

Singita



Photo by Brian Rode

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

Temperature

Average minimum: 12°C (53.6°F)
Minimum recorded: 07°C (44.6°F)
Average maximum: 24°C (75.2°F)
Maximum recorded: 35°C (95.0°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0 mm
Season to date: 753 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:32
Sunset: 17:32

The days are getting longer again. We had a few very chilly mornings and evenings as a large cold front pushed in from the south and everyone had to put their fleeces and jackets back on. Across the country snow fell, but fortunately this area does not get that cold. Other than this front that arrived, we have had a fairly mild winter so far (until this last month). Some of the trees have already come into bloom as if they are expecting spring to arrive early. Others are still in the process of losing their leaves. The knobthorn trees are now showing their

fluffy white flowers and the long-tailed cassias have already finished showing off their golden petals and they are now starting to get new leaves. Winter is not really the time for flowers here, although there are a few plants that do add some colour during the colder months. The impala lilies that grow up on the cliffs and in some of the open areas in the northern reaches of the concession have been lighting up the bush with their deep pink and white blossoms. The aloes have also been in flower and are still attracting the sunbirds, orioles and starlings to the nectar feast. The flame combretums have also started flowering with blood-red stamens and stigmas. They also produce a lot of nectar and the sunbirds have been enjoying the sweet banquet that these flowers produce.

Normally at this time of the year the N'wanetsi and Sweni Rivers have stopped flowing and only pools remain. This year is very different. We received a lot more rain last summer than we normally do and both rivers are still running strongly through the concession. There is still water flowing across Mbeki's Crossing and there are even water lilies flowering there. The Xinkelengane stream has stopped flowing now though, although there are still a few pools in this drainage line, and the animals are therefore still spread out throughout the concession. The grass is still long and lush throughout the area, although it has turned golden in colour. The thick grass layer has attracted quite a few zebras and wildebeest into the area. With all the grass and water in the concession we are expecting great game-viewing next month.



Impala lily

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for July:

Lions

- With the arrival of the Maputo male into the area and the confrontation with the Kumana male, the Shishangaan Pride (with the exception of two lionesses) seem to have disappeared. It is well-known that when a new male lion takes over an area from the previous "king" one of the first things that he does is kill all the young lions (sired by the previous territory-owner). The Shishangaan lionesses obviously know that their youngsters are in a very precarious situation and we hope that they have moved them away from the danger. We have, however, seen that two of the lionesses (including the lioness with the bad limp) have now started consorting with the Maputo male and have been seen with him on numerous occasions.
- The Kumana male was seen on a few occasions this last month. At the beginning of July he was seen fighting with the Maputo male. Since then, he has only been seen by himself. He has sustained some new injuries and is sporting two bite marks on his back. It seems that the Maputo male has taken over

the area. Unless the Kumana male is able to drive the Maputo male out it is very likely that he will have a very hard time. It is a sad ending to a majestic male lion to be driven out from his territory and away from his lionesses. Most male lions that lose their territories when they are already at a late stage in their lives do not last much longer. Fortunately, he did manage to scavenge something to eat in the form of a zebra carcass and, on another occasion, a giraffe carcass.

- The Maputo male was seen fighting with the Kumana male at the beginning of the month. Since then, he has been seen in the company of two of the Shish females. It appears that he might have been successful in his territorial take-over attempt.
- The Mananga pride has been seen on a few occasions this last month, mainly in the north-western side of the concession, near Gudzani Dam. This pride is becoming quite large now. There are at least seventeen individuals in this pride now (including sub-adults and cubs). They have two older cubs and five young ones. Towards the end of the month we were lucky enough to witness the Mananga pride killing and feeding on a zebra foal. Earlier on in the month they were seen feeding on a giraffe, and on another occasion a waterbuck. Lion numbers have been dropping drastically over the last century and scientists in the Kruger National Park have been doing lion counts. Recently they were doing studies to the west of the concession and tranquilised many of the Mananga lionesses. They then put brand marks on these animals so that they can identify individuals from a distance. It was a surprise to us, when we saw the pride after that, to see that many of the lionesses have “s”, “z” or “ss” marks on their rumps. They do not seem to be behaving any differently to the vehicles after their ordeal.
- The Mountain pride also seem to have disappeared. We have not been seeing much of them this last month. We think that, with the males fighting, that the Mountain pride have moved out of the area. Some of the guides believe that they have moved into Mozambique or possibly to the north of the concession. There are, however, large blocks of the concession in the north without roads and it is possible that they could be there in the hills. We saw them twice in July. At present this pride consists of 4 adult females, 1 sub-adult male and six juveniles.
- The two Shish males have not been seen regularly this last month. When they were sighted, they were usually with the Mananga pride. Xihamham is also sporting a new brand mark on his rump. These two male lions are also old now and, very likely, will soon have to defend their territory against younger males who want to take over the area. Towards the end of the month it appears that Xihamham was chasing after two young males.
- Two young males were seen in the northern part of the concession on at least two occasions this last month. These two are probably looking for a territory to take as their own. They will have to deal with the Shish males first before they are successful in their take-over.

Leopards

- The Nhlangueni female was seen a few times in the central area of the concession. She has a youngster (a young male) who is now at the age where he is going to have to move out of the area. The Nhlangueni female has been seen snarling at her son and on one occasion they were seen to be fighting with each other when the young male assumed that he could help himself to some of the duiker carcass that the female was feeding on. On another occasion the Nhlangueni female was seen feeding on a young impala that she had hoisted into a marula tree. The Nhlangueni leopardess is a very relaxed individual and has provided some amazing sightings this month.
- The Mbiri Mbiri male leopard is one of the most relaxed leopards in the area and we have seen him on quite a few occasions this July. He has been moving widely in the concession. On one occasion he was seen in the hills in the east and then a few days later he was seen again in the far west, near Gudzani Dam. He has also been sighted in the far north of our area. He does, however seem to prefer the Central Depression. He is now of an age where we think that he will have to move away to find a territory of his own.

- The Euphorbia sub-adult male is another of the relaxed leopards that we see in the area. He is usually seen in the area just north of camp. He was seen feeding on an impala on one occasion this last month and on another occasion, he was seen being chased by some hyenas.
- A large male leopard, with a distinctive throat-dewlap, was seen a number of times this last month mainly in the vicinity of the Sticky Thorn thickets. He is generally quite relaxed with the vehicles although he has realised that he can avoid the cars by heading into the thorn thickets where we cannot follow. He was seen eyeing out some waterbuck one morning, but soon figured out that they might be too big for him.
- Towards the end of the month we found an old male leopard near Puff Adder Pool, on the banks of the N'wanetsi River. He seemed to be injured and was lying in a thicket, where he barely lifted his head. A few days later he was seen a short distance away near Xakamba Pan. He had killed a porcupine and was feeding on the carcass. He did not look in good condition and has a few wounds on his face and legs. We were not sure which leopard this was, but going through old identity kits, checking out his facial spot patterns and comparing them to old photos it does appear that this is the Ndlovu male (a male who used to be dominant in the area north of camp for many years).
- Quite a few unidentified or unknown leopards were seen this month. Most of these sightings were of shy individuals who moved away as soon as they saw the vehicles. Towards the end of the month a young male leopard was seen feeding on an impala that it had placed up in a large leadwood tree just west of the concession.

Cheetahs

- We had one sighting of cheetahs this month. Two males were seen in the grasslands on the road to the staff quarters. We assume that we have not been seeing these beautiful cats because of the large burnt areas to the west of the concession that now provide great habitat for these cats that rely on speed to catch prey. The grass in the concession is still quite long and this is not really conducive to high-speed chases.

Wild dogs

- We did not see any African wild dogs / painted wolves during July. These animals tend to den in the winter months in southern Africa. We have heard that there may be a den-site just outside of the concession to the south, but we cannot access that area. We are hoping that when they finish denning that we will start to see them again.

Spotted hyenas

- We have had quite a few sightings of these interesting creatures this last month. We have also managed to locate a den-site that is now active, with cubs. Unfortunately for us this den is situated on top of a rocky ridge and we are not able to get close to it.
- There is another den that is being used that is on the public road between the camp and the airstrip. There are a few youngsters there, including at least one cub that is still black in colour (they are black in colour when first born and only start getting their spots when they are between two and three months old). Fortunately, many of our guests get to see these youngsters when they first arrive or when they depart the lodge. These hyenas are presently using a culvert under the road as a den-site.
- On one occasion we saw a group of hyenas chasing a young male leopard.
- We also saw a clan of hyenas, one morning, that were skulking around the base of a marula tree in which a leopard had hoisted her kill.
- Over the few days that the Kumana male lion was feeding on a zebra there were also at least six hyenas that were seen in the close vicinity, hoping to scavenge from the carcass once the lion had finished with it.

Elephants

- We have had regular sightings of elephants this last month, although we have not seen any particularly large gatherings. Most of the sightings have been of small breeding herds (up to ten individuals), bachelor herds or lone bulls. We normally see the larger gatherings when water is limited and the herds join up at the remaining water-points. Because of the amount of rainfall that we had last season there is a lot of water all over the park and the elephants have not needed to gather at places such as Gudzani Dam, Dumbana Pool or along the N'wanetsi River. As the temporary, seasonal pans start to dry up we should start to see more elephants coming to the more permanent water-bodies.

Buffalos

- Towards the beginning of the month, we had views of a large herd of buffalos (approximately 300 individuals) in the far northern sections of the area. This herd then crossed the boundary of the concession, into the rest of the park.
- There have been quite a few sightings of bachelor herds (dagha boys) in the area this last month. A group of at least seven bulls have been seen regularly in the vicinity of Double Crossing, where they have been coming to the pool to drink water. There have also been two individuals that have been hanging around the area near Xinkwenyana Crossing. These bulls have been quite grumpy and do not seem to like the presence of the vehicles. Two more bulls have been seen near the N'wanetsi River, at Euphorbia Crossing. Another group of at least three bulls have been seen feeding in the Nhlanguleni valley. They are most likely drinking at Hyena Pan, which is still holding water.

Plains game

- The general game sightings have been great. We have regularly come across large mixed-species groups (see Coman's article). We have had regular views of South African giraffes, greater kudus (we have even had quite a few sightings of herds of males, with their long, impressive spiral-shaped horns), common waterbuck, plains zebras, impalas, blue wildebeest and warthogs, amongst others.
- Although the grass is still long and lush it is thinning in places and we have started to see some of the smaller, dwarf antelopes again. We have had a few sightings of klipspringers and Sharpe's grysbok in the rocky, hilly areas and have been seeing steenbok and common duikers in the grasslands.
- We have had regular sightings of all three of the common primates of the area (chacma baboons, vervet monkeys and thick-tailed bushbabies). The monkeys are often seen around Lebombo and Sweni Lodges, where they can be quite mischievous. Quite a few guests have come down in the mornings and have told us that they saw a fluffy, monkey-like creature on the decks of their rooms at night. Thick-tailed bushbabies are nocturnal primates and it is this animal that they have been seeing on their decks after dark.

Rare animals and other sightings

- There has been a single male sable antelope moving around the north-eastern side of the concession. He has been seen on at least three occasions this last month. Sable antelopes are very impressive creatures with large scythe-like horns that curve over their shoulder. These antelope are beautiful. The males are black, with white bellies and piebald faces. The females are chestnut-brown in colour, with white bellies. Quite a few years ago there used to be a herd of approximately thirty sable antelopes that were seen regularly in the open grasslands near Big-view Hill. One day this herd crossed the border into Mozambique and we have not seen them since. We assume that the male that we have been seeing this last month comes from that herd.
- We have had sightings of all three of the smaller cats that occur in the area this last month (caracal, serval and African wild cat). One morning one of our guides noticed a herd of giraffes staring into the grass. Groups of animals that are all staring in a common direction sometimes give us an indication of the presence of a predator. Upon investigation, they found a relaxed caracal. This is quite unusual as these creatures are usually shy and disappear into the vegetation as soon as they see that there is a

vehicle nearby. This particular animal then proceeded to stalk a steenbok. It was not successful in its hunting attempt though. Servals were seen on at least three occasions this last month. Two of those sightings could have been the same individual as they were both seen in the same vicinity, near the granophyre ridge. A single African wild cat was seen one afternoon quite close to camp.

- We have been lucky with African civet sightings this last month. These are nocturnal animals and most of the sightings of these creatures have been on the night drives. Both species of genet (large- and small-spotted) have been seen regularly on the night drives. We usually see the small-spotted genets in the open grassland areas, whereas we see the large-spotted genets in the hilly areas and along the thickly vegetated riverine areas.
- Other interesting sightings include a sighting of a Cape porcupine one night and a sighting of a honey badger one morning. We tend to have more sightings of honey badgers during our winter and spring months, when the grass is shorter (honey badgers are not particularly large and therefore are not easily seen when the grass and bush are thick).

Birds

The winter months are not our prime birding months as most of the migrants are gone. This month, however, we did record 163 different species (which is very good for winter). There are a few species of birds that arrive here during our winter months, coming down from the mountains to the west of the park where the temperatures are much colder. These include African stone-chats and red-capped robin-chats. We even had a sighting of an alpine swift (a bird that is more synonymous with mountainous habitats). This last month we started getting GPS co-ordinates for the vulture and raptor nests in the concession. So far, we have found 21 active nests of white-backed vultures, at least one nest of a white-headed vulture and one lappet-faced vulture nest. We have also found three bateleur eagle nests, three nests of tawny eagles and two nests of African fish-eagles. By far the majority of these nests have been in large knobthorn trees (particularly the vulture nests), which shows just how important this particular tree species is to the environment. Since most of the vultures in South Africa are considered to be endangered species, we are very fortunate to have so many nests in the area.

Some of the special or rare birds (species listed in the 2015 Eskom Red Data Book of Birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland) seen in the concession this last month include: white-backed night-heron, saddle-billed stork (including a few sightings of three youngsters in the region of Euphorbia Crossing), secretarybird, Cape vulture, white-backed vulture, hooded vulture, lappet-faced vulture, white-headed vulture, tawny eagle, martial eagle, bateleur eagle, kori bustard, greater painted snipe and southern ground-hornbill. Some birds that are uncommon to the area, that were seen this month, include eastern nicator, trumpeter hornbill, yellow-throated longclaw and African goshawk.



Juvenile saddle-billed storks

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

Wow, how lucky can one group get? Recently we had a family come and visit Sweni Lodge for three nights. On the first afternoon out, we managed to find the Maputo male lion with two Shish lionesses lying in front of the magnificent granophyre ridge, with the late afternoon light glowing on the rocks. We watched the lions for a while before heading to the N'wanetsi Gorge for a drinks break. This is a very pretty area, where the river has cut through the hills on its way to the Indian Ocean on the eastern side of Southern Africa. The sun was now setting to the west, lighting up the river in a golden hue. To the east of us the cliffs rose up, covered in candelabra trees and large-leafed rock figs. As we were having our drinks we watched as the full moon rose spectacularly from behind the hills, silhouetting the strangely shaped trees in front of it. Magnificent!

The next morning, the guests only left for the drive after they had done their Covid tests. This was very fortunate as the early morning had been extremely chilly and by the time that we headed out on drive the sun had already warmed the area up. After a great sighting of elephants right next to the road we were then informed that one of the guides had found the Nhlangueni leopardess. We headed to the area and followed her around for a while. She was obviously hunting. She kept on walking around through the long grass and, every once in a while, she heard and started stalking francolins. She was not successful with any of them. It was amusing to watch her creep into a thicket and then watch the explosion of birds, screaming as they burst out of the grass and flew away, cursing the presence of the cat. We then left her and had a coffee-break. After the refreshments we started heading south, back towards the camp. We stopped at a large tree where a python had been killed a few months ago. The carcass was still hanging from a creeper that was growing in the tree. The carcass was all dried out now and much of it had disappeared (possibly into the mouth of a scavenger at some point). While we were looking at the dried-up piece of snake skin. One of the guides, who was still viewing the leopardess called on the radio saying that she had just caught a small duiker. We were very close to where the leopard was and so we went to take a look. The leopard was at the base of a large marula tree and she was still in the process of killing the poor, unfortunate antelope. We watched as the life disappeared from the duiker and it stopped kicking. The leopardess then proceeded to pluck the fur off the antelope before she started feeding. It was very interesting to watch her removing mouthful after mouthful of hair and spitting it out onto the ground.



After she had plucked out a lot of the fur she rested a bit before starting to feed. We left her there with her prey and assumed that she would, at some point, hoist the carcass into the marula tree. The guests expressed an interest in going back to the area in the afternoon to see if she had indeed put the meat into the tree. When we got to the area that afternoon, we found that she had moved the carcass to another tree on the banks of the Xinkelengane drainage. She had placed the carcass in a Jackalberry tree and was feeding on it. Unfortunately, the Jackalberry had lots of leaves and visibility was very poor. As we were about to leave we saw that there was another leopard in the dry riverbed. It was Nhlangueni's son. He is at the age where his mom is no longer tolerating his presence. She is expecting him to move out of her home now and "find a job". At one point a leg of the duiker fell down and the leopardess climbed out of the tree to retrieve it. The young male took a chance and quickly climbed up the tree that the leopardess had just left. There was obviously no meat left in the tree and the young male descended and approached his mom, hoping that she would give him some scraps. The leopardess snarled at the youngster as he approached and then they briefly attacked each other before separating again. The leopardess kept chewing the leg bone as the youngster lay a few metres away, sulking. It was now already dark and we headed back to the lodge for supper. What an amazing day!

The next day we headed out just after sunrise. Fortunately, it was not as cold as the previous morning. We saw a lot of general game (giraffes, wildebeest, antelopes etc.), including sightings of some of the smaller antelope such as Sharpe's grysbok, klipspringers, steenbok and even a live common duiker. We managed to see a large buffalo bull walking in the plains, with a spotted hyena watching him ambling past. We saw some more elephants on our way back to the lodge.

That afternoon we decided to go to the western side of the concession where some of the other guides had found the Mananga Pride in the morning. On our way there we were lucky to see another leopard. We did not stay with him long. The visibility was not very good and we had already spent a whole day with leopards. We were determined to see if we could find the lions, hoping that we could get a glimpse of the cubs. On the way there we spotted an animal walking in the road ahead of us. It was an African civet. Civets are nocturnal animals and we very seldom get to see them during the day. As we approached the small carnivore it headed off the road into the thick grass. We were lucky enough to see it well before the grass blocked our view.



We then continued towards Gudzani Dam. When we got to the area where they had seen the pride in the morning we struggled to locate them. They had obviously moved. We started looking for their tracks to see where they could have headed. The sun was starting to set in the west and we realised that our chances of finding them were decreasing with every passing minute. Fortunately, one of our trackers had taken some of the students from the Singita Community Culinary School out on drive and he was in the same area, near the dam. (Singita have a programme where we offer bursaries to ten or so community members each year to study cooking with some of our amazing chefs. Upon completion of the year-long course, if they pass all their exams

and practicals, the students then receive an internationally recognised certificate in cooking. Singita then assist them in getting jobs in the industry. It is a very worthwhile project that has changed numerous people's lives over the few years that the programme has been running.) Luckily for us the tracker had just found the lions and so we headed towards him to take a look. When we got there we could see at least ten lions, including two small cubs. They were on the move, with the youngsters trying to keep up with the adult females.



We watched as they passed the vehicle in single-file, the cubs tripping over each hummock of grass. The lionesses at the front of the line then stopped and we could see that they had seen something ahead of them. We peered through the trees and could see a herd of zebras that were on their way to the dam to drink. The lionesses then started creeping towards them, slinking low through the grass and over the nearby ridge. We decided to make a big loop so that we would not disturb the hunt. By the time we got around the ridge we had lost sight of the lions and the zebras. I then got a call on the radio from Lawrence, the tracker who was driving the other vehicle. He was shouting into the radio that he thinks that they may have got something, and that I need to hurry to where he was. I followed his vehicle as he headed to where he had heard the commotion. As we arrived there we could see five or six lions gathered together, growling. We approached to where the lions were and found that they were in the process of killing a young zebra foal. One of the lionesses still had the foal, biting onto the back of its neck. The others were just starting to feed. A small zebra foal is not a lot of meat for a few hungry lionesses and there was a lot of growling, biting and scratching each other as they struggled to get to the carcass to get some of the meat. The noise of the lions fighting was quite incredible. I looked at the other vehicle and could see the cooking students all with eyes very wide. As we watched the lions feeding we then noticed the two young cubs approaching. I was quite worried that they would inadvertently get hurt in the melee around the carcass. One of the cubs stayed to the side while the other forced its way in and got a few mouthfuls of the meat. Fortunately, the adults allowed the cub in and were quite careful not to hurt it. It was getting dark then and we decided to leave the lions to their meal.

On the way back to camp we were lucky enough to see some hyenas, both species of genet and two more civets. As we were approaching Sweni camp we even had good views of a thick-tailed bushbaby. The guests were leaving the camp early the next morning for their next stop in Botswana, so this was the last drive they were going on with us and what a drive it was! During their 3-night stay they saw 30 large mammal species and 80 different species of birds.



One warm July morning we went out on game drive and I surprised by all the animal activity. While driving around the western part of the concession we experienced a beautiful elephant sighting presenting a perfect photographic opportunity. On our way back to the lodge we decided to take the central road so that we would pass by one of the popular waterholes and see if there was any activity. About 100 metres away from the waterhole we saw a large herd of impala, followed by about 15 kudus, and a couple of giraffes heading to the waterhole to drink. I got fascinated by how all of them complemented each other when it comes to making sure whether it was safe or not to make their way to the water to drink. They were all on the lookout for trouble in the shape of predators, and by doing so were increasing their chances of survival. I then realized that survival would be more difficult if some of those animals lived on their own, rather than in a herd. Animals such as impala and young animals are the most targeted by predators. It is therefore much safer for them to be around other animals that can see more than they can because those species are bigger and their eyesight is from a higher vantage point and so on. The pooled synergy of senses helps each species survive.





Leadwoods are one of my favourite trees, and I feel blessed working in the area where I see a lot of them every time I go on game drive. I fell in love with these trees while I was still a young boy looking after my grandfather's cattle. As a young boy, the elders teach you how to survive in the bush, which trees to use and which to avoid. There is a lot I learnt from the leadwood. Leadwood is considered an indicator of sweetveld and good grazing.

Leadwood is one of the heaviest woods found in the lowveld. As a result, this wood sinks in water. Due to the density of leadwood, the tree is termite and borer resistant. A leadwood will remain standing for hundreds of years after it has died. Their sturdy anatomy provides ideal perches for large birds of prey and vultures. Vultures especially require strong perches to support their weight. Also, a dead leadwood is free of the leafy branches likely to interfere with their huge wingspan when they take off from a living tree. Where side branches have fallen off, cavities remain which maybe colonized by hole-nesting bird species.

Leadwood is by no means an easy wood to work and is ill-suited for furniture making. It is, however, well suited for heavyweight traditional use like grain mortars. In the past it was also used for mine props and railway sleepers. Before the advent of steel hoes, the leadwood was used to hoe fields. Obtaining the wood for all these purposes is hard work. Cutting a leadwood with a hand-saw produces sparks.

Because of the great density of the wood, it burns slowly and for a very long time, producing long-lasting coals (sometimes lasting up to 12 hours). The ash produced is high in lime and abrasive, hence it is used by local

people as a substitute for toothpaste. When mixed with milk, leadwood ash also makes an effective whitewash. After a veld fire it is easy to spot where a leadwood used to grow from the white ash lying on the ground.



The leaves are small to medium-sized with a typically wavy margin. It helps to relieve coughs and colds if you inhale the smoke of the burning leaves.

Leadwood bark is very easy to recognize. It is a pale grey colour, which often makes the tree stand out amidst its surroundings. The bark is also very blocky and the texture resembles the scale pattern on a reptile's back.

The young trees have small side branches modified as defensive spines. This is because the younger leaves in particular are browsed by animals like kudu, giraffes and elephants.



Dwarf mongooses



Buffalo bull



Hippos resting



Maputo male lion

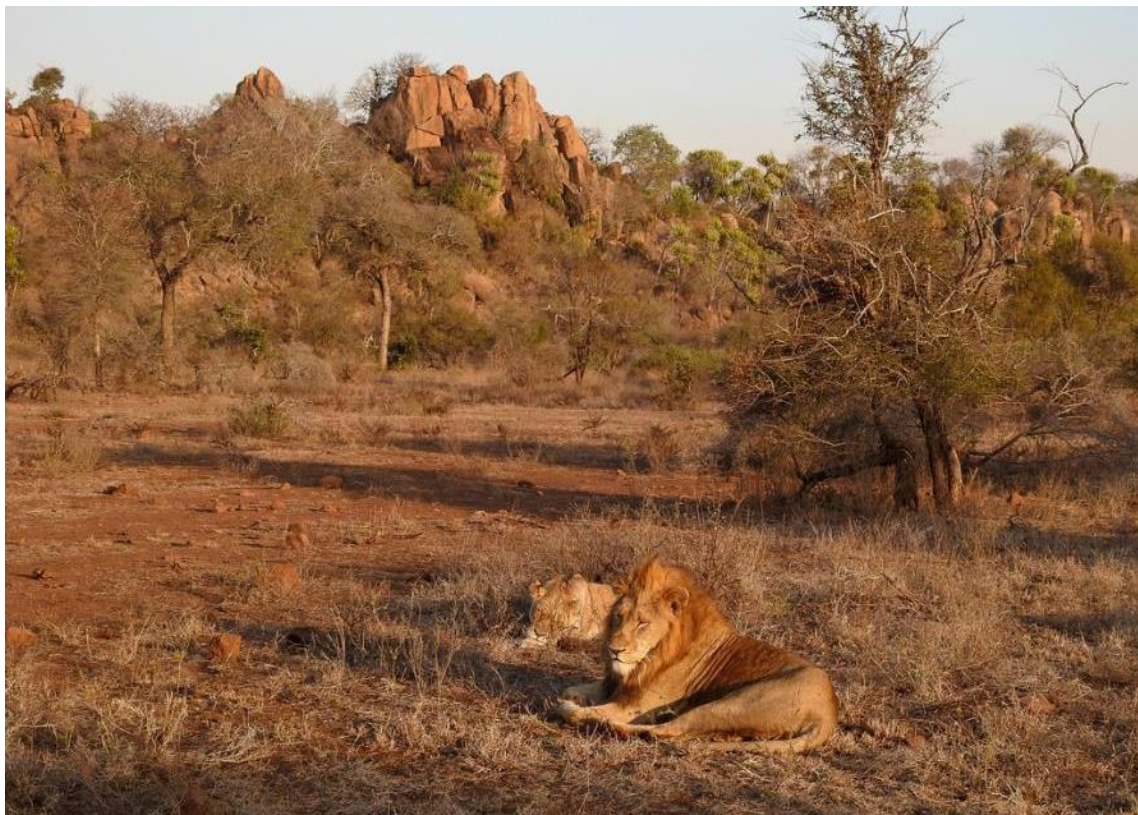


Male collared sunbird on flame combretum
Nhlangueni female leopard with prey





Common waterbuck mother and youngster
Maputo male lion with Shish lioness in front of the Granophyre ridge





Sunset over the N'wanetsi River
Moonrise over the Lebombo hills

