birding, thanks to the abundance of seeds and invertebrates. Birds seen in the month include grey-headed parrot, little sparrow hawk, shikra, barred owlet, Verreaux's eagle-owl, dwarf bittern, African hawk eagle, African crane, Dickinson's kestrel, Wahlberg's eagle and eastern nicator.

#### **Unusual sightings**

- A juvenile honey badger that was incredibly tolerant of our presence, allowed guests a great sighting.
- Crocodile tracks were tracked going up the hill at the Acropolis, all the way down Ultimate Drive, and then almost all the way to the Binya Road. That night the large reptile was seen in the middle of the Binya Road, then it moved off heading towards the Chiredzi River.

#### **Fishing:**

- The water is a touch cooler, but that hasn't stopped the fish biting. Several big Mozambique tilapia have been landed, and some feisty tigerfish.

#### **Rock art and walking safaris**

- It's a lovely time to get off the vehicle for a short walk to appreciate some of the rock art sites.
- Our guides love taking guests walking, such as the adventure to see the biggest baobab on the reserve.

#### **Day trips to Gonarezhou**

- Day trips to Gonarezhou are a must if you have the time – it's looking so beautiful and wild at the moment, with many breeding herds of elephants encountered on the way to Chilojo Cliffs.

**Some bush stories follow, as well as the April Gallery of images.**

## Pride and joy



After a 16 month hiatus, no thanks to Covid-19, I cannot adequately describe what it was like to return to Singita Pamushana.

It just feels right. The powder dust air soothing my skin, open-vehicle-wind ruffling my hair, the persistent sun kissing my neck. The tension in the atmosphere before an electric storm cracks open... The scent of thatch, floor polish and wild basil... The roar of impala, the echo of fish eagles, the way we speak on the radio, the names Chimizie, Chinzwini, Chikwete, Chiloveka... The colours April wears - sage, apple, pewter, copper and bronze... Old friends, smiling faces, kind words. My home from home, where I keep my wildness because the wilderness says so.

The lion tracking scouts had found the Southern Pride near Chiloveka Dam and I debated going to see them or trying to relocate the pack of wild dogs I'd seen that morning. Heading south I noticed how the season had progressed in these drier parts – there were far more metallic colours in the palette, and the vegetation was drying out to the point where it was sharp and bright and structural, and holding the light in a way that's particular to April and particularly beautiful for photographers and artists alike.

The Southern Pride were snoozing on the side of a track, in the late afternoon light. It simply couldn't have been more beautiful, and they are a particular beautiful pride. The dominant male was so relaxed that he didn't even bother to lift his head, which is remarkable when you realise they haven't been regularly viewed by guests for a year. One of the lionesses lay in a pool of gold, idly watching the world go by, or possibly wondering what was for dinner.



Another lioness got up and went for a good cat stretch and claw sharpening session on a resilient mopane tree.



What they were hiding from me was the fact that a little further down the track was another lioness, with two baby cubs of about four weeks old. The cubs saw the game viewer and scampered into the bushes, relying on their excellent instinct to hide from potential danger, while their mother simply stayed where she was letting them know that guides and their guests are no threat. I'm sure that as the respectful viewings of this pride increase the cubs will settle down and provide immense joy to all of us.

The next morning this pride was to be found in serious hunting mode. All the lazing about of this scene was replaced with serious intent and focus. The male set the tone with a resounding roar that let any other lion know he was on patrol. The mother with the cubs was not with the four lionesses and the male – her cubs are still far too little to go out hunting. There is a dense thicket of palms and swamp growth next to the dam, and I'm quite sure she has her cubs safely stashed in the impenetrable fortress. She will suckle them there and introduce them to the pride in the coming months.

It was so heart-warming to see this pride again – to see the youngsters from a couple of years ago all grown up, healthy and strong, and to know a new generation has been born. Old friends, new friends, scarred faces, resuscitating roars.

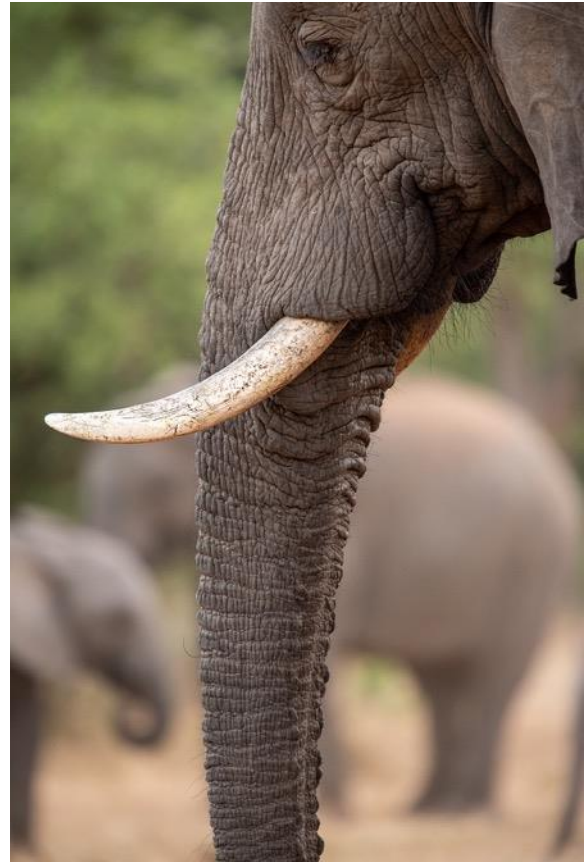
## An extended family affair

We first watched a few bull elephants feeding in the reeds of the riverbed, then noticed the rest of the breeding herd appear on the far bank and cross the sand, trunks raised in S-shapes smelling the air, before negotiating the shallowest part of the river and shepherding their little charges to safety on the other side.

We drove around to Zero Two Pan and, sure enough, some of the herd were already there. Parking some distance away we spent the next hour indulging in their behaviour.

Some drank at the waterhole, others clustered together in tight family units. Those that were hot and bothered kicked up sand, slurped it up in their trunks and threw it over themselves with dramatic flair.

Some little calves stayed by their mothers side and suckled. A calf, emboldened by the audacity of youth, thought he should try his balancing skills on a fallen tree trunk.



Occasionally one of the adults would come and stand near us, just taking a break from the herd, and at other times an irritable mother with a, “Do you know who I am?” attitude would come over and see if we were worth intimidating. With a head shake, ear flap and trunk flick she’d storm off to go and dispense discipline elsewhere.

Once the extended family had moved off three bulls surrounded the vehicle, like circling gangsters itching for a fight, but decided we were such non-confrontational cowards that they sauntered off, in good humour.

A baby calf, about 18 months hold, stays close to its mother.

This three-year-old, snuck away to try some balancing tricks.



## Right of way

An experienced hyena mother chose to suckle her cubs right on the side of the main thoroughfare that cuts through the reserve. Running underneath the road at this point is a big drainage pipe and it was clear from all the tracks and trampled vegetation that she'd stowed her cubs in the drainpipe for safety. While we watching the tranquil scene a large bull elephant appeared from around the bend and came marching on determinedly. We stayed where we were and so did the hyenas, but the cubs were the first to give way and then so did the mother. Once the traffic had passed we all calmly went on our own way again. Such a special scene to witness and a reminder to stay with a sighting and not rush off in search of the next best thing.



### Tortoise crossing

We spotted this tiny tortoise crossing the same main thoroughfare, and it wasn't much larger than a pebble. I decided to move it to safety, after photographing it, and was glad I did because moments later a larger tanker vehicle on its way to Gonarezhou came barrelling down this, the only public road in our reserve.



Photo by Gareth Hook

You should always try to usher tortoises off a busy road, rather than pick them up and move them because they tend to eject stored urine and water when you pick them up. If it is a water-scarce environment this can lead to their dehydration and death. Fortunately this was after the heavy downpour of rain, so it was not in danger of dehydration, and it held on to its water reserves anyway.



### Butterfly diet

It's commonly known that butterflies sip nectar, but they have a wider diet than that sweet treat. Some sip on fermenting fruit, decaying animal carcasses, animal faeces, wet mud and sap from damaged trees. Why? It seems that they gain extra nitrogen and sodium which are needed for reproduction and are scarce in the typical sugary fare of flower nectar.

Some butterflies seem to be distasteful to birds, possibly because of the poisonous plants they eat when in their larval caterpillar stage.

Here a common dotted border (*Mylothris agathina*) butterfly feeds on a sabi star flower in the lodge gardens. All parts of the sabi star are poisonous and ingestion can cause moderate to severe symptoms in most animals.

(Photo tip: a smartphone camera is really good for close-up macro shots like this – no need for a tripod to steady a DSLR camera, and the smartphone camera gives a deeper depth of field.)



This foxy emperor (*Charaxes jasius*) was feasting on a less savoury meal of lion faeces. I had been alerted to the awful smell at a lion sighting and followed my nose to see this surprising scene.



Twitter



The serene simple beauty of a common turtle dove coming in to land at a waterhole.

The magnificent bright colours of a rare Narina trogon perched in a tree. This is one of the most sought-after birds a twitcher can ever wish to see. Narina trogon photos by Scott Wenham.



## April Gallery





Previous page:

Above: Dawn swims through a thick blanket of mist over Hwata Pan, rim lighting the worn down rhino rubbing post. Little toads poke their nostrils above the water's surface, and guinea fowl peck through the remnants of the night's deposits.

Below: An hour or so later, further down the track, the mist rose to reveal two chilly giraffe.

This page:

Left: An impala lamb from last year, framed by the soft/spiky foliage.

Below: A female kipspringer perches on point as she surveys her territory. A little further away her horned partner did the same.





Nyala bulls prefer to strut their stuff rather than fight for dominance. This one is a clear winner in his baubled necklace, yellow tights and backlit crest of erect white hair running along his spine. Photo by Mark Saunders



This lioness would give any nyala bull a run for his money/life in a beauty contest.



The sunsets in April have been spectacular! The Arora Borealis' southern hemisphere challenger!

Photo by Josh Saunders



The same scene as above, taken with a drone.

Photo by Scott Wenham



Sunset behind the Malilangwe Dam.

Photo by Alex Naert



Electric storm along the river and heavy rain about to drench the reserve.

**All stories and photos by Jenny Hishin, unless otherwise stated.**