

Singita



Photo by Brian Rode

WILDLIFE REPORT SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For the month of May, Two Thousand and Sixteen

Temperature	Rainfall Recorded	Sunrise & Sunset
Average minimum: 14 (57.2°F)	For the period: 0 mm	Sunrise: 06h27
Average maximum: 27 (80.6°F)	For the year to date: 103 mm	Sunset: 17h12
Minimum recorded: 11 (51.8°F)		
Maximum recorded: 31 (87.1°F)		

We are now in autumn and the temperatures are starting to drop again. Since we did not have a lot of rain this past summer season there are large areas where there is no grass, and where there is grass it has already changed from green to golden yellow. Some of the trees are already starting to lose their leaves and the days are becoming shorter. As a result of a lack of rainfall the water in the N'wanetsi River is once again receding and we hope that at least some pools will last through the dry winter months. Due to the lack of grass and the fact that the leaves are starting to fall the visibility into the bush has been great and we have had some amazing sightings.

The skies are typically clear during our autumn and winter months and already we are seeing the lack of clouds. This means that our night skies are becoming more and more spectacular. The stars are amazing. We are very fortunate in this concession that there is almost no artificial light pollution at night and the views from the new tower are spectacular. This month Mars, Saturn and Jupiter have been visible in the evening skies. Looking at Jupiter through binoculars we can even see three of the four Galilean Moons!

These moons are called Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto and were discovered by Galileo in January 1610. They were named, at the suggestion of Johannes Kepler, after lovers of the Greek god Zeus (even though Ganymede was a male mythological figure).

Talking about lovers – the impala rut has been in full swing this month. There has been a lot of action with males fighting with each other, herding the females and mating with them. This has been accompanied by lots of sounds. It is almost unbelievable to hear the loud roaring of a horny male impala! It is a sound that you could barely believe comes from such a beautiful dainty-looking antelope.

Our wildlife review for the month is as follows:

Buffalos:



The lack of green grass in the area, although it allows us to have great visibility into the bush, has meant that the large herds of buffalos have moved elsewhere into the Kruger Park. This is one of the wonderful things about operating in an open system – when conditions are not quite suitable the animals have the option of heading towards greener pastures. It also means that it's a constant surprise as to what we are going to see on our drives as anything could move onto the concession. There have, however, been small groups of dagha boys (old male buffalos that have separated from the herds) seen in the area near the N'wanetsi Crossing to the east of the camp, and near Hyena Pan in the northern area of the concession. In this photo one of the old male buffalos is accompanied by some yellow-billed oxpeckers. These birds are particularly rare in the Kruger National Park. Oxpeckers have a symbiotic relationship with large mammals. They are often seen on the backs of larger herbivores. The birds benefit from the relationship by getting food (in the form of ticks) and nesting material (in the form of hair), while the animals benefit by getting cleaned and by having additional eyes on board to see predators and other dangers in the area. Some of the guides have done day drives into the park and have seen herds of buffalos, particularly to the south of the concession where more rain fell and the grass is lush.

Leopards:



Photo by Jacques Briam

It has been great month for leopard viewing. A leopard is one of those animals that just takes your breath away. It is beautiful, agile, graceful and at the same time extremely dangerous. They are often active and are interesting to watch. The Lebombo Concession is large and we have a quite a few known leopards that have their territories within our area. We also regularly see unknown leopards, particularly young males, who move through the concession following the Lebombo Hills. This range of hills has a lot of winding, rocky, vegetated valleys that cut through the ridges and these are great places for a leopard to hide away, unseen. I am almost sure that every drive we go on a leopard sees at least one of our vehicles, without us seeing it. Fortunately the guides and trackers do manage to get sightings of these elusive cats fairly regularly. It is a testament to their skills, as the rocky environment is not an easy place to track or spot these camouflaged creatures.

The Nhlangueni female was seen once this month, quite far north in the concession. She was spotted walking in the Central Depression and then started to climb up the ridge. About half way up she found a big, flat horizontal rock upon which she lay and surveyed the bushveld below her, scanning the area. She obviously did not see anything of interest and lay her head down on the rock and fell asleep. In the afternoon of the same day we saw her again, still lying there resting on the same rock.

We have seen a large male leopard (possibly the Ndlovu male or the N'wanetsi male) a few times this month along the N'wanetsi River, particularly on the other side of the water, at the base of the cliffs. We also had a sighting of a very pale, almost white male leopard lying on the rocks near Dumbana Pools. He was slightly shy. On the twenty-first of May we found a different young male leopard on the hills just to the west of the Mozambique border. As soon as we spotted him in a Delagoa-thorn and knobthorn thicket he quickly ran away through the thick vegetation and over the rocky ridge. He was extremely shy. As we were leaving the area and heading back to camp we smelled the strong odour of something dead. We looked around in the thicket and found a half-consumed male impala. We decided to leave the area and return after dark. That night he was much more relaxed and we had great views of him feeding.

The Xhikelengane female was seen on the evening of the fifteenth. She was hunting impalas. We all turned off our lights and watched her stalking in the bright moonlight. However, the impalas noticed her. We left her as she headed off towards the west.

The Xhikova female and a young male have been seen a few times in the area between James' and Joe's roads this month. On the eighth of May she was seen dragging an impala that she had just caught. And a few days later she was seen stalking some other impalas. The Sticky Thorn female was also seen a few times this month, on one occasion feeding on a steenbok.

Cheetahs:



Photo by Brian Rode

We have not had many sightings of cheetahs this month. Right at the beginning of the month the female cheetah we were watching last month was seen in the Central Depression with her four cubs. The cubs were playing and chasing each other and one was even jumping on its mom as she lay there searching the open areas for prey. It was awesome to watch them. For the rest of the month she was not seen and we think she left the concession.

The general game along the public road towards Tshokwane has been incredible. The zebras have been amazing. We have literally seen hundreds of zebras in the open plains. We are very fortunate to have access to these public roads and, as we are quite far from Satara or any other camps, we often have the roads to ourselves in the early mornings. The game has been great in these open plains and a few of the guides have taken extended morning drives in order to see this. On at least two occasions unknown cheetahs were seen in the open grasslands and Collen even managed to watch one chasing some impalas. On the morning of the twenty-third of May an unknown, young male was found in the region of Xhingwenyana Crossing. Margaux was busy watching him when she saw a klipspringer come onto the open areas away from the rocks. Klipspringers are rock specialists and are not particularly quick over the open ground. The cheetah immediately knew that he had the upper hand and chased down and caught the little antelope in front of Margaux and her guests. What an awesome sighting!

Elephants:



We have seen elephants almost every day this last month. They have mainly been moving in the areas near Sisal Line and in the rocky hills. We have seen quite a few herds coming down to drink water along the N'wanetsi River and at the gorge. Others have been drinking at Hyena Pan, as it still has a little bit of water. It is always wonderful to watch elephants as they are always doing something. The social interactions within the herds are always great to witness. Elephants are such expressive animals and are full of character.

Photo by Brian Rode

Lions:

The month started off with a bang for lion sightings. Right at the beginning of the month Jonathan, Solomon and Jani were watching the smaller portion of the Shish Pride. The pride was walking towards Xhingwenyana Crossing when they came across a young hippo. What happened next was amazing. The pride decided to take on the hippo. Soon they were all over it. Some were on its back, some were biting and clawing at the rump while others were trying to avoid the large mouth of the

hippo. The lions had scratched and bitten the hippo, but it still carried on fighting back. Eventually the hippo managed to shrug off the lions and made its escape. The next morning we found the pride feeding on a different, younger hippo that they had obviously killed after losing the first one!

On the second of May the smaller and larger portions of the Shish Pride had joined together during the night and managed to chase a giraffe into the border fence. The giraffe had obviously flipped right over the fence into Mozambique and the next morning we found the whole pride (more than 25 individuals) feeding on it.

On the night of the eighth of May the pride were found harassing some honey badgers near Dumbana Pools. Badgers are really tough animals and soon the pride decided to leave them be. Then they came across another hippo, which they started hunting. The hippo got wind of the lions and ran away. The next afternoon they were found in the same general area, this time hunting impalas. They managed to catch an impala and there was lots of in-pride fighting over the small prey.

On the morning of the twentieth of May we found the larger portion of the Shish Pride (with the white lion) feeding on the carcass of a hippo.

The Mountain Pride are doing well and all seven cubs are still healthy and growing up very quickly. They have been operating in the far north of the concession, in the hills near Hyena Pan. A lot of the time they have been hunting in areas inaccessible to vehicles, but for a while they were using a rocky area near the pan and near the road as a den and we got some great views of them there. The third female was attracting a lot of attention from the Shish males and it is possible that she could be pregnant now.

The Xhirombe Pride was seen a few times in the hills south of the N'wanetsi Gorge. On the nineteenth they were seen on the Mozambique side feeding on an impala that they had driven into the fence. Later in the month they were seen feeding on an impala that they had obviously killed by driving it towards the fence. These lions have obviously figured out how to use the border-fence to their advantage.



Some of the Shish Pride resting at Dumbana

Photo by Brian Rode

Spotted hyenas:



Photo by Brian Rode

The Nyokene Clan have moved their den-site to a small cave on the side of the Nyokene drainage. Hyenas will move den-sites every few months as the parasite load (ticks and fleas) builds up. This clan has provided

some great viewing this month. At present they have four dark cubs (less than 3 months old), two cubs that have just got their spotted coats and two slightly larger cubs. The younger cubs are very cute at the moment, looking like little baby bears or puppy dogs.

The H6 Clan have also moved their den-site and are now a little further west, in a culvert, along the paved road.

Other interesting sightings:

We have been lucky enough to see honey badgers on a number of occasions this month. The honey badger that often raids the rubbish cages behind the kitchens has made its presence known a couple of times this month and one morning when Deirdre and Jani went to the top of the tower to go and look at the view as it was getting light, they came across a young honey badger sleeping in the fireplace. They realised that it would not be a good thing for a guest to come up there and find him/herself trapped on top by this tough little creature and therefore decided to wake it up. They shouted at it and clapped hands but the honey badger kept on sleeping. Deirdre then took one of the chairs and poked it with a leg, using the rest of the chair as a shield in case the honey badger decided to launch itself at her. The young badger then woke up, looked at the two guides and made a run for the stairs and right through the main area.

We have also had quite a few sightings of porcupine, genets and civets, as well as scrub hares on the night drives.

Late on the afternoon of the thirteenth the bus carrying the staff from the lodge to the staff quarters at Shishangaan came across a pack of wild dogs on the public road. It was already getting dark and the game drive vehicles were far away at that point and could not respond to the sighting. The guides were disappointed that they did not see the dogs, as we very seldom (maybe once or twice a year) see these incredible animals. Fortunately early the next morning five dogs were spotted on the public road outside camp. We followed them all the way to the N'wanetsi River Crossing when the first public vehicles arrived. At that point the dogs decided to head away from the road into the Kruger and we left them and headed back into the concession. It is always a privilege to watch these amazing animals. They have such great stamina as they trot kilometre after kilometre looking for prey. They are probably the most successful hunters out of all the 'super-predators' of the African bush and they kill almost every day, sometimes even twice a day in a co-ordinated pack effort.



Photo by Brian Rode

Colouration and chromatic abnormalities

The colouration of animals usually serves to camouflage them in the environment in which they live. This enables them to hide away from predators or to enable the predators to sneak up to their prey without being noticed. In order to hide themselves many animals make use of either 'disruptive colouration' or 'background pattern matching'.

In the case of disruptive coloration animals often have strongly contrasting colours and patterns (often in the form of striping or blotching), which tends to break up the outline of the animals, enabling it to hide more effectively. Examples of disruptive colouration can be seen on animals such as kudus, where the white stripes break up the outline of the antelope against the bushes or, for example, on leopards and cheetahs. The rosettes on leopards or the spots on cheetahs serve the same function of breaking up the predators' outlines and enable them to blend into their environment.

Background pattern matching is evident in animals such as lions where the colour of their fur blends in well with the grass in which they often hide.

Another form of colouration or patterning that animals may use to hide better is known as 'counter-shading'. This is particularly evident in many antelope, of which impala is a prime example. Counter-shading is the pattern of animal colouration in which an animal's pigmentation is darker on the upper side and lighter on the underside of the body. When light falls on a uniformly coloured object from above (e.g. from the sun), it makes the upper side appear lighter and the underside darker, grading from one to the other. This pattern of light and shade makes the object appear solid, and therefore acts as a visual cue which makes the object easier to detect. Counter-shading reduces the ease of detection of predators and prey by counterbalancing the effects of self-shadowing. In the case of impalas the counter-shading is evident in the three colour stripes. The back is dark, the flanks slightly lighter and the belly is white. This pattern of colouration counteracts the effects of shadows produced by the sun.

On occasion specific individual animals may be found that have chromatic aberrations or unusual colours that do not serve to hide the animal. Examples of this include albinism, leucism and melanism. These aberrations are usually caused by recessive genes that give them the unusual colours. It's rare to find animals with these colour aberrations in the wild as they tend not to blend in with their environments, thus making them easier targets (in the case of prey species) or make it more difficult to sneak up to their prey (in the case of predators).



Photo by Brian Rode

Albinism is a strange genetic disorder characterized by the complete or partial absence of pigment in the skin, hair and eyes. Animals that are albinos are white in colour and usually have red or pink eyes (the blood in the eyes shows through).

Leucism is different from albinism in that the melanin is absent partially but the eyes retain their usual colour or are lighter in colour (but not pink or red). Some leucistic animals are white or pale because of pigment cell defects. Leucistic animals usually do still have some patches of darker colour, particularly in the lips and eyes. Some animals may be partially leucistic, where pigmentation is lacking only in certain

areas on the body. At the moment we have a female impala on the concession that is partially leucistic. In her case her flanks are white (not light brown) and her eyes are also very pale.

In the larger portion of the Shish Pride there is a young male lion that is leucistic. He is a white lion. White lions are very rare in the wild (there are estimated to be only approximately ten white lions in the wild, in the world). In white lions the white colour is caused by a recessive gene known as the colour inhibitor gene (or 'chutiya') and is distinct from the albinism gene. These white lions vary from nearly-white through to blonde.



Photo by Brian Rode

According to traditional African oral history, white lions have been seen in the Timbavati area (bordering onto the Kruger National Park) for centuries. It's said that a special white lion cub was born during Queen Numbi's reign, over 400 years ago, in an event heralded by a star that fell to Earth. In the 1970s, white lions were once again discovered and became the focus of several books, most notably Chris McBride's, *The White Lions of the Timbavati*, which was published in 1977. – Wikipedia.

At some point it is possible that lions with the white genes moved from the Timbavati area to the Satara/Lebombo area. This could have happened when some young male lions, with the recessive white gene, reached sexual maturity and were forced to leave their pride's territory by the dominant males of the area. Over years this recessive white gene was carried in the genes of the offspring of the Timbavati lions. When a male carrying this recessive gene mates with a female carrying the recessive gene one or some of the cubs produced could be white lions.

The white lion from the Shish pride has now become famous and sightings of him are often reported by the public when the pride enters or leaves our concession and is seen on the public roads. We are lucky enough to see this famous animal on a fairly regular basis, although as a male lion who is getting to the age where he will have to leave his father's territory, we are expecting that he will soon have to leave the area.

Recently we located a pale or 'white' leopard on the concession. This leopard had almost none of the typical orange colouration of normal leopards, although he does have the normal black rosettes. He is not one of our usual leopards and is fairly shy of the vehicles. We believe that he is a nomadic male that has left his mother's territory and is busy trying to find an area that he can call his own. Since we already have dominant males in our area it is very unlikely that he will settle here.



Photo by Brian Rode

Melanism is almost the opposite of albinism or leucism. Melanistic animals have an unusually high level of melanin pigmentation, resulting in a darker appearance. The animal known as a 'black panther' is actually either a black / melanistic leopard or jaguar. When one looks at a black panther in good light one can actually see the rosettes as darker patches in the black fur. Black panthers are generally only found in central African or South American jungles, where they blend in well with the deep shadows. There are rumours that a black panther was recently seen at the bottom of the Blyde River Canyon, to the west of the Kruger Park, although this has not been photographically substantiated.

Two other chromatic abnormalities found sometimes in animals include Xanthochroism and Erythrism.

Xanthochroism is where there is an excess of yellow pigmentation and is sometimes found in birds such as the yellow morphs of the black-collared barbets or the crimson-breasted shrikes.

Erythrism refers to a strange and unusual reddish pigmentation of an animal's fur, skin, hair or feathers. A few years ago a leopard was seen in a game reserve in a province of South Africa that had reddish-brown rosettes on a pink background – a true 'pink panther'!

May moments in time



A journey of giraffes Photo by Brian Rode



Grey heron and reflection Photo by Brian Rode



A gathering of yellow-billed storks

Photo by Brian Rode



Photos by Jacques Briam



Articles by Brian Rode
Photos by Jacques Briam, & Brian Rode
Singita Kruger National Park
South Africa
Thirtieth of May 2016