

# Singita



Dumbana female - Photo by Rudi Hulshof

**WILDLIFE JOURNAL**  
**SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA**  
**For May, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four**

**Temperature**

Average minimum: 15.5°C (59.9°F)  
Minimum recorded: 12.0°C (53.6°F)  
Average maximum: 26.5°C (79.7°F)  
Maximum recorded: 33.0°C (91.4°F)

**Rainfall Recorded**

For the month: 18 mm  
Season to date: 450 mm

**Sunrise & Sunset**

Sunrise: 06h28  
Sunset: 17h11

Without a doubt the favourite month for many guides and trackers, May has brought with it the earthy smell of the sweet turpentine grasses drying out, the sound of leaves crunching under our boots and the cool but still moist air creating the beautiful misty mornings leaving little dew droplets on your eyelashes as you head out on drive wrapped up in a warm blanket. By midday though, the temperature is perfect and the sun travels on its way to set in a few hours behind the burnt orange sky, revealing the most magnificent starry nights.

## A Sightings Snapshot for May follows:

### Lions

- After what felt like ages, the guiding team were delighted to see the Shish Pride coming back into our concession from the Kruger Park's H6 road. They went on their usual route into the southwestern section of our concession, hanging out just south of the river during the heat of the day before some rutting impalas caught their attention and they managed to catch one of the very distracted impala rams. Of course, just one impala is never enough for 21 mouths, so they quickly moved on in search of more.
- The Shish Pride has certainly dominated the lion sightings this month, spending a good portion of their time near the N'wanetsi River around Dave's Crossing. One morning in particular we were treated to the entire pride spread out over Dumbana rocks with the Nyala female leopard eyeing them out from the top of a tall dead leadwood tree.
- Maputo, Xai-Xai and the Chava Pride also returned from the west at the beginning of the month, both males in really good condition.
- The last remaining Trichardt male has been seen patrolling south to north near the Kruger/Singita boundary. He has been very vocal, perhaps he is looking for his brother, realising just how vulnerable a single male lion can be in this area. He met up with three of the Mananga lionesses in the middle of this month before crossing back west out of our concession near the N'wanetsi River.
- On the 17<sup>th</sup> the team found tracks for multiple male lions entering the concession near the road experiment sign, so a few trackers set off on foot to try to find these "new" males and females. One of our guides spotted them about two kilometres north of the lodges, boulder-hopping across the N'wanetsi River. They were weary of the vehicles and kept moving south along the base of the Lebombo mountains. It is always exciting to see new lions, but this proves our suspicions of the Trichardt males not having as much of an active presence in the south of their territory anymore. If this continues the Shish and Mananga cubs are at a higher risk from any intruding males.
- Near the end of the month Maputo and Xai-Xai were located on the central western side of our concession. Both were well-fed and very vocal, calling every few minutes and marking their territory every few metres. Earlier that morning we had seen tracks of the Mananga females entering the concession just south of where we had the two very focused male lions. They appeared to be on the scent of the females, who understandably were not going to be sticking around for these intruding males to find any of their cubs.

### Leopards

- Dumbana female and her two cubs have been frequently seen around Ntsibistane near the drainage lines that feed into the N'wanetsi River. In this area, the open grasslands and now dry mud wallows are a hotspot for many animals including the presently distracted rutting impala rams. We have patiently watched in the hope of a successful hunt, but unfortunately, the sheer number of impalas ultimately means she is spotted before she can get close enough to one to ambush.
- Our team discovered the Zamani male feeding on an impala ram he had hoisted into a leadwood tree near Gudzane Dam. That evening he was nowhere to be found, instead the Gudzane female was scavenging on the same carcass. The next morning Zamani had reclaimed his meal, keeping a watchful eye on the Gudzane female who waited in the shadows below.
- Monzo male made a surprise appearance this month near the "fig-in-leadwood" along the N'wanetsi River. He then continued on his usual route west towards the rocky ridges near our western boundary. The last time he was sighted was the 14<sup>th</sup> of March so the team was delighted to know he is still around, despite his confrontation with Lebombo male at the end of January. Near the end of the month, he was spotted again near the river heading north from an area known as "Big Croc View" and again the next day near Euphorbia Crossing.

- Lebombo male was only seen on one occasion at the beginning of the month heading west towards our concession boundary. A definite pattern has emerged, when he is away, Monzo comes out to play.
- Sekele female was briefly seen near Gudzane Dam. She has also eluded us since last year, which may mean that a good portion of her territory is outside our concession, west of Gudzane Dam.
- There have been several unidentified leopards seen this month, with one young male having hoisted an impala ram into a leadwood near Green-apple Hill.
- The Nyala female has been seen a few times this month, elegantly resting in the branches of a tall tree - the pod mahogany and leadwood seem to be the favourites.

#### **African wild dogs**

- A pack of six were found stalking impala one morning and managed to catch one of last year's lambs, devouring every last bit before trotting on north to the last remaining pools of water for a quick drink before resting in the shade of some giant euphorbias.
- Towards the middle of the month a pack of 12 dogs, with a few of what looks like last year's pups, now almost as big as the adults themselves, spent a few days hunting impala in the open planes north of Dave's Crossing on the N'wanetsi River.
- We have had confirmation that one of the packs we see is denning in Mozambique, meaning we will likely have intermittent sightings of the adults as they hunt on our concession and run back to feed the pups. African wild dogs regurgitate food to their pups at the den-site. This is the safest way to carry the meat back without attracting the attention of other larger predators.
- A pack of six were found towards the end of the month in the far north eastern portion of our concession interacting with a small group of spotted hyenas, almost like children playing tag, chasing each other up and down. The sounds made by these two predators during such encounters are unexpected and unforgettable!

#### **Cheetahs**

- With a heavy heart we found that the pair of young cheetahs (seen late last month) unfortunately did not make it through without their mother. Being almost "over-specialised" hunters means that these predators are particularly vulnerable to attack by other larger predators as well as their kills being stolen more regularly. As they evolved to gain speed, they lost power and strength.
- An adult female cheetah was found near the end of the month in the central depression. The golden sunlight showed off her beautifully spotted coat as she walked through the long grass. She had recently fed, her belly hanging low and we were spoilt to see her again in the same area the next morning. Two days later she was found stalking a steenbok near the Sticky Thorn thicket, and again the next week near the Gudzane Dam.

#### **Spotted hyenas**

- Many single hyenas have been seen wandering around along the roads in the late afternoon, and early evenings. A few came past the impala ram in a tree with the Zamani male leopard.
- Two individuals were found running down the road with some remains of a waterbuck carcass with the Confluence male leopard sniffing behind them. The Confluence male had some blood on his chin so had been feeding on the carcass before the hyenas showed up.

#### **Elephants**

- A massive elephant bull in musth with impressive tusks has been ambling around the central regions, following the many herds moving through the grasslands.
- The breeding herds have been migrating daily up to the warmer air in the mountains in the evenings and then back down to open grasslands below during the day. Their diet is slowly changing from the once lush green grass to stripping the bark from raisin bushes and other trees.

- The herd with the large and tuskless females have returned to feed on the untouched trees and bushes in and around the lodges and the boutique and gallery. A habit they've kept up every dry season.

#### **Buffalos**

- A small herd of about 30 came to drink from the N'wanetsi River near the Dumbana drainage then headed back west out of our concession.
- The old lone bull has been spending most of his time between the valleys in the Lebombo mountains.
- Another single bull came to drink from the Gudzane drainage, while we were enjoying our coffee and Amarula from the Gudzane lookout.

#### **Plains game**

- The steenbok and duiker seem to be around every corner now that the grass is quickly drying out and we can see these small antelope.
- The general game is starting to congregate around the last remaining pans and the open areas around the N'wanetsi River, with most afternoons seeing the plethora of species on our central depression and closing into a tighter circle around Gudzane Dam.

#### **Rare animals and other sightings**

- A serval and her three kittens were seen one evening on what we call "Park Road" (S41). Having the longest legs and largest ears of any cat allows the serval to see above the tall grasses of the savanna, and hear their prey which they ambush with great success.
- An African wild cat jumped up out of the long grass on the way back to the lodge one evening, hunting what appeared to be a small rodent.
- A herd of sable (one bull and three cows with calves) were found moving through the mountainous areas in the north-eastern parts of our concession. They are weary of the vehicles, but since being sighted last month, they are only running a few metres before turning to watch the vehicle. We are hoping for more regular sightings of this herd in the future.

#### **Birds:**

- An African rail was seen at the edge of the river by the Ostrich Link fly camp, the first recorded sighting for Singita Kruger National Park.
- The red-crested korhaan have begun their unique "rocket" display, entertaining all nearby with their frantic flight straight into the air before rolling over and falling from the sky to glide and land last minute at the display site.



African rail – photo by Singita Guest

**Some Bush Stories follow, as well as a May Gallery of images.**

As the winter season approaches many trees have begun dropping their now yellow, orange and brown leaves to await the next rainy spring season which begins in September. The grass is drying to a yellow crisp and everywhere will soon take on the dull brown and beige colour scheme, typical of our dry winter season. Vegetation around the rivers and waterholes remains green due to the available water and this invites many animals from a much larger area than usual. The mosaic of this contrasting brown and green is beautiful, especially when viewed from one of our sundowner spots on the Lebombo mountains overlooking the Xinkelegane drainage with its large leadwood and jackalberry trees.



Colours are some of the most important things to many living organisms. Brightly coloured flowers, for example, attract birds and insects to help with pollination but the same colour can be a toxicity warning sign to some hungry mammals.



Experiencing a game drive in this season you will find that spotting the animals and birds is that much easier because the vegetation is open, and the majority of the animals are restricted to the last remaining waterholes. This also makes it easier to predict their movements.

## Colours in the bushveld birds

To survive in the animal kingdom, an individual must find enough food to sustain itself while avoiding danger in the form of predators. But survival is about more than staying alive, it's being able to find a mate and reproduce successfully to ensure the personal gene multiplies.

Within the bird class, species are divided between these two 'schools of survival' and both have their cost and benefits.

Having bright colours such as the lilac-breasted roller makes a bird an appealing mate. His visual attire is further enhanced by exhibitionist displays. The roller gets its name from its propensity to noisily take to the sky, flying upwards until it reaches an imaginary summit from whence it shoots downwards rocking side to side on its wings or 'rolling' all the while vocalising in a less than songful manner!

Birds such as doves and sparrows select less for colour and more for tones that blend them into the environment. Remaining undetected by predators is a priority and they will rely more on courtship rituals and song to locate a partner and maintain pair bonds. Some of these duller species have hidden crests that can be erected to impress the females, such as the red-crested korhaan. This bird will only introduce its colourful head crest when needed for courtship. Some birds take blending in to the extreme and species such as nightjars, sandgrouse and scops-owl use cryptic colouration to mimic their surroundings so perfectly that they are almost undetectable.



## The mystery of male lions' manes

Article by Monika Malewski

Lions have long captivated human fascination, particularly due to the striking feature that sets them apart; the mane. This thick, luxurious hair around the heads and necks of male lions symbolizes power, masculinity, and grandeur in the animal kingdom.

Manes are a key indicator of a lion's sex, with fully grown males sporting them while females typically do not. However, exceptions exist, such as lionesses with hormonal imbalances developing mane-like features, though these cases are rare. Lions exhibit a unique sexual dimorphism, with no other cat species displaying such distinct differences between genders.



The Trichardt male – April 2022



The Trichardt male - May 2024



The "missing" Trichardt male – October 2022

The growth of a mane in male lions typically begins around two years of age, marking their transition from adolescence to adulthood and the onset of sexual maturity. As male lions age, their manes grow and often darken, enhancing their intimidating appearance, which aids in territorial defence against rival males.

Various factors influence the size, density, and colour of a lion's mane, including genetics, hormones like testosterone, age, nutrition, health, and environmental conditions. Access to high-quality food sources and overall health contribute to healthier, more impressive manes. Additionally, environmental factors such as climate can affect mane characteristics, with lions in hotter climates often having shorter manes to prevent overheating.

Just as in humans, there's natural variation in mane characteristics among lions due to genetic diversity. The mane serves multiple purposes, from attracting mates to establishing dominance within a pride and deterring rivals. It provides some protection during fights, particularly face-to-face confrontations, but its initial function is a visual display of power and dominance within the lion community.



Kumana –2021



Maputo (left) and Kumana (right) – 2022

When I arrived at Singita three years ago, the Kumana male was the last remaining dominant male over the Shish Pride territory. He had a beautiful thick golden mane, which towards the end of his reign lightened in colour and thinned out as he aged and was gradually pushed out by the Trichardt males. Interestingly these two brothers, at that time, had looked scruffier and had a patchier mane than Kumana in his prime. Once the testosterone levels of the Trichardt males began to rise, however, with the conception and births of the many cubs to both the Shish and Mananga Pride, their manes grew and thickened showing off their status. The Maputo male, who for a short period had shared territory with Kumana had also had a smaller mane compared to now. Now the tides are turning and due to the loss of his brother, the remaining Trichardt male is realising his weakness and so are the Maputo and Xai-Xai coalition. In just the last few months we have seen a change in both Maputo and his recent coalition “brother” Xai-Xai. Even though he has a collar (for research purposes) and is much older, his mane appears to be thickening slightly.

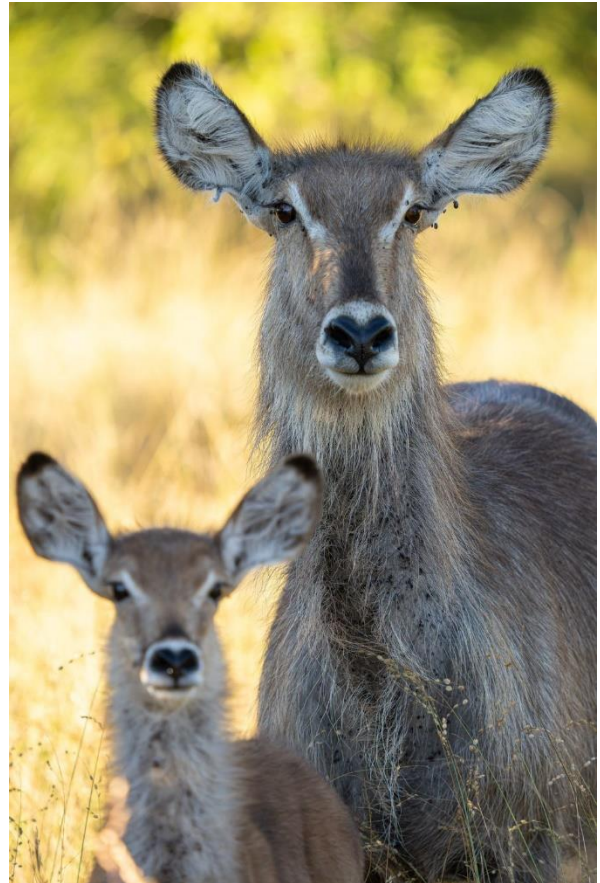
Having the privilege of being able to spend years watching the rise and fall of various males has made it very obvious that the mane is far more than just decoration, it is a banner of dominance, and male lions just wouldn't be the same without it!



May Gallery



Shish Pride – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Waterbuck and calf – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Pack of African wild dogs feeding on an impala – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



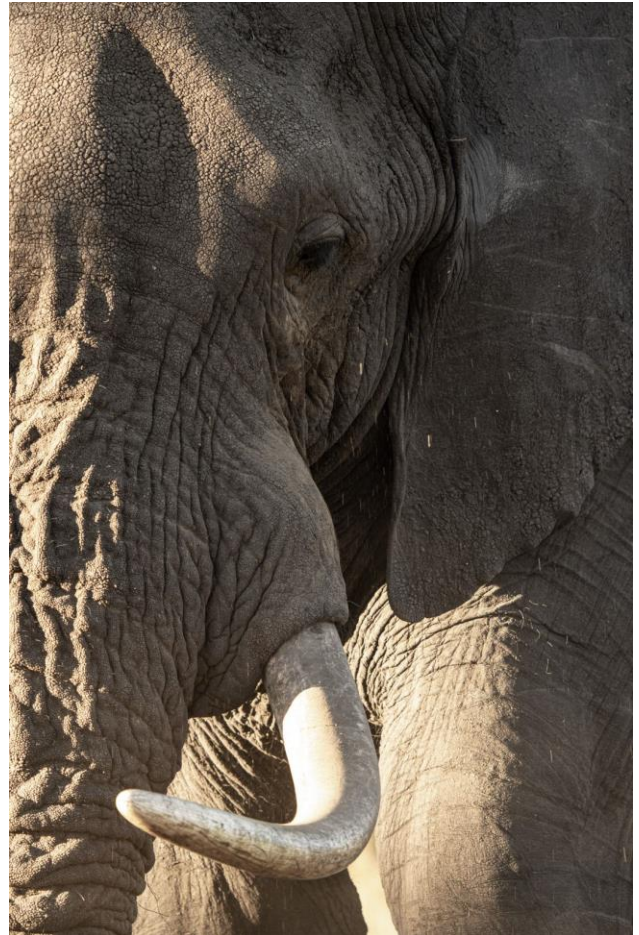
Elephants drinking from the N'wanetsi River – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Xai-Xai – Photo by Monika Malewski



Zamani male – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



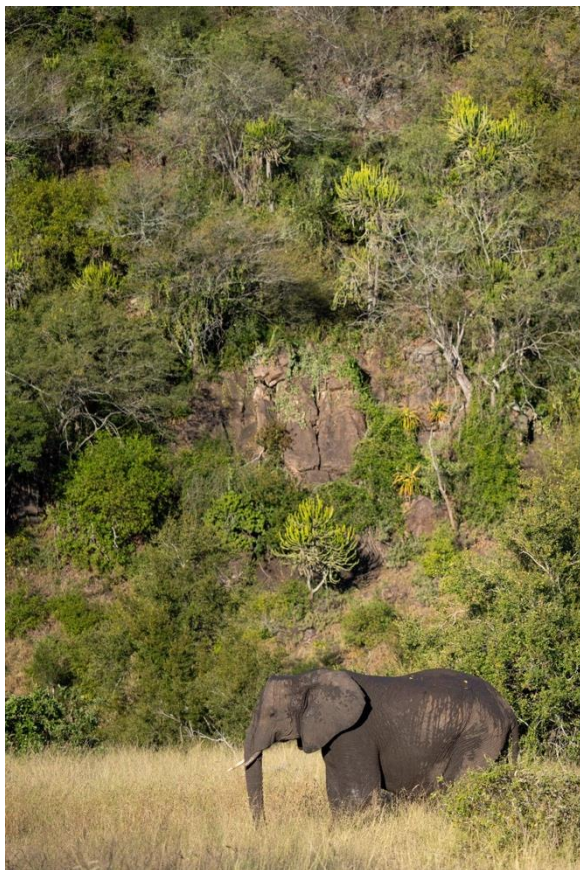
Elephant bull – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



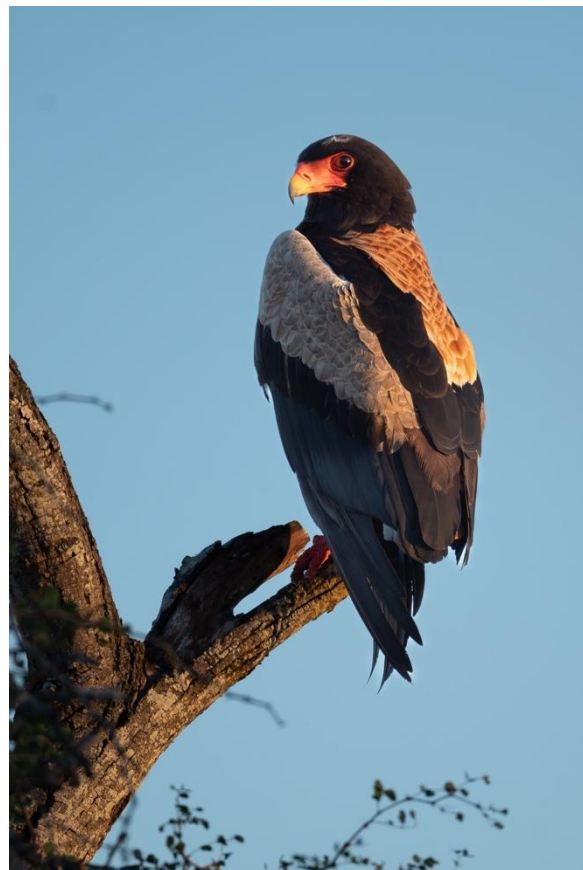
Lilac-breasted roller – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Shish Pride – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Elephant cow – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Bateleur eagle – Photo by Monika Malewski



African wild cat – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Serval – Photo by Rudi Hulshof



Maputo male – Photo by Rudi Hulshof