

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA
For the month of February, Two Thousand and Twenty-Six

Temperature

Average minimum: 20.3°C (68.5°F)
Minimum recorded: 17.0°C (62.6°F)
Average maximum: 30.6°C (87.1°F)
Maximum recorded: 35.0°C (95.0°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 12 mm
Season to date: 442 mm
(*Season = Oct to Sep)

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:40
Sunset: 18:35

Singita in the Sabi Sand is still a lush, emerald-green paradise because of the heavy rains we experienced a month ago. However, the rivers have subsided significantly since then and we only received twelve millimetres of rain for the month of February. While the vegetation is at its thickest, providing a private sanctuary for the regions famous leopards, the air is filled with the calls of migratory birds and the playful antics of young impala and wildebeest born just months prior. As you move through the reserve, you may encounter the sweet, tropical fragrance or ripening marula fruit, which draws in herds of elephants.

Here's a sightings snapshot of the month's sightings:

Elephants

- Elephant herds and bulls have been drawn in from afar thanks to the fruiting marula trees. Some of the larger bulls have been shaking the trees to encourage the fruits to come falling down. One or two of the marula trees have also either been ringbarked or even pushed over by those larger elephant bulls.

Buffaloes

- One large herd of buffalo continue to frequent the south of the reserve and the more open grasslands.
- Other herds, of up to a couple hundred strong, are seen grazing and then heading to water sources. They're a sight to behold! Just to switch off the game-viewer and listen to them as they pass by is quite remarkable.

Lions

- The Mhangeni Pride of lions are still somewhat fragmented. The three sub-adults have been with one of the older lionesses; the lioness and the four new cubs have been with the other older lioness and have also been seen with the Nkumati male (their father) in the southern parts of the reserve. The males, as well as the pride, continue to torment the large herd of buffalo that frequent the southern grasslands.
- The Plains Camp male lions have been heard more than they have seen for the month. They have been spending a lot of their time up in the north (still inaccessible) and the western sector of the Sabi Sand game reserve.
- The Tsalala lioness has been sighted on several occasions close to the lodges, often very vocal and walking with intent past some of the rocky outcrops in the area. Could she be hiding something from us?
- The Nkumati sub-adults were also seen recently, both looking in good condition, just with a couple of new scratches and nicks on their faces.

Leopards

- The Nkuwa female and her young male cub have been thriving in the lush, green environment - often found with particularly large bellies. Mom is always on the lookout for their next meal!
- The Thamba male and the Rivala female have been seen mating together around Castleton. They have subsequently parted ways and the Rivala female continues to frequent the river to the west of the lodges.
- The Tisela female and her two daughters seem to be spending more time apart than together and we hope to see more concrete boundaries being created by the two young females now that they are just about on their own.
- The Hlambela male made a cameo appearance from across the river! His rasping led him to being discovered in the Hukumuri/Sand River confluence.

Cheetah

- The male cheetah has been sighted on a handful of occasions. He was flushed by the Othawa Pack of wild dogs on one occasion. He has been a tough cat to find in the long grass!

African wild dogs

- Only once the rivers and streams became crossable did we start seeing more of the wild dogs. Specifically, the Othawa Pack, they have been making the most of the lush conditions and feasting on the abundant impala lambs.

- The Toulon Pack were also seen on the northern bank of the Sand River, looking south to cross but the fear of what lurks beneath got the better of them and they disappeared further north.

Unusual sightings

- Dan had an incredible sighting of a Southern African rock python basking in the warm summer sun.
- Jason had a unique sighting of a pair of honey badgers early one morning as he left the lodge.

Bird list

- We have added three birds to our list for the month of February. Taking our total number of birds for the year to 250.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as the images for the February Gallery.

The Southern African python

Article by Marc Bowes-Taylor

My love for reptiles started over 20 years ago by visiting snake parks, keeping a few specimens and reading books about them. Caring for them, how they lived in the wild, how to find them and how they bred fascinated me. All of this and more has made me really passionate about a creature most people fear.

The few books I had I soon read cover to cover and repeated until the information was, and still is, imprinted in my brain. One particular page in a book authored by none other than Johan Marais I can recall vividly, which was about a female python and her hatchlings sunning themselves outside of an old mammal burrow. Parental care in snakes was not totally unheard of but definitely something I wanted to know more about.

Southern African pythons, back then, were considered just one species, *Python natalensis*, the African rock python. Now they are classified as *Python sebae* which are found in east Africa north of Zambia, and *Python natalensis* which is what we have here in South Africa. These snakes were very foreign to me living in an urban area. They seemed like more wild snakes than the brown house snakes and spotted bush snakes that I found in my garden and were then transferred to a tank in my collection. A python was the snake I really wanted to see - the longest snake in Africa.

Years later I realised my dream when I saw my first wild python in an ebony tree at Singita, spotted by my eagle-eyed colleague Vusi. A dream come true! As years went by since that first sighting I got to see them occasionally on the reserve but still in the back of my mind was that vivid memory of the python family at the entrance to the burrow. It would be something really special to see that in real life. A mature female is about 3 metres in length, taking at least five years to reach that length. The odds are heavily stacked against an individual making it to that size. My dream came true one day when Lucy found a couple of hatchlings at a burrow. I knew this must be a nest site. To witness a mother and her offspring altogether was a such a special moment. The magnitude of such an occasion is lost on many people but it's something I cherished every second of!

In years to come we will monitor this hole to see if she uses it the following seasons. There is even potential to do studies on her as there is a lack in data in the population in the north east of our country. Size of the clutch, genetics and when they lay is all valuable knowledge to herpetologists.

Here is more information on their breeding habits:

The Southern African python is one of the largest snakes in Africa, and its breeding behaviour is a fascinating mix of patience, competition, and careful timing with the seasons. Mating usually takes place during the cooler months, often from late winter into early spring, when adults become more active and start seeking out potential partners. Males use scent trails left by females to track them over long distances, relying heavily on chemical cues rather than sight. When several males find the same receptive female, brief but intense competition can occur, with males attempting to outmanoeuvre each other for access. Courtship itself is relatively subtle compared to flashy bird or mammal displays. A male will align his body alongside the female's and use gentle tactile movements, including rubbing and small spur-like structures near the cloaca, to stimulate her receptivity. If the female is receptive, copulation can last for several hours, and in some cases pairs may mate multiple times across several days. Females are capable of storing sperm for a period, which gives them flexibility in timing fertilization with favourable environmental conditions.

After mating, the female lays a clutch of eggs—often several dozen—in a well-hidden, sheltered spot such as a burrow, hollow log, or dense vegetation. Unlike many reptiles, the Southern African python shows a notable degree of maternal care. The female coils tightly around her eggs to protect them from predators and environmental stress. Through subtle muscular contractions known as shivering thermogenesis, she can even raise the temperature of the clutch slightly, helping maintain suitable incubation conditions until the hatchlings

emerge. Once the young snakes hatch, they are fully independent from day one but stay close to the burrow with their mother until their first shedding of skin and then they will disperse into the surrounding habitat to begin life on their own.

The journey of water: from Sand to sea

Article by Lucy Stoffberg

Every morning I have a cup of coffee before the guests come down for game drive. I take that moment to stand on the lodge deck overlooking the Sand River, often mesmerized by the first light of the day touching the water. Amazed that it is always flowing, I think about the journey the water has made to reach this moment. I am constantly reminded that nothing in the bush exist in isolation — especially water.

The Sand River, which winds quietly through this landscape, may at times seem gentle and unassuming. Recently after the big rains, it has been turbulent and powerful with its force. In the dry winter months, it retreats into pools and hidden channels beneath the sand. But its story begins far from here.

The river rises in the highlands of Mpumalanga in the Drakensberg mountains, fed by summer rains that gather into streams and tributaries. It flows as the Sand River for roughly 50 km. From there, it becomes the Sabie River, flowing eastward through the Lowveld and into the vast wilderness of the Kruger National Park. Along the way, it sustains elephants, leopards, kingfishers, ancient jackalberry trees, and countless other unseen lives. It brings blessings wherever it flows.

Eventually, the river crosses into Mozambique, where it joins the great Komati River system. From there, after a long and patient journey, its waters finally meet the Indian Ocean.

Standing beside the Sand River at sunset, watching a herd of elephant's drink from water that will one day touch the sea, I am reminded of how connected this ecosystem truly is. The rain that falls in the mountains, the sand beneath our feet, the wildlife we cherish — and the ocean far beyond — are all part of one continuous story.

And here in Sabi Sand, we are privileged to witness a small, beautiful chapter of that journey every day.

Majenje, the macrotermes

Article by Alweet Hlungwani

Macrotermes are a genus of fungus-growing termites, are one of the most resilient and successful communities in the African savannah. Termites embody a sense of community even though the workers and soldiers are as blind as a mole! They spend most of their time doing what each of them is assigned to do according to their given portfolios, in what is known as a caste system.

After the first big rains, millions of termite alates emerge from termite mounds to go on nuptial flights. Doves fly until their wings fall off. During that time a host of mammals, birds and other creatures feast on them, providing a great amount of protein to many. I have seen baboons and lesser-spotted eagles that visit us in summer from as far as Poland and Romania feeding on them. Reptiles like monitor lizards love them. Aardvarks that are known to come out in the middle of the night in some reserves come out earlier because they can't resist the buffet that's freely presented at that time. During a feasting frenzy chacma baboons will be jumping about but catching them with great precision. They are also a delicacy for humans - local communities will be swatting them into bowls of water so that they can lose their wings and be cooked up as a nutritious source of protein. If you go to towns like Thohoyandou, the entrepreneurial Venda people will be found selling termites from massive basins and making a living out of them.

Some termites that escape and make it after their wings have fallen will pair to mate and become the queen and the king. Their eggs will hatch and that will be a start of a colony which can take about 5 to 10 years to mature and be a fully established colony that can produce swarming alates again.

Through pheromones the queen will differentiate the nymphs into reproductives, soldiers and workers. The workers are the ones that eat woody material. They cannot digest it but they regurgitate it into fungus gardens inside the termite mound. The fungi produce food for the whole colony, or city, as you may call it. The queen is so large she's almost immobile and her job is to lay over 30 000 eggs a day! She is protected by the soldiers who are equipped with razor-sharp mandibles that can chop, lacerate and cut through tough tissue.

The workers build tunnels through and under the mound which they use to go and fetch dead woody plant matter to feed fungi gardens. The mound's temperature is regulated at 31 degrees Celsius to maintain the right humidity that allows for the yield of the fungus on which they depend. If the workers numbers decreased, the queen will increase their numbers by laying eggs that will produce workers, and she will do the same with soldiers.

Termite mounds can reach a height of 7 meters, and if compared to any skyscraper we build, they would outcompete us on performance! The structure is built in clay and is hard and not easily eroded by rain or force.

Termites have one of the most complex societies, and they are one of the main drivers of the ecology of the African savannah.

Abandoned termite mounds can become great homes for aardvarks, pythons, bees for the hives, and nesting sites for birds like bee-eaters. They can be used as a vantage point for cheetahs, lions and leopards when they are hunting or reclining.

In Tsonga folklore a termite mound that grows within a hut is a bad omen that signals a death of a family member. Personally, I have witnessed two deaths in close proximity to termite mound emergence in a house, in my lifetime. Do I believe it? I generally don't want to but I do wonder.

Abandoned termite mounds were used to make furnaces for smelting copper and iron by the Bantu people in the Lowveld, in the Early and Late Iron Age, in what is now the Kruger National Park.

Architects such as Mick Peace, a Zimbabwean architect, designed the Eastgate Centre, a retail and office building in Harare modelled after a termite mound to reduce air-conditioning costs in the face of great baking heat waves.

Termites are a fascinating subject to study. We can ask, "What can we learn from this that will benefit us?" They've allowed us to discover so much – and there is always more to learn.

February Gallery



The Nkuwa female and her male cub – just about as big as mom now! Image by Matt Durell
The Mhangeni lioness and one of her cubs. Image by Matt Durell



Two of the playful Mhangeni cubs. Image by Matt Durell



The male cheetah scans his surrounds, contemplating his next move. Image by Matt Durell





A western cattle egret looking for a meal. Image by Jason Gipson.
A European bee-eater! Image by Jason Gipson





The Rivala female eyeing out her next potential meal. Image by Jason Gipson
Morning traffic below. Image by Matt Durell

