

Singita



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

Temperature

Average minimum: 22.8°C (73.0°F)
Minimum recorded: 22.1°C (71.7°F)
Average maximum: 33.6°C (92.4°F)
Maximum recorded: 38.4°C (101.1°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 186.5 mm
Season to date: 577.5 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:52
Sunset: 18:19

Raising the dam levels, widening the rivers and saturating the earth has been the agenda of the continuous rainfall we've received. An interesting result of this as far as wildlife sightings go is that you will often find animals right in the middle of the road or open spaces. Many species prefer not to get bogged down in the mud and would rather have their hooves/paws on compacted soil with clear visibility around them. The airstrip has been busy with wildlife arrivals and departures!

On one afternoon four major species were seen in one location: a pair of lions were mating, five white rhinos were grazing, and an elephant and a black rhino were browsing along Mahande Road. On another occasion guests enjoyed seeing giraffes, lions, buffalo and a black rhino in one spot: the black rhino gave the vehicle a quick charge before taking off at speed, the lions were relaxing, the buffalo were in the mud cooling off, and the giraffe were towering together staring at the lions.

A sightings snapshot for February follows:

Lions

- The majority of sightings were of five lions that were on or close to the airstrip. A pair of them were mating. At one stage there were herds of zebras and impala close by.
- Three lions were also seen in the north, on the side of the main Binya Road.
- A final stage of a long-term study on lion behaviour began this month. Selected lionesses from different prides were collared for monitoring purposes. One of the objectives of the study is to provide direction regarding re-wilding and the optimal stage at which lions should be introduced to reserves to avoid over-predation on specific prey species.

Leopards

Two of the months highlights were:

- During a boat cruise, hearing and then seeing a territorial male leopard patrolling his territory along the shoreline.
- A relaxed female leopard walking along Pamushana Access Road, and then stopping to drink at a rain-filled natural pan before disappearing into the night.

Wild dogs

As the story that follows in this journal details the pack of wild dogs can be virtually impossible to find, and then just miraculously materialise in front of your eyes.

- This was the case later in the month when they were seen trotting along Pamushana Access Road, and then spending time around Nhanga Pan in the days that followed, where guests got to see them successfully hunt a young impala.

Rhinos

- Sightings of white rhinos are always on the cards. At this time of year they are bulking up as much as possible on all the nutritious grass available, and it's reassuring to see them gather at dusk around a favourite waterhole to drink, but almost as importantly to socialise, strengthen bonds and form alliances with one another.
- The more solitary black rhinos seem to be enjoying each other's company at this time and have gathered together in crashes on occasion. The highlight of one afternoon game drive was seeing a total of seven black rhinos.

Elephants

- Vast breeding herds can be feeding a few metres off the road and you won't see them as the vegetation is so thick and high, but thankfully they have also been using the roads. Smaller breeding herds of elephants join together during times of abundant food to form a large breeding herd.
- It's also the time when more of the large bulls are in musth, so we make sure to respect their space. A highlight was watching a bull elephant throwing mud on his back.

Hyenas

- There must be active hyena dens at the moment because you see the spotted adults returning along the same paths early in the morning after a night's hunting foray.

Buffalos

- Interestingly, we are seeing smaller herds of buffalos together at this time of grazing abundance.
- The old dagga boy bulls that have left the breeding herds seem very content to wallow in the mud on hot afternoons, and chew the cud.

Plains game

- Some of the plains game have been congregating in the open areas, and one such sighting heralded about 60 zebras together, with giraffes and two white rhinos in the distance.
- Venturing south a group of guests had a great sighting of sable and Lichtenstein's hartebeest.

Birding

- Bring your earplugs if you don't want to be woken by the dawn chorus! There are so many species and it is phenomenal to listen to them singing their hearts out before sunrise.
- A morning's birding trip on the water resulted in 27 species being seen.

Boat cruises

- The boat cruises always end up being a highlight of our guests' stays. There are very few places in Africa where you have this opportunity on safari, and have the vast dam and river system all to yourself to explore. Every boat cruise offers hippos, crocodiles, birdlife and magic.

Fishing

- Oh my – the fish are biting! Especially the tigerfish and some enormous ones have been landed and released (over 3 kg). Others have hit the lure with such sudden violence, only to leap out the water and throw the lure – leaving you with a slack line, a fleeting memory of silver-orange-black flying through the air, and hours of wondering if that would have been your PB (personal best). Some monster breams have been caught too, and it is such a reassuring sign of a water system brimming with life.

Rock art

- While bush walks are not held during these times of dense vegetation we do encourage our guests to get out of the vehicle with their guide and admire the rock art sites that are close to the road. One such site where the ancient artworks can be clearly seen is a short distance from the lodge at Chinzwini.

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

An afternoon at “four-leaf clover pan”

We’d been on a mission the whole week to find the pack of African wild dogs. Nothing beats spending an afternoon with these Critically Endangered animals, and photographing them as they play and prepare to go off hunting. The best way to do this is to look for tracks and then check every pan, dam, and waterpoint in the area. It really is like looking for needles in a haystack as they travel enormous distances during their hunts. They can be seen hunting in the south one morning, only to be spotted hunting that evening 50 km (31 miles) away in the north. During the day they like to find a water source to quench their thirst, and relax and recover nearby.

Having all but abandoned the search for another day luck struck when we found them slap bang in the middle of a sandy track next to a series of unnamed temporary pans – those that only have water in the rainy season. We counted 16 of them sleeping, occasionally lifting their heads if they heard something of interest, shuffling about to avoid the shifting sun and every now and again getting up and flopping into the little pool of water alongside where we’d parked, to cool off. We were further delighted to observe that the alpha female had the rounded belly of pregnancy.



When settling in for the afternoon we'd noticed the pan had little clumps of four-leaf clover surrounding it. What could be luckier? We were with these much sought after animals, in the far north of the vast reserve where not even cellphone signal could bother us. Cameras were at the ready, flasks of cold water in hand, and what turned out to be a trifecta of our favourite sundowner snacks that the chefs had packed (crisps, pistachios and biltong). There were smiles all round and wild horses couldn't have dragged us away.



Well, wild horses they were not but we could hardly believe our eyes about an hour later when two black rhinos just materialised out of the mopane woodland to drink at the little pan. Black rhinos are also Critically Endangered. What are the chances? Two Critically Endangered species in one sighting! But black rhinos are curious, highly sensitive and can be confrontational.

The mother sported an incredible second horn – the longest and sharpest we'd seen, and she'd barely taken a sip when she spotted the vehicle and made a beeline for us at a determined clip. We were determined not to move. It was at this point that the wild dogs saw the rhinos too, and they did not want to be driven away from the pan either. A pair of dogs ran in front of the mother rhino and jumped into the pan as if to claim it as their own. The rhinos were shocked by their presence and audacity, and beat a hasty retreat into the thickets. But curiosity and righteous indignation had the mother creeping back, head hung low, and stalking the wild dogs. The dogs lost their nerve and bolted from the pan. From that moment it was game on, with the calf thinking it was great sport to chase the dogs, and the dogs trying to hold their nerve and be nonchalant, only to scutter out of the way at the last second as the armoured tank bore down on them. The highly weaponised mother was always close by to add an extra charge when needed, but eventually the snapping dogs rallied and chased the rhinos deeper into the thickets.

The pack was immensely pleased with themselves and with tails held high they trotted off down the road. We were not sure the rhinos were done with them, but were relieved that it all ended well.

As we followed we could still catch a glimpse of the black rhinos, and no doubt they returned to 'their' pan to drink in peace. We could hardly believe the extraordinary sequence of events we'd witnessed. It'll always be remembered as our afternoon at "four-leaf clover pan," and I'm so grateful to have the photos and story to share with you.

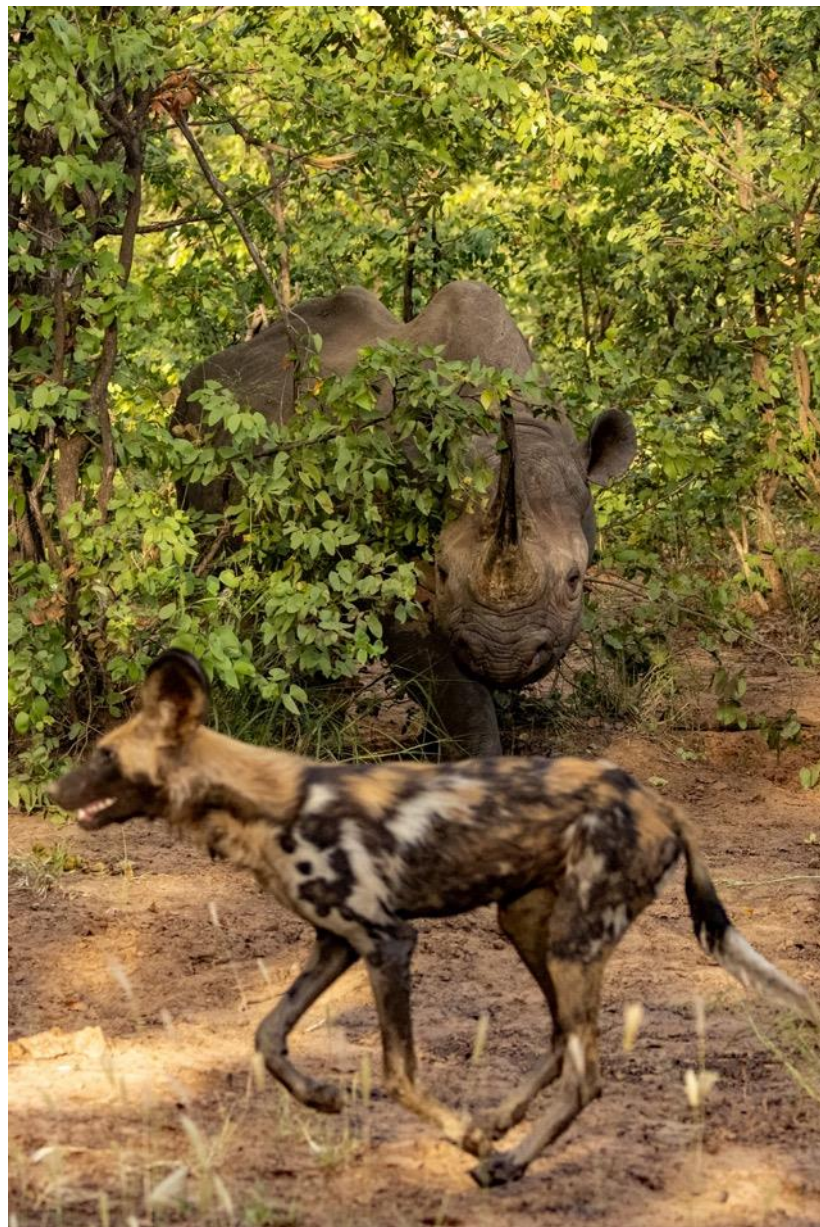


The black rhinos appear out of the mopane woodland.
The mother, with her incredible second horn, makes a beeline toward us.





Two of the wild dogs run over and jump in the pan to claim it, chasing off the rhinos.
The mother sneaks back up on them, as they bound away.





The calf thinks it's a great game and chases some of the younger dogs, while the older pack members do their best to be nonchalant.



With “play bows” and jinxing from the dogs, and mock charges from both species, the encounter continues, but the dogs back off when the mother rhino turns on them.



By reviewing the rhinos’ identification markers The Malilangwe Trust’s ecologists can confirm that the mother is referred to as Pukwani and her calf is Makelwani. Makelwani is a three-year-old female calf, and is Pukwani’s tenth calf at Malilangwe. Normally by now the calf would have been forced to go off on her own because her mother would have had a new calf about six months ago, but the mother’s calving intervals have been increasing because she is old, estimated to be about 40 years of age. She was first recorded in iMfolozi Game Reserve as an adult in 1990, giving her a birth date in 1983 or 1984. She was one of the founder black rhino cows translocated to Malilangwe over 25 years ago. Black rhinos don't live much beyond 40 years.

Learning of these facts goes to make this sighting all that more special. How incredible to see this legendary mother rhino thriving at such an advanced age, and knowing that she has contributed so enormously to the conservation of her Critically Endangered species.

The green green grass of home

During February the grasses are at their zenith. Grasses are so varied and so beautiful, and I think a bouquet of grasses rivals any bunch of flowers. The way they bend and sway as the wind washes over them is like watching starlings murmurate, or the aurora borealis dance, or thousands of tiny fish shoaling. It's a mesmerising floral ballet and it stops me in my tracks when low light catches it at play.



Dawn breaks over a meadow of grasses, including Natal red top grass.

Some of my favourites are bottlebrush grass, signal grass, cat's tail grass, finger grass, guinea grass, herringbone grass and spear grass, but my top two are Natal red top grass that has velvety pink inflorescences, and feathered chloris that has cream tufts of 'feathers'.

Photographing grass forces you to be creative because it looks exquisite when backlit or side-lit and the inflorescences shine brightly. But not everyone is grass obsessed so as a wildlife photographer it's great if you can include a small creature clinging to a blade of grass or fluttering by. I have spent probably too long sitting in a field of grass at sunrise willing an enchanting feline animal to slink into frame and part the sea of gold and green before me.

Enchanting is a word not often associated with spotted hyenas, but they are technically more feline than canine belonging to the suborder Feliformia. (Feliformia is a suborder within the order Carnivora consisting of "cat-like" carnivorans, including large and small cats, hyenas, mongooses and viverrids. It is in contrast to the other suborder of Carnivora, Caniformia consisting of "dog-like" carnivorans. It is also because of this classification that we refer to baby hyenas as cubs, not pups.) Anyway, while randomly focusing on some side-lit feathered chloris grass that was just too beautiful to pass by, I noticed some slight movement that turned out to be two hyenas returning from night patrol. They were ambling along and stopping here and there to sniff the grass and read the signs of any animals that may have brushed the grass when passing by.

These are without doubt the most enchanting photos I've ever taken of hyenas and it's a great joy to have the grass help showcase the soft, gentle, curious aspects of their complex nature.



Twitter

With the month of love upon us it was amusing to watch these two trumpeter hornbills dry off after being caught in a rain shower. The male (on the left) with the larger bill and casque spent a significant amount of time on the branch, on his own, grooming and preening and fluffing his feathers in an effort to look his best. Sometime later his mate flew in and landed next to him, snuggling up and looking like a wreck!



Another bird looking none too pleased at getting caught in a storm was this shikra – a small accipiter that has cherry-red eyes. (Accipiter refers to any medium-sized forest-inhabiting hawk of the genus *Accipiter*.) They have short broad wings and a long tail and a characteristic flight pattern of several quick flaps and a glide.



February Gallery

A breeding herd of elephants blocking the road.



A mother elephant
feasting on
trunkful after
trunkful of grass.



Precious vital raindrops clinging to the vegetation.





Calm and passive one moment...



Red in tooth and claw the next.



Warm blooded mammals cooling off in the mud.
Cold blooded reptiles warming up in the sun.





The stripes line up as a foal suckles.
Egrets chaperone a rhino and catch insects that get disturbed by the large grazer.





Zebras framed by a woodland.



Guests taking a closer look at the biggest baobab on the property, with a growing girth of 32 metres.

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