

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT
SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE
For the month of March, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four

Temperature

Average minimum: 22.3°C (72.1°F)
Minimum recorded: 18.1°C (64.5°F)
Average maximum: 34.1°C (93.3°F)
Maximum recorded: 41.8°C (107.2°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 41 mm
Season to date: 344.6 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:00
Sunset: 17:55

It's been unusually hot for March, with the average maximum shimmering at 34.1 °C, and thankfully there was some rain towards the end of the month. It has been a long hot summer and you can tell that many of the animals are looking forward to cooler temperatures, and these became noticeable after the equinox on the 20th. One of the month's highlights was the emergence of lunar moths with their beautiful lime green wings with twisted hindwing tails.

A sightings snapshot for March follows:

Lions

- The majority of sightings this month have been of the Nduna Pride. They've been seen in the area around Nduna Dam, but it's been very interesting to see that members of the original pride have been found in the area of Chikokovelo, along the Chiredzi River, which is the stronghold of the River Pride.
- The three pride males were seen trailing a herd of buffalo for a few days, and indeed a buffalo was killed by lions which provided many meals.
- A tense sighting was of lionesses trying to kill a warthog, but they failed.
- There is currently a mating pair of lions from the Nduna Pride – so that's always promising.
- Two beautiful sightings were of a pride of eight lions all relaxing on a sand bank along the Chiredzi River; and a pride of nine lions biding their time on the flat mown helipad.

Leopards

Fleeting glimpses of leopards were had earlier in the month, but then there was a string of excellent sightings that included:

- A mother with two cubs on the road near the lodge.
- An adult male sitting on a sand bank at the confluence of the Chiredzi and Nyamasikana Rivers.
- A male leopard hunting along the shoreline of the Malilangwe Dam.

Wild dogs

- Two packs have been seen this month which is encouraging. The smaller pack was seen along the river and the larger pack in the central regions, and both packs were seen during one lucky drive. They should start looking for den-sites shortly, so we hope they choose the Malilangwe Reserve for this.

Hyenas

- The hyena highlights include seeing eight clan members feeding on a zebra carcass. From the tracks at the scene we suspect the zebra was killed by a lioness and the hyenas chased her off her kill claiming it for themselves.

Rhinos

- Sightings of both white and black rhinos have been a daily occurrence, and it has been a case of how many rhinos were seen on a game drive rather than not seeing any at all.
- With limited water and territory available we are seeing black rhinos more often in places that they didn't previously frequent.

Elephants

- Sightings of breeding herds have increased this month – three different herds were seen on a single drive. They seem to be enjoying the mopane leaves.
- Bulls are always impressive, especially when we see the big tuskers that we've come to recognise over time. They are gathering at Hwata Pan to replenish their thirst.

Buffalo

Here are two excerpts from our guides' daily sightings reports:

- "A glorious sighting of a buffalo herd stretching out from Mahande Loop to Hwata Pan and past our vehicle heading north into the mopani treeline. We saw lots of calves. There must have been around 400 buffalo."
- "There is nowhere in the world one can be ten metres away from buffalo, rhino and elephant, while watching the sunset and enjoying drinks on the ground, except at Singita Pamushana, Malilangwe."

Hippos

- Usually we see hippos in the dam, but on a short walk to the river 51 hippos were seen in an area we call Hippo Pools. We could sit on the bank and watch them interacting and calling, not more than 15 metres away.

Plains game

- Excellent plains game in the central areas, plus the occasional glimpse of a sable or Lichtenstein's hartebeest.

Rare sightings

- An African wildcat was viewed during the day, a honey badger at dusk, and three porcupines (two adults and a young porcupette) were seen at night.

Birds

- The birding highlight for the month has been watching carmine bee-eaters flying around the game-viewers as they hawk insects flushed from the grass.

Boat cruise

- One of our longest serving guides filed a report of his "Best Boat Cruise Ever!" It was of watching a leopard seemingly trying to hunt crocodiles on the shoreline.

A report from another guide included:

- "The boat cruise was out of this world with great sightings of a pride of nine lions on the shoreline, hippos, crocodiles, giraffes, birds and three elephant bulls mud-bathing. We saw so many crocodiles that we lost count."

Fishing

- With the hot weather the fishing has been good, with many breams landed.

Photographic hide

- The hide has been in use again. On one occasion four of the Big Five were seen from the hide: Two bull elephants, six white rhinos, a breeding herd of buffaloes, and three lions.
- It is an amazing experience to sit in the hide and watch an elephant bull at such close quarters that spray from his trunk lands on you.

Rock art

- Guests were in awe of the art at Mabhakweni and Chidhumo rock art sites, especially after being informed about the estimated age and seeing how defined the depictions are.

Walks

- It's a great time to start doing longer bush walks now, and they are enjoyed even more when rests are taken at some of the rock art sites.

Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft

- Visits were conducted during the month, to see the ancient bushcraft skills.

Daytrips to Gonarezhou National Park

- Two different packs of African wild dogs were seen on one of the daytrips, as well as eight lions and an abundance of elephant bulls and breeding herds.

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

Ultimate leopard

This would rank as one of my top ten leopard sightings at Singita Pamushana. Unfortunately there were no guests to share it with at the time, but I had left the lodge for an afternoon scouting drive, and arranged to pick up a few Malilangwe Trust staff members that were a 15 minute drive away. True to form I had left the lodge earlier than I needed to, so took a detour along Ultimate Drive. I was pottering along, and then thought to myself that I really must pay close attention to the trees because it was hot but also muggy and wet from the light showers of rain and that would make it prime time for leopards to seek dry shaded refuge in trees. Well, I can honestly say that I hadn't even punctuated the thought with a full stop when I saw a tail hanging from a tree. It was a marula tree, in clear view, and in it was a leopard, fast asleep.



My heart beat like a caged tiger trying to escape my chest. I needed to 'get the shot' but didn't want to disturb her in any way. Invariably leopard sightings here are fast and fleeting. Above is the fine art moment I was after, with lots of white space and an 'incidental' animal in a hero tree. But then I wanted to photograph her more zoomed in, and to do so I had to drive almost underneath the tree following the road. I went about it very slowly and respectfully and, amazingly, she stayed relaxed in the tree.

By now I was late for my friends, and there was no way I was risking disturbing her again by driving back under the tree, so I drove the long way round to collect them. They received the mysterious instruction to hold on tight and be quiet, as I drove swiftly back to the site. I was so relieved to see she was still there and I could share this moment with friends. She did not have a kill in the tree, so to find her simply sleeping up in a tree, out in the open like this, was phenomenal.

We spent about an hour with her, and drove past the tree again, avoiding eye contact, to see her from the other side as well. Eventually she stretched, yawned and repositioned herself. Then she got up and moved to another branch to consider her way down.

Leopards climb trees with mercurial action, even when they have a kill in their jaws, but getting down often seems far more awkward. With grappling claws and flying bark she went headfirst, then sideways, then backwards, - then a forward leap to the ground – and with that she simply melted away into the bush.



When looking at these photos in high resolution and enlarged I can tell from the slightly ragged edges of her ears, and the staining in the grooves of her spine-chilling canines, that she is a middle-aged leopard.







Leopards have to be the embodiment of perfect shape, proportion, strength and line.

Lucky marula tree

As you can imagine I drove past that marula tree regularly in the days after that leopard sighting, on the off chance of spotting her again. She was not there the following morning, but a black rhino was! Below is a screengrab of a video I took with my iPhone, while taking photographs on my Canon R5 camera, and you can see the marula tree on the left. In fact you can see the tree has some mud on it – and that is from where a muddy elephant would have rubbed up against it to scratch its side. I drove that route this very morning and there were three white rhinos there – so it really is my lucky tree. Imagine all it has seen in its time! It would be fascinating to leave a time-lapse camera there and film the tree during its seasons and see the animals and birds that benefit from it.



Here are some facts and figures about black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis*), and how they differ from the white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum*) we have here:

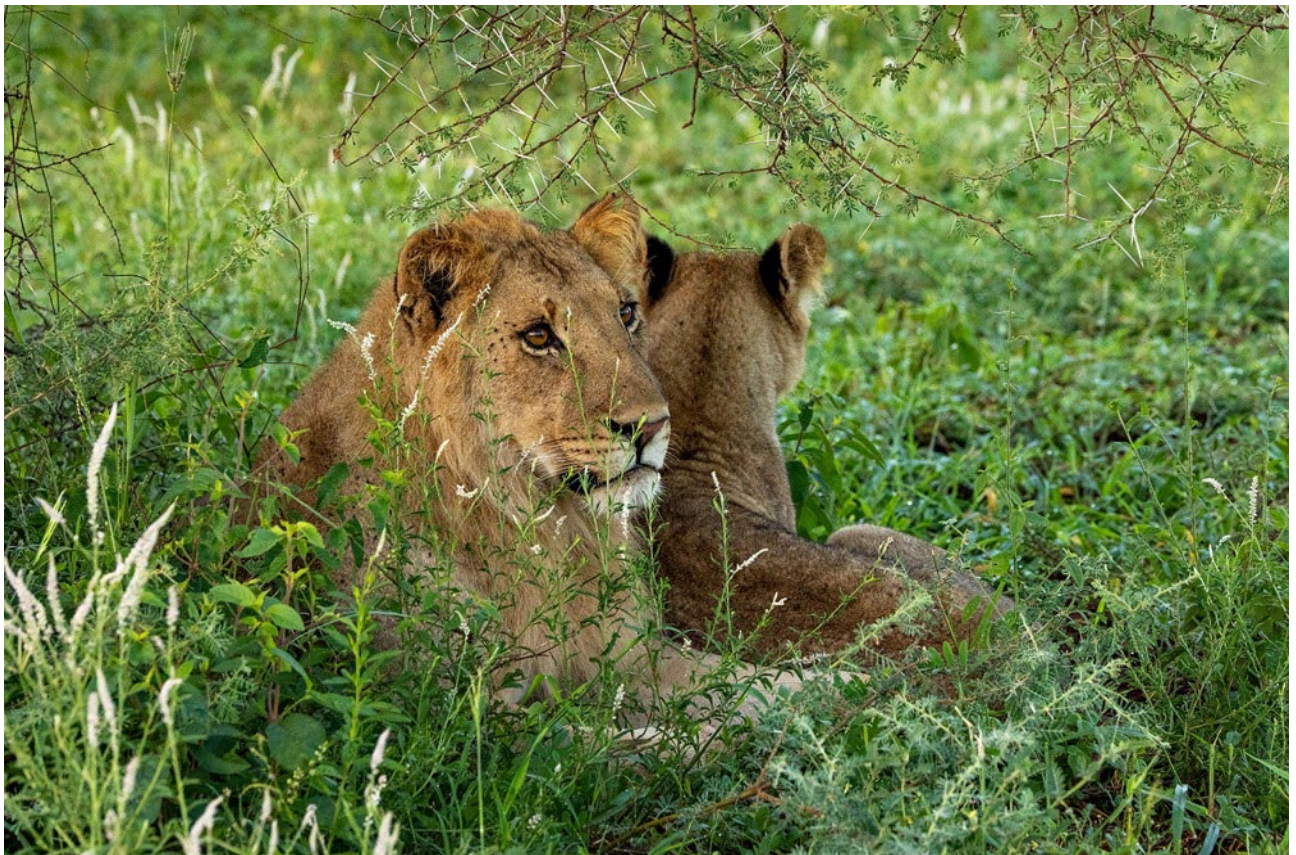
- Black rhinos are most easily distinguished by their pointed upper lip, which is adapted for grasping.
- They are primarily browsers, feeding on vegetation including leaves, branches, shoots, and fruits.
- These rhinos are mainly solitary animals, except for females with calves and during mating.
- Black rhinos are known for their reactive behaviour compared to other rhino species.
- They have poor eyesight but possess a keen sense of smell and hearing, which they rely on for communication and detecting threats.
- Black rhinos are territorial animals, marking their territory with urine and dung piles.
- They can run at speeds of up to 55 kilometres per hour (34 miles per hour) when threatened.
- Female black rhinos typically give birth to a single calf after a gestation period of around 15 to 16 months.
- Calves stay with their mothers for up to three years before becoming independent.
- Black rhinos have a lifespan of around 35+ years in the wild.
- Historically, black rhinos inhabited a wide range of habitats including grasslands, savannas, and forests. Their populations have declined significantly due to habitat loss, poaching for their horns, and conflicts with humans.
- Conservation efforts, including anti-poaching measures and habitat restoration, have been implemented to protect black rhinos. Here in Zimbabwe, Singita's conservation partner, The Malilangwe Trust, is responsible for one of the world's most successful black rhino programmes.
- The IUCN Red List classifies black rhinos as critically endangered, with only a few thousand individuals remaining in the wild.



No time for coffee

We set off before dawn with the resolute intention of driving to the Banyini central area and enjoying a cup of Zimbabwe's finest La Lucie coffee, as the sun rose. Well, of course we were thwarted, because as we entered the Banyini we found five members of the Nduna Pride snuggled up together on the side of the track, as if waiting for us. The two cubs, now verging on sub-adults, were cold and hungry and bored.





It was so special to see how the cubs went from each of the two pride lionesses and the young adult male, and demanded attention and affection. When the adults had had enough of them they turned their attention to us, walking alongside and then up to the vehicle to see if we were of interest, passing through pools of golden light and string-of-star flowers.



Finally the adults got up and showed a little interest in some distant plains game, but then walked over to the waterhole instead and spent the rest of the day in the shade there.



When zooming in on the portraits of this cub I can see weak black spots on its longer whiskers, and broken off black ends on the shorter whiskers. These weak points are indicative of a time of severe stress or illness when the cat's body is so weak it cannot produce healthy whiskers. This could be due to a stage of malnutrition when the pride weren't making enough kills or a bout of mange. The Nduna Pride has split into two portions in the last year or so, so the stress/illness period probably coincided with that time.

It's interesting to note that the young adult male has a deformed tail. We're uncertain of the exact cause of this, but it does make him instantly recognisable.



Again, later in the day, the cub needed affection and reassurance from the pride lioness.

Powdering by nose

It was so lovely to park in the shade a little distance away and watch this family of four spend the afternoon huddled together enjoying powdery dust baths. The older calf hadn't quite worked out the technique and was trying to learn it, while the little one just enjoyed being covered in the soft sand that her mother directed her way.

Elephants first loosen the soil they want to use for a dust bath by gently kicking it forwards and backwards, then they Hoover it up in their trunks, aim, and blow it all out so that it cascades over their body. They even dust under their bellies and between their legs.

Dust bathing helps elephants regulate their body temperature. By coating themselves in dust, they create a protective layer that acts as insulation against the sun's heat and helps them stay cool. It can also help them protect themselves from insects and parasites. The dust acts as a barrier against biting insects and helps suffocate parasites such as ticks and mites that may be on their skin. The dust may also serve as a form of sunblock, protecting the elephant's skin from the harmful effects of ultraviolet (UV) radiation.

On this occasion it also seemed to be a social activity with the family engaging in it together.



Other members of the large breeding herd passed by, and it was so endearing to see the older calf recognise a friend and step over to say hello by way of a trunk touch – much like we would pat a friend on the shoulder or shake hands.

Note the fine red the sand in these photos. This wilderness area of roughly 115 000 acres / 50 000 hectares has 38 different habitats and ecological zones. The soil colour changes dramatically in the different areas. You can be driving down a single track and come across black, white, brown and red soil. This red-coloured sand is due to the presence of iron oxide minerals which impart a reddish hue to the sand grains. The type of soil gives rise to the flora that flourishes in it, and the flora attracts the herbivores that prefer it, the herbivores attract the predators that prey on them, and the scavengers clean up the carcasses that are left – which ultimately decompose along with everything else and add nutrients and minerals to the soil.



Season's highlight

Every season, in fact every month, has a highlight for me – something that grabs my attention more than it has in the past, possibly because it is more conspicuous at the time. The last month's highlight has been the ridiculously cute wildebeest newborns. With what looks like fake eyelash extensions, shaggy coats that go wavy in the rain, silly expressions and gangly antics, they are adorable.



Wildebeest calves enter the world with a unique mix of vulnerability and resilience. They are typically born during the rainy season when the grass is lush and plentiful, providing ample sustenance for their mothers. At birth, wildebeest calves are already remarkably agile, capable of standing and walking within minutes to keep up with the moving herd. Their coats are a soft, sandy brown, adorned with faint stripes. Under the watchful eyes of their mothers and the protective circle of the herd, baby wildebeest learn quickly, honing their instincts for survival in this wilderness, where plentiful predators see them as prey. They form close bonds with their mothers, relying on them for nourishment and protection

The gestation period of these blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*), also known as the common wildebeest, typically lasts around 8.5 months, or approximately 240 to 250 days. After this period, the female gives birth to a single calf, although occasionally twins may occur. Ideally the mothers give birth within a short timeframe of each other which helps to overwhelm predators with the sheer number of vulnerable calves, increasing the chances of survival for each individual.

In terms of weaning, baby wildebeest are usually weaned by six months. During this time, they transition from relying solely on their mother's milk for sustenance to consuming a diet consisting primarily of grasses. After weaning, the calves continue to stay with the herd and gradually become more independent as they grow older.



Twitter

These marabou storks (*Leptoptilos crumeniferus*) were doing themselves no PR favour. Overall they are not renowned for their good looks, the fact that they deposit urates on their legs to aid cooling down, or that they are mostly scavengers. I observed them engaged in yet another unappealing behaviour. They were walking back and forth on the edge of a waterhole and fishing out terrapins. Then they would flip the terrapin over and drop it onto its back on the bank. The flailing little chelonians would struggle to right themselves and escape back into the water. If they tried the storks would run after them, catch them and flip them again.

In the photo you can see the stork on the left has caught a terrapin and is busy flipping it, while circled in white on the bottom right is a flipped terrapin lying on its shell.

Marabou storks are carnivores that feast on the carcasses and scraps of dead animals. They often gather around carcasses with vultures and hyenas trying to get at the spoils. However, they also take live prey such as fish, rodents, small and young birds and terrapins.



Possibly they were hunting these terrapins and wanting the terrapin to dry out and die, and the meat to become tenderised and loosened so that they could peck out the flesh more easily. It did seem cruel, but such is Nature, and I hope they were doing it for the purpose of needing a meal. However, think I may have silently cheered when the little terrapin on the bottom right succeeded in flipping itself back over onto its legs and scurrying to the water. Both marabous gave chase and waded in the shallows trying to catch it again, but the terrapin had made good its escape and lived to fight another day!

March Gallery



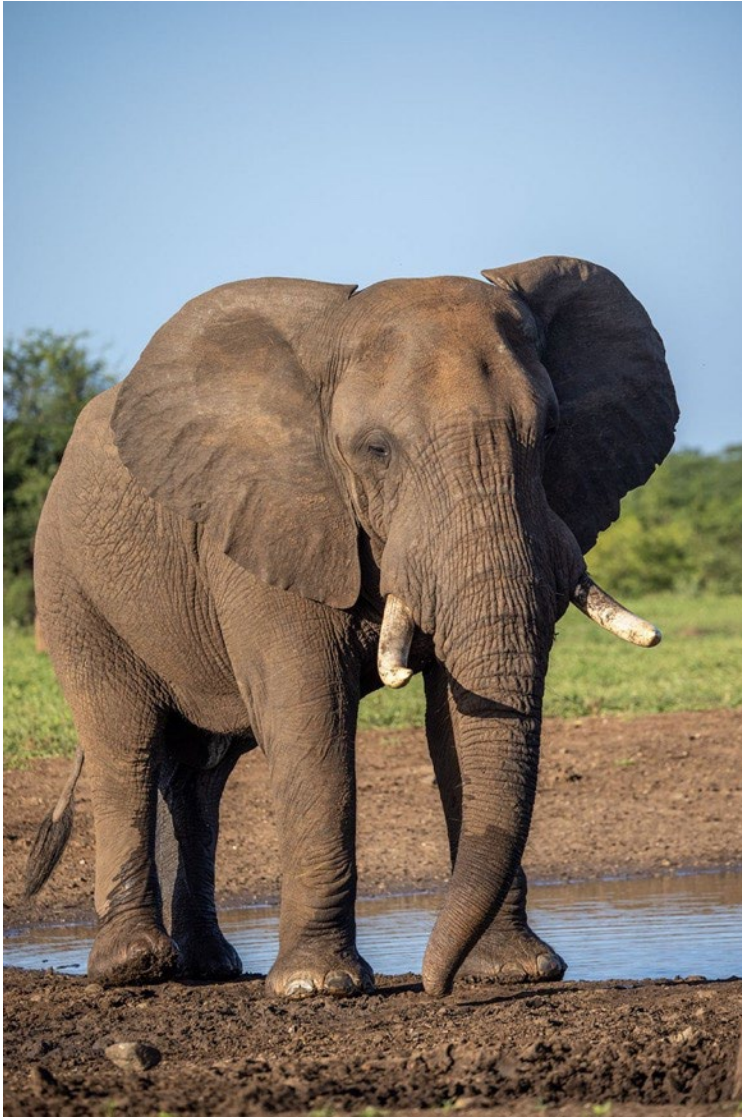
It's always a delight to find a flowering flame lily (*Gloriosa superba*) with their usually bi-coloured yellow and orange-scarlet flowers, but this is the first time I've seen the pure yellow form.

The leaves are shiny, bright green and are tipped in a tendril, which will cling to anything it touches. The flowers present as 'nodding', i.e. they are up-side-down, with the ovary at the base, the stamens in the middle and the petals at the top. There are six free petals, and they are bent backwards (reflexed) so that they are pointing upwards. The stamens are presented in a ring around the flower, each tipped with a large anther. The base of the flower is made up of the large, shiny, green ovary tipped by the style, which is bent sharply outwards from the point of attachment at the tip of the ovary, and tipped by a stigma with three short arms.

Gloriosa superba is the national flower of Zimbabwe.

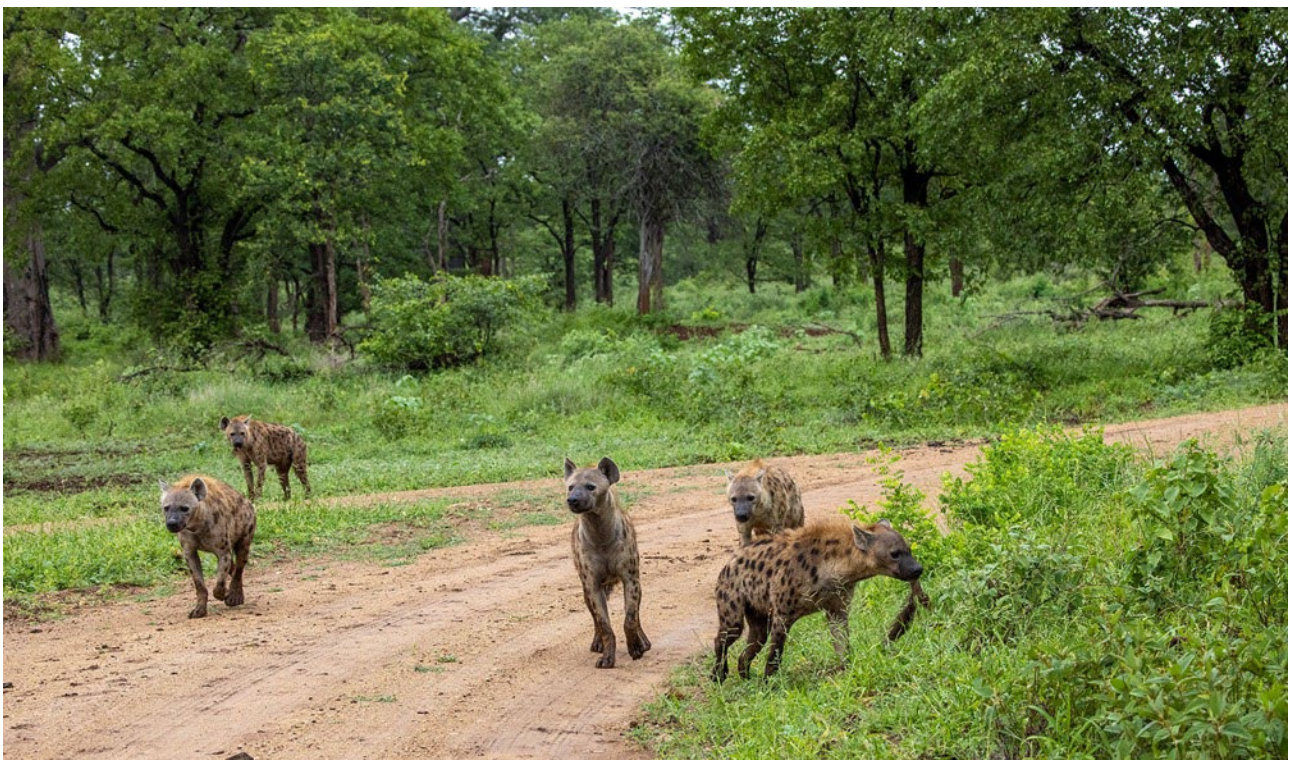


A giraffe strolls into the sunset alongside the airstrip.



This bull elephant was in full musth, and very thirsty. They need to drink often in this state of elevated testosterone because they lose a lot of liquid from the constant stream of urine produced. They can also be quite belligerent in this state, and after he drank he turned his attention on us, and I could tell he was going to come over for a 'chat'. I decided it was better not to enter into negotiations about anything with him, and made a swift exit.

Also giving off a vibe of 'we don't negotiate' was this clan of spotted hyenas returning from a hunt early one morning. One of them sported the tail of a hapless beast in its mouth, as if it were returning home having captured the enemy's flag.



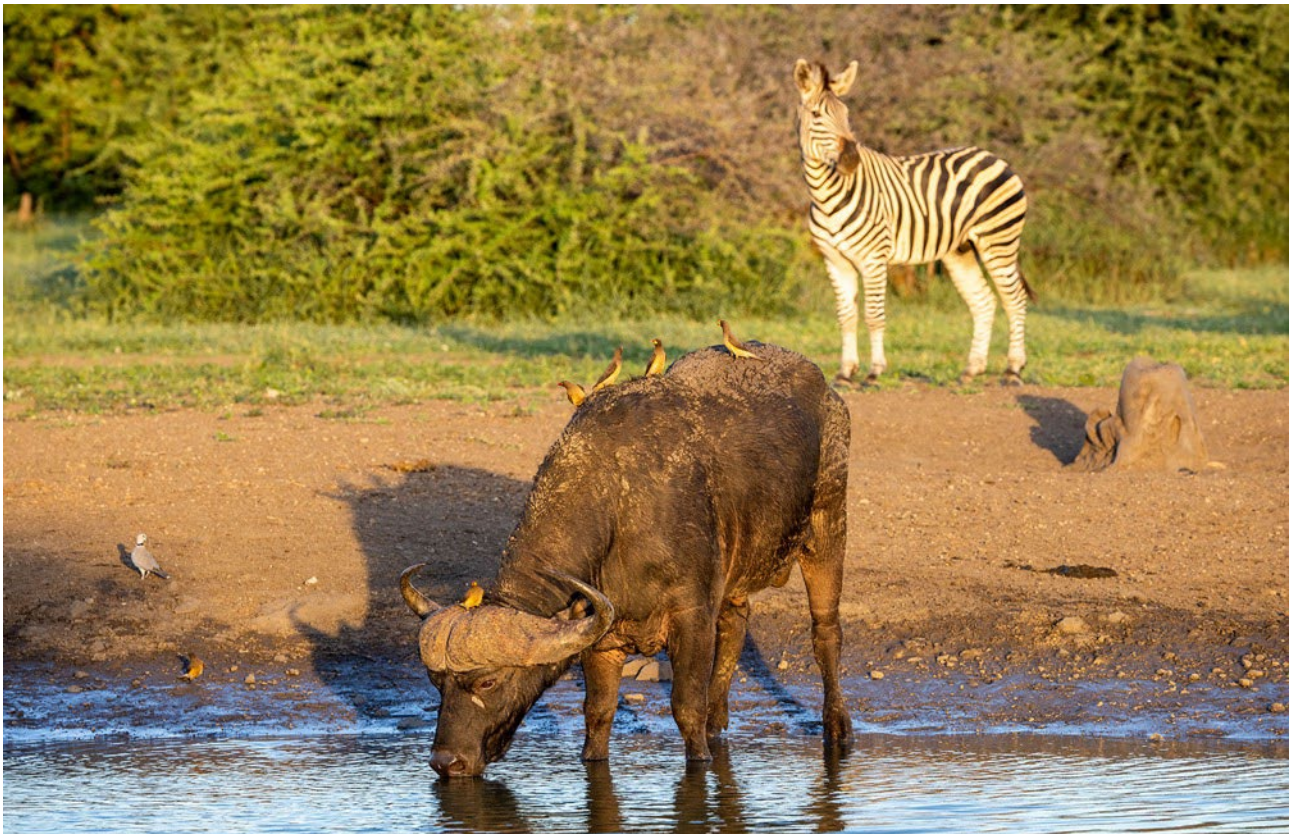


Look how healthy these herbivores are, carrying a good amount of weight thanks to the green season.





Muddy buffalo bulls are synonymous with high temperatures and drying water sources, giving rise to their nickname of 'dagga' boys (meaning muddy).





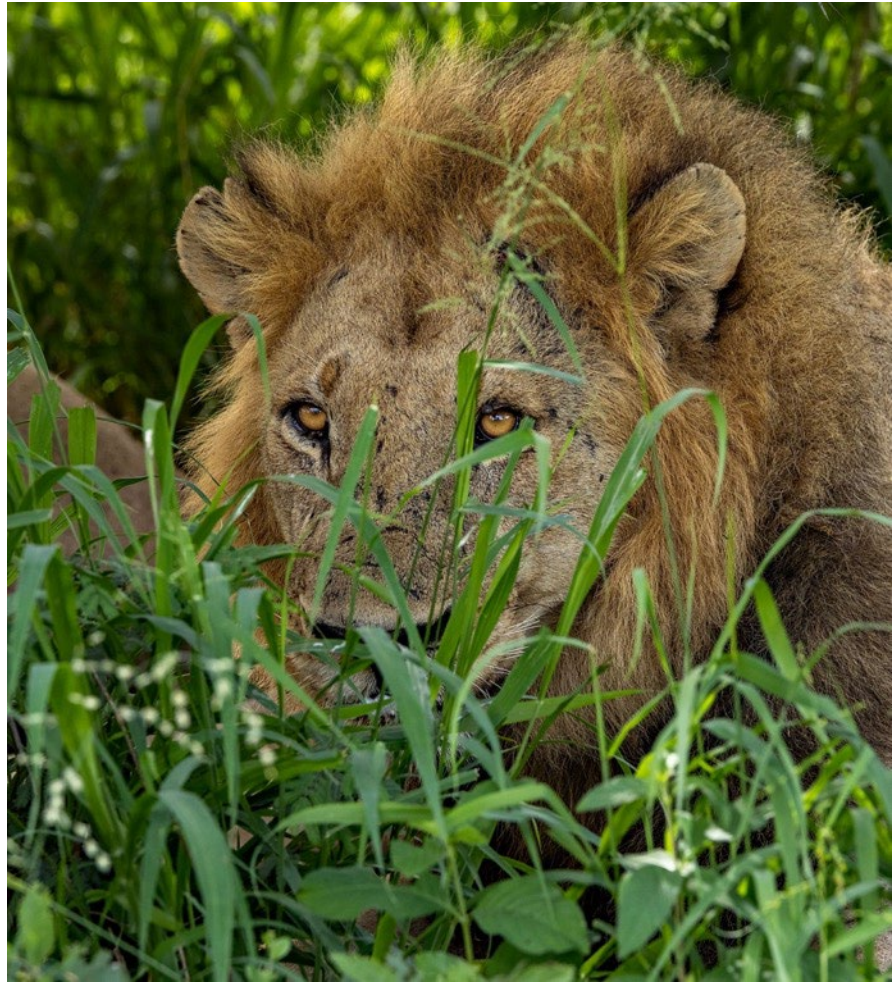
Black rhinos prefer to be concealed in thick vegetation, so this mother and calf made quick work of crossing the open airstrip, while impala grazed in the distance. Once on the other side they settled down, against the lush backdrop of the Hlamba Mlonga sandstone range.



My father always used to ask the riddle: "What's black and white and read all over?" (A newspaper). In this case it would have to be: "What's black and white and gold all over?" (A dazzle of zebras at sunrise).



I can categorically tell you from this lion's stare, that someone on the back of the game-viewer was inadvertently standing up or shifting significantly in their seat, breaking the illusion of all of us in the vehicle being one complete unit. You can see how his head is lifted and his eyes are focused and zeroed in on the individual.



Far more relaxed was this male lion who lay fast asleep under the arc of a tree.



A handsome male trumpeter hornbill with his chest feathers all fluffed out.