

Singita



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

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.3°C (70.3°F)
Minimum recorded: 18.6°C (65.4°F)
Average maximum: 36.3°C (97.3°F)
Maximum recorded: 40.7°C (105.2°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 5 mm
*For the year to date: 12 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:09
Sunset: 18:04

October has been hot and dry. You'll see from the photos in this journal just how parched the landscape is, but every now and again there is a pop of green, sending signals of hope. The baobabs have dug deep and started getting their leaves as well as a couple of other early-bird tree species. The evening winds have picked up, and thunderclouds are brewing in the afternoons, threatening the relief we're all waiting for. The sunsets, exacerbated by the dust in the air, have been like balls of fire dropping onto the horizon.

Our guests have enjoyed incredible sightings in these extreme conditions, and the month has been dominated by rhinos and lions. However, there is always time for relaxation and reflection. One of these occasions took place when guests were encouraged to sit barefoot around a glowing fire in a riverbed, and enjoy a drink before dinner whilst watching the night sky spectacle.

Here's a sightings snapshot for October:

Lions

- **Southern:** This pride has moved back south around a spring in the Chiloveka area that's dominated by thick ilala palms, and the reason became clear when two four-week-old cubs appeared out of the thickets to join the pride that were feeding on a buffalo carcass. The cubs have been stashed away in this almost impenetrable area for the last month, by their wise mother – the lioness with the damaged left ear. The pride males were seen mating with one of the other lionesses earlier in the month.
- **River:** This pride spends much of their time in the swamps across the Chiredzi River – an area that's hard to access and impossible if the river is too high to cross. But this month they have given spectacular sightings in the riverbed, and it has been a treat to see not only the three pride males together but also the six curious cubs that are about nine months old.
- **Nduna:** The pride have been drinking, hunting and relaxing around Nduna Dam. Amazingly the two old pride males are still in control of this pride, despite having sustained severe injuries from an attempted hostile takeover by other males in recent times. The one male has been mating with the one oldest lioness and testing the receptiveness of the others.
- **HQ:** Not much is known about this pride, but a lone male was spotted around the HQ area this month.

Leopards

- Fleeting sightings are occasional, and every now and again sustained sightings of these elusive cats are had. Two such occasions this month were when a leopard was seen relaxing on the rocks in the Nyari area; and the other was when a leopard had killed an impala and dragged it into a tree one morning. She was still on site during the afternoon drive, as she carried on feeding from her bounty.

Rhinos

- **White:** Large crashes of white rhinos are seen together. We have also been introduced to some brand new arrivals – their mother's cautiously making their way to drink after sunset, with their babies at heel. An intense scene was watching two white rhino bulls fighting each other.
- **Black:** There have been excellent passive and active sightings of black rhinos – especially as they make their way to water during the twilight hours. A black rhino caused much excitement when it gave chase to three giraffes, and then walked towards the game-viewing vehicle and gave us a few mock charges before taking off at speed.

Elephants

- It's tough times for elephants this month – there is little available for them to eat. Lone bulls are seen chewing on roots and bark. There relief should come next month with the rains. A huge breeding herd has been spending time around the dam, even swimming across the shallows, as they drink and cool off, and make the most of the greenery that survives near the water's edge.

Plains game

- A highlight was a herd of 13 sable antelope drinking at Banyini pan.
- A nyala gave birth to her lamb very close to the lodge – a rare privilege to witness the event.

Photographic hide

- The rhino sightings in the cooler hours have been incredible, and offer guests photographs and memories never to be forgotten.

Fishing

- The water has heated up and the fishing is good! Many successful fishing safaris have returned to the lodge with tales of tilapia, catfish and tigers being caught.

Wild dogs

- There are four pups with the pack, and together the twelve members have been hunting in the north-western regions and drinking at Sosigi Dam.

Buffalo

- Enormous herds, one numbering about 1 000 individuals have been kicking up dust, drinking at the permanent water sources and feeding along the river banks.

Unusual sightings

- There was an epic battle between a hyena and warthogs. The hyena chased the warthogs, but they were having none of the opportunist's brazenness and turned around and chased the hyena. Wisely the hyena backed off leaving the warthogs with their heads and tails held high in victory.
- The track of a large python left in the sand was seen, so the guide and guests followed it and it ended up disappearing into the water at Banyini pan. The python was visible in the water, and while everyone was watching it two lions came to drink, then a lone hyena came along to check on the lions. The lions showed no interest in the hyena and it moved away to go and sit in the water where the python was. It wasn't long before the hyena noticed the snake and then tried to catch the python using its feet and its mouth to bite it, but only ending up with a mouth full of mud. It persisted and then suddenly bolted from the water, as it had most likely received a nasty underwater bite from the big snake!
- A glorious scene was watching a breeding herd of well over 30 elephants swimming across the Malilangwe Dam from the western to the eastern banks.

Boat cruise

- Our boat cruises safaris are a unique and idyllic way of experiencing the African wilderness. Memorable moments from this month include seeing a female crocodile out of the water protecting her nesting site; a fish eagle eating a huge bream; watching a pod of 38 hippos; spotting a male leopard drinking near the old jetty; and marvelling at eight terrapins all sunning themselves on one log.

Hyena

- We've seen them trailing the wild dogs, patrolling the roads, and eight of them came to drink, play, display and call close to where guests were enjoying a sundowner.

Walks & rock art

- It's a great time to walk, as long as it's during the cooler hours of the day. One walk incorporated a boat cruise over to an area from where the guide chose to depart, and on that walk, half way up a hill, they came across a site where there were a number of carcasses under a rocky overhang. It was where a leopard, on a few occasions, had used the site to eat its prey. Some of the remnants found were a fully intact crocodile skull, a terrapin skull and the bones from a bushbuck or impala. Other walks have been to see the fascinating rock art paintings, and to hug the biggest baobab on the property.

Birds

- The highlight of a walk along the Chiredzi River was spotting a Pel's fishing owl!
- Other twitching ticks included a secretary bird; a hammerkop and a woolly-necked stork both with a frog in their bills; broad-billed, European and lilac-breasted rollers; African and Klaas' cuckoo; striped and brown-hooded kingfishers; scops owl; a pair of African hawk eagles; and yellow-billed storks.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as an October Gallery of images.

A morning with the pups

Following wild dogs on the hunt is near impossible, so when the call came through that the pack had been spotted at Sosigi Dam I headed straight there, hoping that they'd finished their dawn hunt, had a drink, and were settling down for the day.

My luck was in, and they were doing just that. The adults were looking for a place to flop down, choosing the indentation left by an uprooted tree, and the pups were settling near some sculptural fallen branches. But like all youngsters the pups had ants in their pants and weren't quite ready for their nap. Every now and again they'd fidget and play.

I was positioned far away enough to not compromise their natural behaviour, but had enough reach with my large lens to photograph them, rising light, open terrain, and the potential of a jungle gym and obstacle course with the fallen trees. I cranked the shutter speed to over 1 000 to freeze movement (1/1250 sec), pushed the depth of field far to get enough of the subject dogs in focus in one frame (f/5,6), balanced that out with an ISO (640) that wasn't too grainy, switched to continuous spot focus and trained it on the pups, silently pleading that they'd play around the nearby logs. The frozen fleeting results are on the next page.



Above: Pups
cuddle near the
sculptural boughs.

Right: An adult
scans the area.





Hyenas waited and watched nearby, hoping the dogs would hunt again and give them a free take-away meal.

The River Pride's curious cubs

As mentioned in the sightings snapshot the River Pride spend most of their time across the Chiredzi River, and in the swamp area on that western side. If the river is too high to cross, or if they have disappeared into the swamps we don't see them for longer periods of time than our prides that have territories on the eastern side of the river. Our lion tracking team had tracked them to an area opposite Chikwete Cliffs and let us know that they were in an area of the riverbed suitable for viewing.

We forged the shallow river, followed it downstream, and spotted the lions in situ. The cubs weren't visible at the time, but the three large males were, and they were napping in a huddle together. I photographed them as one yawned, and on reviewing the photos noticed something on his tongue. Zooming in you can see the raw gashes of where he has bitten his tongue! It's bad enough biting your tongue as a human omnivore, but imagine the pain for a carnivore as that carnassial shear rips into its own flesh! I'm glad I wasn't around to witness his wrath when he did so – he must have lashed out in pain.



Leaving the big boys in peace we went to look at a lioness who was lying on a hilly bank of the riverbed. Then a little pair of ears appeared over the hillock and after a few minutes they materialised into a lion cub who cautiously went and lay down next to mom. Then another, and another, and another appeared, until all six cubs were on the crest, backed up with the safety of mom, and staring at us with utmost curiosity. It was such a delightful time and they were as fascinated with us as we were with them. One youngster needed some extra love and reassurance from mom, and elicited a head and tummy licking session. Just look at the canine fangs of that lioness as she yawns – truly a mother not to annoy!

The cubs are around nine months old now, and it was such a privilege to spend time with them, and for them to get used to seeing humans in a non-threatening manner. Their focus only shifted from us when the lion tracking team started their vehicle and left the scene to head home.

That evening, as night fell, the pride started to get active and make preparations to secure their next meal. Feeding the whole pride which includes the three males and the six cubs is a relentless demand. During these dry months the predators prosper as the herbivores, weakened by the lack of abundant grazing and water, are easier to hunt – but all that will change when the rains arrive next month and the tide turns in favour of the grazers that'll be re-energised by new green growth.



Rising light

Most of the wildlife viewing and photography at our photographic hide takes place in the late afternoon and sunset, but if you get up well before sunrise and make a beeline to the hide with do-not-get-distracted blinkers on you might find some early-bird drinkers in the rim lighting of the rising sun. It's a long shot but the rewards were so worth it when we got there and two rhinos arrived to drink just as the sun was kissing the water.



An oasis of blossoms



Some trees like the poison-pod albizia / large-leaved false-thorn (*Albizia versicolor*) have dug deep and sent out their new leaves along with their blossoms. It was a relief to spend time in the shade of this giant and stop chasing the “big and hairy” sightings and instead watch all the activity around the small and hairy blossoms. The fluffy appearance of these flowerheads is caused by the long white vertical stamens. They’ll turn into thin pods which usually contain six seeds. The seeds and pods are poisonous to most animals, including domestic livestock, and the young pods are the most toxic. However parrots, which have strong beaks, eat the seeds of this species. Antelope, including kudu and elephant, eat the leaves.

The tree was abuzz with bees and other insects pollinating the flowers, as well as birds and squirrels feeding on the blossoms. Impala nibbled up the fallen bounty beneath.



A tropical boubou (*Laniarius aethiopicus*) at the feast.

A brown-headed parrot (*Poicephalus cryptoxanthus*) begs for food from a parent. (Note: we also get Meyer’s parrots here and they hybridise with the brown-headed parrots. Although there is yellow on this adult’s head it shows very little turquoise, and there is a hint of lightness to the eyes, so we can say they are more brown-headed than Meyer’s.)

A mopane squirrel (*Paraxerus cepapi*) gobbles up the blossoms.



The Nduna Pride males

We'd climbed up a steep rocky outcrop overlooking Nduna Dam, to enjoy a sundowner and see what came down to drink at the remaining water after a long hot day. No sooner had we settled in when we heard impala alarming. They'd spotted a pride of lions that were sleeping in the thickets near the water's edge. We waited to see if the lions would come and drink, or if they'd ambush some unsuspecting animal, but the impala had long since told all and sundry about them. As the sun set we returned to the vehicle and drove around to where they were lying for a closer view. I was amazed to see that a male, hidden behind a bush from our first position, was indeed the long-standing territorial male of this pride.



He and the other pride male had been severely injured in an attempted pride take-over about a year before, and I suspected they'd been overthrown by the new males. His scars tell the story – there's a scribble of scars below his right eye, the right part of his nose is missing and the base of his tail is swollen and scarred. But he's still king! And he was showing interest in mating with one of the lionesses too.



His brother was also seen at close quarters this month – and his injuries and scars are even more severe.

A huge bull white rhino ambled along, marked his territory in a midden, sent dung flying by kicking it back and forth, and then marched through the middle of the pride on his way to water. The lionesses scattered, but this old boy kept his nerve and refused to be inconvenienced by a short-sighted rhino.



The male got up later, greeted and assessed the lionesses, and let us see just how much bigger he is.

Respite from the heat

On our way back to the lodge on a hot dusty morning, we came across this lone tusk-less bull elephant. Although in good condition you could tell by his demeanour that he was depressed by the heat and the lack of nutritious green food. He was just forlornly standing there on his own, chewing on twigs and eking out the few nutrients he could from the bark. It was a rather sad sight.



Back at the lodge and during a delicious brunch on the shaded deck, we noticed movement on the shore on the furthest end of the dam. Checking the scene through the spotting scope that's permanently placed at the bar we were able to confirm that the movement was indeed a breeding herd of elephants, and not a mirage.

Quick plans were put in place and soon we were in one of the safari cruise boats and heading out to see if we could view them from the water.

What ensued was a scene of such joy.

A huge breeding herd was spending the morning at the water, swimming and feeding around the green border. Noticing our arrival they raised their trunks like periscopes to assess our intentions, then soon settled down and went back to swimming in the glorious cool water.

This story and photo sequence will continue over the next few months, as it was too beautiful to limit to one journal.

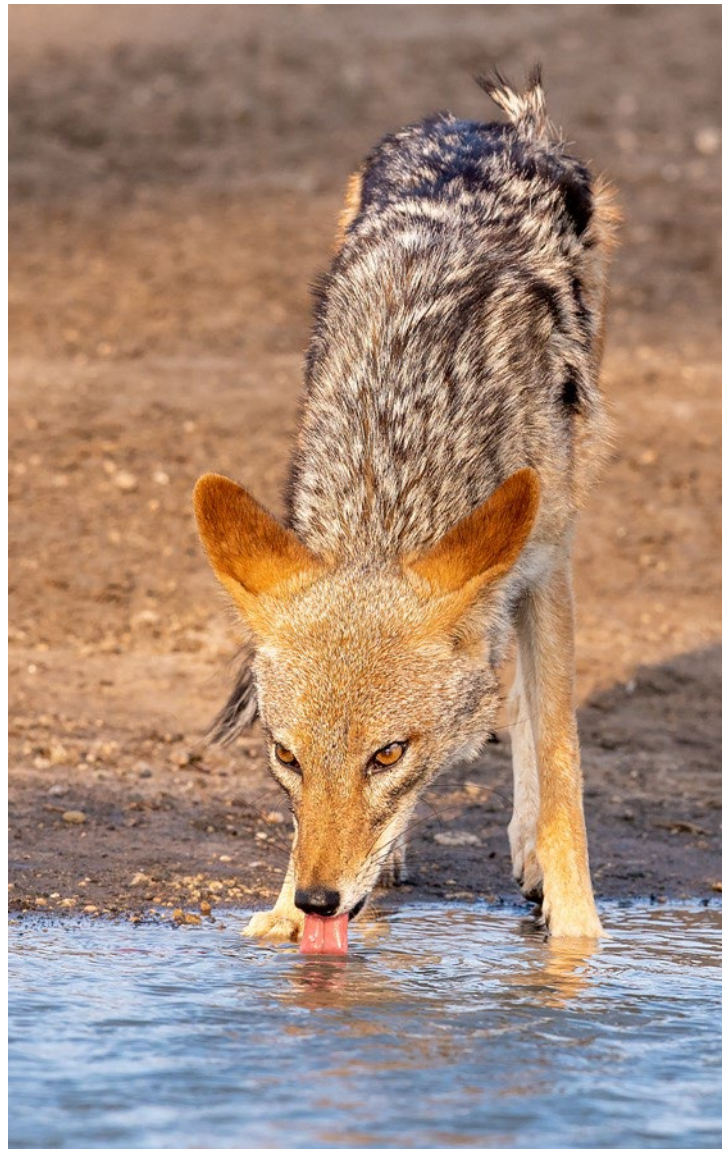


Dietary requirements

This jackal surprised us by arriving in the bright light of mid-afternoon at the photographic hide. She had a good drink, then her nose caught the scent of something interesting. She sniffed out the remnants of a little drowned and rotting bird at the edge of the water. But she just could not bring herself to eat it. The expressions of disgust and distaste, and ultimately spitting it out, were proof that beggars can be choosers.

“Dr Google” tells me that a black-backed jackal, as an omnivore, eats almost anything that is available, but I beg to differ. This one drew the line at poultry past its expiry date. The more reliable Smithers’ Field Guide to Mammals of Southern Africa confirms that they’ll eat rodents, hares and rabbits, small antelope and the young of larger species, small carnivores, birds, reptiles and amphibians, carrion, fruit, insects and other invertebrates. They also eat small portions of grass, to aid digestion.

When large carnivores are on a kill, jackals hang about waiting their turn, or make mad dashes in to snatch a scrap. They may pester hyenas so much that they abandon part of a carcass. They are fast and agile enough to take evasive action from an irritated lion or hyena, but do not take their chances with a cheetah. Surplus food is cleverly cached for a later meal.



Photography tips – depth of field

It's a rare problem to have too much light on your side with wildlife photography, but that was the case here with this lion lying in dappled shade in the late morning. The camera's automatic mode gave a deep depth of field of f/11 which kept some of the foreground and background sharp too, but I wanted to isolate the lion from the distracting background so changed to a very shallow depth of field of f/2.8 in manual mode. You can see the difference in the two images below:

f/11



f/2.8



October Gallery



Like a leopard in a henhouse I cannot help myself in a frenzy of shutter frames to snatch silhouettes of these angelic doves as they descend to drink.



This image of an eland bull shows how perfectly his colouring blends into this desert palette of October.



A crash of six rhinos move off into the grasslands to graze for the day.



Late afternoon arrivals at the pan. The white rhino on the right is Makombandlela, a 3rd generation Malilangwe cow. Her bull calf Malezani is 30 months old. It's likely that she will very soon force his independence by chasing him off just before giving birth to her next calf.



Straggling members of a large herd of buffalo bombarded two rhinos out of the way as the bovine beasts drank and cooled off before nightfall.



After dark, and well after the buffalo had left, a mother white rhino arrived to drink with her precious newborn in tow. Our rhino conservation team were delighted with this first report of the anticipated calf. The inter-calving interval for white rhinos here is 29 months, so the mother was right on queue delivering this new baby, that is now between four and six weeks old. Levani, the mother rhino, is one of the original cows of the rhino programme, and is over 31 years old!



Dawn and dusk: A rhino sips from the golden pond at dawn.
That evening, in the same spot, zebras drink the cool blue water of dusk.





A youngster splashes about joyfully in the shallows.
The TGIF expressions of these wallowing rhinos says it all!

