

Singita Kruger National Park
Lebombo & Sweni Lodges
South Africa

Singita



Wildlife Journal For the month of March, Two Thousand and Fifteen

Temperature

Average minimum: 18.9°C (66°F)
Average maximum: 33.0°C (91.4°F)
Minimum recorded: 10.0°C (50°F)
Maximum recorded: 37.0°C (98.6°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the period: 2 mm
For the year to date: 81.95 mm

Spots and stripes Article and photos by Nick du Plessis

Leopards are well known for their adaptability, it is the social dynamic that arguably makes them the most successful and hence, widespread, of the large cats in Africa. What we mean by 'adaptability' is not only the different habitats they thrive in, but also the prey they hunt and the variety of that prey. Most species tend to 'specialize,' but what happens if the prey they concentrate on runs out or learns to evade them? Leopards have been recorded to prey on everything from birds, eggs, lizards and even fish if necessary, and have the capability of bringing down medium size antelopes if the chance exists.

But for the first time in my career I saw a large male leopard feeding on a zebra foal. This is unique and just highlights the opportunistic nature of the animal. Why it's unique is because zebras are renowned for fighting

back - they will kick, bite, chop at and even stamp the predator if they need to, and leopards, being as solitary as they are, are notorious for never picking a fight they know they won't win. If they do and get injured, they don't have the safety net of a pride or clan to fall back on for survival.

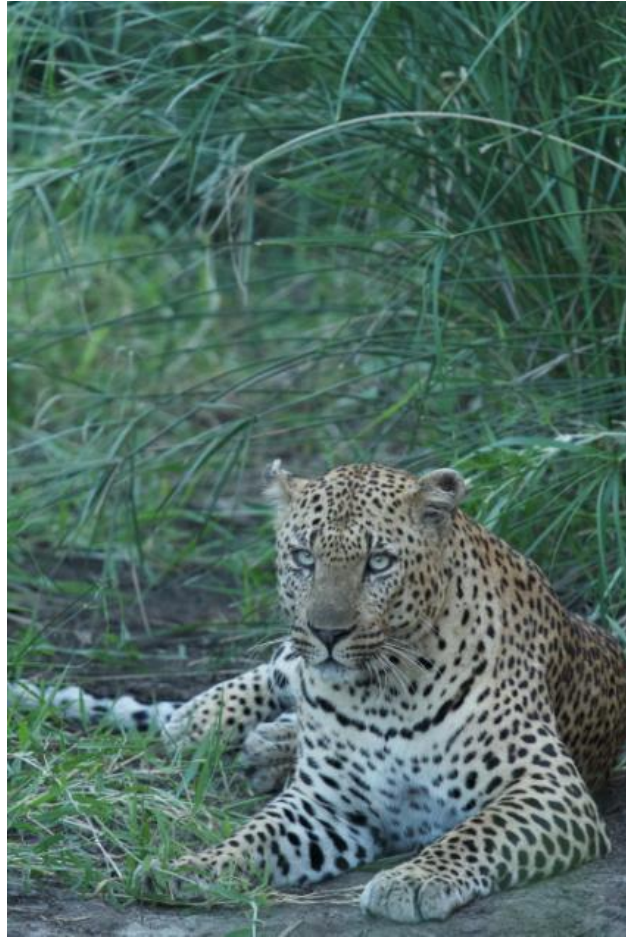


What was even more exciting was how we managed to find it. We had guests that were on their first afternoon with us, and had actually, prior to going out, asked what the chances were of seeing a leopard on the concession. Although we had been fortunate of late we really had to talk it down - the large pride was back in the area which normally minimizes our chances of seeing these elusive spotted cat, but we promised that if we saw any fresh sign or evidence that we would try our best to follow up.

We couldn't have been out for more than ten minutes when tracker Christoff confidentially stuck up his hand and said with a grin on his face, "Tracks, and its leopard, fresh male leopard." The tracks were on top of all the vehicle tracks from the morning. We have all sorts of ways of aging tracks and signs but a sign like that simply means it has been here somewhere between the drives and, being so hot, couldn't have gone very far.

We both got off the vehicle to have a closer look and get a general direction of where the tracks were going. While doing this, and having the Land Rover turned off, it gave us the chance to listen out for any alarm calls. It wasn't seconds and we started to hear zebras and Egyptian geese alarming directly ahead of us in the same direction that the tracks were heading. Now we were all getting uncontrollably excited! I thought we should go and check in the direction of the zebras who were clearly flustered, but my experienced tracker convinced me otherwise and advised that we checked towards the river first and those geese, and then if we had no luck to go and check the zebra. Almost immediately after starting to drive and check in the direction of the river we found this magnificent sighting. It must have been only minutes after the event, the leopard was still catching his breath and the little foal was making its last kicks and attempts to pry free.

He then proceeded to drag it to cover across the N'wanetsi River, to the edge of the Lebombo mountain range, where he stashed it, and we were all lucky enough to see him gorge himself there for the following four days.





Animal body language and our interpretation of it is, I believe, the most underrated skill on safari. It is something that only comes with time and experience in the bush, and with someone who has a lot of of patience and perception. It can completely change the drive and experience of a sighting. Body language as a definition is: *a type of nonverbal communication, where thoughts, intentions, or feelings are expressed by physical behaviours, such as facial expressions, body posture, gestures, eye movements and the use of space. Body language exists in both animals and humans.*

It's so important that we understand the animals' non-verbal communication to ascertain if they are happy and comfortable with our presence, or upset for whatever reason and want more space. You will often find guests slightly confused and surprised at how much these animals tolerate us, but I believe this is possible due to the way we treat them and respect the signs on a day-to-day basis and the way we form a relationship of trust. For example having a large male lion walk within metres of the car, seemingly paying us no attention whatsoever, or why at times viewing an elephant herd from a far distance is the best for both parties. It all comes from reading the signs...

The goal of every sighting is to view and leave it with as little impact as possible, and understanding animal behaviour helps greatly with this. Interpretation can be something as simple as predicting a yawn to capture that perfect photograph or, more seriously, understanding the difference between a warning and full charge of an elephant barreling down on you. There are also times where unknowingly you may show some aggressive or negative behaviour - this happens most often when first approaching an animal, especially if on the road directly ahead of you. If you think about it, we are driving a big car, which makes a big noise, add that to the fact you may be driving directly towards the animal, and it simply doesn't look good. Even we as people don't enjoy that - if you're walking down the street and someone starts walking straight towards you relatively quickly, making a noise, your first reaction will be a defensive one. Defensive in the wild may mean running at the intrusion or away from it. For this reason, wherever possible, you will see the game viewers approaching animals at angles.

Another rule of thumb is if an animal continues with its normal behaviour it is comfortable and relaxed with your presence.

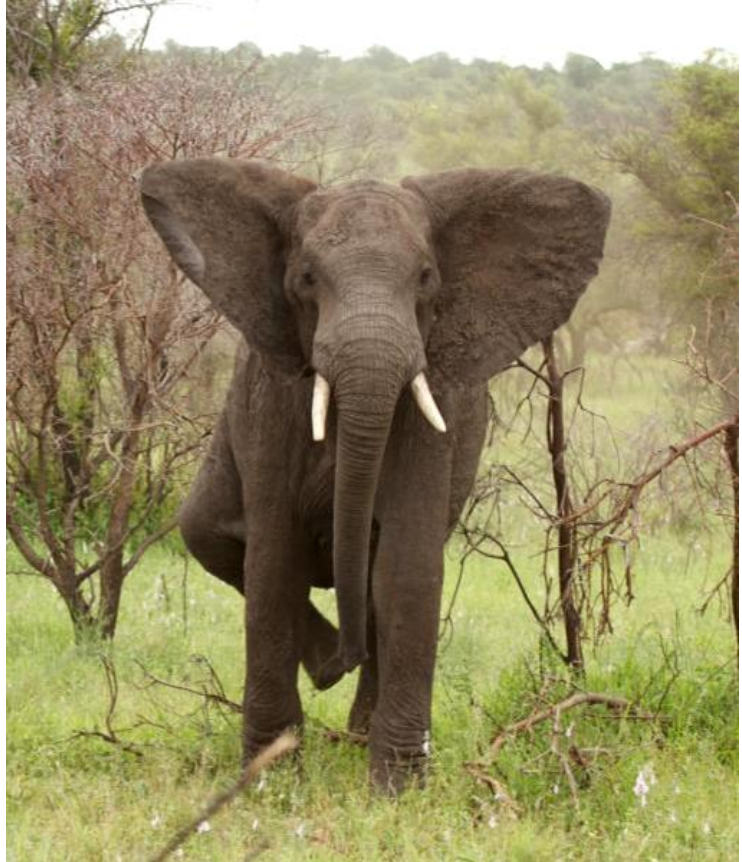
The photographs used for this article are three very different sightings and scenarios. What would your first interpretation be of each of the captured scenes? It's not by any means a trick question, but rather a little insight to what you may come across on a safari, and how you would handle it.

Being in all three sightings I have an unfair advantage but will tell you exactly what happened next.

The leopardess on top, after yawning and grooming for a while, stood up and we followed her as she began hunting along a very rocky ridge. This yawning and grooming is typical textbook behaviour, often referred to as 'contagious behaviour' and generally means that the animal is about to become more active.

The female elephant alongside was fortunately giving us a warning charge, trumpeting and kicking up some dust to intimidate us, and simply wanted a little more space. Once reading her signals and providing her with the necessary space she and the rest of the herd calmly continued with their day, eventually reaching the water for a drink.

And lastly this young lioness from the Shishangaan pride, who after opening her eyes for no more than a few seconds, fell back asleep, content with our presence. We found the entire pride in the exact same spot later that afternoon.



The dry season and an amazing game drive that ended in a lion kill

Article by Barry Peiser

The summer season has been a dry one and the river and pans are now all dry, except for the deepest pools. Storks have visited and fished out most of the remaining fish, the grass is drying and the days are getting shorter. Game viewing has been good with the lions. Guests have wanted to view rhinos and leopards, two species that are often hard to come by.

Leaving the lodge one morning my tracker Christoff pointed out tracks of rhino on the road, not far from the lodge, heading north up the N'wanetsi River road. This was the perfect start and as we continued driving north to follow the tracks, we noted that the rhinos had moved off and on the road, sometimes walking parallel to the road. Then the road bent right and the tracks continued north. At this point Christoff recommended following up on foot whilst I drove to areas north of the position to confirm the direction.

However, whilst driving around, one of the field guides called in a leopard sighting. I let Christoff know about the sighting and he recommended following up there whilst he trailed the rhinos.

Fortunately we found the leopardess and followed her as she moved east along the road to a hyena den-site. The disturbance from the Land Rovers alerted the resting hyena clan and they caught wind of the cat and proceeded to chase her up a leadwood tree. She remained in the tree till the hyenas below lost interest and allowed us some video time and photos. Once she descended that was the last we saw of her as she went deep into the bush and we called for a coffee-stop where the stories and photos were shared with enthusiasm and delight!

By now lion, elephant, buffalo and the secretive leopard had been seen. So next up was the scarce rhino, which we hoped and prayed Christoff and another fellow tracker Exon would find. To our relief they did, and luckily enough the rhinos weren't too far from our position. We viewed them for a short while before the little calf spooked and caused the lot of them to run off into the bush. Guests, guides and trackers were all very proud now that the 'Big 5' had been found. The trackers could take a break after they had trailed for three hours in some rocky covered grass slopes.

The decision was then made to return to the lodge, however, as we crossed over the river we spotted lions crossing the road and traveling with purpose... Naturally we followed them and they began stalking some zebras on the riverbank. The rest was a blur of excited anxiety for both the lions to catch the zebra as well as for the zebra to escape the claws and fangs of the lions!

The ambush set up of the pride worked by chasing a zebra in the opposite direction from the rest of the dazzle. The lionesses showed cunning, speed and determination as they closed in on the zebra, springing onto its back and pulling it to the ground, pouncing onto its neck to pin it down and grabbing it by the throat, suffocating it till the flying legs and fighting body became limp.

Emotions were flying and the atmosphere was filled with relief once the fighting zebra lay still and the tired lionesses released the zebra to breathe deeply and pant. The sighting was called in on the radio and others came to join us as the lionesses began to feed. Then one by one they moved away from the carcass to call the cubs for a feast.

The vultures began arriving and landed on a nearby leadwood. After half an hour, the cubs and mothers returned to continue feeding and the squabbles began as each looked for a place to feed. By the time they began feeding, it was noon and we returned our guests to the lodge to have lunch. We were all still in high spirits and pumping adrenalin and continued sharing our accounts on the events that had just taken place.

It had been a great game drive and would be near impossible to beat!

Birds of a feather flock together

Article and photos by Nick du Plessis & Barry Peiser

With autumn in full swing and all the water drying up along the river and drainage lines, the diversity of bird life has been amazing!

A variety of storks have taken centre stage. It's not uncommon to see as many as five different species feeding around the small pools of water. The likes of open-billed, yellow-billed, woolly-necked, black, marabou and saddle-billed storks have all been sighted.

For the storks it has been 'like shooting fish in a barrel.' Most of their diet appears to be fish like bream, tilapia and catfish, with the odd frog or fresh water crustacean wherever possible.



Game viewing updates Article by Deirdre Opie

Lion: A total of 89 sightings. The majority of the sightings (67) were of the bigger portion of the Shishangaan pride, which comprises of 5 lionesses and 17 cubs, one of them being the older male white cub. The smaller portion of the pride has the young female white cub and she is also doing well. The Mountain pride was seen 17 times, and has been in the Mahlangulene area of the concession. The Shishangaan pride was seen on 5 kills, 3 zebra including a foal, and one waterbuck.

Leopard: A total of 38 sightings. The two male leopards along the river are being seen regularly. As the vegetation dies back so the leopard sightings increase, hence the high total for the month. The Tingala female and the Xhikelengane female have been seen twice and 12 times respectively. The following kills were seen: an unknown female on a Sharpe's grysbok kill; the Ndlovu male on an impala and a zebra foal kill; the N'wanetsi male on a kudu kill and the Xhikelengane female on an impala kill.

Cheetah: Only one sighting of the mother and two sub adult cubs, around Gudzane North.

Hyena: The Nyokene den is doing well, with three cubs and a number of adults present, sometimes even lying in the water at the pan.

Elephant: A total of 72 sightings. The bull sightings were 17, and the herds 55. One guest sighting was of a female struggling to help her calf out of the mud, which she eventually got right.

Buffalo: A total of 22 bull sightings and 17 of breeding herds. In the northern blocks the buffalo herds are being seen more often. There was one of about 600 animals regularly frequented the concession.

Wild dog: One sighting of a single male, on Leadwood Road.

General: A young eland bull ran across the depression, much to the surprise of Nico and his guests. The trackers immediately went back up to the area to have a look at the tracks of an animal most have never seen. There were also two interesting snake sightings, one with a black mamba eating a scrub hare and another with an African rock python with a kudu calf in front of Sweni, Room 2.



After the burn in September last year the vegetation has recovered, however some of the areas in which the fire was very hot have not entirely recovered. These now make a perfect hunting area for the Secretarybird (pictured left). We very rarely see these birds and of late we have been seeing a pair in the area of Ma4pounds.

These are birds which are only found in Africa but they are a threatened species for a number of reasons, such as habitat fragmentation and degradation, collisions with power lines or fences, secondary poisoning and even hunting.

Singita currently helps sponsor a project with Birdlife South Africa whereby the funding received is used for satellite tracking devices so that they can learn more about the movements of these birds.

If you wish to make a donation to Birdlife South Africa's Secretarybird Project, please go to <http://birdlifesouthafrica.givengain.org> and click on 'projects' 'secretary bird' and 'donations'.

Articles & photos by Nick du Plessis,
Barry Peiser & Deirdre Opie
Singita Kruger National Park
South Africa
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