

# Singita



Photo by Rudi Hulshof

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

### Temperature

Average minimum: 25.0°C (77.3°F)  
Minimum recorded: 24.0°C (66.2°F)  
Average maximum: 36.2°C (97.1°F)  
Maximum recorded: 40.0°C (104.0°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 10 mm  
Season to date: 10 mm

### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:47  
Sunset: 17:46

The month of October has once again proven to be a time of prime game viewing. For the majority of the month, the conditions have been dry, with clouds building, and bringing the promise of much needed rain. At the end of the month, we received the first bit of rain, that helped to settle the dust. The migratory birds that have arrived back, are advertising their presence and it is wonderful to hear their calls once again.

A Sightings Snapshot for October follows:

## Lions

- Lion sightings have continued to be phenomenal during October. The summer rains have not yet arrived, and as such the N'wanetsi and Sweni Rivers along with the Gudzane drainage system attract large concentrations of animals to the concession, resulting in abundant prey for the lions.
- The Mananga Pride have made at least six confirmed buffalo kills, and probably a few more that we did not find. Both portions of the pride have been seen virtually daily, sometimes together, when the feeding frenzies are taking place. The two Shishangaan males are still the rulers of their domain and are regularly seen with the pride. Seeing over 25 lions lying sprawled out near their kills remains an awe-inspiring sight.
- The Shishangaan Pride of seven females has also provided countless hours of viewing this month, often accompanied by the two Trichard males who are the dominant territorial males in the southern parts of the concession. For weeks the speculation as to the location of a den-site has been a talking point between the guides and, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October, we managed to get the first view of the three new additions to the pride. This is a very vulnerable time for the survival of the cubs, and we can only hope that they become part of the 20% of lions that reach adulthood. The hope of their survival has become even greater because one cub is a white lion, and there are currently only three, wild, free-roaming white lions in Africa.
- For a week during the month, two lionesses from the Mountain Pride were viewed moving around a valley that still has rocky pools of trapped water. The young Mountain Pride male was also seen alone a few times. Late in the month, the remaining six Mountain Pride females made an appearance and were found a few hundred meters from where the Mananga Pride was feeding on a freshly killed buffalo bull.
- A coalition of five large males is being seen more often in the north, and this could spell some trouble for the aging Shishangaan males who, at over 15 years of age, are well past their prime.
- Members from the reported coalition of seven males in the south are also frequently making their appearances in the concession. When not seen attempting to increase their territorial range into the concession, these males have been found regularly with a large pride we have been calling the Southern Pride along the H6 road leading from our airstrip to the lodge.
- The Maputo male has been found a handful of times, without his coalition partner the Kumana male, who we last saw in poor condition in September. His absence may indicate that age caught up with him, and he may no longer be alive.
- A big surprise was the reappearance of the Xirombe male lion who has been missing for several months. He was viewed for a few days feeding on a kudu kill, and for a good while afterward, as he rested and digested his meal.

## Leopards

- The Dumbana female has, for the most part, left her two, almost two-year-old, sons to a life of independence. Over the past two months, she has spent an increasing amount of time alone, only being seen twice with her sons. She has been seen on two different occasions mating with two different male leopards that have adjacent territories here in the southern parts of the concession. (The Lebombo male and a yet-to-be-named male that has been seen on many occasions marking out his territory along the N'wanetsi River close to the lodges, where he was also located with a fresh warthog kill in a weeping boer-bean tree for a couple of days.)
- The two young Dumbana males have been concentrating their activity around the N'wanetsi River close to the lodge, providing us with sightings on about 95% of drives. Soon they will be nomads as they establish their territories in months and years to come. This will be important as they will need to leave their maternal territory where their mother will require space to start raising her next litter.

- The Nhlangueni female and her two cubs have also been seen regularly in the central depression, and we are glad to report that the cubs are both still strong and growing accustomed to the presence of a vehicle.
- A few sightings of unknown leopards have been reported in various places on the concession, and there is currently a focus for the guiding team to use photographs of them to confirm the identities of these individuals. This will allow us to map out their territories, gaining a better understanding of the leopard population's dynamics going forward.

### **Cheetahs**

- Cheetah sightings have been rewarding in October. We have managed to see six different individuals during the month.
- The coalition of two adult males has been moving in and out of the concession and was seen feeding on a warthog carcass mid-month.
- The female and her two almost full-grown male sons have spent several days in the central regions of the concession. They had an interesting encounter with a pack of nine wild dogs on a late afternoon drive recently. All ended well with no injuries reported and the cheetah family was seen the following day moving through the central depression on route to Gudzane Dam.
- We have also had at least three visits from a female cheetah moving on her own in the vicinity of the lodges. The thought is that this female may be pregnant and seeking a suitable safe den-site to give birth. She managed to kill an impala after a long stalk and chase, a mere stone's throw away from the lodge's entrance a few weeks ago.
- We have not seen the group of four subadults for a while now, but trust that it is only a matter of time before they again make an appearance.

### **Wild dogs**

- There have been six sightings of wild dogs this month. The most has been of a pack of nine wild dogs that have ventured east from the north western parts of the concession. The other pack of wild dogs consists of three individuals that are seen in the southern regions of the concession. The pack of nine allowed for great viewing on a warm summer morning as they chased a herd of impalas through the central depression and managed to take down two adult impalas just to the north of Pony pan. With the impala birthing season approaching in the coming weeks, we hope the pack remains on the concession during this time.

### **Spotted hyenas**

- A clan of hyenas has been seen frequently around the Xingwenyana crossing. This seems to be the clan from the central parts of the concession who have been seen frequenting the hoisted carcasses of several leopards in the area, even managing to steal an impala carcass from an unknown male leopard. They have also been seen finishing off the remains of the buffalo carcasses that the lions have left behind, most notably around Dudu's crossing. The clans are still not at the population to truly compete with the lion prides of the area however they still make for eyrie calls into the early evening as the sound reverberates off the Lebombo mountains.

### **Elephants**

- The N'wanetsi and Sweni Rivers are still holding substantial water which allows elephants from far and wide to quench their thirst come midday as the mercury starts to climb. Several male elephants have been courting females that are in oestrus. The most notable sighting was that of a baby elephant being born just below Green Apple Hill's lookout point. We were attracted to the area due to the vultures descending. The Maputo male lion arrived on the scene shortly after having followed the vultures' movements and found the remnants of the placenta which he proceeded to consume. Not far off in the

shade of a knobthorn, the family of elephants gathered around the young one as it lay flat on the ground, exhausted from taking its first steps in search of a cooler environment aided by its mother's gentle guidance. After several minutes we could see the tiny trunk twitch and move. This initiated the rest of the herd to begin touching the infant elephant with their trunks suggesting a welcoming behaviour to that of the herd's newest member.

### **Buffalos**

- There have been frequent sightings of a group of 13 males and a single female buffalo in the vicinity of Xinenene Port. This is probably due to the water being held by the rocks being the only surface water available for quite some distance. There was a herd of over a thousand that entered the northern parts of the concession, making their way towards Gudzane Dam to drink before heading westwards towards the open grassland plains. The herds have been trailed by various prides of lions as the buffalo seek out areas with sufficient water to drink.

### **Plains game**

- The open and burnt areas throughout the concession have been swathed with a green flush from the first rains of the summer season. This has caused an abundance of zebra and wildebeest to be attracted to the new green shoots that are on offer. Several journeys of giraffes have been seen browsing on the new leaves that are spurting on the branches of the sticky thorns. The impala females are looking heavily pregnant with the birthing season imminent.

### **Rare animals and other sightings**

- There have been several sightings of klipspringers along the Lebombo mountains. Some pairs have been seen venturing down the rocky escarpment towards the N'wanetsi River. There have been five sightings of Sharpe's grysbok throughout the concession. An African wild cat has been seen along the western grassland plains hunting small rodents.

### **Birds**

- There was the first recorded sighting of a gorgeous bushshrike on the concession, in the Nyokene drainage line.
- Due to the multiple buffalo killed by the lion prides there has been an abundance of vultures seen scavenging the remains of the carcasses. Lappet-face, white-backed, white-headed, and hooded vultures have been seen.
- Migrant birds have been seen returning to the concession, to date there have been confirmed sightings of the following migratory birds: Klaas's, Diedericks, Jacobin, and red-chested cuckoos. European bee-eaters have been seen along Ma-Four-Pounds Road. Woodland kingfishers have been heard calling along the N'wanetsi River. Wahlberg eagles have been seen returning to their annual nesting sites throughout the concession, with a pale morph individual seen.

**Some bush reflections and articles follow, as well as the October Gallery of images.**

## Are hippos the most dangerous animal in Africa?

By Rudi Hulshof



Whilst out on the drive, we are often asked questions by our guests enquiring about facts they have read, seen, or heard in preparation for their upcoming African safari. Regularly, I have had the question posed to me about the hippo's aggressive demeanour, and concerns about how dangerous they are.

For years, as a child growing up, spending virtually every school holiday (vacation) in the Kruger National Park, I too became indoctrinated to the notion that hippos are the most dangerous animal that can be encountered in Africa, due to them being responsible for the most human fatalities, approximately 500 human deaths, per year. This number, I believed, far surpassed the deaths caused by all the other species, including lions, elephants, leopards, Cape buffalo, and rhinos to name a few.

I was however mistaken, and since starting my journey as a professional safari guide 25 years ago, I have been very focused on factual information rather than anecdotal statements handed down from father to son, or safari guide to apprentice.

To answer the question posed in the title, we need to start at a point and make a distinction between what constitutes an animal when referencing the above statement about hippos being the most dangerous. More people are killed per year by the malaria parasite that is transmitted by the *Anopheles* mosquito, (between 750 000 and 1 million) but this is an insect. Similarly, crocodiles are assumed to kill in the region of 1 000 humans annually, about double that of hippos, but they are reptiles. Both insects and reptiles are part of the Animal Kingdom and therefore we have already debunked the statement that hippos are the most dangerous animals in Africa, since crocodiles and mosquitoes are responsible for a far greater number of human fatalities. A better description would be to refer to hippos as the most dangerous mammals. But is this accurate?

Those individuals who have joined me on safari drives will attest to the fact that I am pedantic when it comes to explaining that I believe that no animal, especially hippos, is more dangerous than any others. Every animal out there will defend itself from another species if it feels threatened, be it a lion, hippo, or warthog. This behaviour we tend to unfairly anthropomorphize as "aggression" or "dangerous" animal traits. By their nature, unless provoked, animals will live lifetimes without feeling the need to display interspecific defence or attack behaviour, and will generally only do so to ensure they are not harmed, injured, or displaced in any way.

When we start looking at statistics of animal attacks that lead to human fatalities in Africa, we are usually drawn to making conclusions based on what the media world decides to report on. The Big Five (elephants, lions, leopards, rhinos, and buffalo) are the usual culprits that get the first thought, since the definition of the Big Five is: The five most DANGEROUS animals to HUNT ON FOOT. Any species that is pursued by a hunter with the intent of killing it, will be defensive, and would likely lead to a confrontation should it be cornered or wounded. Hippos, on the other hand, are an easy animal to hunt, considering a hunter can simply walk to the edge of the water to aim, without too much resistance from the targeted individual, since it is in the water which it considers its safe comfort zone. It is for this reason that the hippo is not included in the proverbial Big Five.

Why then do hippos get classed as dangerous and responsible for many human deaths per year?

The largest factor to consider in answering this is their habitat and their distribution range. Most human / Big Five interactions in Africa would occur in controlled access areas, zoned as nature reserves, protected conservations parks, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, etc. In these areas, one would find that viewing of these wild fauna species gets done in a controlled, relatively safe manner, either being led by experienced guides or needing to follow guidelines and rules stipulated upon entry. This results in limited incidents of human fatalities. The question I often pose when discussing this out on drive is; Where in Africa does one find Hippos? The answer is, in virtually every large river system on the continent whether that be in a protected area or flowing through rural and even sometimes urban environments. The chance of a person in Africa encountering a hippo is therefore far greater than the possibility of a person walking into a lion.

As per the IUCN, there are about 130 000 hippos, versus around 20 000 lions on the continent. Pure statistics show that the probability of a lion attack is therefore far less than a hippo attack. This should not be misconstrued as a hippo being more dangerous, but rather interpreted mathematically and statistically by looking at probabilities of interactions between humans and various species of wildlife.

The shared resource of water also contributes greatly to potential contact between humans and hippos. Due to the third-world nature of most developing countries in Africa, turning on a tap is a foreign concept in countless rural areas dotted across the length and breadth of Africa. There are millions of people who would need to physically visit rivers or natural water sources daily, be it to fetch water to take home for household chores, collect water to consume, cook, wash and bath in, do laundry, fish, and even transport from village to village to engage in commercial trade activities. It is here that the chances of human-hippo conflict increase and massively surpass the interaction probabilities with previously mentioned large animals.

The most common hippo attacks come from the water with humans on boats. Since hippos are submerged, it can be incredibly hard to see them from the surface. If a human in a boat, raft or canoe floats by while fishing, it's easy to miss the massive animal at rest. Suddenly, the hippo could launch itself at the boat, protecting its territory, usually capsizing it. Once a human is in the water, there is little they can do to stop the attack. This leads to a further misrepresentation of blame to the hippo, as a large number of deaths could be avoided if a greater percentage of people had the know-how and ability to swim. I read years ago that over half of human deaths attributed to hippos are in fact drownings, and not due to actual physical contact between our two species.

Given space and distance, along with the respect due to them, the manifestation of aggression towards a human from a mammal would generally not randomly occur. There are however bound to be the odd incidents that happen without provocation, which must be considered too when investigating specific incidents of human/animal confrontation when putting forward explanations to clarify or confirm statements. I leave it up to you to decide if the hippo is the most dangerous animal in Africa, or if simple semantics has lead us to formulate a skewed perception of their impact based solely on reported numbers.

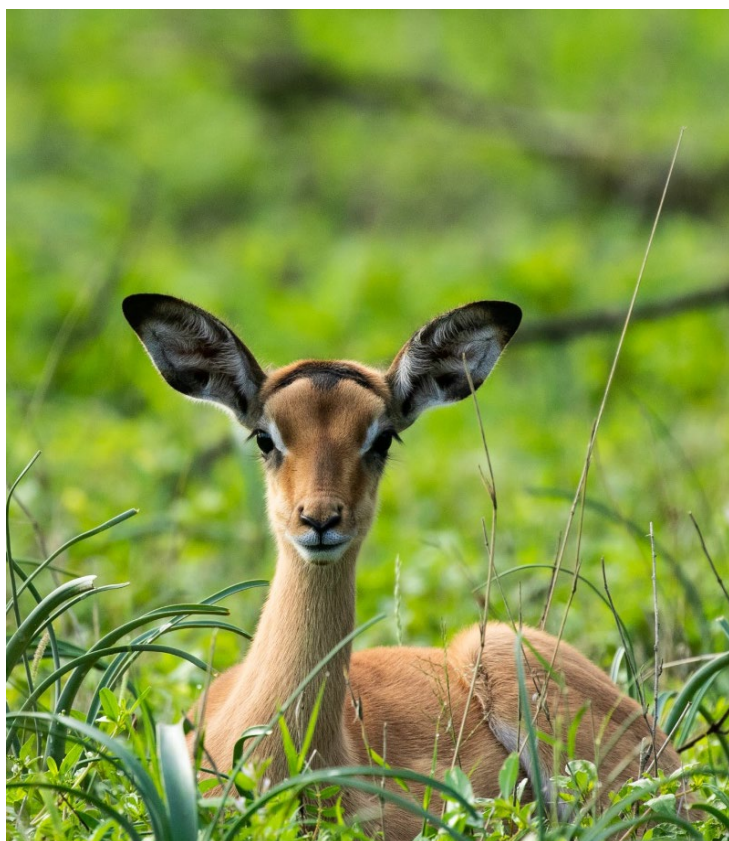


## The not so silence of the lambs

By Liam Henderson

Every year without fail two things are guaranteed here at Singita Kruger National Park. Firstly, the impala antelope will give birth to a vast number of young lambs as the impending summer rains start to fall upon the barren earth of the concession. The second guaranteed thing is that every year, guides will try to predict when the first lamb will be seen. There are strict rules as the evidence to substantiate a valid sighting of a wobbly impala lamb taking its first steps has to be backed up with photographic evidence or a second pair of eyes to bear witness to the animal. This can become quite troublesome as there have been cases where a steenbok has been called in as being mistaken for an impala lamb!

However, every year there is the rise of a debate to a theory that has travelled all areas that impalas inhabit on the African continent. That theory is impalas are able to delay their birth of their young if the summer rains have not yet arrived. Everyone who is worth their salt when it comes to the African bushveld has heard this story time and time again. While it makes for an interesting phenomenon, there are valid sceptical reasons that point to this theory being untrue.



Impalas in southern Africa are synchronous breeders, meaning they tend to mate and give birth around the same time each year. Impala breeding usually corresponds with the wet season—they usually mate in May, at the end of the wet season, and give birth in November, at the start of the next wet season. That predictable breeding schedule usually gives impala calves their best chance at survival. Impalas and other prey face a higher risk in the dry season, when dwindling food and water supplies give predators the advantage.

It's possible just as many impala calves are born before the start of the wet season as after it. But it's survival of the fittest on the savanna—calves born just a little too early may die before humans ever know they were there. And on top of that, natural birth for an impala born a month late would be impossible because the offspring would be too large.

Any woman that has borne children can state that when the baby decides to arrive there is no delaying it, let alone for an entire month! However, there may be some truth to the delaying in the form of adequate nutrition being available for the final developmental stage of the impala foetus. These can be seen and noted in East Africa with the wildebeest migration. The final developmental stages of the foetus of the wildebeest happen in the last two to four weeks of the gestation period. This results in the foetus growing almost two thirds of its final birthing weight. So, if there is limited vegetation and water available for the impala mothers, there may be a delay in the time of the birth. This could be onset by environmental conditions such as drought or severe temperature changes. Conversely the arrival of early rains could provide the much-needed nutrients and water that would stimulate and fuel the final developmental stages of the gestation, which would allow for the birthing to come much sooner than anticipated.



## October Gallery



Maputo male, and one of the coalition of three. Photos by Rudi Hulshof.



Male cheetahs and a male leopard. Photos by Rudi Hulshof.



Mananga Pride and the Shirombe male. Photos by Rudi Hulshof.





Dumbana female mating, Photo by Rudi Hulshof.



Shish lioness and her three cubs. Photo by Rudi Hulshof.





Elephant bull. Photo by Solomon Ndlovu.



Plains zebra. Photo by Solomon Ndlovu.