

Singita



Dumbana 1:1 Male Leopard

Photo by Rudi Hulshof

WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For February, Two Thousand, and Twenty-three

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.3°C (70.3 °F)
Minimum recorded: 02.0°C (35.6 °F)
Average maximum: 29.6°C (85.4 °F)
Maximum recorded: 37.0 °C (98.6 °F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 228mm
Season to date: 241mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:45
Sunset: 18:30

Over the past decade we have been seeing a shift in global climate and weather patterns, which makes predicting weather and rainfall a gamble. This February has been a classic from the past, with about a third of our annual expected rainfall being recorded due to moist air being pushed over the eastern regions of South Africa from the warm Indian Ocean. Line thunderstorms have also been developing, which added to the wet month we have had.

Regardless of the rain, we have still been spoilt with amazing sightings and spectacular views of flowing rivers and streams. The long grass and sodden soils don't deter the perseverance and experience of our masterful guides, and our guests were still treated to memorable experiences viewing not only the abundance of larger mammals but also the smaller birds, trees, flowers, and insects.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for February:

Lions

- Most of the sightings this month have been of the two respective portions of the famed Mananga Pride of lions. At present, the pride numbers are in a constant state of flux, with the larger portion ending the month with a regularly seen number of 13 individuals. One lioness has been seen on her own a handful of times in the north-western portions of the concession, and it is hoped that she has cubs at a den-site that she is concentrating her activities around.
The smaller portion of eight, which comprises two adult females and their six, now almost one-year-old cubs, have been joined regularly by the two Shish Males. These ten lions surprised all guides by venturing much further south than is normally expected and provided some quality viewing just on the lodge's doorstep a few times!
- The Shishangaan Pride have not been seen too often during February, as they follow known seasonal distribution patterns, taking them into a wilderness zone south of the lodges. We have had a good number of sightings, and the pride fragmented into smaller groups of two to five members, which was the most we saw together at any one time.
- The Trichard Males have, on occasion, been seen with members of the Shishangaan Pride, but have also been encountered on their own on many occasions. They seem to have retained control of their territory around the lodges and on the concession, as we have not seen or found any signs of the larger coalition of males that for the past six months have been venturing into the concession from the south-west.
- The larger coalition of males, as already mentioned, have been absent on the concession, but remain a threat in the long term. They have been seen a handful of times along the road between the lodges and the staff village on our daily commutes between the two. It would appear that they are spending more time in the west, where they have cubs in a pride that now need their protection more than before. The cubs were viewed for the first time with pride, whilst feeding on a zebra along the H6 road linking Singita Lebombo and our airstrip.
- Wet weather during the month prompted the guides to venture further from the concession at times in search of animals, and this led to a few magical sightings of the pride that resides near our airstrip close to Satara. The distance travelled to see this pride is negligible when the reward includes seeing the now dominant and territorially established white lion male born almost eight years ago in the Shishangaan Pride.

Leopards

- At least three unknown and as yet unidentified female leopards were seen over the month. Two of these sightings were of these females feeding on carcasses of impalas. One young, still-dependent female cub was also spotted near the end of the month, and it certainly bodes well for future leopard sightings that we are seeing new individuals entering the concession and relaxing in the presence of the game viewers.
- Nhlangueni female has only been seen on a single occasion, and no sightings were recorded of either of her two daughters that are still dependent on her at this point.
- The Dumbana female leopard has been conspicuous in her absence this month. She has in all likelihood given birth to a new litter of cubs after she was recorded mating at the end of October last year. The timing is right, and hopefully, when we do see her again as she starts venturing further from her

chosen den-site, we may be able to confirm our suspicions by seeing suckle marks or, even better, get confirmed sightings of her cub/s.

- The Pelejambo male was seen several times, with the best sighting being of him in a dead leadwood tree in the central depression area for about an hour with the Mananga Pride all of lions around the base of the tree! After the lions lost interest, the Pelejambo male descended the tree and continued unharmed along his way.
- The two Dumbana males have stayed close to their maternal territory, and have provided the bulk of our leopard sightings this month. 1:1 Dumbana male, the paler of the two, seems to be well established in the central regions, and as I write this, is finishing off a young impala he killed and hoisted into a leadwood tree a few minutes' drive from the lodge. His brother, a 3:3 darker male, is most often seen in the northern areas along the Xinkelengane Drainage system that eventually feeds into the Nwanetsi River near Green Apple Hill, where many of our past and future guests will and have been mesmerized by incredible elevated views of the concession plains.
- A male was seen once with a nervous female. He did not give us the chance to properly identify him, as he was more interested in following and trailing the female that made a hasty retreat from the approaching game-viewing vehicle.
- The Mbiri Mbiri male was seen once, and so too was the Monzo male.

Wild dogs

- The small pack of three was seen four times this month, and no sightings were recorded of any of the other packs that we have been seeing regularly over the past year. The mere fact that we can see wild dogs is a gift, as they are considered the most endangered large carnivore in our area. There are less than 350 individuals in the entire Greater Kruger National Park ecosystem.

Spotted hyenas

- Frequent sightings are still commonplace, with known hotspots of at least three different clans that hold territories on the Lebombo concession. Many daytime sightings were had because of the cooler wet weather we have been experiencing most of the month.
- The smallest of the clans hold territory on the Western boundary of the concession, and sightings of members are almost guaranteed upon the return to the lodge in the evenings along Park Road near James Road junction.
- The two other clans have a large number of members and are seen around Ostrich Link, Monzo, and Ma4Pounds, and Lastly Golf Course clearings and Xinkelengane Fly Camp respectively.

Elephants

- As marula season starts drawing to an end, we are seeing more and more elephants moving back east into the grasslands where feeding can take place without the constant friction and abrasion on their molar teeth from the woodier diet of roots, bark, leaves, branches, and marula pips. We should be seeing an even greater influx of these large pachyderms in March, due to the good rains we have had in February, leading to an explosion of lush grass growing on the plains on the concession.
- Large breeding herds numbering over 50 individuals have not been uncommon this month, and the nutrient-rich diet at present ensures that breeding-age bulls are in musth and have been in constant attendance with these herds.

Cheetahs

- We managed to see several different cheetahs, totalling seven sightings this month! It appears that the female who was raising two sons has sent them to a life of independence, as both she, and the two brothers were seen separated from each other on a few occasions. A second and even a third female cheetah were seen feeding on impala kills during February. A large adult male was also recorded on the concession.

Buffalos

- We have needed to venture into the furthest north-eastern corner of the concession to locate the breeding herds of buffalo that prefer the vegetation in this region. There are hundreds of mud wallows dotting the landscape here which works in their favour.
- There has been a group of around 15 bulls spotted a few times along the eastern boundary of Pan Link, all the way to Hyena Pan.

Plains game

- We are truly fortunate at Singita Lebombo to have almost constant and consistent sightings of all manner of plains and general game. Giraffe, zebra, waterbuck, kudu, impala, and wildebeest can be viewed in fairly large numbers spread throughout the concession, daily.
- An interesting sighting of a newborn impala was recorded in the last week of February, making this little lamb's arrival a good three months later than his fellow generation of lambs that were born in November.

Birds

- Most of the migrant birds are in southern Africa for the abundance of food that is present during the wet warm season here in the Kruger National Park.
- It is a veritable pallet of colour in the sky as you see the bright breeding plumage of many of the normally drab-looking birds, and their longer feathers.
- We have seen hundreds of Amur falcons feeding on the winged termite alates that take flight after rain, and were thrilled with a sighting of a lanner falcon on the fringes of the flock of falcons one afternoon near Xingwenyana Crossing. This bird party also included blue cheeked bee-eaters, carmine bee-eaters, little bee-eaters, Eurasian bee-eaters, lilac-breasted and European rollers, joined by dozens of yellow and red-billed hornbills gorging themselves on termites.

South Africa is a very biodiverse country with rich fauna and flora that can only be found in these soils and skies. But not much is being done to focus our protective gaze on the tiny creatures that have six legs perfectly fit for function and some which have wings that often defy gravity. We have an innumerable amount of insects globally which make up over 70% of the world's fauna, of which an estimated 43 565 species call South Africa home.

Insect numbers are dropping dramatically, with a global estimated reduction of 40% in the next 50 years. This mass "genocide" can be attributed to pesticides, extermination, and largely to habitat loss due to land transformation and urbanization. In addition, humans normally have a negative association with insects, making us think of dirt and disease, which some insects can carry, however, we forget they are the miniscule minority, and even the ones that do still play their ecological role.

Insects do more good for the environment than we can imagine and if they all had to go extinct the human race and lifestyle would go in a downward spiral because the balance and diversity of the ecosystem lies with them. We should be worried when insect populations drop which they are doing at an unprecedented rate. Compared to the number of insects that would swarm towards the light of your cars at night and end up on your windscreen years ago, to the few insects that you find today, which don't even warrant an immediate windscreen wash, it is blatantly evident to see that their numbers are plummeting.

Some insects lay their eggs in fruits that are ripening on a tree, where the developing larvae then feed on the fruit and make it inedible for humans, but that doesn't discourage other animals from getting sustenance from it. That same insect that "destroys" the fruit like the fig wasp can be praised by the fig tree for its survival as it pollinates it where no other insects or methods would be as effective and, without them, fig trees would have died out and vice versa. Some insects like certain species of female mosquitoes can cause malaria however those same mosquitoes and larvae play a major role in the ecosystem because their larvae provide food for wildlife and the surviving larvae eat organic matter in the wetlands, helping recycle the nutrients back into the ecosystem. Blowflies, which can seemingly be a pest, help speed up decomposition by feeding on the soft tissue of carrion and they often help in forensic investigations. Other species of flies have helped us in the bush find animal carcasses by their loud buzzing and lead us to predators. Ants, which some consider pests and give some the heebie-jeebies, are incredible decomposers and ensure the soils that grow the food we eat are turned, aerated, and nutrient-filled.

I could go on and explain how the thousands of insects that share our country plays a significant role in maintaining the biodiverse land we live in but you just have to look around to see their magic. It may not always be obvious but we need to realize that for something to be allowed to coexist with man, there does not always have to be a direct benefit for us. So before you destroy a hive, before you squish those ants, before you kill a wasp, first think about what you can do to make coexistence with these living creatures possible - because all they are trying to do is survive and their survival is crucial for us to thrive.

I had been struggling to think of a topic to write about in this month's journal. I was thinking about highlighting some information and facts about spiders because of the amazing photographic opportunities they presented on several drizzly misty mornings that we were treated to after good rains this month. The rain and mist coupled with early morning diffused light coming through the moisture layer, made for the most beautiful scenes that included hundreds of spider webs. Then I read Walter's post that he submitted for this journal and it made me realize that for the first time since 2012, I was again seeing vast numbers of golden orb spiders, whose decline I have been speaking to my guests about over the past decade.

So, let me tell you all about them. Their decline is largely due to the use of toxic insecticides in agricultural areas, causing a lack of a food source (insects) for the spiders. I would normally see in their thousands in the years gone by. Admittedly, the drought of 2015-2017 also caused a sharp decline in the numbers, but the writing was on the wall with evidence of plummeting numbers years before the drought hit.

The explosion of visible spiders this year, is a small sliver of a silver lining, that Singita's One Planet Purpose, along with greater awareness and sensitivity to the environment, being pushed by large corporate companies, is benefitting conservation initiatives in South Africa. We get so bogged down by negatives about doom and gloom regarding global warming, greenhouse gas emissions, water shortages, and a multitude of other catastrophic environmental factors, that we are blinded by the small victories that should be noted and used as further motivation to stay true to our convictions of making a difference in conserving nature and biodiversity on earth.

Should you be planning a visit to Singita over the next couple of months, you will be treated to spectacular scenes of spider webs strung up between shrubs, trees, and bushes dotted all over the concession here at Lebombo. The most visible and prominent of these is the aforementioned golden orb spiders which I would like to introduce you to, with a few facts to follow:

The banded-legged golden orb-web spider (*Nephila senegalensis*)

Size: females large (30-40 mm); males much smaller.

Colour: female colour pattern distinct; abdomen bright yellow with a dark pattern; ventrally yellow with dark markings; legs banded; sternum yellow. Carapace: longer than wide; eyes: 8 in 2 evenly spaced rows; abdomen: large, elongated, and cylindrical; legs: long and slender, tufts of setae on tibiae of legs I, II, and IV absent. The males are much smaller, uniformly pale in colour. Juveniles have a pattern on the abdomen differing from females.

Behaviour: These spiders build large (1-1.5m in diameter) orb webs. The viscid spiral of the web is yellowish golden which is characteristic of the *Nephilas*. The radii of the web are pulled out of their direct course to give the web a notched appearance. The supporting lines are very strong, and some resistance is felt when one wanders into them. The spiders make use of the same web over a long period, replacing only the viscid lines. The web of older spiders is half a circle, while in the young ones, the orb is more complete. The small male/s are usually found on the edge of the web of females. The spiders live for about one year and the adults are very commonly found during the summer months. They prey on a wide range of flying insects.

Habitat: They are found in grassland, savanna, and open forest, and frequently encountered in gardens.

Distribution: Distributed throughout Africa, but more commonly found in the warmer humid regions. They are widely distributed throughout South Africa.

Interesting facts:

- The golden orb web spider is not the largest species but makes the largest and strongest web, and it gets its name from the glowing colour of its silk.
- It is quite common in our area and prefers dense woodland thickets, where it can construct a huge web between two adjacent trees. It also prefers undisturbed bush to gardens – there it can trap large flying insects where there is less disturbance by humans.
- The silk is so strong that it can capture small birds, which the spider doesn't eat. To avoid the web being damaged by bigger creatures, it leaves a line of insect husks on the web, like the safety strip across a glass door!
- To spin the web, it releases a thin thread of silk in the wind. When it catches onto something, the spider walks along it, trailing a loose, stronger thread, which it fastens to the other side. From the centre of this strong one, it spins another to a point lower down, forming a strong Y-frame. Around this, it spins the rest of the web of sticky capturing silk.
- One usually sees only the female spider, because the male is small and insignificant. Although he is essential for the survival of the species, he leads a very subordinate life. He is so tiny that he can live on the female's web and steal her food, often without her noticing him.
- He also leads a dangerous life, because he has to inseminate the female and may be mistaken for prey, so he usually does this while she is feeding!
- The golden orb web spider belongs to the genus *Nephila* and commonly occurs in the warmer regions of the world, with a few species in South Africa. Like other web spinners, its legs are specially adapted for spinning, with the tip pointing inwards rather than outward, as is the case with many wandering spiders. This makes it clumsy on the ground, but very agile on the web.
- Its bite is painful, but not dangerous to humans.
- As elsewhere in nature, there are always thieves and robbers to steal from an abundant food source. The dew-drop spider is a tiny species with a silver abdomen, which lives on the periphery of a golden orb web.
- It is so small that it is dwarfed by a fly, but so cunning that it can cut the prey loose from the large web without the larger spider's knowledge!

As you drive along on your upcoming safari, please enjoy the presence of these vital arachnids, and see them through conservation eyes and not those of fear or anxiety. Every organism out here plays a vital role in a healthy ecosystem, which will be in jeopardy without every single organism, be it a large elephant or a small spider!





Nile crocodile in fast-flowing water.



Female cheetah.



Elephant feeding on marula fruit.



Elephant breeding herd.



Mananga lioness.



Pelejambo male leopard.



Malachite kingfisher.



Trichard male lion.



Cape buffalo bull.



Shishangaan female lion in the long grass.