

# Singita



## WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA

For the month of August, Two Thousand and Twenty One

### Temperature

Average minimum: 13.7°C (56.62°F)

Average maximum: 27.3°C (81.18°F)

Minimum recorded: 9°C (48.2°F)

Maximum recorded: 36°C (96.8°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 2 mm

Season to date: 876.95 mm

### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:21

Sunset: 17:36

Tall shadows cast over the dry earth as the burning sun descends into the mountainous horizon. A blanket of twinkling constellations and planets swamp the sky and the familiar winter stars shine down on us. This month brings exciting changes with mating leopards, the discovery of new life, and sadly some death. Mother Nature has a delicate way of telling her story and just as you cannot have diversity without destruction, you cannot have life without death. As the sun rises up from her sleep, she brings prospect and life with every ray she casts. New lessons are learnt and the heartbeat of the bush carries on...

## Here's a Sightings Snapshot for August:

### Lions

- The biggest news this month is the death of the Styx male lion (who was partnered with the Nkuhuma male forming the Nwalungu males). Sadly on the 14<sup>th</sup> August, this male was found dead at a pan in the southern parts of our property. The cause of his death is thought to be from wounds he attained after he and the Nkuhuma male stole a wildebeest kill from the Mhangeni pride the previous day.
- The Nkuhuma male is looking in good condition and we've seen him quite a lot this month. He was located at a sodic area south of the river with a new male lion to the area. This newcomer was later identified as one of the males from the Black Dam Pride from Thornybush. This interaction seemed relaxed as both lions seemed unchallenged and adequately happy in each other's presence. However, this was a brief engagement and the new male hasn't been sighted since.
- The Mhangene pride have been roaming throughout the property still avoiding any male lions. They're being sighted in the south and also north of the Sand River. The pride comprises of six lionesses, a year-old sub-adult female and a five-month-old cub, also thought to be female.
- The Tsalala females have been seen a lot this month and seem to be settling along the Sand River. One very exciting sighting was seen from Boulders Lodge deck where the two lionesses were stalking waterbuck in the river. As these females gave chase, a group of twelve buffalo bulls chased them away from their prize and they were left to try another day.
- There is definitely a big shift happening with young males on our property and sightings have increased. The two Plains Camp males have been settling in the north this month, seen once chasing the Tsalala females.
- Two sub-adults (young male and female) from the Othawa break-away pride have also been roaming through the land.

### Elephants

- Many breeding herds frequent the winter bushveld, pausing at the Sand River to enjoy a mid-morning drink before trampling back through the dry vegetation. Most drives, morning and afternoon are filled with elephant sightings, as they gather in groups to share the vital water resources.

### Wild dogs

- The wild dog pups are getting older now and the adults have been moving the den-site. It's been such a luxury viewing them at their intimate young stage. They've now moved further south and we are unable to follow their growth. We look forward to seeing their progress as they start to become more nomadic and independent.
- The Othawa pack have delighted us with regular viewing this month. With no pups this year, the pack continue to chase around the Sands pursuing prey as they go. On one exciting occasion, we watched them chase an impala into a pan of water. The dogs then circled the water, not daring to get in and were nearly chased away by a herd of elephants that came to drink. After a long suspenseful 20 minutes, one brave individual made his way into the water and claimed his prize. Dragging out the impala from the depths, the pack rushed excitedly to the animal, but they weren't alone. Within seconds, a clan of hyena emerged and fought the dogs for the meal. Shrieks and screeches shook the full moon sky and another clan of hyena joined the party. An unfortunate ending for the impala and a dramatic evening for the pack.

### Leopards

- Having such a huge territory, the Hosana male leopard was only sighted a few times this month, however some exciting news – at the beginning of this month, he was seen mating with the Nkuwa female!
- A beautiful sighting of the Flat Rock male leopard was a highlight this month. Driving along the river's edge, one of our guides located him lying magnanimously on a termite mound.

- Sightings of the Ntoma female have increased in August. At the beginning of the month and at the end, we found her with two separate kills. This allowed for some stable and exciting viewing. Tracks have been seen of two cubs with her, and although not yet seen we are excited at the prospect of these new arrivals!
- The Thamba male leopard hasn't been seen so much due to him mating with females to the west of us.
- The Nyeleti male leopard is looking good. He's been mating with the Schotia female over five days in and around the lodges.
- The ever curious and adventurous Kangela male leopard wanders through and around the lodge vicinity, exploring and learning to hunt for himself. He's been seen with the Schotia female at several kills this month and we believe she is still providing for him.
- Shangwe male leopard hasn't been seen so much this month. We believe he may be moving more east to build his own territory.
- The Misava male still resides around the Sand River, having been viewed from time to time this month.

### **Cheetah**

- A male cheetah is seen regularly through the grassy open clearings in the south, as well as a young female. On one wet cold morning, one guide located the female and upon following her, located two cubs in the tall grass! An incredible discovery and so exciting to have a cheetah denning on our property for the second year in a row!

### **Bird List**

- The bird list for August includes one new bird species, bringing our yearly total to 284, so far.
- It was with great excitement when two Caspian terns were sighted flying around Pios crossing, a lifer for those who got to see them!



(Wild dogs, photograph by Gareth Poole)

**A selection of bush stories, and an August Gallery follow.**

Recently a group of guests and I had a very interesting encounter between predator and prey, where the little guy won!

It was the first afternoon drive with my guests who had been on safari at two different lodges before they came to Singita, and told me that they had no expectations as they had already seen a lot of different animals. They were very keen to just take a very easy afternoon drive to soak up some of the African bushveld. We did end up sitting with one of our resident lion prides who were fast asleep. As if by an alarm clock they all started stretching and grooming which is usually a sign that they will start moving.



One lioness got up and walked to where some impala were running away from where the lions were lying up. All of a sudden, the bush exploded with about 20 banded mongooses dashing in all direction with a lot of vocalisation. The lions were all up in a dash and one of the lionesses had managed to catch one of the mongooses. We drove around to where all the commotion was coming from only to find that the mongoose had managed to free itself from the lion's mouth (most probably by delivering a painful bite to the lip of the lion).

At this stage the tiny and very outnumbered mongoose had found some shelter under a fallen log and had an adult lioness, a small four-month-old cub and a one-year-old cub all trying to get to it. Banded mongooses are known to be very fierce little creatures and will always put up a good fight. Every time the lions came in with a paw or an attempted bite, the mongoose would charge out ferociously and bite at the lip or paw of the lion! Eventually after about 20 minutes of this the lions actually decided to move on (with a few painful nips to their lips).

Banded mongooses are social animals and I have no doubt that the little hero managed to find its family group or 'rush' as it's known, probably also with a few bruises but happy to have survived the lion onslaught! We had spent a wonderful relaxing afternoon out in the bush watching a wildlife documentary unfold right in front of us !

## Bee-eater colony

Article by Nick du Plessis



We have recently found something that you would more regularly associate with parts of Botswana or Zambia, a very active nesting colony of white-fronted bee-eaters (*Merops bullockoides*), one of the most striking little birds on the property. Now, like the name suggests, they are probably most well known for their diet which consist mainly of bees and other flying insects, they also have a remarkable bit of behaviour with this whereby, once catching their prey they have a favourite perch or

branch where they land and will rub the bee until the sting is out. Only once it is out will they consume it!



We found the colony by complete chance while following the two Tslala females to the river's edge, where their presence alone flushed the entire colony out of their nests. While we knew we had a lot in the area along the river west of the lodges I was pleasantly surprised how large the colony is. Although we have an impressive river frontage these birds are very specific when it comes to nesting requirements. Demanding a sheer bank of vertical sand near watercourses, these banks need to be quite high with the belief being that it avoids any flooding in the beginning of the wet season. They then dig out perpendicular burrows believed to run as deep as 1m long.

Where these little birds become very interesting is how complex their social structure is. Although they are monogamous they are also very often cooperative breeders, whereby non-breeding individuals will help close genetic relatives raise offspring, and although this is not unusual in mammals it is quite rare amongst birds. This behaviour benefits the numbers and success rate of raising offspring within a colony.

I hope with us spending more time around them they become more used to our presence like so many of the other species in the area and make for some great photographic opportunities in the future.

On the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> August, my tracker Martin and I, were lucky enough to find one of the only three adult cheetah seen on the Singita property. We currently have regular sightings of an adult male, an adult female and a sub-adult female, predominantly in the south of the concession.

On this particular morning it was the adult female we were following and after about half an hour she led us straight to the most amazing surprise: two new five-week-old cubs. The cheetah had stashed the two vulnerable cubs in high red grass, in and amongst a guarri bush thicket. Due to their diminutive size and the height of the grass we initially couldn't make out the two cubs, but when mom called out we could hear the distant bird-like chirps of the two youngsters.

We were then spoilt for the next half an hour as the mother settled down and the two cubs played all around her, feeling comfortable that there was no danger present as the mother was completely calm. We are unbelievably privileged to be exposed to such sensitive and adorable moments from time to time here in the Sabi Sand.



Sadly cheetah numbers in Africa are really low, the species having been heavily prosecuted over the last several decades. There are estimated to be only 7 100 cheetahs left in the wild, and their future remains uncertain across their range. Cheetahs are listed as “Vulnerable” by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, but after a recent study revealed significant population declines, scientists are calling for cheetahs to be uplisted to “Endangered.” In North Africa and Asia, they are considered “Critically Endangered.”

Cheetahs are frequently killed by farmers, either pre-emptively or in retaliation for livestock predation, even though the actual damage they cause to livestock is relatively minor. Cheetahs are profoundly affected by loss of prey from human hunting and the development of land for agricultural and other purposes. Direct hunting in some parts of Africa for skins contributes to cheetah population declines, as does the illegal trade in live cubs and adults, many of which die during transport.

In the Greater Kruger National Park, the park in which Singita Sabi Sand is a part of, it is estimated that there are approximately 350 cheetah remaining today. A number which has steadily climbed from only 120 in 2011. The biggest threat to the cheetah here are the large numbers of lion which naturally control the cheetah population. This female cheetah on Singita has recently successfully raised two male cubs to adulthood whom have since dispersed from their mothers and fathers' respective territories (we believe they've moved further east into the national park) and will hopefully be siring their own cubs and growing the population of free-roaming cheetah even more.

Only time will tell what will come of this new litter, but we are hopeful that this incredible mother will be successful in raising these two new cubs on Singita Sabi Sand.

Today I want to share a brief information about dwarf mongooses, yellow-billed hornbills and their symbiosis. Safer together: Relationship between dwarf mongooses and hornbills.

Dwarf mongooses are relatively small distinguishable predators hunting small creatures. Their Shangaan (local tribe around Greater Kruger Park) name is machiki-chorr referring to the call they make which is onomatopoeic. They reside within the warm, dry open woodland with adequate hiding places, e.g. termite mounds. These little creatures can be easily identified by their long and slender shaped body. They have an approximate weight of 300g, and have an average body length of 40cm. They have a long pointed face and their ears are relatively small. They have long curved claws on their front feet with which they use to dig for food. Their preferred diet involves termites, snails, scorpions and reptiles. It is to be noted that they feed on a large number of insects which is an important ecological role. They are perfectly adapted to find their prey with their keen senses of smell and hearing. They also have great vision which helps them spot predators, even predators in the air. However that alone might not be enough...

Hornbills are strikingly remarkable birds which, as their name implies, have a beak which is shaped as a horn. The focus here will be on the yellow-billed hornbills, which are some of the most common birds in Sabi Sands. They normally feed on insects and seeds, and they are normally found in savannahs and subtropical climates.

The mongooses and these hornbills are no strangers to each other, in fact it is very common to see them together. They have similar needs in food preference. This led them to have a mutualistic relationship. It was mentioned above that though the mongooses have great eyesight it is still not enough to protect them and that is why they have a good relationship with these hornbills.

The hornbills are a watchdog for the mongooses, and they feed on insects disturbed by the mongooses when foraging. They have a greater success if they live in a foraging group. In the process the hornbills will get food and if any predators come they will cause a loud screech, warning the mongooses to escape.



This relationship is a win for both species, as security for a meal, sounds like a fair trade.



How often after watching a wildlife documentary, have you stopped to think about how many months or even years it may have taken to put together a storyline? To catch every moment and bring to life the ongoing tale of what has been observed?

In guiding, we may not be filming a documentary, however hours spent in the bush allow us to observe an array of different species and piece together their life story as it transpires, helping to give us a deeper understanding of the animal and allowing us to form our own connections.

Having guided in different parts of the Sabi Sand game reserve over the past seven years and having had an innate love for those of the *Panthera* species (lions and leopards), this has given me the opportunity to follow the lives of a few individuals of whom I have grown very fond - namely the Thamba male leopard and Hosana male leopard.



Hosana male with his mother Karula female (image by Chene Wales-Baillie)

Let's start with the Hosana male leopard. He was born in the last litter to a female named Karula who was very well known for being an extremely successful mother, bringing almost every one of her litters up to adulthood during her lifespan. I began viewing Hosana when he was a few months old, still under the care of his mother, being raised alongside his littermate and sister Xongile female. The two of them were unfortunately left to fend for themselves around the age of a year and a half when their mother Karula unexpectedly disappeared, which became an interesting time in terms of the leopard dynamics in the northern Sabi Sand.

Hosana male being the confident and outgoing male that he is had no trouble in looking after himself, however the same could not be said for his sister who, not long after, also disappeared and was never seen again. I was very glad to have spent a few hours with her in the days before her disappearance.



Hosana male leopard fighting with a hyena over food - February 2018  
(image by Chene Wales-Baillie)

Around a similar time, a few months after Hosana male was born, so too was the Thamba male who was the son of a female named Thandi, the first daughter of Karula (Hosana's mother) - and I am hoping I haven't lost you with the family tree confusion here!

Having the opportunity to view leopard cubs is probably one of the most special things one can ever experience and I will never forget the first time I viewed Thamba male and his littermate - they were tiny! Thandi female had caught three impalas during a storm the previous night with two kills hoisted and one on the ground, she brought her two little cubs to feed for the first time and it was magical.



Thandi, Thamba and his littermate drinking (screenshot taken of video by Chene Wales-Baillie)

In the wild it is very difficult to raise cubs until adulthood and unfortunately leopards have a very high mortality rate. This was the case for Thamba male's littermate who was found to be killed by the Styx Pride who, at the time, were feeding on a waterbuck. We assume Thandi and the cubs moved in to investigate the smell and were caught unaware of the lions. Thankfully Thandi and Thamba both got away, although at a huge loss of one family member.



Young Thamba male (image by Chene Wales-Baillie)

As the months went on, Thandi began moving into Karula's territory, a space left open by her late mother which sparked the interactions between Hosana male and Thamba male as youngsters. More frequently we would find Thandi on a kill with both Thamba and Hosana and it almost seemed as if Thandi began to adopt Hosana male as her own (who technically was her little brother).

The two males grew bigger and bigger and were forming quite distinctive characteristics. Hosana male was always more confident, the naughty one who never took any nonsense. Thamba male on the other hand, had more of a passive nature about him, often feeling the upper paw dealt by his slightly older half-brother.

Before moving to Singita, the time I spent with these two males was often confrontational and I began to notice Thamba male moving further and further away from his mother and away from the constant hassle given by Hosana male. Being a guide, and I guess being human, you tend to naturally form an emotional connection with these animals (as wild as they may be), and it's one of those sad things knowing that a young male will always move away from his natal territory, often never to be seen by you again.

This was until I became a guide at Singita, to the west of the area I previously worked and viewed these two males. I had been guiding for a few months already when I heard on the radio that one of the other guides had found a new leopard, north of the Sand River. If we aren't familiar with a leopard, guides often share images to

try and identify the individual - this helps us to be able to log the correct information in our ongoing Panthera research. I looked at the image and knew straight away, it was Thamba male! I couldn't contain my excitement and all the thoughts began to come to mind, "Will he become territorial here?" "Will he end up mating with the Schotia female?" "What if he gets killed by the Nyeleti male?" "Yay! A leopard I know!" ... the thoughts went on and on.

Three years later and after coming into contact with a number of other male leopards as well as mating with a few females, Thamba has successfully taken over a large portion of Singita, south of the Sand River and continues to get bigger and stronger than ever before, even chasing the Nyeleti male away from a carcass. One of my fondest memories of Thamba male growing up here on Singita was listening to him vocalise for the first time as a territorial male. I couldn't help feeling proud of this young male who I had seen on so many occasions as the "weaker" male against Hosana, he was the underdog who was now coming out on top!



My favourite Thamba male comparison – Image on the left taken by Chene Wales-Baillie, image on the right taken by Ross Couper



Young Thamba male (image by Chene Wales-Baillie)



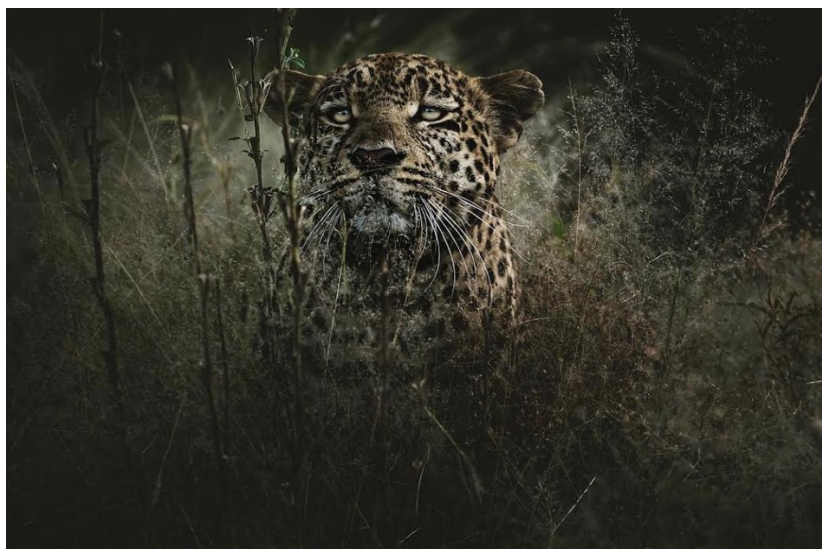
Thamba male as an adult (image by Ross Couper)

My luck in seeing these two males again wasn't over, when Hosana male too began moving west from his natal area and onto the northern parts of Singita, now encompassing the entirety of the property north of the Sand

River as his territory. Hosana male too has mated with a number of different females over the past few years and we also believe him to be the father of a cub given birth to by the Nkangala female.



A young Hosana Male (image by Chene Wales-Baillie)



Hosana male as an adult (image by Ross Couper)

In writing this journal, I ended up going through a number of old photos and videos bringing up many memories of my time spent with these two incredible male leopards. I find it amazing to be able to compare images of them as young males to them now being fully grown, territorial males who only grow from strength to strength each day. As I say, it's hard not to form an emotional attachment to these wild animals, however having the opportunity to observe them grow and live out the lives of a once scarcely viewed animal and to be able to understand where their lives have taken them over the last number of years has been truly invigorating and something, I have formed a great passion for.

Both males are now coming into their prime years as dominant male leopards and as they do, I only hope to continue watching the storyline of their lives ,and being able to share this ongoing and magnificent real life 'documentary' whilst viewing them with my guests.

Gallery for August



Photographed by Nick du Plessis



Photographed by Marc Bowles-Taylor



Photographed by Chene Wales-Baillie



Photographed by Marc Bowles-Taylor