

# Singita



## WILDLIFE JOURNAL SINGITA PAMUSHANA, ZIMBABWE

For the month of October, Two Thousand and Twenty One

### Temperature

Average minimum:	17.9°C (64.2°F)
Minimum recorded:	12.1°C (53.8°F)
Average maximum:	31.6°C (88.8°F)
Maximum recorded:	42.8°C (109°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the month:	35.8 mm
*Season to date:	35.8 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug	

### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise:	05:10
Sunset:	18:04

We've had all kinds of weather extremes – scorching days of over 40 °C followed by some cold downpours of the first of the season's rains. But let's dive right in to the sightings...

### Here's a sightings snapshot for October:

#### Lions

Lion activity has been great – we've seen them on kills, heard them roaring, and on one occasion had a whole pride walk past guests, guide and the game viewer as they were having sundowners, on their way to drink.

- Southern Pride: They are in good condition and we've seen them on a wildebeest and buffalo bull kill.
- River Pride: Sightings of this pride of eight were enjoyed while they slept off a buffalo feast in the riverbed at Chikokovele. Seven hyenas and several vultures made quick work of the leftovers.

- Nduna Pride: The two old males of this pride have been seen on their own, and with the rest of the pride females and cubs. They've been between the Nduna and Lojaan areas, enjoying the warmth and concealment of the rocks. On one occasion were roaring close to the safari goers and then the females and cubs went to inspect the vehicle and spent time near the enthralled guests. On another occasion three buffalo bulls came to the waterhole the pride were watching over, and two lionesses tried to catch one of the buffalo.
- Two young adult males: We've spotted the two young nomads a couple of times, but they are still skittish and disappear on being found.

### **Leopards**

- Sightings of these elusive cats have been sporadic, except when on an occasion when a guide and tracker noticed fresh drag marks from a leopard kill crossing the road. With their guests in tow they tracked it through some thick bush to find a baby zebra that had been stashed away by the leopardess who was feeding on the kill she had made.
- One afternoon drive netted two leopard sightings, both in the vicinity near the lodge!
- A female leopard was seen briefly lying on the branch of a tree watching impalas which were feeding, but she jumped from the tree shortly after being seen.

### **African wild dogs**

- The pack of 12 wild dogs (6 adults and 6 puppies) was seen resting in the Kwali area, with quite a few hyenas waiting for them to hunt. At dusk the adults chased after some kudu and impala, with the hyenas in tow.
- The puppies have delighted guests by curiously coming up to the vehicles to ponder the occupants.

### **Hyenas**

- Hyenas are spotted all over the reserve. They were also seen one afternoon from the boat, feasting on a dead hippo.
- About 20 hyenas were observed feeding and fighting over a wildebeest carcass. We presume they had killed the wildebeest themselves during the night.

### **Rhinos**

- White rhinos: You are guaranteed to see white rhinos at Singita Pamushana. Sometimes the numbers are almost unbelievable as you can see over ten in one area at one time, and should you spend several hours at a favoured waterhole you can see close on twenty.
- Black rhinos: Seeing black rhinos is harder but every now and again they are seen in multiples too, such as one late afternoon game drive to the Chiredzi River for a sundowner when three black rhinos were seen en route, and then two more further along on the opposite side of the river. Another endearing sight was seeing a mother and her month-old calf feeding along Pamushana Access.

### **Elephants**

- The bachelor boys have been a delight as they converge at Hwata Pan for drinking sessions.
- One breeding herd was spotted near the river so the guide took the guests on foot through the thick riverine vegetation for a closer look. After 20 minutes of careful approach they were able to safely observe some of the adult females resting in the shade of trees, throwing dust on themselves and the babies lying resting at their feet. They also got to watch a calf wake up and start nursing.
- The highlight of one afternoon boat cruise was spending close to half an hour with a breeding herd as they were drinking from the shoreline. A total of 15 were seen but more were in the vicinity evidenced by the sounds of them browsing and shaking the trees.

### **Buffalo**

- Old dagga boys are dotted around the reserve, and the breeding herds drink daily from the various permanent water points.
- A highlight was at Nduna Dam when two herds of Cape buffalo came to drink. One herd had more than 500 and the other herd more than 700. Two male lions were watching the buffalo drink, from a distance.

### **Plains game**

- Plains game abound, especially during the hot weather out on the plains.
- There have also been good sightings of herds of sable, and Lichtenstein's hartebeests with their calves.

### **Photographic hide**

- If the animals are thirsty enough and you get the timing right, sightings from inside the underground photographic hide can be off the charts. Such as when guests saw impala, wildebeest, buffalo, white rhinos, eland, warthogs, sable, elephants and giraffe – all in one session in the hide.
- One group of guests spent the afternoon sitting in the hide and saw over 10 white rhino coming to drink, an elephant bull drinking and mud bathing, and then a lioness drinking in the dark.

### **Walks**

- It's an excellent time to walk, and it is what our guides like doing best.
- One group walked for about three hours and had special sightings of kudu, impala, buffalo, an elephant bull and abundant birdlife along the Chiredzi River.
- Another group did some caving and found various shards of pottery and a broken blue bead.

### **Water safaris and fishing**

- There have been excellent catches of bream, tiger and catfish after consecutive days of hot weather.
- It's a particularly good time for the redbreast tilapia.
- The sunset water safaris are always exceptional, but even more so when elephants, black rhino or leopard are spotted from the boat, as they were this month.

### **Birds**

- It was a delight to have avid avian enthusiasts in camp. We saw 50 species on the first morning which, and some of the migratory species had just arrived. By the second morning their bird list was up to 90!

### **Day trips**

- We hosted a full day trip outing to Great Zimbabwe, followed by a relaxing sundowner cruise on the boat when we got back. Great Zimbabwe was a medieval African city and part of its ruins still feature an enormous curved stone wall and tower. It was part of a wealthy African trading empire and was thought to have been the capital of a great kingdom, during the country's Late Iron Age.

### **Community visits**

- We took one of our guests to visit and get involved in the Khomonani Women's Garden. The Garden was set up by The Malilangwe Trust to provide funding and support of a market garden, which is managed by a group of women. The garden has a borehole, pump, solar power system, 30 000 litre water storage tank, gravity-fed canals and storage sheds.

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

### **Black rhino encounter on the sunset safari cruise**

The sunset safari cruises are usually the ultimate in relaxation and a type of zen meditation. You cruise along, soaking up the indescribably beautiful splendour of the lake, sandstone cliffs, riverine vegetation, jungle and sculptural trees. Then there's the prolific birdlife – so many species nesting around or fishing from the lake, and you're guaranteed to see the animals that live in the water such as hippos and crocs. Every now and again you may see some antelope grazing on the banks of the river.

We were puttering along up the narrower reaches of the river, sipping our sundowners and well under the spell of it all when suddenly there was a great crashing and bashing just ahead of the starboard bow. It was a black rhino! It was just about to step down from the bank and have a drink when we appeared. Flustered it blustered about for a few seconds, then stopped and surveyed us for a few more, then stormed off back into a dense grove. It waited until we were gone before enjoying its sundowner drink.



There was no time to faff with camera settings for this photo, and I always leave my camera in P (Programmed Auto) mode when I'm not using it, as this lets the camera automatically adjust the shutter speed, aperture and ISO for optimal exposure, without using the flash. Here it chose a huge ISO of 6400, resulting in a grainy image, but one that is still sharp and correctly exposed for this after sunset, surprise situation.

### **Pot of gold**

When we eventually got to these lions that our lion tracking team had found it was like finding a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow of emerald, sage, copper, bronze and chestnut leaves amid silver-grey tree stumps and foliage, on top of a dark chocolate and liquorice rock. A majestic scene if ever there was!



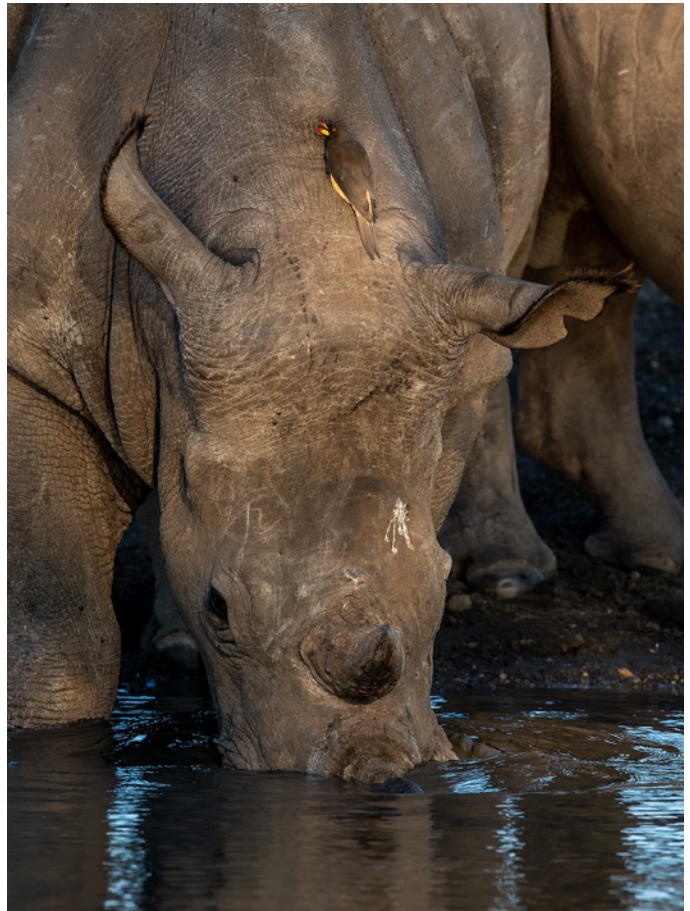
They were on the far bank of a deep ravine and we managed to photograph them from different angles, while one lionesses kept an eye on the lion tracking team that were on foot in the distance.





## Spa treatments

This white rhino arrived at the pan during the glorious golden hour, and began drinking as normal. But then it began what seemed like unusual behaviour. It plunged its whole front horn underwater and began snorkelling around. Even the yellow-billed oxpecker between its ears seemed alarmed.



It horned the muddy bottom of the pan, then turned around and sat down in the shallows wetting its behind while resting its head on the bank.

After that it heaved itself up and strode over to a nearby rock, and began to reveal the reasons for muddying parts of its body.





At the rock it vigorously scraped its horn back and forth - it was now clear that it had muddied it in order to shape and sharpen it on the rock, and the mud was acting as a sandpaper agent.



After that it went directly to a much favoured rhino rubbing post – the worn and polished smooth stump of a tree. There it had a glorious bout of scratching an itch – in the most hard to reach of places - again the mud acted as a sandpaper agent. It had to squat down like a frog to get to the really itchy bits because the stump has been worn down so much over the years.





## Puppy school

It is such a privilege to observe a pack of African wild dogs for an extended period of time – even when they are doing ‘nothing’. The dogs’ tracks and their strong body odour led us to where they were having a midday siesta. At this stage the adults go off to hunt at dawn and dusk and then return to where they left the pups, often with a babysitter in charge, and then regurgitate meat from the kill for the excited begging pups and their minder. The pups are under six months old now and it’s really interesting to see how they are expected to behave as a unit. They are encouraged to be a tight-knit little group and will often be reprimanded if they go off independently exploring. The adults also act as a tight-knit group, all sleeping in a heap too, but always a short distance away from the patchwork of pups.



In this sequence of photos the pups were lying in a game path of soft sand. They tried to sleep but you could see they really wanted to play and pester one another. With each little sound of possible excitement their mickey-mouse ears would prick up and they’d look hopeful that a diversion would take place.



Then one of them got up and found a great stick – and needless to say they others needed that stick too.





This adorable, long-legged, white socked, little pup went on a brief foray to hide behind a branch and spy on us to see if we were worthy of interest, but wisely went and lay down with its littermates again. It has such beautiful markings – even a little white spot upon its nose!

When these pups are a little older and able to run with the adults on a hunt, they'll be permitted to eat first on kills, a privilege which ends once they become yearlings.

African wild dogs' natural enemies are lions and hyenas. Lions will kill the dogs where possible, whilst hyenas are frequent kleptoparasites. The alpha female's gestation period lasts about 70 days, with an interval between each pregnancy being about 12–14 months. They can produce more pups than any other canid, with litters containing around six to 16 pups, with an average of 10, thus indicating that a single female can produce enough young to form a new pack every year. This begs the question: Why are African wild dogs the second most endangered carnivore in Africa, after the Ethiopian wolf? It's because they are extremely sensitive to habitat fragmentation as a consequence of their wide-ranging behaviour, conflict with livestock and game farmers, road accidents, infectious disease, and killings by detestable, viciously cruel, bushmeat snares. All of these causes are associated with human encroachment on African wild dog habitat. Our species needs to be educated to change our behaviour, and we need to establish new, protected areas that can hold these animals sustainably if our future generations are ever to have the privilege of observing them.

## What scares an elephant?

These are seven of the biggest elephant bulls on the reserve. They were having a calm and pleasant time drinking and cooling off at a shallow pan. Then, apropos of nothing, they all turned and fled at speed, shrieking and running from the water. We'd seen no evil, heard no evil and spoken no evil! So what scares a combined weight of 35 tons of Africa's biggest land mammal? A mouse? That's a myth but most mammals, including humans, are naturally startled by critters that scurry by in a hurry. But I doubt it was a mouse or a snake. I suspect it was either a low-frequency rumble made by another approaching bull, as elephants communicate at frequencies beyond our audible range. Or it was a swarm of bees that had flown in for a drink at the pan. I often see many bees drinking at the very edge of the pan. Bees can sting elephants around their eyes, ears and trunk tips, and elephants are very frightened of them. In some areas around crops where people don't want elephants to invade they install bee hives to deter the elephants from approaching the area.





## Flower of the month: Sand forest poison rope (*Strophanthus petersianus*)

Sand forest poison rope is a climbing plant with the most extraordinary flowers with twisted rope-like petals. The flowers are fragrant and have a white corolla, sometimes with reddish pink stripes on the inside. From the photos you can see how the bud has string-like petals tips that then open and twist down together. The seed pod is huge by comparison and shaped like two big thorns/horns, before it splits opens and releases the seeds for wind dispersal.

*Strophanthus petersianus* has been used as arrow poison, and as a charm against evil. As the principal ingredient in arrow poison the arrows were dipped in a concentration of the ingredient taken from the seeds and pods, and the effect was to stun the prey.



Plants from this genus produce toxic alkaloids and cardiac glycosides. The drug acts on the heart before influencing any other organ or tissue. Some of the chemicals in the plants are used to produce a drug which was taken as a cardiac stimulant to treat heart failure and sometimes g-strophanthin is advocated as an alternative treatment to more contemporary practices.

Sand forest poison rope habitat is coastal forest and rocky woodland, and it is native to countries from Kenya south to South Africa.

The name of the genus is derived from the Greek word *strophos* which means twisted cord or rope, and *anthos* which means flower, alluding to the shape of the flower.





Above: A sand forest poison rope flower in full bloom.  
Below: The large two-horned seed pod.





## October Gallery



The scenes you see on a sunset safari cruise.  
A bull elephant having a midday shower.







A white rhino crossing a road, just as dawn is breaking.  
A spotted hyena curled up in a little nest on the road, early one morning.







Often you'll find two zebras standing head to tail, swishing the flies off one another. These three were trying out a three-way fly swat configuration!

A secretary bird looks on disapprovingly as two bull elephants send mud flying everywhere.





A young kudu bull developing a magnificent set of horns.



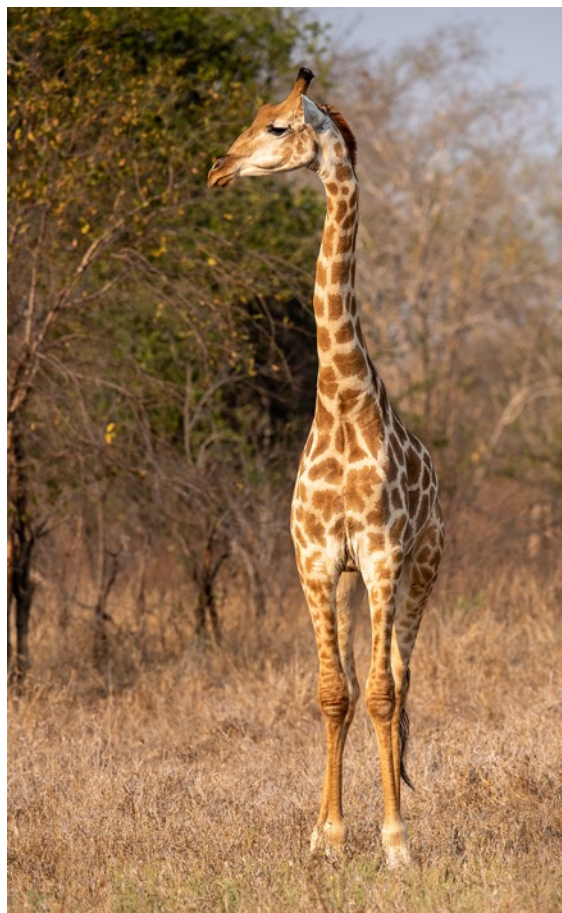
The adorable curiosity of two of the Nduna pride cubs.  
Photo by Sarah Ball.







A flock of doves do a flyby and spook the zebras as two white rhinos calmly drink.



A graceful giraffe bends towards the early morning sun.