

Singita Kruger National Park  
Lebombo & Sweni Lodges  
South Africa

Singita



## Wildlife Journal

For the month of February, Two Thousand and Fifteen

### Temperature

Average Minimum: 20°C (68°F)  
Average Maximum: 32°C (89.6°F)  
Minimum recorded: 17°C (62.6°F)  
Maximum recorded: 37°C (98.6°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the period: 38.5 mm  
For the year to date: 72 mm

The ever growing 'mega pride' Article and photos by Nick du Plessis

It is sometimes quite difficult to decide what to write about in a monthly journal, there are normally a couple of particularly interesting events to choose from which may have happened or been developing over some time. But this month was an absolute 'no-brainer' as the sightings and regularity of the Shishangaan pride has never been more dependable. Guests have enjoyed a total of 63 lion sightings this month, most of which have been of the Shishangaan pride. It has been incredible, especially since there were a couple of months recently where they were keeping a very low profile and we were heavily reliant on the Mountain pride in the north.



What has made it even more exciting, and was the reason for the pride splitting in the first place, is the number of cubs that have been seen in the last couple of weeks. We now believe there to be a total of at least 28 cubs, with a further two lactating females that haven't brought their little cubs out of hiding yet. And within that huge number of cubs there is a second little white cub! We knew there was a chance of this, but to actually see the second little cub as proof that the gene is definitely in circulation was just brilliant, and this time it is a female! Why that is so important is that the young white male, once reaching sexual maturity, will be evicted from the pride and we may never see him again - this is the species way of discouraging inbreeding. On the other hand, with a bit of luck, the female should theoretically spend her entire life within the pride, meaning staying in this area, reaching maturity and having cubs of her own.



The pride though is still divided, hence the sheer number of sightings we had. What we can't wait for is the time when the entire 'mega pride' comes together. We actually believe it is going to happen sooner rather than later. It appears to be a very dry year, and as a result that normally means the pride coming together where all the food and water is in the same place. In the past that has been around Gudzane Dam on the western side of the concession, but with the apparent shift in the pride's territory it looks more and more likely to be somewhere along the N'wanetsi River, maybe even Dumbana Pools, which would be incredibly close to the lodge. All that we can say is watch this space...!



## The African wild cat

Article and photos by Barry Peiser



The other day, whilst driving back to the lodge, my tracker and I noticed European rollers (*Coracias garrulus*) and other birds alarm-calling and dive-bombing near a shrubby bush. A closer inspection revealed this small cat with big yellow eyes peering through the short grass at our vehicle. It was an African wild cat (*Felis silvestris lybica*), one of the smaller wild cat species that can be found in the Kruger. This little African wild cat was looking for bird nests to raid and the birds were clearly agitated and alarming to warn the other birds of its presence. It is the second smallest cat species after the small spotted cat, found further west in South Africa's interior. The serval (*Leptailurus serval*) and caracal (*Caracal caracal*) are also found in the Kruger, though equally difficult to find. The African wild cat hunts rodents and birds. They look rather like domestic tabby cats and mixed breeding of African wild cats and domestic cats occurs on the edges of reserves or wildlife areas where domestic cats are

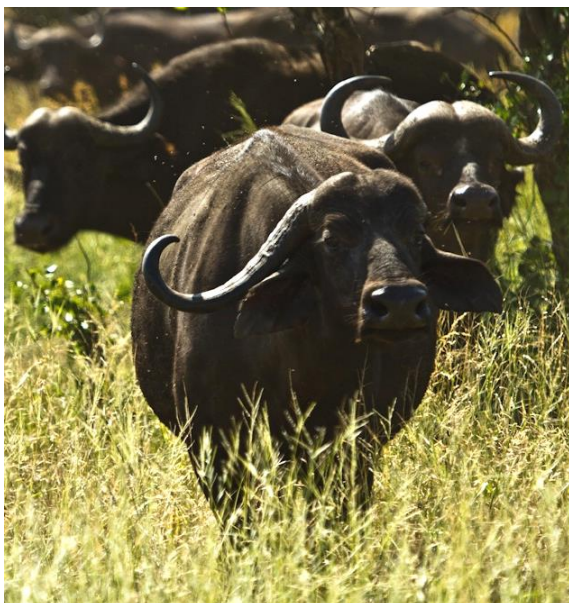
kept among human habitation. African wild cats are very nervous and it is unlike these cats to remain still unless they are trying to be undetected. As such photographing these cats are difficult and it was very special to capture an image and watch this little feline for a short while as it tried to decide whether pursuing the baby birds in the nest nearby was worth the fuss these birds were making or if it was a better idea to run and hide from our presence. It duly slunk off behind the nearby shrubbery to avoid the dive-bombing birds.



## The end of the rainy season      Article and photo by Barry Peiser

The summer has come with just one chance of flooding, but since then the rain has been scarce. The water in the N'wanetsi has almost all dried up and the river has already been reduced to scattered pools. The grass on the savannah plains is drying and all the clouds that pass us by tease constantly without dropping any rain. Unless we receive more late summer rains and lots of it, then we are in for a long, dry and dusty winter and potential drought.

The game continues to thrive on the burnt areas where the grass is shorter, and elephants are abundant despite the marula trees bearing their fruit further west of the Lebombos. The thirsty mammoths are now digging holes in the N'wanetsi riverbed to search for clean ground water beneath the sand because they've churned up and dirtied the remaining river water.



The charismatic mega fauna (elephant, buffalo and rhino) are wallowing daily to cool down in the heat and to rid themselves of biting flies. Rhino sightings have been scattered and crashes have been seen, however these animals are covering large areas across the concession and it is difficult to know where they will be. Leopards have been quiet and just one or two sightings have been stable enough for guides to show their guests before these animals move off into impenetrable cover. As far as the world's fastest mammal is concerned we've see a mother cheetah and her two sub-adults fairly regularly. Buffalo bulls coming down from the hills to the depression area are seen moving to wallows and then grazing on the ridges.

Storks and crocodiles have taken to the river pools where the fish are trapped and are taking advantage of easier catches. The red-billed queleas are growing quieter after a few busy weeks when lesser-spotted eagles waited like a haunt of vultures to snatch up the unsuspecting little nestlings from the sticky thorns and knob thorns.



This beautiful flower is known as the flame lily (*Gloriosa superba*), and if you know just where to look it can be found in a couple of places on our concession at the moment. With the vegetation drying up as quickly as it is, it's really a welcome splash of colour during drive!

What I always find most interesting about the flora in this area is the traditional uses for these plants and it's something that guests find fascinating as well. Maybe it is our 'survival DNA', or planning for the worse but how cool is it to use a plant to catch a fish, cure a cold or make a rope?

Fortunately I work with, and have since the beginning of my time at Singita, one of the most experienced trackers - Christoff Ndlovu (pictured left). His mother and sister are traditional healers and he sees the traditional uses and medicines as an opportunity to invite foreign guests into his culture by showing them how they



survived in this area for thousands of years without our modern/western medicines.

To give you few examples the flame lily was traditionally used for treatments ranging from things as simple as open wounds and itchiness to treating snakebites and even cancer. There is always the science behind how these medicines actually work and with the flame lily it is no different - it contains high levels of Colchicine, which is most often used these days to relieve pain in cases of gout.

## Birds of a feather flock together



**Wattled starlings (*Creatophora cinerea*)**  
Articles by Deirdre Opie, photos by Barry Peiser

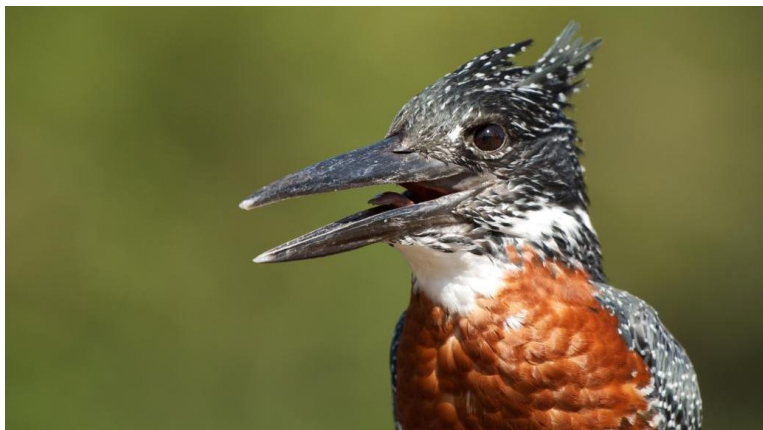
There is an estimated population of 130 000 adult wattled starlings in the Kruger National Park. Currently, on our concession, we are seeing flocks of hundreds. What's interesting about these birds is that they are nomadic which means local seasonal movements, so we see them only at certain times of the year. This is the first year in my six years here that there have been so many on the concession. No doubt the grass flush after the burn and the abundance of insects are the cause. Although they nest in large colonies, the pairs are monogamous. They particularly like to choose knob thorn trees (*Acacia nigrescens*) to nest in. The female and male will both take turns to incubate the 2 - 5 eggs for a period of just 11 days. The chicks will even come out the nest before they can fly which makes them vulnerable to birds of prey, such as the Wahlberg's and booted eagles. They are also the only African starling to probe into a grass mat to catch insect larvae for food.



**Red crested korhaan (*Lophotis ruficrista*)**

The genus name *Lophotis* refers to the Greek word for a crested bustard and *ruficrista* is Latin for red crest. The male will only open up the red crest on the back of his head if a female is nearby. In the breeding season a male will call loudly to attract a female's attention, then to impress her he flies straight up into the air, throws himself backwards like he's been shot and falls to the ground, spreading his wings at the last moment.

If that doesn't impress then what?



**King of kingfishers**  
Article and Photo by Nick du Plessis

The giant kingfisher (*Megaceryle maxima*) is the largest of the kingfishers in Africa and can grow to reach sizes of 45 cm. Although they are fairly common they're usually very shy. This male though seemed to be tolerant of vehicles and let us get within five metres of him at the weir before he decided to fly off.

## Game sightings update

Lion - A total of 63 sightings. The Shishangaan pride was seen with a new white lion cub beyond the border of the concession, in a litter of four. It is very young and we hope to see it on the concession in due course. The Shishangaan pride were viewed on a zebra and an impala kill. The Mountain pride were also viewed on a zebra kill.

Leopard - A total of 16 sightings. The Xhikelengane female was seen the most, and once with a monitor lizard kill. A mating pair of two unidentified leopards was also seen. The N'wanetsi male was only seen once on an impala kill. The Tingala female was seen with an unknown male sharing an impala kill.



Cheetah – A total of 24 sightings. The mother and two younger cubs made up most of the sightings and were seen on two separate occasions on impala kills. A single female and a single male are also being seen.

Hyena - The Nyokene den has two new cubs, the total clan is around 10 in number.

Buffalo – A total of 35 sightings with the majority being of the bulls, however with the opening of a few new roads in the north there should be more herd sightings in the coming months.

Ground hornbill – A nest site has been found along the N'wanetsi River and it looks as if the female is going to be occupying a hole in a large sycamore fig. There are five different groups on the concession and monitoring is going well.



Articles By Barry Peiser, Deirdre Opie and Nick du Plessis  
Photos on site by Barry Peiser and Nick du Plessis  
Singita Kruger National Park  
South Africa  
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