

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT
SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE
For the month of December, Two Thousand and Twenty-Three

Temperature

Average minimum: 21,8°C (71.2°F)
Minimum recorded: 17.1°C (62.7°F)
Average maximum: 33.6°C (92.4°F)
Maximum recorded: 42.1°C (107.7°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 140 mm
Season to date: 221.6 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:18
Sunset: 18:39

The thirsty landscape has gulped up the rain and a vibrant metamorphosis has taken place. A lush carpet of green has emerged, with muddy pools in the depressions, and the environment thrums with newfound vitality and rejuvenation.

Here's a sightings snapshot for December:

Lions

- Nine members of the Nduna Pride were seen together, without the territorial males. There were two subadult males, two cubs and five lionesses sleeping in a shady spot.

- The older female of the Southern Pride was seen with territorial males in attendance. She was calling to locate the rest of her pride, and wanting to hunt.
- One of the best sightings of the three territorial males together was of them having a long drink from a puddle of water on the Mahande drainage line.

Rhinos

- On two occasions this month we witnessed both white and black rhinos drinking together. The second occasion was of two white rhinos arriving to drink, followed by two black rhinos. There was much sniffing and jousting between the rhino species, and later the black rhinos took off at speed, leaving the white rhinos in a cloud of dust.
- There have been some glorious scenes of white rhinos mudbathing.
- There was an adrenalin-charged sighting of two bull white rhinos challenging each other. Both had blood on their faces and horns. The wounds weren't too bad but they were definitely establishing dominance. The one rhino defended himself by walking backwards for about 300 metres to a pan.
- On the way to Gonarezhou for a day trip our guests were treated to three black rhino sightings on our reserve.
- A black rhino bull was intrigued with the engine being switched off and the vehicle rolling to a stop. He could not help himself from coming to investigate very cautiously. He made a few lunges close to us before deciding to run off.
- In a different area a shy black rhino initially ran off but then came back and charged at the vehicle three times, splashing up red dust every time he slammed his brakes on.

Buffalos

- There are huge aggregations at the moment. Herds well in excess of 500 have been seen.
- The old dagga boys are in their element with all the mudbaths about.

Elephants

- With the vegetation thickening up the best place to look for breeding herds is around the dam, when out on a boat cruise.
- There was an impressive sighting of three elephant bulls – two of which sported huge tusks.

Leopards

- Interestingly three leopard sightings this month have been of leopards in trees. One had an impala kill hoisted close to the airstrip (and another leopard was seen walking along the road nearby), the second was of a leopard relaxing in a tree on Pamushana Access Road, and the third was of a male leopard in a mopane tree.
- Another precious moment was of a leopard drinking at Sosigi Dam.

Wild dogs

- Three wild dogs provided the highlight of a morning game drive when they tried to hunt a newborn wildebeest. The wildebeest cows grouped together and chased the wild dogs away for roughly 200 metres on a high speed chase!

Hyenas

- An eerie sighting was of eight spotted hyenas feeding on a dead black rhino, which was killed by another male black rhino in a territorial fight.

Plains game

- The plains game are all bulking up on the new grazing that's emerged.

Unusual/other

- We witnessed a feeding frenzy of multiple birds species that were hawking alates (reproductive stage termites that are winged). There were Amur falcons, European bee-eaters, carmine bee-eaters, European rollers, southern masked weavers, red-backed shrikes and broad-tailed paradise whydahs. It was incredible having the bee-eaters swoop close in front of guests as the birds caught the termites.

Boat cruise

- Our safari boat cruises continue to be the highlight for many of our guests. Sightings of birds, crocodiles and hippos are guaranteed, and there is no better way in the world to enjoy a sundowner!

Fishing

- The fish are biting! While tilapia are being landed the tigerfish are playing hard to get.

Walks and rock art

- Most of the walks at the moment are conducted in the hills and incorporate looking at, or looking for, rock art. Along one cave system a walking party discovered the remains of a warthog. The signs indicated it had been killed by a leopard. Right next to the warthog's lower jawbone was the carcass of a hooded vulture. It seems the vulture did not pay attention to the whereabouts of the leopard when it flew in to scavenge off the warthog, and got caught and killed by the leopard.

Photographic hide

- The hide has still been in operation, despite the rain which will probably make it temporarily inaccessible in due course, and an abundance of wildlife has visited there to drink. Elephants, white rhinos, buffalo, zebras, jackals, buffalo and impala have all showed up.

Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft

- Guests really appreciated seeing the bushcraft skills displayed at Kambako. One group got to see about 900 buffaloes and a crash of six white rhinos on their trip to Kambako which is located just beyond our eastern boundary.

Gonarezhou Day Trips

- Always vying for attention are the elephants and Chilojo Cliffs, so when there happen to be elephants in the riverbed below Cholojo Cliffs it's a very impressive bonus.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as a December Gallery of images.

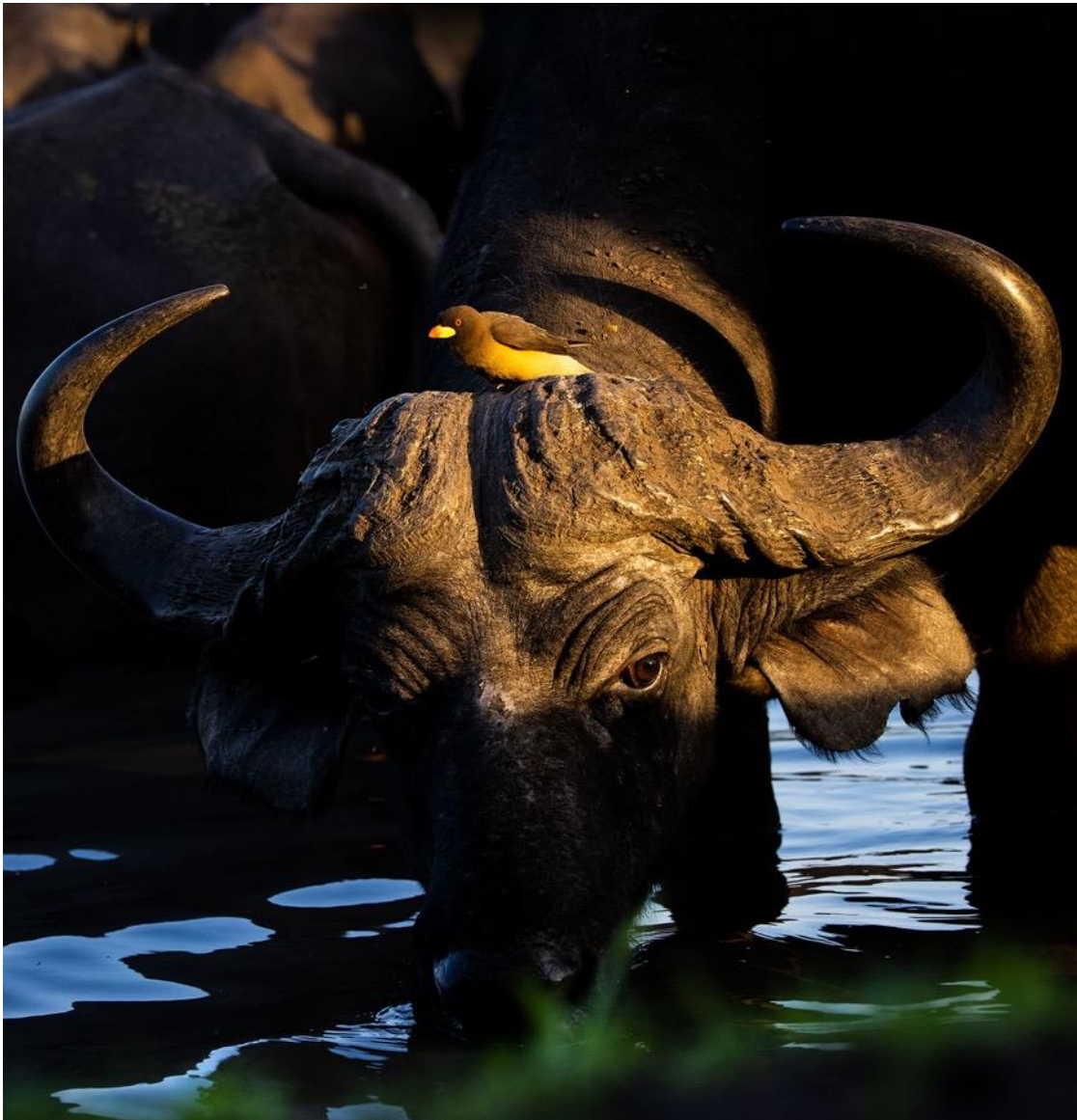
Buffaloes galore



First you see a dust cloud, then a black band on the horizon, then hundreds of Cape buffalo all but block the light as they come to drink at the pan that's home to our sunken photographic hide. They like to drink daily, but it's not often that they graze in this area, so when they do inundate the small pan it gives you a brilliant opportunity to observe them at closer-than-would-otherwise-be-deemed-safe quarters, and to notice their individuality – those with enormous horns, curious eyes, attitudes of authority, irritation at onlookers, zen-induced expressions. The cautious, the bold, the tranquil, the playful. Of course it is a photographer's dream to try and capture their portraits too:





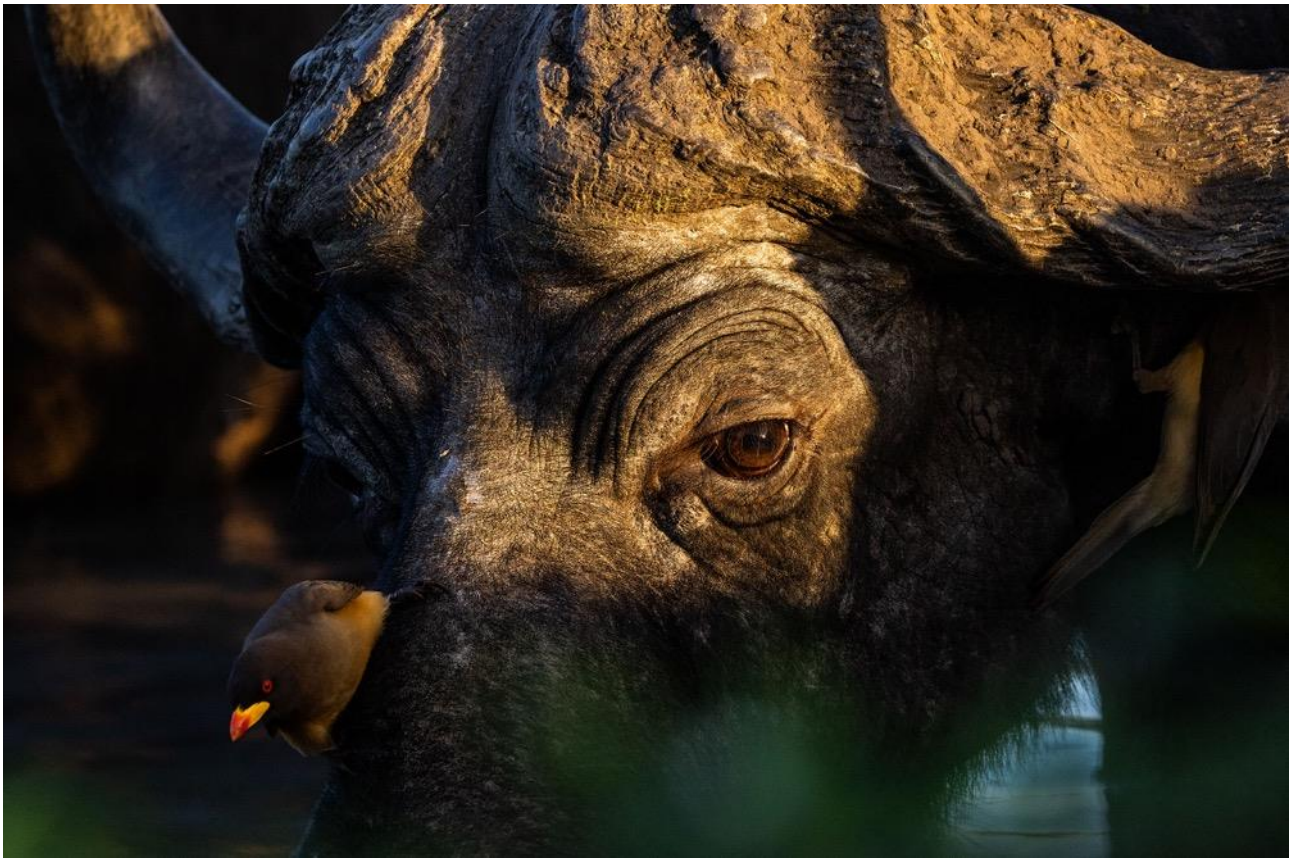


Buffalo are highly social animals that form large herds, which can consist of hundreds of individuals. These herds are often led by a dominant female. We estimated this herd to have over 250 members.

In a scene of tranquillity like this it seems contradictory that these bovines are one of the "Big Five" - animals that are known for their unpredictable and aggressive behaviour, especially when threatened. A wounded buffalo is your worst nightmare. Even a single lion gives a buffalo a wide berth. That said they seem to be the favoured prey of lions, but it takes a pride, preferably including adult males, to bring a buffalo to ground. Even then all members of the pride need to watch their backs as buffaloes are known for their mobbing behaviour where they will confront predators.

The best chances of observing buffalo are around water sources. Apart from drinking they love to wallow in mud which helps to cool them, and provides a soothing, protective muddy layer against insects. They're also surprisingly good swimmers and are known to cross rivers when they need to.

Being inside the hide it amplifies the sound they make, over and above the splashing, which is a cacophony of grunts, bellows, and even growls!



An Endangered pair

We spent most of a sunny afternoon, parked in the shade, watching a pack of African wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*) rest and reposition themselves as the shadows shifted. The year's litter of pups looked well and, with ants in their pants, and a lack of appreciation for afternoon naps, they jostled with one another.

Wild dogs are listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List of threatened species, with a decreasing population heading towards being Critically Endangered, if not there already. Their population has been estimated to be around 6 000 individuals worldwide. All are threatened by habitat fragmentation, human persecution and outbreaks of disease. Every sighting of them is so precious and can never be taken for granted – they are simply one ecological disaster away from extinction.



So, imagine our surprise when a hooded vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*) landed in a little clearing in front of the dogs. Hooded vultures were assessed for the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species in 2021, and are listed as Critically Endangered, also with a decreasing population. Being scavengers their diet includes carrion, faeces, and other organic matter. By consuming faeces, vultures can obtain additional nutrients that were not fully absorbed during the digestion process of an animal. African wild dogs wolf down chunks of meat when they eat, and have a fast digestion process – so we've observed hooded vultures in the company of wild dogs before.

But one of the pups thought a winged playmate had arrived. It crept closer and closer to the vulture. The disapproving vulture stood its ground. The pup advanced, then paused, then danced away. But its curiosity got the better of it and it kept trying to stick its nose into the vulture's face. It only just evaded getting pecked on the snout! Eventually a stale mate was reached and the dog pretended it wasn't really interested anymore, and the vulture casually flew off and landed a few metres away.



The pup attempts a play bow advancement, and the vulture rebukes it with a hiss and snapping beak!





A stalemate is reached and each pretends to ignore the other. Nothing to see here.
(Just two of the world's most endangered species actually interacting with one another.)



The hooded vulture resumed its pursuit of looking for some fast food.
(‘Coprophagy’ is the term used to describe the eating of faeces – a behaviour not limited to vultures.)



As the sun sank in the sky the adults got up and rallied the pack for the evening's hunting activity.



Daredevils

The lion sightings have been phenomenal this month, thanks to our guiding teams, dedicated lion tracking team, multiple lion prides, and of course our commitment to conservation and the science-based management of the reserve's flora and fauna. While watching these apex predators we've noticed some rather cavalier creatures gamble with their lives...

These three lions we fast asleep beneath a thorny tree in an open area – there were two males with a lioness. As we arrived on the scene we noticed a leopard tortoise to the left of the tree, retracted into its shell. Then, to our dismay, the tortoise made the risky decision to strut (it was moving fast – for a tortoise) right past the lions and behind our vehicle. We all sat there desperately willing the lions to keep sleeping and not notice the tortoise, and for “Speedy” to make his getaway. He did. As it happened the two male lions seemed far more interested in the lionesses movements.





Photo by Brad Fouché



Photo by Jeff Thompson

Head Guide, Brad Fouché, and his guests were at a sighting of a lion eating a zebra when they noticed a movement in the bushes behind the kill. The movement-maker turned out to be a large crocodile! Both apex predators were at the kill at the same time but didn't fight each other for the carcass. We're not sure of exactly what the dynamic was... Did the lion kill the zebra and just happen to be near her nest site and she came to investigate? Did the croc make the kill and the lion steal it from her? Or the other way round?

Later in the morning when I arrived there, the croc was nowhere to be found. Nearby lay a second male lion, with a full belly, in the shade of an umbrella tree.



I can only say that these guineafowls were playing chicken. This peaceful lioness was napping in a clearing at dawn. A male lion lay nearby. These guineafowls insisted on running back and forth behind her, seemingly having no sense of direction, and shrieking with delighted terror as they went. Ignoring them was impossible and she lifted her head wearing that familiar expression when your alarm clock goes off on a workday morning.

We noticed this raptor in amongst a procession of hooded and white-backed vultures, at a scene where lions had killed a wildebeest and the scavengers were lining up for scraps. I have to admit that identifying this raptor had me foxed – it turned out to be a juvenile African harrier-hawk. Their colouration looks nothing like that of the grey adults. Birding is hard enough – and then along come the juveniles in disguise!



Reserved seating

Continuously working at and knowing a wildlife reserve well you develop an insight to the characters and behaviours of many of the animals and birds.

At Hwata Pan there is a tree in which you will often see a tawny eagle. This eagle scares the living daylights out of doves, guineafowls, queleas and the shower of birds that descend to the ground to drink. If you are inside the photo hide you can tell that the tawny eagle is hunting in the area by the way the little birds take off in terror.





Arriving at the pan one morning we were delighted to see a large grey heron perched in the tree, just minding its own beeswax. Actually, it was probably scoping out the water to see if there was any amphibious prey worth hunting.

Anyway, the tawny eagle arrived on the scene moments later and was having none of this intruder sitting in its spot! The eagle flew circles around the heron, and then started to come way too close with those talons. The heron reluctantly flew off, but was not giving up that easily. It too started looping around the tree and showed off its impressive wingspan. It definitely had the tawny eagle rattled but the eagle was not relinquishing the throne.

When birds are not trying to confuse you with their juveniles, birding can be the most enjoyable hobby. The Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve is a birding mecca, with more than 400 different species!

December Gallery





A baby white rhino scratches the tiny stump of its horn under one of its mum's skin folds, before succumbing to a nap while she has a long and deserving drink.





Rounding this corner, seconds later, was a vehicle filled with children on the school run. Imagine what a wonderful childhood they're having – and what brilliant excuses they have for being late for school!





We three kings of Nduna are, being territorial we traverse afar, field and fountain,
moor and mountain, gaining a pride and a scar...





A creature that'll give you a brief look before melting away is an adult kudu bull; whereas hippos will hardly take their eyes off you and snort, vocalise and yawn in a threat display.





The tip of the misshapen horn, of this white rhino cow, now dips below the water level as she drinks.
A black rhino gives us a quick once-over as dusk descends.





This clan of hyenas had just given a rallying cry and were setting off to do battle with the night. Failing to stay undetected from our beady eyes was this little croc.

