

# Singita



## WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA For the month of December, Two Thousand and Twenty One

### Temperature

Average minimum: 20.5°C (68.87°F)

Average maximum: 30.2°C (86.35°F)

Minimum recorded: 15.0°C (59.0°F)

Maximum recorded: 36.0°C (96.80°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 65mm

For the season to date: 242mm

### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 04:59

Sunset: 18:39

Pops of orange and pink scatter the land as wild flowers burst from the soil, bright aquamarine flushes of blue sweep across the skies as the woodland kingfisher darts through the air. The jewels of summer are exploding with life throughout the lush, emerald green landscape. At this time of the year, and much like the red berries of Christmas mistletoe that decorate the halls, so too does the fruit of the large sour plum's delicious flesh bring a sweet and sour treat to many, both human and animals alike. December is a time of giving, in which nature gives back the life of our surroundings in this magnificent wilderness area through abundant volumes of rain and golden rays of sunlight. There is a particular essence of joy in the air as the young wildebeest prance across the grasslands and the fish eagle bursts out with calls of delight. It is truly the most magical time of the year, and a time to express gratitude to the creation of our marvellous living world.

## Here's a Sightings Snapshot for December:

### Lions

- Last month brought the unfortunate news of the adult Tsalala female's passing, and with that, concern over her remaining daughter's future. However, she has proven that although she is alone, she is a fighter! A lioness with a true lion's heart, continuing along the banks of the Sand River, hunting and persisting as a healthy young lion. It still remains a question as to what the future holds for her, nevertheless we continue to observe as she thrives.
- The lion dynamics are still constantly changing as dominant males pass and new blood makes its way into the area. We believe there to be only one remaining Birmingham male to our east with the disappearance of the second male. As his roars are solitary, the prospect for other larger coalitions to move in become very apparent. Without the protection of both their fathers, this has also caused a shift in the young Nsevu sub-adults (11) who have made several appearances on the property over the last month.
- Not only have the Nsevu youngsters made an appearance, so too have the Nkuhuma sub-adults (7, sometimes 9 with 2 adult females) who seem to have broken away from their natal pride and are beginning to roam in search of safe areas away from any new coalitions that may take their lives.
- The Plains Camp males along with two adult Nkuhuma lionesses (who too have broken away from their pride) continue to move frequently back and forth across the river. Their roars still piercing the air in the still evenings around the lodges each night.
- With no change to the Mhangene pride, who remain in hiding for the time being, until coalitions settle, we have noticed one young female from the pride sneaking off from time to time to be with the Nkuhuma (Nwalungu) male, perhaps she feels that he is consistent enough in the area in order for her to mate with him.

### Elephants

- We always find it amazing the way elephants seem to vanish for a period of time and then burst into abundance once more. With marula season fast approaching, the eager elephant bulls in musth seem to be everywhere and around each corner, always up to no good. There is a wonderful feeling brought by the presence of a herd of elephants during December. As they gently feed on the lush green vegetation you truly feel a sense of joy which we are sure they too are feeling in these summer months. We are looking forward to the marula fruit season and can't wait to watch as elephants from all corners of the reserve rush to feed on these sweet treats.

### Leopards

- The festive month that is December marked the birth of the Schotia female's new litter. At this stage we are not certain of the number of cubs she has given birth to, however with clear suckle marks and secretive movements in and out of the lodge area each day, we are sure that in a few week's time, the pitter patter of small, spotted paws will begin to move out of the den and bewilder us with emotion and excitement!
- One of our guides, Paul Josop, managed to be in the right place at the right time on two occasions late December, when he managed to witness the incredible determination and strength of two of our most dominant male leopards. The Nyeleti male, who although is getting older, without a doubt has not lost his experience and strength as we watched him stalk, strategize and catch a young impala which he quickly hoisted up into a tree, away from one hungry hyena.  
The second of two once-in-a-lifetime sightings began with an early morning, exploring the northern parts of the reserve and finding the Hosana male leopard, who too was hunting with complete calculation and execution when he too, sunk his claws into an adult impala ram. As for both of these two males, along with the Thamba male and Xipuku male, all four continue to remain dominant and have guarded their territories well throughout the year.

- Earlier on in the year we discovered the youngster of the Nkangala female, who at that point in time was too nervous for us to ever gain a proper visual, however this month, in the presence of who we believe to be his father, the Hosana male, the newly named Mzemba young male has begun to show tolerance toward vehicles and allowed us to spend some wonderful moments with him.

#### **Buffalo**

- With an abundance of vegetation and water, larger herds of buffalo are flourishing, and the emergence of a large number of small waterholes and mud wallows have allowed for many individual bulls to enjoy the hot summer days in a cool, pool of mud.

#### **Cheetah**

- With more than 10 sightings of cheetah over the past month, we have been extremely privileged to witness this magnificent endangered species so frequently. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December we were treated to one of the most incredible sunsets alongside the female cheetah and her cub.

#### **Bird List**

- The bird list for December includes four new bird species, bringing our final yearly total to 300, our highest count in the last few years, beating our 2020 total by nine birds.
- Specials included a capped wheatear and a cuckoo finch.

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

Animal dung seems to be a waste product to many lives and yet here come the dung beetles that can travel for kilometres in search for animal dung. They therefore evolved to feed on other animals' dung, especially from large herbivores such as elephant, rhino and buffalo that leave big piles of dung on the ground.

I remember one morning we went out on game drive and came across two dung beetles rolling a big ball just made from a rhino midden that was close by. The size of the ball was huge! We then drove towards the midden itself to see how much activity was going on there, and the amount of beetles we found was unbelievable! Most of them had just begun making the dung ball and some had finished already and that sighting became everybody's highlight of the day.

Food is digested, nutrients are absorbed and all that remains is the waste to be eliminated. Dung is mostly made of water and undigested fibre neither of which would seem as suitable as food. However, in nature nothing is wasted. In between these fibre particles there are microbes containing nitrogen and amino acids, the perfect ingredients for an insect meal.

For dung beetles' dung is on the menu and the fresher it is the better. The young prefer it solid and the adults squeeze out the liquid with specialized mouth parts that they use to filter their food separating what they need from what they can't eat. Dung beetles also play an important role in the ecosystem by collecting dung which helps in regulation of the food chain, enhanced plant growth and the spreading of seeds. They also reduce the number of parasites by removing dung on the ground's surface.

In the reproduction process of dung beetles dung is still the main factor. Male dung beetles collect as much fresh dung to make a ball and the female judges their potential mate by the size of the ball. After a mating pair is established the female attaches herself on the ball and the male rolls the ball away - he does it backwards by pushing the ball on his hind legs.

Along the way males do come across challengers who try to claim their ball and they battle against one another- this can last for an hour. When they finally complete their journey, the couple digs a small hole in the soft ground the female then lays the eggs inside the dung ball and she seals the ball afterwards by using more dung and saliva. When the hatched dungbeetle is born it eats its way out.





We are now in full swing with the rainy season and it is that time of year where we have had enough rain for the shrubs and trees to start to bare their berries and fruits. One can only imagine the relief that this brings to the various species in the area. After having to endure the harsh winter feeding on vegetation that has minimal nutrients and tastes like a cardboard box, the rains bring new feeding opportunities and allow the bush and animals to flourish. With the ample food sources that are lying around this gives the newborn animals a great boost at an early age both with the multiple nutrients and many places to hide from the ever-existing threat of predators.



Nature truly does have so much to offer from so many different aspects and it is always mind-blowing to learn about the different types of vegetation in the area and what the different vegetation has to offer.

For me there is one tree in particular that I find very interesting both from what it has to offer as well as a very interesting traditional side. This is the marula tree, it is one that is well recognised for multiple different reasons. From a traditional side, the tree is said to bring happiness and success to a marriage should you get married underneath it and, once married it is even said that the sex of a newborn may be decided by the tree - if the father takes a branch of the female tree and puts it under his pregnant partner's pillow, she will most likely have a daughter. This is just one of many beliefs and I can honestly say that it is jaw-dropping to hear the local Shangaan staff speak about the tree and what it has to offer. Many of us know about the famous drink to have on a safari: Amarula. This is one of many uses of the fruit from the marula tree, not only is the fruit used to make this world-renowned drink but it is also used by the locals to make marula jam and marula beer, both of which are some of the tastiest things that you could have.

Learning about all of the vegetation from a local Shangaan is something extremely special and something that I will treasure forever. Over the years I have learnt how important it is to have the knowledge of the vegetation

in the various areas of the reserve as this will not only give you a broad understanding of the bush but it also plays a vital role in the locating of the various species in the area. Once you know what vegetation grows where and what the different species feed on, this can give you a great starting point in looking for specific animals.

There is always more to learn about the bush and what it has to offer and who better to learn from than the best trackers in the country with the background knowledge of growing up in the area? Hearing the heartfelt stories from the locals is truly something special and something that you will remember for the rest of your life.



## The heart of a hyena

Article by Andries Mohlala

I wish I had a good story to tell about my favourite animal in the wild, the animal that I vowed to defend at all times. I guess this was borne from how hyenas have always been criticized for their looks, their smell, their scavenging behaviour and maybe laziness, always taking from the good-looking well-groomed celebrities of the wild.

On this day, morning game drive, I was really educated on the ways of the wild - this experience really drove home the fact the only guarantee in the bush is that there are none. Driving along, just looking about for any surprises that nature might have in store for us, we got more than we bargained for. It all started with a loud growl coupled with the famous laugh of a spotted hyena. We followed the sound and four fully-grown spotted hyenas had a young male leopard of about a year in age in their jaws. They were dragging the animal by its tail and some were lying on top of the leopard as though they wanted to take some of the leopard scent or stop it



from getting up. So, the leopard was still very much alive and it tried to put up a fight but there was no succeeding, the hyenas were too strong and they outnumbered the young leopard.

One might wonder why hyenas would want to kill such a beautiful animal, such a graceful creature? Why did the leopard not climb a tree or just run? Well, they are many questions but not a single answer would fit what transpired as a satisfactory response. We have not, as guides, had an opportunity to experience what I saw that day. We do know that one would be eliminating competition for resources - hyenas will kill and feed on anything they can sink their very strong jaws into.

It was the saddest thing I have ever seen, but maybe that's what nature is all about or, the true meaning of survival of the fittest. I did not like it one bit but I am only here to observe, learn and understand. My opinion counts for zero, how I feel goes unnoticed.

### **A transitional year**

**Article by Chene Wales-Baillie**

A magnificent thunderstorm roars around me as I type, the beating of rain to the soil and wash of grey across the bushveld reminds me that the end-of-year rain is truly here. Perhaps a metaphoric sign from nature that we now are able to wipe the slate which was 2021 clean, and walk into a new year with a clear new perspective on life? However, it also leaves time to reflect on a year gone by within the wilderness and one which brought about new challenges, new dynamics and new ideas.



Making time to get out with other guides to learn and create new ideas.



After a year of being cocooned away from the world, many began to spread their wings and travel once again, allowing us as guides and trackers the pure joy of showing so many new faces the beauty of our surroundings in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve. With so much time spent indoors, we were given a new value to nature. One where going on safari was not just about viewing larger game, it was about grounding ourselves, connecting with nature and appreciating the smaller things.

This year I have learnt that one of the best ways to properly connect with nature, is to get off the vehicle, be on the ground and to look at the tracks and signs left by the creatures of the wild. As my tracker Ruel always says, "So many people know what an impala is, yet how many actually know what its footprint looks like?", and with this, the two of us have shifted into a new perspective in our game drives, where finding animals - begins with their footprints. Tracking helps us to tell a story, the story of the spirit of the animal, its movements, its way of life. It allows us to gain a primitive understanding of the way nature moves and connects with all of its surroundings and definitely forms an integral part of a grounding experience.



Learning how to collect fresh water from the river.



Ruel teaching a family how to track a lion.

Nature's pure beauty, flourished once again this year, but if anything, the way we experience it changed and we, as guide and trackers, opened our eyes once again to a new way of thinking. We experimented, we became more creative and we learnt that in nature there is so much to learn and that although it is constant, it is ever changing and so we too need to change with it, and have fun with it!

2022 is around the corner and there is so much for us all to look forward to when it comes to life in the bush. We continue to follow the lives of individual leopards and lions; we watch as the changes in herbivore movements continue and we wait and see what the changes in climate will do to our landscape in the coming year. Whatever may come, I believe this year has been a transition in the way we all value our time in nature and I hope that each and every one of you who come to visit our home in 2022 take in every moment, get yourself on the ground, take your shoes off, feel the air against your skin and breathe in the beauty of the world around us.





Inventing a “Bushveld Fever Tea” cordial to be added to gin and tonics.



Creating clay bowls with patterns made with leaves.



Creating clay animals



Gallery for December







An incredible sunset with tracker George Nkuna – image by Quentin Swanevelder



Rhino bull enjoying the cool water – image by Gareth Poole





Mhangene pride – image by Gareth Poole



African wild dog – image by Gareth Poole