



Wildlife Journal

For the month of April, Two Thousand and Fifteen

Temperature

Average minimum:	19,1°C (66,3°F)
Minimum recorded:	16,8°C (62,2°F)
Average maximum:	30,9°C (87,4°F)
Maximum recorded:	36,8°C (98,2°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month:	33,5 mm
For the year to date:	155,0 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise	06:10
Sunset	17.30

Every month is best for something in the bush, and my personal favourites are the 'A's' - April and August. They're the milder change-of-season months when the weather and landscape seem to be at their most beautiful transitions. This month was characterised by luxurious warm days, and with only a couple of hours of light drizzle.

The highlights for the month were many, especially for those on the high protein, low carb. diet:



We watched a female cheetah chase and kill an impala, and then saw her and her female cub feasting on the spoils. A coalition of male cheetahs provided a memorable, if not rather sensitive, sighting - more about that later...



Seven lions have provided memories to last a lifetime - a pride of two adult lionesses, two sub-adults and three cubs. A drive on the final morning of a group's stay ended with two adult male lions and two lionesses hunting a waterbuck, which they missed by a whisker!



Excellent news is that a pack of 14 wild dogs are still being seen on the reserve. One morning they set their sights a little too high on an eland, but ended up killing something much smaller. We couldn't see what it was but were lucky enough to see a couple of very bloody adults return to the rest of the pack and the wonderful 'begging' ceremony that took place as the adults regurgitated the meat for the others.



There've been glimpses of leopards, the exception being a handsome male posing on a rock for an extensive photo shoot.



The hyena den-site on the road close to the lodge is STILL active, and five cubs can be spotted up to mischief, close to home.

Those that eat their greens were also in abundance as the grass is drying out quickly and they're congregating in the pockets of vegetation that are still lush.



We've been seeing some large herds of buffalo congregating at waterholes. There was a herd of over 150 drinking at the most active pan in the central area, and later in the month guests enjoyed watching about 400 buffalo grazing east of Whata Pan.



Singita Pamushana is one of the few properties in the world where you have a chance of seeing majestic sable antelopes. This month's sable highlights included a beautiful breeding herd drinking at Nduna Dam, and a small herd of about eight sable with calves returning to their preferred grasslands in the east.



The elephant sightings have been exceptional as there is an abundance of these animals about. We had to wait patiently for a breeding herd of more than 50 elephants with their little ones that blocked our main access roads as they went about their leisurely way. There's also been lots of activity with bulls and breeding herds drinking, swimming, mud bathing, rubbing and scratching.



Thanks to the protection that our rhino population is afforded, guests are very likely to see one of these endangered animals during their stay. A group of visitors were fortunate enough to spend uninterrupted time with a crash of 12 white rhinos this month.



We always see a pod of hippos when we're out on the boat - you can even spot them from the lodge deck using the telescope, but a highlight one night this week was when three tip-toed along the West Valley Road on a feeding foray.

There are a variety of activities to do between or instead of game drives, for those who have done enough relaxing and unwinding.



We've had some perfect conditions for fishing. One afternoon guests netted a total of 13 bream plus a few tigerfish. Thereafter sundowners were enjoyed on the water with great birding opportunities, as always. Our guests also enjoyed visits to Kambako Living Museum of Bushcraft, and came away with the ancient knowledge of bows and arrows, making fire from sticks and learning how to grind millet grain.

A real treat for the guides is when we see something unusual, special or rare for this area. This month's most talked about moments were:



- The porcupine scuttling down Croc Creek Road.
- The giant eagle owl hooting at us on our way home.
- The two metre African rock python crossing the road.
- An African wildcat (*Felis silvestris lybica*) as it dashed across the open airstrip area. It's so rare to see these little predators that were first domesticated about 10 000 years ago and are the ancestors of all domestic cats.

And now for some of the month's most interesting stories...

Caught in the act



Photo by Simon Capon

Imagine the thrill of coming across two male cheetahs on a kill. It's such a privilege to see, especially as they have disappeared from an estimated 76% of their historic range in Africa. Their population has declined by at least 30% over the past 18 years, and is primarily due to habitat loss and fragmentation, as well as killing and capture of cheetahs due to livestock loss as well as for trade. Then imagine you are Simon Capon who has spent years on this reserve researching his thesis for a degree of Master of Science in Conservation Ecology, a thesis that looked at the decline of sable antelope through much of the lowveld. A thesis that aimed to determine the cause of the decline and the continued lack of success in the sable population. And then imagine his mixed emotions when he realised these two cheetahs had killed one of 'his' precious sable calves!

Our research department is busy formulating identikits on some of the predator populations, as part of another study, so by looking at the spot patterns of these two cheetahs we know that they are a coalition that was first sighted on the reserve in 2012. They look to be in excellent health and fitness, and it is not uncommon for males to form coalitions for the advantages of hunting success and safeguarding a territory. Let's hope these two don't develop a preference for sables in the future!



Better protected

Serrated-hinged terrapins (*Pelusios sinuatus*) have excellent strategies to protect themselves. They live in permanent waterholes, mostly emerge on a log or rock island in the watery sanctuary and have a hard shell to protect their body and head if under attack. But they have another secret weapon as I found out when I once demonstrated my fishing prowess by actually hooking a greedy terrapin. I was in such a panic to return the poor creature to the water that I handled it extensively to remove the barbless hook from its snapping jaws. Afterwards I smelt my hands and nearly passed out from the stench - it's the kind of fact you'll never forget once you've experienced it, and that is that terrapins, like skunks, secrete a musky liquid when threatened!

Interconnection

This is a perfect scene - a young bull white rhino, walking along a riverbank, grazing as he goes. A bull of this age has probably separated from his mother some years ago, and probably also from another male that it may have teamed up with before it felt the urge to search for, define and protect a territory of its own.

With the advantage of having an enormous reserve and very few game drives out, our guides and guests have the opportunity to spend as long as we want at any sighting. This allows for a more in-depth look at the ecology of the area - the relationship of organisms to one another and their physical surroundings.

A rhino and a single tree might seem disconnected at first - after all white rhinos are grass eaters, not leaf browsers like black rhinos. But all rhinos must rest, and this must be done in the shade to protect them from solar radiation, sunburn and dehydration.

The apple leaf or rain tree (*Philenoptera violacea*) that is dominating this photo is a particularly effective drought resistant species. The tree is frequently attacked by spittle bugs that use their drilling mouthparts to feed on the tree's cambium layer, and the bugs then excrete a foamy sap as a nest that insulates them from drying out. This 'spit' accumulates in great quantities and rains down on the ground below to such an extent that the ground is wet, allowing the tree to use the moisture in drought conditions. The area below an apple tree is shady and often damp, making it the ideal place for a rhino to rest. Another advantage is that if the area becomes muddier than surrounding areas after rainfall, it may be used as a mud wallow for large animals like rhinos, and mud wallows have the propensity to become hollowed-out pans and eventually waterholes.





The young and the restless

There are many youngsters about at the moment, as fit and healthy as can be after a summer of mother's milk and lush green grass. But the dangers of winter lie ahead with diminished grazing, less cover to hide in and very limited water sources. Notice how much lighter these wildebeest calves are than their mothers. The calves of most antelopes are too weak to outrun predators soon after they're born, so the golden newborns are hidden in the golden grass until they're strong enough to flee danger. But wildebeest are migratory and their calves need

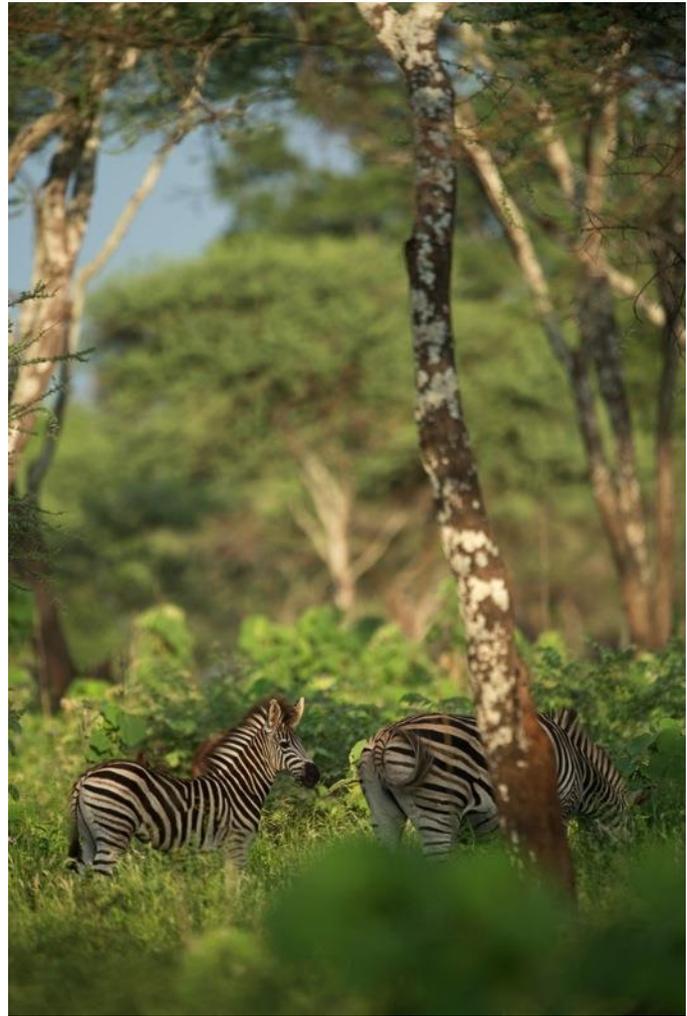


Photo by Mark Saunders

to keep up with the herd at all times. So, while they still retain the ancestral golden antelope colouration they've developed what are probably the most precocious calves of any antelope species. Newborns can stand in a few minutes and run within five minutes! Once the calves are up on their tiny hooves and have suckled, they are led into the nearest nursery herd. The presence of calves that are a few days older, and therefore harder to catch, helps conceal the vulnerable day-old youngsters.

Something that is particularly noticeable with zebra foals is that their legs are almost as long as an adult's. They too are quick to be up and cantering within the herd, protected by its mare and the stallion. For a predator the foals are difficult to single out - not only do their stripes contribute to an optical illusion, but because a predator's head is at about zebra belly height, all they see of the foal is legs - the tiny body is hidden behind the adults yet the legs look like they belong to an adult because they're just as long. It's a remarkable evolutionary adaptation, but it seems that for every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction. Zebra foals are often caught by predators that have developed their own techniques to overcome the long-legged miniatures' disguises.

This bambi-like creature is a nyala lamb (*Tragelaphus angasii*). A mother finds a well-hidden thicket to give birth, and she hides her lamb in the hopefully impenetrable thicket for about 18



days. She returns to the area find and nurse her lamb. When it can keep up on its own it joins the herd - this behaviour is similar to that of sable and some other species of antelope.

This young lamb bounded across the road in front of us, to join its mother who was slowly walking off - it must have been about 18 days old and decided it didn't want to be left alone any longer - and quite right too considering what was hidden in the thickets of the next story...



The sound of crunching bones

There is absolutely no way you would have known there was a lioness and two cubs in the thicket above. The only thing that gave them away was the sound of crunching bones. We never discovered what the victim was, but it must have been small because after some time the bone-cruncher emerged with slight bloodstains on her jaw. She was looking for a new prey item.

We scoured the area for tracks over the next two days, and found the pride again in a different woodier thicket. Eventually we caught a brief glimpse of a cub as it curiously peered at us from the thicket. Its belly was full, as was its mother's, so no doubt she'd hunted successfully again.

Long distance vision

This is the view that'll greet you when you wake up at sunrise for a freshly ground cup of coffee and your game drive. There's something about endless views of uninterrupted nature that seems to order all that is going on in one's head and allow you to think clearly and 'see the wood for the trees.' I'm sure you know what I mean, and I hope that one day there'll be some smart scientific explanation for it, but we all know instinctively that we need to return to nature every so often to find ourselves.



"Truly a miracle place under the sun - OUTSTANDING!"

Bill & Donna Pirrone, New York, New York.

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