

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA For the month of December, Two Thousand and Fifteen

Temperature

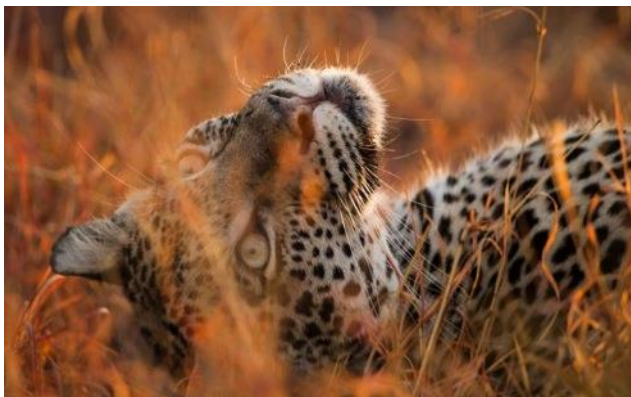
Average minimum: 22°C (71.6°F)
Average maximum: 34.2°C (93.6°F)
Minimum recorded: 18°C (64.4°F)
Maximum recorded: 41°C (105.8°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 36 mm
For the year to date: 286 mm
For the season to date: 173.2 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise 05:05
Sunset 18:46



With a maximum record of 41°C, the vegetation has been scorched by the hot conditions. Fortunately with the light rain that we did receive it's allowed some of the flowering plants to blossom.

Here's a highlights package of the month's sightings:

Hyenas:

It's such a joy when hyena cubs are about - they're curios and like to investigate everything around them.

**Lions:**

Lion sightings currently could not get any better! Two male lions of the Matimba coalition have been sighted on a few occasions, and they are gradually expanding their current territorial zone north of the river. The Mhangene pride continue to dominate the central area of Singita Sabi Sand. We watched a few interactions between the Majingalane male lions and the sub-adult males of the Mhangene pride that resulted in the young males being dispersed from the pride temporarily. One of the lionesses from the Mhangene pride has been seen with prominent suckle marks indicating that she has given birth. The lionesses has been seen moving in front of the lodges during the early morning and we suspect that the cubs are hidden in the river just east of Boulders Lodge. Exciting times ahead with this pride!

Leopards:

Hlaba'Nkunzi's male cub has slowly started to become independent. The young male has been wandering along the lodge perimeters and has been seen on a regular basis.

Buffalos:

A large herd of buffalo have been congregating around Castleton dam on several occasions. A few single bulls have been encountered.

Elephants:

Many elephant were seen moving along the Sand River as they were drawn to the remaining water source. It's been a treat watching them from the lodges. (Insider tip: an ideal location to watch game is from your private plunge pool!)

Wild dogs:

A pack of 21 wild dogs has been seen north of the Sand River. With their puppies growing up they are covering more ground which means more sightings are bound to occur.

We are fully into the summer and, after a relatively mild start, there has been some seriously hot weather too. Often after a heat wave lasting several days, there has been a promising build-up of thunderclouds, with some spectacular lightning displays, but not enough rain. It seems that, as expected, we are into the second consecutive year of this current dry cycle, after several years of above-average rainfall.



Rain or no rain, summer is always a great time to be in the Lowveld if you are a bird enthusiast. Many of our impressive array of birds are here throughout the year, but there are also a considerable number which are only here seasonally. Keen birders among the guiding team have a little bit of competitive fun by trying to predict when certain migratory species first make their appearances - for example 15 August for the Wahlberg's eagles, 17 November for woodland kingfishers and 20 December for carmine bee-eaters. There is also apparently a little bit of personal pride in being the first person to actually see one of the returning migrants, let alone just accurately predict the date.

To me, it is always exciting to get to see one of the less commonly seen birds for a particular area. One which is definitely worthy of mention for this year is the squacco heron. I know that in my first 18 years of guiding in the Sabi Sand, I had no more than two sightings of this attractive heron. I should hasten to add that I have seen an abundance of them further north, in the Chobe, Okavango and Zambezi rivers, yet here they are a relative rarity.



My first sighting of one at Singita took place a few months ago, when I led some guests on a foot approach to an elephant bull that was drinking at Jim's Dam, a waterhole just south of the airstrip. Having enjoyed the special feeling of being quite close to a large mammal on foot, I was then very excited to see a squacco heron take off and fly away from where it had been feeding among the short reeds and sedges in the shallow water. With its white wings and prominently brown back, it was unmistakable. None of my colleagues had seen one here in recent years, so this was pretty exciting. More recently however, in November and December mainly, we have had regular sightings of at least one squacco heron, mainly at the prominent river crossing just upstream of Ebony Lodge. While having early morning coffee on the deck at Boulders Lodge a couple of weeks ago, I saw three squacco herons fly past the lodge down the river together! I imagine this was a pair of them with a single offspring. Another special bird for the area is the broad-billed roller. Quite common elsewhere, particularly further north, it is a rare treat to see this very beautiful roller in the Sabi Sand. Lilac-breasted rollers of course are very common, and even "non-birders" usually remark on their exquisite colours. For us guides a sighting of this bird is something to write home about!

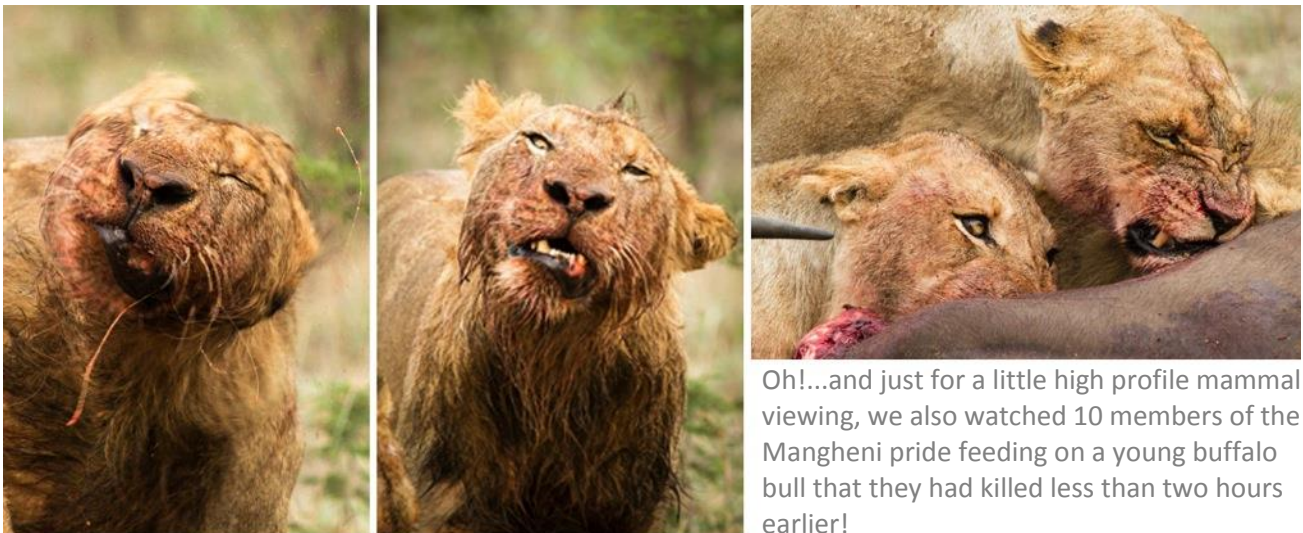
Black-bellied bustards are very much in evidence at present, and a few minutes spent with a territorial male on a termite mound at sunset will almost always bring a smile of amusement and appreciation to the face of any guest, when this elegant bird stretches out its neck and utters its unique call. It appears to suck in air as it draws its head and neck back onto its shoulders, then two or three seconds later it releases the air with a curious popping sound. Yes, this is definitely one of the birding highlights of this time of the year, and it never loses its special appeal. I cannot think of another bird species that is more likely to make people chuckle with delight.

Trumpeter hornbills also have unusual calls, sounding very much like a young child starting to cry - a really mournful wail. Their numbers in this area are low, but we have been having fairly regular sightings of a flock of eight of them recently. Most sightings have been close to the Sand River, upstream of Ebony Lodge.

A yellow-billed stork has been seen in or near some of the waterholes recently. It is not quite as spectacular as the saddle-bill stork, but being a much more uncommon bird, it is worthy of being ranked among the highlights. Interestingly, many years ago this handsome bird was known as a wood ibis, rather than a stork! European or white storks, and also black storks and marabou storks, are seen here every year, but a less common sighting here is that of open-billed storks (now called African openbills) - this summer, there have been several sightings of small flocks of openbills. On a morning of birding with colleagues on Christmas Eve, we were able to compile a list of 105 species either seen or heard by the time we returned for breakfast.



Highlights for me were good views of two white-fronted bee-eaters (a personal favourite) and a single green-winged pytilia (previously melba finch), which is a really gorgeous little bird. It is worth mentioning that this pytilia also serves as host to another very beautiful bird that is a brood parasite, namely the paradise whydah. While the focus for the morning was birding, we also had high quality chance sightings of four of the so-called "Big Five". Without actively looking for them, we happened upon a young leopard stalking a bushbuck, a herd of about 45 buffalo, three other buffalo bulls in a mud wallow, a rhino bull in a mud wallow, and two herds of elephants bathing in the river (it was VERY hot that morning!). Of course plenty of other mammals were seen, including zebra, giraffe, kudu bulls, wildebeest, many hippo and hundreds of impala, with the babies in their nursery groups always a joy to watch. This once again confirms my firm belief that when spending time watching birds, we are in no way sacrificing the viewing of high profile mammal species. To the contrary, we actually enhance the chances of seeing so much more. I feel that by noticing and appreciating the birds, the trees, the flowers and many other less iconic components of the biotic community, we are able to gain so much more from a guided nature experience, than if we focus too heavily on the Big Five. Yes, of course the Big Five are important and most guests want to see them, but let us never become trapped in a mindset which dictates that other living beings are less worthy of our admiration. On Boxing Day, I once again took a few staff for a session of early morning birding, before they had to be at work. By the 7h30 morning meeting, which some had to attend, we had notched up 81 species, and then took the tally up to 104 by breakfast time, with some of the highlights for me being sightings of a male red-headed weaver, a tiny but ever so gorgeous malachite kingfisher, and a pair of dwarf bitterns (I don't think I have seen more than ten dwarf bitterns in my career).



Oh!...and just for a little high profile mammal viewing, we also watched 10 members of the Mangheni pride feeding on a young buffalo bull that they had killed less than two hours earlier!

Everyone benefits... well almost everyone!

Article by Andy Gabor

We were lucky enough to watch a male cheetah feasting on an impala recently. Cheetahs eat furtively, nervously and anxiously and he was constantly raising his head from his meal to check his surroundings for any enemy predator that may be advancing to his position. Cheetahs have small mouths and have to strangle their prey, the advantage of having to do this is twofold, it stops the prey from being able to breathe by suffocating it, and it also stops the prey from crying out. If the animal that the cheetah was trying to prey upon were to cry out it would draw attention to the position of the cheetah as well as the free meal the other predator (lion, leopard, hyena or wild dog) may manage to steal away.



While the cheetah was feeding, a collection of vultures had started to gather, the hooded vultures came first followed by the African white-backed vulture. Into the surrounding trees, tawny eagles and bateleur eagles were starting to perch, in the hope of managing to steal a morsel or more of the impala away from the cheetah and also away from the other vultures, so they too could feast.

The cheetah, who had been eating for some time, was now fairly full, in fact he started to resemble a large potato on four toothpicks his tummy was so round! True to form of gorge-eating and then resting he waddled over to the shade of a guarri bush to settle down and start digesting some of his meal. And still the vultures were gathering. It is possible he waited for too long and too many vultures had gathered but in mere moments the vultures managed to swoop in and attack the remains of the impala. Sadly the cheetah had no chance of taking his well-earned meal back, there were just too many of them. They picked at the bones and the skull, tearing out the eyes and the cheeks. Squabbling between themselves, allowing the smaller vultures, eagles and even starlings to grab little titbits of the impala's flesh. In no time at all, the previously fleshy carcass was reduced to a pile of bones.



The vultures struggled to takeoff, their crops were so full! Some of the larger vultures were taking a few hops along the ground, a running start, in order to takeoff and settle themselves in the dead trees around. All of a sudden the vultures, eagles and starlings who were still feeding off the scraps, scattered as a large female hyena came running in to claim what was left of the carcass. She picked up the remains in her incredibly strong jaws and ran off. A few metres away the hyena stopped to crunch on a few of the rib bones, and then a few more. She then once again grasped the remains (which by now consisted of the skull and the spine) and ran off, possibly back to her den-site. The cheetah's survival instinct reacted immediately - as soon as the vultures had gathered around the carcass and were fighting and feasting the cheetah scampered off to safety.





Then out of the corner of my eye I saw the starlings start to return to where the vultures had been running at each other, spreading their impressively large wings to look even more ominous in order to chase off any competition. The starlings were picking things up in the grass and flying off with them. Looking closely with binoculars we all watched as the starlings picked up feathers of the vultures. Nest building material of course! Nothing goes to waste in the bush, not even a feather.

Entertainment at sundowners

Article by Andries Mohlala

It was a warm day on a December afternoon, temperature going up to 38 degrees Celsius, making it sweaty and very uncomfortable to be out in the sun. Trackers and guides had tried hard to locate the lions that were seen earlier that morning, but no success was coming our way. Drinks break was called to allow everyone to get out of the vehicle, stretch a bit, and with an ice cold drink have a chance to have a conversation about the proceedings and to try a different approach on finding the animals. While we were standing around appreciating the sun going down, my attention was drawn to a number of newly born impalas that came out of the bush running at full speed towards a large open area, and we started chatting about how amazing it was to have these little things born with the ability to outrun some of the fastest predators.



As we were chatting away the adult impalas started snorting in alarm, also coming out of the thicket but facing their youngsters as they alarmed, which was a sign that there might be a predator in the area. My tracker and I looked in the general direction of where the impalas were facing, but all we saw were the baby impalas still running around in circles.

One of the guests picked up a pair of binoculars to help look, and she reported that some of the baby impalas appeared to have long tails and that's when we had a more careful look at what was really going on. It turned out that the "impalas with the long tails" were actually lion cubs that were chasing the little impalas! Seemingly the cubs had no idea what they were doing because they were running with the impalas as opposed to making a kill as they were supposed to do! That was the end of our sundowners as everyone got excited and wanted to see more and much closer, so we were back in the vehicle very quickly and a sighting of lions was established that way. There were not only cubs in the area, but adult males and females too.

Two wildebeest births!

Article by Stacey Gerber

My tracker, my guests and I were exceptionally fortunate on a recent morning game drive. Shortly after we began our game drive we drove past a small pan and observed a small herd of blue wildebeest slightly east of

the pan. We had decided to take a closer look so we slowly made our way in that direction. As we approached I noticed that two of the wildebeests' tails were held out at a strange angle – almost horizontal to the body. Upon closer inspection I realized that the reason for this was due to two small hooves protruding from the females' genitalia!

The females walked in circles, lay down and then got up again to continue to walk in circles. Both of these females displayed this strange behaviour that was of course associated to giving birth. This continued for approximately 20-30 minutes as we observed the calves progressively continuing to make their way out.



Finally, one of the females lay down and laboriously pushed and we watched as the baby was born. We were so privileged as we witnessed both of the births as well as their first steps. After timing them, we found that one calf took 10 minutes to walk (and remain standing) and the second calf took 8 minutes.

We all agreed that it was an experience that we would remember and appreciate forever. I know that to witness even one birth in the wild is a rare treat, but to have witnessed two of these miracle events within a few minutes of each other must be something that very, very few people have done. This was certainly one of the big highlights of my guiding career so far!



Black mamba!

Article by Michelle Campbell

With their coffin-shaped heads, rapid attacks, and lethal venom, nothing provokes fear quite like this endemic sub-Saharan African snake. Named not for their skin colour but for the inky black interior of their mouths, wild black mambas can pose a truly terrifying sight. So now imagine seeing *FIVE* of them on a single drive!

Such was the unlikely occurrence one early, sunny morning in December. The months of November through March are well known to be snake season, with rains and a warmer climate resulting in many species becoming more active. The black mamba indeed is a diurnal predator; chiefly ambushing prey such as hyraxes, bushbabies and other small mammals. That said, the likelihood of seeing these snakes whilst on game drive is low, as they are known to be shy and avoid confrontation.

They also have predators of their own that they need to hide from, specifically the snake eagles, of which the black-chested snake-eagle and brown snake-eagle we see here. Both of these birds of prey have specialised scales on their legs to prevent snakebites. Due to the mambas' shy and nervous nature, these snakes can quickly change from being timid to defending themselves if they feel endangered, and it is this behaviour that makes them such a feared species. When threatened with no perceived available escape, these snakes can raise their upper body off the ground to stand erect, with the front third of their bodies rising up to 3 to 4 feet (0.9 to 1.2 m) off the ground. Then, they spread their cobra-like neck flaps and gape their mouths to expose the black lining. This is a defensive posture taken to scare away the threat.

If black mambas need to attack to defend themselves, they will strike repeatedly. With front positioned fangs that act like hypodermic needles, the mamba can inject its quarry with a serious dose of neuro-cardiotoxic venom. They have the ability to inject up to 400 mg of this lethal substance – bear in mind only 10-15mg is needed to kill a human!





With characteristics like that, it is not surprising that black mambas feature as potent figures in African folklore, and legends tell of them outrunning horses (wild exaggeration!), rearing up higher than a man's head and killing people within minutes. In rural areas, black mamba bites can still be fatal, as access to medical treatment is scarce and antivenom is even scarcer. Of the five sightings we had that unusual morning (of which the outcome was that my tracker thought someone had cursed us), all of the snakes were on the ground in the road, and upon our approach, reared up before shooting off into the bush like a bullet. Each time the act provoked my 6-foot tracker to leap up out of his chair and me to slam the vehicle into reverse! Better safe than sorry. The lesson however, was that despite their terrifying reputation, in most cases, black mambas would rather flee than fight, so it is best to give them respect and space, as we do with all of the other beautiful species we observe in the bush.

Southern ground hornbills

Article by Daniella Kueck

This is a very distinctive, large bird that can be found whilst out on drive. They are an endangered bird species in South Africa due to their large territorial range and lack of habitat, with as few as 400 – 500 groups occurring, half of which stay in the Greater Kruger areas which includes Singita Sabi Sands as well as Singita Kruger concession. Sightings of a flock are few and far between, with the individuals usually being quite shy in nature. However, we are sometimes lucky to view a flock on a good day, where one can spend a good few minutes watching them as they forage through the grass and bushes, looking for foods like snakes, scorpions, frogs, mice, insects and even tortoises.



Last week on a morning game drive, we happened to find a flock of six still perched in a tree close to the road. As four of them descended the tree in search of some breakfast, two stayed behind to perform their morning preening session. This process involves using the bird's beak to run through every feather from its base to its tip, conditioning them with oils from the preen gland found at the base of the bird's tail feathers. Birds preen for a number of reasons: to keep their feathers in good condition, to remove any dirt or parasites, to keep their feathers aligned and flexible as well as waterproof.

And watching such a massive bird performing this so close to the road happened to be quite a spectacle. In the interest of keeping track and monitoring the flocks that we have in the area, all of our southern ground hornbill sightings are recorded.

Bird list:

236 species recorded. (229 in November)

Highlights were the Broad billed roller, European Roller, Dwarf Bittern, Squacco Heron, Trumpeter Hornbill, Grey headed kingfisher, Cape Vulture and White headed vulture. Summer is well and truly here with the Woodlands kingfishers in full song and Amur falcons returning.



Photo Credit: Guest Chris Stamper



Photographs on location by Ross Couper, Daniella Kueck, Andy Gabor, Grant Pengilly, Michelle Campbell and
Andries Mohlala
Singita Ebony and Boulders Lodge
Sabi Sand
South Africa
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