

Singita Sabi Sand

Ebony & Boulders Lodges
Castleton House
South Africa

Singita

Wildlife Report

For the month of January, Two Thousand and Fourteen



Temperature

Average minimum: 18.0°C (64.4°F)
Average maximum: 30.0°C (86.0°F)
Minimum recorded: 12.0°C (53.6°F)
Maximum recorded: 39.0°C (102.2°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the period: 91 mm
For the year to date: 508 mm

The best time to come on safari is... Article by Dylan Brandt

Right now! The Sabi Sand Wildtuin is a special piece of land perfectly placed for exceptional game viewing all year round. One often hears that the best time to come on safari is in the winter. The bush will be dry so spotting animals will be easier, true. There is perennial water on the property where elsewhere water is scarce and the animals are drawn to these parts, true. But what about summer and the 'wetter' season?

To the west of the Sabi Sand Wildtuin lies the Drakensburg mountain range and it is this mountain range and the moist air blown over the warm Mozambique current off shore that creates an oasis below. When this moist air hits the mountain the air rises and condenses to form clouds, these clouds now full of moisture fall east of the mountains and release rain throughout the lowveld where we are, leaving much of the highveld a semi desert.



The moisture we receive in the wetter months creates a flush of new grass and tree growth in the area and when the dry season arrives there is still enough grazing for herds of buffalo up to a thousand and large herds of elephant, to name a few, and of course the predators in tow. This means there is little animal “migration” in the area because there is enough food all year round.

During the wetter months of summer herbivores like buffalo, zebra, wildebeest and impala give birth to take advantage of the greener period and predators take advantage of these birthing times. The bush is thicker in summer, yes, but we rely heavily on tracking so whether it is summer or winter, tracking is very important and takes a lot of luck out of the equation.



So whether you are on safari in the winter or in the summer there are many things to take advantage of at both these times of year.



Turn up the tension

Article by Ross Couper

The Selati male lions continue to reign supreme in the north and the west of Singita, even though they've lost one of their coalition members. Two of the Selati males moved south for a few days and they had a successful kill of a buffalo cow that they fed on for two days. Lions are the most visible, most gregarious and nosiest of all the cats. The patriarchs, regal with their large manes of hair as fragmented as dry grass, dominate the territories and invisible lines are drawn between prides.

As dawn broke across the grass plains we could hear distant roaring. After a few minutes it was evident that the roaring was coming from more than one lion. As we continued our route towards the sound we realised that the roars were further and further south, as if the two animals were moving very quickly. We eventually got sight of a

single male and in a zigzag motion he continued to mark his territory and emit short 'grunt roars'. A second male appeared and they both swiftly changed direction again, this time heading further east. We were now bordering the area where the Mashingalane male lions roam. In the distance we could see a third lion. Was this the battle that we had all been waiting for between the great coalitions of the east and the west?



The Mashingalane males currently out-number the Selati males by one, and are a force to be reckoned with. As we approached the single male we noticed that the Selati males had already attacked him, as there were bite wounds around his rump and close to his spine. It was also noted that he was younger and smaller despite his darkened mane of hair. The two Selati males approached the third male cautiously but valiant enough to have short bursts of charging the male lion into submission, and instinctively the single young male lion sat on his hindquarters and moved his body in a circular motion to protect his spine and rump area. Teeth were exposed in a fierce grimace towards the two male lions.

Within the short time that we saw this interaction several fights broke out between the three males and often with the two Selati males taking advantage of the fact that they could attack from various sides, keeping the single male lion at a disadvantage and inflicting more bite marks around his rump. After a couple of hours the three lions settled down and lay in the shade a short distance from each other.

The exertion of the fight had exhausted the males. The two males then stood up and walked off from the third male and headed back west roaring again as they moved through the long grass. The third male was identified as the Sparta male that had been seen on a few occasions with the Tsalala male. They both were initially seen on a wildebeest carcass and were later chased by a large herd of buffalo. The Tsalala male lion was much larger than the Sparta male.

The Sparta and Tsalala male lions had ventured from the south obviously in search of territory and we saw them on several occasions after the wildebeest carcass incident. They had disappeared for approximately two weeks since then.

Lions will often move in search of territory and one of the most vulnerable times is when they try and establish a territory of their own. Wounds are often inflicted around the rump from fights amongst males - these could be scratches or bite puncture wounds from the large canine teeth. At about five years of age a male lion has developed a thick mane of hair to protect their necks during fierce battles.

On the topic of lions and their injuries I have witnessed a female lion in Singita Kruger National Park survive with a broken front leg. A young male accompanied the female lion for the several months and she was dependent on the male for survival. They had been seen several kilometres to the west of the Singita concession in the Kruger National Park still moving together and the female was in good condition despite her now deformed leg.



Lions are resilient creatures and will often overcome injuries very quickly, particularly skin tears, puncture wounds or ligament tears. Lions are afforded the ability to rest for long periods and rely on the remaining pride members to hunt on their behalf. There is also an added advantage to being in a pride or a coalition - they will often mutually groom each other and during this bonding they'll clean a wound by instinctively licking it.

We returned later in the afternoon to the area where the Sparta male was lying in long grass, in the shade. Nearby was a small pool of water that had accumulated from the rain. He had been rolling in it and was lying on his back to avoid the flies from bothering his wounds. The following afternoon we found the male again in long grass, still lying on his back, but he had moved a considerable distance therefore his injury was not life-threatening. We stopped for a sundowner before deciding to return to the sighting. As we stood listening to the silence of the bush, we suddenly heard a lion roar just to the west of where we were standing approximately 200 metres in the bush.

As the light faded we all stood motionless with our binoculars to try and find the male. Finally he put his head up in the long grass. As the light faded we packed up our sundowners and decided to head back to lodge and not put unnecessary strain on the Sparta male that was not too far away from the roaring lion. The following day the Sparta male was seen still in the same position, but by the afternoon he'd gone and that's the last we've seen of him.

Feathered fight Article by François Fourie

It was a cool overcast morning with a few stagnant mud puddles in the roads. Now usually when you see these puddles you always try and look for specific animals like terrapins and frogs enjoying the small aquatic habitat that has been created, but on this day what we found was completely opposite and something that I have never seen before. We came around the corner and found two Wahlberg's eagles (*Aquila wahlbergi*) on the ground, talons grasped in a tight squeeze, in the middle of a mud puddle!

Initially we thought it was part of a mating ritual but after observing the behaviour we saw that they were fighting quite fiercely with one individual definitely having the upper hand, constantly pecking aggressively at the chest of the other and pulling out his feathers.

These eagles are quite territorial and reuse the same nest almost every year, so I think that maybe a younger male was trying to take over the area but came off second best. We watched this go on for about 20 minutes and then, in an instant, they released their hold and the larger eagle took off in flight.

Unfortunately for the other individual it looked like it had quite a bad injury to its left wing and was not able fly off. We watched how this eagle hopped off into the thickets, not knowing what his fate might be.



More than meets the eye

Article by Daniella Kueck

One very warm summer's afternoon, whilst enjoying the company of four sleepy lions, we noticed something off to the right hand side of the vehicle. To my pleasant surprise we discovered a tiny female chinspot batis (*Batis molitor*) sitting comfortably on her nest, roughly three metres away from the vehicle. On closer inspection, we could see how she had used bits of spiders' web, as well as twigs and leaves to form a perfect little bowl in which to incubate her eggs.



These birds form monogamous pairs and have a distinct call which can often be heard around the lodges or out on drive. Close quarter territories with other chinspot batis pairs, results in more frequent vocalizing of territorial pairs.

The female has a brown spot on her chin, which differentiates her from the male (black spot), who couldn't have been too far away. These little 12 cm birds will often take turns incubating the eggs, giving the other one some time to forage for insects within their territory. They are strictly insectivorous, and forage with a very erratic flight pattern and a lot of 'wing-fripping', which encourages their prey to be flushed out of hiding.

They need to be careful about leaving their nest unattended or else it could fall victim to a brood parasite, specifically the Klaas's cuckoo. Klaas's cuckoos play no role in the parental care of their own offspring. Instead they lay their eggs in the nest of another bird, one species being the batis. When they lay their eggs, they will evict the batis' eggs to make space for theirs. The male and female batis are often unaware of what has happened because the cuckoo's eggs resemble the batis', only slightly bigger. The batises and will continue to raise the cuckoo chicks as if they are their own!



Predator fascination

Article by Leon Van Wyk

Something which I have observed throughout my guiding career is a phenomenon which I like to call 'predator fascination'. A large number of species exhibit behaviour which is characteristic of predator fascination. Even we as humans experience the feeling. The majority of our guests feel more drawn towards a predator than towards a herbivore, and even some guides in the industry show a tendency to focus their attention more on carnivores than on herbivores.

Out in the wild, the phenomenon is evident among a multitude of species, from the smallest birds to the largest land mammals. Next time you are out on a game drive or a walk, look for evidence of predator fascination. If a leopard is walking along a road, not actively hunting, and is spotted by a herd of impala, it is more likely than not, that the impalas will snort their alarm at the leopard, but will also follow the leopard, for some distance, keeping their eye on the predator to see where it goes. They stretch their necks out, open their eyes wide, and are clearly fascinated by the predator, knowing it to be dangerous to them. Vervet monkeys in trees will also get extremely excited if they see a leopard nearby, especially if the leopard is active. Even if the leopard is showing no intention whatsoever of hunting the monkeys, they keep uttering their chattering alarm calls, until they lose sight of the leopard.



If a snake is seen moving through the branches of a tree, and is spotted by birds, these birds are certain to utter their own alarm calls, and also determinedly mob the snake. Other birds in the area, clearly fascinated by the possibility of seeing a predator, will congregate in the immediate area, and add their own particular versions of abusive vocal assault to the snake. A slender mongoose might attract similar hostile attention from whatever birds might be in the immediate area.

If an elephant bull approaches a water hole, and sees a buffalo bull lying peacefully nearby, he is most likely going to pay little attention to the buffalo. If, however, there are a couple of lions lying close to the water hole, the elephant is not likely to ignore them – he is far more likely to advance aggressively towards the lions, letting them know in no uncertain terms that they are not welcome.

An eagle, such as a Wahlberg's eagle, perched on the upper branches of a dead tree, will frequently attract the attention of smaller birds, one of which is likely to be a fork-tailed drongo. Drongos are very plucky birds, with the confidence and fearlessness of a Jack Russell. They will repeatedly swoop down and mob the eagle, sometimes pecking it on top of the head! If the eagle eventually decides that it has had enough of being abused, it is likely

to fly off, but the harassment does not end here... the drongo continues to pursue the eagle in flight, almost 'riding on its back' as it takes the attack to a new level, constantly using obscene bird language as it drives the unwanted predator further and further away.

Almost any predator, when it exposes itself out in the open, is likely to draw the attention of some or other creature that is fascinated by it. Most creatures that are fascinated by predators don't keep quiet about the fact that they've just seen a predator. Guides and trackers use this fact to great advantage, as by following up on the alarm calls or signs of animals that have seen a predator, they greatly increase their own chance of finding such predators.

Next time you see a major predator that is active, whether it be a cheetah, leopard or lion, look around you to see what other creatures might be fascinated by it. Also listen for agitated sounds or alarm calls, even of birds which might have seen the predator. If you see nothing or hear nothing out of the ordinary, you might think for a moment that this 'predator fascination' story is a lot of nonsense. Oh, yes? Pause for a moment longer. You are watching the predator, aren't you? Why? Predator fascination, of course!



Singita's boulder-hopping leopard

Article by Jon Morgan



The monkeys were alarm calling during high tea at Boulders Lodge. After closer inspection Leon, the assistant head ranger, saw a glimpse of a leopard walking on the northern bank of the Sand River, which runs in front of the lodge. It was the Nyaleti male - a male leopard who we often see on Singita's property and he is in his prime and in the process of staking his territory.

Our guests were intrigued, as they hadn't seen a leopard yet. Leon and I decided to cross the river at a place called Pios' Crossing to get onto the northern bank of the river, and follow up on the leopard. Leon crossed first and as I went in behind him, I stopped briefly to show my guests the hippos. All of a sudden one of my guests

said, "Look! There's a leopard!" and sure enough, the Nyaleti male had made his way up the bank of the river and appeared in front of us. He casually walked along the bank until he reached a couple of big boulders. Instead of walking around them, he promptly hopped from boulder to boulder all the way across the river to the other side. (Watch the video - <http://youtu.be/jMxeZEGjdQ>) We followed him slowly for about five minutes before a herd of impala struck his interest. We stopped and watched from a distance as he stalked the herd.



After 20 minutes of sitting in a thick bush, sneaking closer and closer, he disappeared from our sight and went into a dry riverbed. While one of the other guides was following him, they noticed a second leopard in the area, a female leopard nicknamed the Xikavi female (pronounced Shi-ka-vi), and she was heading south. They crossed paths within four metres of each other and didn't seem to acknowledge one another. The Nyaleti male made his way north and started stalking another herd of impala. We decided to follow him as he looked like he was seriously on the hunt this time.

Eventually his cover was broken and he was seen, the impalas alarm called and the entire herd bolted into a clearing. Having had no luck, for the second time round, the Nyaleti male made his way to a large termite mound and collapsed under a giant jackalberry tree and appeared to lose all interest in hunting.

He settled down and started grooming himself for a while when all of a sudden he sat bolt upright, glanced over his shoulder and broke cover. He shot off across the clearing and ran past our vehicle at high speed. Not knowing what had startled him, we all sat on the vehicle wondering what all the fuss was about. It wasn't as if he was stalking impala or chasing them as the herd was far from him by now. Seconds later, another big male leopard called the Dewane male burst out of the bush and came thundering after him, chasing him across the clearing. The Nyaleti male gapped it at high speed and covered all the ground that took him five minutes before in a record speed of about a minute and a half! We managed to catch a glimpse of him boulder-hopping back across the river to safety. As soon as he got onto the other side, he crouched in the long reeds, peered back over the whole expanse of the river with big round eyes and kept an eye on his much bigger rival.

So there we had it, the Nyaleti male, who is about five and a half years old – so he's a big male, being chased by the Dewane male, a bigger territorial male, and the Xikavi female who happened to be in the same vicinity and managed to evade any encounters with both males. It seems it might be a while still until the Nyaleti male can challenge the Dewane male's territory.

Establishing territory

Article by Ross Couper

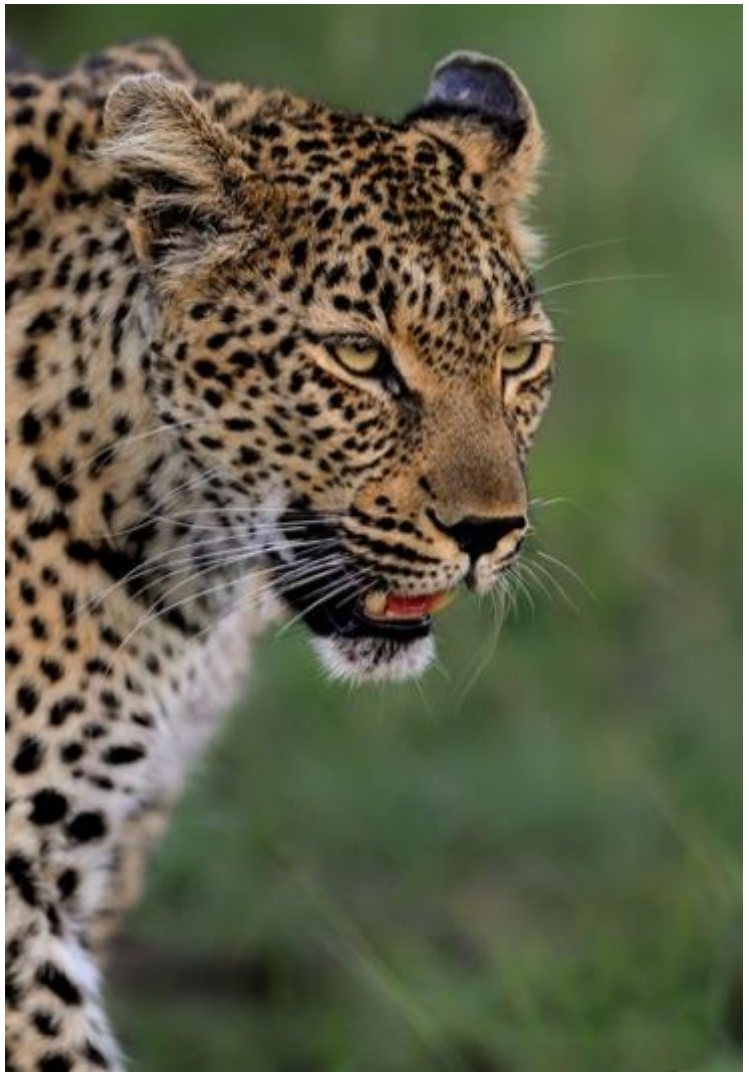
The Hlabankunzi female leopard has been visiting the perimeter around the lodges frequently.

Since the passing of the resident Ravenscourt female leopard, her territory was available to any leopards of the area. The two most prominent leopards that currently visit here are the Hlabankunzi and Xikhavi females.

The last few months have been busy for the Hlabankunzi female after her mating antics with the Kashane male and the Nyaleti male leopards on various occasions. It definitely looks like she may be pregnant and she has been scouting around the rocky outcrops close to the lodge in search of a prospective den site.

The rocky outcrops close to lodge, have many caves and crevices that would be ideal for a leopard. The Ravenscourt female leopard utilized the outcrops on numerous occasions with her litters, so it's proven to be suitable and a successful breeding location.

As loyal subjects we wait to see which princess will take up the crown of our fallen queen.





Who would have thought that we would be describing a relaxing beverage as a 'downer' as if we have to drink as quickly as we can as not to miss out on any potential sightings? Could this be where it originated? I doubt it, as anyone would agree that this is the second best part of the day, the best part being sunrise. There is always an eloquent beauty when describing a sunrise, but a sundowner is sultry and a time in the day when everything settles down to rest itself for the following day.

A sundowner, in colloquial British English, is an alcoholic drink taken after completing the day's work, usually at sundown. The sundowner has been referenced in literature since the 1950s.

The most common sundowner drink is the gin and tonic with a slice of lemon or lime. Interestingly limes and other citrus fruit have been used by the Royal Navy for the prevention of scurvy since the mid-18th century. This may have been the reason why we all drink gin and tonics with a slice of lime. It was noted that lime was used by Mexicans to wipe the edge of their glasses or beer bottles to avoid flies from sitting on the mouth of the drinking glass or bottle.

Recently we put a twist on the old favourite sundowner by adding a cucumber to the gin and tonic. Being out in the bush we are often reminded to try something different and add new memories to a guest's experience.

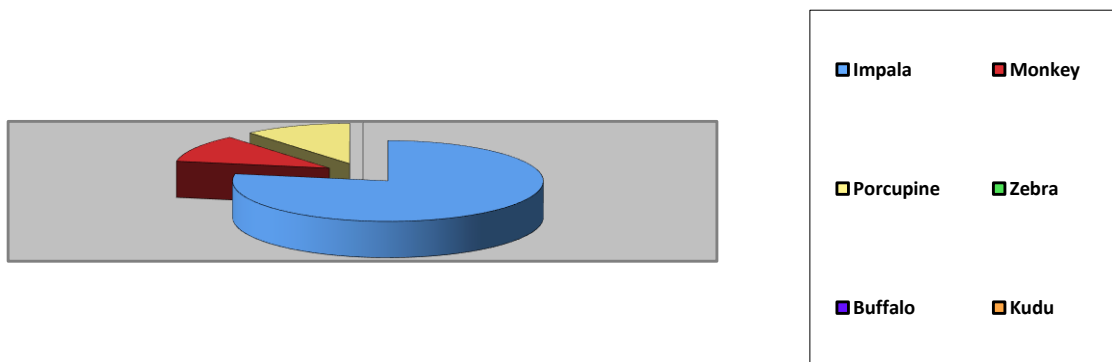
Peaceful sitting watching the sun setting, as the sky illuminates in various colours and listening to the sounds of the bush is the best way to experience the sundowner first hand. A sundowner is a time to reflect on the afternoon's sightings and interesting interpretations that we may have come across during the drive or walk. A time to rejuvenate and, of course, quench your thirst, whilst taking in the sights and sounds around you.

	Lion	Leopard	Reedbuck	Cheetah	Elephant	Buffalo	Wild dog	Hyena
No. of sightings	37	79	N/A	25	107	66	13	18

Statistical analysis:

- Lion sightings: Sightings are down by 40% this month; this is possibly due to the new boundaries being drawn between the coalitions and the skirmish that ensued earlier in the month. No one knows who is in charge of this area!
- Leopard sightings: Nice improvement from last month, up by 4 sightings. The good news is the tolerance levels of the Mobeni female towards the vehicles' presence as she used to be very nervous. Her change in behaviour may be due to the absence of the Ravenscourt female's presence. The Hlabankunzi and Xikhavi females have provided great viewing over the course of the month.
- Reedbuck sightings: None officially recorded this month, conditions are tough to view them currently.
- Elephant sightings: Slightly down from December figures. There was a dip mid-month where we didn't have any elephants around, but as the marulas ripened in the area, they came flooding back.
- Buffalo sightings: Buffalo viewing remains consistent, almost exact number of sightings as last month. The big herds are always so special to see.
- Cheetah sightings: The big news for the month! The sightings have increased threefold this month. At one point, we had 5 different individual cheetahs seen on the property, in one drive.
- Wild dog sightings: Considering the time of the year, the dog viewing has been great. Up from 3 sightings last month to 13 this month.
- Hyena: First month that their figures have been included into this report, thus difficult to compare figures. Next month will be a better reflection when we are able to draw comparisons.

Kill analysis



January highlights:

There have been some unusual events this month. The first event was of two adult male kudu bulls who found themselves in a bit of a twist! We presume that these two males were fighting and due to the shape of their horns, managed to get themselves interlocked and unable to separate. I have observed evidence of this occurrence during my guiding career but never witnessed it first-hand.

The second event was just as astounding. A pack of wild dogs were out hunting and brought down an impala very close to a waterhole. Suddenly a hippopotamus charged out the water, chased the dogs away and receded into the water with the kill. The hippo then proceeded to consume the remains of the kill, in the water and the dogs were left looking on. I think they are still as astounded by this as we are.

There are a few female leopards wandering around with very pregnant tummies and scouting out potential lairs within our property. Hopefully the February report will be able to shed some more light on this!

The Selati male lions encountered the Tsalala and Sparta male lions. The Sparta male hasn't been seen for a few days, he had sustained a few injuries but we trust he is doing well and just keeping a low profile of late.

The good news is that a female cheetah and her two sub-adult cubs have returned to the property. The adult female joined up with an adult male cheetah. They were observed mating – not something I can say I had ever seen before but hopefully it means there are new cubs on the way! If this is the start for 2014, it is going to be a bumper year!



Photographs on location by Ross Couper, François Fourie and Jon Morgan
Singita Ebony and Boulders Lodge
Sabi Sand
South Africa
Thirty-first of January 2014