

# Singita



## WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA MALILANGWE, ZIMBABWE

For the month of April, Two Thousand and Twenty-Three

### Temperature

Average minimum: 17.6°C (80.0°F)

Minimum recorded: 14.3°C (61.6°F)

Average maximum: 31.6°C (88.8°F)

Maximum recorded: 37.2°C (98.9°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 2 mm

\*For the season to date: 576.5 mm

\*Season = Sep to Aug

### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:11

Sunset: 17:30

April is one of my two personal favourite months at Singita Malilangwe. The colours of the trees changing to precious metals and the way gold-leaf confetti from the *Kirkias* flutters down around you is delightful. The weather is also ideal – a nip in the air in the early morning hours, sunny days, and saturated sunsets. There were a couple of misty mornings too which add a sense of mystery as you don't know what animal could materialise from the invisibility cloak. The mist is also sensational for wildlife photography. There is still a lot of water around for this time of year, as Cyclone Freddy topped up dams, pans and temporary waterholes as it dissipated over Zimbabwe last month.

The sightings have been very good and in addition the terrain is looking incredible; in fact it is often the landscape that impresses our guests just as much as the wildlife they have seen on drive.

## **Here's a sightings snapshot for April:**

### **Lions**

- River Pride: We've been seeing this pride of five lionesses, five sub-adults and three cubs regularly on the eastern side of the Chiredzi, and watched in awe as they leapt across the Chiredzi back to the western Hippo Valley side near the end of the month. They were seen attempting to hunt a nyala bull, and seen feasting on a Cape buffalo just below Malilangwe House.
- The Nduna Pride have surprised us with spending time far west of their usual territory, around Nhanga and Nyari Pans. We've seen 12 lions, including two cubs. The cubs gave the game away on one occasion when the pride showed interest in hunting a buffalo, but we've seen them feast on two buffalo bulls, a female kudu, and two kudu bulls in the month. A mating pair was observed at month-end.

### **Leopards**

- Wonderful sightings of a fairly relaxed male leopard in the Nyamasikana Crossing, West Valley Hyena Den, Pamushana Access and Sosigi Dam areas. On these various occasions he was seen: trying to hunt impala but the wind was not in his favour, perched in an umbrella thorn tree, looking for hunting opportunities, relaxing in the shade, and being simultaneously curious and aloof while stargazing!
- Guests were delighted to see a female leopard drinking water on the side of the road. She was spotted again hunting around Kwali. She is possibly the mother of the fairly relaxed male.

### **Rhinos**

With lots of water still available in temporary pans the rhino sightings are slightly less frequent than usual, and by that we mean you may see five on a drive rather than 15!

- White rhino sightings are almost guaranteed on a drive if you go specifically in search of them. There've been occasions when a crash of six rhinos have been seen together.
- Black rhino sightings are more erratic, but one group of guests were treated to a black rhino on the side of the Binya Road in Malilangwe, as they were travelling back from a daytrip to Gonarezhou National Park.

### **Elephants**

- You can often predict fairly accurately when and where a breeding herd will choose to drink. Waiting at the river or a dam and seeing the extended family arrive and enjoy all that the water offers is a delight.
- The bulls are seen singly or in small bachelor groups. Some are sporting some impressive ivory.

### **Buffalo**

- Banyini Pan is a favourite gathering place for buffalo, but it is due to be dredged which has instead seen the large herds gathering at O2 Pan and at Ray's Drift on the river, to drink.

### **Wild dogs**

- A pack of 11, with a heavily pregnant alpha female have been hunting in the central regions and have pretty much stolen the show this month. To see them on the move or finishing off a kill is an intense experience.
- There has also been sightings of a pack of four wild dogs. They too have been hunting impala, and one of the females is pregnant. Hopefully both these packs will choose to den on Malilangwe in May, and raise their pups here.

### **Hyenas**

- Known for their scavenging prowess it was no surprise to find 10 hyenas feasting on the remains of a kudu carcass that they'd usurped from the Nduna Pride in the Hunyugwe Dam area. What was a surprise was finding two hyenas with a fresh impala ram kill, on the Hippo Valley side, that were so

skittish they temporarily abandoned the kill when we spotted them. We surmised they'd made the kill themselves as there wasn't a sign of another predator around.

#### **Plains game**

- Plains game abound which includes giraffes, wildebeest, zebras, impalas and even some sightings of sable antelopes and eland.

#### **Unusual sightings**

- The prize for this category went to a honey badger that was bustling around at Chikwete Cliffs, taking no nonsense from man or beast!

#### **Walks**

It's a wonderful time to embark on a walking safari, and it's what our guides love doing most. Walks included:

- Tracking white rhinos for over an hour and finding six of them resting in the Delagoa thorn bushes, and with the wind in the group's favour getting to about 20 metres without the rhinos being disturbed.
- Getting guests who had been on many safari drives in their lives to get out on foot for the first time to track an elephant bull. After 20 minutes of tracking with the wind in their favour they got to about 40 meters of the giant.
- One of the guide and tracker teams crossed to the Hippo Valley side to conduct a walking safari, and while giving the safety briefing an impala darted past with a wild dog chasing it! This turned out to be one of the members of the pack of four wild dogs.

#### **Boat cruise**

- Boat cruises are the ideal way to finish a safari experience. By that stage guests will have seen much of the wildlife on the reserve and can simply relax and take in the magnificent scenery and birdlife from the water. But every now and then there's a final surprise, like the black rhino cow with a calf that showed themselves on the banks of the Malilangwe Dam.

#### **Fishing**

- As the saying goes, "The best month's for fishing have an A in them." April still delivered with some excellent catches of tilapia/bream and tigerfish.

#### **Rock art**

- A road twists through the Chidhumo rock art site making it one of the most popular places to visit to see the artworks left behind by the San people over 2 000 years ago.

#### **Gonarezhou day trip**

- Two experiences are guaranteed on a day trip to Gonarezhou National Park – herds of elephants and the striated Chilojo Cliffs.

#### **Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft**

- Guests thoroughly enjoyed observing and participating in the bushcraft demonstrations, and especially enjoyed the traditional food they were offered to sample.

**Some Bush Stories follow, as well as an April Gallery of images.**



## Wild dog dawn



A pack of wild dogs spy-hop through the scrub, eyeing out a wildebeest and a distant herd of impala. Note the browse line made by giraffes on the pod mahogany tree, and the rest of pack waiting on the road.



Having no luck on the airstrip they reconvene on the road to weigh up their hunting options.

This was an incredible morning – there was a delicate veil of mist, the sun was rising, and the radio announced the presence of wild dogs on the airstrip. We were nearby, and got to see the pack of 11 trotting down the road, scouting about for hunting opportunities. The airstrip is a popular place for plains game to spend the night – being open it is more difficult for predators to sneak up on them. However, wild dogs adopt a shotgun approach to hunting, so avoiding 11 of them is near impossible. Some of the dogs spyhopped through the bushes to get a better view of what was on offer. They tried to intimidate a wildebeest bull into a chase, but he was not engaging. Some stray impala fled down the airstrip to the other end where the rest of the herd had gathered. The pack continued down the road and the impala fled in all directions, but the hunt was unsuccessful. These endangered animals have one of the highest hunting success rates, but that doesn't mean every foray has its rewards. The alpha female is heavily pregnant and soon they'll need to be feeding her too, and the new pups when they're weaned. They reconvened on the road, just as the sunlight was breaking through the misty veil, creating one of the most mesmerising scenes I've ever seen.

### Golden moments

Driving past the main pan in our central open areas we noticed some tawny smudges on the saturated red soil. Sure enough it turned out to be members of the River Pride that had chosen to spend the hot afternoon lying in the shade near the water. We watched them sleeping for quite some time, and then our patience was rewarded when one of the lionesses got up and went to drink just as the last golden drops of sunlight were distilled in the water. As if the scene could be even more perfect her sister then got up and joined her from across the stream.



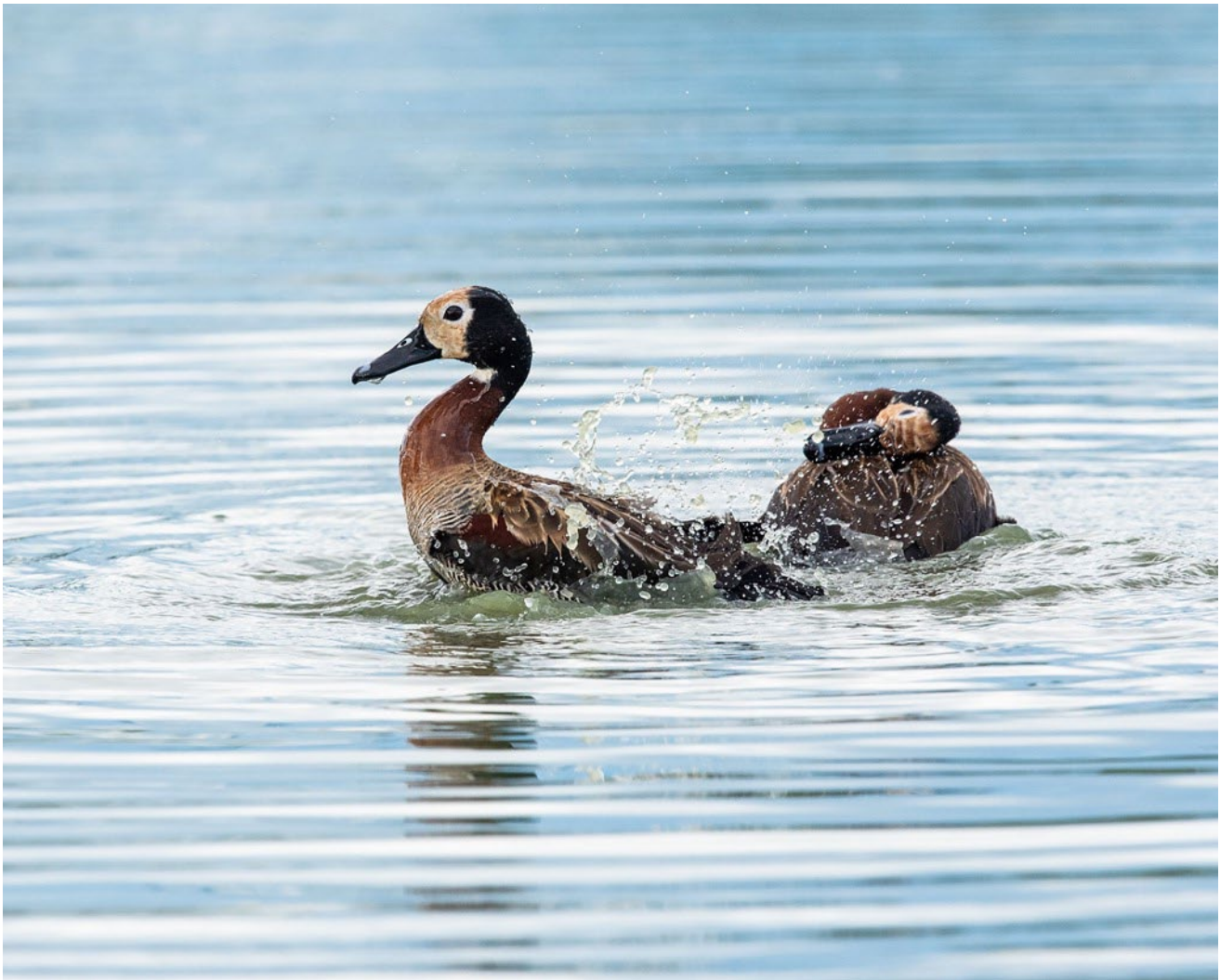
As night fell the lionesses finished their drink, and with full bellies headed off in a westerly direction to see what the night held in store. Two males followed behind them, stopping here and there to bellow out a thunderous roar reminding all that they are the territory holders of this primitive wilderness.



## The dance of the white-faced whistling ducks

White-faced whistling-ducks (*Dendrocygna viduata*) are instantly recognisable by their white faces, and whistling calls. In many other duck species, males have colourful plumage that they use to attract mates, however, these ducks do not. The male and female are very similar in appearance, although the female is slightly larger than the male. Because the drakes do not have flashy feathers to attract a new mate every year, they invest more time and energy into keeping the mate they have. Mating pairs tend to stay monogamous for several breeding seasons, and share parenting roles. They keep their bond strong in the non-breeding season by preening each other's feathers. Their courtship displays consist of both sexes dipping their bills into the water, followed by the male rubbing the sides of his head on his backside. After mating has occurred, the pair will take part in a step-dance, in which the couple wades side by side in the water with their wings outstretched.

It was an absolute delight to watch this couple courting one another recently. Their displays were demonstrative, energetic and charismatic, and we all decided there is absolutely nothing wrong with some dramatic expressions of love every once in a while!



Bathing and splashing while the other rubs the side of its head on its back.



Left:  
Affectionately nuzzling one another.



Below and following page:  
An invitation to a step-dance with  
wings outstretched.









White-faced whistling ducks are usually seen in flocks, as in this photograph taken this week. They spend a lot of time roosting near water, where they preen themselves and others.

Most foraging activity takes place at night. Here, in a scene reminiscent of the movie, *On Golden Pond*, they set off after sunset to feed.





## Stars in our eyes

With our Canon cameras in hand a talented young photographer and I decided to try our hand at doing star trail photographs. We set up just before sunset, with our cameras on tripods and switched off all artificial light sources. About an hour later, after our long time exposures had finished, we tried a few other star shots, and while doing so I scanned with the torch to see if any predator eyes showed. (Our vehicle was right next to us.) Way in the distance green eyes reflected, but even with the binoculars it was too far to tell what animal it was. About 10 minutes later I checked again, and announced, "Ah! Those green eyes are a leopard." He was standing fairly nearby with that curious cat expression on his face. We levitated into the vehicle scooping up all our camera gear, and fervently wished he wouldn't disappear. Spinning our shutter speeds from 30 seconds to 1/40<sup>th</sup> of a second we managed to snap his portrait in the warm glow of the headlights. He was relaxed, curious, and then he'd decided he's seen enough of our antics and casually strolled off into the night.



What an incredible evening that was! We spend so much time and energy searching for leopards, so to have one come and find us, and lie down to watch us, was such a bonus.

This is the star trail result, photographed by Scott Wenham.



## April Gallery



A water monitor lizard trying to impersonate a rock monitor lizard.



Wildebeest on the move.





Giraffe on the airstrip, at sunset.  
A breeding herd of elephants drinking after sunset.







A shy hyena moving off with its kill.  
Zebra mare and her foal.





A rhino cow with an incredibly long horn, and her calf; and a bull rhino still waking up as dawn breaks.







A tiny wide-eyed sengi (elephant shrew) pauses for a second before dashing across the road to cover.



A scene so beautiful we had to just stop and breathe it in.

**All stories and photographs by Jenny Hishin, unless otherwise indicated.**