

Singita *Kruger National Park*
Lebombo & Sweni Lodges
South Africa

Singita



Wildlife Journal

For the month of December, Two Thousand and Fourteen

Temperature

Average Minimum: 20.7°C (69.2°F)
Average Maximum: 30.4°C (86.7°F)
Minimum recorded: 15°C (59°F)
Maximum recorded: 36°C (96.8°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the period: 155.5 mm
For the year to date: 471.5 mm

Almost 100 mm of rain was recorded over the three days from 26th to 28th December. On 27th December the Sweni River went over at the confluence, followed by the N'wanetsi River the next day. Gudzane Dam is full and Xhikelengane drainage has water scattered along its course. The burnt areas have recovered and are looking good and general wildlife has flocked back.

Shishangaan Pride homecoming



The large Shishangaan Pride has made a long awaited return to the concession! For the last few months, following the fires, the pride had been non-existent and majority of our lions' sightings had been that of the Mountain Pride, further north. When the rains finally came and the burnt areas started to green up and teem with wildlife, the lions were caught on the wrong side of the now-flowing N'wanetsi River and it wasn't possible to cross safely at Gudzane stream with their cubs.

Shortly after, and seemingly out of nowhere, lion tracks were seen around the central parts of the concession! The previous day we had seen four of the dominant males further north of this location. Upon investigation, we stumbled upon a magnificent sighting of 21 lions (and this isn't even the full complement of the Shishangaan Pride)! Five lionesses with 16 cubs of varying ages and sizes were seen, including the white lion cub, which looks slightly dirty, but is growing well and thriving. This leaves five lionesses unaccounted for, some of which should have cubs! With the pride having successfully hunted and fed where there is so much plains game, we hope that they will stay on the western side of the concession.

So far the Shishangaan Pride has been seen much further south of the concession than we have ever known them to be, which means with the dominant males around, there is a definite shift in territory. This is because the lionesses with cubs need to be as close to the central parts of their territories as possible and thus avoid the chance of encountering any nomadic male lions that would try to hurt or kill the cubs.



Rhino approach on foot

It's an incredible experience to drive around a reserve and view the wildlife, but there is something altogether different and very special about walking in the bush and approaching a dangerous animal on foot. When guests, who have never been on a safari before, are asked whether they would like to approach a dangerous animal on foot, they often hesitate when the safety of the vehicle is no longer an option.

As a guide, I explain to guests that if they listen to every word I tell them when walking, they have no reason to fear. I check which way the wind is blowing, so that we can walk in the direction that best masks our scents. We need to have adequate cover to hide behind should a rhino come charging towards us, although this is quite unlikely. I then cover the ground rules with my guests about walking in single file - the shortest person in front and the tallest at the back. This is so that I can see all their faces and be able to communicate with each of them. I tell them to keep their hands by their sides, in case they should trip. It is emphasised that there is absolutely no talking whilst walking – this is so that the guide and tracker leading the group, can listen whether there are any animals ahead and react quickly if need be. We give hand signals and I tell guests to click their fingers should they need to get my attention. When I put myself into guests' shoes, I suddenly realize their thoughts and questions!



“This guide has a large, scary rifle! Is it enough? Can he handle it correctly? What if the rhino crushes him?”

The burnt grass below your feet crunches and you walk quietly, as you've been told to do. Then you become aware of a rhino's tracks on the ground! The guide points this out to the group and you take note of the size of that foot! The guide then tells everyone to stop. When you're walking in the bush and there's the anticipation of seeing a rhino, you're taking in a lot of information from the environment – both visually and audibly - the smells of wet grass, rhino dung and the sweat on your shirt - everything makes you realise what an intense experience this is. At the same time though, you remain focused and keep alert, listening, watching the others and looking for the animal. As you continue walking, you don't realize how quickly time goes by. Then the guide lifts his hand to tell you to stop, he points to his mouth to silence you and then to his eyes, signaling you to look ahead. In the distance there is what appears to be a big, grey rock lurking from behind the bushes - and then you realize that it's the rear end of a rhino less than 30 metres away! Your heart starts pumping and the adrenalin courses through your veins! The guide and tracker give you the signal to come over to them and they position you on the edge of cover with an amazing view of the rhino, and the guide whispers that you can take a photo.

The rhino standing in front of you weighs approximately one ton and has a horn, which is almost half a metre long, on the end of its nose. The rhino's hide is covered in mud and its ears are flicking back and forth listening for any danger. Its head sways from side to side slowly, enjoying the gentle breeze and it is completely unaware of your presence. The guide indicates that you are to get up slowly and back away quietly from the rhino. You walk back to the vehicle feeling in complete awe of this amazing experience!

Kruger's colourful flowers

Most guests' expectations of the colours they will see when on safari in Kruger National Park are generally dull versions of grey, green and brown - typical khaki, bush colours. I think this stems from the many documentaries filmed in East Africa, where the grass is dismal brown and only ankle height and this is thought to be the norm wherever there are wild animals. Fortunately with our flora, this is certainly not the case and at this time of the year especially, the bush is incredibly vibrant. Lush green grass appears almost electric and adds to the wonderful diversity of wild flowers that are currently in bloom. In South Africa there are approximately 20 000 different wild flowers and these make up as much as ten percent of the entire world's flowering plant species. These flowers are found in all shapes, sizes and colours and we have seen and captured these beautiful blooms in our concession following the rains.



Blue plumbago - *Plumbago auriculata*



Wild parasol flower – *Karomia speciosa*

Plumbago auriculata - *Plumbago* (Latin) for lead – it is believed that this plant could heal lead poisoning; *auriculata* – is an ear like appendage and refers to the leaf base.

Karomia speciosa - *Karomia* – named after Karon in Vietnam where the first species of this genus was found; *speciosus* means showy and spectacular with reference to the flowers.



Common bride's bush – *Pavetta gardeniifolia*



Yellow mouse whiskers – *Cleome angustifolia*

Pavetta gardeniifolia - *Pavetta* is derived from the word 'pawetta', which is the Sinhalese vernacular name for a small tree species found along the Malabar Coast in India; *gardeniifolia* (Latin) relates to the leaves which are said to resemble those of the genus *Gardenia*.

Cleome angustifolia – *Cleome* refers to strong-smelling herbaceous plants; *angustifolia* means narrow leaves.



Poison apple – *Solanum panduriforme*



Sickle bush – *Dichrostachys cinerea*

Solanum panduriforme - *Solanum* – (Latin) meaning nightshade; *panduriforme* means shaped like a fiddle and makes reference to the shape of the leaves.

Dichrostachys cinerea - *Dichrostachys* (Greek) *dis* meaning two, *chroos* means colour and *stachys* means spike, the flower have two different coloured spikes; *cinerea* means ash coloured and refers to the bark of the tree on which these flowers are found.



Swazi impala lily - *Adenium swazicum*



String of stars – *Heliotropium steudneri*

Adenium swazicum - *Adenium* – means glandular enlargement, *swazicum* refers to the plant being native to Swaziland.

Heliotropium steudneri - *Helios* - the sun, *trope* - alludes to an old disproved idea that the flower heads followed the sun; *Steudneri* named after H.Steudner, a botanist who collected in Ethiopia.

Game viewing

- Lion:** A total of 41 sightings – 33 of which were the Mountain Pride, who had been seen with two separate buffalo kills as well as a giraffe and warthog kills; the Shishangaan Pride were seen six times during the month and successfully killed and fed on both a wildebeest and a giraffe.
- Leopard:** A total of 28 sightings - the Xhikelengane female was seen around Dumbana Pools as well as Xhingwenyana crossing. It is possible that she is searching for a mate, as she appears to have lost her three cubs we had previously seen. The Tingala female has been around the southern areas close to the lodge and should be mature enough now to be looking for a male. The Ndlovu and N'wanetsi males were found along the river close to the lodge. There was a surprise sighting of an unknown female with two cubs in the Nyokene area. Despite being skittish around vehicles, she has been seen on two separate impala kills.
- Cheetah:** A total of 24 sightings - Two females both with two cubs each have been seen regularly around the depression and golf course clearing. Impala lambing season is just in time for the older pair of cubs to start learning to hunt. A young male cheetah has been seen in Mozambique and around the depression. He appears to have an injury to his right back leg.
- Elephant:** A total of 68 breeding herd sightings and 21 bull sightings – the elephant herds are everywhere but since the rainy season, our sightings of them have fluctuated. There are days where finding elephants can be difficult but then there are other times when we have as many as five herds sightings. There is a big tusker that we have seen in the north around the Xhikelegane and Nyaleti areas.
- Buffalo:** A total of 36 breeding herd sightings and 11 bull sightings. A big herd of about 150 animals was only seen once at big view hill. Buffalo bulls are found mostly around two pans on Mbatsane and along the fence close to Pan link.
- General:** There is a hyena clan that has been seen regularly around warthog pan. It is possible that they are establishing a den site in the area.



Articles and photos by Nick du Plessis,
Barry Peiser & Deirdre Opie
Singita Kruger National Park
South Africa
Thirty-first of December 2014