

# Singita



Photo by Brian Rode

## WILDLIFE REPORT SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA For the month of March, Two Thousand and Eighteen

	Temperature		Rainfall	
Recorded	Sunrise & Sunset			
Average minimum:	20°C (68°F)	For the period:	21 mm	Sunrise: 06h00
Average maximum:	32°C (90°F)	For the year to date:	185 mm	Sunset: 17h52
Minimum recorded:	17°C (63°F)			
Maximum recorded:	40°C (104°F)			

It has been another amazing month here at Singita Kruger National Park. Autumn has arrived and the sun is rising later and later every day. The temperatures have started dropping in the early hours of the morning, although it is still not cold enough to have to wear fleeces or jackets yet. The days are still warm though, and the heat during the midday periods is quite intense. There is still a bit of moisture in the air and we have even had a little bit of late rain. Soon the clouds will disappear altogether and we will have clear blue skies again, more typical of our winter months. The water level in the N'wanetsi River is, however, starting to drop and there are many areas where the riverbed is now dry. There is still a lot of water at the weir in front of Lebombo Lodge and the pools near Dumbana and Puff-Adder Crossing are still full. With the late rains there is a fair bit of standing water in the concession in the form of pans and seasonal waterholes and

this has meant that the game has been spread out widely across the concession. The grass layer is thick and in the basalt areas it is in full seed. This is attracting quite a few seed-eating birds to the area and it appears that the red-billed queleas are gathering again in fairly large flocks, particularly in the far north of the concession where it seems that they are starting to build nests again. This is very late in the season for them to be nesting. The vegetation is lush and green and the grass is just starting to change colour now. There is lots of food for the grazers and we have been seeing large herds of zebras and wildebeest. In the hills there are still many wild flowers and there are stands of yellow hibiscus and melhanias in full bloom. It is very pretty. There are still many migrant birds in the area. The number of European rollers has, however, diminished and we can see that the barn swallows are starting to gather before heading off on their long journeys north. We are now looking forward to seeing what April will bring.



Photo by Margaux Le Roux



Photo by Brian Rode

Our wildlife review for the month of March is as follows:

#### Buffalos:

Buffalo viewing at Singita Kruger National Park generally improves with the grazing conditions. We have been lucky enough to have seen numerous herds throughout the month, of various sizes. It has been a great joy to see their black forms wading through grass that is so long one can barely even see their legs.

In amongst some of these herds, there has been the movement of four smaller legs in between the large ones, which is always something that brings a smile to the face of those who see them. It is a good indicator that the animals are in good condition and breeding well. It is incredible to see how well the herd protects these youngsters, hiding them behind a formidable wall of adults.

To our knowledge, the buffalos have by and large escaped the clutches of the area's many lions, as we did not see lions killing or feeding on buffalo at all this month. Nevertheless, we are sure the eternal drama has played out many times, unseen and under the cover of darkness.

We are hoping that the frequency of buffalo sightings continues to increase as the grazing conditions become comparably more favourable on the N'wanetsi Concession, than the western areas of the Kruger National Park. We have already begun to see this trend, with at least two herds of more than 50 buffalos being recorded on one drive towards the end of the month.



Photo by Brian Rode

### Elephants:

It is always difficult to explain what it is about elephants that holds such a deep attraction. Regardless of what an elephant sighting means to a particular individual, there is always something there. That is why we count ourselves extremely lucky to go on safari in an area that is so good for them. That having been said, Marula season in the west of the Kruger National Park has meant that we have seen fewer of these great animals than usual.

We have seen some large herds, with up to forty individuals recorded in one group towards the end of the month, but most sightings have been of herds that are much smaller than that. Still, there have been sightings of baby elephants, who are highly amusing at the moment. This is because they quite simply cannot see above the grass, and often all one can see is a moving 'rock' and occasionally the periscopic trunk behind their mothers, as they follow them in complete trust.

It has been interesting to note the number of musth bulls that we have been seeing on the concession. A general theme throughout the month has been the excellent food sources available to the animals. This has led to the elephants being in good health, which in turn has caused more bulls to go into this state. Thus, our game drives have often been punctuated with sightings of elephants walking with purpose, trunks swinging from side to side as they swagger off in search of mates.

An added treat for us has been the presence of extremely large elephant bulls around our airstrip, who prove to be quite the dramatic welcoming party, or send off crew, to our guests as they arrive or leave.



Photo by Brian Rode

### Spotted Hyenas:

Spotted hyenas are possibly some of the most interesting large mammals in the bush. Many people have strong opinions about whether they like or dislike these creatures. Unfortunately, they have often been portrayed on documentaries and movies as "evil", thieving, dirty, mischievous creatures. It is as if we judge them according to our values, like the animals are humans themselves. Spotted hyenas are in fact super predators in their own rights and have their own set of "moral or community standards". They are social

animals that live in clans and have a distinctive, organised order of hierarchy within their clans. In spotted hyena clans the females are dominant over the males and the “queen” or “alpha” is at the top of the hierarchical structure. Although they are considered scavengers they do often hunt for themselves and can even bring down prey as large as zebras or wildebeest.

We are fortunate to see hyenas regularly on the concession. There are at least three different clans of hyenas that live in the concession. The clan that lives in the area around Cassia have not been seen very much this month. This is not surprising, however, as the area where they reside is very far north in the concession and it takes quite a while to get there, which means that in the mornings when we do get up there it is already hot and the hyenas are already hiding. The Xinkelengane / Nyeleti Clan, which also den in the far north of the concession seem to have moved their den-site and we are no longer seeing them at the old position. We think that they have moved into an area near Golf Course Clearing, where we do not drive due to the sensitivity of the soils in that area. We have also not seen much of the clan that lives in the culverts under the H6 public road. Even though we have not been seeing much of these clan members we have had at 26 sightings of hyenas during the month of March.

An exciting find this month was the discovery of the new den-site of the Nyokeng Clan. They have moved to the Granophyre Ridge where they are denning in amongst some fallen boulders. We are looking forward to seeing more of this clan, with their youngsters, in April.



Photo by Brian Rode

Lions:



Photo by Margaux Le Roux

One of the most amazing things about game viewing on the N'wanetsi Concession is the sheer number of lion sightings one gets to experience. The viewing of lion prides and coalitions is almost a daily occurrence here, but that in no way diminishes the sheer wonder one feels when viewing the largest of all the African cats.

The Shish Pride, as always, is very special to see, with the white lion and his brothers still in very good health. Each day brings us closer to the moment when there will be a big change in that pride. The males will have to leave, and make their own way in life, leading to a drastic reduction in the number of individuals in the pride. As they draw ever nearer to the four-year-old mark, this change is imminent.

The Mountain Pride have been slightly enigmatic in March this year, especially towards the end of the month. We are under the impression that one of the lionesses in the pride has a set of cubs somewhere in the central area. We look forward to meeting the little ones when she is good and ready to show us!



Photo by Brian Rode

The Shish Males continue to dominate most of the area in which we conduct our game drives, but do not seem to be the force they were when the male with one eye was still part of the coalition. They operate as a coalition of two for the most part, with the older male seen on his own more often than not. There have been two sightings of a new, young coalition of four males that were seen around Dave's Crossing on the last day of the month. We are very interested to see how this is going to play out.

Lastly, one of the Shish Males was seen mating with an unknown lioness near our staff village for numerous days. It made for great viewing for both staff and guest alike, as the lions were regularly seen on the commute to and from the lodge.

Cheetahs:

We have had a good month of cheetah viewing. There were 15 reported sightings of these beautiful, sleek, spotted cats this month.



Photo by Brian Rode

During the first week of March we were lucky enough to see a female cheetah with her four playful cubs. She stayed for a few days in the open grasslands of the area that we call the Central Depression. It is a stunning part of the concession with short, open grassland with a backdrop of the Lebombo Ridges. The Xinkelengane Drainage lies at the base of the Lebombos and is a dry streambed, with a thin strip of tall riparian trees growing on the banks, that snakes its way through the plains. The mother cheetah and her cubs were last seen heading in a south-west direction, where they exited the concession.

There were no cheetah sightings for about a week after that, until after the middle of the month when a pair of cheetahs were seen on one of the plateaus between the Lebombo Ridges. The two cheetahs seemed to be fairly young and had probably only recently left the company and support from their mother (usually at around one-and-a-half-years old). It is not usual to find a single male and female pair together. Normally cheetah males either walk alone or form coalitions with other males (often brothers). The female is generally solitary unless with cubs or youngsters of her own. It is therefore likely that these two cheetahs will part ways in a few weeks or months. This pair of cheetahs remained in the open areas near the Ntsibitsane Drainage for approximately a week, hunting impalas. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of the month we found them feeding on an impala that they had just killed. The two cheetahs stayed around for close on a week before they also left the concession. We had some great sightings of them while they were here.

On the morning of the 31<sup>st</sup> we were lucky enough to find another female cheetah with four older sub-adults.

#### Leopards:

There were 23 reported sightings during the month of March. There is a reasonable number of leopards in the area, but they are not always easy to view as many of the individuals that patrol and utilise the ridges and valleys of the Lebombo Ridges are quite shy and hide easily among the rocks. They have beautiful markings, with black rosettes on a golden pelt, that allows them to blend in extremely well into the surrounding environment, making them almost invisible. The thick grass layer in the area has made it easy for the leopards to remain undetected, and for them to disappear rapidly once they are "spotted".



Photo by Brian Rode

The young Dumbana male was seen a few times. He was found feeding on an impala on at least two occasions this month, once near Monzo Pan (where he hid the impala in the long grass under some bushwillow shrubs, only to have it stolen from him during the night) and once near our western boundary road, where it crosses the N'wanetsi River. This time he had put the kill up in a large jackalberry tree.

There have also been a few sightings of a fairly relaxed male moving through the concession. On one occasion he was seen dragging an impala through the grass towards a thickly-wooded, rocky area of the Xinenene Poort (a poort is a South-African term meaning a steep-sided, narrow, rocky valley that slices between two hills or through a ridge).

A large tom leopard was seen crossing the weir in front of Lebombo Lodge early one morning. He was fairly relaxed and spray-marked the bushes at the end of the crossing, to mark territory, before heading north onto the rocky ridge where we were unable to follow him.

There has also been a shy female and her young cub that has been seen on a few occasions close to camp. The youngster is fairly relaxed, but the adult is shy and therefore disappears quite quickly after they have been found, taking the youngster with her by calling it to follow.

Other interesting sightings:

There have been a few interesting sightings on some of the night drives. Some of the nocturnal creatures seen this month include both small-spotted, and large-spotted genets. These are small cat-like creatures with exquisite markings on their coats. They almost look like nocturnal mongooses or ferrets, with the patterns of pseudo-leopard and a ringed black-and-white tail. They are small carnivores that can climb trees very well. During the day they hide in cavities in dead trees, holes between the rocks or in thick vegetation. The two species (*Genetta genetta* and *Genetta maculata* respectively), are very similar looking. The small-spotted, however, has much smaller spots, a white tip to the tail and is generally seen in the basaltic grassland areas. The large-spotted genet has much richer-coloured, bigger spots across its fur, the

tip of the tail is generally black and we see them more often in the riverine vegetation or on the ridges where they blend in with the more mottled and shadowed habitats. They feed on insects, arthropods, reptiles, birds, eggs and even fruit.

We have also had a few sightings of African civets (*Civetictis civetta*), a slightly larger, also nocturnal, cat-like carnivore with beautiful markings. There were a few reported sightings of Cape porcupines and even a single sighting of a caracal (an incredibly exquisite, reddish, lynx-like cat, with tufted ears and a shortened tail) that was busy hunting something in the grass near the stick-thorn thickets.

Because of the long grass and thicker vegetation at this time of the year we have not had many sightings of the smaller antelope species such as klipspringer, Sharpe's grysbok, steenbok or common duiker.

Notable bird sightings during March include a sighting of a pink-throated twinspot (a beautiful, tiny, pink and black bird with white spots on the belly) that Blaine and Warren saw while they were on a walk in the northern areas of the concession. Many of the migrants have already left the area, although we have still been seeing European rollers, southern carmine bee-eaters, woodlands kingfishers and barn swallows. They will probably leave the area next month.



Southern Carmine Bee-eater



European Roller

Photos by Brian Rode

### Some of the eagles of Lebombo Concession

(Article and photos by Brian Rode)

Due to the great diversity of habitats in the Singita Kruger National Park Concession we are fortunate enough to see many of the southern African eagle species.

Eagles are large, powerfully built birds of prey, with heavy heads and beaks. Like all birds of prey, eagles have very large, hooked beaks for ripping flesh from their prey, strong, muscular legs, and powerful talons (that are extremely formidable weapons used to kill and grab hold of their prey).

Due to the size and power of many eagle species, they are ranked at the top of the food chain as "apex predators" in the avian world. They are the bird version of the big cats in Africa. They are hunters and the type of prey preferred varies according to species, for example the favoured prey of the African fish-eagle is predominantly fish and the brown snake-eagle likes to eat snakes. As "apex predators" eagles are extremely important in controlling numbers of their prey species. Many eagles feed on creatures that humans often consider pests, such as rodents, termites, grasshoppers, snakes and other reptiles etc.



African hawk-eagle (*Aquila spilogaster*)



African fish-eagle (*Haliaeetus vocifer*)



Brown snake-eagle (*Circaetus cinereus*)

Most eagles scan from a perch on cliffs or in trees and fly down and grab prey, usually without landing, and take flight with it, so the prey can be carried to a perch and torn apart. Many eagles will also scavenge from carcasses and road-kills (e.g. bateleurs and tawny eagles). African hawk-eagles often chase birds and ambush them in woodlands. These birds are usually seen in pairs and are very striking with their black and white colouration.



Tawny eagle (*Aquila rapax*)



Bateleur (*Terathopus ecaudatus*)

Eagles' eyes are extremely powerful, for example, it is estimated that the martial eagle has up to 3.6 times better vision than that of humans. This amazing eyesight enables eagles to spot potential prey from a very long distance.

Female eagles are generally larger than the males. Eagles normally build their nests, called eyries, in tall trees or on high cliffs. Many species lay two eggs, but the older, larger chick frequently kills its younger sibling once it has hatched. This is known as "Cainism". The parents take no action to stop the one killing the other.

A few species of eagles in southern Africa are known to kill small mammals. In more forested areas of the Kruger Park one may find crowned eagles that regularly kill monkeys and small antelopes such as duikers. We do not see these eagles on our concession, but we do see martial eagles fairly regularly. These are majestic, large, powerful eagles that are known to, on occasion, kill and feed on small antelope, such as baby impalas, steenbok and klipspringers. A martial eagle was once recorded having killed a 37 kg (82 lb) duiker, 7–8 times heavier than itself. Their favourite prey, however, is probably guinea-fowl or monitor lizards.



Martial eagle (*Polemaetus bellicosus*)

Eagles are some of the largest birds of prey in Africa, excluding the vultures. Eagles in the genus *Aquila*, are usually superb soarers, and have relatively long, broad wings to capture the up-drafts of the thermals. Their primary feathers usually flare at the ends, looking like fingertips at the ends of the wings. These fingertips act as wing slots, stabilizing the movement of the wind over the feathers at really slow speeds, such as when they are soaring.

Some of the eagles that we see here are seasonal migrants, and we only see them during the summer months, for example Wahlberg's eagles and lesser-spotted eagles. Others such as the African fish eagles, martial eagles and the tawny eagles are resident in the area throughout the year. During the summer months, particularly when the red-billed queleas are nesting in the concession, we see a great influx of eagles.



Lesser-spotted eagle (*Aquila pomarina*)



Wahlberg's eagles (*Aquila wahlbergi*)

### March moments in time



Photo by Margaux Le Roux



Photo by Margaux Le Roux





Articles by Brian Rode and Blaine Moolman  
Photos by Brian Rode & Margaux Le Roux  
Singita Kruger National Park, South Africa  
Thirty-first of March, Two Thousand and Eighteen