Singita *Sabi Sand*
Ebony & Boulders Lodges
Castleton House
South Africa

Wildlife Report

For the month of January, Two Thousand and Fifteen

Temperature

Average minimum:	18.8˚C (65.8˚F)
Average maximum:	33˚C (91.4˚F)
Minimum recorded:	16˚C (60.8˚F)
Maximum recorded:	41˚C (105.80˚F)

Rainfall recorded

For the period:	13 mm
For the year to date:	13 mm

Lion roaring

Article by Francois Fourie

It's a sound that can be heard from kilometres away and one of the greatest things of living in the bush. Sitting around a fire with friends and hearing the roar of a male lion from afar calling to his brothers...

A lion’s roar is not only used for the purpose of making contact with their pride members but it is also done to announce his presence in his territory and to make sure that any other potential intruders stay away. It truly is one of the most special experiences sitting with a male lion only 10 metres away and he starts roaring. That

feeling is one that you can't put into words... even more so when it is a pitch dark night with only starlight above and he starts to roar... your whole body can feel the vibrations of the roar right to your very core!

Once you've heard Africa's biggest cat roar then you can truly understand why people call this magnificent animal the "King" of the jungle!

The greatest challenge, reaping the reward

Article by Andries Mohlala

One of the privileges of being a nature guide is that there is always something to look at and talk about when you're out in the field; the greatest challenge though is to find what you're looking for... And on this particular afternoon, my tracker Vusi and I had a cheetah on our minds, and without tracks or any sign we both knew that it was going to take a lot to find our target.

First animal sighting was in the form of a large breeding herd of elephants mud bathing to cool down and cover their sensitive skin with natural sunscreen. We spent about half an hour watching as these African giants played, rolled in mud, some even went to find big trees nearby to give their skin a thorough scratch to get rid of some parasites that got trapped in the mud.

With the engine not running we had the opportunity to also pay audible attention to what was happening in the bush; the one sound that got my attention was the starlings chirping around one small bush, the noise was getting intense and the birds seemed to be moving from one small bush to the next. Every opportunity to locate an animal is never missed, and we went to investigate the cause of the commotion. We stopped next to where the birds were calling and waited until we located the source, which turned out to be a two metre black mamba! This is a very beautiful grey and whitish coloured snake which derives its name from the black colour in its mouth. Birds started mobbing the snake again as we were watching and it decided our vehicle looked to be a good hiding place! Needless to say we cut our stay very short as the snake started towards us at an alarming speed! The search for cheetah was forgotten, safety became an issue as we took off at high speed, desperate to put a bit of distance between the fast-moving serpent and us. We stopped a safe distance away to discuss what had just happened.

"In actual fact" (I began), "snakes only bite in self-defence and a lot of the times they administer dry bites since venom is their digestive juice and wasting it in biting something they cannot eat is something they avoid, in case they need it to kill prey." Generally, snakes prefer to take off when encountering humans, unless moulting, especially mambas since they get temporarily partially blinded in the process of moulting (shedding skin from eyes to tail).

As I went on to try and get everyone to settle down, Vusi turned on his seat and faced the guests with his arm outstretched and finger pointing at something sitting on a dead knob-thorn tree. That was the end of the snake and cameras were back in business as it was confirmed that we had managed to locate the cheetah… or had the cheetah located us? It made no difference, as we approached to about twenty metres of the animal that was minding its own business, scent-marking with tail pointing upwards. With its small head, long thin legs and a long streamlined body, it is an animal built for high-speed chases, with the long tail getting used as a rudder when chasing prey. Unfortunately cheetahs are difficult to census using conventional techniques, as they generally occur at low density and are largely non-territorial, very mobile, and difficult to spot. They also sometimes form local transitory hotspots, which are non-representative of overall density, giving a false impression of many cheetahs in an area, therefore cheetah population estimates are nearly entirely based on often unreliable questionable data. Seeing one was enough and we were all over the moon with joy!

Zebra surprise

Article by Daniella Kueck

Especially out here in the bush, often we come across the animals which typically spark a lot of excitement like lion and leopard, completely understandable because they are so beautiful, and we get so focused on that one animal/s in that moment, that we could so easily miss something else that's happening right next to us. For example, if you are fortunate enough to see lions feeding on a carcass, always take a moment every now and again to take a look around you. You may find a side-striped jackal creeping closer to look for any scraps, or a pair of hooded vultures possibly eating the discarded stomach and intestines.

In the event that you may be lucky enough to see a cheetah feeding on a carcass, always keep a lookout for that spotted hyena or even potential leopard that may want to come in and steal the cheetah's meal away, because it could happen in the blink of an eye. I was in a sighting not too long ago of a large herd of buffalo with a dazzle of zebra in amongst them, when we noticed that one of the female buffalo was starting to give birth. This can be an extremely lengthy process as she even continues to feed in that state. We were so focused on watching her, and seeing how far she eventually was and how the other buffalo were acting around her, that we had completely

missed one of the zebra on the other side of the vehicle giving birth! Someone eventually noticed a very small dark, wet body lying next to one of the female zebras and it was soon clear that the mare had just given birth! We were sad that we had missed it but it was still an amazing sighting seeing the mother clean the adorably tiny foal, and watching it wobble on its feet and fall as it started strengthening its legs.

A most memorable scene

Article by Daniella Kueck

At the moment, the bush is teeming with life and we are being spoilt with endless different sightings around the reserve. One afternoon I was out with my guests on drive and we had found a herd of roughly 500 African buffalo as well as over 80 elephants of every shape and size, two warthogs, four white rhinos, a herd of impala and seemingly endless numbers of zebras, all scattered across a 360 degree view of a completely open area with short grass. I didn't know where to park the vehicle because there was so much going on around us! It was difficult to choose an ideal position.

The rhino were curiously watching the buffalo as they walked and fed. The impala seemed to just be minding their own business and were just feeding, merely taking advantage of the abundance of eyes and ears looking out for potential predators. Young boisterous elephant bulls were running around and chasing the buffalo for fun, while at least two visible calves were suckling from their mothers. There was also one massive elephant bull in musth, trailing the herds in the hopes that he would find a female with which to mate. The zebra, youngsters, adults and little foals, were all playing, kicking and running around after each other while they vocalised, which is an unusual sound if you are not used to it. The buffalo, being so many, were up to a few different things. Some were just feeding, while others were being rudely interrupted by the boisterous young bull elephants. Some of the buffalo bulls were practicing their fighting skills by butting their horns together. Others enjoyed a cooling mud bath in one of the drainage lines, with two male warthogs, after a long and extremely hot day.

And to top it all off, it was during a beautiful sunset which cast a magnificent golden light over everything. We must have spent almost two hours there. We didn't have to go anywhere else, it was all right there for us to see.

Army of ants

Article by Andy Gibor

On a recent walk with colleagues in the bush I noticed a single Matabele ant walking with determination across the mat that I had laid out for us to prepare a spot of lunch on. I watched her as she strode across the mat dipping her tail as she went.

I love watching the little things in the bush and Matabele ants may be little in size, but enormous in every other respect. This is one formidable ant not to be messed with. If you disturb a Matabele ant she releases a very pungent odour as a repellent, they also have very strong mandibles and pincers that can inflict a very painful bite… in fact, more than 10 bites have been known to paralyse a human’s arm - but don’t be scared of these little warriors, like every other insect and animal they don’t bite for no reason.

Once she had passed across the mat we all noticed a very strong scent in the air, similar to bitter almonds or almond oil, which could only have been attributed to the ant. She was dropping a pheromone for her to follow back to her colony once she had found a suitable termite mound to raid. I did not pay any more attention to her until a short while later an entire army of ants walked across the mat again, following the pheromone she had dropped on her scouting trip. As these soldiers passed across the mat you could hear them stridulating as they moved, marching abreast of one another to their pre-determined destination.

Matabele ants are voracious hunters and prey on termites; they are named after the Matabele soldiers who marched in stride formation, killing everything in their path. So too does the Matabele ant. Once the scout, a sterile female worker, finds a suitable termite mound with a weak point, a hole in the side of the mound that is not being protected, she will come back to the colony. There can be up to 20 million ants in a single colony! Once there, she assembles an army of ants, around 300, and they go back to raid the mound. They move in a large group, sometimes in single file and sometimes as a mass with the smaller worker ants on the inside and the larger ants protecting them on the outside.

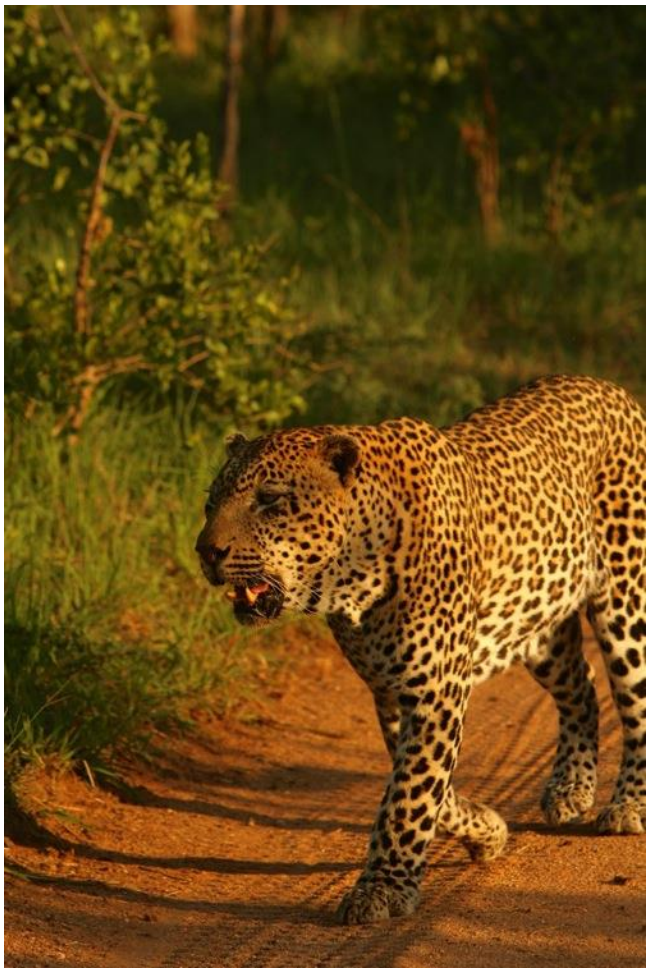
They may split up on the route back, but once she finds the mound she releases her pheromones which the other ants can detect and march to where she is to attack the termite mound simultaneously. At the mound they very quickly neutralise the army and worker termites, focusing their attention on the smaller termites, nymphs and eggs within the mound. Using their incredibly powerful pincers they gather up the termites, literally gluing them together with saliva and carrying them back to their own colony.

A Matabele ant can carry up to 10 nymphs in its mouth at a time. Back at the ant colony the bounty of termites is distributed amongst all the ants who had not gone on the raid, including the queen.

Competing predators

Article by Ricardo Careaga

In the competition of who's the greatest hunter in the bush the first prize will undoubtedly have to go to the painted wolves (African wild dogs). Their astoundingly high 80% success rate makes leopards and lions look like rookies. While the big African cats (lion, leopard and cheetah) may be faster, the stamina and collective hunting behaviour of the painted wolves makes them truly exceptional hunters.



This was perfectly demonstrated during an amazing afternoon safari. We started our drive with the intention to find a leopard that had walked in the vicinity of the lodges. After five minutes of driving we found his tracks and started to follow them. He walked on the roads for a while but then moved into the vegetation making things a bit more difficult. There were three vehicles that were working the area to try to find him and with great teamwork we did. We found a large male leopard walking and patrolling his territory, stopping every now and then to scent-mark different bushes.

As he walked on the northern edge of some clearings, a herd of about 50 impala with several babies saw him and started doing their habitual alarm calls to warn everybody of his presence. The male leopard, being in patrolling mode, wasn't too interested in the impala so he kept walking and scent marking.

Suddenly, and completely unexpectedly, a pack of painted wolves came bolting towards the same herd of impala, but from the southern edge of the clearings! Chaos erupted and the impala started running in all directions trying to get away from the dogs. It was quite a spectacular sighting since there were predators and prey everywhere. There were so many impalas that even the dogs didn't know which one to catch! We saw one dog making a run for an impala lamb which, even at only one month old, are incredibly fast. The dog chased the baby antelope on the same edge of the clearings where minutes before we had been following the male leopard.

The hunt happens at such speed that most of the time you can't keep up with them. Both prey and predator went into the thickets, one running to stay alive and the other to keep its own pups alive. We lost sight of them momentarily but when we found them again the baby impala, unfortunately for it, had become part of that 80%. Not much was left of it.

There was still plenty of daylight left so the pack kept hunting impalas. In about 20 minutes they killed three of them! What superb hunters they are indeed!

Mamba and mongoose

Article by Sipho Sibuyi

We had received good rains and because it was summer the vegetation was green, and there were plenty of insects about. My tracker Louis spotted a dwarf mongoose. As you know, they are largely insectivorous, but also eat spiders, scorpions, birds' eggs and even snakes. The mongooses were vocalizing, with twittering sounds, whistles and chirps. They were foraging in the short grass (10 cm green flush), when suddenly all their heads went up as they stood on their hind legs. One mongoose gave a sharp whistle, and they all ran fast in the same direction.

We then spotted a large snake that was causing the commotion. The mongooses ran towards and surrounded the snake, which Louis could now see was a black mamba! For about half an hour we watched the interaction between the mamba and the mongooses, and we thought that the mamba was going to strike out and catch one. The snake kept raising its head high, then dropping it again as it approached first one mongoose then another. The mongooses continued to mob the mamba, and they were quick enough to dart back and forth between the snake and the safety of the holes in a nearby termite mound.

Eventually, the mamba slithered away in the grass, and all the mongooses became quiet and disappeared into the holes in the termite mound. We realised that by working together as a group, the mongooses had managed to stand up to the snake and save one another from the danger. There had been a lot of communication between the members of the mongoose colony. A lesson for us is that so much more can be achieved when we work together as a team and communicate with each other.

A passionate affair

Article by Ross Couper

With a strong love for wildlife, there is always one animal that stands out as being a firm favourite and everyone knows that leopards have stolen my heart. I always dreamed of viewing leopards in their natural habitat.

Having the privilege of watching mating leopards was a highlight in my guiding career. With an animal that has

secretive and solitary behaviour patterns watching the leopard antics of a mating pair is unbelievable. The excitement wells in the few short months that follow, with the possibility of leopard cubs being born. I had a few opportunities whilst guiding at Singita Kruger National Park to view leopard cubs, and after being transferred to the Sabi Sand reserve I often returned to visit Singita Kruger National Park and follow up on the cubs that were in the area. It was an overwhelming emotional reward finding the cubs that are now adults and seeing how successful they have become.

During the last few days I had the opportunity of viewing some of the most incredible leopard sightings I have ever had in my guiding career. I know how lucky we were, as going out every day and finding leopards is definitely not the norm and seeing the various interactions was above all expectations.

Our morning drive started out with soft rain and overcast conditions for most of the morning but braving the weather, we continued west in the hope to cross the river and head north. With no expectations of seeing anything, the guests mentioned that they were happy to see anything and they were just joining the morning drive for the experience of being outdoors and viewing the landscape. With an open mind and a little adventure we had some of the most unique sightings of leopards. As we headed towards the river, a report came through the radio announcing that a female leopard was seen moving west from Ebony Lodge. We ventured into the area and before even realising it a leopard was walking towards our vehicle. With a closer view, we could see a cub being carried in her mouth. The mother walked past us and the cub looked up at us in interest of what we were. We soon realised that this could have been the first time that the cub had encountered a vehicle. The cub continued to peer back at our vehicle as the mother continued walking. It was evident that the cub was quite heavy and the mother would place the cub gently on the ground before repositioning the cub and continuing along the road.

As she continued down the road we all turned to each other and knew we had witnessed something very special in the natural world and as much as our curiosity wondered where she was going with the cub, we chose to leave her, allowing her to continue along the road undisturbed.

We decided that it was time for a break after all that excitement and coffee and tea was the order of the day in the inclement weather. We ventured our way back east and as we continued past the access road to Boulders

Lodge - and could not believe what we were seeing. A mating pair of leopards was lying in the road completely unperturbed by our presence. Could this be a one in a million day? Or was it the sheer pleasure of being open-minded and enjoying everything, as this could just be the key to success whilst on a drive.

Game Viewing Summary for January 2015

	Lion	Leopard	Cheetah	Elephant	Buffalo	Wild Dog	Reedbuck
No. of Sightings	71	69	12	89	49	6	0

Statistical analysis:

- Lion sightings: Statistically sightings are significantly up from last month's 57 to this month's 71. This is largely due to the Othawa lionesses coming into oestrus and mating with the Majingalane coalition. As the one lioness was slightly out of sync with her sisters, it provided us with interactive yet stable sightings for about ten days in the month.
- Leopard sightings: Last month's good news was that one of the adult leopardesses had given birth. She was spotted around the vicinity of the lodges with a single cub in her mouth. A few weeks went by only to discover a hyena coming out of the rocky outcrops close to the lodges carrying a dead leopard cub. The positive news though is that she has been seen since with another cub whilst moving den sites. We had nine more leopard sightings in January than in December, which is positive considering how lush the vegetation is and how difficult these animals are to find.
- Elephant sightings: Sightings are down from December's 105 to 89. What is worth noting is not the numerical figure but rather the quality of the sightings. There have been sightings of herds of over 40 individuals in a herd; there are a number of females in season which in turn has attracted some really big tuskers into the area. They have dominated the southern areas on the lush open grassy plains for most of the month.

- Buffalo sightings: We are up by eight sightings from before. Numerous newborn calves amongst the bigger herds make for special viewing.
- Cheetah sightings: Up by one on last month - but boy that one counts!
- Wild dog sightings: Six sightings in December and again six sightings in January. One of the packs seems to have lost a member or two after a run-in with lions further west of us, but this isn't confirmed for definite.

Predation Analysis:

	Impala	Zebra	Wildebeest	Kudu	Warthog
Leopard	7				3
Lion			3	3	1
Hyena		1			

Game-viewing highlights for January 2015:

Watching the elephants trying to take advantage of the early fruiting marulas, dropping them as they try and collect their fair share is the highlight for the month. Seeing Ross's photo of the little leopard cub that survived being carried to its new hiding place also features in this section - so special. One thing that we tend to overlook amongst all the big and hairies, is the quality of the crocodile and hippo viewing. With the river flooding around the Christmas period and then subsiding, it has been fantastic to watch these water-associated creatures adapt to the variable water fluctuations.

A pack of wild dog welcomed guests on the runway, proving to be a highlight of their stay.

Photographs on location by Ross Couper, Francois Fourie and
Ricardo Careaga
Singita Ebony and Boulders Lodge
Sabi Sand
South Africa
Thirty-first of January 2015