

# Singita



## WILDLIFE JOURNAL

### SINGITA PAMUSHANA / MALILANGWE, ZIMBABWE

For the month of September, Two Thousand and Twenty-Three

#### Temperature

Average minimum: 18.4°C (65.1°F)

Minimum recorded: 12.9°C (55.2°F)

Average maximum: 32.4°C (90.3°F)

Maximum recorded: 37.8°C (100°F)

#### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 14 mm

\*For the season to date: 14 mm

\*Season = Sep to Aug

#### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:35

Sunset: 17:51

We were relieved to receive our first splash of rain in the last week of the month, which has brought relief all round. Up until then the wildlife was concentrated along the river banks, around the dam, in the swamps and at the permanent water pans. This has made for a month of terrific sightings.

In reviewing each guide's monthly sighting report in order to compile the monthly wildlife overview I occasionally come across new terms I've never heard before – and some I hear often... Two new ones this month were:

“... guests enjoyed a sofa safari at the lodge.” I’ve always called it an “armchair safari” but a sofa safari sounds far more comfy! And indeed – you can lie on a sofa at the lodge and watch the birds and other wildlife like endearing dassies.

“...retired buffalo bulls...” was another. I usually call them “grumpy old dagga boys” but retired buffalo bulls is far more respectful and dignified!

But one I hear often enough was this:

“We went out fishing and hooked a few tigers, and we lost a very big one that could have been a record of note.”

On that note let’s get to the monthly wildlife overview:

## **Lions**

It’s been an interesting month viewing lions because it seems there were lions from both the Nduna and River Prides at a kill, which is most unusual. While this was happening there were three territorial male lions mating with lionesses far away within the heart of Nduna territory. Later on in the month the Nduna Pride were seen along the eastern bank of the Chiredzi River, which was always the stronghold of the River Pride, feeding on another buffalo carcass. The River Pride of nine lions were seen walking up and down the west bank of the river looking upset and rattled, as if they had been in a fight, with a male following behind them.

- Nine lions were at the base of Pamushana Hill below Malilangwe House, feeding on a buffalo bull kill. A day later a large number of spotted hyenas had taken over the carcass and they had pushed the lions off. The hyenas fed with raucous intent and lots of fighting going on over the feed.
- Two mating pairs of lions have been seen at Nduna Dam, with a third male there too but keeping his distance from the couples.
- Five lions were seen around Hwata Pan causing much consternation among the herbivores that had walked a long way to reach the lifeline of water.
- An adult male lion was seen feeding on a buffalo calf in the Chidumo area.

## **Elephants**

- A large breeding herd of elephants have been feeding in the swamps this month, and another has been feeding in the north and drinking at the Malilangwe Dam.
- Some impressive bulls, six at one time, gathered at Hwata Pan to monopolise the water.

## **Rhinos**

- White rhino sightings are excellent, now more so than ever. Once the rains come, temporary pans fill and grass becomes abundant they’ll be less conspicuous.
- A black rhino bull has been spending a lot of time on the plains just below Pamushana Hill, and spotting him makes for an excellent start to any safari.
- Usually black rhino sightings are quick and of a lone animal or cow and calf, but this month some guests have been lucky enough to see several in one area, and they’ve been relaxed and provided extended viewing

## **Buffalo**

- Large herds kick up clouds of dust as they arrive in their hundreds at water sources, often just as we are enjoying sundowners – an incredible spectacle to see.
- The retired buffalo bulls have been in evidence too.

## **Leopards**

- We have some wonderful leopard news: Guide and guests left for a sunset drive at around 17.30 and spotted a leopard walking along near Crocodile Creek. They followed her all the way to Ultimate Drive

where she disappeared up into the hills, and after a few minutes they heard cubs calling and making excited noises.

- Another leopard has been seen a few times on the shoreline of the dam while guests have been on the cruise boat.
- An adult male leopard just seen chilling in the shade of the Chiredzi riverbed.

### **Wild dogs**

- Again, good news. The wild dog pack of six adults and seven pups seem to be doing well. They have been spotted on a few occasions in the central areas, hunting impala and, on one occasion, the adults killed a young female kudu.

### **Hyenas**

- Apart from seeing all those hyenas on the lions' buffalo kill, the highlight hyena sighting was of a hyena carrying a full size impala on the road near Nyamasikana River, close to Kwali.

### **Plains game/antelope**

- September is the month to see the shyer plains game like sable antelope and Lichtenstein hartebeest. They are lured out of their far flung feeding grounds to the few permanent water sources. On one occasion 17 sable were viewed at close range along the Mahande Loop, and a herd of 13 hartebeest were at old Chimize pan.
- Interestingly it's been a good month to see Sharpe's grysbok too – on one drive six were seen in total!
- It's beautiful to see a variety of plains game feeding on the crimson sausage tree flowers and green leaves at this time.

### **Birds**

- The quelea in their hundreds and thousands are mesmerising in their mass displays, but vying for bird sighting of the month was a bat hawk chasing a bat.

### **Photographic hide**

- A procession of animals has visited the pan at this hide on hot dry days, but as soon as the rains fall heavy this oasis will lose its allure. As such we've been making hay while the sun shines and seen rhinos, elephants, zebras, buffalo, sable, warthogs and jackals to name but a few, and heard a leopard calling whilst we were in the hide.

### **Boat cruises**

- Water safaris are a firm favourite for everyone, as the water has such a calming effect. Many of the birds that nest in the trees around the dam have chicks at the moment, such as the African fish eagles and African darters. Hippo sightings are guaranteed, as are crocs sunning themselves on the shoreline.
- Because the water is such a drawcard at the moment there have been some amazing wildlife sightings too: a breeding herd of elephants drinking and swimming, lions and hyenas relaxing in the shade, a black rhino drinking and a leopard sitting at the edge of the water.

### **Fishing**

- With the hot weather the fishing has improved, and quite a few tigerfish have been landed, which is no easy feat.

### **Walks**

- September is a great month to enjoy a walking or tracking on foot experience. One very fit group clocked up an 11 kilometre walk!

### **Rock art**

Even if you're not up for a bush walk it is essential to drive to one of the rock art sites and alight from the game-viewer vehicle to have a close look at the cave paintings.

### **Unusual/other**

- While on foot, looking down on an elephant in the river, he seemed to get the groups scent and become agitated, but what had actually happened was he had nearly stepped on two big crocodiles that were feeding on a rotting buffalo carcass! The crocs swam away with the carcass in the one's jaws.
- Immediately after the first rainfall we saw a lot of leopard tortoises on the move, drinking water and filling up their bursa sacs - a reserve water storage system.
- This is not an 'unusual sighting' but more of a unique activity. Because of the incredible baobab trees on the property we will often make them a focus of a safari activity, such as walking to the largest one we have, or having drinks at the "Lovers In Arms" baobabs.

### **Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft**

- The hunter-gatherer lifestyle was demonstrated to very appreciative and amazed guests.

### **Gonarezhou Day Trips**

- Guests have loved the day trips to Gonarezhou this month, the highlights being Chilojo Cliffs and breeding herds of elephants. There have been some lucky sightings too, such as a pride of lions feasting on a zebra carcass. (There's a story about these day trips in this journal.)

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

Getting framed





Our sunken photographic hide provides endless photographic opportunities in the dry months when it's accessible. It's regularly frequented by large herbivores and sometimes you can be lucky enough to find more than one species there. A couple of bull elephants have been clever enough to work out exactly where the source of the water feed is (which is right in front of the opening of the hide) and drink directly from that spot. Some of them are even cheeky enough to spray you with mud should you make a sound! However, every now and then their colossal forms provide a wonderfully creative frame for other animals that have come to drink during the blue and golden hours.

## Dexterity

This peaceful elephant bull was having a quiet time on his own at the waterhole until a more boisterous drinking buddy arrived. Us being in the sunken hide we had a worm's eye view as to the dexterity of his trunk when drinking. They can use their trunks like a flexible straw to suck up water from various sources, such as rivers, dams, or water holes. They will insert the tip of their trunk into the water and then use the many muscles in their trunk to create suction, drawing water up into the trunk. Then they put their trunk tip in their mouth and allow the water to transfer from trunk to mouth. This particular elephant had a way of resting his heavy trunk on one of his tusks for less strenuous effort.



In addition to using their trunks as a straw, elephants can also use them as a scoop. They will submerge the tip of their trunk into the water, filling it with a smaller amount of water, and then curl their trunk up and pour the water into their mouths.

Elephants have excellent control over their trunks and can regulate the flow of water. They can drink large quantities of water by continuously sucking it up into their trunks, or they can take smaller sips by carefully controlling the amount of water they draw up. The trunk is a highly sensitive organ with a multitude of nerve endings. Elephants can use their trunks to explore the water source, assessing the temperature, depth, and quality of the water before drinking. Elephants may also use their trunks to rinse their mouths or bodies after drinking. They might spray water onto their backs to cool down or wash away dust and mud. Sometimes, elephants may store water in their trunks and transport it to another location to drink or to spray on their bodies for cooling or bathing. It's quite a surprise when you see an elephant doing this in an area away from water.

Adult elephants have incredible dexterity and precision when using their trunks. Their trunks are essential for many aspects of their daily lives, from feeding and drinking to communication and self-defence. Watching a baby elephant learn how to use its trunk is an absolute delight. Getting control over that unwieldy appendage can be a dark art!





## Black rhino magic

As guides we all have our personal lucky spots of where to look for certain animals. My black rhino hangouts were not delivering so I asked my learned colleague Japhet Diza to share some clues. He told me to go on an unnamed road near the river at dawn or dusk where he'd been seeing a mother and calf fairly regularly. Well, I was barely 100 metres down that road when this happened! An incredible sighting of a mother and calf black rhino (and a curious fork-tailed drongo looking on). After curiously inspecting the vehicle she ran across the road, baby following behind, and then re-approached us from the other side.



## Gonarezhou day trip



The Malilangwe Reserve shares a border with the Gonarezhou National Park, our like-minded neighbours that we affectionately call “Gonaz”. We offer our Singita Pamushana guests a day trip to Gonaz which usually sees us setting off from the lodge with a light breakfast, doing a game drive south through our reserve to the park’s entrance at Chipinda Pools in the north. We then weave our way south to Chilojo Cliffs, stopping there for a delicious, packed picnic lunch and return back to the lodge by mid-afternoon.

Gonarezhou National Park is one of Zimbabwe's most stunning and remote wilderness areas. Chipinda Pools is renowned for serene surroundings along the Runde River, and if you don't see elephants here then you absolutely will see them later on. Gonarezhou means “the place of elephants”. The park stretches over 5 053 square kilometres (1.25 million acres) and has one of the highest densities of elephants anywhere in Africa.

The road winds its way through the park's diverse landscapes, including woodlands, grasslands, and riverine areas, and has greater hill elevations and valleys than the Malilangwe Reserve. Generally the wildlife sightings are good, the birdwatching epic, and the baobab and riverine trees simply incredible.

On our most recent day trip the wildlife highlights were waterbuck – far from the water, in fact they were surprisingly high up on the hills, a hilarious warthog that thought he was king of the castle, some of the most majestic kudu you could ever wish to see, and, of course, several breeding herds of elephants, and groups of bulls.

Chilojo Cliffs are a permanent highlight of the journey. These towering red sandstone cliffs rise dramatically from the Runde River, creating a stunning backdrop. At the designated picnic area we stretch our legs and enjoy a leisurely lunch while gazing at the cliffs. A quintessential photograph to get has to be of elephants with the striated cliffs in the background!



A young waterbuck amid a meadow of grass and forbs.



The warthog that thought he was king...



Shaking the soil and dust off a trunkful of grass before eating it.





Kudu bulls in a field of gold, and kudu cows and calf amid a copper enclave.







The sequence of photos of bull elephants at Chilojo Cliffs was a sighting etched in eternity. With a mug of hot chocolate in hand, at the crackle of dawn, I sat alone at the cliffs. An elephant emerged through a tributary riverbed and was joined by another at the water's edge. They were ant-like against the enormity of the cliffs. They two mammoths drank as the sunrise traced them in gold, then they ambled across the shallows splashing silver as they went.

If you are ever fortunate enough to visit Singita Pamushana make sure you have enough time in your itinerary to include a day trip to Gonarezhou. It has an aura of such vast eternal wilderness that reaches your soul and diffuses disquiet.



Two baobabs in Gonarezhou National Park that hint at the enormity, peace and splendour that you will find.



Twitter



A hamerkop ignores a rhino as it watches for frogs.



A shikra devours a stolen chick.



My bird app describes the red-crested korhaan as a “rather nondescript, small bustard...” but I think master of camouflage would be more apt. Its eye must have caught my eye and messaged my brain to reverse back after driving past. On doing so the korhaan stood absolutely motionless. Even the auto-focus on our cameras struggled to define the bird.

September Gallery



A giraffe daughter demanding attention nuzzles her mother, amid an umbrella tree canopy.



A tiny mopane squirrel awakes from its nest and basks in a morning sunbeam.



Zebras and Lichtenstein hartebeest are tolerant of each other's company as they make their way towards water, stopping and staring to assess any potential predatory threats.



Three white rhinos march single file towards water in the golden hour of late afternoon.





Racing towards water at a hot trot these three elephant bulls gulped splashy trunkfuls on arrival.





We are all so relieved now that we've had our first rainfall.  
These 'tax collectors' were more belligerent than ever in their search for grazing and water.



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