

# Singita



## **WILDLIFE REPORT SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA For the month of April, Two Thousand and Seventeen**

<b>Temperature</b>	<b>Rainfall Recorded</b>	<b>Sunrise &amp; Sunset</b>
Average minimum: 17.5°C (63.5°F)	For the month: 13 mm	Sunrise: 06:00
Average maximum: 30.4°C (86.7°F)	For the season to date: 783.5 mm	Sunset: 18:00
Minimum recorded: 11°C (51.8°F)		
Maximum recorded: 36°C (96.8°F)		

Honey coloured mornings and dark orange sunsets, along with cool evenings, covered with stars above - this is the start of winter. Presently driving out in the early mornings is a sensory experience, as the cold air brushes across your hands and face, the bush smell is herbaceous and fresh and the sound of rutting impalas echoes through the valleys. There is high moisture content in the air that leaves the bush blanketed in anticipation for the sun to evaporate the droplets off every stem and stalk. Long grass stalks full of seeds bend uneasily with water droplets weighing them down. Looking towards the sunrise in the early morning the open grasslands resemble soft snow upon the grass fields with the white reflection. Looking west, the golden colour adorns the bushveld like a blanket warming it from a cold night.

### **Here's a highlights package of the month's sightings:**

#### **Lions**

The Mhangene pride that usually dominates our sightings for lions has been rather scarce this month. A brief interaction with their now adult offspring, which consists of six lionesses, resulted in a hasty retreat

quite far west. We have been fortunate enough with occasional sightings of the large pride on our western boundary. Fortunately, the three remaining Majingilane male lions continue to move through the area along with the Othawa pride.

### **Leopards**

It has been another active month for leopard sightings. The Hlab’Nkunzi female leopard continues to keep us in awe of how habituated she is to our presence. Respecting her space with her cub and making sure we are never impeding on her personal space with the viewing of her and the little cub has rewarded us with some incredible sightings. The young cub is a male and approximately five months old. A relative newcomer that has been sighted regularly this month is the Torchwood male leopard. This male leopard originated west of Singita and has explored further east of his normal territorial grounds. On a few occasions we have seen him in close proximity of the N’weti male leopard and the Nyelethi male leopard who are in search of territorial ground. This would represent an expansion of territory for the Nyelethi male leopard, and it continues to be nomadic patrols of new land for the N’weti male. We are hoping that expansion of territory is a permanent move for the Torchwood male leopard.

### **Elephants**

Large herds have congregated in the central areas and often have fragmented by the afternoon into satellite groups moving in their independent directions. As we enter the dry season, a pattern of movement that we might expect would be for elephant herds to spend the warm part of the day feeding on the still green *Phragmites* in the bed of the Sand River, and then moving onto higher, warmer ground as the chill of early evening sets in.

### **Buffaloes**

A few smaller groups of buffalo have been viewed north of the river, but with the almost unlimited water availability in the area, the larger herds continue to move over vast distances in an unpredictable manner.

### **Hyenas**

Currently hyena sightings have been prominent within view of the leopards and their hoisted impala carcasses. As most predators are taking full advantage of the preoccupied impala males rutting, the hyenas are always on the outskirts awaiting their share of food. Patience is a virtue, and sometimes hyenas will spend hours or even days waiting for a morsel of food to be dropped by a leopard feeding on its prize in the safety of a tree. Of course, hyenas that arrive on the scene quickly enough will often steal a freshly killed impala from a leopard before the leopard has been able to hoist it into a tree.

### **Bee-eaters and other strikingly beautiful birds**

Article by Leon van Wyk

Ever since I was a very young boy, I have always been interested in birds, and that interest has grown over the years. I am not saying that I find birds more interesting than mammals, for example, but I do like to appreciate all the beauty that is around me... and it abounds! The sky at dawn or dusk, the magnificent trees, both dead and alive, the impala herds, giraffes, butterflies, wild flowers, leopards, streams flowing over rocks - all of these hold great beauty, which I never tire of seeing. Beauty is of course not only a visually pleasing experience or sensation; it is something, which can be extended into the other sensory levels as well.

While I don’t expect all guests to be keen birders, and I must accept that a small percentage of them will show no interest in birds at all, I believe that the vast majority of guests will have within their make-up at least *some* appreciation of birds, however latent this appreciation may be. It gives me great pleasure and satisfaction to arouse this latent interest, and to take guests a little further on their journey of Nature appreciation, by playing a role in stimulating a renewed interest in birds.



*White-fronted bee-eater*

Usually one of the surest ways of sparking a flame of interest in birds for the birding novice, is to point out a few of the really striking birds, whether it be an impressive bird of prey such as a martial eagle, or a highly colourful bird such as a lilac-breasted roller. Saddle-bill storks are also very easy birds to appreciate, because they are large, not particularly shy and they are certainly beautiful. Some of the kingfishers are also brightly coloured, and in the period between mid-November and late March, the brilliantly coloured woodland kingfishers are plentiful, and their calls and courtship displays are certainly attention-getting. These birds are intra-Africa migrants. They are not fish-eating kingfishers (only five of southern Africa's ten

species of kingfishers regularly eat fish - the others are mainly insectivorous, but sometimes take small reptiles and even mice.)



My personal favourites are the bee-eaters, all of which are very beautiful in their colours. Of these, the carmine bee-eater is probably the most striking. They grace us with their presence for a number of weeks during our summer months. This summer we were fortunate to have them around here for longer than usual, from early December to the middle of March. Their breeding grounds are further north, mostly in steep river banks of major rivers such as the Chobe, Okavango and Zambezi, and I fondly recall some breathtakingly spectacular views of many hundreds of these gorgeous birds moving around us and into their holes in the banks of the Zambezi, while we were drifting along in a boat, fishing for tigerfish. Perhaps not quite as spectacular but still very beautiful is my favourite bee-eater of all, the white-fronted bee-eater.

*Carmine bee-eater*

We see them in the Sabi Sand sporadically throughout the year, usually not in great numbers, although sometimes temporary groupings of up to 20 may be seen. I find their combination of colours (white front, red throat, green wings, gold body and indigo vent) particularly attractive, and I have on a couple of occasions managed to take a few pleasing photographs of them.

European bee-eaters, like European rollers, are summer visitors, and they are extremely colourful, featuring bronze, blue and yellow. They generally fly in large flocks, often very high, and one usually hears them before seeing them. They do sometimes perch low enough on a bare branch for one to have a good look at them through binoculars, but I have yet to take a reasonable photograph of one! The fourth of the bee-eater species that we see regularly is the aptly named little bee-eater. Very small and very cute, this bee-eater is usually seen in small numbers in reasonably open terrain, and individuals will often return to the same perch, usually only a few feet off the ground, repeatedly, between short hawking excursions to catch flying insects.

If guests do appreciate pretty birds, it is well worth spending ten minutes watching little bee-eaters that are sufficiently close to the vehicle. Predominantly green and gold (the colours of the South African national rugby team, the Springboks), a close look with binoculars will reveal further subtle beauty, such as the cobalt blue line just above the eye.

Again, I have yet to take a pleasing photograph of little bee-eaters, but some of my colleagues have! Blue-cheeked bee-eaters are seen frequently by guests at our lodges in the Kruger National Park (Lebombo and Sweni), but I have on one or two occasions seen them here too. Visitors to Singita Pamushana in Zimbabwe might see swallow-tailed bee-eaters.

Some of the less easily seen but also very beautiful smaller birds include the golden-breasted bunting, the green-winged pytilia and the males of most of the sunbirds.



*Lilac-breasted roller*

It is interesting to note that while in some bird species there is a very significant visual difference between male and female (high level of sexual dimorphism), in many others (including rollers and bee-eaters), the two genders are equally colourful.

I urge everyone to take the time to look at and appreciate some of our feathered treasures out there... we are truly blessed with a huge variety of them. And remember this: Time spent watching birds does not impact negatively on your quest to see high profile mammals... it often actually significantly increases your chances!



*Brown snake eagle*

Winter is slowly creeping in, with the ever shortening days and the cold nip in the air when the sun is below the horizon. It is my favourite season and I just cannot wait! One thing that most people forget to do, as simple as it seems, is we often forget to look up...

With stunningly crisp, and on average spectacularly clear evenings, winter is the perfect time to take a moment and look to the stars, and there really is no better place than out in the middle of the bush, with no light pollution for miles around and in pure silence (besides the calls of the wild of course). It's a chance to marvel at the Milky Way and to learn about a few of the constellations visible during this time of the year in the southern hemisphere, as well as the opportunity to take a peaceful moment of quiet to yourself.

Most of the light being projected by these celestial bodies is years old, with some light having left particular stars in the late 1500's and only reaching us now. An example is that of the red giant known as Betelgeuse, which is a star found in the constellation of Orion. We see it's light in our night sky from November to May.



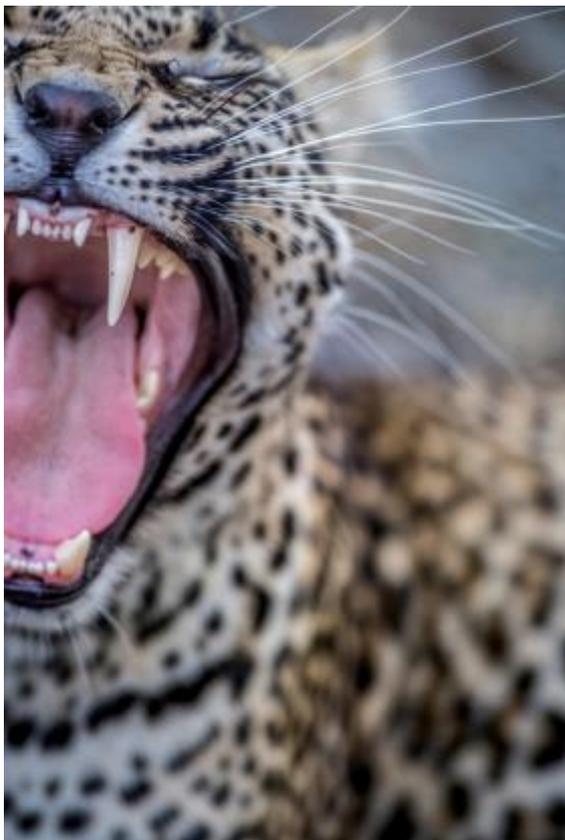
The Southern Cross, also known as The Crux, which is one of the smallest but oldest of the 88 main constellations, of which we can see most either fully or partially here in South Africa, is the constellation used to find south. While Orion is still visible, this constellation can be used to find north.

You could also get a chance to see one or two of the 2 271 satellites orbiting earth, or if you're really lucky maybe even a shooting star. Using a powerful telescope at least two other galaxies, the rings around Saturn and the moons orbiting Jupiter, a few nebulas and star clusters can be seen.

When your view of the night's sky seems endless, star-gazing is something that you'll remember for a lifetime.



Morning game drives are always unpredictable and very exciting; the eighth of April was by no means any different. It involved a lot of fresh leopard tracks and male lion tracks as reminders to just how much activity happened when we were asleep.



Nothing materialised out of all the tracks though; a lot of trackers got dropped off on different roads and locations to try and locate any of these beautiful big cats, but all was to no avail, as if these super-predators were all out to prove a point... that they are in control of their kingdom!

My team of guests and I decided we needed a refreshment break; there's nothing like a cup of coffee in the bush with birds singing different tunes all around.

Back on the road and ready to carry on with our hunt for the leopard, we received an update on the radio that a male leopard had been located and was hunting a porcupine! That sounded wrong, and if true, dangerous for the leopard, because the quills of porcupines are known to have caused misery, and in some cases even a slow death, to a lot of predators.

Nonetheless, the news was good and exciting that we were possibly going to see a leopard - and a leopard hunting, for that matter!

When we got to the sighting, there was not much to see but a leopard's tail sticking out of a burrow on the side of a termite mound. We could hear growling coming from the mound. After a few seconds the leopard came out and looked around and went down again; again the growling started, which sounded like two animals having a kind of a disagreement in the termite mound.

We were getting educated on how porcupines were hunted and we were waiting to see how things were going to work out for the leopard and the porcupine.

The next thing all the growling stopped and a porcupine shot out of the hole on the other side of where the leopard was positioned, and a second later the leopard followed, but he had a dark object in his mouth which did not resemble a porcupine at all. He dropped the thing in long grass and went to sit a short distance away, before he began to groom his dusty coat for a minute or two, and then went back to his object which turned out to be a baby porcupine.

The feeding took all of maybe three bites and he was done, and as he turned to leave I could not help but notice that actually he had one porcupine quill sticking out under his scrotum, a small price he paid for his miniature meal! My guess is that he has done it before, because a lot of inexperienced hunters end up with half the porcupine's quills all over their body.



## **Animals will not survive without droughts**

Article by Iska Meyer-Wendecker

Last year brought about the most severe drought the Sabi Sand had experienced for a few decades. The landscape was quickly changing over the winter months due to a harsh lack of rainfall during the preceding summer, which caused a chain reaction of events to unfold: not much vegetation was able to grow and the few lush green grasses and leaves soon turned into a golden brown colour, slowly drying in the burning sun. Especially the highly nutritious and palatable grasses were quickly consumed by the herbivores and soon only the less nutritious fibrous grasses were left. As a result, the drought particularly hit the larger grazers,

such as hippo, zebra, and white rhino. Here in the Sabi Sand, however, we witnessed that the buffaloes were being hit the hardest. Not having enough wholesome grass to feed on, they started losing condition slowly at first, and eventually very rapidly during the second half of winter.



During the last winter months there was hardly a week going by without a few buffalo carcasses being discovered that simply died of malnutrition or other drought-related stresses. The predators had it a lot easier during this time, with the lions often killing three buffaloes at a time, finishing one carcass completely, feeding on half of the second, and not even touching the third as it was too much meat for them to consume. There were many carcasses that

were never fed on by any scavengers, as there were so many other remains to feast on.

The numerous deaths meant that there were no large herds of buffalo to be seen for a few months. Buffaloes were either gathered together in very small groups or often seen alone – bulls, cows and youngsters alike.

For us humans it was difficult to witness without developing emotional stigma or feeling a sense of tragedy. However, there is a positive or even necessary aspect to such severe droughts that many do not realise: it is Nature's way of bringing flora and fauna back into balance. There are some species (both in the plant and animal kingdom) that can 'out-compete' others if certain conditions prevail. If these conditions continue for a longer period, a particular species would grow in numbers and might ultimately have a negative effect on other species.

In the natural world only 'disasters', such as floods, fire, or drought can remove a significant part of an outcompeting species and bring back a balance to the ecosystem.

An additional positive effect of drought is that it primarily removes the weaker gene pools and diseases. Any buffalo that was weakened by either of these two factors was more likely to die of the drought than a healthier animal. The results of this were soon to be seen when the rains returned in November (the start of the rainy season.) The rain was plentiful and soon the vegetation was flourishing again. The surviving buffaloes regained their strength. Soon the animals were regrouping and we started seeing larger herds returning again. The condition of these animals really impressed us, as it appeared to be even better than it had been before the onset of the drought! They had strong, defined muscles, shiny noses and glossy hair on their hides. Parasites and diseases were much less prevalent among the herds, and soon we started seeing the arrival of the first calves again.

Without the drought, the weaker animals might have spread parasites and diseases further, continued to pass weaker genes on via reproduction, thus resulting in a less favourable gene pool. The drought was able to stop this negative chain reaction, and allowed the stronger animals to thrive and pass on their strong genes.



Photographs on location by Ross Couper, Leon van Wyk and Danielle Kueck  
Singita Ebony and Boulders Lodge  
Sabi Sand  
South Africa  
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