Singita *Pamushana Lodge*
Malilangwe
Zimbabwe

Wildlife Report

For the month of August, Two Thousand and Thirteen

Temperature

Average minimum:	15,4˚C	(59,7˚F)
Average maximum:	28,5˚C	(83,3˚F)
Minimum recorded:	11,0˚C	(51,8˚F)
Maximum recorded:	35,9˚C	(96,6˚F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the period:	0 mm
For the year to date:	354,6 mm

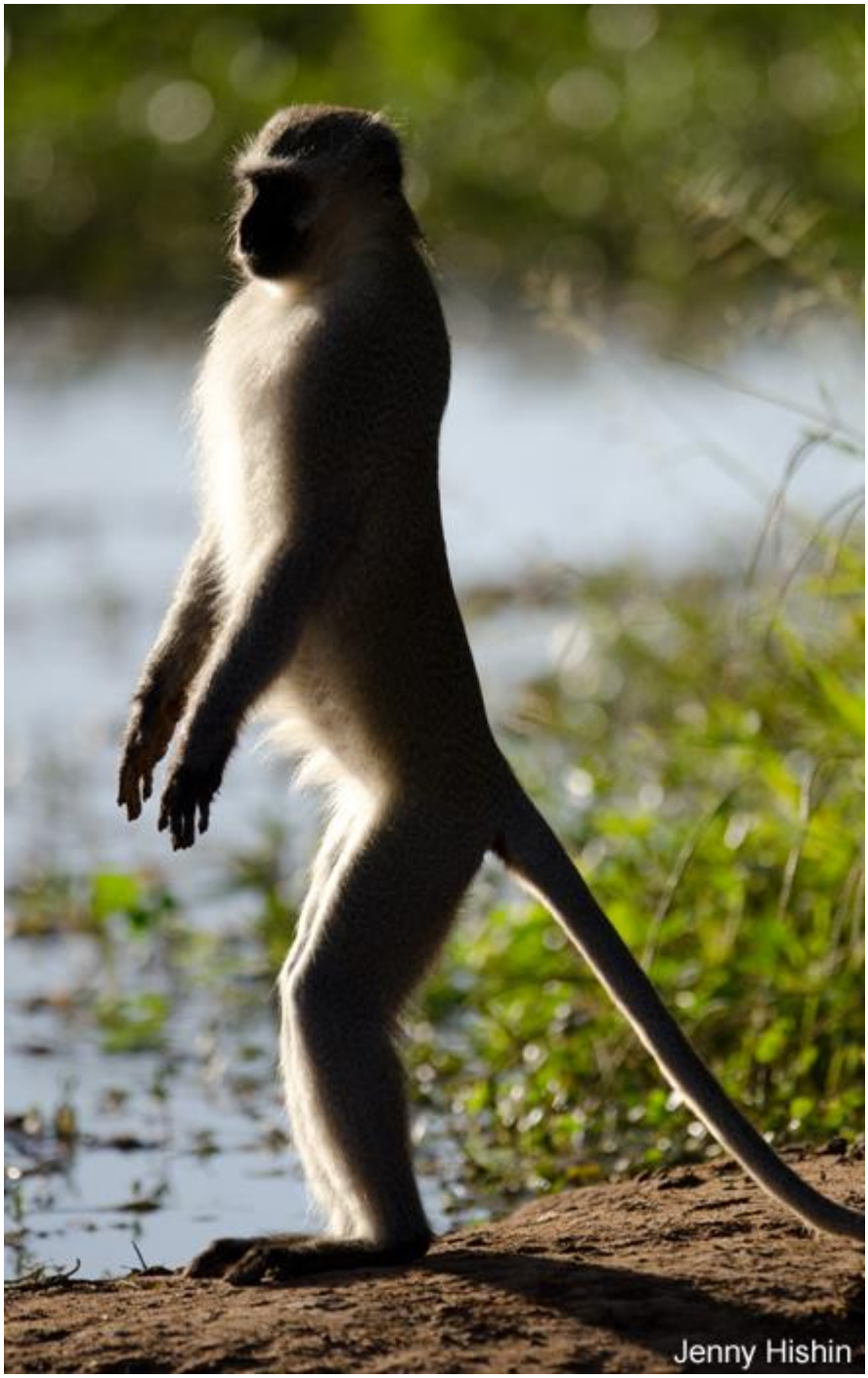
It's been a month of thrilling sightings, newborns and close encounters. First of all I want to tell you about the arrival of 17 wild dogs on our reserve. Seven adults and ten playful pups were seen at one of the pans. Guests enjoyed a thrilling afternoon watching the pack chasing elephants, wildebeest and hyenas! The season for wild dog denning has just finished and we suspect that this pack has arrived on our property via the south, from Gonarezhou National Park. We fervently hope they'll make this their home for a while, and I'll be sure to keep you updated with photos and stories if they do.

Also vying for number one top sighting slot were the witnessed birth of a baby giraffe and the arrival of a baby boy black rhino. Weighing in at only 40 kg, and looking like a cartoon character, there can be few things more adorable than a rhino calf. (I do realise that I tend to say this about all young animals - but that's just how it is!) Photos to follow next month, so please stay tuned...

Eyes, ears and whiskers

Buffalo *(Syncerus caffer)* aren't usually described as beautiful, tender and patient, but in spending a sunrise with a large herd we were able to notice some of their finer details - the softness of their chestnut eyes, the way the sun shines through their thin pink-skinned ears and highlights their whiskers, as well as how they mostly tolerate the persistent probing and pecking of oxpeckers.

Neighbourhood watch



A troop of vervet monkeys *(Chlorocebus pygerythrus)* spent the morning at a large pan in the middle of an open area. It was fascinating to note that they took turns to watch for danger and sound the alarm for their family should anything suspicious happen.

This sentry was on guard at the water's edge - never feeding or being distracted. At one point it thought it saw something and stood up on its hind legs for a better view. Fortunately it turned out to be a false alarm, and the rest of the morning was spent in safety.

The most significant studies done on vervet monkeys involve their communication and alarm calls, specifically in regard to kin and group recognition, and particular predator sightings. Individuals seem to be able to recognize, and identify from and to which monkey each call is intended. Mothers can recognize their offspring by a scream alone. A juvenile scream will elicit a reaction from all mothers, yet the juvenile's own mother is quicker to look in the direction of the scream, and looks there for longer. Vervets have four main predators: leopards, eagles, pythons and baboons. The sighting of each predator causes them to sound an acoustically distinct alarm call, and that informs the others of what evasive action to take.

Red velvet

Red velvet mites, as their name suggests, are bright red, fluffy and small. Right now they'll be buried underground, but when the rains come later in the year they'll emerge and set about their intriguing, but not well-researched ways... They're harmless to humans and if you inspect them closely you'll see they have little lobster-like claws - an indication of being related to scorpions and spiders. As bizarre as they are they have a sex life to match - the male spins a sperm garden web and lures females into it... Arachnids from this family are found in many parts of the world, and in India, due to their alleged ability to increase sexual desire, red velvet mites are known as 'Indian Viagra'!

The soul of a survivor

One of the many things I admire about lionesses is their selfish pursuit of survival - their blinkered tunnel-vision focus on staying alive and raising their cubs, and never getting thrown off course by inconsequential details. They need to be 100% in it for themselves, in order to live out each day.

These two lionesses are getting on now, and have seen it all, and more. I recall the time I witnessed one of them trying to defend her little cub from a buffalo bull. The buffalo killed it but the lioness put up the bravest of fights, going back again and again to try and save her cub from the goring horns and the pummelling boss. Did she mourn her cub? I think she did in a way lionesses do, but she didn't let it stop her from continuing to hunt for herself and feed her remaining two cubs.

When we found these two lionesses recently they were with the remaining two cubs who are now strapping sub-adults. The whole family was well fed and they were lying in the shade of mopane trees. I wonder what they think - do they recall scenes from their past, like photograph memories, and think about their immediate future and where to hunt for their next meal? It's hard to say. But they seemed utterly content and 'in the present,' even as a procession of flies marched up the one's nose and the other yawned with extravagance.

Scarred for life

I think we all share a love for the inky thumbprint patterns of zebras' coats. They're so outlandish, bold and eye-catching, yet work very well as a form of camouflage when a herd gallops away from a pursuing predator. The combined effect of all the stripes streaking past one another can dazzle a predator and make them unable to zero in on an individual to target and attack.

Every now and again you'll notice a zebra with terrible scars, usually on its rear or flanks, and stripes that don't match up. These are the healed wounds of where a lion's claws raked the zebra's skin as it tried to catch it, but wasn't able to hold on and tackle the zebra to the ground.

One of our guests sent me this photo she took at Singita Pamushana recently, and after referencing it with my other scarred zebra photos I can confirm that this survivor is new to me - it has a distinctive (obviously very lucky) crucifix on its tail.

Who goes there?

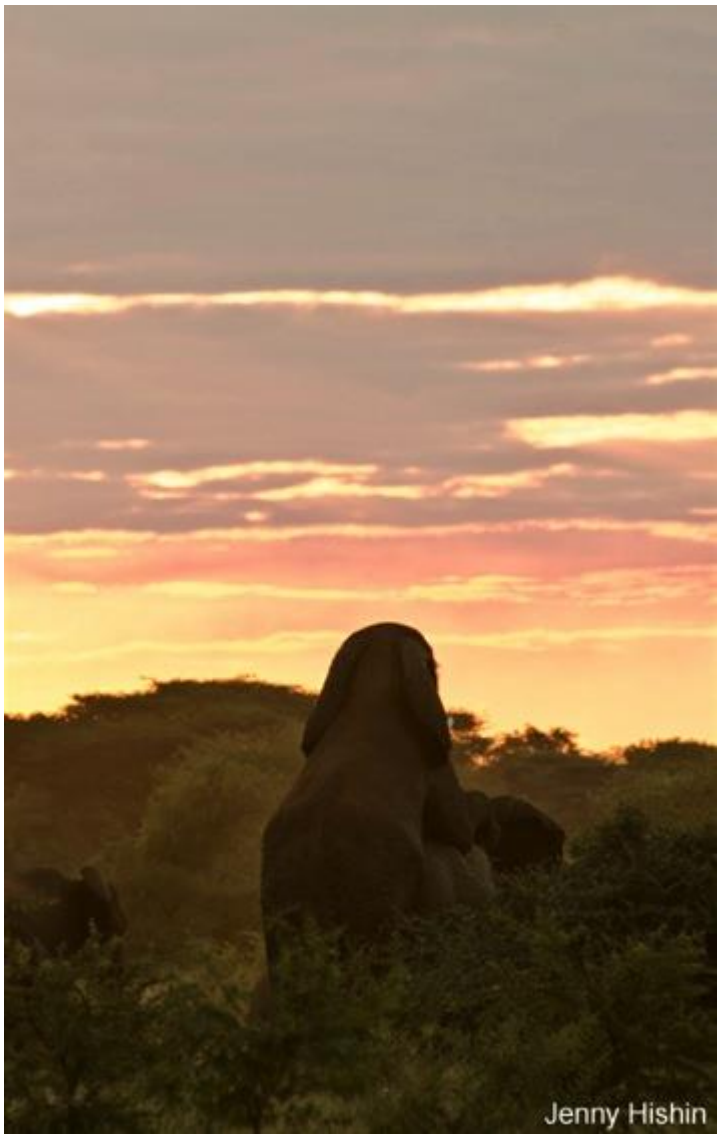
I was driving along a sandy track, heading east, away from the Chiredzi River, when an unusual drag mark caught my eye. It carried on for quite a way, but I soon decided it wasn't the drag mark a stick would leave if an elephant were trailing one in its trunk, as they often do. It also wasn't the right kind of drag mark that an elephant's trunk leaves behind. Nor was it the drag mark the limb of an antelope leaves as the dead animal is carried off to be eaten by the predator that has it in its jaws. It wasn't serpentine either.

I pulled over to have a proper look, and the first thing to do is look on either side of the drag mark for the tracks of the animal that was doing the dragging...

There, evenly and steadily placed were the distinctive tracks of a crocodile - a very large crocodile. Such was the detail that you can even see the crocodile skin scale marks left behind from beneath its feet.

The drag mark itself - the long stripe you see in the photos, was the groove left by the croc's tail. In the photo on the left the croc would have been walking towards camera, and below I photographed it from the other side so you can see the scale marks clearly and the webbed toe indentations.

Elephant facts and figures



We were lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a rare scene one very early dawn - elephants mating. Later in the day we watched as a pair of young bulls took their time over a long drink at the source of a fresh water supply.

Both these scenes reminded me of the facts that everything to do with elephants is always on a massive scale. I'm no fan of too many facts getting in the way of a great sighting, but here are some colossal details:

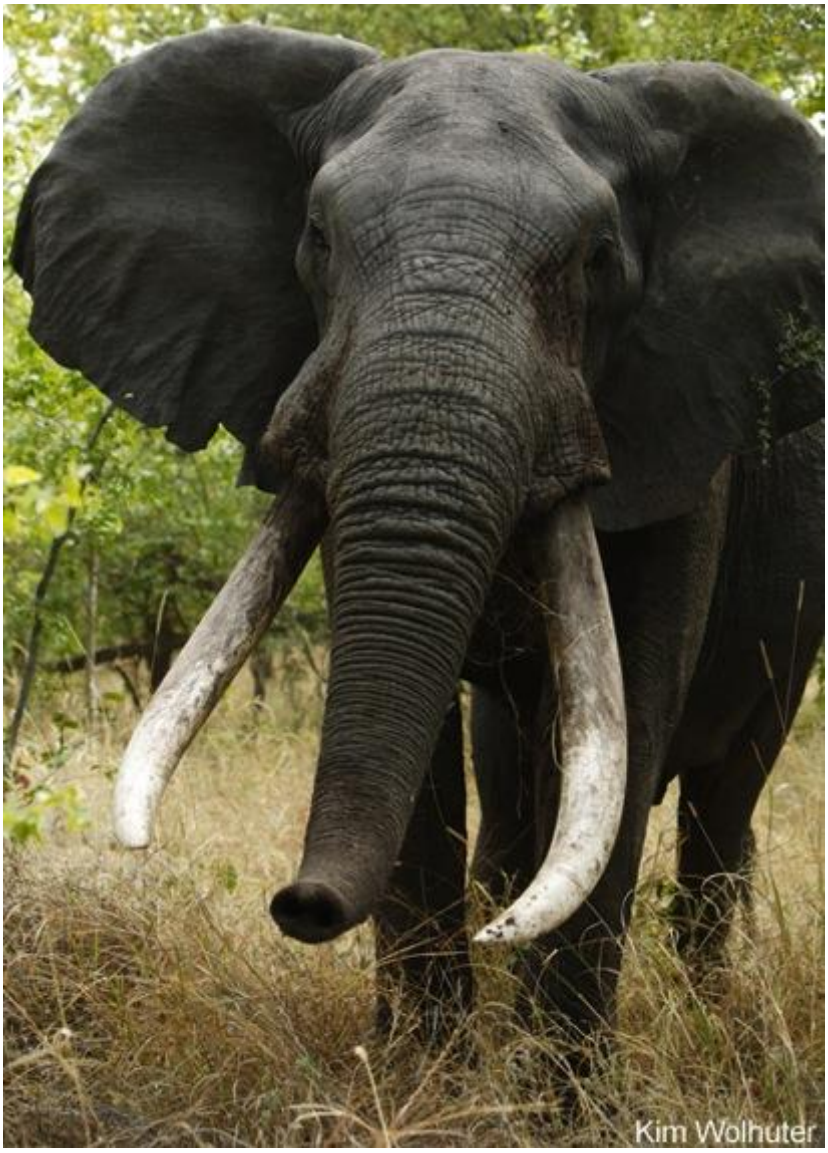
- African elephants are the largest living terrestrial animals.
- Male elephants stand about 3,5 m tall at the shoulder and weigh up to 6 tons, while females stand about 2,7 m tall and weigh up to 3,2 tons.
- Elephants eat about 150 kg of food a day.
- An adult bull drinks about 120 litres a day.
- They produce 100 kg of dung a day.
- Calves are born after a gestation period of nearly 22 months.
- Birth weight is about 120 kg.
- Life expectancy can be 60 years.

A living legend

Kim Wolhuter, our resident wildlife filmmaker, has been spending some time documenting the life of one of Singita Pamushana's living legends - an elephant bull named, 'Samanyanga'. 'Samanyanga' means 'tusks' and this bull has the most magnificent set of ivory I've ever seen.

He's an old boy - possibly in his 50s, and you can tell just by the bony shape of his skull that time is marching on for this wise soul. It's so rare to see an elephant with such big tusks in today's world - most tuskers have been killed for their ivory and much of the gene pool that results in elephants with large tusks has been wiped out with them.

It's so touching to see this noble creature that has survived droughts, disease and persecution, amble steadily along, carrying his heavy load. The weight of his ivory gives him a distinctive ponderous gait and proud posture. Often you'll find that he is accompanied by a couple of younger bulls - these are known as 'askaris' - a word that can be interpreted as 'trusted scout'. They look out for him, and learn from his age-old wisdom - the top photograph is the most beautiful portrayal of this.



All a twitter

It's such a great sight to see a pair of endangered white-backed vultures *(Gyps africanus)* nesting, and you can tell that this is an active nest by the branches that have been added to it, as they still have their green leaves on.

This long-legged bird with a yellow 'moustache' is a white-crowned lapwing *(Vanellus albiceps).* The yellow wattles are thought to be an ornament for courting potential mates. Large wattles are correlated with high testosterone levels, good nutrition and the ability to evade predators, which in turn indicates a potentially successful mate.

There are many interesting and unusual things about these birds, but the one I want to point out is the spurs they have on the leading edge of their wings - see the red circled area. Some birds have wing spurs (think of a spur-winged goose) that occur on the carpal (wrist) joints and, like horns, grow from the base outwards. They are thought to be used as an aid to fighting or defence whereby the wings are spread and the bird swoops fast and low, attacking an intruder with its wing spurs.

I've had some of my very best bird sightings while waiting in the carpark - and this was one of those occasions. A staccato loud drumming that did not let up splintered the peace and quiet. Following the sound I was able to zero in on a bearded woodpecker *(Dendropicos namaquus)* that was drilling into a dead branch, in search of juicy grubs.

The male has a striking red crown, whereas the female's is black, and she briefly flew in and rested on the branch above as he hung on upside down in his search for a meal.

I spent a good while watching him transfixed by the many adaptions woodpeckers have that allows them to carve out their niche in the world. The most obvious is their chisel-like beak that they use to drill holes in trees to obtain food or make a home. The beak is also used for drumming, which is the male's way of signalling to his mate or declaring his territory to other woodpeckers.

The tongue has special extensions that make it very long, allowing it to reach far beyond the tip of the bill to explore below bark and down bored insect holes. For choice morsels in those hard-to-reach places it may extend its tongue over 10 centimetres beyond the tip of its beak. It's also covered in sticky mucus and armed with barbs so that no insect stands a chance!

Watching the force with which the woodpecker strikes the tree, it's amazing that the bird can hold on upside down. You can see in the second photo that the toes are still and in focus but I've used a slower speed to capture the rapid movement of its head. Its toe arrangement, two toes facing forward and two backward, gives the woodpecker a solid base on which to cling to the tree. Its sharp claws dig into the wood, and its stiff, square tail feathers brace against the tree to act as a support prop.

Even the woodpecker's skull is specially designed to withstand repeated blows and to protect the bird's brain from concussion. Unlike other birds, the bones between the beak and the skull are joined by a flexible cartilage, which cushions the shock of each blow.

Rudiments and Theory of Music

An African heart beats to the rhythm of thundering hooves,
As clouds of dust rise and fall to pandemonium,
Marking time on the pendulum of life.
Insatiable thirst overpowers the colour of day
And debilitating fear must finally succumb to death.

Another score pervades from purveyors of the trees,
An allegro of excitement amidst an intricate canopy
Where twisting serpent creates a cadenza.
Feathered bravura cannot vindicate the foray
And venomous stealth takes away from the tempo of being.

A pulse plays out in scaly chest and hot-blood heart
Where a symphony of croaks and murmurs derive
Beside the gentle waters that collide with maiden's rock.
Through twisted horn and broken sheath
A grassland melody blows across the scattered plains.

Diminuendo is welcomed by sunset in the west
Dolce in a new-born's nest, dolorosa from an old one's grave.
Before the final chord falls to host the keeper of the night
Nature's composition pauses and the coda harmonises
A glitter of gleaming veins on the dusk of dusty bones.

By Shelley Mitchley
Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve

Winter show

We have the most magnificent Sabi star (*Adenium multiflorum)* growing in the central area of our lodge, and each winter, when everything else is dry, brown and seemingly lifeless, it erupts in a show of crimson-tinged star-shaped flowers - this when the rest of the plant is completely leafless. It's such an injection of colour and inspiration - and it's no wonder why the beautiful flowers were chosen to illustrate a stamp many years ago, when Zimbabwe was known as Rhodesia.

"One of our favourite family trips The experience will be imprinted on our hearts for the rest of our lives. The team at Singita made this trip exceptional, thank you each and everyone!"

Giammalva family, Greenwich, Connecticut

By Jenny Hishin
Singita Pamushana
Malilangwe Wildlife Reserve
Zimbabwe
Thirtieth of August 2013