

Singita



Photo by Jenny Hishin

WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE

For the month of June, Two Thousand and Twenty One

Temperature

Average minimum:	12.1°C (53.7°F)
Minimum recorded:	09.7°C (49.4°F)
Average maximum:	26.2°C (79.1°F)
Maximum recorded:	32.2°C (99.3°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month:	25 mm
Season to date:	807.9 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise:	06:31
Sunset:	17:23

It's been a sunny and somewhat balmy month for this time of year, and we've had a welcome 25 mm of rain. We've welcomed several guests to Singita Pamushana in June, and some of them were families with young children. There is much to keep youngsters engaged here, and one of the highlights for them is learning the art of tracking and dung identification!

Here's an overview of wildlife sightings and activity for the month:

Lions:

- The prides have quite a few cubs at the moment, and they are always such a treat to see.
- A pride of four lions were seen below Chikwete Cliffs - one male, a lioness and two cubs.

- Two lionesses and a lion were seen feeding on a wildebeest along the Mahande River.
- A coalition of two adult male lions looking very full were seen sleeping for hours north of the Banyini Pan.
- The Southern Pride were found on the southern side of Chiloveka Dam. They were well fed from a kill. Three lionesses, two cubs and the pride male were on site.

Leopards:

- Leopards sightings have been unexpected this month – one female was seen as we drove up the hill leading to the lodge, and another was spotted on the water's edge five minutes into a boat cruise!

Rhinos:

- There have been excellent sightings of both black and white rhinos.
- On one drive twelve white rhinos were seen feeding south of the Banyini Pan.
- The best sighting of a black rhino this month was when guests and guide were on a boat cruise and a black rhino had waded into the river, and was calmly drinking.

Elephants:

- A great many bulls have been seen, and a few good tuskers among them.
- Some bulls tried to chase off four white rhinos from the same waterhole – water is now becoming scarce and the elephants are less willing to share.
- A delightful scene with elephants was that of a breeding herd where all the youngsters and babies were playing in the mud.

Buffalo:

- Large herds of buffalo, numbering in the 100s, are seen daily, as well as individual old dagga boys enjoying a quiet life of solitude.

Wild dogs:

- The pack/s should be denning this month.
- The highlight sighting was while watching a black rhino drinking, a hunting party of dogs crashed the scene and chased a young nyala bull into the water!

Hyenas

- A clan of hyena continue to dominate in the central areas, and on occasion one may give a game-viewer a thorough roadworthy inspection.

Plains game

- The plains game are abundant – no game drive returns without having seen several impala, giraffe, zebra and wildebeest. Sometimes the more reclusive antelope like sable are seen.

Other wildlife sightings

- Seeing a honey badger was a brilliant bonus! It was near Nduna and it quickly trundled off into the rocky outcrops nearby.
- Guests had a super sighting of a porcupine close to Old Hyena Den, as it was out on a foraging mission.
- It's lovely to see the resident pair of black-backed jackals on the Banyini.

Bush walks and rock art

- It's a good time to do bush walks, now that the vegetation is thinning out. On one walk three white rhinos were seen resting in the shade of mopane trees. Some of the walks included visiting rock art

sites and hearing the interpretation of these paintings by the guide, while the guests caught their breath and absorbed the scene.

Boat cruising and fishing

- The water safaris are so popular. Not only are guests guaranteed sightings of hippos and crocodiles and birds, but you never know what else could be seen.
- The children who visited us this month were taught the art and techniques of fishing and were rewarded by landing four very good size tilapia.

Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft

- At Kambako Julius was, as always, at his best showcasing the talents of the vanishing lifestyle of hunter/gatherers, as well as some traditional dances which the guest participated in and thoroughly enjoyed.

Day trips to Gonarezhou National Park

- The highlight of one day trip was the epic Chilojo Cliffs with beautiful light and, later, a surprise viewing of a young male leopard. Another was seeing the landscape of Gonarezhou, plus a pride of lions and two leopards!



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

Eventual success

These lions had been giving our dedicated lion tracking team the run around. For days their tracks led the scouts on a wild goose chase up and down and round about a vast area strewn with rocky outcrops. Eventually we caught up with them in the far northern reaches of the reserve. They had hunted and killed a buffalo and had feasted on the spoils.

We got to them late afternoon and they had finished feeding for the time being. We sat in the vehicle and waited patiently on the other side of the donga from where they'd tripped up the buffalo and made the kill. After some time one of the mother's gave a soft contact call. Five, ten, maybe twenty minutes later there was a little rustling and some movement in the grasses far away. Another call and another waiting period and then this little face appeared through the grass. It was very timid and probably one of the first times it had seen a vehicle and humans. It stayed very close to its mother and watched us intently.



The next morning we returned to the scene and were rewarded after the long drive before sunrise by seeing one of the lionesses feeding on the carcass. It was simultaneously spine-chilling and awesome to see her tear through the hide and bite into the beefy meat.

Interestingly the site of the kill which was well off-road was difficult to find the next morning. A large herd of buffalo, no doubt to which the victim had belonged, had moved through the area in the night. They must have stumbled on the lions and the carcass because the grass and vegetation was well trampled and churned up.

A buffalo of the size that was killed weighs about 800 kg. It would have fed the pride for quite a few days, after which they would rest a few days before hunting again.



Touchdown!

On the way back from the sighting with the lions in the previous story, we noticed a smudge of what looked like churned up earth on the airstrip. A private charter had taken off a few hours earlier, and certainly no maintenance was scheduled for the airstrip. As we drove closer a few impala that were grazing on the eastern end of the strip bounded off in front of us. Then the mound of “churned up earth” jumped up and started running towards the impala and us. It was a pack of wild dogs and three hyenas, all of which had been sleeping on the warm gravelly runway.



A couple of the wild dogs gave chase to the impala that shotgunned off in all directions when they too realised what the “churned up earth” really was. It was clear by the blood on the wild dogs’ necks that they had already hunted successfully that morning and were now more interested in resting.

Not content to let sleeping dogs lie however were the hyenas. Hyenas are notorious for trailing wild dogs and then stealing their kills from them. If it is a love/hate relationship it is only one way. While the hyenas might love the dogs for their hunting prowess and being reluctant suppliers of free meals, the wild dogs detest hyenas. Incredible fights break out when the hyenas are trying to pinch a kill from a pack – the dogs chase them, nip them on their backsides, bite and bark, while the hyenas shriek and yelp and double-back and dive in. It’s a numbers game but the hyenas are bigger in individual size, hardier and have a more powerful bite, so invariably they get the spoils.

We couldn’t help being bemused by the scene that played out and adding our own anthropomorphic spin on it. Most of the younger dogs huddled together and rested, while a couple of the older ones lay a little further away. One hyena was particularly desperate for the wild dogs to go and hunt again. It would slowly, cautiously, almost humbly sidle up to one of the dogs as if to encourage it to get up and provide a meal. He was a real brownnoser! The wild dog was having none of it. It refused to move and had that expression of, “Do not annoy me. Do not come any closer. I see you but I am ignoring you. Go and sponge off your own kind. If you breathe on me I will bite you.”

It took quite some time for the hyena to get the message.

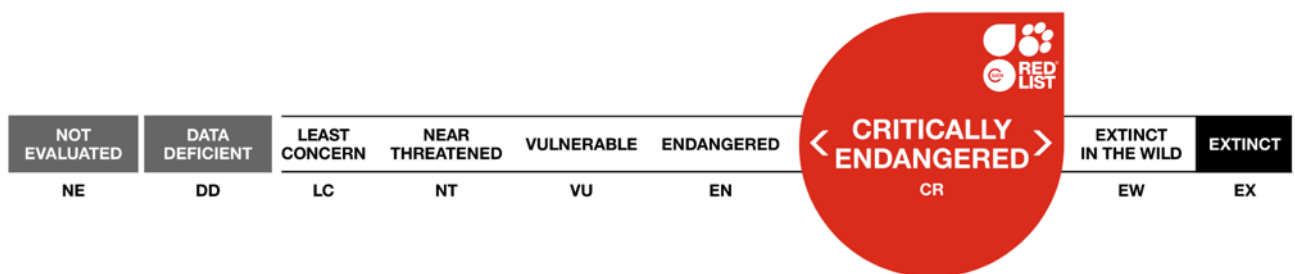




After a while the younger dogs woke up and wanted to play. It's a joy to see them chase after one another, spar, rise up on their back legs and grapple. Playful nips are given, ears are ruffled and tails pulled.

Before the pack got up and went to find some shade at midday, a hooded vulture circled above them and landed. It was looking for any leftover scraps from a kill, but vultures are also known to eat the faeces of wild dogs to obtain the nutrients from the protein-rich excrement.

What's so unusual about this photo is that you have a circle of African wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*) that are listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List with a hooded vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*) in the middle that is listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List.



How sad it is that our species is responsible for the decline and near extinction of these precious species, but how grateful I am that there are well-managed private reserves that are doing their best, thanks to the funding by generous donors, to protect our animal kingdom.

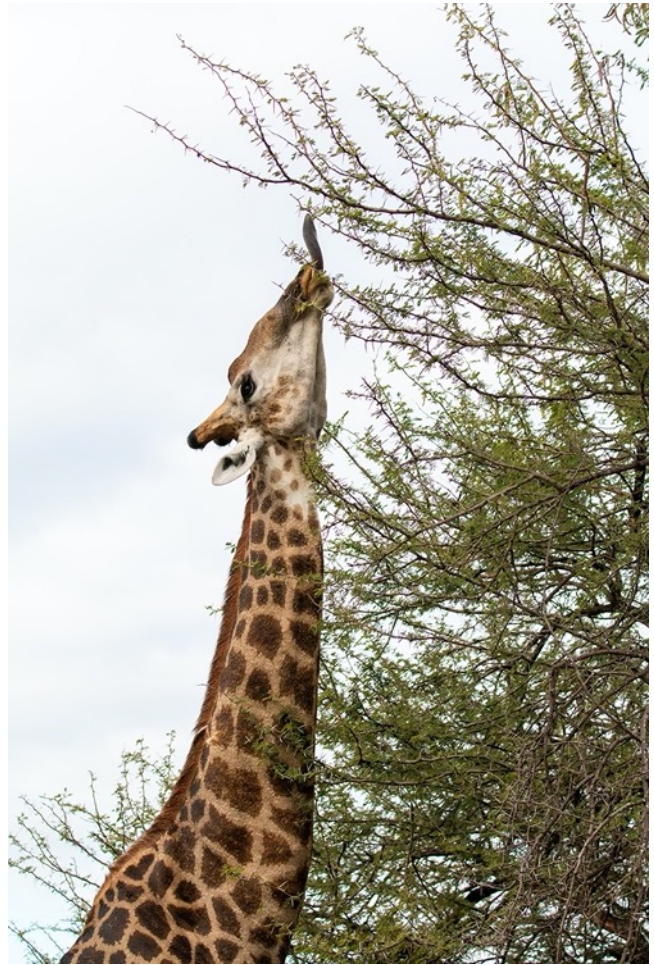
The long and the short of it

Long legs, long necks and long tongues – everything a giraffe needs to ensure it gets the leaves and buds on trees that no other animal can reach.

They can stretch their head and neck to a near vertical position. They use their extremely dexterous tongue as well as the ridged roof of their mouth to grasp leaves and strip them carefully from a thorny branch. They prefer the leaves and shoots from *Vachellia* or *Senegalia* (formerly *Acacia*) trees.

But when it comes to drinking their neck is actually too short to reach the ground, so they have to shuffle, spread their legs and bend down in an awkward position that makes them vulnerable to predators. Fortunately giraffes only need to drink once every few days, as they obtain most of their water from all the foliage they eat.

Photo of giraffe feeding by Jennifer Conaghan





Stars in stripes

It's wonderful when the planets line up and you have perfect light and a great sighting. That happened when we were in the underground photographic hide, eye level with the water, in the late afternoon golden hour, and these zebras plucked up the courage to come and drink.

As a wildlife photographer or artist of any sort you are always learning, always developing your style. I keep notes of my learnings and try to trigger them off in my head while dialling in the settings on my camera before the fleeting moment is lost.

For a scene like this what you need to remember is to focus on the eye of the animal closest to you and allow enough depth of field (your f-stop) to keep the rest of the subjects in enough focus too. Of course these 'rules' can be broken with beautiful effect.

Here a red-billed oxpecker combs through the ear of a zebra as the two of them wet their muzzles.

Four line up in perfect fleeting formation.



He who speaks with forked tongue

We first saw this rock monitor lizard on the ground before it climbed up this tree, then down again, in its effort to hide from us. We get two species of monitor lizards here – the Nile/water monitor (*Varanus niloticus*) which is Africa's largest lizard, and this slightly shorter stockier rock/tree monitor (*Varanus albigularis*).



In this photo you can see its distinctive forked tongue. What is absolutely fascinating is that the twin ends of the tongue collect odour particles from the air and then deliver them to the corresponding receptors of the Jacobson's organ (a fluid-filled bi-lobed sensory organ in the roof of the mouth), which can detect differences in strength on each tongue tip, and from this work out the direction of the scent, allowing the rock monitor to follow the scent trail and locate the prey. How clever is that?

They are carnivores and will eat anything from eggs to insects, reptiles, frogs, small mammals, birds and carrion.

Rock monitors are found further from water, normally sunning themselves on a rock or in a tree. They can be quite intimidating when disturbed – hissing and swishing their tails, or in extreme cases shamming death.

Both species will defend themselves if necessary by biting, scratching and lashing with their powerful tails, so it's best to stay on the right side of these intelligent and impressive lizards.

Bringing home the bacon

While tracking lions their huge paw prints led over a trail of harvester ants returning to their nest. We watched them bringing back little bits of dry vegetation, and were extremely impressed when one heroic worker ant returned with this spectacular starburst of a seed!

Ants may play an important role in the dynamics of plant communities by acting either as seed dispersal agents or as seed predators, or both. During the day, these ants search the savannas for vegetation and plant seeds, and carry them along back to their nest. This food is stored in the nest in communal chambers called granaries. In addition, ants provide soil aeration through the creation of galleries and chambers, mix deep and upper layers of soil, and incorporate organic refuse into the soil.



Twitter



Birds of all shapes, sizes and colours adorn the land, trees and skies. Some of the month's highlights include: Openbill stork (a rare sighting – seen on the dam), African hawk eagle, bateleur, three-banded courser, secretary bird, lesser moorhen and a tawny eagle fighting an African hawk eagle.

Yet to win a beauty contest are the marabou storks.

Having a splashy bath was this Meve's starling while some wattled starlings (the lighter ones) plucked up the courage.





Photo by Josh Saunders

There are several types of hornbills found here – the most common being the southern yellow-billed hornbill and the red-billed hornbill.



June Gallery



A troop of baboons were caught napping in a baobab tree. The moon was full and the sun yet to rise. Baboons choose a big tree in which to roost for safety, and make sure they are in it by dusk and only leave it well after dawn when they can spot any daylight lurking dangers.



This grey foam-nest tree frog was lying flat against the branch when we spotted it. They are arboreal frogs and are adapted to live away from water for months at a time. One of their adaptations is water-loss resistant skin that changes colour in response to temperature. It was a boiling hot day and the frog was a heat-reflecting chalky white rather than the dark brown hue they have during cold nights.



Perspective – the elephant standing next to the baobab looks tiny, while the elephant in the foreground makes the baobab in the distance look like a bonsai.





A Swainson's spurfowl perches above the mist-spritzed vegetation. Putting her best hoof forward (the golden one) was this giraffe followed by a friend.



An owl keeps a beady eye out for prey during the night, thanks to rod cells that outnumber cone cells 30 to 1 in owl species.



Rhinos have poor eyesight at the best of times, but these six white rhinos chose the cool cover of darkness to congregate at a waterhole, drink and socialise with one another. They rely on their other well-developed senses and an array of vocalisations to communicate with one another.

All photos and content by Jenny Hishin, unless otherwise indicated.