

Singita Kruger National Park
Lebombo & Sweni Lodges
South Africa

Singita



Wildlife Journal

For the month of February, Two Thousand and Fourteen

Temperature

Average Minimum: 20°C (68°F)
Average Maximum: 32°C (89.6°F)
Minimum recorded: 17°C (62.6°F)
Maximum recorded: 35°C (95°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the period: 38 mm
For the year to date: 154.8 mm

Flehmen grimace

What's that funny face and smirk all about? It is something which most of us have seen before since it's actually not all that uncommon to observe in most domestic house cats. You've possibly seen the expression, the one which is followed by an intense sniffing session. This upward lip curling and exposing of the front teeth and gums is a behaviour which is practiced by carnivores big and small, and even hoofed animals, and is generally a means of testing and analysing different scents. Scents can be checked for any number of reasons but are predominantly used to determine sexual condition or to investigate a newcomer within a territory.



This is done through a specialised organ called the vomeronasal organ, more commonly known as the Jacobson's organ. It is situated in the top palate and the grimace is in an attempt to ensure the scent reaches the organ in the roof of the mouth.

Huge python makes an impressive catch

Early one morning we headed out on game drive and found fresh leopard tracks not too far from the lodge. We followed them but were unfortunately not successful in finding the leopard and decided to continue in a northerly direction. Towards the end of our drive we decided to head back to the area where we found the leopard tracks earlier that morning, and much to our surprise saw a few vultures perched in a dead leadwood tree, in that same spot. This got us very excited hoping that we might find the leopard with a kill. Little did we know what was waiting for us!



(These photos were taken by guest Amay Barros)

As we approached the spot where the vultures were perched we found some drag marks across the road. We started investigating the signs and came across this magnificent sight. We didn't witness the whole kill, but to see a Southern African rock python (*Python sebae natalensis*) of this size (3.5 - 4 metres), killing an adult impala was something not often witnessed in the bush, as pythons this big are very rarely seen.

The Southern African python is listed as vulnerable in the latest South African Red Data Book and may not be killed or captured. Unfortunately, to this day both its skin and fat are still used in traditional medicine.

The dagga boys



Oval depressions with the periphery darkened by moist soil, accompanied by slush green dung spilt on nutrient-rich basalt land. The tracks of the buffalo look at least 12 hours old, two maybe three bulls heading straight to the Xhikelengane drainage. This was quite a common phrase given to guests when the tracking of buffalo started in the early Kruger morning.

Studies of animal behaviour show that many species have a hierarchical structure and use an array of body language in order to survive and have the best possible mating opportunities. In Cape buffalo behaviour the most experienced females are known as pathfinders. These females are responsible for taking the herd to the most beneficial grazing and waterpoints in the breeding herd's home range, which changes throughout summer and winter. As the pathfinders follow the rain to nutrient-rich grazing they contribute to the health of the grasses due to trampling and seed dispersion caught between the hooves of these dark beasts.

The breeding herds of the N'wanetsi section have been few and far between on the concession as they have



been concentrating in the interior of the basalt flats to the west, traversing north and south as the rain comes and goes. Estimates of 500 plus have been recorded in these herds, which always baffle the eye when the horizon darkens with horns swaying side to side and grass being mowed at a phenomenal rate.

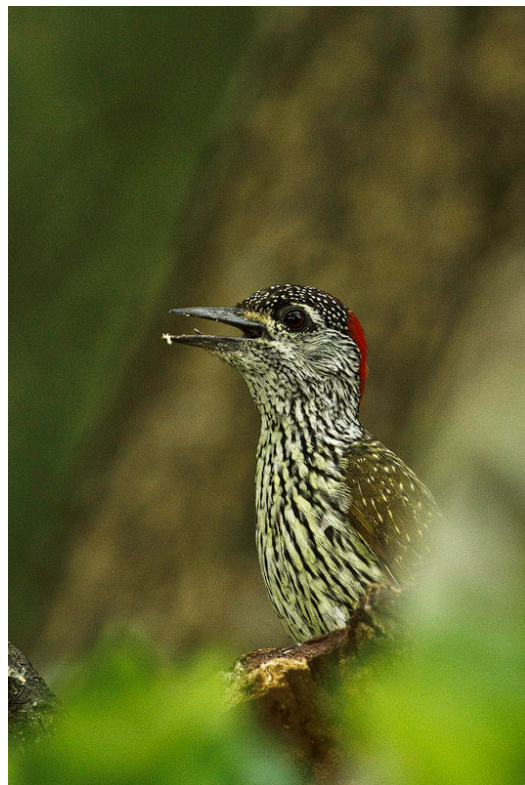
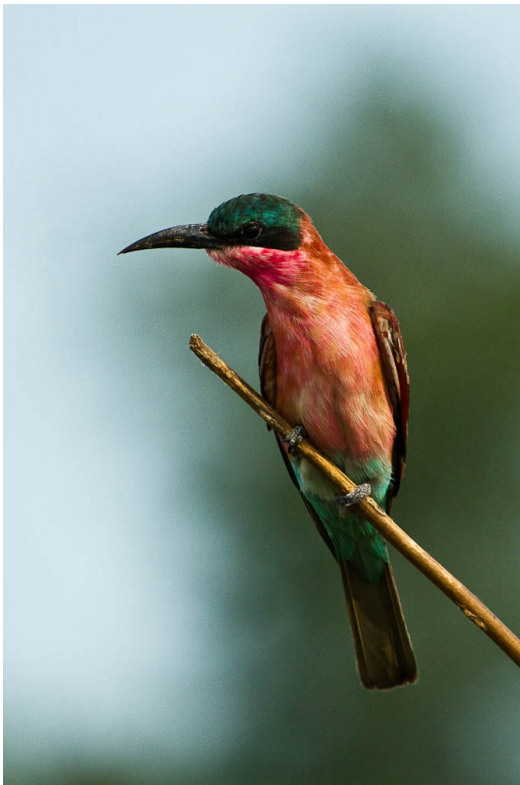
Older bulls post mating, as well as bulls in prime mating condition, sometimes leave the females in summer. Post mating bulls often depart permanently, while males in prime mating condition leave the breeding herd periodically to reach better grazing, which results in higher testosterone because of increased nitrogen levels in the highly nutritious grass. This type of grass grows along the Xhikelengane drainage

and up along the Mozambique border. Lone 'dagga' boys ('dagga' means muddy) or bachelor herds of up to 30 can meet in these areas - and this is sometimes where they meet their final fate by way of lions.

The tracks took us to the drainage area and there we found these buffalo bulls - one completely smothered in thick black mud and another battle-scarred and belligerent, both taking a moment out of their grazing regime to stare us down.

Avian eden

The concession is flourishing with amazing birdlife at the moment. Below are just a few photographs:



Above a beautiful southern carmine bee-eater (*Merops nubicoides*) and a female golden-tailed woodpecker (*Campethera abingoni*). These two photographs show how different feeding habits require different beak

adaptations. Although both are insectivores, the manner in which they feed is extremely different, the bee-eater pictured left is an insect eating bird catching most of its prey in flight and the woodpecker uses its strong robust beak for tunnelling away for food under the bark of the trees.



A female double-banded sandgrouse (*Pterocles bicinctus*) shows how effective her cryptic colouration can be on the sandy soils. There is a very interesting bushman story about double-banded sandgrouse - it tells us if these birds are disturbed the first direction they take off in is towards the closest water. So if they were hunting in an area they weren't familiar with they could find fresh water by simply chasing these birds. They take off vertically then fly in the specific direction towards water.



A male saddle-billed stork (*Ephippiorhynchus senegalensis*) glides effortlessly towards its nest on the concession. Interestingly, this pair is using a nest that they stole from a pair of white-backed vultures! A total of nearly 600 birds can be seen in the Greater Kruger National Park. The saddle-billed stork is part of the Big 6 of birds. The Big 6 of birds is a list made up in an attempt to mirror the famous Big 5 of mammals, and in turn increase the popularity of birds and show guests what diversity and splendour there is within the birds of Kruger National Park. The Big 6 are: the saddle-billed stork, martial eagle (*Polemaetus bellicosus*), kori bustard (*Ardeotis kori*), lappet-faced vulture (*Torgos tracheliotos*), southern ground hornbill (*Bucorvus leadbeateri*) and the Pel's fishing owl (*Scotopelia peli*). With the exception of the owl, the other five can be seen on the concession year round.



The male red-crested korhaan (*Lophotis ruficrista*) is most famous for his kamikaze display which he does to impress any potential mates in an area.

He starts by calling, as in the picture, to get the attention of any females. After a while, when he's sure she is looking, he flies vertically into the sky and once he reaches about the height of a giraffe he tucks in his wings and comes barrelling down towards the ground! At the last possible moment he will open his wings and softly land on the ground.

Apparently the idea is that the male who can open his wings closest to the ground is the strongest, bravest and most genetically impressive and therefore ought to be chosen by the female as their mate...

Eye spy



Jumping spiders of the family *Salticidae* are most active during the day. They have excellent vision which they use to hunt prey and recognise mates and enemies. These spiders can leap more than 20 times their own body length and are propelled by their back legs.

When hunting the eyes of jumping spiders see in three different ways using the different sets of eyes. They work like telephoto lenses and have a movable retina to increase the visual field, allowing them to distinguish prey at 30 - 40 cm.

Jumping spiders are the only spiders known to respond to their own image in a mirror, taking up a threat posture as they would on encountering

another member of their own species.

The Xhirombe pride's eye spy of the Lebombo rooms.



The false eye markings of a mopane moth.



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