

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT
SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE
For the month of August, Two Thousand and Twenty-Five

Temperature

Average minimum: 14.0°C (57.2°F)
Minimum recorded: 08.6°C (47.4°F)
Average maximum: 30.5°C (86.9°F)
Maximum recorded: 38.0°C (100.4°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 6 mm
Season to date: 721 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:02
Sunset: 17:44

Spring is in the air – early blossoms are open and the calls of the first migrant birds have been heard. It's a joy to see vultures sitting on their nests atop the highest trees, and to see a resident pair of crowned eagles preparing their nest in a stately baobab once again. The grass is the precise colour of lions, and the dappled greens, yellows and coppers of mopane leaves provide the perfect invisibility cloak for leopards. The weather is warming up properly with some high midday temperatures, and the August winds have breezed through.

Here's an overview of the month's sightings:

Lions

Lion sightings have been excellent – so much so that one game drive saw three different groups of lions during a morning drive in the areas of Nduna Dam, Lojaan Dam and Hwata Pan.

- The Nduna Pride of three males, six lionesses and a nine-month-old cub were seen together, and split up in various factions during the month. We watched with bated breath when the pride was at Nduna Dam and a herd of buffalo came to drink. Ultimately the buffalo saw the lions and chased them away.
- The River Pride leave tracks all over the Hippo Valley side before diving into the swamps or the river! On one occasion 12 of them were seen, two males, six lionesses, and six sub-adults, sleeping in the shade near Ngwenyeni Pan. There's a mating pair within this pride, so perhaps there'll be more mouths to feed before year's end.
- The three Nduna males feasted on a buffalo north-west of the Banyini, keeping a wake of vultures and hyenas waiting their turn.
- The mane-less male lion was seen walking from 02 Camp, past Nyari, before resting below the hills.

Leopards

Sightings have been few and far between this month, other than a few quick glimpses, but a couple of highlights were:

- A magnificent male leopard with a kill, feeding on top of the rocks at Lojaan Dam.
- A female leopard crossing the road in front of a game-viewer, and then sitting on the side of the road for guests to get a good look at her.
- Watching white rhinos and two spotted hyenas at Banyini Pan, when a female leopard crept into the scene for a drink.

African wild dogs

The large pack of 24 wild dogs have stolen the show this month! Their ten pups are doing well. Highlights include:

- Watching the pups play with an old impala bone, before the whole pack set off to hunt, then seeing the adults kill an impala ewe. The meal was devoured in a matter of minutes.
- Hearing a wild dog calling, then seeing it on the track ahead, then seeing five more, then watching as they fetched the pups and led them to a warthog kill.
- The eight adults of the Hippo Valley Pack were seen hunting in the Machurini area along the bank of the Chiredzi River. They were in hot pursuit of an impala which they killed, fed on and then crossed back to the Hippo Valley side, and headed west.

Elephants

Breeding herds: It gets a little more challenging to find breeding herds during the dry season when food and water become more scarce, which leads to smaller family units staying together to find resources. The river area, the swamps, and the periphery of the dam are the areas to search and have offered great rewards.

- There was a herd of more than 40 elephants at Croc Creek near the lodge, heading to the dam, where they drank and splashed water on themselves to cool down.
- Another herd of more than 40 elephants was near the swamps area, feasting on pods from the umbrella trees.

Bull elephants: Various large bulls have been spending long hours during the heat of the day dominating the pumped water sources.

- It was interesting to see two old elephant bulls together with a very young bull.
- A bull elephant in musth challenged a male white rhino at Hwata Pan. The rhino at first stood its ground but the elephant proved himself by not giving up and eventually the rhino fled.

Buffalos

Herds of about 400 buffalo have been seen regularly, north of the dam, in the swamps and along the river.

- One game drive saw three separate buffalo herds on their morning drive. The herd at Nyamasikana Pan was bullied away from the water by a breeding herd of elephants that came to drink.
- A lone buffalo bull was seen swimming across Nyamasikana River.

Rhinos

White: Every game drive can count on seeing white rhinos, which is an extraordinary situation. There are a few tiny calves at the moment which are adorable to watch, especially when they show energetic exuberance.

- An unusual sighting was at Kim's Crossing where two white rhinos were on the riverbank. One went up the steep bank then tried to come back to join the other, but took a different route down, stumbled, and tumbled all the way down. It seemed okay once the noise and dust had settled.

Black: Black rhinos are on many a wish list for our guests, and fortunately sightings of them have been very good. There was one drive this month that saw seven black rhinos in total!

- There was a fearsome showdown at Hwata when two adult bull black rhinos had a fight. (However, it didn't seem to bother the two adult male lions just 200 metres away, that were looking very full and lying in the shade of the mopane trees.)

Spotted hyenas

- There is possibly a hyena den near Malevula Hill, but we are yet to see cubs emerge.
- The guaranteed place to see hyenas this month was on the Banyini when eight of them were kept waiting by three male lions to abandon a buffalo carcass.

Brown hyenas

There have been regular sightings of brown hyenas, so much so that they can be added as a category to this sightings overview!

- A brown hyena was seen throughout the morning in the vicinity of the Nduna lionesses as they fed on a buffalo kill.
- Another great sighting of a brown hyena was at Chikwete Pools.

Plains game

There's no better time to see plains game as it is dry and they are drawn to the limited grazing and water sources.

- A herd of more than twelve Lichtenstein hartebeest have been drinking regularly at Chiloveka Dam.
- A herd of sable antelope and three hartebeest were grazing between Southern Straight and Bandama Roads.
- More than 20 giraffe were drinking together at Nyamasikana Pan.
- Eland, sable, zebra, wildebeest and impala have been gathering at Hwata Pan.
- The warthog population has rebounded and it's wonderful to see them down on their front knees mowing the grass, or dashing off elsewhere with their aerial-like tails pointing high in the sky.

Unusual sightings

- A honey badger announced its presence atop a termite mound before dashing away.
- A very unusual visitor was a grey-headed gull seen flying above the water of the dam, feeding on the midges at sunset.
- Also, a Palmnut vulture was seen at the northern end of the dam, close the hippo skull area.

Photographic hide

Our hide and the pan underwent some maintenance in the early days of August, and we were as relieved as the animals when it, and the source of water, were restored. It can be active throughout the day, as well as before and after sunset, and the light changes as steadily as the diversity of thirsty birds and animals.

Rock art

Visiting the rock art on the property is always a fascinating experience and it invites one to reflect on where we've been, and where we are going to, as a species.

Walks

It's the perfect time of year for walking safaris.

- One group tracked a calling leopard, but didn't glimpse the cat.
- One of the guides took his guests for a walk on the Hippo Valley side of the property. They saw impalas, four white rhino bulls, two elephant bulls, kudus, and a pride of three lions that were feeding on something. The lions did not see them until they started backing off. Once safely back in the gameviewer the group went to see the lions which were busy with a wildebeest kill.

Boat cruises

Our boat safaris prove to be popular adventures as guests relax, enjoy sundowners, and look for birds and animals while the boat moves along at a gentle pace. It is the best way to get close to hippos, crocodiles and birds without disturbances.

- Terrapins have been seen in vast numbers, lining the edge of the water or fallen trees, and enjoying the sunshine.
- Buffaloes, elephants and waterbuck have been seen on the shoreline this month.
- An incredible sighting took place when guests were watching a pod of hippos. In the background, a pride of seven lions appeared walking along the shoreline, intently scanning the area for prey animals.

Fishing

The water is warming up, and the fish are biting! Bream, catfish and a few snappy tigerfish have been landed, and a lot more have not!

- Taunting one of the fishing parties was a giant kingfisher that dived into the water and pulled out a medium-sized bream. It then proceeded to knock the fish repeatedly on a branch to kill it and tenderise it, before swallowing it whole.

Gonarezhou National Park

Not only did our guests see the Chilojo Cliffs and many other special landmarks, but they also saw elephants, wild dogs and a leopard!



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

First sighting of a brown hyena

We were in the photo hide after sunrise when our lion tracking team radioed to say they had found the Nduna Pride of lions on a buffalo kill about 30 minutes away, and then added that they'd glimpsed a brown hyena in the area too. Having never had a proper sighting of a brown hyena my ears were pricked. No doubt it would probably be gone when we got there, but you can't catch a fish without a line in the water – as they say. So, we swiftly packed up and set off. About half way there the team radioed again to say we must hurry because the hyena was still around. We hurried harder.

Arriving at the scene we found the lions lying in the long grass near their recently killed buffalo. They'd eaten their fill and were taking a break but there was still an enormous amount of meat on the carcass. But, there was no sign of the brown hyena. The lion tracking team told us it had moved off. Both vehicles went in search of it, in different directions, but no luck. After some time observing the lions we left the area and, of course, that's when the brown hyena reappeared, according to the team. We turned back, and this time parked far away from the carcass and waited, binos in hand. What happened next was something entirely new for me.

Out of the thickets, moving with a sloping, deliberate gait, a brown hyena (*Parahyaena brunnea*) appeared. Sometimes called the strandwolf, it is the rarest of all hyena species, found only in southern Africa, with fewer than 10 000 estimated to exist. I had always known they were elusive, mostly active under the cover of night, but here one was, revealed in mid-morning light.



It looked strikingly different from the spotted hyenas we see so often. Its long, shaggy brown coat bristled along its back, and a pale ruff of cream-colored fur framed its neck. Its striped legs carried it forward cautiously, ears pricked, nose lifted to catch the scent of the lions' kill. It was bigger than I expected, about 70- 80 cm at the shoulder, but there was a quiet confidence in its posture - this was a master scavenger, built for exactly this moment.

The brown hyena circled wide at first, assessing the danger. Lions are known to kill brown hyenas when territories overlap, and even a single misstep could have ended this animal's life. Still, it seemed to be

calculating the risk. Brown hyenas can survive in harsh deserts and rocky savannahs, ranging hundreds of square kilometres in search of food, and this opportunity was too rich to ignore.



It crossed the road, snuck behind a bush, and appeared at the head of the carcass. My heart was racing – the last thing I wanted to see was a brown hyena being killed. It might have got one mouthful, it was all so quick I couldn't tell, but a lionesses erupted with a snarl, lunging just enough to send the intruder scrambling back. The hyena had realised in that instant that there were several lions hidden in the golden grass and this meal was worth skipping to stay alive.



I quickly checked my camera realizing what I had just captured: my first brown hyena here on the Malilangwe Reserve, one of Africa's most elusive carnivores, playing its age-old role as the opportunist of the bush. They are rare, near-threatened, and so secretive, yet there it was to remind me that the wild still holds secrets, so many secrets, and if you are lucky you still get to glimpse them.



Returning to the scene later that afternoon we found no trace of the brown hyena, but the lions were tucking into the carcass again in another fierce bout of feeding.

Here are some more facts about brown hyenas:

- The largest populations survive in the southern Kalahari Desert and coastal regions of south-west Africa.
- Their average weight is 40 - 44 kg (males) and 38 - 40 kg (females), with little size difference between sexes.
- They have powerful jaws, capable of cracking the leg bones of prey such as impala.
- Brown hyenas are primarily scavengers, feeding mostly on carcasses left by lions, leopards, and cheetahs.
- They can digest bone matter completely, while indigestible parts like hooves, horns, and hair are regurgitated in pellets.
- They supplement their diet with rodents, insects, eggs, fruit, and fungi.
- Brown hyenas are mostly nocturnal, spending about 80% of their activity time at night.
- They can roam over 233 - 466 km² territories, traveling up to 30 km in a night searching for food.
- They live in clans of 4 - 6 individuals, usually extended families with a mated pair and offspring.
- Clans maintain territories through "pasting", where they mark vegetation and rocks with secretions from their anal glands.
- Cubs are born with their eyes closed, open them after 8 days, and are weaned at 12 months - later than most carnivores.
- Their average lifespan in the wild is about 12 to 15 years.

An afternoon with the pups

Finding where the wild dogs have settled in the morning, after hunting, and returning to find them there in the afternoon, is an indulgent and delightful experience. The pups, always in a huddle separate from the adults, will inevitably get ants in their pants and want to play. One of the pups resorted to finding a stick and walking among its littermates to tease them into a game. They woke up and started a rough and tumble session. It was a blur of tails and teeth, paws and pointy ears!



During the last light of golden hour the adults began to stir. It's fascinating to watch the greeting ceremony and watch the dynamics of hierarchy – the submissive posturing and the graceful dominance of the alpha pair. The adults bow, stretch, white tail tips up, and nuzzle one another. Then some of them will interact with the pups, running circles around them and chasing them, but very definitely reminding them to be submissive and not get too big for their boots. Wild dogs need to act as one unit to be successful, and pups that try to go off on their own or act up are quickly reprimanded.



The pups are about four months old now, and it's a delight to see them running with the pack. Every now and again one will get the 'zoomies' and go racing off – almost parallel to the ground as it flies through the air.

As dusk fell the lead hunters decided the direction of the hunt and set off, the rest of the pack and pups following. After following them for a while we decided to stop as it was now pitch dark, and that was when one of the adults reappeared in front of our vehicle, with a scrub hare in its mouth, and began to devour the small meal in bone-snapping, bloody, bite-sized chunks. A vivid reminder of savage skills required to survive.

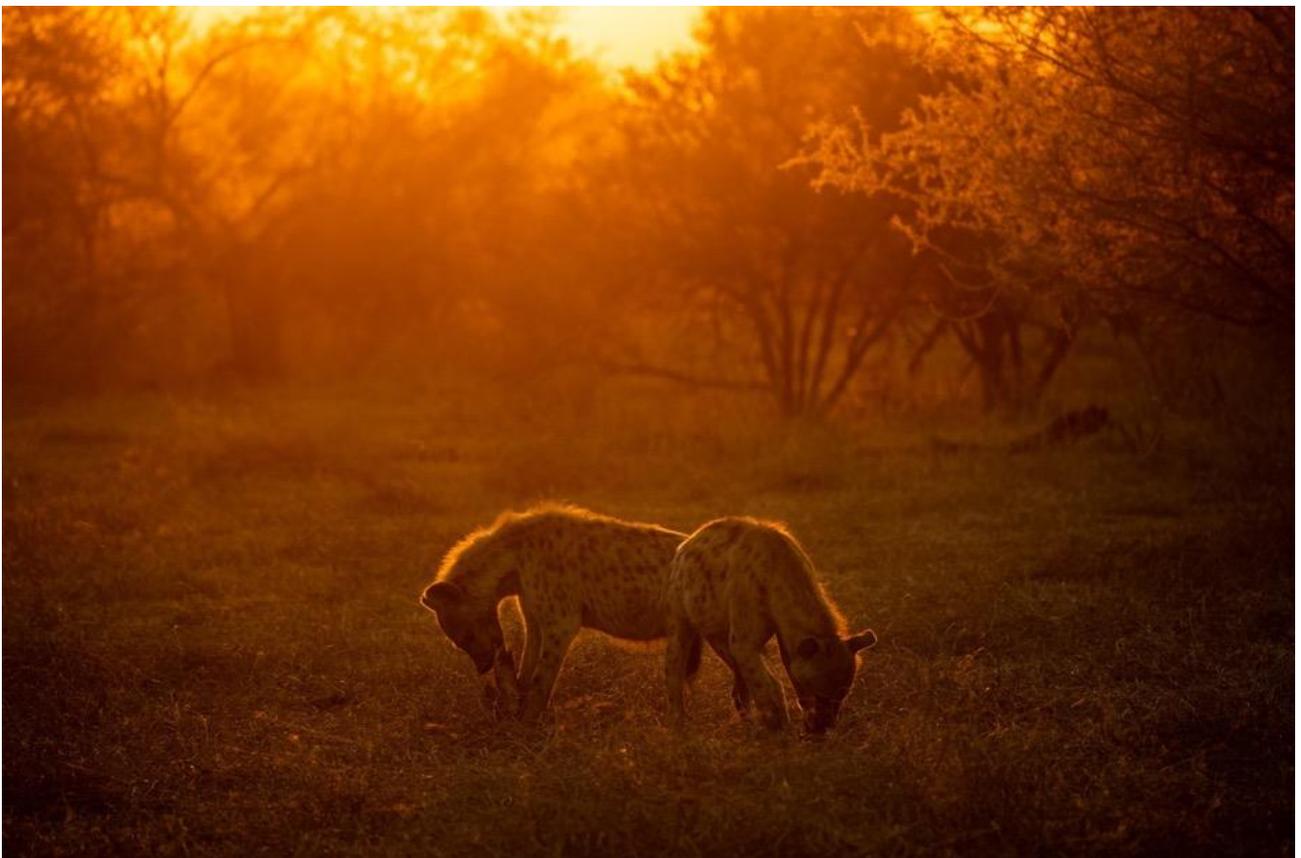
Morning light

I love photographing wildlife, backlit, in the pre-dawn light and during sunrise. Many animals are most active at dawn, especially predators and grazers, giving you both beautiful light and peak wildlife activity together – it's just a matter of getting up really early, getting lucky and lining them up!

Our photographic hide is a good place to start before sunrise. Pre-dawn often has mist, haze, or humidity, which scatters light, creating soft, dreamy conditions. The sky shifts through gun-metal greys, purples, blues, and pinks, adding dramatic and ethereal backdrops, and the water's reflections are pastel-perfect.



Once the sun rises you have the classic golden hour tones of reds, oranges and golds. We passed the sunrise in an open area, and about 5 minute's drive away came across these hyenas heading north. Quick driving and positioning had us in position for when they crossed the sunrise, and an especially low angle got them rim-lit in copper as they stopped to crack open some bones from an abandoned kill.



Seeing the colours in the tapestry

During a discussion about conservation and tourism with Dr Bruce Clegg, The Malilangwe Trust's Ecologist, he spoke metaphorically about encouraging people to see, "the colours in the tapestry" of a natural wilderness area. I think it's such a beautiful way to describe how every single thread, stitch and colour are integral to a complete tapestry – how every type of soil, flora and fauna are integral to a complete ecosystem. Inspired, I decided, on a more literal level, to have that phrase in mind for a series of photos:



Backlit white *Albizia anthelmintica* blossoms against a background of gold and green leaves.
The drying mud splatters on the textured hide of an elephant.





A Meves's starling, resplendent in a *Terminalia pruinoides* tree.
Sunset reflections of a sandstone boulder.





A carpenter bee gorging on the nectar of *Ochna barbosae* flowers.
The individual filaments of an *Albizia anthelmintica* flower.



Actions and reactions

It was a scorcher of a day, and I went to the recently repaired and refilled pan at the underground photo hide, at midday. Nothing was there initially, but then one elephant bull arrived, and duly another, and another. At the peak there were ten bulls there – all drinking, splashing and spraying, while jostling and bullying one another to drink from the cleanest water source right in front of the hide. It was a perfect opportunity to get some creative close-up details, at high speed, of the water being sprayed, as well as focusing on details such as the bristly hairs on their trunks.





But then something happened. Something that I've debated even admitting in this journal.

One of the bulls came and stood right in front of the hide's openings, and starting sniffing and feeling about with the tip of his trunk. He couldn't see me, but I was pretty sure they all knew I was in there as the others that were further away could see me. His trunk began reaching onto the ledge where you put your equipment, and I quickly snatched my camera, binos and cellphone away in case he grabbed one of them with his dextrous "finger-tipped" trunk. Standing alone in the hide I wondered to myself just how sentient elephants are. "Was he trying to initiate contact with me?" Of course I would NEVER allow an elephant, or any wild animal, to touch me, but I decided to see what he would do if I began to sing...

And this is what happened: Each massive bull elephant froze. They listened intently for about five seconds, and then, as one, they spun around and ran for their lives! Like chickens! It was as if I had dropped a bomb in the water! Honestly, my singing really isn't that bad. It isn't. It was just a soft gentle song. I didn't know if I should laugh, be highly offended, or be sorry that I'd caused them such distress! Initially they all grouped together in classic defensive positioning – a circle with heads facing inwards, then, after some time, turned with heads facing outwards (see photo), and eventually the bravest elephant of all marched back into the water to continue drinking, followed sheepishly by the others, at which point I left the poor souls in peace.



August Gallery



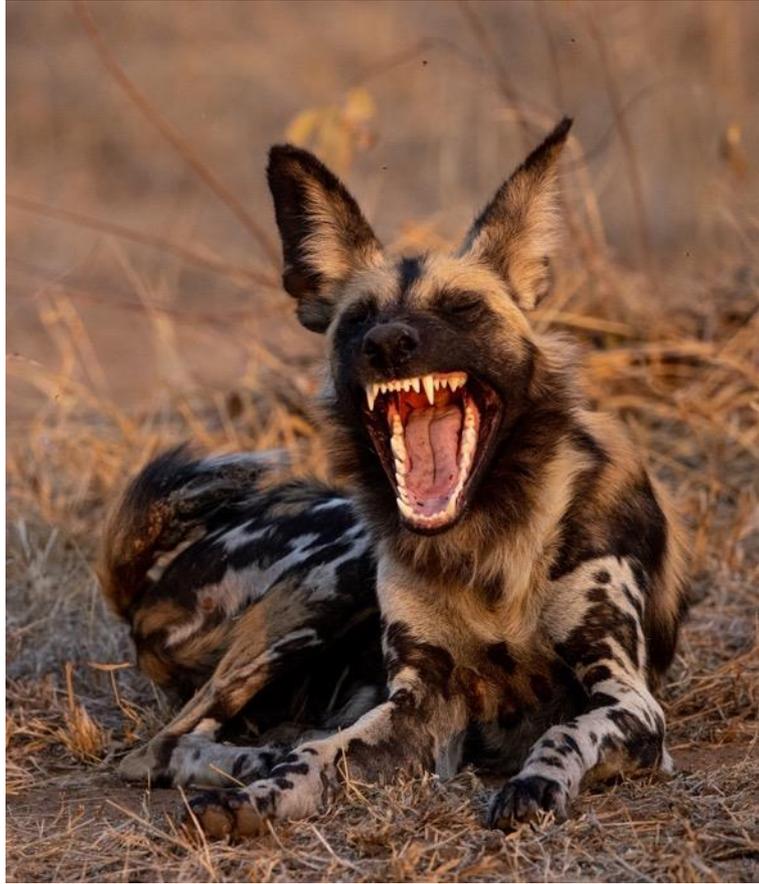
It's always such a treat to see a breeding herd of elephants, and the care given to the little ones by their mothers and siblings.



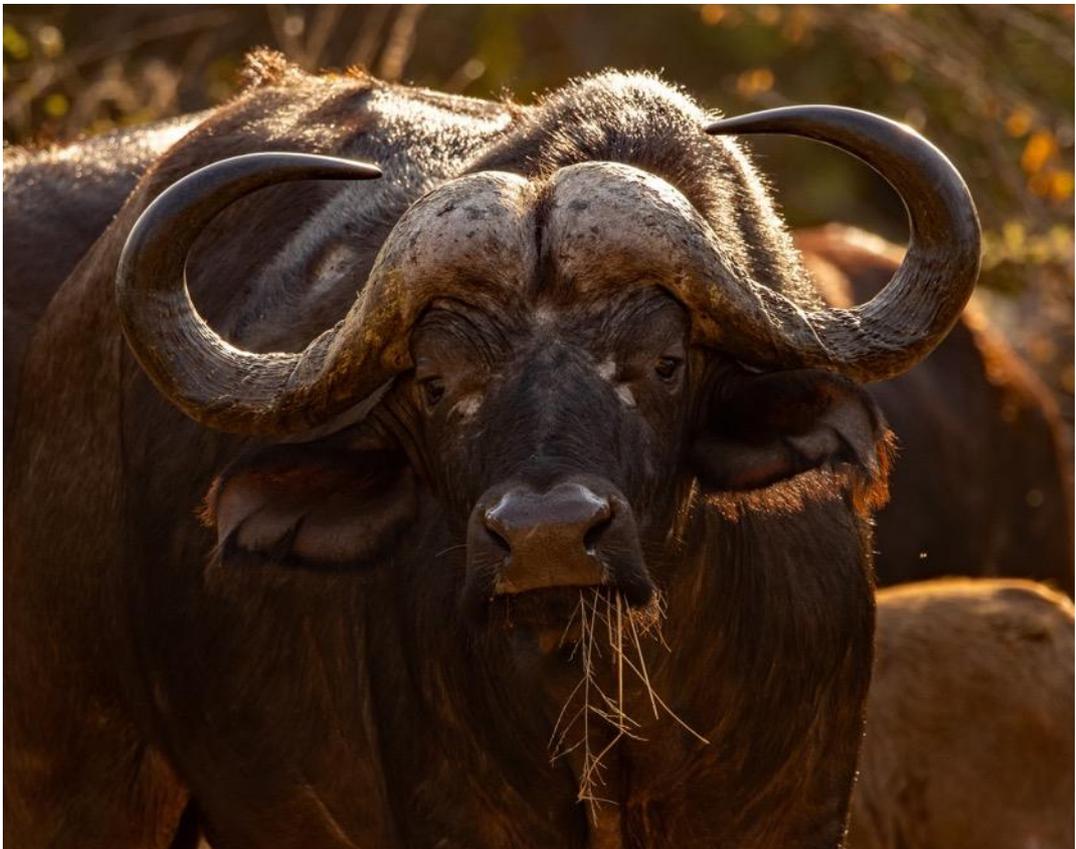
The umbrella tree forests west of the Chiredzi River provide the most beautiful backdrop and filtered light.







Lest you are lulled into thinking African wild dogs cannot shred an impala in seconds.
A beguilingly casual buffalo bull contemplates his next move.





A journey of a dozen giraffes cross the riverbed.



This tiny precocial crowned lapwing chick must have been only a day old. It was about the size of a golf ball with legs, and its cryptically patterned down matched the surrounding earth perfectly – an essential camouflage for when danger approaches, the chick instinctively crouches low and stays perfectly still, blending into the ground. Often, a predator will walk right past without noticing it.



Chiloveka Dam, now reduced to the size of a pan, is currently a very popular drinking spot.

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