

Singita Sabi Sand  
Ebony & Boulders Lodges  
Castleton House  
South Africa

Singita

## Wildlife Journal

For the month of March, Two Thousand and Fourteen



### Temperature

Average minimum: 17.6°C (63.68°F)  
Average maximum: 28.4°C (83.1°F)  
Minimum recorded: 8.0°C (46.4°F)  
Maximum recorded: 34.8°C (94.64°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the period: 308 mm  
For the year to date: 847 mm

### Seasonal changes

Article by Ross Couper

After living in the bush for several years, you start to see the subtlest of seasonal changes in the vegetation. I am always waiting in anticipation to see the metamorphoses as it engulfs the bush with a blanket of change and, if you look closely, you will notice that the changes are very evident when pointed out. These small details are often included in the game drives but are brought to the fore during the guided walking safaris.

Yesterday I parked my safari vehicle in the shade, waiting for it to be filled with fuel, and when I returned an hour later it was filled with dried leaves. This was an indication that autumn was advancing.

The endless birdcalls in summer are always a clear indication of the summer season. As the season progressed through the rainy months, a few summer residents still fed on the last of the abundance of insects before their long return to North Africa or Europe. This week it was difficult to hear a woodland kingfisher call. We have seen a few of them but they're a lot less abundant than they were and they are not calling as a territorial display anymore.



Autumn shows us a sign of change, subtle but it's there, you just need to look closely at the smaller aspects of the bush and relish the change. It always amazes me when I look back at previous photographs from winter last year and compare them with some of the images captured during the summer months and compare the incredible transformation that takes place. The wildlife is preparing for the winter ahead - they are often seen foraging on the vegetation that is abundant at present and has good nutrient and mineral content.

### Marula trees – myths, legends and food for the soul     Article by Leon van Wyk & Ross Couper

Time has once again flown by, and yet another marula season has come and gone. This February saw a real bumper crop of these delicious fruit being produced by the many hundreds of marula trees (*Sclerocarya birrea*) that are to be found on the sandier, well-drained areas of Singita Sabi Sand. A great many different animals tucked into these fruit with real gusto! Not only the elephants, who are so famous for enjoying these smooth-skinned, large-stoned fruits of the mango family, but also monkeys, baboons, impala, kudu, warthogs, zebra...and of course, humans.

Whether it's a sundowner or a morning stop, Amarula is a truly South African liqueur that's always on hand to add variety to the beverages we serve. We cannot resist inviting guests to taste the liqueur either in the morning as an added twist to coffee or as an evening sundowner on ice.

With the marula trees abundantly scattered amongst us, it's inevitable that at some stage during a stay this tree will be noted in a sighting, a guided walk or a beautiful landscape scene.



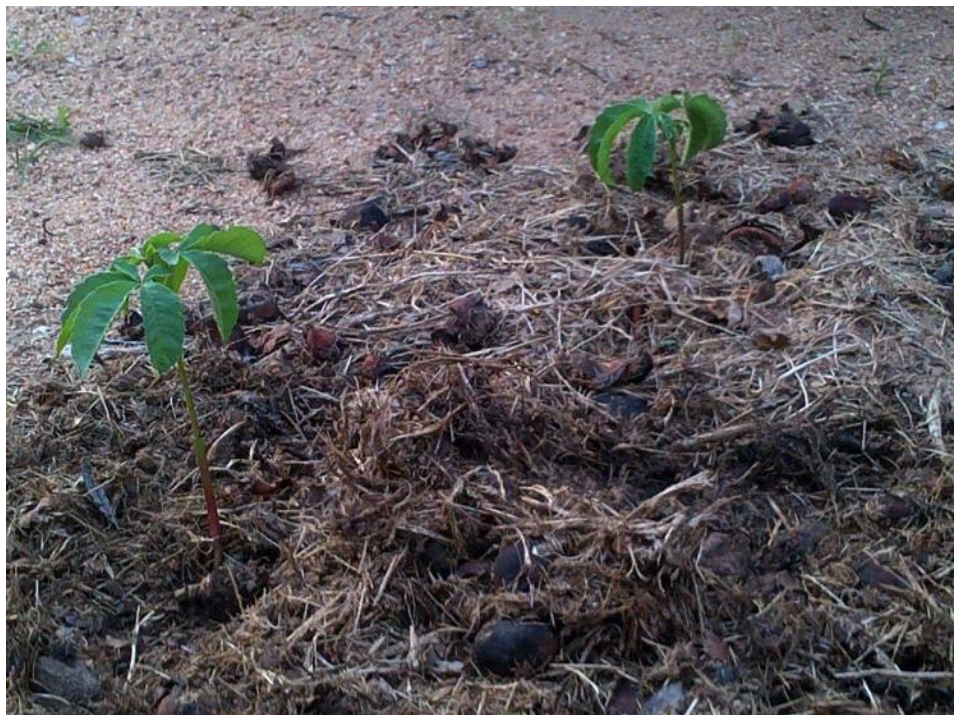
Often larger mammals will change their food source based on the nutrient value and minerals within the trees or grass that have flourished after the summer rains. Elephants are continuing to feed on large areas of grass along seep lines that are still very high in nutrients, soft and have a lot of moisture in the leafy material.

The nutrient content and availability of the natural pastures fluctuate from year to year and between the wet and dry season. The wet season commences from approximately the end of October and continues until early April, with January and February as the months with the highest precipitation. The dry season stretches from May until the end of October. The most difficult period is August to October, when the nutritional value of the natural grazing is at its lowest, and most antelope grazers are in the final trimester of pregnancy. Some species have a gestation period that ends at the end of the dry season - the offspring then benefit from the onset of the wet summer with a good food source and cover.

As seen in the images below, some of the fruits were particularly large and succulent this year (first picture). The elephant digestive system only has limited impact on the fruits, and the majority of them pass through intact, with the skin merely fractured and somewhat softened by the gastric juices. The second picture of a pile of marula-filled elephant dung shows this clearly. Squirrels happily feed on these 'second hand' marulas, eating not only the pulp but also the kernels (nuts) from inside the stones.



Passing through the digestive system of an elephant greatly increases the chance that the seeds within the marula fruit will germinate, and if they do, they will also have a very fertile substrate in which to begin their new lives as tender young saplings (*third picture*). And so the cycle continues! Elephants may be destructive in terms of what they do to individual trees, but they certainly also re-pay Nature by giving thousands of new little marula trees a good start. A small percentage of the little saplings that germinate will manage to become full grown trees, the females of which will produce fruit of their own.







There has always been an African myth about the marula fruit intoxicating large mammals when they have consumed huge amounts of the ripened, fallen fermenting fruit. Elephants can consume one to two percent of their body mass per day. An elephant eating only marulas may eat in the region of 30 kg in one day or approximately 714 individual fruits. This is less than half of the marulas needed to produce intoxication, and is based on several assumptions that are unlikely to occur in the field. There have been reports of elephant behaviour that resembles an intoxicated state, but the calculations show that this is unlikely to occur only from eating marulas.

It's speculated that the behaviour may come from eating beetle pupae that live in the bark of marula trees. These pupae have traditionally been used by the San people to poison their arrow tips, and if an elephant eats the pupae it may cause some behavioural changes. Another explanation is that the strange behaviours are most often reported for bull elephants and this may be because the marula is a prized food item and they are acting defensively to protect simply the food resource.

With that being said, I recall a sighting that we had as an elephant herd moved through the bush feeding on the fruits. The younger elephants walked behind the older siblings picking up the fruit as they moved and consuming them - the older elephants seemed to be 'teaching' the youngsters what to eat, and what not to eat. A few younger elephants passed by our vehicle and moved towards an open area on the road after consuming a large amount of fruit that had been forcefully knocked down from a tree that had been shaken backwards and forwards by an adult cow. We watched in awe because the youngsters definitely seemed to display signs of being rather tipsy!















Marula fruit is described as being tart, sweet and refreshing, with a 'guava-like' taste and anything from 'tropical' to 'revitalising' to 'pleasant' or 'sour-sweet.' I often described the fruit as being similar to a litchi with a sour aftertaste that draws you back again for more, particularly when you are out tracking in the hot sun or conducting a walk with guests as it makes for a refreshing stop whilst enjoying the tree's canopy of shade.

Local communities have used marula fruit for generations to cure and prevent scurvy; the anti-scorbutic value of the fresh fruit makes it important to their diet.

There is a wealth of legends around the marula fruit and its many uses that add to its cultural value. These include it being used as a food source, its magical qualities as a healing ingredient and its fertility properties. There are also many uses for its bark, leaves, nuts and kernels. The Tsonga people call marula the 'food of kings', and celebrate the 'Feast of First Fruits' by pouring offerings of fresh marula juice over the tombs of their dead chiefs. It is known to the Zulu as the 'marriage tree', for it is a symbol of fertility and is used in a cleansing ritual before marriage. Myth has it that the Hare acted kindly towards Elephant during the year of the drought, and was rewarded with a tusk. This he planted in his garden, which grew into a beautiful fruit-bearing tree. Because the elephant gave up his precious tusk the Hare was able to enjoy marula fruit in the time of famine. Forever after, the elephant seeks out its tusk and devours hundreds of kilograms of fruit during the marula season.

Johnson my tracker has mentioned that when a marula fruit falls to the ground that it is a time of plenty amongst the local villages for a high nutrient food source and because of the marula beer that's produced. A large amount of time is spent in the shade of a marula tree collecting the ripened fruit, preparing the brew and doing much 'quality control' tasting.

The last signs of the marula fruits are the dried kernels that are collected by tree squirrels as they store food for the long winter ahead.

## The incomparable thrill of experiencing lions roaring at close quarters Article by Leon van Wyk

It had been an amazing morning's viewing, starting off with the Hlabankunzi female leopard walking up the steps from Ebony Lodge towards the turning circle where we park our Land Rovers before setting out on game drives. We had followed her until she disappeared into the rocky outcrops between Ebony and Boulders lodges. Full-bellied, she had obviously been feeding on a kill, and was heading back to where her young cubs were stashed, to allow them to suckle. Totally relaxed around vehicles, she had almost brushed the side of the Land Rover as she walked past us, merely glancing at the open-mouthed guests sitting on the rows of seats behind me.

This high quality sighting had set the tune for the morning, and an hour later we found another leopard, drinking from a little stream of seepage water on one of the roads. This leopard was the Ravenscourt male, and it later transpired that he had a duiker carcass hoisted in a marula tree nearby. A great sighting of elephants followed shortly after this, with a very impressive bull in musth, trailing behind a herd of females and youngsters.

The morning coffee break was spent reflecting on the earlier sightings, and we also derived a great deal of pleasure watching a tree squirrel going about its antics in a marula tree. Plenty of beautiful birds had also delighted my guests and me, and when we saw a female cheetah, first resting in the shade and then getting active, it was almost too good to be true! She had been found by one of the other guides earlier, who had been heading towards the sighting of the Ravenscourt male leopard.

When we returned to the lodge for breakfast some time after 10h00, when it was already getting really hot, one of my guests predictably said to my tracker and me, "Well, Leon and James, what an amazing morning! I don't know how you're going to top that!"

"How indeed?" I thought to myself. It is important to realise that not every game drive is 'action-packed', but each one is unique. If this were not the case, would I still be guiding after 21 years? I think not. What is really important to me is that guests *enjoy* their experience on safari, and it is not necessary to see the 'Big Five' in order to enjoy a game drive. I have never yet judged the success of a game drive by the number of 'Big Five' sightings. In fact, some of my most enjoyable game drives have been those where the main focus has been birding. But that is not for everyone.







Anyway, I wanted to continue to thrill my guests, as they were really raving about the morning's viewing. Some of the other guides had found three adult male lions (members of the Mashingilane coalition of four) during the morning drive, but we did not even go to that sighting, as there was so much else going on, and I thought we would keep those lions in mind for the afternoon / evening drive. The lions had been left near the Mobeni stream, a little way north of Castleton Dam. So, James and I agreed that in the afternoon we would make our way slowly towards that area, in the hopes of finding the lions and perhaps seeing them get active. In the back of my mind, I secretly dared to hope that the lions might also roar while we were with them, but I had to keep telling myself not to expect too much – it had already been an amazing day!

Our slow drive towards the area took as along the Sand River for a while, where we appreciated the magnificent trees and some good sightings of various antelope, as well as a number of elephants and rhino that had just finished having a mud wallow. By the time we reached the last area of the lions, the sun was already setting. It was yet another beautiful sunset, with dead trees silhouetted against an orange-pink sky. James spotted the lions first, thanks to a hind paw sticking up through the grass into the air. Three large male lions were resting close together, on the western edge of a stream. To claim that they were 'resting' is probably a massive understatement. They were fast asleep! I was confident, however, that they would soon wake up, and within 15 minutes or so, they began to stir. We had parked our Land Rover about 15 metres from the sleeping giant cats.

One can soon lose interest in watching animals sleeping, even animals as large and impressive as adult male lions. I tried to build up the anticipation among my guests, saying that we had probably arrived at the lions just at the right time, and that we should soon see them lift their heads, yawn and perhaps move around a little. We decided that we would invest some time into the viewing of these big males, even if it meant that we would forgo our usual evening drinks stop. It turned out to be the right decision.



Two of the males began to yawn and stretch, and then one after the other, they stood up, walked several paces towards us, and relieved themselves – fortunately we were not downwind! They then walked around the vehicle before flopping down next to each other again, between two and three metres from the vehicle! Earlier, I had prepared my guests for this, and had stressed that they should not worry if the lions came close to us. I had also requested that if the lions began to roar, everybody should please remain silent throughout the duration of the



roar, in order to fully appreciate the magnificence of the sound at close quarters. I would never park the vehicle as close to the lions as they had chosen to lie – but since it had been the animals themselves that had decided to move in a non-threatening manner to a position very close to us, it was fine. Everything about their body language told me that it was fine.

As if scripted, we now heard a lion roaring far away in the distance, probably about 7 or 8 kilometres north and east of where we were. This would undoubtedly have been the fourth member of the coalition. I knew now that what I had dared hoped might happen, was about to happen, but at even closer quarters than I had imagined in my earlier fantasies. All three of the male lions near us began to respond to their distant brother, by letting out full-blooded, reverberating, spine-chilling roars! The cacophony around us lasted two to three minutes, and then was repeated again about ten minutes later. The nearest lion was facing us directly as he roared, so I could feel (and smell) his hot breath as I gazed down his throat! Words cannot adequately describe what it is like to experience a lion roaring at such close quarters, but suffice it to say that we could feel the reverberations in our own thoracic cavities, and the vibrations coming up into our feet through the floorboards of the vehicle. I have experienced this wonderful vocal display on countless occasions, but never at closer quarters than this, and the thrill is never diminished. It is always a huge highlight for anybody fortunate enough to experience it, and I know that all my guests were thoroughly awe-struck!

After that amazing experience, we decided to head back to the lodge for a drink. Over a gin and tonic, we enthused wildly about what had been a really brilliant day, with the roaring lions being voted unanimously as the major highlight. We all looked forward with great excitement and anticipation to the next morning's drive – who could know what it was to deliver?



## The question of succession

Article by David Steyn

In our line of work and after spending any amount of time in the African bushveld, you learn that animals come and go, but there are the precious few we hold on to, close to our hearts. Speak to any guide anywhere in Africa and they will all have an animal that, on a property where they have worked, they have a special connection with. It's a connection that whenever you are out in the field and you locate fresh signs of this animals it is like meeting up with an old friend that you haven't seen for a long time. When you eventually track down or you see this particular animal it always instils a sense of happiness.



As I'm sure you are aware, or even if you aren't, we had a marvellous female leopard here named the Ravenscourt female, who graced these parts for the better part of nine years and added nicely to the leopard gene pool of the Sabi Sand. Our reliable 'go to girl' who would never leave us for too long and always made for amazing



viewing. After her death the big question on our lips was, "Who would or could possibly replace this amazing leopard?"

Enter the Hlabankunzi and Xikavi females, leopards who were predominantly located on properties to the west of us and very rarely seen close to the north western edges of the property, given the Ravenscourt female's iron hold over the area. However, since her passing and with the void of space being left open it appeared that these two females would try to claim the prized territory. The Hlabankunzi female, who recently surrendered a portion of her previous territory to her newly independent female cub, naturally gravitated into the empty area, whilst the Xikavi female, a relatively young leopard with a single cub, saw an opening and decided to explore it.

Over the past few weeks the western section of Singita has been a territorial chess game which has unfolded before our eyes with the Xikavi female immediately bringing her cub into the area to try and lay claim, but for only a very brief time until the Nyelethi male, made infamous by killing the Ravenscourt female last June, moved through the area and presumably killed the cub as she was seen for two days vocalizing in the area where she last left her cub - a behaviour we have witnessed in other instances when females lose their cubs. Days later she had moved from that area and back to her regular behaviour patterns of scent-marking and territorial displays in the areas just west of the lodges. On one morning we followed her for the better part of three hours as she moved through the western sections scent-marking as much as she could, starting at Ebony lodge all the way through to the western boundary, as a territorial leopard does.

Amazingly, the very next day we found the Hlabankunzi female on the very same path to the very same prominent trees and mounds scent marking over where, just the day before, the Xikavi female had been moving through, and again eventually ending at the western boundary, in what can only be described as a blatant challenge to the so-called claim over the area. This continued for the next two or so weeks, with regular sightings of both the females which providing some amazing viewing.

Some days later, heading out to the western areas one morning, we stumbled upon the Hlabankunzi female, but something was different, she seemed different. The normal swaying belly of hers had disappeared, looking slimmer than two days before, then, as she turned, it hit us. The tell-tale brown staining on the fur around her teats, and the excess belly skin told us one thing, she'd had cubs!

That was the final blow! The Hlabankunzi female had pulled out her trump card and won. She, like her predecessor, has given birth to her new litter in the safety of the lodge surrounds, and for now seemingly



secured the territory for herself, with the Xikavi female being pushed once again to the north western edge of the property.

We all know how quickly things can change in life, and change is inevitable, but for now we can only wonder, "Will the Hlabankunzi female fill the paw prints of her predecessor?" I guess time will tell.





This is one of the last images of the Ravenscourt female, being tackled by her male cub, now known as the Ravenscourt male.





After watching a pride of lions for a long period of time, we knew that it was inevitable that they would stand up and move as the entire pride showed signs of restlessness. As we were about to depart, one of the lionesses broke her cover from where she was sitting in the shade and gave chase to a group of zebras that managed to get away. It was an awesome sight to see the whole scene take place in an open clearing.

The wind had picked up and it started to rain. On the horizon clouds were building up and an African thunderstorm was brewing in the distance. We could smell the dampened earth and cool breeze blowing from the south-east where we usually receive rain. After her unsuccessful hunt, the lioness stood and glared at the dazzle that ran off on the horizon, dismayed by her lack of success. She was panting heavily and glanced back over her shoulder to the rest of the pride, surely missing the help of her three sisters who could have improved her chances of success.

The sighting in itself was epic and, just as we were enjoying watching the nine cubs running and chasing each other under a beautiful rainbow, a fellow guide Francois informed me via the radio, from his different vantage point, that a single wildebeest bull was heading straight towards the lioness. Within minutes the lioness noticed the wildebeest and lay down in very little grass cover. The unsuspecting wildebeest (gnu) then approached in her direction and looked right over her. In the back of my mind I knew that something should come of this, as the night before we witnessed the same pride kill and devour a wildebeest. The scene was set. The rest of the pride lay down in the distance and it was now her chance to ambush the dainty looking beast.

Unaware of her presence, he advanced with the herd trailing in the distance. The lioness broke her cover and launched herself from a mere five metres away. "That's it!" I thought, however to no avail. This wildebeest had other plans on this St Patrick's Day - he put his head down as she attacked and managed to force the lioness off himself. What happened then was a short but intense dance between the lioness attempting to get a proper hold on the wildebeest and him defeating her in her own strategic moves by moving in a circular motion forwarding the lioness off. To our surprise, the blue wildebeest manage to turn the tables around and he actually charged the lioness and managed to lift her off the ground with his horn at one stage, chased her over a short distance before realising that he was a source of food, and then decided it was better to run for his life before the remaining pride members would close in on the action taking place.





## Surprise visitors to drinks stop

Article by Coleman Mnisi

On the afternoon game drive of 21 March, we had been following up on the tracks of two male lions. After some time spent on these tracks, without success, I suggested to my guests that we go and stop for a drink, and then continue to work the area afterwards, when the lions would be more likely to be active.

After having stopped for drinks, we received an update on the radio that a male lion had been found, heading towards a clearing on a road called July East, where the lodge had set up a surprise drinks table for one of the other guides and his guests. We headed directly to that area, and found a male lion walking straight to the drinks table, and sniffing it! It was one of the best sightings I have ever had, a real highlight for the day, and even at the dinner table that night, the lion visiting the drinks stop table was the main topic of conversation!



## Great activity at a termite mound

Article by Sipho Sibuyi and Louis Gumede

It was a quiet morning, and quite cool after the rain we had been having. Birds were perched high in the tree-tops, seeking to reach the warm sun. We noticed a termite mound that was darker on the top, and I explained to my guests that the soil on top was darker because it was still wet from recent building activity. My tracker Louis then spotted a dwarf mongoose on top of the mound, and soon it was clear that there were more - the mongooses were vocalising.

One mongoose then started to dig into the top wet portion of the mound and actually went inside. After a few minutes the mongoose emerged from the hole, and with binoculars I was able to see that its body was covered with termites! The other mongooses that were on the outside of the mound now began to eat the termites that were on its body! The same mongoose then 'went fishing' again by entering the hole again for a second time, and once again its companions ate the attacking termites on the mongoose when it emerged.

Next, a few birds including crested barbets flew down onto the termite mound, and the mongooses disappeared into the long grass. The barbets then fed on the termite soldiers. After a few seconds a yellow-billed hornbill flew down and chased off the barbets, and the hornbill now started feeding on the termites!

It was such a wonderful sighting to see what an important role the termites play, and my guests were fascinated that such small creatures could play such major roles. It really was a great sighting, and we enjoyed watching it for about an hour.



## Game viewing summary for March 2014

	Lion	Leopard	Cheetah	Elephant	Buffalo	Wild dog	Hyena
No. of sightings	32	59	31	108	68	1	11

### Statistical analysis:

- Lion sightings: Lion sightings have averaged just over one sighting a day for the month. Considering that we haven't been able to cross the river due to the high water, we can possibly consider ourselves lucky to have such a high average. The Mhangeni pride has spent several days on our property. Let's hope that they will spend more time on our side in future.
- Leopard sightings: Statistically sightings are up from last month. We are seeing the Hlabankunzi female regularly now and hope to see her cubs very soon. Sightings are up by 13 this month, almost two sightings per day.
- Elephant sightings: Third consecutive month in a row with almost identical number of sightings. Elephant viewing has been exceptional and we are really enjoying the interaction between the herds.
- Buffalo sightings: Numbers are back up again after a quiet February, up by 28 sightings from last month.
- Cheetah sightings: As predicted, the sub-adults reached independence this month and are doing well. Numerous adult male cheetahs seen this month form the bulk of the sightings. Numbers of sightings are statistically slightly down from the high February figure, from 36 to 31.
- Wild dog sightings: Again just a single sighting of wild dogs this month. Reports from our neighbours indicate that the alpha female is pregnant. I'm hoping to report that they are denning on our property in the next few months! Positive thinking.
- Hyena: Quality viewing remained consistent from February into March. The known den sites have been inaccessible due to wet conditions, but viewing has been good.

### Kill analysis

It is interesting to note the crocodile kills on impala. We came across a medium sized crocodile on two separate occasions within a week, feeding on an impala at the same dam. Either this crocodile has mastered a specific technique at this spot or we think that there is a young, inexperienced leopard flushing the impala into the dam and the opportunistic crocodile is taking advantage of the leopard's inexperience. We'll need to monitor this closely to see what the root cause actually is.

	Wild dogs	Lion (4)	Leopard (8)	Cheetah (4)	Hyena (1)	Crocodile (2)
Impala			4	2		2
Wildebeest		1				
Duiker			1			
Vervet monkey			1			
Zebra		2				
Giraffe					1	
Buffalo		1				
Kudu			2	1		
Steenbok				1		

## Summary for March 2014:

Bird list: 229 species recorded in March.  
Specials include African crane, corn crane and white-backed night heron.

The birth of numerous young buffalo calves this month is amongst the highlights for me. Watching them take their first steps into this unknown world is something to marvel. On the other end of this same scale was seeing an adult male leopard moving through a buffalo herd of a few hundred strong and emerge with one of these new calves in his mouth! I'm sure that fine line between bravery had just been tested!

The Mashingilane coalition of four male lions met the three Selati male lions on the western fringe of the property, they however seemed to all depart the scene relatively unscathed. I do however believe that there have been new territorial boundaries scraped in the sand, but only time will tell.

The exciting news is that the Hlabankunzi female leopard definitely has at least one cub. She had them in a temporary home under Ebony room eleven's deck before taking them by the scruff of their necks to their new home in the rocky outcrop behind Boulders. Her cub from her previous litter has been seen regularly in the western areas of the property and we hope that this is the sign of things to come in the future as she sets up her territory after reaching independence. The Ravenscourt male seems to be doing well and still hanging around within the area.

Another highlight for me this month has been the size of the elephant herds over the last few weeks. The size is both in reference to numbers within the herds (60 – 80 in one group) as well as the size of the individuals within the group. It is nice to know that the dominant gene of 'big tuskers' still prevails in this day and age. Many of the really big bulls are in musth, their scents fills the air and is unmistakable!

Photographs on location by Ross Couper  
Singita Ebony and Boulders Lodge  
Sabi Sand  
South Africa  
31st of March 2014