

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT

SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE

For the month of May, Two Thousand and Twenty-Six

Temperature

Average minimum: 16°C (60.8°F)
Minimum recorded: 12°C (53.6°F)
Average maximum: 29°C (84.2°F)
Maximum recorded: 35°C (95.0°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 4 mm
Season to date: 624 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:23
Sunset: 17:19

After the high rainfall over a prolonged period the grasses are tawny and the dense bush and trees still bear leaves. It's been a most beautiful month of late autumnal colours, with some low mist, scattered showers, puffer-jacket mornings and T-shirt afternoons.

The mid-month-moon cast a slim smile over the neon, yellow-green, spiny cucumbers that are dotted all over the landscape, while multitudes of orange butterflies rested in flower meadows, Burchell's coucals became conspicuous by their presence, and impala rams sounded the final call on the rutting season. It never ceases to amaze what the different months highlight – every aspect of flora and fauna ultimately has its "place in the sun", which happens to be the meaning of the word Pamushana.

What a perfect time to celebrate Africa Day on 25 May, to celebrate African unity, diversity, and our shared heritage.

Here's an overview of the month's sightings:

Lions

Lion sightings have been excellent this month, with some game drives achieving multiple sightings. Kills include giraffe, zebra, impala and buffalo. In some scenes guests have been treated to watching lions while rhinos roam in the background, or vice versa.

- The Nduna Pride has a mating pair that were seen at the dam. Other sightings of this pride include three males and a lioness sleeping under a tamboti tree.
- Three lions – two lionesses and a male were found feeding on a giraffe carcass near Matsanga Pan along the Chiredzi River. The carcass had not been opened when we arrived at around 17h00, and guests got to see the lions cut open the skin around the soft stomach - their carnassial teeth working like shears. Eventually hyenas, and vultures got their turn to clear up the carcass.
- Six lions - three males and three lionesses killed a zebra south of Simbiri Hill. The male lions fought over the kill but the younger male did not move away. The next day it was one adult male and three lionesses at the carcass, when along came a nomadic male lion. They fought and the other three lionesses were displaced, but the younger male still refused to relinquish the meal. He fed while the nomadic male also fed from the opposite side – such an interesting dynamic.
- Twelve members of the River Pride have been seen on the Hippo Valley side - two males, six sub-adults, four lionesses. They also have a mating pair.
- A vocal coalition of two young males have been letting everyone know they mean trouble, especially on misty mornings when their roars carry even further on the wet air.

Leopards

Leopard sightings are an enigma! Either they are not seen at all, or you catch a darting glimpse of one, or you set out on your first safari and there is one lounging over a termite mound like a house cat!

Exceptionally lucky guests saw a leopard as their first animal at Old Hyena Den, then a white rhino at the airstrip, followed by a big herd of buffalos, after that a male elephant at Banyini, and lions for the finale. She said it was her best game drive ever, seeing the big five in less than an hour, and has some stunning photos to prove it!

Great moments included seeing:

- A male leopard jump out of a mopane tree to escape lionesses.
- A sub-adult male leopard perched on top of the hill at the HQ/Kwali junction.
- A female leopard at the Kwali turn-off, not very far from the lions that had killed a zebra.
- A female leopard sitting on a termite mound at Crocodile Creek.

African wild dogs

It's denning season! We've been seeing two packs. One of approximately 13 wild dogs denning in the Chikokovele area, and the other of about 6 adults on the Hippo Valley side of the Chiredzi.

- The packs have been hunting impala with dogged determination – they need to feed the alpha female and babysitters back at the den-sites.

Elephants

Sightings of breeding herds of elephants have been scarce as they seem to be feeding in the thickets north of the Malilangwe Dam. However, going on a daytrip to Gonarezhou is sure to be rewarded with breeding herds as the road we travel there offers a more open landscape and views. Bulls, however, have been in abundance. Highlights include seeing:

- Two bulls picking the pods off a torchwood tree.
- A huge tusker was feeding barely 100 metres from lionesses.
- Three big male elephants feeding on a thorn tree, picking branch after branch unfazed about the thorns. They were joined by a male in musth that fed from the other angle.

Buffalos

- The Chiredzi River became crossable again this month after the season of heavy rain, and one of the joys of driving in this area is seeing an incredibly large herd of about 800 buffalos feeding near the swamps. There is availability of palatable grass and water in the same area, as well as trees that provide good shade.

Rhinos

“Rhino Ops” were carried out this month. These operations are a collaborative effort between the reserve's ecologists, security scouts, veterinarians, and helicopter pilots. The work includes ear notching calves and taking DNA samples to monitor, track, and manage the reserve's black and white rhino populations. Guests visiting the right place at the right time got to observe some of these highly coordinated operations.

White rhino highlights:

- Guests who had just arrived let their guide know that their safari wish was to see rhinos with their horns. (Rhinos are dehorned in many reserves.) This wish was achieved within 20 minutes of starting the safari, as they had an amazing sighting of seven white rhinos on the airstrip!
- Three white rhinos were seen on Orphan Road - the male was courting the cow with a young calf. There was a lot of chasing, and the calf was squealing and moaning in fright.
- A calf of only a few days old was seen tottering along next to its mother.

Black rhino highlights:

- There have been black rhinos giving intimidating mock charges, some have inspected the game viewers and walked away without drama, some have fled when a vehicle is still 300 metres away, and some have just stood and ignored our onlookers.

Spotted hyenas

- Five hyenas were seen feeding on an impala in the Kwali area. It's not impossible that they commandeered the kill from one of the leopards that have been seen in this area. They then headed into the hills where they've dened before, so possibly they have an active den-site there.

Brown hyenas

Two sightings of brown hyenas this month:

- A brown hyena was seen carrying a giraffe leg bone, east of Hwata.
- Later in the month an individual was seen at a spring near Simbiri Dam.

Plains game

There have been great sightings of plains game, including impala, wildebeest, zebra, giraffes, as well as eland, and occasionally sable and Lichtenstein hartebeest.

- An extraordinary gathering of 30 giraffe took place at Hwata Pan.

Birds

- Keen birders racked up 50 species in one morning drive – an excellent tally for this time of year.

Photographic hide

Our sunken photographic hide has opened its water-level windows again, now that animals are being drawn to drink from this permanent water source.

- Species viewed from the hide include: a male lion, buffalos, zebras, giraffe, rhinos, and warthogs.
- Birds include various pigeons and doves, guinea fowl, double-banded sandgrouse, Egyptian geese, and a tawny eagle.

Walks and rock art

The landscape is still too thick for conducting walking safaris, however guests are encouraged to get off the game-viewing vehicles for short walks to see the largest baobab on the property, and to see the various rock art sites that are close to the roads.

Boat cruises

The boat cruises on our luxury safari boats are a must. Birds, crocodiles and hippos are always guaranteed, as well as the most tranquil zen feeling of peace and solitude.

- A couple of cruises have had the added bonus of seeing a breeding herd of elephants at the top end of the dam, and a black rhino standing on the shoreline.

Fishing

May is an excellent month for fishing!

- Bream, catfish and the occasional ferocious tigerfish have been landed. But I must warn you – fishing can be emotionally draining! One moment you are in a perfect tranquil state in paradise, and the next you are hanging on to your rod and reel for dear life, trying to land a big fish. Elation if you do, and devastation if you get it next to the boat and it unhooks itself, or leaps out of the water and throws the bait.

Gonarezhou National Park

The great untamed wilderness of Gonarezhou is always a pleasure to visit. The views, scenery, and the different herds of elephants seen on the way, coupled with a picnic stop to see hippos and crocs, then a series of waterfalls and finally Chilojo Cliffs is always a highlight for guests.

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

Catching up with the pack

It's wild dog denning season which means the alpha female has chosen a den-site – often a hole that's an abandoned burrow dug by another animal, a hollowed out termite mound or a rocky crevice or cave. Often the hole needs further digging out to be deep enough for her and her pups to be safe. She gives birth to her litter of pups – often a litter that numbers in the teens, and nurses them safely inside. The rest of the pack needs to do all the hunting, and bring back meat that they then regurgitate for the mother dog to feed on, and later once the pups are weaned for them to feed on too. After about three months the pups will be big and strong enough to leave the den-site and run with the pack, after which the den-site will be abandoned.

We know this pack has been spending a lot of time in the riverbed area of Chikokovele River, so their den-site is definitely there, but it is our policy not to seek out or disturb den-sites as this can compromise the safety of the pups and the pack. As tempting as it is to see pups, it has been observed elsewhere that it can cause the alpha female to move her litter to a new den-site which might not be as safe and lead to pup

mortality. Also, wearing a path of vehicle tracks to a den-site can be a tip-off to hyenas and lions who will follow the tracks, find the den-site, and kill the pups.

So, what I'm leading up to is that seeing a pack of African wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*) that are listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (considered the second most endangered carnivore in Africa, outranked only by the Ethiopian wolf) is extremely rare. But, driving in the vast hunting grounds that surround their den-site area is a good way of hopefully spotting them. Exactly this happened when they were seen hunting near the Chiredzi River, where they managed to take down an impala, feed quickly, chase off an opportunistic hyena, and leave the scraps for the vultures.

Bloody-faced four members emerged from the bushes, then lay down in the road to recover from the chase and feast.





What we didn't realise was that the rest of the pack had already gone down to the river to drink and catch their breath. In due course our four got up and trotted off, disappearing into the thickets, and fortunately emerging on the riverbanks where we had gone to wait for them in the hope of catching another glimpse.

The pack reunited with much joy – they greet each other with head low, ears flat back, and mouth wide open to touch, lick, or gently bite the other's muzzle - mimicking a pup begging an adult for regurgitated food. They play and jump on one another and do what I call “kangaroo boxing” when they stand on their

back legs and paw at each other's heads while trying to nip the other. The air fills with their bird-like twittering and chatting sounds – it's a delight to see and hear them. (It is less delightful to smell them – African wild dogs have a very distinctive pungent odour!)



Then the games began. Chase is the number one sport, and they seemed to love it even more in the soft mud. The recent heavy rains have left a rivulet in the riverbed, filled with clean, crocodile-free water and puddles created by the stomping feet of elephants. Some dogs lay down in the shallows to cool their bellies, and those that still had some energy chased, splashed jinked and dived. What a rare privilege to see these incredible apex predators that are so vital to a healthy, functioning, balanced ecosystem.

And just like that they left. With a signal given by one of the lead dogs they all trotted up the muddy bank and into the bush, making a beeline for the tributary Chikokovele River. We didn't follow as we knew they'd be going back to the den-site. There they would have delivered the 'take-away meal' to the alpha-female and perhaps one or two adult dogs that had stayed behind as additional babysitters and security.





Surprise visitor

Our underground photographic hide at Hwata Pan is renowned for late afternoon golden light, shining on all the thirsty animals that have arrived to drink after a hot day in the sun. But there's a short period in the morning, as the sun rises, when you get the most phenomenal backlight, and I had gone there in the hope of finding something toothed and clawed coming to drink.

Alas, as is most often the case, it was a huge flock of helmeted guinea-fowls plucking up the courage to come and drink. They are actually great fun to watch, squawking, squabbling, kicking up dust and having panic attacks if anything that could be a raptor flies overhead. It's a superb way to enjoy a flask of coffee as the sun rises. They also make brilliant backlit subjects, especially when flying.



But then, a little creature jumped into frame that looked momentarily like a kangaroo! It was a female duiker. I cannot tell you how often I have wanted to photograph a duiker, but the ALWAYS dive away before you can get a shot. (The word duiker means "to dive".) Here she was in the open, and completely unfazed by the guinea fowl and totally unsuspecting that I was concealed within the hide. She didn't come and drink, instead she bounded over to a very specific spot and squatted to urinate.

Not knowing much about the habits of duikers I later found out that when a female duiker is in oestrus, she will squat unusually low to urinate. Males investigate this recently voided urine to detect pheromones. Regarding their waste it's also interesting to know that territorial male duikers use urine and secretions from glands beneath their eyes to mark their range. The chemical communication establishes boundaries and conveys social information. Wildlife rehabilitators have found that young, orphaned duikers are often unable to eliminate waste on their own. In the wild, the mother would lick her baby to encourage urination and defecation.



Just as the little duiker was trotting away a guineafowl flew in creating this wonderful backlit moment.



The young and the restless

These are the two new kids on the block, and they're looking to take over territory. They've been spending a lot of time in the central region of the property, which is on the edge of various prides' territories, and they've got a lot to say for themselves. Their roars can be heard bouncing off the sandstone cliffs in the dead of night, as they announce to all and sundry that they are a threat to be reckoned with.

Setting off on an early game drive we found them heading towards Simbiri Dam. You can see they don't have the confidence of territorial males yet, they walk with a somewhat anxious stride, looking over their shoulders, listening, and making sure they don't run into any territorial males, at this stage they are more "bark than bite", but that will soon change.

As they got to Simbiri Dam wall they peered over the edge and scanned the area. The baboons roosting on the cliffs barked their fury, and the guinea fowl on the shoreline screeched in alarm. The more confident lion gave a few low roars that echoed through the amphitheatre of sound. The more timid brother of this two male coalition had disappeared, and we cast about looking for him, finding him appear, a little unnervingly for us, through the bushes right in front of the vehicle. He'd snuck round the side so as not to risk walking between us and the water's edge.

The braver lion settled down on the rocks, determined to appear in control and impossibly handsome lounging on the rocks – a tapestry of copper, gunmetal, ivory and mint. After about 15 minutes, he got up and slunk past the vehicle between us and the water's edge, and followed his brother's tracks north.



That was the first of three lion sightings we were to have that extraordinary morning. On the Hippo Valley side of the Chiredzi River a mating pair from the River Pride were seen, and further downstream opposite Chikwete Cliffs the rest of the River Pride were found lying in the riverbed soaking up the sunshine. Chikwete Cliffs is the perfect place to stop for coffee or a sundowner as it overlooks the riverbed below, and the view simply cannot be beaten when it has the addition of lions lying in the riverbed below.

That evening we spotted one of the males again – his eyes catching the spotlight as we drove past the rocky ridge near Kwali. They'd looped back around and were scanning the area from the elevated position of the belly-warming rocks. No doubt the stage was set for another encore of roaring and self-advertising.

Male lions typically form coalitions and begin attempting to take over a territory between 4 and 5 years of age.

Before launching a takeover attack, the nomadic coalition will patrol the borders of a chosen territory. They look for signs of weakness in the resident males. They listen closely to the roars of the reigning males to judge their numbers and health, targeting older, solitary, or smaller coalitions whose grip on the pride is slipping.

It will be so interesting to see if these up and coming males are successful in the future, or if they are sent packing.



Kudu family portraits

What a scene this was – a magnificent kudu bull with a family of adult cows and their offspring, against the backdrop of the feathery reeds of the riverbed. Females usually form small groups of 6 to 10 with their offspring. Male kudus may form small bachelor groups, but they are more commonly found as solitary and widely dispersed individuals. Solitary males join the group of females and calves only during the mating season (around April and May here). Once the mating period ends, the males depart.



As field guides, we find kudus to be very trustworthy when it comes to giving alarm calls about a nearby predator or threat. Kudus never lie, whereas squirrels, for example, are dramatic sensationalists!

Critter



These are *Acraea* butterflies, and they are in abundance at the moment. You'll see their vibrant orange-red wings, speckled with black spots, and a black-and-white scalloped margin, set against mauve flowers in the meadows. Their aposematic colouring is a warning sign to predators (such as birds) that they should be avoided as they have stored toxins in their systems that they acquired as caterpillars. When a predator tries to eat one, the awful taste causes them to spit it out. The aposematic colours help the predator quickly associate it with a negative experience and avoid them in future.

Many butterfly species rely on elaborate courtship rituals. This usually involves the male hovering, releasing pheromones, and engaging in coordinated mid-air dances before the female signals her consent. However, with *Acraeas* the males will actively stalk females from high vantage points, dive onto them mid-flight, and physically knock them to the ground to commence the copulation process.



Twitter



An Egyptian goose serenades its partner on landing.

Guineafowl rally together to drink at dawn.





The morning light catching the top of Simbiri Hill.

A rather dejected looking young white rhino with a host of oxpecker 'friends'.





*A current star of the show is the pretty
Ruspolia decurrens.*

*The jet-black coat of this sable bull,
driven by hormones and age, is the
hallmark of a fully mature, dominant
male.*





These impala, one with a couple of puncture wounds, settle a last minute score.

This buffalo bull was wallowing alone in the shallows of a dam. On closer inspection you can see a wound beneath his horn where he has been hooked by another bull. It's clear he's not giving up without a fight.





Portrait of a black rhino etched in character and curiosity.

Wildebeest, zebra and eland. There were impala there too. Together they graze. Divided they fall.





*After sunset there is a moment of mauve light before it fades to black.
Here a mother white rhino with her new calf uses the fading light and solitude to drink safely at the day's end.*

Elsewhere a young hyena uses the night's start to have a drink and go in search of a meal.





A male lion pants in the sunset after a heavy meal.

A bull elephant pierces the sunrise with his tusk, as impala nibble the dew-kissed grass.

