

Singita



Kumana and Maputo male lions in front of Lebombo Lodge

Photo by Brian Rode

WILDLIFE JOURNAL **SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA** **For the month of September, Two Thousand and Twenty-one**

Temperature

Average minimum: 15.3°C (59.4°F)
Minimum recorded: 10.0°C (50.0°F)
Average maximum: 29.8°C (85.64°F)
Maximum recorded: 38.0°C (100.4°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0 mm
Season to date: 753mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:37
Sunset: 17:54

Spring has sprung and the grass is not green... yet. In fact, the western half of the concession is covered in stunning gold and pink fields. The grass in the basalt plains is still long and thick. This has provided great forage for the grazers and we have had fantastic sightings of various general game species, including herds of zebras and wildebeest. Although many of the trees have lost their leaves the browsing animals are looking fat and healthy. Some of the trees in the hills have already started getting new emerald-coloured foliage. The pod

mahoganies (*Afzelia quanzensis*), in particular, are looking spectacular at the moment with a bright verdant colouring. In the basalt grasslands the knobthorns (*Senegalia nigrescens*) have almost finished flowering and are starting to get new shoots. The long-tailed cassias (*Cassia abbreviata*) are also now in full leaf and add an emerald hue to the golden plains. The impala lilies are still blooming, with their stunning pink and white blossoms. They are dotted across the hills and in the open areas in the far north of the concession. The flame combretums (*Combretum microphyllum*) are also still in full flower. These are shrubby creepers that can be seen growing up the trees along the river and on the cliffs of the Lebombos. The flame-red flowers have a high nectar content and are attracting a lot of iridescent sunbirds and yellow-fronted canaries. Some of the migrant birds have already started to return and we have seen, amongst others, yellow-billed kites, Wahlberg's eagles and even a single flock of European bee-eaters (this is very early for them). We have been amazed to see how much water is still in the concession. After the great amount of rain that fell last summer, the N'wanetsi River is still flowing strongly through the concession. Normally, at this time of the year, the river would have basically dried up and there would only be a few standing pools holding the precious liquid. Some of the seasonal pools in the hills still have water and Hyena Pan, in the north-eastern hills, is still attracting a lot of animals in the late mornings. There is still water in the Mbeki Drainage and there are even beautiful purple waterlilies flowering there. We are starting to see more insects and reptiles again as the temperatures have started to increase. During the day the river crossings support a host of brightly coloured dragonflies and at night they are spectacular with the bright flashing lights of the fireflies. There has been a male boomslang that has been seen a few times on Joe's Road. This is a spectacular-looking, yet highly venomous snake. It is a bright lime colour and is fairly large (at least a metre and a half in length). This is one of the very few sexually dimorphic snakes in southern Africa (the males and females differ in colouration). The males are emerald, while the females are khaki-brown.



Impala lily

Photo by Brian Rode

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for September:

Lions

- The story of the Kumana and Maputo males is an amazing one. The Kumana male, when he first arrived in the concession, was one of a coalition of three males. Unfortunately, two of these males have since departed this world. The Kumana male continued to control the territory and even sired youngsters with the Shishangaan lionesses. A few months later a different male – the Maputo male, arrived in the area. It was obvious that he was intent on taking the territory from the older Kumana male. They were seen fighting on a few occasions and we all wondered who was going to be successful. The Maputo male was even seen mating with one of the Shish lionesses. It looked like a bad situation for the Kumana male. Then, at the end of August both of the males were seen feeding on a Cape buffalo together. Most coalitions of male lions consist of brothers and it is unusual for unrelated males to get together peacefully and form a bond. This month, however, it appears that exactly this has happened. The Kumana and Maputo males have seemed to have made a truce and throughout this last month they have been seen together. There are no more signs of aggression between the two. Towards the latter half of the month these two males managed to kill a Cape buffalo on the bank of the N'wanetsi River, near an area that we know as Euphorbia Crossing, and shared the meat between them.
- The two Shish males have been seen quite a bit this last month. They have mainly been seen in the company of the Mananga Pride. Since they have a much larger territory than that of the pride, and since these two males are also the males that cover the Mountain Pride lionesses, they cannot always be with the Mananga lionesses. They have therefore been seen away from the lionesses on a few occasions this last month. At the beginning of the month these two lions were seen feeding on a young giraffe in the far northern plains. We are not sure if they killed it or whether the lionesses from the Mananga Pride did the deed and were then robbed of it by the males.
- The Xhirombe male is a male that used to belong to a pride known as the Xhirombe Pride. It was a small pride consisting of an old lioness and two youngsters, one being the Xhirombe male and the other being his sister. When his sister came into heat/oestrous she left her mother and brother and we never saw her again. The mother was really old and was starting to struggle to hunt. Both her and her son were often seen along the Mozambique border, where they utilised the fence by chasing animals towards it, and trapping them so that they could kill them. This strategy proved to be quite successful. Eventually, however, the old lioness finally disappeared and we assumed that she had died. The Xhirombe male continued to move around in the area near the Mozambique border and was, on occasion seen closer to the lodges. Eventually he too disappeared. The last time we saw him in the area was in May 2019. One evening, this last month, one of our guides was headed towards the Poort (a set of cliffs on the Mozambique border overlooking the N'wanetsi River as it flows out of South Africa on its way east towards the ocean), to watch the sunset, when he came across a male lion. This lion was very relaxed with the vehicle. Towards the end of the month this same male lion was once again seen near the Mozambique border, much further north than where he was seen before. One of our guests managed to get some decent photos of him and we were able to compare them to the lions in our identity kits at the lodge, and we were extremely surprised to find out that this male is in fact the Xhirombe male. Prior to these sightings we had not seen the Xhirombe male in over two years. He is looking great (although he does have a few scratches on his nose). It is great to have him back and we are hoping that we will have regular sightings of him again.
- We have had a few sightings of a coalition of five young male lions on the H6 public road that leads to the concession. They have been seen moving closer to the concession and were, on one occasion, seen feeding on a giraffe with a large pride of lionesses on the road leading to the Shishangaan staff quarters. It is possible that this large coalition might eventually make their way into the concession, particularly when the standing water dries up in the plains outside the concession. This will put pressure on the new coalition of the Kumana and Maputo males.

- We have not seen the members of the Shishangaan Pride this month. During the period that the Maputo and Kumana male lions were fighting this pride moved away from the concession. This was a prudent move as it is well-known that when a new male lion takes over a territory, he kills all the youngsters from the previous dominant male. Since the Shishangaan Pride did have youngsters that would be vulnerable to such infanticide, and not knowing who the successor would be, they seemed to have made the decision to move from the danger.
- We have not seen much of the Mountain Pride this last month. We have seen their tracks going into Mozambique a few times (where we cannot follow). When they did return, they tended to remain in the hills where they are very difficult to track. Towards the beginning of the month, we did see them on at least two occasions. They were looking healthy and the young male is growing strong.
- Other than the Kumana and Maputo males, the Mananga Pride are the lions that we have been seeing the most of this last month. They are seen mainly in the western half of the concession, near Gudzani Dam. At the beginning of the month, we counted six adult and subadult females, one young male and seven cubs (of two different ages). Unfortunately, one of the younger cubs disappeared and we believe that it died. Towards the end of the month some of our guides were lucky enough to see four new cubs. Since they are still very young (we estimate that they are less than six weeks old) and are still hiding them in den-sites we have decided not to put pressure on them and have zoned the area where they are denning as a “no-go zone” until they are at least eight weeks old. We will then see if we can allow one vehicle at a time to view them. This month the Mananga Pride were seen feeding on buffalos at least twice and on a wildebeest on one occasion.

Leopards

- We have had some great leopard-viewing this last month. Altogether we have had fifty-one sightings of these beautiful cats in September.
- The Mbiri Mbiri male leopard (Mbiri is a shangaan word meaning “two” and refers to the number of spots above the whisker line, which is used to assist in identifying individuals. The Mbiri Mbiri male thus has two spots on either side of the nose above the whisker lines). The Mbiri Mbiri male is our “star leopard” at the moment. He is very relaxed with the vehicles and when we find him we usually get great views of this stunning cat. One morning one of our guides was having a coffee break, at Warthog Pan. Everyone was out of the vehicle, chatting and enjoying the caffeine and snacks when the Mbiri Mbiri male leopard came sauntering out of the bushes. He then proceeded to walk within twenty meters of the group without even giving them a side-ways glance. As he passed by, the guide got everyone into the vehicle and then they had to wait for a while, as the curious cat lay nearby watching them, until another guide could arrive and place a vehicle between the leopard and the first vehicle so that the guide could get out and quickly pack up all the cups and flasks that were still on the table on the front of the vehicle! We have watched him stalking impalas on at least two occasions this last month, but unfortunately for him, he was not successful in these attempts.
- A large unidentified male leopard has been seen on a few occasions along the banks of the N’wanetsi River, near Dumbana and Puff Adder Pools. He seems to be fairly relaxed with the vehicles and we are still checking the ID kits to see who he could be. A large male leopard was found near the Sticky Thorn thickets a few times (possibly the same male). On one occasion he had killed an impala and had hoisted it up into a large leadwood tree (*Combretum imberbe*).
- The Dumbana female leopard and her two cubs were seen on a few occasions in September. They seem to be hanging around the area of the Ntsibitsane Valley. On one occasion we found them feeding on a Sharpe’s grysbok, which they had hoisted into a stunted jackalberry tree (*Diospyros mespiliformis*). On another occasion they were found with an impala carcass in a tree near Ntsibitsane First Crossing.
- Towards the end of the month we were fortunate to find the Hlangulene leopardess near the central depression. This is an extremely relaxed leopard and one of the older leopards in the area. She was walking around in the grasslands obviously looking for prey.

- On one occasion one of our guides found a pair of leopards quite close to the lodge. The female was quite shy. She had very unusual patterning, in that she had a large black mark on her chest like a bib. Another female leopard was seen close to Lebombo Lodge. She had killed an impala and had hidden the carcass at the base of the cliffs. On another occasion one of our guides was driving along the northern boundary road when he came across two different leopards within a few hundred meters of each other. On another occasion one of our guides was lucky enough to find a fairly relaxed leopardess with a cub near the north-western side of the concession.

Cheetahs

- Right at the beginning of the month we were lucky enough to find two male cheetahs in the far north-western reaches of the concession. They had killed an adult female waterbuck and we found them just after they had finished feeding on it.
- Another two cheetahs were seen a couple of times near the road that leads to the staff quarters.

Wild dogs

- Towards the end of the month a pack of African wild dogs with small pups made their appearance on the H6 public road. It appears that for a short while they were using a culvert under the road as a temporary den-site. Quite a few of our guests got to see these critically endangered animals when they were transferred to and from the airstrip. What an amazing start and finish to their safari here at Singita Kruger National Park.
- We have recently been seeing the footprints of wild dogs coming into the concession from Mozambique and then returning there. It will probably not be too long before we actually see them in the concession.

Spotted hyenas

- Towards the end of last month one of our guides located an active hyena den in the far northern part of the concession. This den is in a hole in the ground in a forest of apple-leaf trees (*Philenoptera violacea*). It is a beautiful setting and we have had some good views of the young cubs.
- We have had regular sightings of a clan of spotted hyenas that are using a culvert under the H6 public road. They have been seen by many of the guests as they have been transferred to and from the airstrip, upon arrival or departure.
- We have had fairly regular sightings (particularly at night) of individuals walking around searching for something to eat or patrolling the clan's territory.

Elephants

- The elephant numbers seem to have been increasing again in the concession and we have had numerous sightings of both breeding herds (females with youngsters) and bachelor herds. A particular herd, with a tuskless matriarch, has been seen a few times near Lebombo and Sweni Lodges and has caused quite a bit of damage to the gardens around the lodges, and even caused damage to the boardwalks leading to one of the rooms!

Buffalos

- We have had a couple of sightings of a large herd of buffalos in the area. This large herd contains a cow with a brand-mark (depicting the letter and number R15) on her rump. We are not sure where this buffalo came from or when it was branded.
- We have seen a few small groups of dagha boys (bachelor males) in the area, particularly along the banks of the N'wanetsi River. A pair of these bulls was seen regularly near Xinkwenyana Crossing, until one of them was killed by lions. Another pair of bulls was hanging around near Euphorbia Crossing until one of them fell to the same fate. A group of seven old bulls have also been moving up and down the Ntsibitsane Valley and in the area of New Mamba Road, in the hills close to the Mozambique border. At

the beginning of the month two bull buffalos were seen in the far northern plains until one of them was killed by the Mananga Pride.

Plains game

- The general game viewing has been amazing this last month. There have been large herds of plains zebras and blue wildebeest throughout the concession. We have also been seeing large journeys of giraffes. The warthog population has also increased after they were almost wiped out during the last few years of drought. There are quite a few spectacular greater kudu bulls moving through the area and a particular bachelor herd of males (with incredible, long, spiral-shaped horns) has been seen regularly browsing in the sticky thorn (*Vachellia borleae*) thickets. Since many of the trees are still bare and the grass in the hills has started to thin we are seeing more of the small antelopes, including Sharpe's grysbok, steenbok, common duiker and klipspringer. Waterbuck are regulars and there is a particularly large herd of these beautiful shaggy antelope, with their distinctive white-ringed rumps and heart-shaped noses, that has been hanging around the area of Xinkwenyana Crossing.

Rare animals and other sightings

- We have had some good sightings of some of the smaller nocturnal mammals this last month. This has included sightings of both large and small-spotted genets, African civets and even a few sightings of honey badgers.

Birds

- This last September we recorded seeing 179 species of birds in the area. It is now spring here in the southern hemisphere and some of our summer migrants have already started arriving. Yellow-billed kites have been seen regularly this month gliding over the lodge. A pair of these birds nest in the large trees in front of Sweni Lodge. Some of the sandpipers have also returned (common sandpiper, wood sandpiper and common greenshank). We have also had a single sighting of a flock of European bee-eaters flying over the lodge. The Wahlberg's eagles have also returned and we are very happy to see that the pair that usually nest in the trees just upstream from lodge are here again and collecting nesting material. One of these birds is an uncommon pale morph, while its partner is the normal dark-brown form of this species. We have also been fortunate enough to see a few greater painted snipes in the concession, along the N'wanetsi River. One pair even bred near Euphorbia Crossing and we were delighted to see that they had four chicks. Greater painted snipes are unusual in that they are polyandrous birds, where the male raises the chicks. One morning one of our guides was lucky enough to see a black saw-wing flying along the Xinkelengane Drainage. This bird is very uncommon in the area and is usually found closer to the mountainous escarpment to the west of the Kruger National Park. Other rare or threatened birds seen in the concession this last month include saddle-billed storks (including three juvenile birds which have been seen regularly in the area of Euphorbia Crossing), yellow-billed storks, and hooded vultures (there are supposedly only between 50 and 100 breeding pairs in the country). One day this last month we saw 16 hooded vultures perched in the trees nearby where the Kumana and Maputo male lions were feeding on a buffalo that they had killed, white-backed vultures, lappet-faced vultures, white-headed vultures, tawny eagles, martial eagles, bateleurs and a few sightings of southern ground-hornbills. One morning one of the guides and his guests were lucky enough to witness a young gabar goshawk hunting and killing a southern red-billed hornbill right in front of them.

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

It has been a very good year, and we have received about 392 mm of rain since the beginning of 2021. Mother Nature has surprised us with unusual rainfall in early winter (end of May). The rivers are full of water and still flowing, and it is the longest I have seen the N'wanetsi River flowing in more than ten years. Usually, the river flows for a week after receiving heavy rain around January or February and stops flowing shortly thereafter, with only a few areas along the river where one will find pools of water. Most of the rain usually comes from the south eastern side of Kruger National Park in the direction of Maputo in Mozambique, from the Indian Ocean. The eastern part of Kruger got more rain than the western part.

Because of this we have seen a lot of general game coming across from the west looking for good grazing and water. We have seen large herds of buffalos and elephants in the concession. We are now in our spring and we are experiencing trees flowering. Animals like baboons, monkeys, giraffes and kudus are very happy as they have been feasting on the flowers. The game viewing experience has been exceptional as animals do not need to travel far for food and water.



The conditions have also increased our leopard sightings along the N'wanetsi River and Xinkelengane Drainage. As the grass is starting to open up in the basalt grasslands, the leopards have moved to the much thicker areas along the river's and drainage lines, in order for them to set up the perfect ambush for potential prey. Some incredible sightings have been happening along the Ntibitsane Drainage. The drainage runs along the north-eastern side of the concession. The Dumbana female leopard and her two cubs have been spending time along this drainage line moving east and south west to the N'wanetsi River.

Elephant sightings have also increased along the N'wanetsi River from the lodge all the way north towards the Central Depression area. We had a few sightings of elephants feeding between Lebombo Lodge, the Boutique and Sweni Lodge. Guests had the privilege to view most of the game from their rooms, looking over the N'wanetsi River.

Every morning on game drive, we enjoy looking at the trees and seeing the change developing daily, with new leaves and growing and multiplying. The smell coming from all the flowers is so incredible, and it is a great way to start the day. Mbeki's Crossing has beautiful water lilies on the western side of the crossing, and it does not matter which side the sun is lighting them up, as they always give off rich colours that catch your eye. Crocodiles have also spread out all the way from N'wanetsi River to Mbeki's Drainage, the drainage still has flowing water. Mother Nature has indeed spoiled us this year!



We have five different types of mongooses in the Singita Kruger National Park concession.

They are:

1. White tailed mongoose
2. Banded mongoose
3. Water mongoose
4. Dwarf mongoose
5. Slender mongoose

Banded mongooses and dwarf mongooses are gregarious animals (live in groups). The rest of the other mongooses are solitary.

The slender mongoose (Manghovo) is one of the most amazing animals we have in southern Africa, especially in the lowveld region in South Africa. It is very important in my culture (Tsonga or Shangaan) to specifically try and see one of these mongooses when you are traveling from one place to another on foot, more specially around the rural area. Some types of mongoose are active at night but Manghovo is active during the day, so your chances of seeing one when travelling by day are good. If you are walking somewhere and see a slender mongoose crossing the road in front of you from right to the left with the tail up, that means you will have a bad journey so you had better not proceed. If it crosses the road from left to right with the tail up, that means you will make it but it won't be easy. Seeing a slender mongoose crossing the road with its tail down means you are welcome to proceed with your journey.



You are welcome to proceed!

Photo by Brian Rode

September Gallery



The Xhirombe male lion

Photo by: Mary-anne Katz (Guest)



Male greater kudu

Photo by: Brian Rode



Male saddle-billed stork

Photo by: Brian Rode



Zebra and giraffe

Photo by: Brian Rode



Cape buffalos

Photo by: Brian Rode



Mbiri Mbiri male leopard

Photo by: Brian Rode



Young gabar goshawk with red-billed hornbill prey

Photo by Brian Rode



Male klipspringer

Photo by Brian Rode



Sunrise over the Lebombo hills

Photo by Brian Rode



Sunset over the Lebombo hills

Photo by Brian Rode