

Singita



Photo by Wessel Booysen

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

Temperature

Average minimum: 17°C (62.6°F)
Minimum recorded: 11°C (51.8°F)
Average maximum: 28.7°C (83.6°F)
Maximum recorded: 40°C (120.2°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 34 mm
Season to date: 787 mm

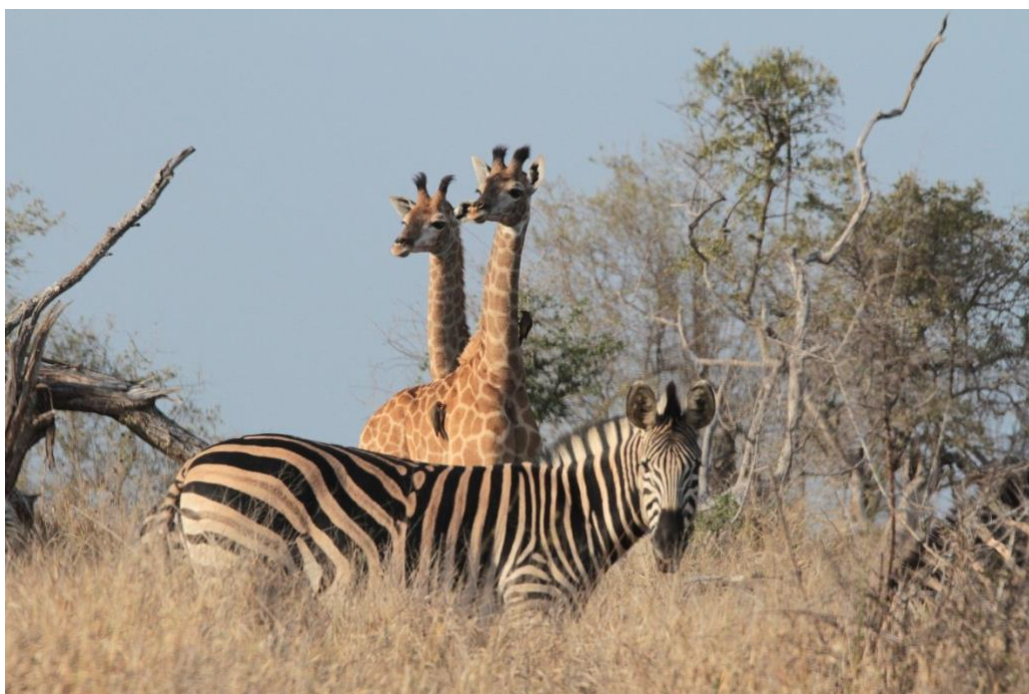
Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05h05
Sunset: 18h05

Spring is gracefully gliding further and further away from the cool winter temperatures of previous months, and we've enjoyed a few sprinkles of rain wetting the way for the seasonal summer rainfall. A number of the pools in historically dry drainage lines that when flowing, feed into the N'wanetsi, are still carrying water in them as a result of the unseasonal great rains we received in the first quarter of the year. We have also had warmer weather this October with an average maximum of 28.7°C which is 2.7°C warmer than the previous year.

Most trees are slowly starting to plump up in their green lush leaves, and a number of them are wearing their beautiful floral attire which has brightened the bush with the various splashes of colours, from the pale yellows carried by the purple cluster pod, to the lavender and yellow flowers dangling from the sickle bush, to the deep red flowers drooping from the green apples, to the mauve radiating from the apple leaf, and a host of other shades of colours that haven't been described yet by man. These flowers have also sweetened the warm air, leaving a floral scent lingering, attracting a number of insects including beautifully coloured butterflies that splash the bush with colour. We have also had incredible sightings of fireflies hovering over the rivers, sporadically radiating a glow of bioluminescence along the anterior part of their bodies, looking like fallen stars.

The first impala lamb was born on the 30th of October 2021, we expect a number more to begin dropping, as the females are nearly bursting at the seams. A number of zebras, giraffes, buffaloes and waterbuck have also been sighted with full-bodied bellies housing young calves ready to navigate the world.



Giraffe photo bombing a zebra

Photo by Wessel Booysen

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for October:

Lions

- The Mountain pride has been seen on a number of occasions in the western parts of our concession staying true to their name by always being in sight of the mountains and rocky outcrops. These lions are in great condition, usually seen with full bellies or on the hunt. The pride is 11 strong at the moment.
- The Kumana and Maputo male coalition is growing stronger by the day, with us having seen them establishing their dominance and maintaining their title of the Kings of the South. They are usually heard cementing this by robust roars that can be heard from Lebombo and Sweni Lodges.
- A pride assumed to be the prodigal Shishagaan pride has been seen on the southern parts of our concession on a number of occasions after the chaotic breakaway caused by the turf war between the Kumana and Maputo males, which led the pride who were in May nine strong, to break apart and seek safety. It is believed that the majority of the pride (five members) have been seeking refuge in Mozambique but now that the dust between the two males has settled, they have now made a miraculous return far south and west of our concession. Two members of the Shish pride (one limping

lioness and another lioness) have also been seen mating with this newly founded coalition, however we are yet to see all members of the pride reunited to form the pride of nine that they were.

- The Mananga pride are still established in the north-western sectors of our concession, although they have been seen moving further and further into the concession with their young cubs doing extremely well. This pride is estimated to be 19 strong when all together, according to a head count that was done in the beginning of this month, which included six lionesses and thirteen sub-adults and cubs.
- Two members of the Shish male coalition, one of which was Xihamham have been seen on a number of occasions with the Mananga pride feeding, and have on occasion been seen wandering the concession as a pair ensuring no intruders enter their northern territory.
- What is believed to be a breakaway from the Northern pride, two young lion and lioness have been seen in the furthest northern sections of our concession. No signs of any other pride members have been seen in that area.
- The Southern pride has been sighted on a number of occasions along the H6 public road, both feeding, resting, wandering about, and they are being accompanied by young cubs as their pride number increases. The paternity of the young cubs is unknown at this stage.
- The Semana pride that hosts the much sought after white lion has been seen on a number of occasions along the H1-3 with his established pride which him and his brother reign over after they were pushed out of their maternal pride (the Shishangaan pride). He has been seen sporting a number of scars on his face, telling of the dangers he has encountered now as a territorial male. The brothers were also seen with a carcass at our landing strip.
- The Xhirombe male who was assumed to be somewhere in Mozambique or dead has risen from the ashes and has been seen around the far eastern part of the concession not too far away from the fence line, heading north.



Mananga pride watching waterbuck

Photo by Wessel Booysen

Leopards

- The Mbiri Mbiri male has been seen on multiple occasions in the central parts of our concession towards the north, marking his territory, and was once spotted sporting a fairly fresh wound around his collar that could have been caused from taking down prey or contact with another male in that region. He looks to be in good condition and the wound seems to be healing well.
- The Dumbana male has also been seen around our central parts of our concession, marking territory and vocalising.
- A skittish male has been seen around Central Depression once with an impala kill that he abandoned at the base of a leadwood tree.
- An unknown male has also been seen on the far south-western part of our concession going in and out of our boundary.
- Two unknown males were also seen in the Nyala ridge. It was uncertain of their interaction as both of them were hard to keep up with on the hill boulders.
- An unknown female was also sighted around Gudzane Dam area, she was very skittish, and hurriedly moved north.
- The Dumbana female and her two cubs have been found mainly towards the east, around the Ntsibitsene region, which seems to be a good place for the mother to leave the cubs as she goes and hunts. The one cub is extremely curious usually approaching and watching the vehicles closely, while the other tends to be shy.



One of the Dumbana female's cubs

Photo by Wessel Booyesen

Cheetahs

- Towards the end of the month a female cheetah and her three sub-adult cubs entered the concession from the west. They successfully brought down impala and fed on two occasions. The one carcass was stolen by hyena and the other kill they managed to enjoy fully on their own, until they decided to leave the rest to the vultures hovering in the area.



Cheetah

Photo by Wessel Booysen

Wild dogs

- The pack of eight wild dogs who have been denning south of our concession have begun exploring a wider range, now that the pups are old enough to follow the adults. They have been sighted along the H6 public road east of the H1-3 turnoff and have entered our concession where we believe they spent time hunting around the mountainous area in the north west. We have shared moments with the pack interacting, other times tracks and scat is all that we found to know that they were still in the region.

Spotted hyenas

- We have seen a number of lone hyenas wandering the concession looking for an opportunity to hunt or to scavenge of which some have been successful, forcefully nabbing carcasses away from cheetahs, leopards and at times have been gifted some carcasses by lions. Some of their prizes included impalas, buffalo, and warthog remains.
- Clans have been seen all across the concession, namely the H6 clan as well as the clan denning around Xinkelengane fly-camp where we have seen six very young cubs.

Elephants

- A number of elephant bulls have been seen both in bachelor herds and on their lonesome feeding, wallowing and on occasion trailing breeding herds from a distance.
- The bigger breeding herds are slowly making their way back into our concession with herds as many as forty elephants roaming the concession. A number of smaller breeding herds have also been seen.

Buffalos

- Buffalo bulls or commonly known as “dagga boys” have been seen all around the concession in groups as large as 15 to groups as small as two, with solo bulls also sighted around the riverine areas. A number of these older dagga boys found themselves to be the victims of hunting lions this month.
- The large herds are slowly starting to make their way back into the concession as conditions here are favourable for them, with various herds ranging from 100 to over 1 000 buffalo. They have been seen in the northern parts of our concession and smaller groups sighted in the south.

Plains game

- The plains game are in extremely good condition for this time of the year with the grasses and vegetation still being plentiful and retaining a substantial amount of nutrients. Herds of impala, wildebeest, kudu, dazzles of zebra, and towers of giraffe have been seen across the concession, in every nook, corner and cranny, without fail.



A dazzle of zebra drinking

Photo by Wessel Booyesen

Rare animals and other sightings

- There were two sightings of caracal on the concession, one on the eastern border and another around the western border.
- A very relaxed African wild cat has been seen.
- An innumerable number of jackals have been seen, both alone and in pairs, resting, wandering and sometimes waiting around a carcass for an opportunity to scavenge.
- A lesser bushbaby was seen on the eastern border, pouncing about in the trees.
- Crested guineafowls have both been sighted and heard around the gorge region and as far west as the granophyre ridge.
- An old crocodile was seen lingering around the Mananga pride who had made a buffalo kill in the Gudzane region.

Birds

- Slowly the migratory birds are returning to the concession for the season of plenty. A number of the migratory birds have arrived early but we are still waiting for some of our long-distance travellers like the red-backed shrike to cross our borders. Most of the winter altitudinal migrants are gone now, returning back to the mountains to the west of the Kruger National Park. Some of the more interesting and special birds that we have seen this last month include the greater painted snipe, little grebe, crested guineafowl, southern ground-hornbill, secretarybird and lappet-faced vulture. As summer approaches the diversity of bird species will increase.

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

By looking at and understanding the meaning of the road names of our concession, you can get an idea of the special topographical features, species of animals or trees we often see in the area, and also some interesting history.

N'wanetsi is the most driven road as it's the main road heading north into the majority of the concession from our two lodges, Lebombo and Sweni, and gets its name from the river with the same name that it runs along for its entire course. The name 'N'wanetsi' is from the Xitsonga language and the meaning is nowadays obscure, some claiming it's derived from 'n'wetsi-n'wetsi', meaning 'shimmering'. There are, as far as I have seen, no less than three other rivers in South Africa and one in Zimbabwe bearing the same name, all spelt slightly different.

Nyokeni means place of the snake and this road winds through a beautiful rocky euphorbia-clad valley, a perfect place for snakes to bask in the sun.

Msimbitsana is named after the drainage-line (rivulets draining water from high areas into larger rivers) it runs along which is from the Xitsonga word for the tree lavender fever berry (*Croton gratissimus*), which grows in abundance on the rocky ledges.

Three of the mountain passes are Peladyambu (sunset), Name Badge Hill (a guide once dropped his name badge here) and Ngumi (klipspringer).



Photo by Tovhi Mudau

Nkayanini means place of the knob-thorns (*Senegalia nigrescens*), Mhlanguleni place of the magic guarri's (*Euclea divinorum*), and Ntoma means jackalberry (*Diospyros mespiliformis*).

Mangwa means zebra as this road is on the Lebombo plains where we often, especially in winter, see large herds of these animals given the good grazing, open terrain and close proximity to Gudzani Dam where there is often still water deep into the dry winter.

A very interesting road is Sisal Line, where in the middle 1970's Sakkie Schoeman of the Kruger National Park's technical department had - under the orders of a senior officer of the SADF (South African Defence Force) – created a sisal buffer on the entire eastern boundary of the Kruger National Park. At the time South Africa and Mozambique were unfriendly neighbours with opposing political ideas and the rows of spiny sisal plants were to form a barrier in the case of an invasion by MK freedom fighters (uMkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the African National Congress, South Africa's current ruling party since independence). Sakkie personally harvested about five million sisal plants from an area on the western boundary of the park to plant 13 rows, 0,75 m apart for 320 km. The sisal line was a complete failure as the plants, in spite of their spiny nature, were very sought after by some animals, especially elephants and porcupine, and were fed on with relish and eventually disappeared.

The history of a place always make you appreciate the environment you find yourself in just that little bit more. Stories are to be found everywhere, even and especially long after the people they involved have disappeared.

Blades of life

Article by Ishmael Nyathi

There are different types of grass species in the Singita Lebombo concession that attract a large number of animals. Grasses are very important in our ecosystem as it not only protects the soil against soil erosion but also is a food source to many different animal and insect species that all need to work together in order to balance the ecosystem. The grasslands play an important role in the development of a diverse community of animals, birds and insects that interact to form a complex food web. The grasses feed the herbivores, such as white rhino, zebra, buffalo, wildebeest and other antelope species, which in turn attract the carnivores, such as lions, leopards and cheetahs. The scavengers, like vultures and hyenas, follow. Then the decomposers (bacteria, fungi, termites) break down the leftover organic matter, making it available to producers (the grasslands), which completes the cycle of a healthy, well-balanced ecosystem.

However, certain species of grasses need to be controlled by fire in order to aid in their rejuvenation process because the moribund grass can suffocate the growth of new blades, which is a threat to the balance of the ecosystem. In this case, there is human intervention in the form of controlled burns. It is important to do management burns at the right time of year, in perfect conditions, to minimise the risk of a runaway fire that can cause unintended damage to the ecosystem and decimate large areas of grasslands. In September 2020, a fire managed to jump the firebreak of one of our neighbouring reserves. The fire burned for 4 days non-stop.

It has been interesting to observe the changes that the uncontrolled fire made to our concession's ecosystem. In the burnt areas, different species of grass, such as red grass (*Themeda triandra*), stinking grass (*Bothriochloa radicans*) and guinea grass (*Panicum maximum*), are now flourishing. We have also noticed that in areas where guinea grass used to have a stronghold, red grass is now the dominant species. These changes in the grasslands have had a ripple effect on the wider ecosystem. Animals that used to frequent different areas are now moving into the burnt areas where the hierarchy of grasses has changed. Buffalos, zebras, wildebeest and white rhinos

have changed their habits to follow the grass. As a result, some predators are also starting to frequent those areas, following the game. It is even attracting different bird and insect species.

Grass is highly dynamic, but it is often underrated. It is one of the blades that weaves our environment together. Grasses play a vital role in the wellbeing of the biome and are an indication of a healthy, balanced ecosystem.



Hyenas in a nest of grass, and a breeding herd of elephants in long blades of grass Photos by Wessel Booyesen



Barn owl



Mananga pride cub



Zebra with waterbuck in the background



Chacma baboon



Buffalo passing a hyena clan



Shish males



Impala ram with broken horn



White-backed vulture making a landing