

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT
SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA
For the month of May Two Thousand and Sixteen

Temperature

Average minimum: 13.8°C (57°F)
Average maximum: 25°C (77°F)
Minimum recorded: 11°C (51°F)
Maximum recorded: 28°C (82°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 9 mm
For the season to date: 396 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise 06:32
Sunset 17:11

Winter is certainly on our doorstep and the crisp morning air and the shorter grass has heralded the arrival of a few new additions. For the first time in many years we have an active African wild dog den-site in the north of our exclusive traversing area. Some of our guides and almost all our guests have never seen young wild dog puppies before, so it has been a highlight for all.

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

Leopards:

Hlaba'nkunzi recently killed a bushbuck in view of Singita Boulders Lodge. Guests were astonished to see the kill take place in broad daylight, early in the afternoon. Many guests decided to sit and watch the scene unfold before heading off later than usual on their afternoon safari. Hlaba'nkunzi and her son are still viewed together however she is becoming more and more reluctant to share her carcasses with her young male leopard son who is becoming more independent. They are both still moving within the lodge perimeters.

Wild Dogs:

Described as being one of the most exciting days in any guide's career was finding a wild dog den. Grant Pengilly was overwhelmed with excitement when sharing the news of the recent site, just north of the Sand River. We have seen seven puppies emerging from the den and the guides have agreed that the puppies are approximately four weeks old.

**Lions:**

In April we mentioned the two new lion cubs born into the Mhangene pride and this time we are announcing that an additional four cubs have been seen within the same area as the last den-site. The four little fur balls have been viewed on a few occasions, from a distance, however they are just too young to be moved from the den-site at this stage.



Buffaloes:

Herds have been seen in strong numbers. Water pans are now centralised to certain parts of the reserve due to the change of season, and the herds have kept to the specific path.

Elephants:

Several herds continue to congregate along the Sand River in view of the lodges.

Man-eating lions?

Article by Iska Meyer-Wendecker

The southern part of Singita Sabi Sand covers an area that in the late 19th century used to be cut through by the historic Selati Railway Line. Originally built to transport gold from the mines in the north-eastern part of South Africa all the way down to the coast, it was later used recreationally to view game and as a general means of passenger transportation. Today the old railway line has been transformed into one of our numerous reserve roads with the area embracing wide open spaces with beautiful views of the Drakensberg Mountains and regular offerings of spectacular sunsets. I've hardly ever driven our old railway road without encountering at least one member of Africa's popular Big Five.

Due to the breathtaking scenery and the historical background of the area I often take a moment and stop the drive to tell our guests about this particular part of our reserve. When speaking about the dangers people faced in the past with wild animals, I very often get asked why lions today do not actively stalk or hunt us when we are out in bush. It's a difficult question that cannot be answered with a straightforward response. However, if we look at the history of human settlement across lions' habitation in Africa we can find some interesting information that can start some fascinating discussions.

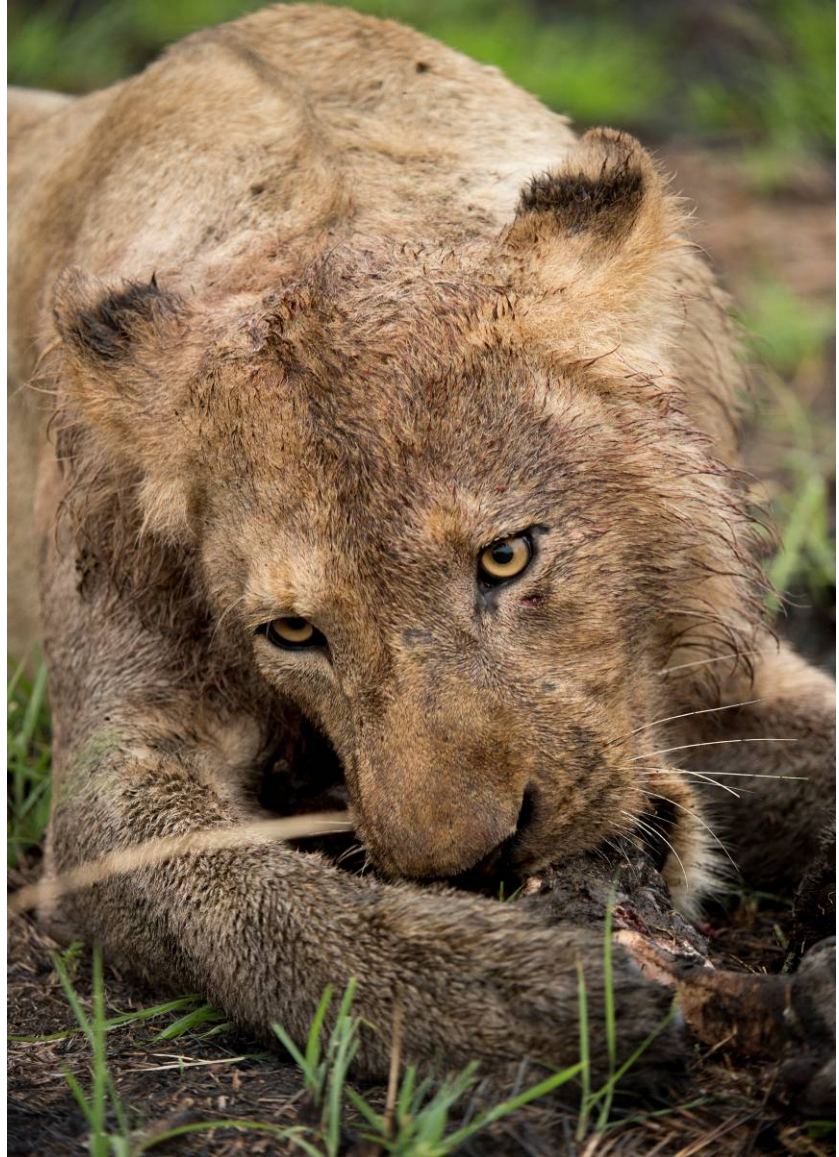


When the Selati Railway went under construction it was soon dubbed the *man-a-mile line*, naming it after the numerous men that had lost their lives to disease, accidents and marauding lions while building the tracks. Later on, at the beginning of the 20th century, when the railway was used recreationally, there were many reports of passengers waiting along the tracks for the next train to arrive, regularly having to climb trees in order to protect themselves from prides of lions. Eventually permanent ladders were mounted against prominent trees along the railway for travellers to use in a potentially dangerous lion encounter.

The case of the man-eating lions around the Selati Railway Line is just one example where these magnificent predators moved away from their usual diet that typically consists of larger herbivores such as buffalo, zebra and larger antelope species. Lions – generally speaking – do not hunt other predators (e.g. hyenas, leopards, and cheetah), and neither do they commonly prey on omnivores (e.g. jackals, baboons and civets). Just like all

other predators and omnivores, we humans have forward-facing eyes for advanced binocular vision, very different to the prey species' eyes, which are located on the sides of their heads to give them excellent 270-degree vision. From an anatomical point, we humans do not fit into the typical prey species diet of a lion. Fortunately today we do not face these issues here any longer and we are able to watch large prides of lions from the safety of our open game viewing vehicles or even on foot while out tracking them in the bush. When encountering lions in the bush they do not associate us with food like they would when gazing at a zebra for instance. Humans have moved away from living in the open bush and the prides do not come across us living amongst them in big numbers any longer.

The Selati Railway Line, however, presented a situation where a large number of people spent day after day in the open bush at exactly the same locations for prolonged periods of time. Eventually the lions in the area came too comfortable with their presence and learned their routine, which caused their usual respect for us humans to be lost. It would take just one successful manhunt to convince a pride that we are easy prey for them. This was also the case in the Kruger National Park, where an unspecified number of Mozambique refugees used the park as an escape route from their war-torn country in the '80s and '90s. Many of them were reported to have lost their lives to lions hunting them while walking through the wilderness. Again this was a similar situation of lions becoming familiar with a routine, a high number of individuals, and the people often moving in the darkness of the night. Even these days every so often we read in the news of lions attacking people, but yet again, there are answers to be found if we take a close look. Often the animal was diseased, threatened by a particular situation and acted in self-defence, or connected a threat with humans due to maltreatment in the past and yet again merely tried to protect itself.



Luckily our lions in the Sabi Sand have not experienced such threats and have never associated us humans with food. Of course we need to treat them with utmost respect and always give them the space they need. As long as we conduct ourselves in the right way and keep our distance we will be able to keep enjoying the presence of these mighty animals – be it from our Land Rovers during game drives or out on foot in the bush.

The early days of an animal's life is a time for learning. Watching such a learning process take place in front of us can be both interesting and entertaining; it is certainly always fascinating.



A relaxed young male leopard, the son of the Hlaba'nkunzi female, has recently given us some fine opportunities to watch him as he moves through the transition phase between being a cub and being an independent sub-adult leopard. Now approximately 15 months old, independence could be thrust upon him at any time in the next few months.

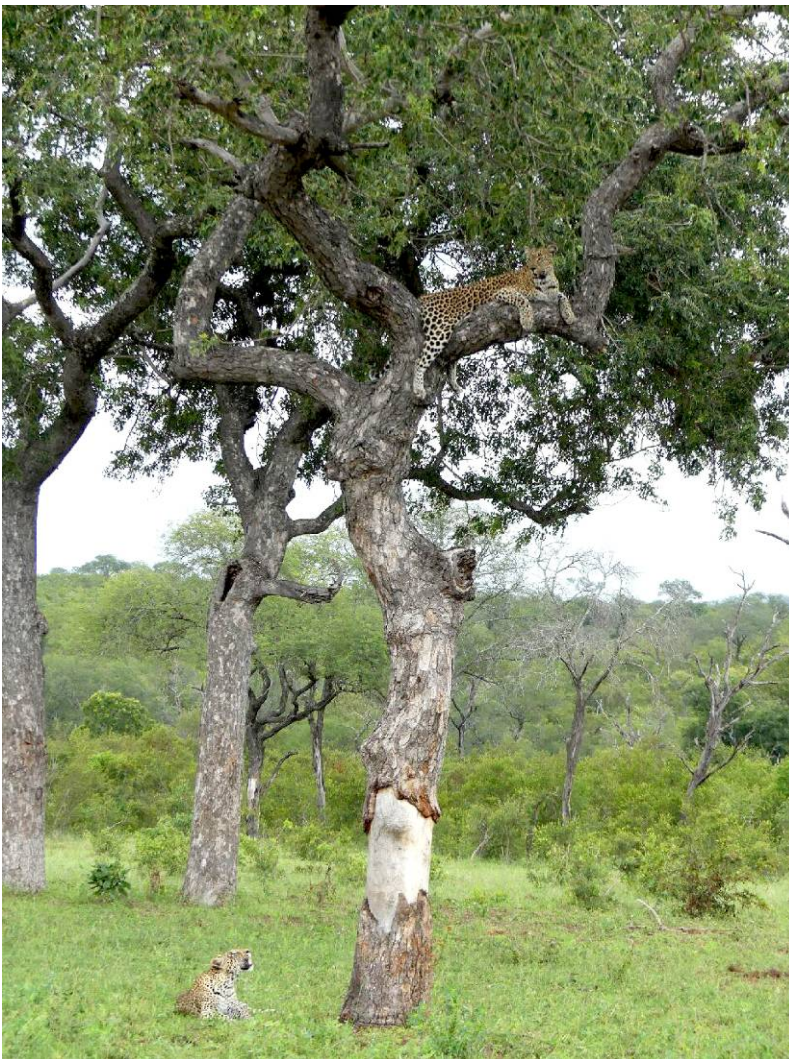
One fresh morning we had only driven for about five minutes after leaving the lodge, when we came upon a young leopard walking towards us in the road. He seemed in no hurry whatsoever, and soon lay down in front of the vehicle, watching the Land Rover and its occupants with mild curiosity. A few minutes later, a second Land Rover joined us at the sighting.

By now we had recognised the leopard as the Hlaba'nkunzi female's son, a leopard that our guests had seen the previous evening. Virtually at the same time as we first came upon the leopard that morning, we also saw two large buffalo bulls, lying down in reasonably long green grass, close to a fallen marula tree, perhaps 20 metres to the east of the road. Now the young leopard also became aware of the two buffaloes... or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the leopard became aware that there was SOMETHING, some living creature, in the grass nearby.

Curious as ever, he began to move cautiously off the road and in the direction of the two buffalo bulls. It didn't take long before the buffaloes became aware of the leopard, and they both stood up. By now the young

leopard could very clearly see what the other life forms were, but he continued to move towards them, not making too much effort to conceal himself.

Fascinated, we watched as the leopard leapt up onto the limbs of the fallen marula tree, and moved confidently along them, until he was no more than a couple of feet above one of the buffalo bulls. It was obvious that the buffaloes knew that the leopard was a predator, but it was also equally apparent that they didn't consider him to pose any real threat! In fact, I would describe the buffaloes as having appeared slightly amused by the presence of the young leopard so close to them. They began to graze peacefully just below the tree, every now and again looking up at the leopard. The leopard, meanwhile, had a very playful way about him, and walked along a roughly horizontal section of the tree, turning and reaching down with one paw on several occasions, towards the top of the back of the buffalo closest to him. He even extended his claws and touched the buffalo on the spine at least once! It was as if the leopard was toying with the idea of jumping down onto the buffalo to try to have him as a meal - of course such an attempt would have had no chance of succeeding, but the leopard certainly gave me the impression that he was "thinking big" or "dreaming big!"



The vegetation and other structures or obstacles, as well as the relative position of the sun, the buffaloes, the marula tree and the leopard, did not allow me to quite get to the position I would have chosen, and of course I was so caught up in the moment that I didn't pay enough attention to camera settings. As a result, the pictures that I did manage to take were probably nowhere near as good as they might have been. The memory of the incident, however, will remain clear in my mind for a long time to come.

There have been a number of other sightings of this same young leopard showing great ambition, stalking other large mammals, such as a waterbuck bull, an adult male giraffe, and even rhino. At the other end of the scale, we have witnessed him stalking dwarf mongoose, small birds and even butterflies.

He is now larger than his mother, and has an appetite to match. He certainly is large enough and physically strong enough to look after himself, in terms of being able to subdue and kill prey of suitable size. His education process seems to be going well, and we believe that it is a case of an

active enquiring mind that will benefit him, rather than a case of "curiosity killed the cat." He has already provided us with much fine viewing, and I am optimistic that he will continue to do so as he approaches independence, as well as afterwards, when his mother produces her next litter.

Bats about bats

Article by Daniella Kueck

When on safari, the only time that you typically see any sort of bat would be in the early evening, whilst enjoying a sunset drink or meandering back toward the lodges. This is when bats leave their roosting spots and set out on an evening of feeding. These bats would either be insect or fruit eating bats. Other 'giveaways' of the presence of bats would be their high-pitched ticking sounds that they mostly make by clicking their tongues at the backs of their throats.



Wahlberg's epauletted fruit bats are a bat species that you have the best chance of getting a proper look at whilst in the Sabi Sand and Greater Kruger areas. These bats can often be found roosting during the day underneath the thatch of some lodges. These bats are fairly large, about 12-25cm in length, varying shades of brown, from a greyish brown to a russet brown with white spots of fur located at the top part of the base of the ear in both sexes. Scent glands are located at the places where the white ear spots and shoulder epaulets are found.

They feed on a variety of fruits found in and around the area like the figs of the Sycamore fig found growing along rivers and drainage

lines. These trees rely on animals like birds and bats feeding on their fruits - not only do the seeds need more light to grow, making the area right at the base of the parent tree not suitable, but also can only germinate after passing through the gut of an animal.

Ebony Lodge welcomed three of these adorable creatures for a couple of weeks before they decided to find a new roosting spot.

One morning drive, to my absolute delight, whilst off-roading in the Sand River to find some male lions, my manoeuvring in the river bed along the dense bush of the banks, led us to two Wahlberg's epauletted fruit bats hanging out in a large bush on the edge of the river bank, right above the vehicle. This was the first time that I've ever seen these bats whilst out on drive with guests. It was an absolute treat for the morning! A bonus sighting which was completely unexpected!

Photographs on location (unless stated) by Leon van Wyk, Grant Pengilly, Ross Couper, Daniella Kueck and Michelle Campbell
Singita Ebony and Boulders Lodge
Sabi Sand
South Africa
Thirty-first of May 2016