

Singita



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

Temperature

Average minimum: 20.5°C (68.9°F)
Minimum recorded: 18.0°C (64.4°F)
Average maximum: 27.5°C (81.5°F)
Maximum recorded: 33.0°C (91.4°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 430 mm
Season to date: 716.4mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 5:30
Sunset: 18:44

January's above-average rainfall in the Lowveld has breathed abundant vitality into the landscape. Seasonal rivers that lay dormant for much of the year have surged back to life, reconnecting waterways, replenishing groundwater, and carving fresh paths through the land. Grasslands have responded with explosive growth—thick, green swards now blanket the plains, providing abundant grazing and reducing pressure on wildlife after leaner seasons. The botanical response has been equally dramatic. Dormant seeds have germinated en masse, trees and shrubs are pushing out new growth, and flowering plants are transforming the veld into a mosaic of colour and texture. This surge in plant productivity has rippled through the ecosystem: insects are flourishing, birdlife has increased in both diversity and activity, and breeding conditions for amphibians and reptiles have improved significantly. Altogether, this exceptional January rainfall has acted as a powerful ecological reset, reinforcing the Lowveld's resilience and reminding us how closely life here is tied to the rhythm of rain.

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

Elephants

- The soft but unmistakable thud of marula fruit hitting the savanna floor signals the start of an elephant feast. It is never long before herds stride in, carefully collecting the fallen fruit one or two at a time.
- Well-used pathways are beginning to form between marula groves that grow on sandy crests, shaped by the steady foot traffic of passing herds.
- Many bulls have been observed in musth at this time of year, coinciding with peak breeding conditions as cows benefit from the abundance of nutritious forage and come into oestrus.

Buffaloes

- The grasslands have flourished during this exceptionally wet season, alive with diversity and movement. As such large herds of buffalo have been seen almost daily in the southern parts of Singita Sabi Sand.
- These herds are often accompanied by zebra, rhino, wildebeest and giraffe, creating scenes reminiscent of a classic wildlife documentary.

African wild dogs

- The Othawa Pack, now numbering 17 individuals, has been sighted regularly, with weekly encounters throughout the area.
- On one occasion, the pack ventured remarkably close to the shop between Boulders and Ebony Lodges.
- A particularly memorable sighting occurred near the Tavangumi outcrop, where the dogs interacted with a troop of baboons for over 30 minutes, engaging in energetic chasing seemingly without intent to harm.

Cheetah

- Despite the extensive long grass across the savanna, cheetah sightings have been consistent.
- The territorial male in the south has been actively hunting and was observed feeding on a hard-earned kill.

Leopards

- The Thamba male has been especially active this January, mating with the Rivala and Ntoma females, as well as the Nkuwa female.
- Nkuwa is still caring for her one-year-old cub, leaving uncertainty as to whether she was truly in oestrus or protecting her cub from the male; however, Thamba is believed to be the biological father.
- The Tisela female continues to dominate the western parts of Singita, patrolling as far as the airstrip and north to Red Road, marking the boundary she shares with Rivala.
- The Xihangu female remains a standout, captivating us with her striking blue eyes and adventurous spirit.

Lions

- The Mhangeni Pride introduced their four newest cubs one afternoon following a successful wildebeest hunt by their mother and another lioness.
- The three Kambula males have been trailing a large herd of buffalo between Triangle Pan and 40km Pan. With resources abundant, the buffalo have remained localised, drawing in lions from surrounding areas. Patient guests were rewarded when these males successfully hunted a buffalo cow one morning.
- The Nkumati males have also benefited from plentiful prey in the southern savanna, and anticipation is building around a potential encounter with the Kambula males as territorial boundaries are tested.
- The Plains Camp lion made only one appearance this month, as the Sand River kept them further north with the Othawa Pride.

Unusual sightings

- A remarkable discovery was made by Lucy this month when she found a Southern African python nesting site, complete with hatchlings! Few snake species in Africa incubate their eggs and remain with their young after hatching. The female python was observed basking with her offspring near the nest—a deserted underground hole - before retreating below once they were sufficiently warmed. The young snakes will disperse after their first skin shed, a few weeks after hatching.
- Guests were treated to a rare sighting of an African civet returning from a night of foraging, a first in over 40 years of safari experiences for some.
- Frog activity has been exceptional following the rains, with edible bullfrogs (*Pyxicephalus edulis*) seen guarding tadpoles in shallow pans. In this species, and the closely related giant African bullfrog (*Pyxicephalus adspersus*), the males assume parental duties, defending the tadpoles from predators.

Birds

- What a start to 2026 on the birding front. Specials include multiple sightings of striped crake, Cape shoveler, European honey-buzzard, red-knobbed coot, dusky lark, common whitethroat and the green twinspace. Our total sits at 247.



Two visitors from Europe, the European bee-eater (back) and a European roller (front). Image by Matt Durell.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as the January Gallery of images.

Leopard... leopard tortoise

Article by Johan Ndlovu

On this beautiful afternoon, I was hosting six guests staying with us for two nights and this was their first time to Singita Sabi Sands.

We had some delicious snacks and drinks before we headed out and our plan was to try and track a leopard which was seen that morning before their arrival. In the process of the leopard tracking, we had an amazing discovery where our tracker Howard spotted three gorgeous leopard tortoises, two males and a female. The smaller males were obviously competing for mating rights, with the female trying to escape from them. We spent some time watching these interesting animals, my guests enthralled with their eager antics.



The leopard tortoise is one of the most fascinating animals and the most common tortoise in the Lowveld. It is also the largest, reaching a maximum of 40 kg, with an average 10 to 20 kg (22 - 44 lbs). Males are slower growers and only reach sexual maturity at between 10 and 15 years old.

They are the only tortoise known to be able to swim.

The shell of a tortoise is divided into two halves, the top and the bottom, the upper part is called the carapace while the lower part is known as the plastron. Males have longer tails than females and a concave plastron that allows them to mount females during mating.

The leopard tortoise is called such because it has similar coloration to its namesake- but unlike the feline leopards they do not have teeth nor do they eat meat!

A leopard tortoise can be recognized by the absence of a small tile that usually fits between the two scutes in the front of the carapace on a tortoise and this small tile is called a nuchal scute.



The shell of a tortoise is its transportable protective body armour. It is formed from a modified fused ribcage and skeleton and when the tortoise is threatened it draws its head directly back into its shell by means of a specialized, flexible neck and then seals off the opening by pulling in its scaly legs.

Tortoises are eaten by numerous predators despite their protective shells - hyenas, leopards and lions break the shells with their strong jaws, and southern ground hornbills feast on individuals, especially those that are caught in veld fires.

Leopard tortoises have a way of storing water in what is known as a bursa sac. This stored water is needed during times of drought or to moisten soil to more easily dig a pit in which to lay eggs.

The sex of the hatchlings is determined by the temperature at which they incubate in their chamber under loose sand and decomposed vegetation. What is especially fascinating, especially in the context of climate change, is that those eggs subjected to temperatures between 26 - 30 °C become males while those exposed to 31 - 34 °C heat develop to hatch as females.



There are not many people in the world who can truly say they enjoy what they do. People across the world work to make a living; some do what they do simply to survive. I am very privileged to be a field guide, and I enjoy every minute I spend out in the natural environment. Being able to work in such a unique setting is something I do not take for granted, and it continues to remind me how fortunate I am to do what I love, every day.

Guiding, for me, is one of the most rewarding jobs there is. We get to meet incredible people from all over the world, exchange stories, and learn about different cultures. Sharing the bush with guests and watching their excitement when they experience wildlife up close is extremely fulfilling. We also get to witness amazing wildlife in a completely natural environment. We observe these animals' day after day and watch them adapt and evolve as the environment changes from season to season. Being out there has a very calming effect on my mind and body as we drive around, admiring the beauty and balance of nature.

A big part of my guiding experience comes from working closely with tracker, Martin. Working alongside him has taught me the true value of teamwork and trust in the field. Martin's deep knowledge of the bush, animal behaviour, and tracking skills is something I greatly admire. Watching him read the smallest signs in the sand or vegetation has helped me develop a deeper understanding of wildlife and the environment in which we work. Together, we communicate constantly, relying on each other's observations to ensure both guest safety and meaningful wildlife encounters.

Guiding has taught me patience, awareness, and respect for the natural world. Every day in the field is different, and no two drives are ever the same. Some days are filled with exciting sightings, while others are quieter and require careful observation and perseverance. These moments have shown me that the bush operates on its own terms, and as guides, we are simply visitors who must adapt and listen. This constant change keeps me motivated and curious, as there is always something new to learn, whether from the environment, the animals, or the people with whom I work.

Another aspect of guiding that I find deeply rewarding is the responsibility that comes with educating guests about wildlife and conservation. Sharing knowledge about animal behaviour, ecosystems, and the importance of protecting these areas allows guests to gain a greater appreciation for nature. By working together with Martin, we are able to provide guests with a more complete and authentic experience, combining guiding and tracking skills to tell the full story of the bush.

For me, guiding is more than just a job - it is a way of life. It challenges me physically and mentally, while also providing a sense of peace and purpose. Each day spent in the bush strengthens my connection to nature and reinforces my passion for conservation. Being able to work in such an environment, alongside skilled colleagues like Martin, continues to inspire me and reminds me why I chose this path.



The recent floods across the Lowveld have been nothing short of extraordinary. To witness nature in full force is both humbling and awe-inspiring — a reminder of just how mighty and unpredictable the natural world can be. Torrential rains swept through the region, sending vast volumes of water cascading through river systems and landscapes, surpassing even the historic flood levels of 2020 in many areas.

Rivers that are usually familiar and steady transformed into powerful, surging arteries. In the Kruger National Park and surrounding regions, the Sabie and Sand Rivers swelled dramatically, while the Letaba and Olifants Rivers surged with such force that their banks all but disappeared beneath the water. Roads were washed away, crossings submerged, and the sheer scale of movement and sound was staggering — water roaring, trees bending, and the land reshaping in real time.

And yet, amid this chaos, life endured. As the rain began to ease and the skies finally cleared, the bush revealed its remarkable resilience. The landscape drank deeply, vegetation responded almost immediately, and the animals — far from being defeated — appeared abundant and content, thriving with the renewed water sources and lush surroundings. There is something deeply reassuring about seeing wildlife adapt so seamlessly to extremes that feel overwhelming to us.

Perhaps the most heart-lifting moment came with the long-awaited confirmation of new life. After weeks of speculation and concern, four new additions to the Mhangeni Pride were finally seen for the very first time. The cubs, now almost three months old, emerged once the worst of the weather had passed — playful, strong, and very much alive. For a long time, we suspected that the large lioness with the distinctive cut ear had given birth. But as the rains intensified and the floods worsened, fears grew that the cubs may have been lost. The sheer volume of water, the cold, and the relentless storms made survival seem uncertain. Today's sighting erased those fears completely. The cubs were seen playing confidently while feeding on a wildebeest carcass, brought down by their mother and aunt — a powerful display of cooperation, protection, and continuity. It was a moment that felt symbolic: life persisting, even flourishing, after destruction.

The floods have left their mark on the Lowveld, reshaping rivers and reminding us of nature's dominance. But they have also brought renewal, abundance, and moments of profound joy. To witness this balance — the wild power of water alongside the quiet miracle of new life — is a privilege few ever truly experience. In the aftermath of the storm, the bush stands resilient. And so does life.



The Sand River beginning to rise at the start of the month. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.

January Gallery



The eye-catching Xihluva female has everyone reaching for their cameras. Image by Colman Mnisi.
A hatchling Southern African python perched on a branch. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.





Seasonal rivers like the Ximobanyana are brimming with life again. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.
The Kambula coalition closing in on their target, an injured buffalo at a mud wallow. Image by Colman Mnisi.





A Bennett's woodpecker, predominantly an ant eating woodpecker. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.
Among the greenery a green-winged pytilia pauses for just a moment. Image by Marc Bowes-Taylor.





Here the Nkuwa female and Thamba male were engaged in a period of mating while their offspring watched on. Images by Marc Bowes-Taylor.

