

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL **SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE** **For the month of April, Two Thousand and Twenty Two**

Temperature

Average minimum: 19.3°C (66.4°F)
Minimum recorded: 14.3°C (57.7°F)
Average maximum: 29.7°C (85.4°F)
Maximum recorded: 38.3°C (100.9°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 65 mm
*For the year to date: 526 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:10
Sunset: 17:31

Have you ever seen a such a smug looking dassie? It's not surprising given his perch! What a month it has been with some unseasonably late rains and spectacular wildlife sightings.

The Malilangwe Reserve is abuzz with activity as operations are underway to move buffalo, zebra and two white rhinos from the property to restock other reserves. Where possible our Singita Pamushana guests are invited to observe these meticulously organised big game relocations. It is thanks to a myriad of factors

concerning the successful conservation of the Malilangwe ecosystem that, from time to time, wildlife exceeding the scientifically-calculated carrying capacity for the area can be relocated, for restocking and introductions at other well-protected reserves.

Guests touching down at our airstrip have had some phenomenal starts to their safaris: Two guests arriving for 11 nights were treated to vultures pointing the way to five lions at a kill within 10 minutes of their arrival! Other guests on the drive from the airstrip to the lodge saw a female leopard sitting on the river sand of the Nyamasikana River Crossing!

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for April:

Lions

- The Nduna Pride has had great success hunting giraffes this month. They were seen feeding on three giraffe carcasses in less than two weeks. At one of these feasts two white rhinos came along and chased the lions from the kill! The Nduna Pride has a mating pair, so there could be some new cubs in 110 days! This pride likes to spend time resting on the high sandstone outcrops and it is a sight to behold seeing them up on a ridge and greeting each other as each member summits.
- The River Pride has been seen on various occasions, trying to hunt or relaxing in the riverine shade.
- Guide, Mike Mpuche, and tracker, Mavuto Mukape, followed up on a feeling and were rewarded with an excellent sighting of a big male lion, "Looking like he had lost a wallet full of money," according to Mike.

Leopards

- There have been some good sightings of leopards this month. The highlight was finding a drag mark crossing a road near the river, following it and finding an impala carcass hung up in a mopane tree. Returning to the area as darkness fell everyone was rewarded with seeing the leopard who had returned to feed on the carcass.

Hyenas

- Spotted hyenas have been seen regularly, especially when they are determinedly on the trail of African wild dogs.

Elephants

- Some magnificent bulls are seen almost daily, drinking at their preferred Banyini waterhole.
- A delightful sighting took place at Sosigi Dam when a breeding herd of over 40 elephants, with some tiny babies among them, spent time drinking at the dam.

Rhinos

- Incredible sightings of large crashes of white rhinos, and one black rhino, have been regularly reported, at a favourite pan, as dusk falls.
- A few unexpected sightings have occurred, such as when a black rhino ambled across a road, then galloped off at full speed. Another was when the deep sound of hooves running was heard, and as the guide and guests drove around a bend they saw a mother white rhino, calf and mature bull running down the road. Making sure everyone got value for money were three black rhinos on the Chimizie Highway that gave the game viewing vehicle a good rev!

Buffalos

- There is never a dull moment when watching a herd of buffalo - always something to see with the pushing, shoving and herd dynamics. Herds of over 300 can be seen daily.

Wild dogs

- Two packs of African wild dogs are being seen, a pack of 10 and another of 8 – possibly originally one pack that has split.
- An alpha female is looking heavily pregnant and will be denning very soon.
- The dogs have been seen successfully hunting impala, but having their meals stolen on occasion by hyenas. These are serious confrontations with potentially deadly fighting and biting that goes on.
- A wonderful safari surprise was heading down a track very early one morning, to be met with wild dogs running as a pack up the track, toward the vehicle. Another treasured time was watching the young dogs playing next to the vehicle, then calling their pack mates with long, low hooting calls.

Plains game

- The plains game are abundant. Guests even got to watch giraffe which were courting.

Rare sightings

- Daytime sightings of smaller treasures such as Sharpe's grysbok, and nighttime spotlight spots of white-tailed mongoose, large-spotted genet, porcupine, and African wild cat.

Birds

- One of the month's birding highlights was watching a little sparrowhawk chasing and grabbing a European swallow in flight.
- Guests had great fun trying to photograph lilac-breasted rollers in flight – easier said than done.

Fishing

- Guests have had a good time fishing, and it seems the tigers are really on the bite at this time of year, but the biggest fishing scoop came from one of our young residents on the reserve. Tristan Saunders landed a 6.5 kilogram (14 pounds) tigerfish – the biggest out of the dam in 12 years! He released it safely back into the waters and it swam off strongly to fight another day.

Bush walks

- Singita Pamushana are renowned almost as much for our bush walks as we are for our rhino sightings. Here are a couple of walk summaries from the month:
- We did a walk that concentrated on the scents and aromatic smells that connect us with the bush. Amongst the outstanding scents were the wild sage, followed by wild basil, as well as purple pan weed.
- We tracked black rhino for an hour and were eventually rewarded as we came face to face with the herbivores, three in number - a mother, sub-adult and an adult bull. Following from behind with the wind in our favour we had the best view before they were disturbed by a breeding herd of elephants.
- On foot we tracked members of the River Pride that we had seen the previous evening within the Chikwete area, at first coming across a bull elephant and continuing with the lion tracks and being rewarded with the kings of the jungle, west of Chikwete Pan. Even though they saw us they still felt comfortable at 30 metres. As we left we saw an adult female leopard - we all got to see her but as is the norm with leopards, when you are on foot, she took off towards the river.

Photographic hide

- A guest who had visited us in 2011, before we had the photo hide, took the opportunity to spend time in it during his visit this month. It was quiet in the beginning which gave him time to set up cameras and familiarise himself with the surrounding area. Double-banded sandgrouses were first birds to come and drink and bathe in big numbers, followed by two big elephant bulls, then black rhinos.

Some exciting and informative Bush Stories follow, as well as an April Gallery of images.

Gaining acceptance

This was a particularly special sighting. I was driving a young friend and it was a rainy overcast morning. As is typical on mornings like these most animals were still tucked up sleeping somewhere in the thickets, trying to stay dry. We were still having a great time though – we checked all the tracks around a popular pan to see what had been drinking there in the night; we found some brightly coloured bont ticks on a rhino scratching post that were still trapped in mud trying to make their escape after the rhino had evicted them; we found a bonanza of fallen marula fruit that the elephants hadn't yet discovered; and then we heard the scouts had located a Nduna Pride lioness.

We raced through the rocky reaches of a sandstone range to get to the position which I knew was in a dense area of vegetation. Still, nothing ventured, nothing gained. Then we got to the position and I managed to maneuver the vehicle into a spot where we could just get the view of a magnificent golden lioness lying on top of a saturated blackened rock amid a myriad of jungle greens. She really was resplendent and my long lens honoured her glory.

We were parked next to a termite mound and some other low umbrella-shaped bushes. Soon enough we heard the rustling of leaves and out popped a cub / sub-adult from one of the bushes. Then another. These two were obviously bored of the rain and staying dry under the bush, and decided a game was in order... This pride are still a work-in-progress regarding their habituation to game viewing vehicles, so it was to our absolute delight that these youngsters decided to use our vehicle and the termite mound for a game of hide and seek!







The first youngster ran up the termite mound and posed. (By this stage I'd had to swiftly change to a close-up lens.) The second lay down behind our vehicle. The king of the castle crouched down, eyeing his quarry, then lay flat, ready to pounce, with only his teddy-bear ear tips visible. Neither of them were that skilled in patience yet, so they sprang around ambushing one another. It was truly delightful!

All the time the mother lioness on the rock was keeping an eye on this rambunctious behaviour (you can see her on the rock in the background of this photo) but she let them have their fun. After a while they had exhausted themselves and went bounding off to find another bush to nap beneath.

It's a great feeling to gain the acceptance of a pride in a way that they are prepared to accept your presence, without moving off, and continue their natural behaviour.

The risks of drinking

Baboons often seem so brazen and confident, so it was interesting to see just how careful this individual was before she had a drink. She sat on a fallen tree trunk near the water, looking ever so calm and relaxed, but it was clear she was scanning the area and assessing it for danger. When she drank she did so from the shallows by crouching right down and getting as level with the water as she could, so that she could still look up and around to check for anything approaching.

Baboons that live in a non-desert area like this have been recorded to drink at least every other day. The availability of drinking water seems to be the key factor influencing where most of Africa's chacma baboons choose to live. However, they are very clever at finding water sources other than rivers, pans and springs – they'll dig wells in riverbeds, drink water that has collected in tree hollows, and even help themselves to a sip or two of swimming pool water should that be on offer.



Clever hunting strategy

When tracking most animals you look for their tracks and listen for their sounds, but with African wild dogs there's a giveaway sign and that's their scent. There are many other scents too when tracking, like that of a bull elephant in musth, a male leopard that has scent-marked with his urine (smells like popcorn!) or the sweet grassy smell of African buffalo – but none is so distinct as that of African wild dogs. You can literally follow your nose to find them if they've recently run along the path you're on. Let me be frank, it is not a good scent – it stinks!

I came across this pack of wild dogs that were heading to their favoured hunting grounds early one morning. The pack came across a big pile of dung in the road, and most of them sniffed it, had a quick roll in it, and moved on. But one of them just couldn't get enough of the stuff! It dived, rolled, writhed, and then did it all again. The dog seemed delighted and so gleeful! It was very funny – from far.

African wild dogs and their odour, scent marking and pack cohesion is a complex subject, that is far from fully understood by our species. What researchers think is that they roll in dung and other unpleasant-smelling material in order to mask their own scent because they do not want a potential prey animal to be able to smell their approach. If they camouflage their own dog smell with the smell of another animal's dung, they'll have an easier time hunting prey. It's really very clever. Sharing an odour together also seems to increase the sense of 'togetherness.' Pack cohesion, acting as one unit, is absolutely essential for the survival of wild dogs. Together they are stronger. They'll also regularly rub against each other to pick up each other's scent.

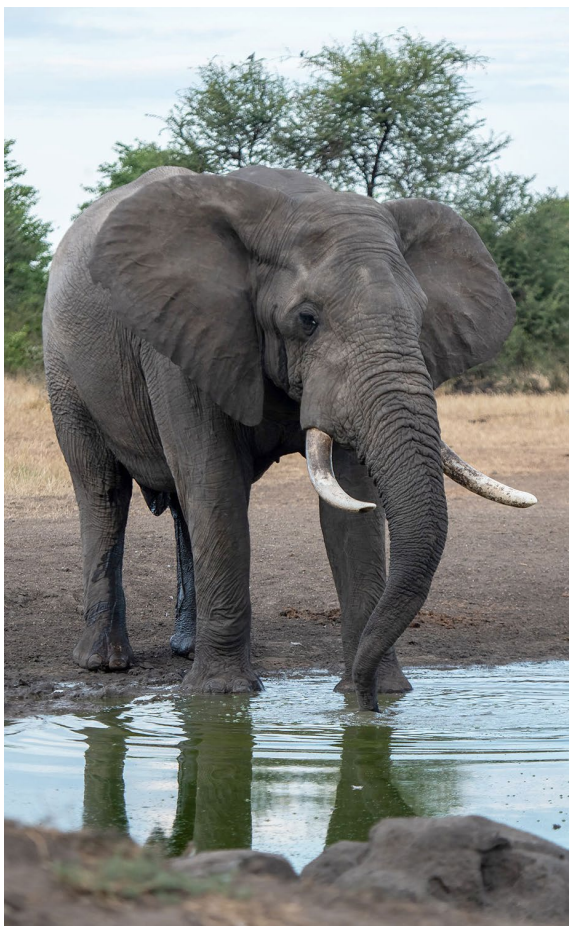
I noticed this particular dog also had some nasty scab wounds on its back from a bite, and maybe the softly abrasive dung was giving those scabs a good scratch too.





A twist in the trunk





We noticed this large bull elephant approaching a pan to drink. He was in good condition, but it soon became apparent there was something not quite right with his trunk. It had a big kink in it, where it folded over itself. As he got closer to the water and his stride got bigger, he folded his trunk over his longer right tusk as if to make sure he didn't trip over it.

Then, at the water it became clear he couldn't slurp the water up strongly like other elephants do, as if using a straw. He used his trunk in more of a twist-and-scoop way, and made do like that, drinking what he needed to.

This condition is known as Floppy Trunk Syndrome. It is a condition that causes trunk paralysis in African elephants and is a result of degeneration of nerves in the trunk. We see it on occasion here at Malilangwe, and it is likely caused by excessive consumption of a shrubby perennial herb named *Indigofera schimperi*, but there are potentially many other chemically defended plants that may also contribute to the paralysis. Bulls seem to be susceptible to it rather than adult cows and young animals, but it is not yet known why exactly this is. It may be due to the far larger amounts of food consumed by big bulls which causes a toxic threshold to be exceeded. The effects are reversible if the affected individual switches to another food source.

Twitter

Top right: Lizard buzzard.

Bottom left: Falcon.
Photo by Sarah Ball.

Bottom right: Raptor with a slender mongoose.
Photo by Sarah Ball.

Next page:

Top: Double-banded sandgrouse, with helmeted guinea fowl in background. A female sandgrouse is in the foreground.

Bottom: Greater painted-snipe – the female painted-snipe is in the foreground.
Photo by Sarah Ball.





April Gallery



Previous page:
An African wild dog scans for prey.

Impala turn their back on danger when drinking, but still keep a vigilant eye out.



This page: A black-backed jackal watches birds coming to drink at a pan.

An oxpecker narrowly evades being impaled on a rhino's horn!
Photo by Sarah Ball.





A journey of giraffe watch for danger as a bull bends awkwardly to drink.
A crocodile snaps its catfish catch into bite-sized chunks.





Kudu bulls sip at sunrise, with an eland in the background.
A Cape buffalo bull (also known as Black Death by hunters) among grasses, thorns and black-jack seeds.





Wildebeest, zebra, eland, impala, guinea fowl and multitudinous unseen insects arrive at the life source.





Under the cloak of darkness a black rhino, with a spectacular horn, slipped into the soothing water as two hippos trundled out for a night's grazing.

White rhinos slake their thirst and commune together as night falls.



All photographs by Jenny Hishin, unless otherwise indicated.