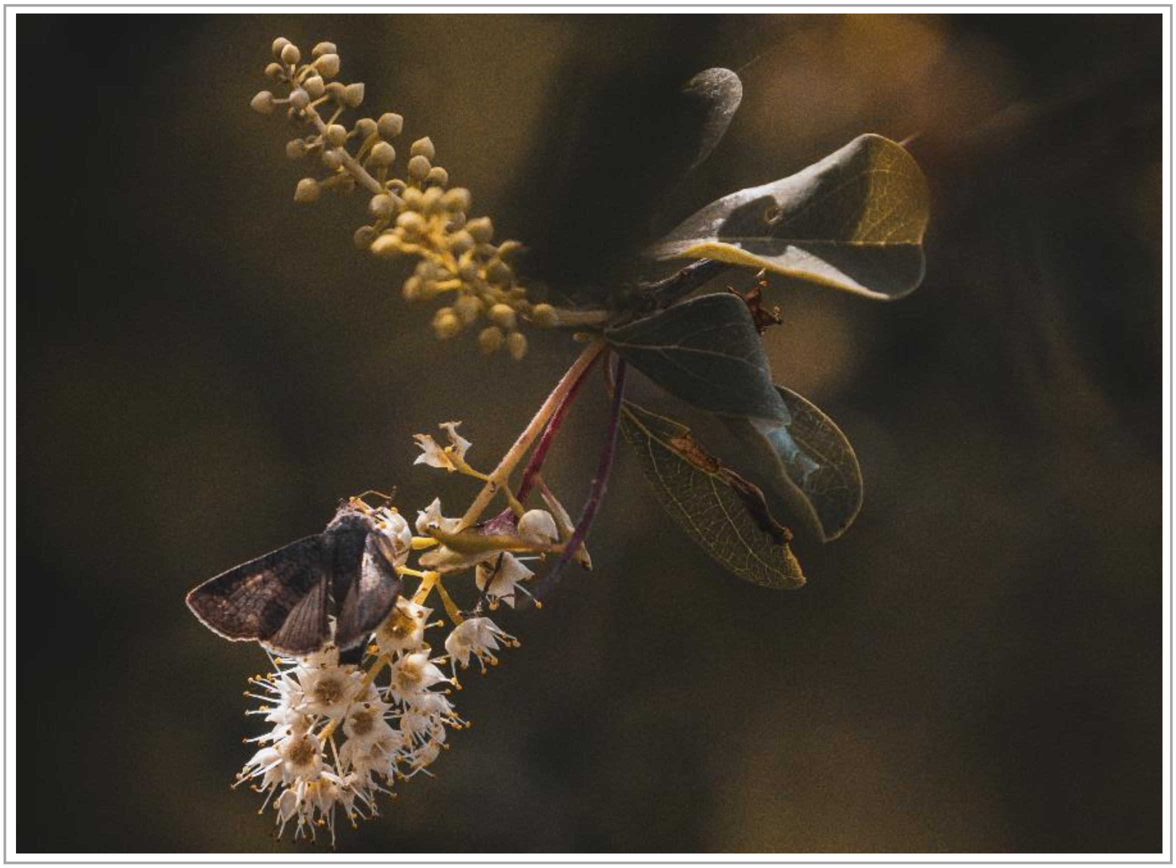
Singita



Moth on a *Terminalia* flower – Photo by Matt Holland

WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA
For the month of December, Two Thousand and Twenty-Five

Temperature
Average minimum: 21˚C (69.8˚F)
Minimum recorded: 18˚C (64.4˚F)
Average maximum: 32˚C (89.6˚F)
Maximum recorded: 41˚C (105.8˚F)

Rainfall Recorded
For the month: 53 mm
Season to date: 181 mm
(*Season = Oct to Sept)

Sunrise & Sunset
Sunrise: 05h00
Sunset: 18h40

After the good rains and under long, sun-soaked days, life surges back into every corner of the landscape. Butterflies flit from flower to flower, flashes of colour riding the warm air, while dung beetles move determinedly across the road, rolling their prizes with tireless focus. Spiderwebs stretch across tracks and pathways, newly spun and glowing in the morning light, and cicadas fill the air with their relentless, electric chorus. Everywhere you look, listen, or step, the bush is alive - loud, busy, and overflowing. It’s a full sensory overload, and December wastes no time reminding you of it.

A Sightings Snapshot for December follows:

Lions

- It appears that the Shish Pride has moved outside of our concession for the festive period. To date, only two members of the pride have been observed. On several occasions, they were accompanied by the younger male with the distinctive mohawk-shaped mane. Since his arrival, his mane has noticeably grown thicker and fuller, which is consistent with increasing testosterone levels. This typically occurs when a previously solitary male joins or takes over a pride.
- One of the younger Shish lionesses has warmed up to this younger mohawked male, and the pair were mating near the Sweni bird hide at the end of this month. So, if all goes well, we might be seeing the next generation of the Shish Pride just before autumn next year.
- With the early (compared to 2024) and good rainfall, game has spread out across the area, as there’s no longer a need to gather around the last remaining waterholes. This has meant predators are having to range further in search of hunting opportunities. We’ve seen this with the Chava Pride. Now that Gudzane Dam isn’t the only reliable water source, they’ve shifted north and west out of our concession into the plains around the S100 and S90. Sightings have therefore been a bit less frequent this month, but when we have found them, we’ve been treated to some great views of the cubs being playful.
- As the Chava Pride has moved north, the Mananga Pride has also started travelling further into our concession. Predator territories are fluid and constantly changing, influenced by weather patterns and pressure from other predators. The pride of 11 — four adults and seven cubs — was found as far north as the Xinkelegane fly camp. There is a hyena den-site just south of there, which is used intermittently when the local clan has cubs, on this occasion, the Mananga Pride encountered several clan members and chased them off, sending the hyenas fleeing with their tails tucked firmly underneath them.
- The Sonop males have travelled far and wide, even seen one evening heading west on the H6. Interestingly, throughout the month we’ve only observed them in the company of the Mananga lionesses. This may be linked to the Chava Pride shifting further north and west, or perhaps because many of the Chava females currently have cubs — suggesting the males’ work there is done for now. With breeding opportunities driving their movements, it seems the Sonop males are once again on the search for new receptive females.

Leopards

- Recently, we have noticed the absence of the Dumbana female, who was previously a regular and much-loved part of our leopard sightings. Based on her sudden disappearance and past behaviour, we believe she may have given birth and is now spending most of her time close to a chosen den-site. Newborn leopard cubs are extremely vulnerable, so a mother will avoid moving far from them during these early weeks. From her previous denning choices, it is most likely that she is in the Lebombo mountains, using rocky outcrops that unfortunately are inaccessible to vehicles. The good news is that leopard cubs grow quickly, and if all goes well, we can expect to start catching the first glimpses of them once they are around eight weeks old.
- Leopard dynamics in the area have been slowly shifting over the past few months, largely due to the dispersal and possible territory changes involving the Mondzo male, Dumbana’s young males, and the Nyala female. As these familiar individuals have moved on or adjusted their ranges, new leopards have begun to fill the gaps left behind. Many of these newcomers seem to come from areas with very little vehicle traffic and are therefore not yet accustomed to being viewed, which has resulted in only brief, fleeting glimpses for now. With time and consistent exposure, however, we are confident they will

become more relaxed around vehicles, and we can look forward to enjoying regular, high-quality sightings that reveal the daily comings and goings of these remarkable cats.

- On Christmas morning we were treated to a special sighting of the Lebombo male leopard. Resting calmly and clearly full-bellied, he looked every bit like a predator who'd enjoyed a successful Christmas Eve dinner. It was a memorable way to start Christmas Day, spending time with one of the area's most iconic residents, with the backdrop of the confluence of the N'wanetsi and Sweni Rivers.

African wild dogs

- This month, the pack of nine African wild dogs - made up of three adults and six pups - has been spending most of its time in the southern part of our concession. With the pups growing and needing plenty of food, the pack appears to be taking full advantage of the seasonal abundance, particularly the newly born impala lambs.

Elephants

- Elephant sightings were a true highlight this month, with extraordinary numbers drawn to the concession's basalt plains after the recent burn. The flush of long, green grass has clearly been irresistible. One guest perfectly captured the scene, laughing that the elephants' trunks looked like they were grabbing a handful of spaghetti—twisting the grass together and stuffing it into their mouths in one efficient motion.
- On one unforgettable afternoon, we counted more than 200 elephants visible to the naked eye at once, spread across the plains, calmly feeding and moving through the landscape.

Spotted hyenas

- This month's spotted hyena sightings at Singita KNP have been a real treat. We've seen the usual lone hyenas moving through the bush, and at times small groups appearing quietly just after sunset or in the early light of sunrise. The highlight, though, has been the den along the H6. Several large females are using the culvert under the road as a den, each with cubs of different ages, which has given us some wonderful viewing. The cubs' playful nature and natural curiosity as they pop out of the den and investigate passing vehicles with open curiosity never fails to charm guests, and their behaviour has truly melted the hearts of everyone who has shared these moments with us.

Buffalos

- With the arrival of the rains, the landscape has changed rapidly, and the grass has grown thick and tall across the plains. This sudden abundance of fresh grazing has allowed the large buffalo herds to disperse, splitting into smaller groups and spreading out over a much wider area. As a result, buffalo are no longer concentrated around the usual open areas and water sources, making them harder to locate. Consequently, we have recorded fewer buffalo sightings this month, not due to a decline in numbers, but because the herds are more widely scattered and well concealed by the lush vegetation.

Plains game

- December on the plains has been full of life and movement. We're seeing plenty of wildebeest calves and impala lambs around, all taking advantage of the good grazing after the rains. The herds look relaxed and in great condition, with lots of youngsters keeping close to their mothers. Kudu are looking particularly good at the moment, with bright, clean white stripes standing out clearly – always a great sign of overall health. The plains game have started to disperse more widely; while many are still drawn to the green carpets on the areas burnt in July, they're now spreading out and making use of a much broader range as grazing improves across the landscape.

Rare animals and other sightings

- After many months without a sighting, we were finally rewarded with an encounter with two male cheetahs near Sonop Waterhole. Shortly after arriving, they climbed onto a fallen tree to scan the surrounding area before moving off to find some shade, where they settled in for the rest of the day. Cheetah numbers remain low in the area, largely due to competition with larger predators, the loss of suitable open habitat, and the high mortality of cubs. As a result, sightings are always special and never guaranteed.
- Adding to our list of seldom-seen cats, some lucky guests were treated to sightings of both a serval and an African wildcat. Although neither species is especially rare, their secretive nature and the current long grass make them difficult to spot, turning these sightings into real highlights.
- A white-tailed mongoose poked his head out of the grass one evening, only to quickly turn and dart away from us. What he didn't notice was a small herd of impala just a few metres away. He suddenly stood upright in surprise, his long body lifting his head high above the grass, while the impala stared him down as the spotlight swept over him.

Birds

- Birding this month has been just as rewarding, with a good mix of seasonal visitors and breeding activity. White storks are being seen regularly, taking advantage of the productive wetlands and open areas. A few thick-billed weavers have settled in around the bridge, taking advantage of the tall reeds, that they use to build their wonderfully woven nests between. A Marico sunbird was observed feeding a diederik cuckoo, a great reminder of the clever brood-parasitic strategies at play this time of year, more of this in the wildlife article by Sean that follows.
- Adding to the atmosphere, ground hornbills have been vocalising frequently, right in the heart of their breeding season and making their presence well known across the landscape.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as the December Gallery.

Brood parasitism – one of nature's fascinating wonders **Article by Sean Surtees**

One of the most interesting aspects of bird reproduction is brood parasitism. At Singita Kruger National Park, this involves several parasitic bird species laying their eggs in host birds' nests, therefore having no responsibility when it comes to parental care. In this way, they preserve precious energy that would be needed to incubate the eggs, and rear and feed the hatchings before they fledge the nest. This allows the parasite to expend all its energy on maximising laying as many eggs as possible during the breeding season. Incredibly, some individual brood parasites can lay upwards of 20 eggs in a season!

When it comes to bird brood parasitism, some parasites will target multiple hosts, and some will target a specific host. As a result of this, certain individual parasites like the indigobirds will target certain firefinch species as indicated below:

1. Dusky indigobird (*Vidua funereal)* parasitizes the African firefinch (*Lagonostica nitidula)*
2. Purple indigobird (*Vidua purpurascens)* parasitizes the Jameson's firefinch (*Lagonostica rhodopareia)*
3. Village indigobird (*Vidua chalybeata)* parasitizes the red-billed firefinch (*Lagonostica senegala)* and brown firefinch (*Lagonostica nitidula*)

One of the infamous brood parasites found here at Singita Kruger National Park is the diederik cuckoo (*Chrysococcyx caprius*), which will target multiple hosts during a breeding season. These include species of bishops, widows, sparrows and weavers.

One of the main benefits of brood parasitism is the substantial increase of the reproductive potential for each individual brood parasite. As already mentioned above, there is no energy wasted on building and defending nests, laying and incubation of eggs within these nests and the subsequent feeding and defending of the hatchlings. The hosts of the brood parasites are additionally negatively affected in the following ways – the possibility of losing an entire clutch or clutches in a single breeding season or, to a lesser extent, a below average number of the host's young being successfully raised and fledged.

From the above, brood parasitism can be best described as an "evolutionary dance or race" for survival between both the host and the parasite. This "evolutionary dance or race" has been happening for thousands of years and will continue to happen for thousands more. But the questions that needs to be asked is what methods have the many brood parasites evolved to be able to parasitize their hosts and what defence methods have the many hosts used to thwart off the ingenuity of the brood parasites? This is essentially coevolution in play whereby one species is looking at how best to exploit another (brood parasite) and the other trying its absolute best to defend or repel against exploitation (host).

Below are some of the ingenious ways in which brood parasites trick their hosts and the subsequent ingenious ways in which the hosts defend themselves.

Methods of parasitism by brood parasite:

1. Distraction

The males distract the host bird while the female lays her eggs in the host bird's nest. Visually, hosts can identify the parasite species and will attack the male when he gets in close proximity to their nest. Both host sexes (monogamous species), or the female only (polygynous species), then chase after the male as he flies away. The female parasite then moves in and lays her egg/s while the hosts are lured away from the nest.

2. Rapid egg-laying and rapid development
Parasites have the ability to lay their eggs incredibly quickly in 10 seconds or less while most host species take a number of minutes to lay theirs. This assists the parasite in avoiding detection during the egg laying process. Parasite eggs are also thicker shelled which prevents the eggs from cracking during the rapid egg laying process. Parasite chicks outcompete the hosts chicks for food as they develop faster after hatching, essentially outcompeting them. This results in the host chick weakening and eventually dying from starvation.

3. Small eggs and egg mimicry
Parasites, although normally much larger in size in comparison to the host, lay smaller eggs to look the same size as their hosts. Some parasites' eggs will mimic the hosts' eggs which makes it challenging for the hosts to identify the imposters egg. The parasites' eggs generally look identical to the hosts' eggs, being it size, colour, markings or shape.

4. Short incubation
The incubation period of the parasite egg is shorter than the hosts incubation period which results in the parasite egg hatching first. Amazingly, in certain species, the parasites embryo begins development before the egg has been laid. This has the advantage of outcompeting the hosts' chick/s for resources in the form of food. Some species even have the ability to push out the hosts' chicks from the nest (cuckoos) or even kill the hosts' chicks (honeyguides) who possess a sharp bill.

Methods of defence by hosts
The immediate goal is for the hosts to protect their nests at all costs by stopping entry in the first place. As per the devious ways that parasites trick their hosts into believing that the parasites eggs are theirs, the hosts also have ways in preventing this from happening. Hosts firstly have the ability to recognise that the parasites eggs are actually not theirs and these will be removed immediately. Some hosts also have the ability to count their eggs and recognise when there is one egg too many. The host will try and identify the imposters egg and remove it accordingly or will abandon the clutch in its entirety. In this instance both the host and the parasite lose as the clutch will not be incubated and will result in no eggs hatching.

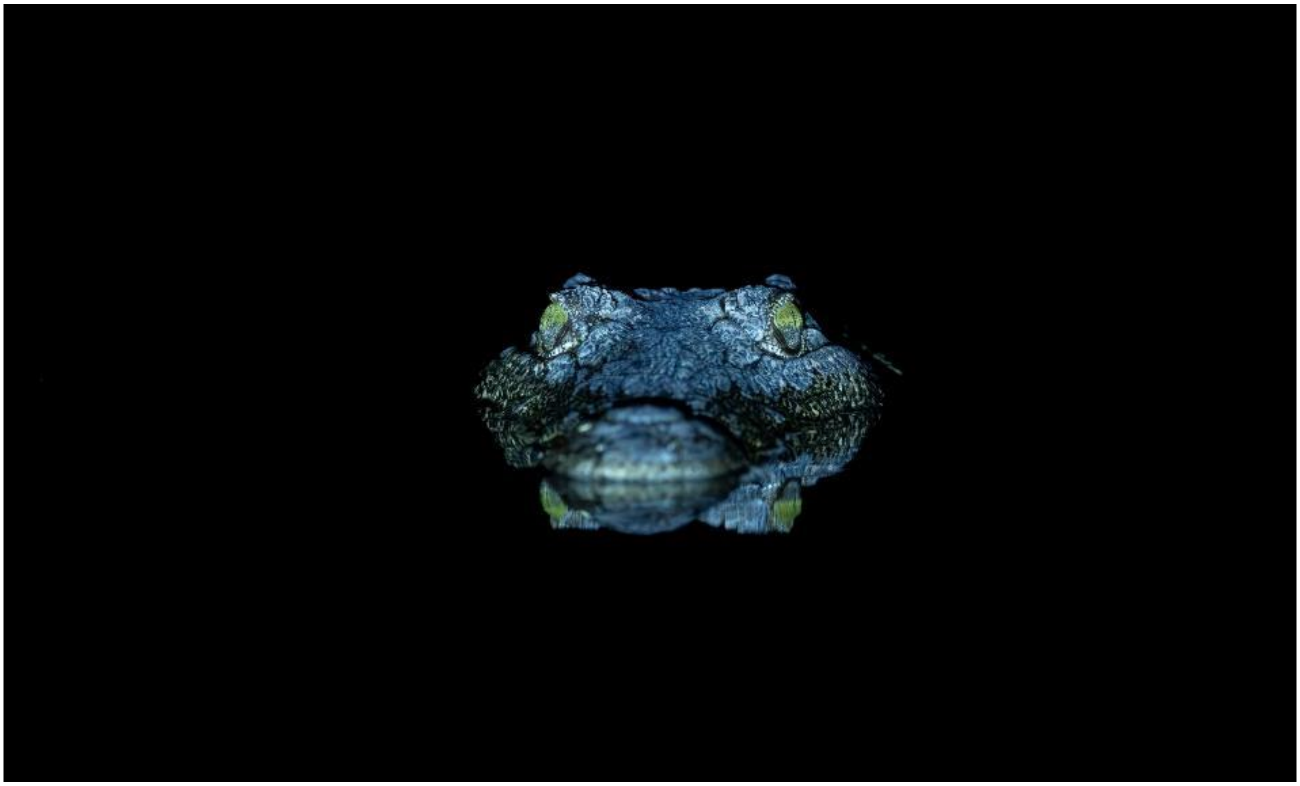
An ingenious way to avoid parasitism is provided by the red-headed weaver. In a very short amount of time, in evolutionary terms, the red-headed weaver has evolved or adapted by extending the length of its tunnel which leads to its woven grass nest. Additionally, it has also shrunk the diameter of the tunnel's entrance. One of the main parasites of the red-headed weaver, is the diederik cuckoo (mentioned above). The lengthening of the tunnel and shrinking of the tunnel's entrance prevents the diederik cuckoo from gaining access to the weaver's nest. There have even been records of cuckoos getting stuck in the tunnel of weavers' nests which has resulted in the cuckoos dying.

Staying with weavers – most weaver species are colonial nesters. Weavers therefore have many lookouts which is advantageous in being able to keep a lookout for parasites. Once a parasite has been spotted and identified, the weavers will band together and pester the parasite until such time as it leaves the vicinity around the colony.

Photos that follow show the incredible and intricate work that go into crafting a weaver's nest. Once this exhausting work is complete and a female successfully lays her eggs in the weaver's nest, the whole colony stays on red-alert for parasites that might try to invade the nests.


Bradwin Adendorff
Wildlife Photography

Ngwenya! **Article by Bernard Stiglingh**



'Ngwenya' means crocodile, an animal that is very well represented in the river systems of Singita Kruger National Park. This ancient reptile, the Nile crocodile, is feared and respected wherever it occurs and has been the subject of folklore and many fabulous myths across Africa. For the local Shangaan people who often still live close to nature and depend on rivers for survival, the crocodile is a deadly reality of everyday life. Fishing, bathing, washing clothes and crockery and watering of livestock all bring people in danger of falling prey to crocodiles. It's a fallacy that hippos kill more people in Africa than any other large animal, instead, this nefarious award goes to the crocodile.

There is a small plant called 'rixiriri' by the Shangaan and Tsonga people, leatherplum by some and *Salacia kraussii* by others. In our area this rare and strange plant is only found in the Pumbe sandveld on our northern boundary. The orange roots, which are rolled up and carried on your person, are still used today as a charm against attacks by wild animals by those Shangaan people who still traverse the wild lands where lions, elephants and especially crocodiles still pose a serious threat.

Then there is something very interesting called 'ndzalama', which in this context refers to a pebble which is found in a crocodile's stomach. These stones are referred to as gastroliths, and are said to aid in the crocodile's digestion by acting as a grinding stone of sorts. In older times the 'ndzalama' would be swallowed by a new chief, in whose stomach it must stay as a sign of legitimacy. If the pebble does not stay, the chief's right to the throne will be called into question, and if passed after a period of time, it's an omen of impending death. This same ritual is then repeated with the next chief. One can see why by swallowing the 'ndzalama' the chief would want the power of the crocodile, the most feared, respected and dangerous animal around.

There is also a widespread belief that a most deadly poison can be made from a crocodile's brain. This poison is called ‘pupeni’ and when it is mixed with the crocodile's liver, ‘xiganama’. Another version is called ‘xikove’, and this is when snuff tobacco is added to the crocodile brain. So feared are people of these very strong poisons, that for the longest time in many regions only the chief was allowed to kill a crocodile. Were a commoner seen hunting or killing a crocodile, they would almost immediately be branded a witch and dealt with accordingly, which usually meant being banished from the village and in a lot of cases even being executed.

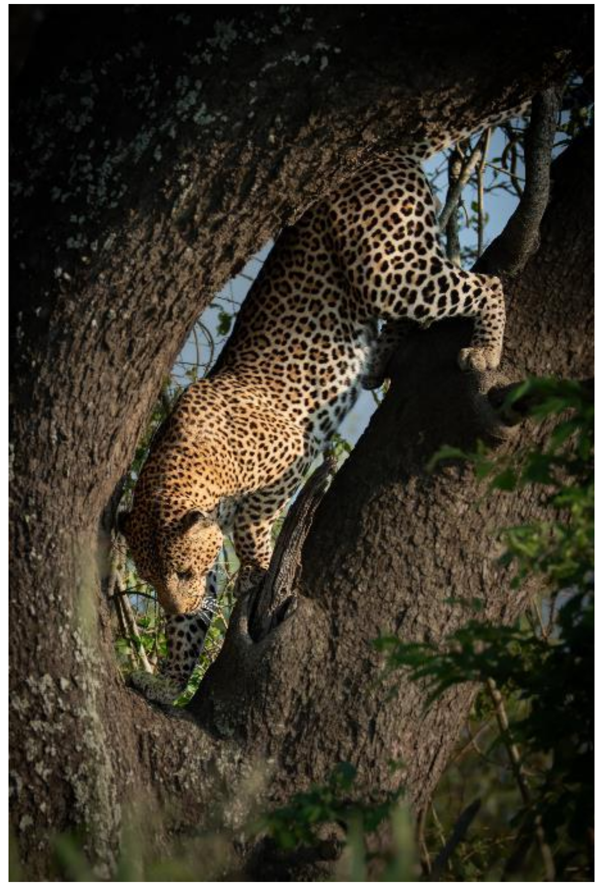
Along the Lebombo mountains, scores of waterways have, over the millennia, carved their way east through the red rhyolite rock, which in the dry months have all but drained into the Indian Ocean save for a few large murky pools. These pools, often shaded by giant fever trees, are the favourite haunts of old large crocodiles, who having either chased away or eaten the other lesser and greater residents, now claim sole ownership of this precious reservoir in an otherwise barren landscape. Here they lie in wait for some unsuspecting victim, man and beast alike who ,on finally finding the means to slake their long thirst, is with a sudden explosion of water and in a fray of swishing tail and gripping jaws dragged down under, never to resurface. These crocodiles are designated a special name, that of ‘ngwenya nkelenga’, or the ‘fever tree crocodile’.

There are those Shangaan people who have taken Ngwenya as their surname, with its cunning and fearsome reputation making it a proud one. The clan praises include 'ngwenya nkelenga, xi vutla ni mindzheko', which roughly translates to, ‘the fever tree crocodile, the Ngwenya (person with this surname) is so brave that he snatches water in his calabash despite this large crocodile lurking in the dangerous water.’

Today, crocodiles remain a powerful symbol of strength, cunningness and danger, but with increased population and pollution in our African river systems, these ancient reptiles are facing an uncertain future. It’s vitally important to recognize the important role crocodiles play in ecology and not villainize them due to their dangerous reputation, for they have as much right to their waterways as do the fish and the reeds and the tiny river crabs.

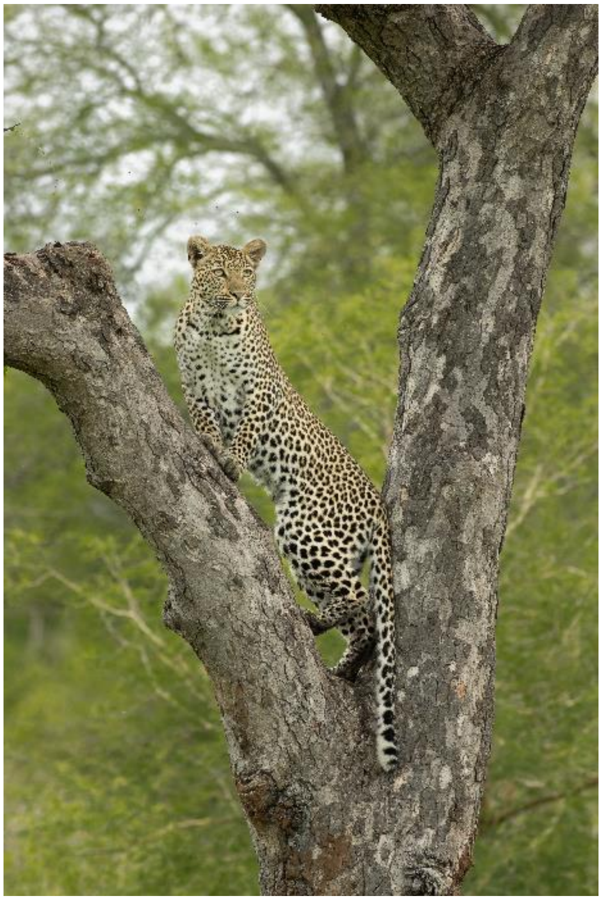
December Gallery

Yellow-billed hornbill – Photo by Monika Malewski



Zamani male – Photo by Monika Malewski

African wild dogs – Photo by Monika Malewski



Khandziya female – Photo by Graeme Stuart

Rock monitor – Photo by Monika Malewski

Common sandpiper – Photo by Matt Holland

Sonop male – Photo by Monika Malewski

Large-spotted genet – Photo by Matt Holland

Crocodile – Photo by Matt Holland

Elephant bull – Photo by Monika Malewski

Mbiri-Mbiri male leopard – Photo by Matt Holland

Mananga sub-adult lion – Photo by Matt Holland

Sonop male lion – Photo by Matt Holland

Compiled by Monika Malewski