

Singita



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

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.2°C (70.1°F)
Minimum recorded: 16.1°C (60.9°F)
Average maximum: 33.6°C (92.4°F)
Maximum recorded: 37.7°C (99.8°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 63.7 mm
*For the year to date: 313.2 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:14
Sunset: 18:38

What an end to the year with a month of excellent green-season sightings! Some of the very best sightings have been when inclement weather threatens, proving that fortune favours the brave and rain doesn't stop play. We've had brilliant leopard viewing thanks to the cats climbing the trees more to search for hunting opportunities, and prey stashing, above the thick vegetation. Also, their camouflage that is so effective in the dry season makes them stand out now against the green backdrop. We have joyous news of new lion cubs for two of our large prides, and there is an abundance of plains game youngsters about. It's also birder's paradise now that all the summer visitors have flocked to this pristine wilderness.

Here's a sightings snapshot for December:

Lions

The lion sightings have been prolific, and mainly of the River and Nduna prides.

- **River:** This pride managed to successfully hunt a sub-adult giraffe along Pamushana Access Extension, about 200 metres from Binya Road. Initially the male dominated the kill and didn't allow any pride members to feed. We managed to see three very young cubs, but they were very shy. When the pride were allowed to feed 13 lions were seen in total, with four of the sub-adults and one of the small cubs. Five spotted hyenas arrived some time later, whooping and calling, and intimidated the lions enough for them to move off and abandon the kill in order to keep their youngsters safe.
- **Nduna:** This pride has been moving far and wide this month, even into the north-eastern reaches of the property, looking for hunting opportunities. One of the lionesses has an injury sustained from a hunt, on her front right leg. There is currently a mating pair from this pride. Mid-month the pride was seen at the Orphan/Nduna junctions, and they had two new cubs in tow! The cubs must be around eight weeks old. In total 11 lions were seen, which excluded the mating pair.

Leopards

Far more leopard sightings than usual this month, thanks to them having to utilise trees at this time, their camouflage not being as effective during this season, and a mother and male cub being more at ease around game-viewing vehicles. The highlights include:

- A morning drive starting out with a male cub walking and playing in front of the vehicle, along with his mother as she looked for hunting opportunities. A big warthog came to drink at a little pan nearby but the wise mother knew it was a formidable adversary and avoided it.
- Spotting a leopard from the cruise boat, which was drinking water on the shoreline of an inlet bay.
- Seeing two different leopards both on impala kills, during one drive.
- Finding a female leopard up in a marula tree, in the Nyari area. A herd of impalas got close to the tree, and like lightning she struck and caught one of the impalas. After killing it she dragged the carcass up the tree. Later the cub joined the mother in the marula tree to feed. This was an epic experience by any standards, but especially for a couple of our guests who were experiencing their first ever safari.
- While viewing a herd of impalas and their young near Pamushana Access a leopard materialised out of thin air and killed an impala lamb in our full view, before it retreated into thick vegetation. After the commotion and distress calls from the impala it came back for its kill and dragged it off into thick vegetation.

Rhinos

White: The white rhinos, being grazers, are parting the green grass seas like big grey battleships.

On one morning drive a total of 22 white rhinos were seen.

Black: Some of the highlights include:

- Spying on three black rhinos asleep under a tree.
- Seeing a black rhino cow with a small calf. The mother had a rear horn that was longer than her front horn, and she was large in stature. She mock charged the vehicle a couple of times before running off with her calf, and it was then that we saw that there was also a big bull with them.

Elephants

It's hard to misplace an elephant, but they disperse far and wide during the wet green season.

- A lucky sighting of one bull elephant was enjoyed at sunset from the cruise boat.
- A single bull elephant walked right up to the vehicle to inspect the new guest arrivals, which resulted in an array of thankful prayers!
- A relaxed breeding herd was seen feeding near Lojaan Dam, and also a herd west of the Chibi area.

Buffalo

- The dagga boys are in their element, chilling out in some of the mud wallows.

Plains game

- Plains game abounds, and the animals are enjoying the lush grass. Many of the wildebeest have newborn calves, and the impala lambs are a delight.
- A dramatic sight was of two eland bulls fighting, and kicking up the red earth in a memorable display.

Wild dogs

- The pack of African wild dogs has been seen a few times. They are keeping the new populations of plains game in check.

Hyena

- On night patrol nine hyenas were seen walking along the Pamushana Access road.

Unusual sightings

- A delightful sighting of a four-toed elephant shrew at Nyamasikana Crossing.

Boat cruise

- Quite possibly our most popular safari activity, and one unique to the Singita offering.

Fishing

- The tigers are biting – it's landing these fighting fish that's so challenging. Red-breasted bream and Mozambique bream are being caught at the moment – in two hours a family fishing expedition had the time of their lives landing 24 big bream.

Birds

Keen birders set out with guide Stephen Chinhoi this month, and racked up the following big ticks:

- First afternoon = 70 birds
- Water birding from the boat resulted in a growing tally with fish eagles and an osprey.
- Parking in the cleared area near the harbour they managed to record 50 bird species feeding on the insects soon after the rain.
- At Ray's Drift they tried their luck with Pel's fishing owl, and hit the jackpot. The owl flew from the Hippo side across the river to Malilangwe side.
- On departure the birding list was at 203 birds!

Guide Time Mutema also had keen birders.

- 64 species recorded in one drive.
- They reached a total of 101 species within 2 days.
- On an afternoon boat cruise on the Malilangwe Dam that total increased to 123 birds.

Gonarezhou day trip

- Gonarezhou means "The Place of Elephants", so for guaranteed elephant sightings a day trip into our neighbouring national park is a must.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as a December Gallery of images.

The passing parade

Breeding herds of elephants are made up of all the females, their young offspring, and a couple of breeding males. When male calves get too stropky and troublesome due to their rising testosterone levels, they are driven out of the breeding herd and go off on their own, joining up in small bachelor groups. Often breeding males go off on their own too as the breeding herds generate a lot of stress, and they return to the breeding herds when they are in a state of musth which is when their testosterone levels surge.

What was fascinating when watching a breeding herd coming down to the water's edge to drink was where the breeding males positioned themselves. They hung around on the open area at the water's edge, making sure that every female elephant had to walk past them in order to reach the water. As each new female arrived the males would reach out their trunks and test her receptiveness to breeding by analysing the scent of her hormonal state. The females came out of the forest with the one purpose of drinking, then went straight back, while the males stayed in the same spot for hours checking out the passing parade.

An elephant's gestation period is 22 months and, in optimal habitats, calving intervals are 2.5 to 4 years. Taking these long periods into account the window for bulls to mate with cows in oestrus is relatively small, so there is much competition and they need to not miss an opportunity.



Here two big bulls overshadow two females, and the bull on the right is testing the receptive state of the cow on the left. The cow in the middle had a young calf at foot that was pushed out of the way as the bull at the back zeroed in on the cows.

Civilised company



These lions are members of the Southern Pride, a pride that is growing in numbers and has their core territory in the south, protected by two large males. We found them around Mapanye Springs early one morning, with their bellies full and nothing much more than digestion on their agenda. Every now and again a vulture would fly overhead to see if they had a kill nearby, and the lions would watch it, assessing if the vultures were perhaps going to some new kill that they should know about. But the vultures never descended so the lions didn't follow up, instead they flopped back down and relaxed or had a drink of water from the spring.

We did the same. We poured a cup of Zimbabwe's finest La Lucie Private Reserve Gourmet coffee, put our



feet up and enjoyed the company of a pride of wild lions.

One lion in particular caught my eye, a young male with the start of a mane. He was affectionate to the one lioness, probably his mother, and had confident air about him – and a knack for posing handsomely.



I was flying back to ‘civilisation’ that afternoon, and that evening was navigating the airport of my destination to the taxi rank for my Uber ride home. On the way I encountered no less than three uncivilised situations: (An immigration queue that made a glacier’s pace seem speedy; a person having a shouting match over the phone; and a turf battle between the taxi and Uber drivers.)



With city-living anxiety flooding my body I wondered how it was possible that a few humans could have skyrocketed me to this state when that very morning I had been so peacefully relaxing in the company of lions? The only solution is to immediately plan your next safari as soon as you get home, so that you have civilised company to look forward to!





Permanent residents

Being a regular at Pamushana means you get to know the other regulars too, and what characters they are!

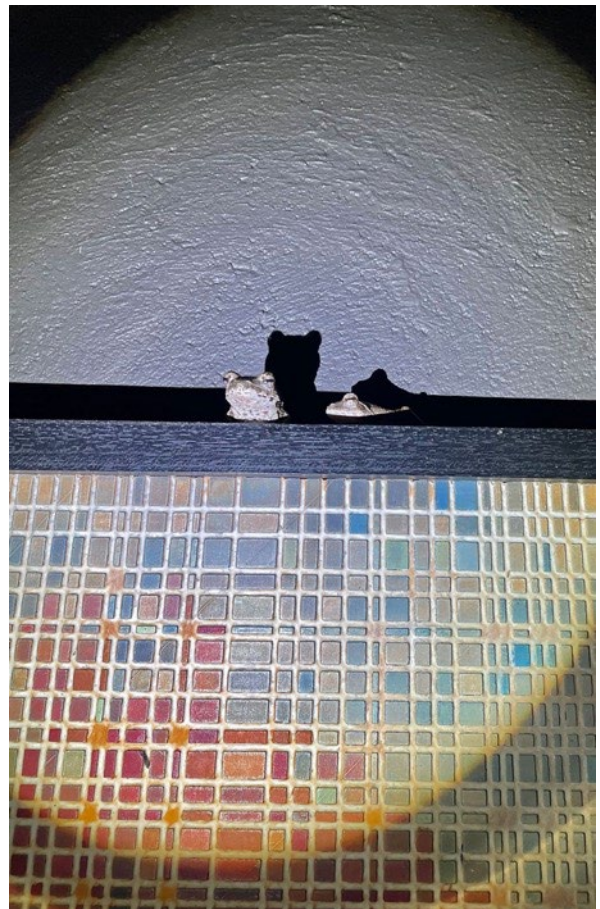


This chameleon spent every night of the week out hunting, on the same branch of a tree that overhangs the driveway. (He wasn't overly effusive. Despite my nightly greetings he'd roll his eyes and wait for me to pass, before giving a hapless insect a tongue lashing.)

Flap-necked chameleons hunt mainly at night using their cryptic colouration for camouflage and waiting for insects to venture close enough for them to strike. They use their telescopic tongue, which can be the length of their body to snatch up the insect, pulling it back into their mouth. A sticky tongue tip and muscles that create a suction hold on to the prey ensure the end is over within seconds.

These two foam-nest tree frogs are simply fabulous, and have excellent taste in art. Every evening they perch upon this stage and sing a riveting duet, while casting teddy bear and leopard shadows on the wall.

These frogs can live for months away from water thanks to being able to excrete urea, reabsorb water, having a skin resistant to desiccation, that changes colour in response to temperature, and is relatively impermeable. They are also able to lose up to 60% of their body weight over the course of several months!





This giant plated lizard resides outside Villa 1. These lizards are described as being rupicolous, which means that they live among rocky outcrops, mostly on the upper slopes of hills. This lizard is used to seeing guests, so it doesn't dash off, but normally an individual would retreat into a rock crevice at the slightest disturbance and inflate its body, effectively wedging itself into the crevice making it very difficult for anything to dislodge it. Many of our guests find this an enviable strategy when it comes time for them to reluctantly check out of their luxury villa set among the rocky outcrops of Pamushana.

This beautiful big mopane moth had found its way into the kitchen one morning, and needed to be redirected to a mopane tree in order to lay her eggs which will then hatch into mopane worms.



Tortoises and terrapins

Shortly before the rains arrived we spotted these two reptilian members of the Order Chelonian going about their business, slowly. One of the many interesting things about Chelonians is that the sex of the embryo development is determined by temperature – females develop at higher temperatures. Climate change is and will have an impact on these animals when you take this fact into account. Chelonians are the oldest form of living reptile, having been in existence for 210 million years.

The top photo is of a leopard tortoise (*Stigmochelys pardalis*) and the bottom photo is of a serrated hinged terrapin (*Pelusios sinuatus*).

The main differences between tortoises and terrapins is that tortoises live on land while terrapins live in fresh water; tortoises have pillar-like legs compared to a terrapin's webbed feet; and tortoises eat vegetation and snails while terrapins dine on carrion, ectoparasites and aquatic invertebrates.

Leopard tortoises are the largest of tortoises in southern Africa, and the same goes for serrated hinged terrapins.

The serrated hinged terrapin is so named because it has a hinge on the front section of the plastron that closes over the head region to protect the head and forelimbs. This terrapin also secretes a foul odour when threatened – an excellent strategy of defence: I'm locked inside my house and I stink so just stay away!

The female serrated hinged terrapin lays seven to 25 eggs, up to 500 m (1 600 ft) from the nearest water, in October to January. We found this terrapin heading back towards the river so it's possible she was returning from laying eggs.



Twitter



Three brown-headed parrots (*Poicephalus cryptoxanthus*) adorn a branch like festive Christmas baubles on a tree. This was an early morning grooming session with their feathers fluffed out to keep themselves insulated with a warm layer of air.

Flower of the month

Adding a splash of Santa Claus red to the landscape are these sepals of the shrub *Ochna inermis*. The flowers are golden yellow. The fruit develop 1-5 carpels which are purple-black when ripe, and are surrounded by these pink to red persistent sepals. (Photo: Shelley Warth)

December Gallery



Three rhinos, heads low, march towards water for the serious business of drinking. Exclamatory lightning bolts connect the thunderstorm to the earth. (Photos by Brad Fouché)





With an incredible horn as a compass point this white rhino navigates the grasslands.
A large herd of buffalo drink from the Chiredzi River while crossing at sunset.





Before the wet season started you would see multiple species at the drinking points. This Lichtenstein hartebeest looked so bedraggled and forlorn as it slouched past an ever resplendent sable bull. Even a good-looking zebra knew he'd been outshone. And the fickle oxpeckers jumped ship in favour of the handsome host!





Wild dogs disappear in the landscape beneath a baobab.
Sunrise filters through the foliage of this riverine tree.





White rhinos away from water tend to move off to more open spaces, but when drinking from a pan will tolerate quiet observation without concern. Even this jackal that was busying itself around a pan was ignored.





Here's looking back on 2022, and wishing it a fond farewell. Thank you for taking the time to read these monthly wildlife journals, and may your 2023 wishes include a safari to Singita Pamushana!

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