



Wildlife Journal

For the month of July, Two Thousand and Fifteen

Temperature

Average minimum:	14,3°C (57,7°F)
Minimum recorded:	11,1°C (51,9°F)
Average maximum:	27,8°C (82,0°F)
Maximum recorded:	34,4°C (93,9°F)

Rainfall Recorded

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

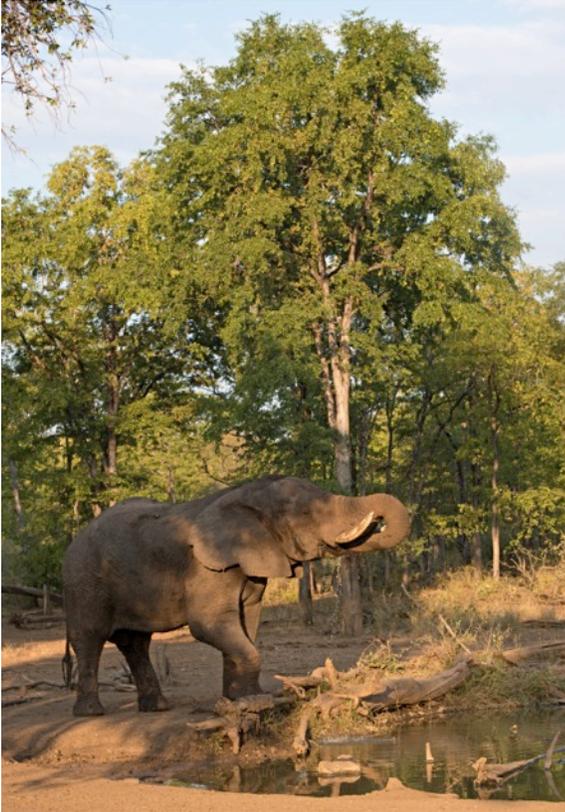
Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise	06:23
Sunset	17:35

These winter months are the most popular for safari - and it's no secret why... cold crisp mornings lead to warm sunny days, where the vegetation is dry and the wildlife is drawn to the sparse permanent water sources. But every now and then you'll be startled out of the meditative monotony of the earthy colours by dazzling sabi star flowers or a flashy chafer beetle.

Lions:

The lions are also feeling the cold. Four of them had curled up for warmth in the drainage tunnels beneath our main access road - it's a little unnerving knowing you are driving 'over' four ferocious predators! The lion prides seem to have had a preference for buffalo meat this month - there have been quite a few kills. The two dominant males of the western section have been spending the last few days lounging about with full stomachs on the other side of the Chiredzi River. At one stage they were seen on the riverbank with three adult females and one young cub. Hopefully some new cubs are on the way as there was mating activity with one of the lionesses - we'll have to wait for at least 110 days to be sure, as that's the gestation period.



Wild dogs:

The pack, up to 14 of them at a time, are seen hunting regularly because they're denning in the hills - but still no sign of the pups...

Cheetahs:

We've had good cheetah sightings this month - a couple have been seen hunting, and so has the female who has raised several litters - she's easy to identify as she is missing the tip of her tail.

Elephants:

The elephant highlights for the month come from the bulls - we've seen magnificent tuskers drinking, feeding, resting, dusting and mud-bathing. They are calm when not in musth and during this calm phase we are able to enjoy long, close-up peaceful encounters with them.

Rhinos

Rhino viewing is what we're renowned for. The highlight this month was when guests got to see black and white rhino bulls interacting, with six lions spectating in the background! The eight black rhinos that we were able to donate to Botswana have settled and are doing well.

Buffalo:

The breeding herds we're seeing are slightly smaller because they've split up to go in search of smaller pockets of pasture. That's said guests and guides got a good dusting when a herd of about 300 Cape buffalo stampeded towards a pan for a drink!

Plains game:

The varieties of habitats here provide nourishment for a diversity of plains game. It's not uncommon to see herds of sable, eland and Lichtenstein hartebeest, as we did this month. Far more abundant are impala, kudu and zebra. Here a family of kudu browse on bush that still retains some green foliage.



Special sightings:

Eliciting a chorus of compliments were a new-born giraffe, still with its umbilical cord attached, and a brand new zebra foal being nuzzled by its mother. Other special sightings were of an African wild cat, genets, a civet, a porcupine and a honey badger. An adult male leopard graced us with his presence, close to one of the safari vehicles, giving guests a chance to admire him.

On the feathered front were many good owl sightings while five racket-tailed rollers stole the show near Nduna Camp.

Activities:

Photo hide: There's no better time than now to relax safely in the confines of our luxurious photo hide, and wait to see what arrives for a drink. One group of guests arrived at the hide mid-morning and stayed there until 12h30. During those few hours they saw six elephant bulls, seven hartebeest, two white rhinos, dozens of zebra and impala, plus a family of warthogs. Another adventurous group sat in the blind from sunset till 19h40. They were entertained non-stop by many white rhinos, black rhinos, elephant bulls, buffalo bulls and a honey badger. A bonus was the most amazing array of animal sounds!

Walks: This is also the best time of year to do a bush walk with your guide. Three elephant bulls gave us a wonderful view of them, backlit by a beautiful sunset, while we were on foot. Another more adrenalin-filled walk was when black and white rhinos were seen at relatively close quarters.

Sport: We have two tennis courts for those guests who fancy a game, and we've recently added a soccer field next to them. A couple of soccer matches took place this month with guests joining in, and almost as much banter was kicked about as the ball!

Know Your Enemy

'Know Your Enemy' is a saying derived from Sun Tzu's, *The Art of War*, which is an ancient Chinese military written work. The text is composed of 13 chapters, each of which is devoted to one aspect of warfare. The last verse of Chapter 3 is:

故曰：知彼知己，百戰不殆；不知彼而知己，一勝一負；不知彼，不知己，每戰必殆。

It is translated as:

"So it is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you can win a hundred battles without a single loss.

If you only know yourself, but not your opponent, you may win or may lose.

If you know neither yourself nor your enemy, you will always endanger yourself."

Verse 18 in Chapter 1 is:

兵者，詭道也。故能而示之不能，用而示之不用，近而示之遠，遠而示之近

It is translated as:

All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near.

We had the pleasure of hosting Scott and Kimberley Sheffield at Singita Pamushana, and during their stay they got to see an extraordinary battle - a lioness hunting and killing a large male warthog.

Although warthogs are smaller than common lion prey animals like wildebeest or zebra, they are formidable opponents. An average male warthog is 80 kg of feisty, tusk-wielding aggression when threatened. The tusks are modified canine teeth that grow sideways out of the warthog's mouth. The upper tusks can reach lengths of 60 cm, the lower ones about 13 cm - but it's the lower ones that can cause serious injury to an unwary enemy. The lower tusks articulate against the inner groove of the upper tusks and each time the warthog's mouth opens or closes, the lower tusks are honed and become blade-sharp. Warthogs also reverse into their burrows so that their tusks face any potential danger, and it is an uninformed enemy that tries to attack this business-end.

However, this lioness knew her enemy. She had hidden nearby the warthog's burrow and waited for him and his family to leave its safe confines. She struck at dusk, intercepting the male, avoiding his tusks and tackled him down with a classic throat-hold. The hog fought for his life, thrashing and squealing but as his oxygen supply was cut off, he weakened and died.

Scott Sheffield was able to record these excellent images of the battle in which the lioness knew her enemy.



Photos: Scott Sheffield

How the mighty fall



We smelt this macabre scene before we came upon it. The rotting carcass of an elephant bull. No predators were nearby - only a wake of vultures. A closer inspection revealed the cause of death. This bull had been tusked by another. In the second photo you can see two large puncture wounds - where the tusk of the opponent entered in the neck beneath the ear, penetrated through the neck and exited just above the ear. But the wound wasn't fresh, our deduction is that a dominance battle had taken place some time before, but the wounds festered, infection set in, and eventually the bull died. You can see how his right tusk gouged into the earth as he collapsed.

An elephant's skin is up to 4 cm (1.5 inches) thick in places. Usually land predators and scavengers with sharp



teeth and powerful jaws like lions, hyenas or crocodiles will open a carcass up, to feed on the bounty of meat, but in this case none of the usual suspects arrived. Perhaps they were all busy or satiated on kills of their own. If there are only vultures at a carcass it will be the large lappet-faced vultures that open it. With their huge bills they are adept at tearing open thick skin, but there were none of the rare and endangered lappet-faced vultures at this feast. For three consecutive days the other vultures hung around, with their frustration growing... The hooded and white-backed vultures could only stick their heads so far down the tusk wounds to get at the meat and had to wait for the areas where the skin was the thinnest to rupture. Eventually they got their fill of very tenderised ripe elephant.

I was fascinated with how the exposed tusk made the perfect arched perch for the vultures. Their wonderful disregard for the ivory was so admirable in a human world obsessed with using ivory for trinkets - to the extent that this obsession has led to a recent surge in elephant poaching elsewhere in Africa, and a rapid decline in their overall population. In a vulture's world ivory is of no worth, whatsoever.

Rite of passage

Hippo mothers are fiercely protective of their babies, even against other hippos, including the dominant bull. That's probably why we saw this mother and her calf alone in one of our smaller dams, a short distance away from our largest dam where a population permanently reside. She'd have walked her calf to this spot for safety.

Calves are born in very shallow water. They suckle underwater by folding their ears and closing their nostrils as they submerge, then pinching the mother's teat between their tongue and palate.

This calf decided he wanted to exit the dam exactly where we had stopped for tea, and opened his mouth with tiny tusks in a threat display. What did amuse me was that he stuck his tongue out!



Colour variation in puff adders (*Bitis arietans*)

I was recently in a reserve in the Western Cape, South Africa, and came across the most extraordinary scene. It was two male puff adders in courtship combat. A female that is receptive to mating leaves a pheromone trail and the males follow the trail, intercept one another, and try and oust the other with neck wrestling! Interestingly, they usually do not bite each other. The fight went on for over 48 hours, which could have a serious impact on their chance of surviving winter, having used up so much energy.

Back in the Zimbabwean lowveld at Singita Pamushana, I came across a small puff adder in the road, and stopped to make sure it crossed safely - after taking a few photos, as always. What struck me was how different in colour this specimen was to those I'd seen in the Cape coastal region of South Africa.

My 'go to' person for all matters snake is ecologist, Simon Capon, so, once again, I asked him to explain the colour difference. His feedback was that some of the old hypotheses were that colour variations evolved to match the substrate, enhancing their camouflage. However, the recent scientific-based evidence he has studied suggests that through the glacial periods of the Pleistocene epoch, populations of puff adders were isolated from each other because the central areas of southern Africa became inhospitable for them. This means that the coastal populations and the northerly populations would have been separated for a significant period of time.



This could possibly have led to physical variations, by breeding within isolated populations (essentially how different dog breeds have developed).

The type specimen of the subspecies of puff adder found most widespread in Africa is from the Cape and, interestingly, it is only the males from the Cape and from the highlands in east Africa that have the vivid yellow markings.





Little beauties

These two zebra foals were so lovely. They must have been born within a week or so of each other, and it was clear they were best friends. Tired of waiting around at a nearby pan for their parents to have a drink, they decided a quick nap was in order and lay down next to one another in a soft, sandy hollow.

This beautiful chafer beetle joined some of the staff for tea one morning. We were particularly impressed with its anchor-like claws on the end of each leg. This one is known as Derby's flower beetle (*Dicronorrhina derbyana*), and is a male - identified by the 'T'-shaped, flat horn in the forehead. The males, being slightly bigger than females are about 40 - 50 mm (1.6–2.0 in) in length.

The larvae live in the soil on decaying vegetable material, while the adults feed primarily on tree sap and fruits. The full life cycle takes 8 - 9 months.

Photo: Shelley Mitchley



Salad leaf feast

It's amazing what behaviour you can observe if time is on your side and you can sit quietly and watch wildlife. These two vervet monkeys were foraging on the islands in a wetland area. They were picking the succulent green shoots of the plants there, and placing them into their mouths at great speed. I tried to match their hand to mouth movements and could barely keep up - and I wasn't spotting the next shoot as they were.

A little further research on this topic reveals that a scientific study has been done on the feeding habits of vervet monkeys which shows that when they forage like this they don't show a preference for one hand being dominant over the other - they are ambidextrous rather than right- or left-hand dominant, and this adds to the speed and agility at which they are able to feed.

They also have dextrous fingers and opposable thumbs - ideal for gripping branches when climbing and jumping, grooming each other, and, as described, manipulating food.

These photos freeze the action of the peaceful feeding frenzy.



Once in a blue moon

This blue-hue photographic technique I've been working on is my latest obsession.



The term 'blue moon' refers to the second full moon in a month with two full moons - and that happened on the last day of this month.

If the moon actually looks blue, it's caused by a rare type of dust in the atmosphere.

The second photograph includes a full moon and the dance of moonlight on the water as a buffalo drinks, and a rhino rubs itself on a scratching post in the background.



All a twitter

It is believed that the secretary bird (*Sagittarius serpentarius*) gets its common name from the crest of long quill-like feathers that give it the appearance of a secretary with quill pens tucked behind her ears. A recent suggestion is that 'secretary' is borrowed from a French corruption of the Arabic *saqr-et-tair* or 'hunter-bird'. Given the shyness of the bird and my struggle to get a photo of it I wouldn't be surprised if it got its name from being called the 'secret' bird!

A far more gregarious bird is this the purple-crested turaco (*Gallirex porphyreolopha*) who helped itself to a drink from the pool edge.



We've been enjoying excellent owl sightings recently.

This Verreaux's eagle-owl (*Bubo lacteus*) wasn't being secretive at all - we spotted it thanks to its continuous piercing calls. Both the female and the young engage in high, piercing calls when begging for food at the nest, at which time the male does the food capture.

I've seen this particular eagle-owl (*Bubo africanus*) regularly. He sits on a stone plinth at a roadside intersection, and uses this vantage point for hunting rodents.

With his solid built, no-nonsense look and penetrative stare I've nicknamed him Arnold Schwarzenegger of "Owl be back" fame!





Aren't these trees so artistically beautiful in their growth form? Their genus *Acacia* was reclassified in 2011. The name *Acacia* remained for all Australian species. Unfortunately, all African *Acacias* had their genus names changed to either *Vachellia*, those with straight thorns, or *Senegalia*, those with hooked thorns. They thrive in deciduous woodland, thornveld and bushveld, and tolerate high alkalinity, drought, high temperatures, sandy and stony soils, strongly sloped rooting surfaces, and sand blasting.

Many birds take advantage of the thorny crowns by building their nests there - the thorns offer protection from predators like snakes.

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