

# Singita



## WILDLIFE JOURNAL

### SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE

For the month of September, Two Thousand and Twenty One

#### Temperature

Average minimum:	17.0°C (62.6°F)
Minimum recorded:	13.0°C (55.4°F)
Average maximum:	32.0°C (89.6°F)
Maximum recorded:	39.4°C (102.9°F)

#### Rainfall Recorded

For the month:	0 mm
Season to date:	813.8 mm

#### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise:	05:33
Sunset:	17:52

September is one of the best months for wildlife viewing. The landscape is dry, the animals congregate at waterpoints, and the weather is sunny and hot. You can see from the photographs in this journal how the palette has changed to metallic copper, silver and gold. Thankfully guests are starting to redeem their bookings that were delayed due to the pandemic, and some intrepid travellers are booking safaris because we've all realised the importance of living in the now and making our dreams come true!

## Here's a sightings snapshot for September:

### Lions

- Southern Pride: We've enjoyed good sightings of this pride that has one cub. One of the best sightings was watching the two adult females trying to hunt a zebra, but the cub spoilt the hunt by failing to conceal itself. The zebras didn't evade these predators for the whole month though because on one of our drives we saw the male feasting on a zebra while the rest of the pride waited their turn.
- River Pride: We've viewed this pride the most this month. Two males were showing interest in one of the females, while the other females with a cub were nearby. Later they all started roaring close to the vehicle which was extremely impressive! They are all in great condition. Their kills have included a zebra, a young buffalo and a bull buffalo.
- Nduna Pride: One of the best sightings of this pride this month was when we saw their four beautiful cubs sitting on top of the sandstone rocks waving their paws at us! Our guests got to photograph the cubs playing and all sitting together while posing and looking down on us from a large jutting out rock. One of the two adult male lions seen with this pride has a large cut on his nose, most likely the result of a dispute with another male.
- Two young adult males: We've been seeing glimpses of two young skittish males, that have possibly made their way from Gonarezhou on to Malilangwe. It'll be interesting to see how the coalitions are challenged in the next few months, and the resultant changes to pride dynamics.

### Leopards

- We've had a couple of sightings of the relaxed female leopard whose territory includes the area closest to the lodge. We followed her one evening after an enchanting bush dinner, and she led us to the Malilangwe Dam shore where she had a drink. On another occasion, after a sunset safari on the boat, we saw her slinking down the lodge's cobbled driveway!
- Other leopard highlights include seeing a leopard on the banks of the Chiredzi River, seeing one on the cliffs near Lojaan Dam, and the quintessential sight of a leopard relaxing in a rain tree on the side of the road before Ray's Drift.
- On a day trip to Gonarezhou a male leopard was spotted lying on top of a big rock at Chionja Hills.

### African wild dogs

- The pack with the pups that we've been seeing are on the move and hunting far and wide now. We had excellent sightings of six adults and six pups drinking at Mabhakweni Pan, then resting in the shade and waiting while the adults went hunting. On this occasion the adults found a dead kudu (possibly they had killed it a few days earlier), but the rotting carcass did not put them off – they fed from it while a lone hyena skulked about in the wings, waiting its turn.
- A short drive and sundowner stop at Sosiji Dam was made unforgettable when four wild dogs arrived to have a drink.

### Hyenas

Sightings of these spotted characters have included:

- A spotted hyena running along the road carrying a buffalo hoof.
- 15 hyenas feeding on a wildebeest carcass.
- Hyenas feeding on a giraffe carcass.
- An adult male hyena fishing for barbel at the Nyamasikana Crossing, close to Kwali.

### Rhinos

If you want to see black and white rhinos in the wild you absolutely need to include Singita Pamushana on your safari itinerary. This month's highlights include:

- Seeing three black rhinos feeding in the open areas of Banyini, then spotting mother and calf black rhinos on our way to Hwata, and while at the pan for sundowners counting 12 different white rhinos that came to drink.
- Spending a couple of hours at a favourite waterhole and counting 18 white rhinos by the time we left after sunset.
- Being charge by a black rhino while on the boat! It was incredible to see this huge animal splashing into the water while we were safely cruising on the boat.
- Guide Mark Friend and his guests saw a total of six black rhinos in one afternoon drive. They had sundowners at Hippo Pools while watching three black rhinos drink nearby. Upon leaving by vehicle and driving towards Ray's Drift they saw a further two black rhinos, and then another black rhino at the elephant skull located on the Old Binya Road as they headed back to the lodge.

### **Elephants**

- With all the food still available at this time of year the elephant sightings have been great.
- Bull elephants have been observed daily from our underground photographic hide, resulting in extremely close yet safe viewing of elephants drinking.
- One bull was seen pushing down a huge tree and feeding on the foliage he wanted.
- Breeding herds with their little ones have been seen at Nduna Dam, at the swamps, and from the boat in the upper reaches of the river system.

### **Buffalo**

- A highlight was seeing a breeding herd of buffalo at Hwata Pan, as it is usually only the bulls that one sees there.
- A huge herd of about 600 buffalo were seen at the swamps on the western side of the Chiredzi River.

### **Plains game**

- Plains game including giraffe, kudu, impala and warthog abound. We've also had good sightings of Lichtenstein hartebeest and sable antelope.

### **Unusual sightings**

- A newborn giraffe calf, with a wet umbilical cord.
- Finding a dead civet and trying to determine the cause of death.
- A striped polecat.
- A black mamba sloughing its skin.
- Four-toed elephant shrews playing around in front of the vehicle.

### **Photographic hide**

Our sunken photographic hide at the edge of a pan that attracts prolific game is a highlight of any safari during the dry season.

- This month guests have been enchanted by (and taken wonderful photographs of) elephant bulls, black and white rhinos, zebras, impalas, giraffe and Lichtenstein's hartebeest.

### **Walks**

- It's the best time to do bush walks and our guests have loved seeing the smaller creatures and details of the ecology, as well as approaching some of the big game like white rhinos while staying undetected.
- Walks are also the best way to get out and appreciate the rock art that adorns the sandstone outcrops of the area.



### Water safaris and fishing

- The sunset water safaris are idyllic! Hippos and abundant birdlife are guaranteed, and every now and again breeding herds of elephants and black rhinos make an appearance.
- The fishing is hotting up! Some feisty tigers have been landed and some big tilapia weighing in at 2 kg have been caught. Fishing expeditions are addictive and our guests fervently discuss plans to return to catch “the big one”.

### Birds

- All our summer visitors have arrived making the birding even better!
- Some of the highlights have been watching a secretary bird walking around, and suddenly catching a dove and eating it! A crowned eagle was seen with its kill, and a juvenile martial eagle caught a rock monitor.
- Birders have loved seeing the bee-eaters, barred owlets, yellow-throated longclaws and scops owls.

### Gonarezhou day trips

- These long trips into Gonarezhou National Park are so worthwhile. Breakfast and lunch are enjoyed along the way, and guests get to see a different area where elephants and the Chilojo Cliffs are always guaranteed. Now that black rhinos have been reintroduced there it is yet another reason to visit the area.



A mother squirrel makes sure her kit is clean behind the ears!

Photo by Sarah Ball

Some bush reflections and articles follow, as well as the September Gallery of images.



## Puppy school

It is an absolute delight and privilege to see African wild dog (*Lycaon pictus*) pups. We are now seeing six of them out and about, and they are learning complex and often dangerous life lessons. One warm September morning some of the guides and trackers who didn't have guests were out looking for sightings to call in to those that did have guests. I'd been in the far north following up on a report of wild dogs that had been seen along the boundary, that our scouts on dawn foot patrol had called in, but it was proving to be a wild goose chase. Looking for wild dogs on the hunt is the same as looking for a needle in a haystack, and I always tell myself not to take the bait unless the pack has been seen resting in one spot which they do between hunts at dawn and dusk. But I was desperate to see the pups! And if you don't have a line in the water you can't catch a fish... etc. So, there I was ambling down a track feeling mildly disheartened when the radio boomed out loud and clear, "Whisky Delta, Whisky Delta!" That's our call sign for African wild dogs which our team-spirited guestless guides and trackers had found. They had spotted six adults and six pups resting in the north-east.

I was far away, and probably on the trail of two other pack members that were hunting, or even a splinter pack, but I quickly made my way to the scene and found the adults and adorable pups walking down the road towards Mabhakweni Pan, with a vehicle of delighted guests in tow.

The adults drank and the pups tried to copy them, getting the muddiest noses and paws in the process.





The adults then lay down in the shade knowing that they needed to rest and conserve all their energy for the next hunt, and to feed the pups, and keep an eye on them. The pups followed their lead, all flopping down in a pile on top of each other. But while the pups were happy to let sleeping dogs lie some of the little ones had ants in their pants and wanted to investigate the myriad of sights and sounds around them. This is not encouraged by the adults and they had to make do with staying in one spot.

One little pup has a perfect pawprint marking on its left rear leg – you can see it in the photo below.





## Many mouths and beaks to feed

It was mid-morning and already toasty. I noticed a few vultures in a tree and wondered if they were waiting for the thermals before they took off to search for a meal. But the more we looked the more we saw. And was that a very faint whiff of death on the air? There wasn't a breeze but something smelt a bit off. Then the final clue we needed was that a circling vulture landed on the ground.

We are very cautious about driving off-road but it was now obvious that there was a carcass somewhere in that section, that vultures were feeding on it, and possibly predators too. There was a fairly clear game trail and I followed that, using the vultures in the trees and my nose as a guide. Soon the scene was revealed – a giraffe carcass surrounded by eager vultures and rotund hyenas.

The carcass was a day or two old, and there was no sure way to tell how the giraffe died. Possibly natural causes like old age, possibly killed by lions and the feast usurped by hyenas, or possibly and quite likely the clan of hyenas hunted and killed it.

Most of the hyenas were resting in the shade, some chewing on a take-away meal. But they weren't thrilled about the idea of the vultures feeding just yet. Some of the vultures – both white-backed and hooded, had used up their patience allowance and were coming in and bravely feeding alongside one hyena. It was quite entertaining to watch how that hyena would try to chase them off, or insist on feeding on the very spot where the vultures had been feeding. With much commotion they would fly off then creep back, their numbers swelling every time.

Eventually the hyenas had had enough – of the giraffe and the vultures, and the vultures descended making quick work of the remains.







A young adult hyena with a chewy chunk of giraffe remains looks for a shady spot to relax, while another hyena chases vultures from the exact spot it wants to feed from.





Vultures, as obligate scavengers, play an important role in preventing the spread of disease, by quickly removing decomposing carcasses from the environment. Recent decades have seen an alarming decline in Africa's vulture populations with both the white-backed vulture (*Gyps africanus*) and hooded vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*) being Critically Endangered globally – that's one step away from Extinct In The Wild.

The reasons for the decline are numerous and complex. Poachers kill great numbers of vultures by intentionally lacing poached animal carcasses with poison. Vultures are also vulnerable to secondary poisoning by the anti-

inflammatory veterinary drug Diclofenac, or unintentional poisoning through the ingestion of fragments of lead ammunition. Other threats include electrocution and/or collisions with power infrastructure, declining food availability, habitat loss and harvesting for belief-based use.

A hooded vulture inspects its meal.

White-backed and hooded vultures.





## Living large



We have some splendid bull elephants on the reserve, with exceptional tusks. Unfortunately some of the tusks have been broken off in battles, but the still impressive remnants have us estimating what they would have weighed. With so few “tuskers” left in Africa, it is a privilege and honour to provide a safe habitat for these gentle giants.

These three big fellas were having a whale of a time at the water – drinking, splashing and chilling. The fun was led by a bull we affectionately know as Butch, seen in the foreground, who has the angular and sunken forehead of old age, and impressive ivory even though they look more like ebony in this photo. The bull in the middle has a broken right tusk, and the one in the background is able to drape his trunk over his long right tusk.

## A new little charge

The mission was to leave the lodge at 05:30 and go directly to a pan in the south-east that attracts a lot of wildlife, and to not get distracted on the way...

The strategy paid off because approaching the area at a snail’s pace from a long way off I saw some white rhinos, and then the familiar outline of a black rhino and a tiny calf. I cut the engine knowing that if the black rhino heard me she would gallop off and not return. I hopped out the vehicle and silently made my way to behind a fallen tree and was able to get a lovely photo of them, in step, leaving the pan. Black rhinos calves follow their mothers from behind, while white rhino calves move in front of their mothers.





Back in the vehicle I drove around and cautiously made an approach. The mother came over, lined us up in her sights with her incredible horns, twitched her wet muzzle and then turned with her baby in tow, and went on her way. From her ear notches we can identify the mother and know her as Chilutsu. Prior to this sighting there had only been one confirmed sighting of the calf which was on the 22nd of April when it was estimated at one week old, so now, at just under five months, we can see that it's thriving.





## Twitter

It's nesting season and we've spotted some fascinating nests. Birds choose where to nest based on their instinctual knowledge of inaccessibility, concealment, food, and proximity.

**Inaccessibility:** The nest needs to be safe from predators eating the eggs or chicks.

**Concealment:** To deal with flying predators, birds look for places where they can hide or at least partially cover their nests. To deal with slithering predators they look for spiky or harm-inducing spots, and to deal with two/four-legged predators they look for height.

**Food:** Their preferred food source needs to be close-by because it is hard work feeding hungry chicks.

**Proximity:** Birds nest where they can stay close to their young. A common misconception about birds is that they sleep in their nests but nests, mostly, are for incubating the eggs and safely containing the chicks.

However, they spend a lot of time there, and need to roost nearby on a perch.

The bird nests I've photographed this month have all been built above water which is a very clever strategy, for all the above reasons, except if it floods!

Hamerkops build enormous nests, but you don't usually see them directly above water. They need a large platform and this fallen tree over a shallow tributary provided just that. The hunting ground is in the rocky crossing nearby where they feed on frogs and tadpoles.

The palace is the work of both the male and female hamerkop. The roof is an engineering masterpiece constructed with one bird inside and one bird outside the nest. The entrance is concealed and a mud-lined upward-facing tunnel leads to the entrance of the internal chamber. The chamber is also lined with mud providing insulation for the eggs and chicks while the parents are out hunting.





This is the nest of a pair of green-backed herons. It is built right above the water, in a scratchy, overhanging semi-submerged bush. It is placed low over the water and built out of spiky sticks. It contains three of the most beautiful light blue eggs. The chicks hatch after 25 days.



These pied kingfishers have dug out holes in this vertical mud bank for their nests. The nests are generally 4-5 feet deep. The adults perch nearby on this fallen tree and hunt by hovering over the water to detect prey and diving vertically bill-first to capture fish.





**Flower of the month: the sausage tree (*Kigelia africana*)**

*"I tried to express through red and green the terrible passions of humanity."*

Vincent Van Gogh

*"Any colour is more distinctly seen when opposed to its contrary:  
thus, black on white, blue near yellow, green near red, and so on."*

Leonardo da Vinci

*A thimbleful of red is redder than a bucketful.*

Henri Matisse



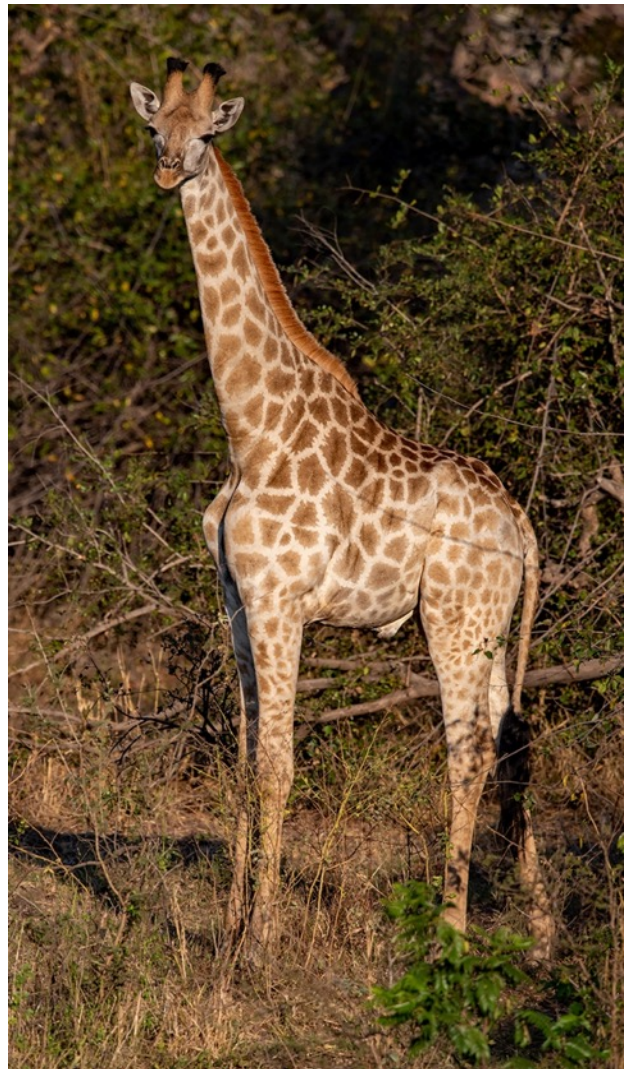
These trumpet-shaped flowers couldn't be any redder against their bright green backdrop, and they spurred me on to remind myself about of the quotes I'd heard about red and green in art class. The flowers hang down from branches on long flexible stems and, once pollinated, develop into the huge sausage-shaped fruit of the tree. They are one of the first trees to flower in this area and a joyous sign of spring. The flowers are velvety on the inside and full of nectar, attracting a host of insects and birds. The strong stem of each flower makes an ideal foothold for birds. I picked up some of the fallen flowers but they had very little scent – apparently their scent is most notable at night indicating that they are adapted to pollination by bats, which visit them for pollen and nectar. Monkeys sink their small faces deep into the flowers to drink the nectar, and I saw a magnificent kudu as well as some impala, bushbuck and duiker eating the fallen flowers.



## September Gallery



Taking a sunset cruise on the Malilangwe Dam has to be one of the most relaxing ways you can spend an afternoon, as opposed to tiger fishing on the dam which launches and plunges you through a whole gamut of emotions! At the moment some trees are so eye-catching as they glow a blossomy gold amongst the jungle green.



This young male giraffe bathed in the golden hour light as he browsed on the trees around Lojaan Dam.





The area around Sosigi Dam has been cleared of some of the encroaching bush, and a track now winds around the area offering sights of vistas and wildlife previously concealed.  
These normally camera-shy eland obliged for their photo as they made their way to the water.



Round rhino rear-ends amid the descending linear tree heights.





A male lion hogs an impala kill while his young cub hopes for a chance to eat.  
A zebra foal nurses out on the plains as wildebeest and giraffe pass by.





A relaxed white rhino with oxpecker earbuds slakes his thirst during the last light of day. That evening a rare photographic opportunity presents itself as three black rhinos use the cloak of darkness to cautiously drink.



All stories and photos by Jenny Hishin, unless otherwise stated.