

Singita

EBONY & BOULDERS LODGES

Sabi Sand • South Africa



Wildlife Journal

From the first to the thirty first of January

Two Thousand and Eleven

Temperature

Average Minimum: 22 °C (71.6 °F)
Average Maximum: 30.8 °C (87.4 °F)
Minimum recorded: 18 °C (64.4 °F)
Maximum recorded: 36 °C (96.8 °F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the period: 242 mm
For the year to date: 242 mm

JANUARY OVERVIEW

Game viewing has been excellent despite the odd challenge posed by occasional downpours of rain which have been generously dealt to us thus far and the resultant effect on the bush is gloriously lush and bountiful.



The Ravenscourt female looks to be heavily pregnant and it seems as if she will give birth any day now. This follows her mating with the Khashane male in October as documented in that month's guide's diary. This will be her 5th litter of cubs having last given birth in April 2009. That litter consisted of 2 male cubs only one of which, the Ravenscourt young male, survived. All of her litters have been born in the Tavangumi koppies, just east of Boulders lodge and, in recent weeks, she has often been seen in this area, leading us to believe that this time will be no different.

In the past month, the Khashane male has been seen mating with both the Mbiri female as well as the Mobeni female, a clear indication that he is the dominant male over a large portion of the Singita property.

Early on in January, we welcomed a new group of 9 trainee guides to Singita Sabi Sand. They commenced the 6 month training program run by Alan Yeowart as part of the

Singita Field Guide and Tracker Training Academy. Not all are strangers to the Singita family, with Claude Visage being one of the Castleton Camp managers and Kobus de Kock having been a lodge anchor at Boulders. Tinyiko Mkhabela, brother of trailing specialist and expert tracker Shadrack Mkhabela, also joins the program after graduating from the Singita tracker training course late in 2010. Others joining the course include Dylan Joubert, Francois Fourie, Gavin Rosenbaum, Lloyd Arnold, Shaun Rabinowitz and Nick Podmore. The trainees always bring with them a new sense of energy and excitement and we all look forward to, as I'm sure they do, an action packed 6 months.

I thought it appropriate to begin with Leon's article on what makes a Singita guide tick, as this is a question we should all be asking ourselves at the beginning of a new year and indeed every day that we are privileged enough to be able to spend time in this environment.

WHAT MAKES A SINGITA GUIDE TICK?

It would not be difficult to write a whole book on the subject of what makes a guide tick. It is somewhat more challenging to write such an article in *précis* form, but a guide should always be up for a challenge. Having been a guide for almost two decades, perhaps I am in a good position to share with the reader a little of what it is that keeps me passionate about what I do.

It is always good to wake up a little earlier than really necessary. I'm not one who can leap out of bed twenty minutes before I'm due to meet my guests for a game drive.

Setting my alarm for the seemingly indecent hour of 04h00 means that I'm not rushed. I can have an invigorating shower and enjoy the feeling of waking up with the birds. The dawn chorus of birds is something to be enjoyed and appreciated at every opportunity. Having had ample time to wake up and get ready at leisure, I believe a guide is much better prepared for the day, and in a more relaxed frame of mind, than if he/she stole an extra half an hour in bed and had to rush to be on time to meet guests.

As guides, we are all obviously passionate about the environment in which we are privileged to live and the game drive is rightly what we enjoy most about this line of work. Every guide who lasts a long time in this industry needs to also be genuinely passionate about people and sharing knowledge and experiences with his/her guests in such a way that the guide's passion and enthusiasm is infectious. Not every game drive is an action-packed, adrenalin-charged sequence of events. There is no doubt that many guides and guests want to see predators in action, or get a kick out of seeing the so-called "Big Five" in one game drive. Being a guide who is no longer a novice, I still get a huge thrill out of seeing guests enjoying themselves, particularly when they start taking a keen interest in the little things. Guests who were once not very interested in watching birds at all, have become avid birders. I love seeing them appreciate the things that I appreciate, whether it is a massive dead leadwood tree, a relaxed old elephant bull having a slow drink, a bee-eater feeding its mate or a nursery group of twenty baby impalas, all exuding freshness, innocence and curiosity.

The sounds and the smells are all very much part of the experience as well and it is so important to pause frequently to enjoy the sounds of the night, smell the damp grass and earth after a good rain and, gaze at the stars in sheer wonder at the enormity of it all. Finding fresh leopard tracks in wet sand is still a thrill to any guide and it is not difficult to involve the guests and get them to share in the excitement, hope and expectation.

There is just so much to share with guests, and once a guide has bonded with them and starts seeing everything through their eyes, the guide-guest relationship has the potential to become very meaningful indeed. There are often just not enough hours in the day to do everything you would like to do with your super-keen guests. For many, a trip to a game reserve is a once-in-a-lifetime experience and as guides we have the opportunity, the privilege and the responsibility of making it unforgettably special for our guests.

Very few careers can offer the variety that a guide gets to enjoy. Sure, the hours can be long at times, but when you're having fun, you hardly notice it. There is often an opportunity during the day to pull off the boots and take a half-hour cat nap. There has never yet been an occasion when I have not looked forward with eager anticipation to my next game drive. Of course it is not only the game drives that we look forward to, but the walks too, as they often offer better opportunities to focus on little treasures and allow time to get to know guests a little better. Joining guests for the occasional drink or meal is also a privilege which we guides enjoy and it gives the guests and their guide a great opportunity to chat about the day that they've experienced, or the one that they look forward to experiencing, together.

I have hardly scratched the surface, but if I had to cut it even shorter, I would conclude that the most brief answer to the question "What makes a Singita guide tick?" is "A passion for people, a passion for the environment, an insatiable desire to learn and a willingness to share with others what we enjoy". I sincerely hope that these attributes are still a part of my humble make-up and will continue to be for many more years. Guiding is, without a doubt, one of the most privileged careers. Any guide that feels differently should not be guiding.

Leon van Wyk, Assistant Head Guide - Singita Sabi Sand

RAVENSCOURT YOUNG MALE BECOMES INDEPENDENT

As the Ravenscourt female seems about to give birth to her 5th litter, it seems fitting to discuss the fate of her previous litter.



The deceased cub when 9 months old

Unfortunately, one of the cubs, also a male, was killed during July 2010 by an adult male leopard (see July 2010 guides' diary for details).

After this incident, there were intermittent sightings of the remaining 3 leopards, but from September 2010, the Xindzele male seemed to become completely independent and he hasn't been seen with the other two since. He was born in November 2007, so by September 2010 he was approaching 3 years of age, by which time he is definitely expected to have become independent. This male would often be seen calling and urine spraying, both signs of territoriality indicating that he is staking claim to a



From left to right, the Ravenscourt young male, the Xindzele male and the Ravenscourt female certain area. His territory seems to now be centred around an area to the west of the Singita property, where he is said to be the dominant male in the area and has asserted this fact through a couple of disputes. Unfortunately, this means that we haven't been seeing him as much as we used to, although we are still occasionally afforded this privilege.



The Xindzele male in all his glory

The Ravenscourt female and young male were still seen together on a regular basis up until her mating with the Khashane male in mid October 2010. After this separation they never seemed to rejoin and it was from around this time that there were intermittent sightings of the Ravenscourt young male attempting to hunt, a sure sign that he was fending for himself and no longer relying on his mother to provide him with kills.



Leopards are the only large cats that don't have any form of hunting training and so, when they become independent, they rely purely on instinct to learn to hunt. Lions will take their cubs to watch a hunt and cheetah will stun prey items and allow the cubs to practice their skills on these animals. A mother leopard, however, will leave her cubs at a place of safety, make a kill, and then return to collect the cubs and take them to feed allowing them no exposure to the hunt itself. This is therefore often a trying time for leopards and they often struggle to take down larger prey items. Being the resourceful animals they are, leopards will usually resort to smaller prey items while they sharpen their skills. The Ravenscourt young male was seen on more than one occasion hunting water monitor lizards in the Sand River.

The Ravenscourt young male 'posing' in a marula
Growing up to 3 metres long, these lizards provide a reasonable meal. He has also been seen on many occasions hunting dwarf mongooses. I wonder how coincidental it was that he became independent just a couple of weeks before the birth of the impala lambs, the first of which was seen on 10 November. This seemed to have been just the opportunity he was waiting for and he wasted no time learning the vulnerability of these young impala. He seems to have survived this baptism of fire and has never failed to look in great condition.

The Ravenscourt female seems to produce very photogenic offspring. Both the Xindzele male and Ravenscourt young male are beautiful specimens and are, I'm sure, becoming two of the most photographed leopards in the Sabi Sand if not globally.

This is a difficult time for a young male leopard, as hunting his own prey is not his only concern. Without his mother's protection and as he approaches sexual maturity, he will need to avoid potential conflict with the already well established territorial males in the area, which in the case of the Ravenscourt young male would likely be the Khashane male, the Othawa male and possibly even his brother, the Xindzele male.

I have yet to see the Ravenscourt young male scent marking or calling, which means that he is not claiming the area he is in as his own territory, but he is almost 1 year and 10 months old now, so it is likely that he will soon start looking to establish a territory. Unless he can displace an old male, which is a risky affair to say the least, he will most likely have to travel quite some distance to find a territory as the density of male leopards in this section of the property is currently very high.

In the mean time, it seems as if the Ravenscourt young male has adopted the area to the east of Boulders as his home and is often seen in the rocky outcrop known as Tavangumi koppies. Ironically this is where he was born and may be his final refuge before he wanders off in search of his own territory. Until then, however, we are enjoying the privilege of being able to view this beautiful and elegant cat at close

quarters and gain insight into the challenges that he faces on a daily basis as he approaches maturity.



James Crookes, Singita Sabi Sand

The Ravenscourt young male stalking around the Tavangumi koppies

GIANT PLATED LIZARD



Shelley Alkema, Singita Sabi Sand

I just adore this time of year when all creatures big and small emerge and behave in bizarre ways in response to so much heat and rain. Reptiles in particular are the perfect example of this as they are ectothermic, requiring external heat for their bodies to gain energy and reach the optimal temperature for moving about. They may do this by lying out in the sun or on a hot surface, however they risk exposing themselves to danger by doing so. During winter when it becomes dry and very cold at night, we see fewer of these fascinating, prehistoric creatures as they find some safe haven in which to protect themselves.

One such large reptile, the giant plated lizard (*Gerrhosaurus validus*), has often caught my attention yet it is seldom discussed due to its shyness and the speed at which it tends to disappear into the nearest crevice. I feel privileged to have had one reside in some large boulders outside my room for the past 2 years. This has given me the opportunity to carefully approach this

individual and study its body texture and shape, large ear openings with triangular tympanic shields, dark eyes and strong legs. The giant plated lizard is not only long, with a tail that extends its body length to around 30 cm, but it is also wide with a flattened head and body. You might say it is a rather robust, and therefore slow-moving, lizard with interesting brown and yellow scales giving it a speckled appearance.

The dry, horny skin of this reptile is modified into plates which prevents rapid water loss and allows it to live on dry land. As I mentioned earlier these lizards live in rocks and prefer the upper slopes of large granite outcrops. Here they have the shelter they require, as the lizard can wedge itself into large cracks by inflating its body. This habitat also provides them with their various food sources, including: invertebrates; vegetable matter such as flowers, leaves, figs and other soft fruits as well as other small reptiles including lizards and baby tortoises.



In midsummer the female will lay between 2 and 5 large, oval eggs in a soil-filled rock crevice that is warm and moist aiding in the incubation of the eggs. This is also well hidden and provides protection from predators. The hatchlings fend for themselves and grow quickly into their adult form.

While they are quick to dive between rocks when disturbed, they also have another form of defence called caudal autotomy. This means that they can shed their tail if caught from behind, giving them a second to escape predation. If they do happen to lose their tail, they have the capacity to regenerate a new tail.

I look forward to seeing more of my reptilian neighbour over the summer months and observing further interesting behaviour.

Shelley Alkema, Field guide – Singita Sabi Sand

AERIAL ASSAULTS

The arrival of summer induces a metamorphosis of the Bushveld. Dry, wilted vegetation transforms into a flush of green, young are born and water flows again. These are just a few of the drastic changes we experience. Something that is often overlooked is the awakening of seemingly dormant castles of sand, the termite mounds that are scattered throughout the property.

These structures are awoken by the drops of life necessary to entice the reproductive termite alates (more commonly known as “flying ants”) out of the safety of their almost impenetrable kingdom. Their time has come to venture out and embark on a dangerous journey in the hope of starting a kingdom of their own.



The danger comes in the form of a myriad creatures interested in these rich and nutritious snacks. Birds are especially fond of these termites and at a termite emergence one may expect to see, amongst others, barn swallows, lesser spotted

eagles, Walberg's eagles, steppe eagles, Amur falcons as well as numerous species of vultures.



Of the 950 odd birds occurring in South Africa, roughly 130 are migratory, returning for numerous reasons but mainly in search of their summer bounty, a buffet of insects. At Singita Sabi Sand, we have about 50 of these visitors, some coming from as far afield as Angola, Mediterranean Europe and even Russia. On the left, a flock of Amur falcons feast on a termite emergence. This meal is well deserved, especially seeing as they have come all the way from Siberia for it!

Scott Dyson, Field guide – Singita Sabi Sand



'Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth.'

Muhammad Ali

James Crookes
Singita Sabi Sand
Sabi Sand Private Game Reserve
South Africa
Thirty first of January 2011