

Singita



Leopard tail - Photo by Rudi Hulshoff

WILDLIFE JOURNAL

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

Temperature

Average minimum: 20.7°C (69°F)
Minimum recorded: 18.0°C (64°F)
Average maximum: 32.8°C (91°F)
Maximum recorded: 37.0°C (98°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 26mm
Season to date: 426 mm
(*Season = Oct to Sept)

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05h55
Sunset: 17h55

March in Singita Kruger National Park is a time of transition, where nature takes a much-needed breath after the heavy rains, strong winds, and soaring temperatures of the hot summer months. The air feels fresher, with early mornings and late evenings beginning to cool, offering relief from the heat. The once lush green grass is slowly taking on a yellowish hue, signalling the end of the wet season. As the park quiets down, the rhythm of nature shifts; a few migrant birds have already departed, while many others gather, preparing for their long journey ahead. The sound of chirping insects fills the air, and the landscape shifts into a more tranquil, reflective mood. It's a month where the park begins to find its calm after the storm, with every breeze and sunset a reminder of the delicate balance between the seasons.

A Sightings Snapshot for March follows:

Lions

- The Mananga Pride managed to take down a large wildebeest at the beginning of the month near the central areas, where the grass is short and game is abundant. The long grass near Pony-Pan offered them refuge from the hot sun the following day. The next evening, we found them very far south on the S41. This area is typically where we expect to see the Shish Pride, but territories are not fixed. Without a dominant male, the pride is moving around more in the south to avoid the Sonop males from the north.
- A Sonop male has been mating with one of the Chava lionesses. If all goes well, we could have three mothers in the Chava Pride within the next three to four months.
- In the middle of the month, we found two Chava lionesses with four tiny cubs. They all appeared to be of the same age, so we assume they are from one mother.
- The two portions of the Shish Pride, which split about a month ago into three adults, one subadult, and ten others, have finally reunited! In the first week of this month, they came together, creating a breath-taking sight as 14 lions walked down the road at dusk.
- For the remainder of the month, the Mananga Pride spent a significant amount of time hunting in the dense sticky-thorns and the area east of Green-Apple Hill. Without success, they decided to move north. For almost a week, they were nowhere to be found, and only by following a group of descending vultures did we manage to spot the ears of a single lioness peeking out from the tall grass. As we approached, the rest of the pride came into view, their bloated bellies and bloodstained mouths evident. For a moment, it seemed the Mananga Pride had returned to their old territory in the north when we found them a few days later in the beautiful open plain known as 'Kori-Clearings,' named for the many Kori Bustards that roam the grasslands. They appeared to be hunting again. Early the next morning, we heard male lions calling. By spreading out across the concession, we were able to find tracks and gradually piece together what must have been a tumultuous night for the Mananga and Sonop males. Vultures perched on nearly every dead leadwood around Kori-Clearings, so we decided to investigate. Like falling dominoes, we first found two of the Sonop males - one with a full belly but a serious gash on his back right leg. Moments later, a radio call informed us that the third Sonop male had been located to the south, accompanied by a single lioness. A few seconds after that, the Mananga Pride was discovered further south, moving quickly away from us. A headcount revealed only six adult lionesses and seven cubs. While it's purely speculative, it seems the Sonop males and the Mananga Pride had encountered one another. Being large, powerful females, the lionesses managed to escape with most of the cubs, though three were still unaccounted for. Two days later, all ten cubs were found sprawled out on park road near the sticky-thorns with five adult females. They had killed what we believe was a female waterbuck, though it was hard to tell as nothing remained except for the stomach contents. It appeared that crocodiles and hyenas had finished off all that the lions had left behind.
- After nearly a month of absence, the Shish Pride returned to our concession for a brief visit at the end of the month. The subadult males, now around two years old, have grown larger than their mothers. Their scruffy necks and faint mohawks hint at the early stages of their manes.
- Casper, the iconic white lion, has made a historic return to the area where he was born after a long absence since leaving the concession in 2019. The speculation surrounding his return stems from reports that younger male lions have recently taken over the territory once ruled by Casper and his brothers. March 28th marks a significant event as Casper reappeared in the very same area of his natal pride, signalling a potential shift in the local lion dynamics. Interestingly, this return coincides with the exact spot where, just the day before, the Shish Pride was observed playing, adding an unexpected twist to the narrative. Casper's return not only captures the attention of wildlife enthusiasts but also hints at the evolving power structures within the pride territories.

Leopards

- The Dumbana youngsters (now almost 17 months old) spent a few days playing in the small guarri-bushes and long grass, crouching low before ambushing one another. Their mother is leaving them alone for longer periods now, enabling them to slowly gain more independence and confidence in their abilities. The young, energetic pair have dominated our leopard sightings this month. The female subadult (2:3) was stalking a Swainson's spurfowl one afternoon when it saw her and flew dramatically into a tall knob-thorn tree nearby. She casually strolled to the base and leapt up, climbing almost to the thinnest branches, determined to catch the bird. Just as we thought she was about to learn a lesson on which branches she could and could not climb, the spurfowl took off, and she quickly slid back down to a more suitable fork in the tree. After methodically scanning the grass below, she carefully descended the tree. We thought the chase was over - until she cocked her ears, crouched, and leopard-crawled into the long grass. This wasn't the end for her. With the sun setting, we decided to leave her, allowing the opportunity for her to practice her hunting skills in the cover of darkness.
- A shy male leopard, seen fairly regularly, was found one morning when investigating a kettle of vultures circling over an open area where an adult impala ram lay dead. He had most likely seen the vultures descending and was hoping for a free meal.
- After a five-week absence, Kalanga has finally returned! Due to the rainfall covering any and all tracks, he could have been hiding within our concession. As a young male leopard, exploring is part of his nature. He is almost at the age where he will establish his own territory and begin mating with females therein. His return was nothing less than epic. As he strolled down the road with all his usual swagger, he suddenly paused, crouched, and leapt into the long grass adjacent to the road. A Swainson's spurfowl flew out, shrieking in panic. Kalanga was too quick and caught it in the air with his front paws. Our excitement was short-lived, however, as the next day he was back in Kruger. Two weeks later, we glimpsed him strolling down the S41, into the loop road south of the N'wanetsi Crossing, and back into Kruger again.

Cheetahs

- A female has been moving along the H6, just east of the first rise. She is in beautiful condition, holding her head high as she glides through the long grass.
- There was a single sighting of a cheetah in the central depression mid-month. Aside from that, these spotted beauties are most likely seeking out plains with shorter grasses to avoid accidentally running into a pride of sleeping lions.

African wild dogs

- The pack of three was seen twice this month, near the granophyre's, less than a mile from the Mozambican border.

Elephants

- The first week of March saw only a few elephant sightings, most of which were solitary bulls. With the marula trees nearing the end of their fruiting season and our concession having few marulas, we know that this time of year, the elephants migrate west to indulge in the sweet fruit.

Spotted hyenas

- The den-site in the granophyre ridge is active, yet the youngsters remain elusive.
- Three individuals are regularly seen in the pan system near the Nstibitsane drainage. Two sub-adults with fluffy coats and their legs still covered with the black fur they are born with, and a single female,

can be found almost daily, stalking impala, chewing on an old bone, or resting in the shade of one of the beautiful umbrella thorn trees.

Buffalos

- Besides the herds grazing in the far northern plains, only a single buffalo bull wandered along the Xinkelegane drainage this month. Buffalo bulls are often called "dagga boys" because of their behaviour and their preferred habitat. The term "dagga" refers to mud in some southern African languages, and the nickname "dagga boys" is given to these bulls due to their tendency to wallow in mud. This helps them cool off, protect themselves from parasites, and perhaps even hide their scent from predators. Additionally, these older, solitary bulls tend to be a bit more reclusive and are sometimes seen as rough or tough, much like the mud they wallow in. These bulls often live alone or in small groups, and their rough, rugged appearance and behaviour have contributed to this nickname.

Plains game

- On the H6 near Sonop, nearly 1 000 zebras gathered, their striking black and white patterns creating a mesmerizing sight across the landscape. Meanwhile, the impala ewes are beginning to show the first signs of the season's change, with the males' horns starting to protrude like small black daggers from their heads. As March progresses, the game has begun to disperse throughout the concession, spreading out into the vast wilderness.

Rare animals and other sightings

- One rainy morning, as we drove through the central plains, something the colour of a steenbok—a light reddish-brown—slipped across the road. It moved with a smooth, gliding motion that heightened my suspicion. When we reached the spot where I thought it had vanished into the tall grass, a rattling cisticola suddenly took flight, hovering above one spot and calling out. Moments later, a caracal dove out from the underbrush! It vanished as swiftly as it had appeared.
- One late afternoon, a serval was spotted gracefully leaping into the tall grass. These elusive, smaller cats are typically found in grasslands and are most abundant in places like the Serengeti and Maasai Mara. As such, encountering one in our area is a rare and truly special sighting.

Birds

- As summer comes to a close, European swallows and European bee-eaters are gathering in large numbers in preparation for their upcoming migration along the east coast of Africa, heading towards southern Europe.
- A flock of five southern ground-hornbills gave chase to something in the open areas north of Dave's Crossing. It was a bit too far to identify the target, but it had their full attention, and it was quite comical to watch these turkey-sized hornbills hopping along together. These large birds possess incredibly strong bills capable of penetrating even a tortoise shell. Their diet includes termite alates, snails, frogs, snakes, chameleons, squirrels, and even young hares.

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

The granophyre ridges of Kruger National Park

Article by Rudi Hulshoff

A geological and ecological marvel along the Lebombo Mountain Range at Singita Kruger National Park.



Nestled within the vast expanse of South Africa's Kruger National Park, the granophyre ridges along the Lebombo Mountain Range, after which Lebombo lodge was named, stand as a striking testament to the region's geological history and ecological richness. These unique formations, characterized by their dramatic, rugged profiles, divide the eastern plains of the park from the rolling Lebombo koppies, creating a landscape that is as visually captivating as it is biologically diverse. For visitors and researchers alike, the granophyre ridges offer a window into the ancient processes that shaped southern Africa and the vibrant ecosystems that thrive here today.

Geological origins of the granophyre ridges:

The granophyre ridges owe their existence to the complex geological history of the Lebombo Mountain Range, an 800-kilometre-long, narrow chain stretching from KwaZulu-Natal in the south to Limpopo in the north. Geologically classified as a monocline, the Lebombo Range formed as part of a rifted volcanic margin during the breakup of the supercontinent Gondwana millions of years ago. This tectonic upheaval gave rise to a sequence of Jurassic-age volcanic rocks, including basaltic lavas, rhyolitic flows, and tuffs. Among these, granophyre—a coarse-grained, igneous rock formed from the slow cooling of magma—emerges as a defining feature. Unlike the more common basalt or rhyolite found in the region, granophyre is distinguished by its interlocking quartz and feldspar crystals, giving it a unique texture and durability. Along the Lebombo Range, the interplay between resistant rhyolite and granophyre and the more easily eroded basalts has sculpted a series of sharp, parallel cuesta ridges separated by savanna plains. At Singita Kruger National Park, these ridges rise

prominently above the N’wanetsi River, their reddish and pinkish hues contrasting sharply with the surrounding greenery. The granophyre formations, often looming as enormous granite-like outcrops, create a dramatic backdrop that enhances the concession’s wild, untamed allure.



Ecological significance and biodiversity:

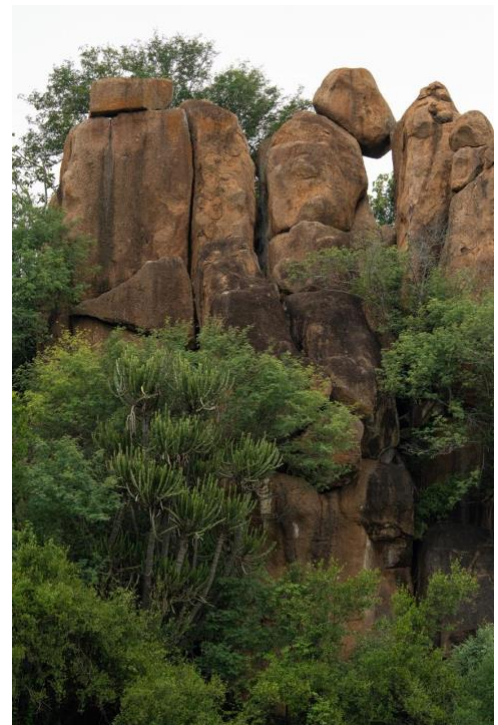
Beyond their geological intrigue, the granophyre ridges play a vital role in shaping the ecological tapestry of Kruger National Park. The Lebombo Range, forming the park’s eastern boundary with Mozambique, is one of its driest and most rugged regions. The shallow, stony soils atop the ridges support a specialized array of drought-resistant vegetation, including succulents and euphorbias like the Lowveld and Lebombo candelabra euphorbias, both known for their highly poisonous latex. These hardy plants thrive in the arid conditions, their resilience a testament to nature’s adaptability.

The ridges themselves are dotted with distinctive trees such as the Lebombo ironwood, white kirkia, and large-leaved rock figs—species uniquely suited to the rocky terrain. The large-leaved rock fig, in particular, stands out as a “rock splitter,” its roots prying apart crevices in the granophyre and rhyolite, contributing to the slow sculpting of the landscape. Along the lower slopes and gorges, where the ridges meet the basalt flatlands, a transition zone emerges, marked by knob-thorn, raisin bushes, leadwood trees and marulas. This gradient of habitats supports a surprising diversity of wildlife, despite the harsh conditions.

While the granophyre ridges themselves are not teeming with large mammals due to the sparse vegetation, they serve as a scenic overlook and a critical corridor for species moving between the eastern plains and the Lebombo hills. Birds of prey, such as eagles, often perch atop these rocky outcrops, scanning the savanna below for prey. Meanwhile, the nearby N’wanetsi River, shimmering beneath the cliffside, attracts a variety of animals, from elephants bathing in its waters to leopards stalking along its banks. The ridges thus act as both a barrier and a bridge, influencing animal behaviour and migration patterns across the concession’s 33 000 acre south-eastern boundary.

A cultural and visitor experience:

The granophyre ridges are more than just a natural wonder—they are a focal point for human experience within Kruger National Park. Perched high above the N’wanetsi River, Singita Lebombo Lodge capitalizes on this dramatic setting, offering guests an unparalleled vantage point. The lodge’s wide wooden decks and glass-walled suites frame the ridges as a living artwork, their imposing forms illuminated by the golden hues of sunrise and sunset.



Historically, the area around the granophyre ridges has also been shaped by human activity. N'wanetsi, now home to some staff, was once a private camp for apartheid-era officials, and carries tales of ingenuity and wildlife encounters. A famous anecdote recounts how ranger Gus Adendorff, desperate to impress Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd with a lion sighting, baited the area with a wildebeest carcass—a ruse that drew 23 lions to the ridges' edge. Such stories highlight the enduring interplay between humans and nature in this rugged corner of the park.



Conservation and future outlook

As part of Kruger National Park, the granophyre ridges fall under the protective umbrella of one of Africa's largest game reserves, a region committed to balancing conservation, community development, and ecotourism. The ridges, while resilient, are not immune to broader environmental pressures such as climate change, which could alter rainfall patterns and vegetation in the Lebombo region. Efforts to preserve this landscape focus on maintaining its ecological integrity, ensuring that the unique flora and fauna adapted to the granophyre environment endure for future generations.

The granophyre ridges along the Lebombo Mountain Range offer a profound encounter with the raw forces of nature. They are a reminder of the Earth's deep past, a sanctuary for specialized ecosystems, and a canvas for human stories etched against a timeless backdrop. Whether viewed from a game drive, a lodge deck, or a starlit dinner, these ridges encapsulate the wild heart of Singita Kruger National Park—a place where geology and life converge in breath-taking harmony.

The leopard tortoise (*Stigmochelys pardalis*), one of the most striking and recognizable tortoise species, is a fascinating reptile native to the savannas, grasslands, and semi-arid regions of eastern and southern Africa. Named for its distinctive yellow-and-black spotted shell, which resembles the coat of a leopard, this species is well-adapted to a variety of environmental conditions. However, its behaviour, diet, and overall lifestyle undergo notable changes between the warm, vibrant summers and the cooler, dormant winters. Understanding how the leopard tortoise navigates these seasonal shifts offers a glimpse into its resilience and adaptability.



Summer: A Season of Activity and Abundance

Summer in the leopard tortoise's natural habitat typically brings warm temperatures, often ranging between 24°C to 35°C, accompanied by seasonal rains in many regions. This is a time of plenty for the tortoise, as the landscape transforms into a lush expanse of grasses, succulents, and flowering plants—its primary food sources. The leopard tortoise is a strict herbivore, favouring a diet of mixed grasses, thistles, and even the occasional prickly pear cactus. During the summer months, it takes full advantage of this abundance, grazing actively to build up energy reserves.

The warmth of summer also fuels the tortoise's metabolism, making it more active than at any other time of year. Leopard tortoises are diurnal, meaning they are awake and mobile during the day. In summer, they can often be seen basking in the early morning sun to regulate their body temperature before setting out to forage. Unlike some other tortoise species, the leopard tortoise does not dig burrows for shelter. Instead, it seeks shade under bushes or rocky outcrops during the hottest parts of the day to avoid overheating. This behaviour highlights its ability to balance activity with thermoregulation, a critical skill in the sun-soaked African summers.

For wild populations, summer is also a key time for reproduction. Female leopard tortoises lay clutches of 5 to 30 eggs, depending on their size and health, often digging shallow nests in sandy soil. The warm temperatures and occasional rains create ideal conditions for egg incubation, which typically lasts 8 to 12 months. Hatchlings often emerge in late summer or early autumn, ready to take advantage of the lingering abundance. In captivity, summer-like conditions can prompt similar reproductive behaviour, though timing may vary.

Winter: A time of rest and resilience

In contrast to the lively summers, winter in the leopard tortoise's habitat is a season of scarcity and stillness. From May to August in the Southern Hemisphere, temperatures can drop significantly, sometimes dipping below 10°C at night, while rainfall becomes sparse. The lush greenery of summer fades, leaving behind dry grasses and limited food sources. For the leopard tortoise, this shift triggers a dramatic change in behaviour: it enters a state of brumation, a reptile equivalent of hibernation, though less extreme.

During winter, the leopard tortoise's metabolism slows considerably, reducing its need for food and water. It becomes far less active, often spending days or even weeks resting in sheltered spots—under shrubs, in tall grass, or among rocks—to conserve energy and stay protected from the cold. While it doesn't fully hibernate, its reduced activity helps it survive on the fat reserves accumulated during the summer months. In particularly arid regions, the tortoise may aestivate if conditions become too dry, but winter brumation is more common across its range.

Water conservation is another key adaptation in winter. Leopard tortoises obtain much of their hydration from the plants they eat, but with food scarce, they rely on their ability to retain moisture. Their kidneys are highly efficient, producing concentrated urine to minimize water loss. In the wild, they may also drink from puddles or dew when available, though such opportunities are rare in the dry winter months.

For tortoise keepers in regions with distinct seasons, replicating winter conditions can be a challenge. In captivity, leopard tortoises are often kept in warm, stable environments year-round, which can prevent natural brumation. However, some experts argue that allowing a controlled cooling period around 15°C for a few weeks mimics their natural cycle and promotes long-term health. During this time, food intake decreases, and the tortoise may sleep more, reflecting its wild counterparts.

Delicate balance across seasons:

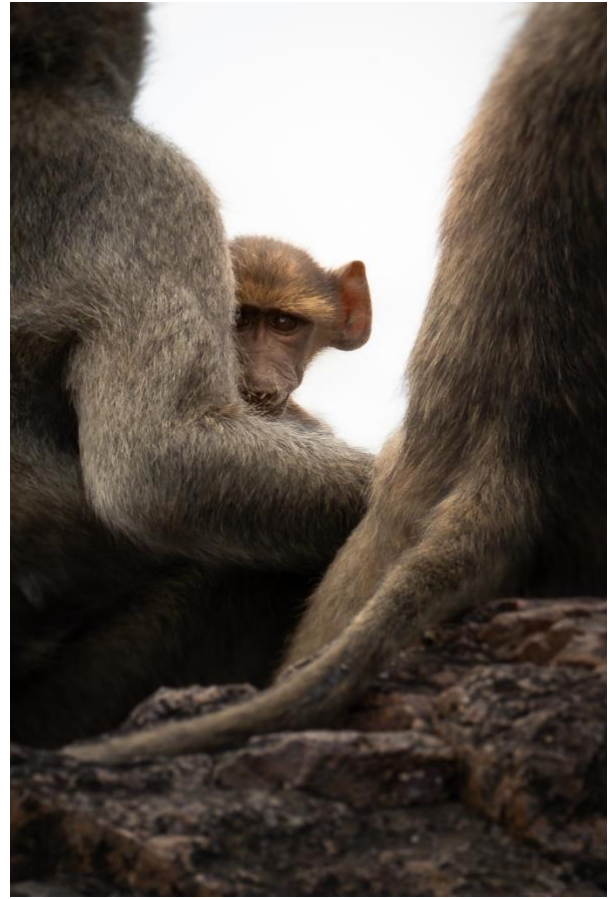
The leopard tortoise's ability to thrive in both summer and winter underscores its remarkable adaptability. In summer, it capitalizes on warmth and abundance to grow, reproduce, and prepare for leaner times. In winter, it conserves energy and endures scarcity with a stoic resilience honed by evolution. This seasonal rhythm is a testament to the species' survival strategy in the unpredictable climates of its native range.

For those fortunate enough to observe or care for a leopard tortoise, these seasonal shifts offer a window into its natural history. Whether basking under the summer sun or resting quietly through a winter chill, the leopard tortoise embodies a quiet strength, its spotted shell a constant reminder of the wild landscapes it calls home. As climate patterns evolve, understanding and supporting these seasonal adaptations will be key to ensuring the species' continued success, both in the wild and in captivity.

March Gallery



Blue-cheeked bee-eater – Photo by Monika Malewski



Chacma baboon – Photo by Monika Malewski

Dumbana female leopard – Photo by Monika Malewski





Mananga Pride – Photo by Monika Malewski

Male giraffe – Photo by Evidence Nkuna

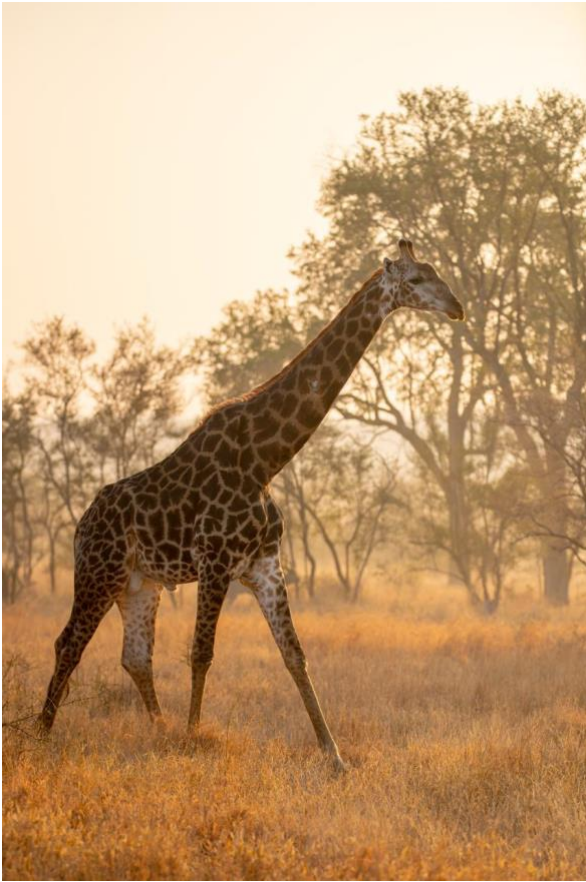
Elephant bull – Photo by Monika Malewski



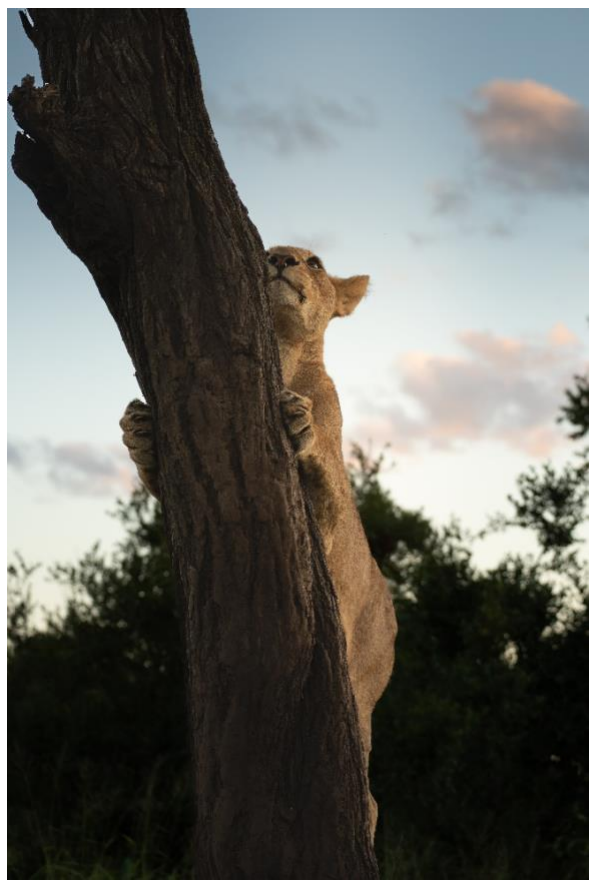


Sonop male lion – Photo by Evidence Nkuna
Dumbana young female – Photo by Rudi Hulshoff





Giraffe bull – Photo by Rudi Hulshoff



Mananga sub-adult - Photo by Monika Malewski

Chava female with cubs – Photo by Rudi Hulshoff





Herd of elephants – Photo by Evidence Nkuna
Nile crocodile – Photo by Rudi Hulshoff





Kalanga male leopard – Photo by Rudi Hulshoff



Tree squirrel – Photo by Monika Malewski

Brindled gnu/blue wildebeest – Photo by Monika Malewski

