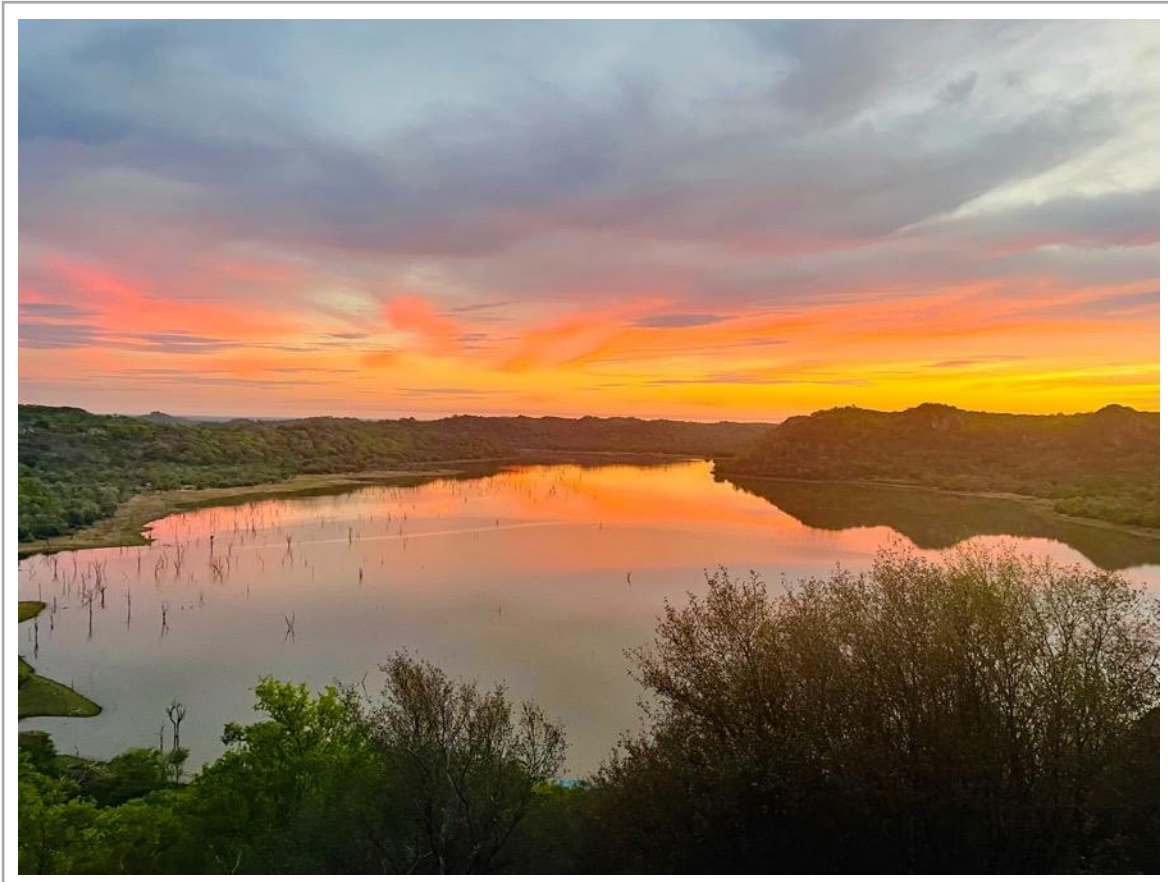


Singita



Sunrise from the lodge on 16 November 2024 at 04:53.

WILDLIFE REPORT **SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE** **For the month of November Two Thousand and Twenty-Four**

| Temperature | Rainfall Recorded | Sunrise & Sunset |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Average minimum: 21.5°C (70.7°F) | For the month: 87.5 mm | Sunrise: 05:03 |
| Minimum recorded: 18.6°C (65.4°F) | Season to date: 121 mm | Sunset: 18:23 |
| Average maximum: 34.9°C (94.8°F) | *Season = Sep to Aug | |
| Maximum recorded: 39.8°C (103.6°F) | | |

This journal celebrates the unique treasures of November, rather than the typical big, hairy scaries. For many of us it's our favourite month of the year - an awakening after the first rain of the season, following months of desperate dryness. The trees and bushes burst into shades of emerald, lime and neon green, while the crispiest layer of peppermint covers the ground. Insects, amphibians, birds, and herbivores delight in being alive, filling the air with a constant hum of happiness. In areas the cicadas are so loud they could scramble your brain! Dragonflies dart above every pool of water. Evening frog choirs compete to out-croak one another. The dawn chorus wakes every birder before sunrise to tune in and witness the wooing and peacocking. On 12 November we heard the first call of a woodland kingfisher and now, at month-end, they are duelling with the "Piet-my-vrou" calls of red-chested cuckoos. The palette has changed from muted to vivid, flowers are in bloom, and a seductive gardenia perfume wafts on the soft twilight air.

A sightings snapshot for November follows:

Lions

According to our dedicated Lion Tracking Team, the fluctuating lion prides, as at November 2024, are:

Four prides on the Malilangwe side of the Chiredzi River:

- Nduna Pride: Seven members. Three territorial males and four females. Males patrol around Banyini, Pamushana, Malevula, Hwata, northern and eastern boundary, Lojaan, Manuchi, but they don't cross the river. Females stay around Nduna area.
- Nduna Split Pride now called the Northern Pride: Six members. One adult non-territorial male, four females, one sub-adult female. They move over the top two-thirds of the property, but not onto the Hippo Valley side.
- Southern Pride: Four lions - two females and two males.
- Also in the southern area are another two females.
- Non-territorial males: Three young males that roam. Possible challengers in future.
- Non-territorial male: One that roams on his own around Sosigi, Formadhanga, Hwata. Sometimes tries his luck but big males chase him.

Three prides on the Hippo Valley side of the Chiredzi River:

- Hippo Pride: 11 members. There are four cubs. Part of the 11 are two territorial males, and they sometimes join with the prides of three and four. They sometimes cross the river, seen around 02 pan, but not east of Binya.
- Pride of three.
- Pride of four.

Highlights during the month were:

- Nduna Pride: There has been a mating pair within this pride. Let's see what 110 days bring...
- Southern Pride: Early in November they were seen hunting buffalo, but after the big rains they have evaded detection.
- The non-territorial roaming male on Malilangwe was spotted at night, stalking zebras. He gave chase but narrowly missed catching a foal.
- Hippo Pride: At the start of the month there were five cubs, but now it seems that one is missing, presumed dead.

Leopards

- Beautiful sighting of a male leopard marking territory along the shoreline below Malilangwe House.
- A mother and two cubs were seen south-east of Kwali Camp.
- A relaxed young male leopard was seen sunning himself on the rocks at the junction of Ultimate Drive.
- Alerted by a distressed klipspringer alarm calling, guide and tracker spent time scanning the area. Much to the guests' delight they found two leopards, a male and a female. The female kept rubbing against the male in a seductive manner, then she picked something from the ground and moved out of view. Further investigation revealed that she had the carcass of a young klipspringer.

Wild dogs

- The large pack are seen in high, fluctuating, numbers. The pups are doing well and are very playful. It is such a delight to see their excitement and clumsy enthusiasm of wanting to help when the adults are hunting impala.
- The smaller pack have headed south and crossed back into Gonarezhou National Park.

Rhinos

At the start of the month, when water was still very scarce, large crashes of rhinos could be seen drinking at the pans and dams. After the heavy rains there are temporary pans all over, and both black and white rhinos have been enjoying mud-bathing and feasting on the new browse and graze.

Elephants

- It's a relief to see the breeding herds picking up weight and energy thanks to the revitalised flora. Watching the tomfoolery of young elephants playing with each other has to be one of life's greatest joys.

Hyenas

- There has been hyena warfare and a big reshuffling of clans. One clan was seen chasing a lone hyena into the depths of Malilangwe Dam. They would bite it and it would seek refuge deeper in the water, but there was a pod of hippos there that weren't happy about the invasion and chased the hyenas. A few days later a dead hyena was found on the Banyini – it had died from several bite wounds. After that there was another noisy fight between clans on the Banyini. At month's end we saw a very heavily pregnant clan matriarch.

Buffalos

- The old bulls are mud-bathing during the heat of the day. Large herds are still travelling far to find grazing as the new season's grass has yet to take hold and establish itself.

Plains game

- We haven't seen any impala lambs yet, which is late for the season.
- There's been a large number of giraffes on the Banyini, with a nursery of calves among them.
- Sable, hartebeest and eland have been seen, although we expect fewer sightings when there is more grazing and plentiful water.

Unusual sightings

- A brown hyena was glimpsed near the big baobab.
- There are so many leopard tortoises out after the rains, and with the new growth coming through. One tortoise had a very bad day when it found itself in the jaws of a lioness. Unsuccessful in cracking the puzzle a male lion took over, but he too failed.
- A large crocodile was seen at her nest at Chikwete Cliffs.
- Two black-backed jackal pups were seen at their den on the Banyini.

Birding

- An extraordinary sighting was that of two palm-nut vultures – a very rare bird for this area.
- It's been an excellent month for raptors, such as Verreaux eagle-owl, osprey, bat hawk and a pair of crowned eagles.

Boat cruises

- Two words. Simply idyllic.

Fishing

- The fish are biting, and there's much activity after the rainfall and increased water level in the dam. One guest landed one of the biggest tigerfish to date, weighing about 5 kg (11 pounds).
- Flying alates caused a feeding frenzy – the water's edge was 'boiling' with tigerfish catching them.

Rock art & Walks

- It's a lovely time to walk as visibility is still good. Guests have been amazed by the flowers and small details, rock art sites and the reserve's biggest baobab on their walks.

Daytrips to Gonarezhou National Park

- These full daytrips are always rewarding with guaranteed sightings of Chilojo Cliffs and vast herds of elephants.

Some bush stories follow, as well as the November Gallery.

A whole lot of bullfrog



A male edible bullfrog, calling to advertise his availability to a mate.

In all seriousness this was my most memorable sighting of November. Never mind mating lions or wild dogs hunting impala. I had been out driving in the morning after intense rainfall during the night, and was sticking to the main roads to avoid the vulnerable muddy soil. I had pretty much decided it was time to head back to the lodge as it seemed everything had gone into hiding. I was a bit despondent and thought it was weather for ducks and frogs. I've never seen an edible bullfrog (*Pyxicephalus edulis*) before, but have always hoped to, and just as I was driving along the raised link road between the Banyini and the airstrip, where the rainwater had flooded the roadside ditch area, I saw a flash of bright yellow in the muddy water. Reversing to check what it was, possibly a snake, I raised my binos and realised it was a bullfrog climbing onto a protruding branch in the water. Several more surprises followed...

As I got my eye in I saw more big green and yellow heads with enormous eyes protruding from the shallow pan's surface. These males are big - about 8 to 13 cm (3.1 – 5.1 in) in snout-to-vent length. Then an almighty fight broke out! Two bullfrogs were splashing and wrestling in the water, the victor getting the opponent in a headlock with his jaws clamped over his head! It turns out they have two tooth like structures in the lower jaw of their wide mouth, and these aggressive bouts often cause serious injuries – even death.

My loser swam off, and seemed a little glum, but I watched him anchor himself onto some branches, and gather his wits. A few minutes later I heard him calling – a beautiful resonating “whoop”, similar to a hyena's call. He did this by inflating his body, raising his head and vocal sacs above the surface, and as he called he caused a rippling effect in the water. It was such a romantic and seductive mating call! Apparently the smaller female bullfrogs swim about freely between these gatherings of males, as the males woo and pursue them.



The glum loser, strategizing his next move.

I scanned about to check on the winner, as it seemed he'd just swum off to some other sticks and was idly floating about there – but how wrong I was. He was in the midst of amplexus! (Amplexus – one of my favourite words, is the mating position of frogs and toads, in which the male clasps the female about the back.) The only reason I knew I'd caught them in the act was because every now and then I saw the female's head emerge from the water, as she gulped some air, before the weighty male pushed her under again.

Well, I thought I'd seen it all now, but they had yet another surprise in store. It appeared that there were now black speckles surrounding them in the water, that hadn't been there a moment before, and by zooming in I realised they were eggs. The male bullfrog's clasp stimulates the release of eggs from the female. As they are released, the male fertilizes the eggs with his sperm. The spawn was drifting in the shallow water.

It's incredible to know that these bullfrogs spend at least 10 months of the year in aestivation underground, only emerging to breed if sufficiently heavy rain, i.e. more than 70 mm (2.8 in), falls within a short period. Breeding activity happens quickly, only over a couple of days, and is prevalent during the early morning. I was in the right place, at the right time, to witness such a fleeting sighting.

I kept a close eye on that temporary pan over the next week, and two evenings later saw an owlet perched on a low branch over the shallows. It's not impossible that this owlet was hunting frogs as it is known that these aggregations of breeding frogs attracts several bird predators, particularly storks and herons. The frogs themselves have a diet that includes a wide range of insects.

Exactly one week later I was driving past the same area, and much of the water had subsided, but I noticed dark patches and ripples along the edge of the pan. These turned out to be dense schools of edible bullfrog tadpoles. They swim in schools, at the edge of the water, to try and avoid predation and to gain better access to food. They were already well developed, and you could see those unmistakable beady eyes. Before long the magic of metamorphosis would cause their legs to grow, their tails to shrink, their lungs to develop, and all the other changes that transforms a tadpole into a frog.

As a closing to this story it appears there has been some misidentification between edible bullfrogs (*Pyxicephalus edulis*) and the closely related species of African bullfrogs (*Pyxicephalus adspersus*). Edible bullfrogs have a distinct tympanum, which is large and oval in shape. A frog's tympanum is a patch of skin

behind the eye that functions similarly to a human eardrum. *Pyxicephalus adspersus* are much bigger than edible bullfrogs.

Regarding edible bullfrogs being edible, they are, but I heard from someone adventurous enough to try one that while it was edible it was far from delicious!



Above: The male and female, during amplexus, in the midst of the released, fertilised eggs.
Below: A dense school of one-week-old bullfrog tadpoles.



The crowning glory

A very special sighting this November was actually seeing a crowned eagle chick. Crowned eagles (*Stephanoaetus coronatus*) are among Africa's most formidable raptors, known for their power. With striking plumage, a rufous-brown crown topped by a black-tipped crest, and claws that'll strike fear into your heart, it is as visually captivating as it is ecologically fascinating.

We are fortunate to see a pair on the Malilangwe Reserve, that have a nest in an enormous baobab on a forested hill. These apex predators prey on mammals such as monkeys, dassies, and even ungulates as big as bushbuck. I've seen one with a guineafowl kill too. Their talons and strong legs allow them to kill prey by crushing skulls, earning them the title of Africa's most powerful eagle relative to body size. It is terrifying to know from history that their predatory behaviour extends to human children.



The crowned eagle's lifestyle is marked by its incredibly slow breeding cycle - one of the most prolonged among birds. A single breeding cycle spans around 500 days, during which only one chick is raised. So, to have a view, through binos, of a fluffy white eaglet in the nest was incredibly special. The fledgling will remain dependent on its parents for nearly a year, a rarity in the avian world.

Behaviourally, crowned eagles are nervous and edgy. In age they are capable of reaching their mid-thirties in favourable conditions. These birds are highly territorial despite their cautious nature, and they exhibit remarkable aggression when defending their nests, often attacking intruders, including humans.

With this knowledge safely in my head we viewed the nest, through binoculars, from the relative safety of the game-viewer. We spotted one adult eagle in the baobab, and on a second visit it was perched on the nest – an indication that the nest was active. We couldn't see a chick, but then by reversing we could view the nest from a slightly different angle. I assumed the white bundle I could make out in the distance was a baobab flower, because the tree is in bloom, but focusing sharply saw it was a chick. With my 500 mm lens extended, sensor cropped in, and then later in Photoshop the image cropped further, you can see the precious eaglet amid the baobab flowers!

This was such an avian highlight for November. Throughout Africa the species faces existential threats from forest exploitation and competition with humans for bushmeat, with deforestation, agriculture, and human encroachment ravaging its habitats outside of well-protected wildlife areas. Their populations are in sharp decline, leading to their classification as "Near Threatened" by the IUCN. May our precious eaglet make it to adulthood and live a full free life.



Above: One of the parents peering into the enormous nest in the fork of a flowering baobab.
Below: The eaglet! The first feathers emerge through the white down when the chick is about 40 days old.
This photo was taken on 17 November.



All things bright and beautiful

Every here and there during November you spot a bunch of cerise, candy stick petals in the form of an ammocharis (*Ammocharis tinneana*). The leaves, which are often grazed by herbivores, and flowers grow from a very large underground bulb. What was unusual about this one, some distance away, was that it had a dark cloud hovering above it. We walked to it and discovered the cloud was a swarm of exquisite gold-spotted burnet moths (*Arniocera auriguttata*) that were attracted by the fragrant flowers.



With their iridescent black wings, gold spots, and orange head and legs they are vibrant little performers. They steal the show after the first rains and, unlike most moths, they are active during the day.

Their bright colours aren't just for show - they are an aposematic signal to predators. Aposematic colouring refers to the bright, conspicuous coloration found on certain insects that signal that the insect may be toxic, distasteful, or otherwise dangerous to eat. The strategy relies on predators learning to associate these bold colours with negative experiences, such as unpleasant tastes or harmful effects. Over time, insects with such warning colours are less likely to be attacked, as predators avoid them based on prior encounters. The effectiveness is enhanced by the insect's ability to maintain or display these colours prominently, even in the presence of potential threats. Sometimes it pays to be a flashy show-off!



These little moths feed on the flowers' nectar, and in doing so play a vital role in pollination. Pollination is essential for the reproduction of many plant species. As insects visit flowers to gather nectar or pollen, they inadvertently transfer pollen from one flower to another, facilitating cross-pollination. This process helps plants produce seeds and fruit, which are vital for their survival and genetic diversity.

Beyond the plants themselves, insect pollination supports entire ecosystems, as it enables the growth of flora that provide food and habitat for other wildlife. Without insect pollinators, many plants would struggle to reproduce, leading to declines in biodiversity and potential food shortages for humans and wildlife alike. The size of insect populations is directly tied to the stability of ecosystems, and we are delighted to have so many insects buzzing about at the moment – they're a true indicator of a healthy biome.

Noticing and paying attention to these small details, especially when you're on a bush walk, opens up a whole new field of interest and marvel. It's so rewarding to see and get an understanding of the bigger picture – especially when they're as bright and beautiful as these are.

November Gallery



Muddy river water from the rain flows into the dam as clouds brew another desperately needed downpour.



Above left: A cicada in the hand is indicative of a million in the bush!
Above right: A northern pygmy toad hopping amid the sandstone outcrops, their preferred habitat.



A southern foam-nest tree frog in the process of producing a thick mucus-like fluid from her cloaca, and using her hind legs to whip it into froth that will serve as physical protection for the developing eggs. It's a bit like making meringues!

Next page: It is always a delight to see these charismatic red velvet mites emerge after the first rains. Here two males have built their "love gardens", and will deposit spermatophore on these. Then they'll spin a woven silk path from the garden and go in search of a female. A seductive mating dance ensues and if a female is attracted she follows the silken trail to the love garden... If the craftsmanship of the garden impresses she'll impregnate herself with his spermatophore.





Left: Who goes there?

The groove is the first clue, and the scaly footprints on either side the clincher – it's the track of a large crocodile that walked down the road. The groove is left by the tail as it drags along after the footprints. Crocodiles use the period after heavy rainfall to move from one waterbody to another. This track was near the Chiredzi River early one morning, and the croc had probably relocated to a pan or dam some distance away, during the night.

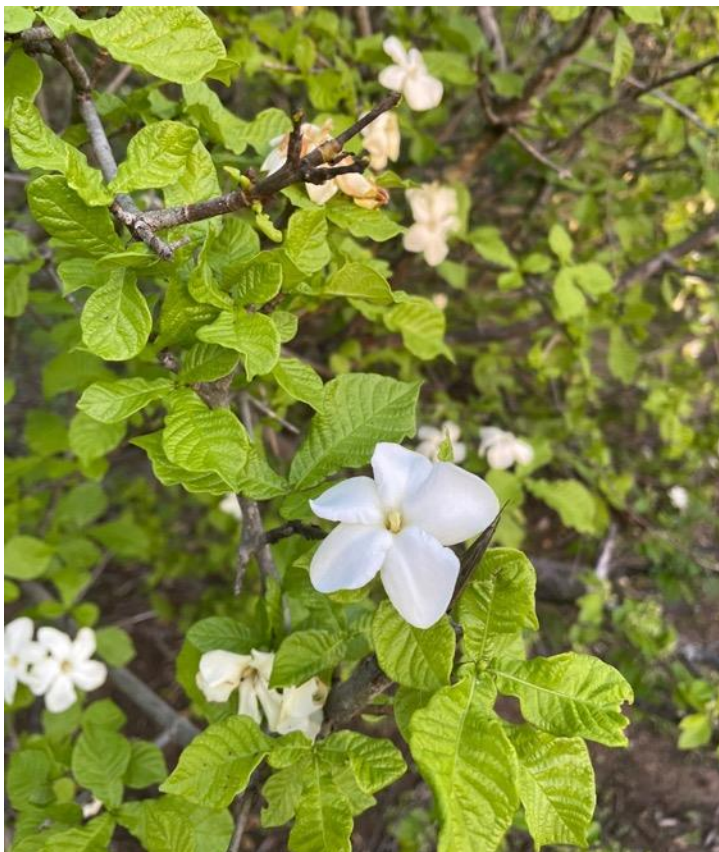
Below: This was a first, and an almost unbelievable sight – thank goodness for photographic evidence! Upon arriving at Hwata Pan and finding nothing there, not even a ripple on the water, two hairy nostrils appeared followed by the head of a hippo! He'd been completely submerged doing an excellent starfish impression. Despite their short stubby legs and enormous girth hippos can travel vast distances in a night in search of grazing, or new habitat. Hwata Pan must have been a convenient stopover on the way to a new dam or river for this transient hippo.





The rest of the Gallery features some of the November flowers – it really is such a special time of year.

Above: The creamy bloom of a baobab tree.



Left: If only you could inhale the scent of this photo. Driving along the gardenia-lined gravel roads, in the warm air of dawn or dusk is an experience beyond compare or rival. No Parisian perfumer could come close to creating such an exquisite aroma.

The flowers on the following pages are:
Bushveld chinchinchee
Pancratium
Crinum lilies (x2)
Green-apple tree flower
Brown-veined white butterfly on a string of stars
Purple tip butterfly on a fireball lily









With an exuberant bushveld chorus ringing through the air, and the colours and decorations of an African Christmas everywhere, we wish you a joyful and flourishing upcoming festive season.

All stories and photographs by Jenny Hishin, unless otherwise indicated.