

Singita *Sabi Sand*
Ebony & Boulders Lodges
Castleton House
South Africa

Singita



Wildlife Report

For the month of April, Two Thousand and Fifteen

Temperature

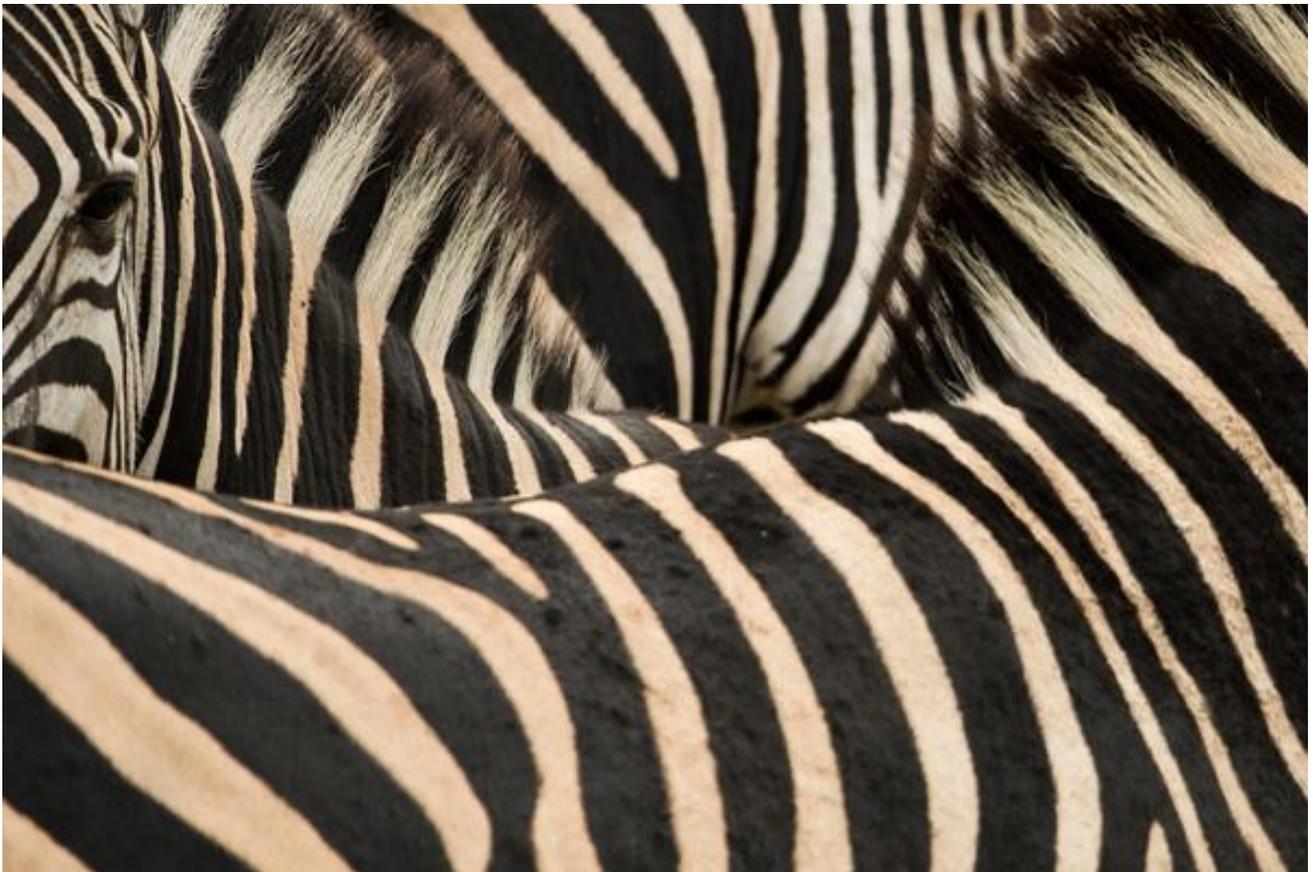
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|------------------|-----------------|
| Average minimum | 14.3°C (57.7°F) |
| Average maximum | 31.5°C (88.7°F) |
| Minimum recorded | 10°C (50°F) |
| Maximum recorded | 36°C (96.8°F) |

Rainfall Recorded

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----------|
| For the month | 29.9 mm |
| For the year to date | 88.8 mm |
| For the season to date (Nov-Apr): | 371.3 mm |

Winter creeps in and lies in wait during the early morning and late evening drives, and you can feel its grip as you drive down drainage lines. It leaves no doubt that the change of season is upon us.

There are so many elements that make this area beautiful. The landscape, the small creatures, the tall creatures and the many that have unique patterns and beautiful markings. You might think that the next photo is of caked mud, but it is actually a close-up view of elephant hide. Pictured below that are the dazzling black and white patterns of zebras.



Unique sunsets Article by Leon van Wyk

We are fortunate in Africa to be blessed with some beautiful skies, whether it be the rosy dawns, the unpolluted blues of autumn days, or the sparkling splendour of our starry night skies. Most famous of all, however, are our sunsets, and after more than five and a half decades on this continent, I still appreciate each and every sunset that I am fortunate enough to see. There's something about sunsets that inspire you to take time to think back on the day's events, and just to marvel at the majesty of it all.

I enjoy structure in sunsets. This can take the form of dead trees, with or without vultures perched in them, or living trees, whether they are the elegant knobthorns (*Acacia nigrescens*), the ubiquitous marulas (*Sclerocarya birrea*) or even the candelabra-like *Euphorbia* trees, protruding strikingly from rocky outcrops.

Animals such as giraffe or elephant make wonderful silhouette subjects in sunset photographs, and sometimes even the big cats offer interesting opportunities when elevated on a mound against a golden skyline.

There's such atmosphere at this lion sighting where guests stretch back and watch the sun setting amongst the wispy clouds.



I love looking at each unique sunset, especially the cloud scattered ones, and saying to my guests, "Nobody has ever seen a sunset quite like this, nor will another one quite like this ever be seen again!"

What a difference an inch has made! Article by Leon van Wyk

A month ago, I referred to the very low rainfall we had received this summer, and it was certainly exceedingly dry at the end of March. There was rain – good rain – but it just kept missing this particular part of the lowveld. We were in a position to see the magnificent lightning displays in the distance on numerous evenings, and they certainly were a sight to behold. A proper African thunderstorm is certainly something memorable.

On 16 April, just a short while after most guests had returned from the evening game drive, a thunderstorm that had been watched in the far distance at dusk, rolled rapidly northwards and was upon us. Torrential for the first half hour or so, the intensity of the downpour soon lessened, giving way to soaking rain for the next few hours. It was wonderful!

We received about 25 mm (1 inch) of rain. The difference that this inch has made is quite remarkable. Within a week, there was a beautiful carpet of green, particularly in the sodic areas, as the dry blades of grass took on some moisture, and the whole landscape was transformed. This was much to the delight of some of the selective grazers, such as impala, warthog and wildebeest, all of which have really welcomed this late season bonus.



Apart from the obvious benefit of fresh and palatable grazing material, an added advantage is that many of the dried-up mud wallows received a substantial top-up. Initially this would mean many more places to drink, and then a few days later these pits would be of more practical value for wallowing, as the brown water became thicker and thicker, offering the most delightful porridgy mud, with which buffalo, warthog, rhino and elephants could plaster their tough hides. An entertaining spectacle to behold after any of these wallowing mammals have applied the mud, is when they vigorously and blissfully rub it off against a rough surface, such as a rock, a log, a fallen tree or the trunk of a still-standing tree.

Associated with the extra moisture in the soil, is a massive spate of extra building activity in the termitaria. Almost every active termite mound has clear evidence of recent building activity, and the soft, moist additions to these structures are often visited by hornbills, seeking to catch and eat as many of the delicious termite workers and soldiers that can be found at the entrances to these newly constructed extra chambers and cavities.



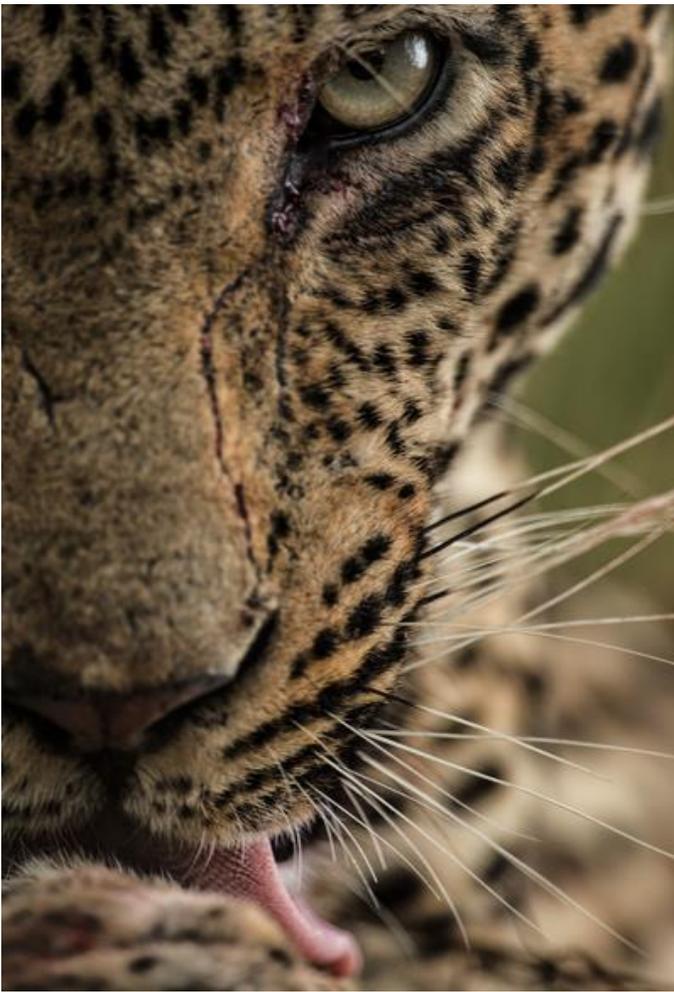
Predator interactions

Article by Coleman Mnisi

It is amazing how we sometimes have a run of top quality sightings on the same day. A few weeks ago, this is how it went for us. On a morning drive, just after we left Boulders Lodge, one of the guides, Nic, reported a male leopard, just east of the lodge, moving north. We followed him for a short while, then we moved south, as we wanted to help follow up on some tracks of a pride of lions reported by Leon, the guide driving out of Castleton.

My tracker Themba joined Leon's tracker James, on these lion tracks on foot, while we watched an elephant bull with huge tusks. Within a few minutes, the trackers called on the radio to say that they had found the lions. It was quite hard to get to the lions, because they were lying in the bottom of a steep dry riverbed, with thick bush all around.

We watched the lions for about half an hour, and then went to see a male leopard that had been found by Nic, heading west towards a waterhole called Camp Pan. When we got to the leopard (an adult territorial male known as the Nyelethi male), he was showing interest in some impala.



While moving west, the Nyelethi male picked up the scent of another leopard. The second leopard was a young male (Ravenscourt male), and when he saw that the adult male was on his trail, he jumped down from the tree and ran towards Camp Pan. The older male chased the youngster through the clearing, but then the younger male decided to stop running and fight back.

The two leopards fought hard, and it seems the Ravenscourt male was not hurt, but the older Nyelethi male received a nasty gash near his eye. The battle of the two big males was tiring and it had everyone at the edge of their seats not knowing what was going to happen next.

After the battle the two leopards went their separate ways, but the Nyelethi male ended up feeding on a duiker kill that had been left in the tree by the Ravenscourt male!

There is some history between these two leopards. The Ravenscourt female leopard that was so prevalent in the Singita area, up until two years ago, had a male cub, and she was defending him from the Nyelethi male when she unfortunately died during the interaction. We named her surviving cub the Ravenscourt male, and it was this youngster who fought his mother's killer, giving him a gash down his nose and near his eye.





Cheetah cubs

That's right, you read correctly, cheetah cubs. We have not seen cubs this small in the area for well over five years. A female cheetah ventured into the south on an early overcast morning, and to our surprise had three very small cubs in tow.

There had been a few reports from neighbouring reserves, but we did not realize that they were this small or that she would be moving them as far as she had at their age. There must have been a good reason to move them, which generally would be an influence from high densities of other predators being in the area where the cubs were born. They have only been viewed once since coming into the north-western sections of the Sabi Sand. We are hoping that they venture back into our area soon.

Unfortunately, since capturing these two images, only two cubs remain. This is the norm as cheetah cub survival rates in this area are relatively low.

On another day during that same week, we had been struggling to find lions. We went far south-east one morning, and followed tracks of a pride, heading north-east. We heard from one of the other guides in the area that there were fresh tracks of wild dogs not far from where we were. I told Themba about these tracks, and we decided to help follow up on them - we might not get another opportunity to search for wild dogs.

About 20 minutes later we heard that the wild dogs had just been found, feeding on a kudu kill. We sat and watched the dogs feeding, and while we were enjoying the sighting, two hyenas arrived from the south. A very noisy interaction between the wild dogs and hyenas began, and it didn't take long before a pride of lions arrived on the scene! Arriving from the south-east, the lions surrounded the wild dogs and hyenas. One of the dogs almost got killed, I don't know how he managed to get away... it was very close!

This sighting really was a highlight for my guests, as well as for me. I'm sure it will be a long time before I see such drama again!



Autumn music Article by Nic Moxham

The end of April brings about an exciting time for us in the bush. As the days get shorter and cooler we begin to hear the snorts and grunts that define the beginning of the impala rut - their breeding season. For weeks we watch as the males chase each other, as well as the females, in an effort to become the outright sire for a herd.

At this stage the hormones of these elegant antelope change to bring about new behavior and social structure that is fascinating to observe. Throughout most of the year these animals live in relative peace with each other. The herds are relatively mixed with females and males coexisting in the herds. As the females become ready to mate the males must challenge each other for the sole right to breed with a herd of females, (which can be as large as 50 impala) for as long as they can remain dominant over the herd. More often than not you will have numerous males that will infiltrate the breeding herd as the dominant male becomes too exhausted from keeping his dominance within the herd, as well as attempting to mate with the females. By the males challenging for this right ensures that the strongest prevail and that the strongest genes for the species are thus spread, essential for a healthy progress and evolution of a species. The males become so preoccupied with this pursuit of dominance that they often forget to watch out for their own survival. Some may get killed in this pursuit as they forget to watch for predators.

The predators are aware of this behavior and often will approach the grunts, snorts and clashes of horns in hope that these antelope are too involved in their testosterone-charged duels that they will make easier targets. I once witnessed a female leopard watch two impala males fighting in the distance. These two males were so deeply involved in their battle that their horns actually got caught together and they were not able to free themselves apart. The leopard seized this opportunity and pounced onto one of the males. This obviously brought about some serious pandemonium as they struggled to break free. One lucky male was able to escape while the other suffered at the hands of this opportunistic cat.

At the end of June most of the females will have been impregnated and the strange sounds of autumn will come to an end as the impalas hormones subside. Antelope generally have fairly lengthy gestation periods which ensure that their young are born relatively well-developed, essential for their chance of survival. They will enter into a six month pregnancy and lamb with the first rains of summer, ensuring that there is plenty of food to provide nutritious milk for their young, and good cover to keep their vulnerable lambs hidden from the jaws of many predators that prey on the easy targets. They have to fear all carnivores at this early stage. Animals like baboons and eagles take advantage of fragile lambs and many will not make it through their first week.



Whatever time you come to the bush there's always something about that time that is unique, compared with any other. Right now it's the sound of autumn and a fascinating display in which to bathe your senses.

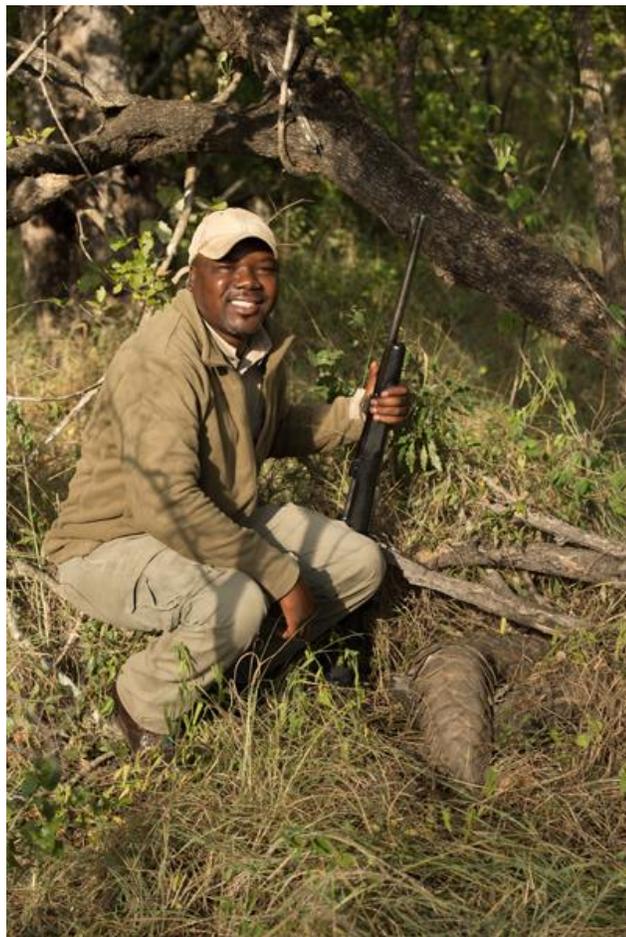
Repeat that message... Article by Ross Couper

During my tenure at Singita over the last three years, I have encountered some incredible sightings. One of the most common questions that is asked by guests would have to be, "What was the most memorable sighting you have ever experienced?" This is by far the toughest question to answer. With the opportunity of being out in the bush on a daily occurrence you are eventually going to see some amazing sightings, not to mention every sighting you have is unique and there is usually a twist to it, even if you think you can predict it. I often read the wildlife journals and think, "Wow, some guides are super-lucky!" But when I started thinking about writing this story it was an overwhelming emotional rollercoaster of adventures, good sightings the most beautiful things you have ever seen. I am going to share one of my experiences that left me speechless after hearing what the sighting was on the radio...



The day prior had been a little quiet with sightings, and Johnson my tracker and I knew that we really needed to have a plan for this morning's drive. The family that was traveling with us had visited Singita on several occasions prior, almost since the opening of Ebony. They knew that we would have quiet days at times and often were really happy to see the small stuff, the landscape and hearing about the stories of what Johnson and I got up to since their last visit. We decided to travel north to explore areas that we usually don't go to often, with the hope that we may find a golden nugget that would make their stay. Two days prior we had the privilege of seeing the Hlaba' Nkunzi female leopard and her cub interacting in the early morning light. We've also seen an unknown female leopard with a young cub that was approximately six months old.

We had been driving for about an hour, before I heard a radio call come through that a female leopard and young cub had been found, not to far from where we had seen the two leopards a couple of days prior. We decided to gradually head into the area to view the two leopards again. I responded to the sighting and mentioned that I was approximately 10 minutes away and I would be eager to view the two leopards. The response back from the guide Johan, left me astounded for a few seconds, "You are welcome to make your way to the sighting, the cub is currently playing with a pangolin next to my vehicle". Leopard cubs are rare sightings and seeing two leopards or more in an area is really specially.



Seeing a pangolin with a leopard cub is unbelievable. After I informed everyone on my vehicle what we were about to see, the shrieks even came from the men.

The pangolin had crawled into an overgrown thicket and was moving about gradually. The leopard cub was pawing at the sharp scales but had also realized that this was no easy meal and already the adult leopard had lost interest in the pangolin. After a few minutes of watching the interaction both of the leopards lost interest and moved off. After waiting until the leopards had moved away from the area, we positioned our vehicle in a safe spot and I allowed the guests to get onto ground level with the pangolin to have a closer view of this very rare animal.

This was my second sighting of a pangolin in seven years. The pangolin lay motionless, aware of our presence. After several years of visiting Singita, this was the first time that the family witnessed this type of interaction. I can clearly understand why they keep returning to this 'home away from home'.

Johnson had told us a few stories of how he had been tracking leopards on two separate occasions and he encountered pangolins resting up in thick bush. This was his fifth sighting, and his smile says it all.



Game Viewing Summary for April 2015

Lion sightings: There was a greater variation in the number of prides seen, with excellent sightings of seven different prides / coalitions. Could this be the beginning of a change in territories?

Leopard sightings: April was a bumper month for leopard sightings, driven predominantly by sightings of Hlab'nkunzi and her cub. Nyelethi continued to be the most viewed male leopard, who continues to put pressure on the older and larger dominant male, Kashane. A highlight for April was the reappearance of the Tasselberry female, who has a cub.

Cheetah sightings: Sightings of the female with her three cubs.

Elephant Sightings: It seemed April was not only a return of the elephants, but a return of large herds of them too; almost 25% of elephant herds seen contained over 21 individuals.

Buffalo sightings: April saw a huge boost in sightings of large herds of buffalo, especially around the lodges and the western sector of the property, a sure sign that the land is getting dryer as they move towards the Sand River in search of fresh flowing water and greener pastures.

Wild dog sightings: The sightings were exciting ones too, with the pack twice seen on impala kills.

Bird list

204 species recorded.

Many of the migratory species that have been with us for the summer months began to leave in April, and we expect fewer species still in the coming months, as the birds go in search of warmer climates. The month was by no means a quiet one in terms of specials to the area though, with sightings of Temminck's courser, violet-eared waxbill, southern white-faced owl and the ever rarer yellow-billed oxpecker.



Google Images



Photographs on location by Ross Couper
Singita Ebony and Boulders Lodge
Sabi Sand
South Africa
Thirtieth of April 2015