



(Photo by Phillip Warth)

## Wildlife Report

For the month of March, Two Thousand and Fourteen

### Temperature

Average minimum:	21,4°C (70,5°F)
Average maximum:	31,2°C (88,1°F)
Minimum recorded:	18,7°C (65,6°F)
Maximum recorded:	35,2°C (95,3°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the period:	113,0 mm
For the year to date:	471,0 mm

### Spillage!

It happened on 21 March after a 13-year absence. A downpour of 51 mm in two hours made our full-to-the-brim dam spill its contents in the early afternoon. There was much excitement and celebration after all the will-it or won't-it anticipation, and to see the cascade of white water fill the Nyamasikana riverbed below filled our hearts with awe and gratitude.

This little fellow looked very grateful that I didn't tread on him - I'd been following in the footsteps - literally of one of our scouts as we tracked a black rhino, and as I was about to place my foot down in the disturbed soil I saw this smiley face peering at me.

Contrary to popular belief many frogs and toads don't live in and around permanent water. Some complete their entire lifecycle on land, while others migrate long distances to reach water during the breeding season. Those that live in suitable soil make burrows and construct tunnels by digging backwards into the soil. Another astonishing fact is that toads can live for 40 years!





## New best friends



Both these sets of scamps looked like twins at first glance, but I'm sure they aren't.

It is quite common for elephants, giraffes, impalas and many other herd animals to group their youngsters together and take turns to babysit them. They're kept out of harm's way and are allowed to learn the ways of the wild under the watchful eye of their guardian. Of course, there is nothing better than to play and explore with a best friend who is your same age and size...

Long may these friendships last!





## Portraits in the wild



You have little choice but to look up to giraffes, and the bush track lent great perspective too.



These belligerent old buffalo bulls are what grass-fed free-range prime beef looks like to lions.



Try to place the focus point on an animal's eye. This elephant has chestnut eyes ringed with blue.



The impala rut intensifies at the time of Easter. Look at the muscular strength of this ram's neck.



## Observing animal behaviour

If time is on your side, and I certainly hope it is on your next safari, ask your guide if there's the opportunity to spend an hour or two observing a breeding herd of elephants. You'll be guaranteed of an entertaining spectacle, as there are always family dynamics at play.

This newest member of the herd bravely approached his brother and desperately tried to copy his trunk-twisting technique of feeding on the lush green grass.







## The court jesters of Pamushana

If Singita Pamushana were a palace - and it is often described as such, the dassies would be the court jesters. They pose, prance and tumble about on the rocks, the roof and in the trees as you dine on the deck, and are always amusing. The young one in the second photograph insisted on climbing up this delicate sapling to nibble on the new succulent leaves, but its weight would only allow it so far.

We see two types of dassie here, the rock dassie (*Procavia capensis*) and the yellow-spotted rock dassie (*Heterohyrax brucei*). Both species live in colonies, share rocky shelters and browse a variety of plants.

'Pamushana' means 'place in the sun' and situated on a rocky sandstone outcrop it shares this ideal location with dassies. Dassies enjoy basking in the heat but always need to be on the lookout for aerial predators in the form of eagles. As such, they have highly modified eyes that allow them to look directly at the sun. This is possible because of an eyelid-like membrane in the eye known as an 'umbraculum' that acts as an umbrella or pair of sunglasses. Also, the pupil of the eye is kidney-shaped and orientated horizontally with the concave edge on the top.

Dassies have a wide range of calls, and we've learnt to identify some of them at the lodge. A distinct one is a whistle that warns of the presence of eagles - and it's quite different to the one that warns of terrestrial predators.





## The Princes of Pamushana

If the dassies are the court jesters of the palace then these two must be the young princes. Their fresh and crispy tracks joined the path I was driving on and lent an invisible frisson of excitement to the morning. I knew they couldn't be far away, but the bush is thick at the moment and x-ray vision is needed. A hundred metres or so later their tracks left the road, but we continued slowly scanning the area, and a few minutes later we saw them resting on a throne of green.

Both these male lions are young and approaching their prime. As full-grown adults with big manes they'll each weigh in the region of 250 kg (550 lb) - that's about the weight of three medium-sized men combined. Their battle scars are few and far between, but I suspect that won't be for long. They are most likely to be brothers from the same litter and have formed a coalition to try and become the dominant breeding males of a territory. To do this they'll need to challenge the current title deed holders and this invariably ends in a scar-inducing fight. In the wild, males seldom live longer than 10 years, as injuries sustained from continual fighting with rival males greatly reduce their longevity.

It wasn't lionesses or territorial males on their







mind this morning though, it was a meal. They were resting, but not sleeping, and keeping a keen eye and ear on the movement of plains game in the distance. Later that day they'd disappeared, but I suspect that they'd hidden themselves deep within a thicket and were waiting to stage an ambush that evening.

It is very concerning to learn about the decreasing populations of wild lions, canned lion hunting and the spine-chilling use of lion bones in Chinese medicine. The lion is a Vulnerable species, having seen a major population decline in its African range. A Vulnerable species is one which has been categorised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as likely to become Endangered unless the circumstances threatening its survival and reproduction improve.







## Ant lion avalanche

Antlions are one of the 'Little 5' but are just as clever and ferocious as their 'Big 5' counterparts.

The adult form looks like a dainty dragonfly but the larval form is completely different - it looks like a bug with a rounded abdomen and wide pincer-like mouthparts.

The conical pits you see here are made by the predatory antlion larvae. They circle backwards and drill down into the soft sand. Then they hide just beneath the surface of the soil at the bottom of the pit and anchor themselves with their backward facing body hairs.

Should a hapless ant come ambling along, chances are good that it will walk over the edge of a pit and then tumble down in the ensuing avalanche. At this point the antlion leaps up and flicks sand over the struggling ant to further impair its escape. Then it grabs the ant, sinks in its hypodermic needle-like mouthparts and sucks out the ant's body fluids!

At the risk of being accused of dishing out TMI (too much information) another disturbing fact is that antlions only defecate once in their lives! In its larval state it has no anus. After it pupates the constipated critter drops a stored faecal pellet, but never does so again as the adult form does not feed.



The clouds were steely blue just before the storm broke and the most beautiful light bathed these waterbuck.



## Tree ID



This striking example of a pod mahogany (*Afzelia quanzensis*) grows on the edge of our private Lone Star airstrip, providing a dense umbrella-like canopy of shade for us when we await the arrival of a charter flight.

Alongside this photo is a close up of one of the large flattened pods. They ripen to thick, woody brown and burst open to reveal shiny black seeds with a bright red aril. The seeds make beautiful beads for necklaces. Another interesting human use of this tree is found in the roots - these can be used to treat eye ailments, bilharzia and pneumonia.



The ideal place for a nyala berry (*Xanthocercis zambesiaca*) to grow is the riverine habitat along rivers. The tree has a massive trunk that look like many stems buttressed together, and has sprays of leaves growing low down, directly from the trunk. The green berry-like fruit turns yellowish-brown when ripe. It is eaten by birds, monkeys, baboons, elephants and antelope, including nyalas - hence its common name. We can also eat the berries and they're used to make porridge when dried.

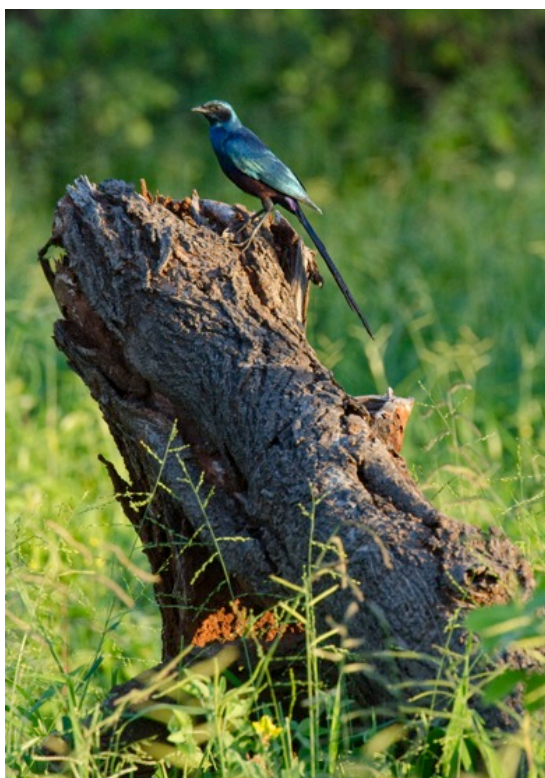


## All a twitter: Perching



coloured, striking bird, predominantly carmine in colour, but with the crown and undertail coverts blue.

Reed comorants (*Phalacrocorax africanus*) prefer to fish in shallow water and catch fish, frogs, crustaceans, aquatic insects and molluscs. Their feathers are less water-repellent than those of ducks because they need to dive for their prey and, as such, they like to perch somewhere and spread their wings to the sun or breeze to dry them.



This iridescent Meve's starling (*Lamprotornis mevesii*) had to take to a perch to do its hunting. Usually they do most of their foraging for insects on the ground, often following elephants to catch their prey as they are disturbed by the large pachyderms. However, the grass is so long at the moment that this starling couldn't see any insects scuttling about on the ground and would have been at risk of being preyed upon by a bird-eating predator if it waded through the grass.

These starlings are particularly eye-catching with their long tails and glossy feathers, and make lovely photographic subjects when the light falls on them at a certain angle - and if they stay still for long enough...

Southern carmine bee-eaters (*Merops nubicoides*) are particularly close to our hearts because it is here in Zimbabwe that this intra-African three-phase migratory species chooses to breed. They make their nests at the ends of 1-2 m long burrows in an earthen bank, and lay from 2-5 eggs.

They roost communally and disperse widely during the day where they hawk flying insects, especially bees, from a perch.

This species, like other bee-eaters, is a richly





"Thank you for an unforgettable vacation. What a special property - so many animals, excellent food and top-notch rooms. It was a great adventure for our family!"

*The Pedrero family, San Francisco, California*

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