

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL

SINGITA PAMUSHANA / MALILANGWE, ZIMBABWE

For the month of August, Two Thousand and Twenty-Three

Temperature

Average minimum: 14.0°C (53.7°F)
Minimum recorded: 10.3°C (57.2°F)
Average maximum: 28.5°C (83.3°F)
Maximum recorded: 37.9°C (100.2°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 7 mm
*For the season to date: 702.8 mm
*Season = Sep to Aug

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:03
Sunset: 17:44

August is definitely a favourite month for wildlife viewing, but over and above that our guests have thoroughly enjoyed stopping on the airstrip in the evening, for stargazing. The pleasant temperatures, clear dark skies, sparkling constellations, and the overwhelming awe at the infinity of it all makes one appreciate this conservation wilderness area even more.

The month's wildlife overview follows:

Lions

The new male coalitions are still in the process of taking over prides, so there is a lot of lion mating activity and roaring going on!

- The Nduna Pride provided eye-opening sightings with a mating pair performing right in front of a game-viewing vehicle. On one occasion the pair joined up with another male and female and began roaring for all they were worth! The pride is quite fragmented and seen in different groupings – on West Valley Road were two cubs, one male and two females; at Logaan Dam there were three adult males and two adult females.
- The River Pride have been seen at O2 Pan. They were rudely chased away from there by an elephant that wanted to drink. There is also a mating pair in this pride.
- Vultures gave away the whereabouts of two male lions that were feeding on a buffalo kill.

Elephants

There have been some terrific elephant sightings this month. Here are three that stand out:

- A large cow herd of 70+ animals, and at least 20 big bulls lurking around the herd, provided a spectacle to guests who watched the bulls vying for a female that was in season, delighted at the babies and adolescents playing, and laughed at the trumpeting and showing off of some individuals. Everywhere they looked they were surrounded by elephants.
- At Nduna Dam there was a herd of well over 50 elephants putting the water to good use, drinking, mud wallowing and swimming.
- Bulls elephants shook thorn trees to relieve them of their nutritious pods, and hoovered up the fallen treats.

Rhinos

Rhinos abound! It's especially gratifying to find white and black rhinos in the same sighting, as has happened a couple of times this month.

- White rhinos: Large crashes have been converging at favoured waterpoints. A rhino bull walked alongside a game-viewing vehicle at their sundowner spot, thrilling the guests by being so close. A funny sighting was finding four rhinos napping under the carport shed at Nduna Dam – making the most of the shade and the soft ground.
- Black rhinos: Some cantankerous black rhinos have checked everyone's heart function with some mock charges and bluster when they see the game-viewing vehicles.

Buffalo

Hundreds of buffalo are continuously munching their way through the reserve.

- A highlight was a herd of about 600 crossing south of the Nyamasikana Bridge on Binya Road. The road is raised up on one side so guests had the buffalo walking forward and peering over and down at them. They drove for a good 400m and had buffalo on one side the whole way.

Leopards

There've been some fleeting glimpses of leopards this month and clues of others:

- We found a drag mark across the road and blood stains and fur from an impala. After tracking and following the drag we found the kill wedged in a tree but the leopard took off before we got there.
- The best sighting of the month was of a female leopard up in a tree, just east of Sosiji Dam.

Wild dogs

- The pups have left the den and are running with the pack, but still need to be babysat while the adults hunt. The pack was seen at Hwata Pan and at the airstrip. Guests were lucky enough to witness the ritual of waking up, greeting and playing before the late afternoon hunt commenced.

Hyenas

- Four hyenas were swimming at Hwata Pan, then also tried to hunt a warthog but failed to execute the hunt so went back to frolic in the water.
- While the adults lay in the shade with full bellies a couple of sub-adult hyenas were brave and curious enough to come up to a vehicle and give it, and everyone in it, a close inspection.

Plains game/antelope

- Plains game abound, and the more elusive sable, Lichtenstein hartebeest and eland are regularly seen making their way towards water.
- Another 'special' that we see often are dainty klipspringers. Like prima ballerinas they pose on point upon stony stages.

Photographic hide

Rhino sightings are always excellent from the hide, but in addition to those it is wonderful when you can recognise some of the large tuskers that occasionally drink from the pan.

- One of these is a bull elephant we refer to as "Butch." He drank and decided to have a bath too, thrilling our guests when they filmed him in slow motion.
- Another incredible sighting was of four bull elephants that arrived at the pan, including "Mapunzawayaya" the biggest tusker on the reserve.

Walks

It's a lovely time to walk, and our guides have conducted many of these grounding experiences this month. Whether it's to look at the finer details, or visit a rock art site, admire an enormous baobab or track one of the larger mammals, a wilderness walk always ranks highly with our guests.

Unusual/other

- An epic sundowner stop including viewing thousands of insect-eating bats emerging from their hiding places in dead trees to go in search of food.
- A troop of baboons started to alarm call and stare intently in one direction – they'd spotted some hyenas coming up the road.

Rock art

It's impossible not to be blown away by the rock art on this reserve, and to experience it is a tangible thread to your human ancestry.

Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft

Just beyond the eastern fenceline of our reserve is Kambako, and every guest that visits returns to the lodge with descriptions of how fascinating it was to see the skills required to survive in the bush. To some its like a different universe!

Gonarezhou Day Trips

Gonarezhou is becoming more frequented by wilderness adventure seekers, and a day trip into the northern section of the park reveals the endless wide open spaces, running rivers, ravines and cliffs that we can all appreciate and, I propose, need in our lives.

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as an August Gallery of images.

Watching you watching me watching you



This got the heart rate up! I was alone on a scouting drive, calling in sightings to other game drives that were out with guests. Lions had been a bit thin on the ground. It was mid-morning and I stopped at the waterhole with the sunken photographic hide to finish my flask of coffee. I parked quite far away so as not to disturb anything that might want to come and drink. As I took my first sip I thought I saw a moving, tall, beige shape. I thought it might be an eland. Then it reappeared in the open and was a lion. He was walking with purpose towards the water and at once I knew he was going to drink – and, guess what – I had the key to the hide in my pocket!

Under normal circumstances (i.e. not when there is a large male lion walking alongside you) you need to park behind the hide entrance, gather all your gear, step over a fallen log, deal with a highly temperamental padlock on an angled door, get inside and carefully check with your torch that you are the only living creature in there, open the six latched windows, sort yourself out and wait for animals to arrive...

In this instance I grabbed camera and bean bag in left hand, key in right, hopped the log and, with mercurial fluidity, opened the padlock first go with one hand, dived in, unlatched one window – and there he was crouched at the water's edge about to take his first sip.

As you can see he was very much aware of me and watched me closely as he drank. But he soon settled down and drank his fill. In fact he drank for ages – loud lapping cat gulps. Even the guinea fowl decided he was no threat and resumed their mad dashing about in the background, kicking up dust as they went.

In due course he finished his drink, sat up, and then strolled off in to the bushes to find a cosy spot to settle down and nap for the rest of the sunny day. What an awesome experience it was to be so close and at ease with this magnificent predator. A once-in-a-lifetime indelible memory indeed!







Surrounded by buffalo

Trundling along a track at sunrise we came across this large herd of buffalo. They were grazing west to east and surrounded the vehicle completely. What was especially interesting photographically is how the light intensity changes if you stay in one spot and take photos in a circumference. You have to override most of your camera's settings as it tries to achieve an even exposure, and use Manual mode instead as I did for these four photos of the surrounding scene.



Photobombing birds

We had such a laugh at this sighting – a huge white rhino bull with an incredible horn arrived at the waterhole but the guineafowl and doves refused to let him steal the show and insisted on photobombing him. This led to some beautiful captures, and some funny ones...



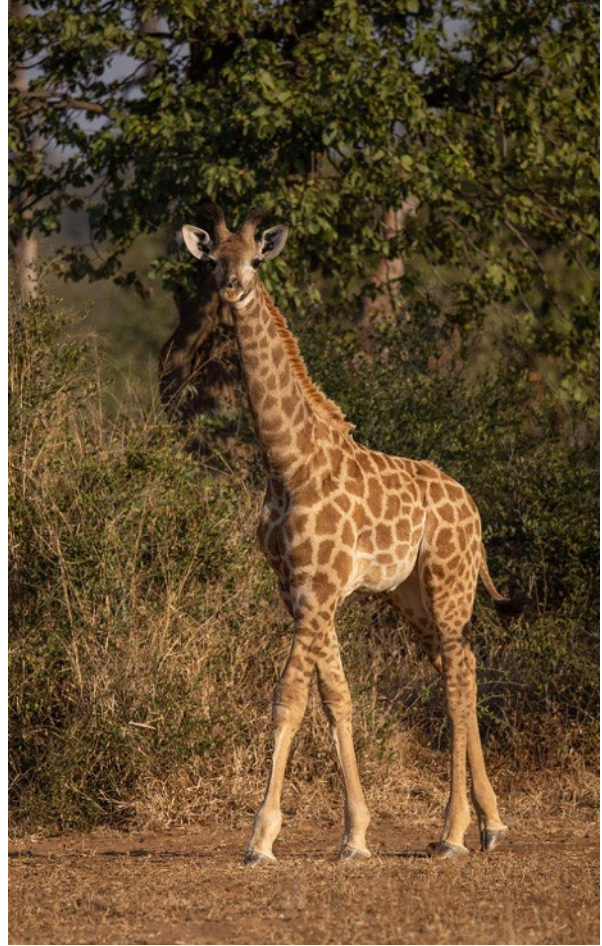
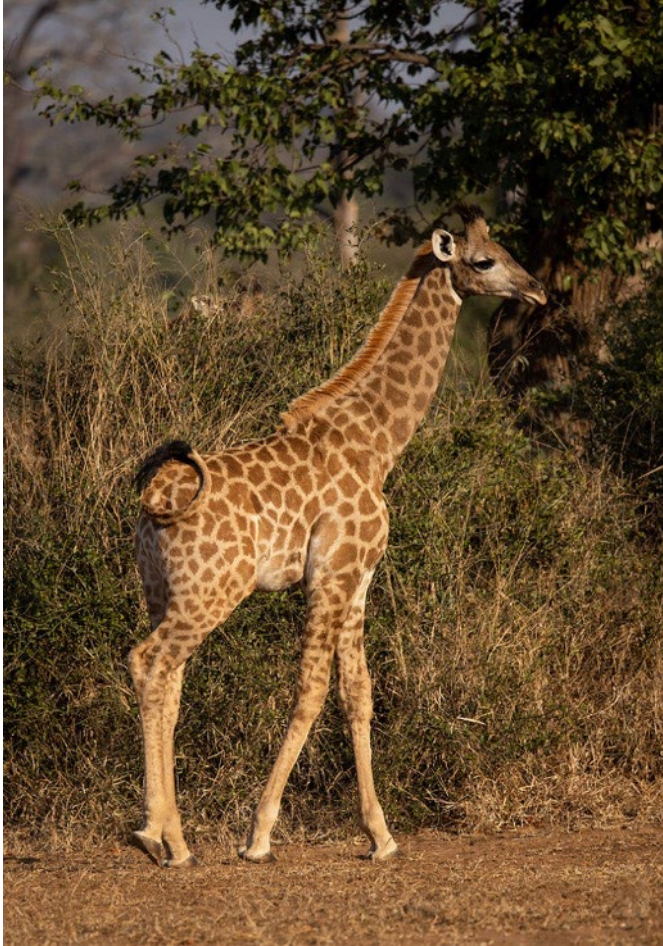
In the first image we thought it would be good to focus on the guinea fowl and frame the rhino almost as an incidental out of focus animal in the background, but even a dove was having none of that and photobombed the guineas' portrait. In the next image everyone played ball and arranged themselves artistically for the photo, but seconds thereafter the birds were at it again, this time with the effect that it looked like a dove had become impaled on the tip of the rhino's horn!



Often in these monthly journals you will read of incredible numbers of rhinos seen during the course of an evening, arriving and leaving a waterhole. On this particular evening there was good moonlight, and there had been a spell of long hot days. As luck would have it an extraordinary scene unfolded as rhinos arrived, but didn't immediately leave, preferring to hang about in the moonlight and socialise with one another. By "painting in" the scene softly with a torch and using a long exposure you can get a better idea of what we were seeing in the near dark. More than 20 wild free-roaming white rhinos in one single photograph!



Giraffe family gatherings



This young male giraffe was seemingly alone, and strutting his stuff up and down the catwalk while swishing his tail exuberantly. We stopped to watch him and were concerned about his vulnerability as large predators, particularly hyenas in this area, are known to hunt and kill giraffe calves quite often. Giraffes aren't territorial and they have quite a loose social structure. The mothers have strong ties with their young calves, but giraffes will herd together and come and go as they please. The mothers stick together and allow their calves to form a nursery group, and take turns watching over them.

As our model was parading back and forth we noticed another young giraffe pop its head out from behind a bush – it is amazing how they can hide. Then we saw two moms on the other side of a donga and were relieved that supervision was nearby. Our calf then crossed the donga and joined up with his mother. A mother giraffe will stand over her calf and kick at an approaching predator. Mothers watching nursery groups will alert their own young if they detect a risk via their periscope-type surveillance, although the other calves will take notice and follow. Allo-sucking, where a calf will suckle a female other than its mother, has been recorded in both wild and captive giraffes.

You can see that the calf's neck still looks quite stocky. Neck length is from a disproportionate lengthening of the cervical vertebrae, not from the addition of more vertebrae. This elongation mainly takes place after birth.

There are quite a few collective nouns for giraffes such as "herd", "tower", and "journey". My favourite is journey and I think a large journey photographed together would make a challenging jigsaw puzzle!



Twitter

The bird viewing is brilliant. Highlights of the month include a crowned eagle hunting dassies at the helipad and a lappet-faced vulture at Sosiji Dam. Guests delighted in some regulars like brown-hooded kingfisher, southern white-faced owl and speckled mousebird, while our head guide got four 'lifers' this month – a burnt-necked eremomela, pearl-breasted swallow, chestnut-vented warbler and white-throated robin-chat.



Here's a backlit crested barbet, and guineafowls having a blast.



A crested francolin allows water to dribble onto its chest feathers, followed by a clutch of Natal spurfowl wetting their whistles at the waterhole.



August Gallery

Here's one of the first images of a pup from the pack of African wild dogs' latest litter. The little one runs off with a piece of regurgitated meat that an adult has provided.

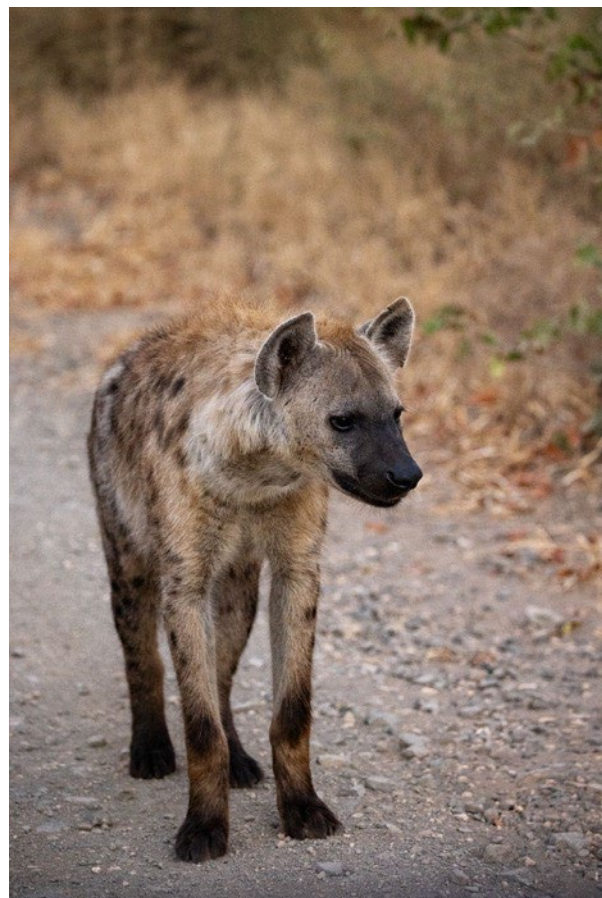


Next page: Twice as impressive – a white rhino bull and his reflection.
An elegant kudu calf takes a sip of water.





Note the streaming temporal gland on this bull elephant. The secretion is called temporin and contains various chemical substances including lipids (notably cholesterol). You often see these secretions in a bull in musth, or in an old bull. He wasn't in musth, but did "check" us before settling down to continue feeding again on the side of the main Binya Road.



A curious young hyena with immaculate dark chocolate paws.

A baby dassie contemplates a big jump.





The opulent colours of winter as an elephant feeds on mopane, and rhinos enjoy a sundowner.





A high-stepping bull elephant arrives at a waterhole during fleeting seconds of surreal light.