

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE For the month of May, Two Thousand and Twenty Two

Temperature

Average minimum: 15.8°C (60.4°F)

Minimum recorded: 11.7°C (53.0°F)

Average maximum: 28.8°C (83.8°F)

Maximum recorded: 34.2°C (93.5°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 6 mm

*For the year to date: 532 mm

*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:23

Sunset: 17:19

As you can tell from the temperatures above winter is approaching but it is nothing a long hug from a hot water bottle on morning game drive can't fix! It's also the time when sightings increase thanks to the grazed vegetation and scant water sources. On one afternoon drive guests saw the Big 5, plus wild dogs and hyenas.

We love surprising our guests with special touches, but we can't tell you what they are! A memorable quote from a guest this month was: "An experience beyond any adjective." And another, after spending five minutes in silence listening to the sounds of Nature, was, "It's like being in church."

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for May:

Lions

- **Nduna Pride:** 11 members of this pride were seen together, sleeping under the shade of a tree. A sighting with perfect soft light was had with the whole pride lying in the open green grassland. A highlight was spending time with 10 members at Lojaan Dam as they feasted on a Cape buffalo carcass which they had killed in the early morning.
- **River Pride:** They have infant cubs! A lioness and two cubs were spotted just before they disappeared into the riverine vegetation of the Chiredzi River. Also, just north of 02 picket, three cubs seen with the pride as they feasted on a Cape buffalo. They cubs are nervous so a respectful far distance is being kept from them. Guests were enjoying sunset drinks at Chikwete Cliffs when suddenly the air was filled with loud roaring from across the river and then return roars from the side where they were standing.
- **Southern Pride:** A wonderful sighting was had of this pride drinking at Hwata Pan, joined by some white rhinos.
- **Territorial males:** Vultures perched in a baobab alerted us to finding two male lions at a giraffe carcass.

Leopards

- There've been some fleeting sightings, such as the one of the leopard sitting next to the airstrip road that took off, and other longer ones such as spending half an hour with a leopard as it stalked impalas one evening, and watching a female moving towards a rocky outcrop one morning, thanks to the warning screeches coming from a flock of panicking guineafowl.

Hyenas

- The hyenas have been doing what they do best – leeching off the wild dogs' kills. There was big drama when they tried to steal a sub-adult kudu carcass from a pack of 12 wild dogs. The hyenas were victorious.
- One of the clans we see regularly has cubs at the moment, and it is a delight to watch these endearing creatures play and tussle with one another.

Elephants

- The breeding herds with their babies are an absolute delight.
- Quite a few of the big bulls are in musth at the moment. One of them pushed down a big thorn tree and we thought he would feed on the leaves, but he didn't, so it seemed to be more a show of strength or an expression of frustration with the tree having no choice but to be the punchbag.

Rhinos

- Our Rhino Ops took place this month – a time when we notch the calves, record data, do analysis and move specific rhinos to new conservancies. Guests in the right place at the right time were invited to participate in these operations and had the experience of a lifetime by meeting team experts, watching the whole procedure from darting to release, and sometimes even participating in recording the information of temperature and body measurements.
- At a favourite hotspot 11 rhinos were seen drinking together, ten white and one black.
- Guide and guests witnessed a terrifying moment whilst having sundowners and watching rhinos come to drink. A white rhino made her way to the waterhole with a baby rhino walking behind her. A lioness was stalking the baby and gave chase to the toddler. Just before pouncing it ran to the front of its mother and she chased the lioness. Other rhinos that were drinking came to the rescue and joined the chase, seeing the lioness off for good.

- Guests on a walk had an adrenalin-filled encounter with a black rhino when it came as close as 10 metres from where they were crouched behind a bush, and started detecting their presence. He charged a couple of times trying to see if they were a threat, before galloping away.

Buffalos

- Large herds of about 400 buffalo are seen drinking every day.
- There was a commotion between a pride of 11 lions and a herd of about 700 buffalo, resulting in three lionesses having to climb up a tree to get away from the stampeding buffalo. Not far from this scene four white rhino were grazing and ignoring the pandemonium.

Wild dogs

- There have been prolific sightings of wild dogs in May, and the best news is that they are denning somewhere in the central areas of the reserve. We will not seek the den out, as tempting as that may be to see and photograph young pups, as it is our conservation policy to treat these endangered animals with absolute sensitivity and not cause any (possibly detrimental) behaviour change due to human presence/interference at a den-site. We are thrilled that they have decided to den on the property yet again, and look forward to seeing new pups running with the pack in the near future.
- We've all relished the moments where we've seen wild dogs lying on a road, or racing up and down it, and playing on the banks of Sosigi Dam with full bellies and excess energy.
- We've watched them make unsuccessful hunts on impala, waterbuck and nyala, and we've seen them successfully take down a young waterbuck, kudu and impala ram. They lost the remains of the kudu and impala to hyenas after co-ordinated efforts to protect their kills, but ultimately losing to the larger predators.

Plains game

- Plains game abound, but the major plains game news is that the impala rutting season is in full force. The air is alive with distinctive snorts and the sound of clashing horns as rams vie for dominance and mating rights.

Birds

- The water safaris are brilliant for birding - a highlight was watching a bat hawk in full flight pursuing the insect-eating bats, while guests enjoyed sundowners on the boat.

Fishing

- Last month the biggest tigerfish in 12 years, at 6.5 kilogram (14.3 pounds), was caught and released in the Malilangwe Dam. Defying the odds a 6.57 kilogram (14.5 pounds) tigerfish was caught and released this month. To say the competition is fierce is an understatement! Our guests have loved trying their chances for bream and tigerfish, and arrive back at the lodge with many tales to tell.

Water safari

- Watching the sun set as it strokes the hills and the moon rise as it kisses the water is enough to soothe the soul of any weary traveller – indeed it's an ideal way to spend a late afternoon on arrival at Singita Pamushana.
- There are always birds, hippos and crocodiles to see. One croc put on a show by catching a huge bream and chomping it close to the boat.

Bush walks

- It's an ideal time for our favourite activity – bush walks. Apart from the big game guests have loved learning about insect life, animal tracks and plants.

Rock art

- One of our guests was a rock art enthusiast so it was a treat to show her some of the various sites and hear her feedback on how well preserved they are.

Photographic hide

- Some of our guests had never experienced being in a sunken photographic hide before and were amazed by the experience of being at eye level with the animals. The afternoons have been starting quietly, sometimes only with doves there, but invariably elephants bulls and white rhinos arrive, and sometimes a black rhino too if you're lucky.

Gonarezhou day trips

- There's an odd phenomenon that if you plan to do a day trip to Gonarezhou National Park it will be that particular day that an abundance of good sightings show themselves on the Malilangwe Reserve. This happened to one of the groups this month. As they left the lodge they met a pack of wild dogs hunting impalas. They drove along behind them watching them make several attempts on antelope, including a kudu. Just as the group were about to exit the Reserve and go into the park they got a message from the scouts that lions had killed an eland on the fenceline. There they saw 3 lions feeding on the eland carcass. Once they finally got into the Park they had a wonderful time admiring the landscape, trees and big breeding herds of elephants. They stopped for breakfast before proceeding to Chilojo Cliffs to enjoy a delicious packed lunch while admiring the striated sandstone natural monuments.

Some exciting and informative Bush Stories follow, as well as a May Gallery of images.

The giant posers

These elephant bulls were especially good at moving in formation and striking a pose, for which I was especially grateful. They really seemed to know their best angles and needed little to no styling which was most helpful as arranging elephants is like herding cats.

On a more factual note it's interesting to know why these bulls were together. Females stay in their family groups, while the males move out at 12 – 13 years. Females are sexually mature at 9 – 18 years, males at 7 – 18 years. After puberty the males live outside the female social structure in unstable, loosely bonded groups of two to four, exceptionally up to 20 - 30, and move back into female herds on their own, in search of cows in oestrus.

Bulls in an area have a dominance hierarchy. From the age of 25, bulls periodically go into musth as their testosterone levels rise to six times the usual level. Musth becomes more regular and lasts longer as bulls age, then periods of musth become shorter after 45. During musth bulls go off on their own in search of cow herds and are very aggressive towards other bulls.

In the Swahili language, “Askari” means protector. “Askari” is the name given to young male elephants that are found in the company of the older, wise bulls. The Askaris spend time learning the skills that the older bulls have acquired and in turn they help to protect the older bulls.

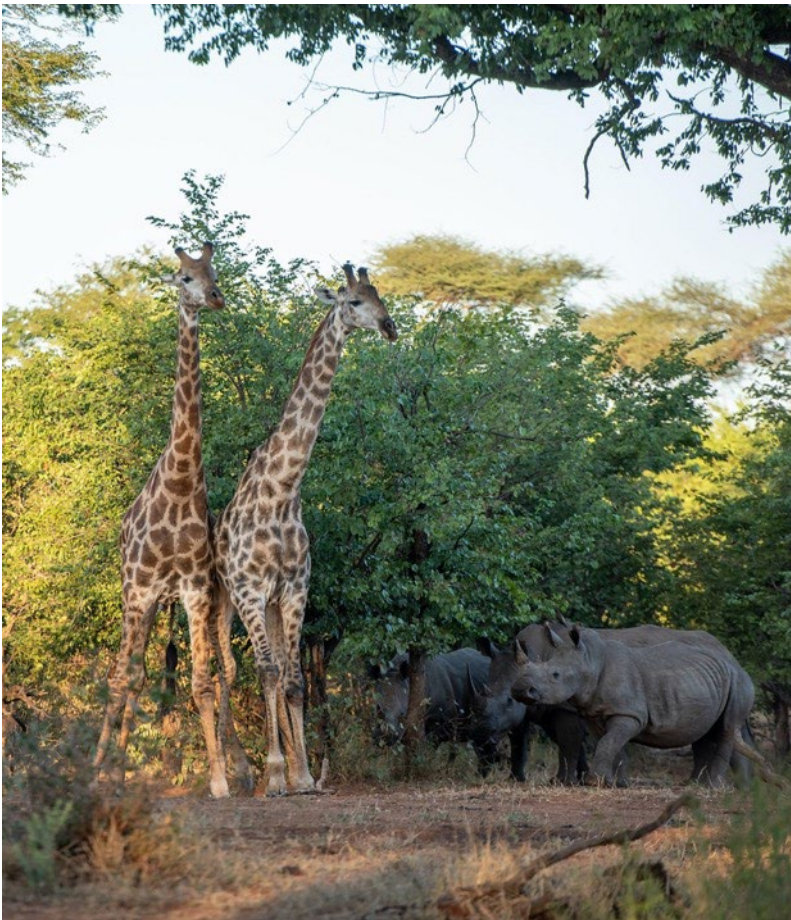
Seeing these bulls drink, splash and dust at the waterhole it was evident that the smallest one was the most lively, while the largest elephant was more calm and concise in his behaviour and made the decisions of when to arrive, depart, and in which direction to go.

The potential lifespan of an African elephant is 60 – 70 years.





Rhino antics



It's not unusual to see a lone white rhino male or a single female and calf, but they are the most gregarious of the five rhino species and can be seen in groups numbering into the teens. White rhinos act more like herd animals using a "safety in numbers" approach to survival.

In the photo above, you see a common position for a group of animals when they're on alert - they stand in a circle so that they're all facing in a different direction and can have a 360 degree view of their surroundings. In the background were two male giraffes having a sparring match. They would silently swing their necks then thump their ossicones ('horns') into one another making a dull thudding noise.

Rhinos' eyesight isn't great – they mainly rely on their strong sense of smell and hearing. Being the third largest land mammals behind the African and Asian elephant, they have eyes that are much

smaller than would be predicted based solely upon body size. Compare them to frogs and toads that have large eyes for their size, great stereoscopic vision, and are quite adept at snatching quick-flying insects from the air. So, while they could hear the giraffes they couldn't really see them. After they had finished drinking they went to investigate the noise, and I could scarcely believe it when they went right up to the giraffes, only a few feet away. Neither could the giraffes believe their eyes and their battle was temporarily put on hold.



These rhinos were having a quiet social gathering and drink of water, but the little one had had its fill of milk from its mother and decided it was playtime.

Young calves often play by themselves with their mothers nearby. They prance in circles and run back and forth. It is adorable to watch.

They'll also play with other calves and try and entice a game that involves some gentle jousting. This little calf went over to the adolescent that was napping on the bank and, not getting much of a reaction for a game, began clambering over her in a pesky king-of-the-castle manner!



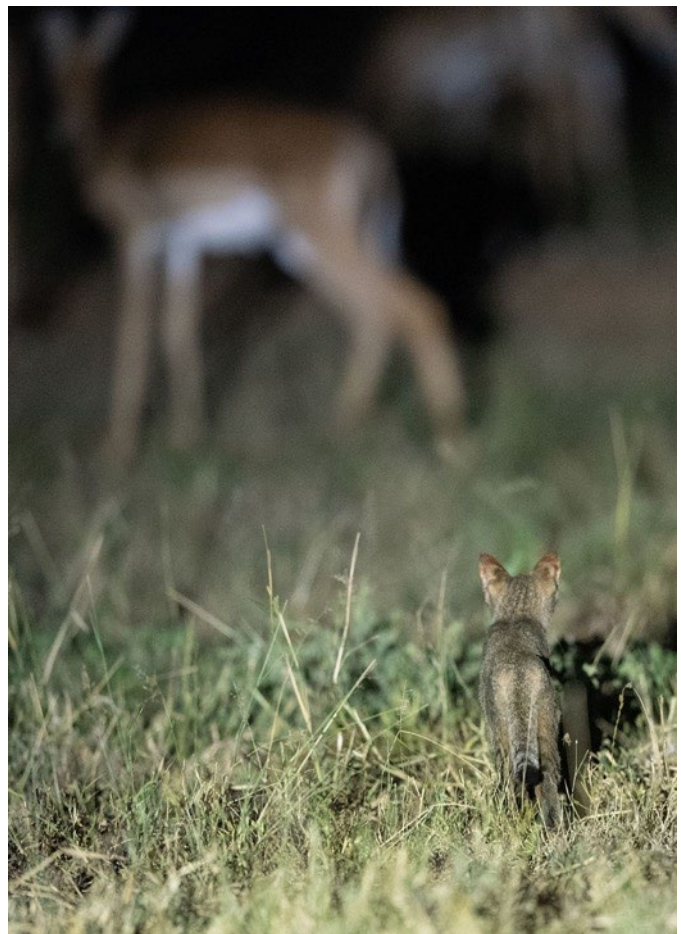
Think big



Skirting the airstrip during night drive my guest exclaimed, “Cat!” I was thinking it would be something bigger but was delighted to see *Felis lybica cafra* in the spotlight. But we’d caught this little southern African wildcat thinking big – it was contemplating stalking an impala! The impala was way too big for a wildcat to catch, but dreams are free. The diminutive predator slunk off, with that typical catty attitude that it wasn’t actually interested in them anyway.

African wildcats diverged from other wildcat subspecies about 131 000 years ago. Some individuals were first domesticated about 10 000 years ago in the Middle East, and are the ancestors of our domestic cats (*Felis silvestris catus*). Today their gene pool is threatened by interbreeding with domestic cats.

Surprisingly little is known about their behaviour. They hide away during the day, only becoming active after dark. They eat dassies, hares, the young of small antelope, birds up to the size of helmeted guineafowl, invertebrates and reptiles. They also eat jackal berries, the fruit of *Diospyros mespiliformis*.



The warthog

Warthogs have not been getting as much publicity as they deserve on these pages. Too often creatures with more fur and less warts steal the limelight. We came across this rather marvellous specimen who actually stood still long enough for a photo before trotting off with its antennae-tail up, so, in tribute, here are some fast warthog facts:

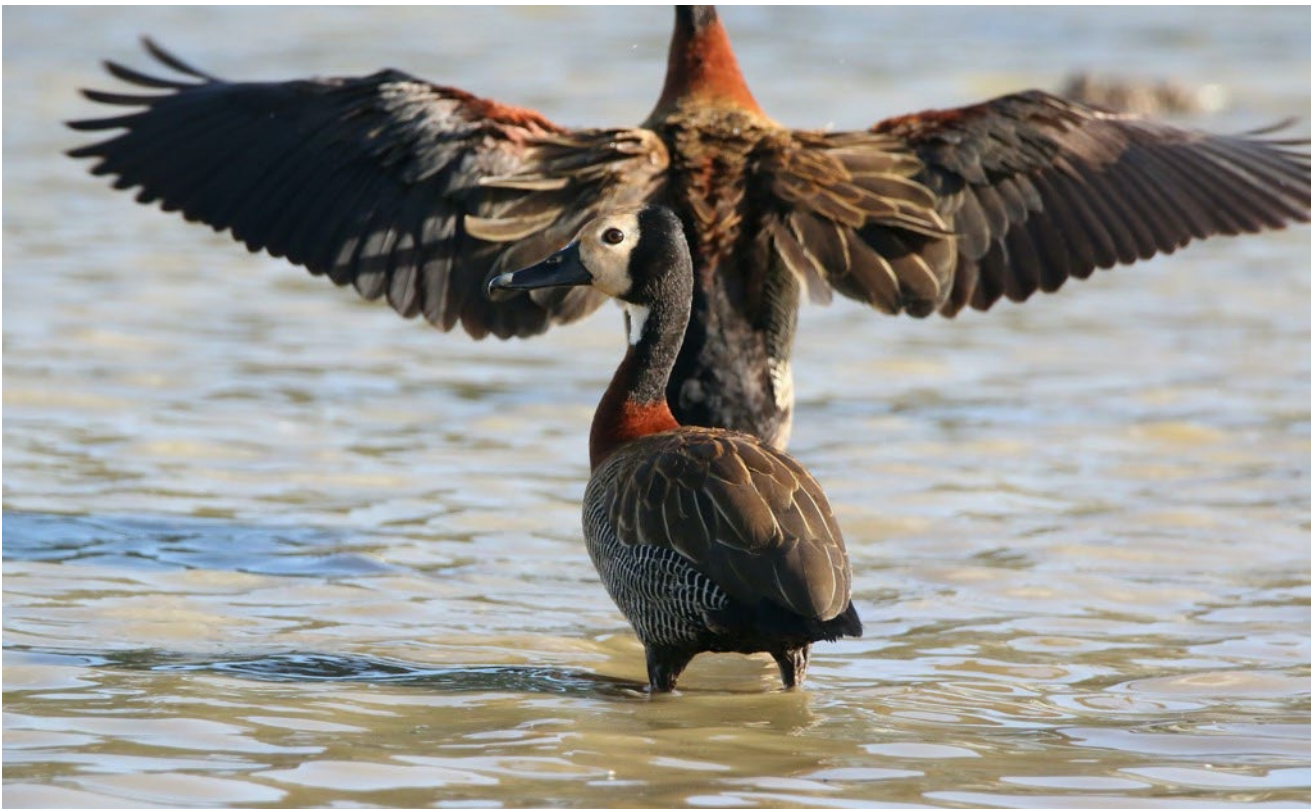
1. Warthogs travel in groups called sounders consisting of 1 or 2 sows and young offspring. Males usually travel alone which is why they are invariably lost. (Okay, I made that last bit up.)
2. Boars have more prominent warts than sows. They are primarily used to protect the face during fights. Actually they aren't warts at all, but rather protrusions made up of bone and cartilage. (Boneandcartilagehog doesn't really work.)
3. Warthogs use burrows for shelter and when entering, the hogs back in. In the mornings, warthogs burst out of their burrows at top speed, guns (tusks) blazing, and get a running start on any predators that may be lurking nearby. Top speed = 48km/h (30mph).
4. Warthogs would rather run than fight. But they can be fierce opponents if forced.
5. Warthogs drop onto their front knees in order to graze. They have knee pads. Truly. It's a rough padding of skin that protects them.
6. They're vegetarians. Some are gluten intolerant. (Okay, okay). Warthogs are grazers, eating grasses, plants, berries and bark. They also use their snouts to dig up roots and bulbs. They definitely prefer a raw diet – that much is true.
7. Warthogs enjoy wallowing! If there is water or mud available, they will often submerge themselves in it to cool down.
8. Warthogs like to be groomed by oxpeckers. It's been noted that at times they have even enticed banded mongooses and vervet monkeys to get in on the act of ridding them of ticks.



Twitter



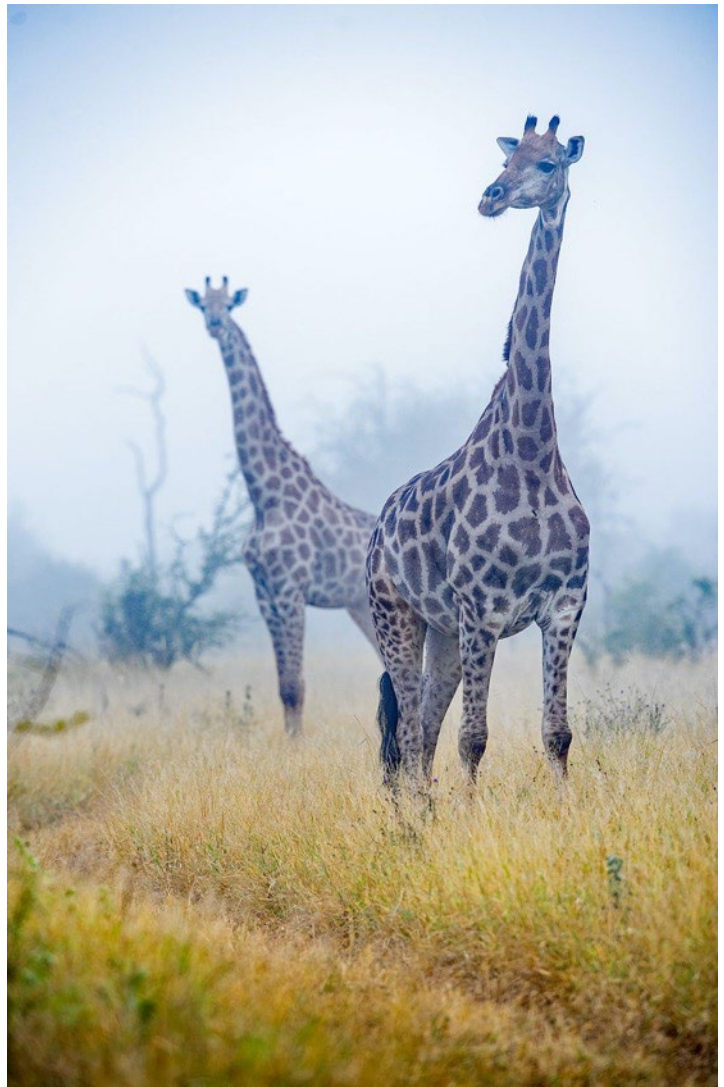
A female adult tawny eagle, in streaked plumage, surveys for prey.
A white-faced whistling duck is photobombed while having its portrait taken by Sarah Ball.



April Gallery

This misty morning drive was one of my favourites. Stepping out of the spritzing aquatic atmosphere where two giraffes, and then, seemingly by magic, four zebras appeared swishing their tails in suspicion.

By underexposing you can capture the mist and saturate the colours beautifully.



These lionesses had killed a buffalo calf, and quickly fed (you can tell by all the flies around their faces), before the Nduna males took possession of it and dragged it away. The lionesses lay on an outcrop of rocks nearby, and looked on longingly at their diminishing meal. The cubs refused to give up trying to feed and the fearsome defensive growls of the males rebounded around the natural amphitheatre.





Two yellow-billed oxpeckers perch on a wildebeest calf's back, while a juvenile, yet to develop colour in its beak, perches on the mother.



Barcoded zebras line up for a drink.



Cape buffalo giving their infamous 'debt-collector' look.



After a long few hours of cat-and-mouse on foot, we caught up with the Nduna pride and cubs.

All photographs by Jenny Hishin, unless otherwise indicated.