

Singita



WILDLIFE REPORT **SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA** For the month of July, Two Thousand and Eighteen

Temperature

Average minimum: 13°C (55°F)
Average maximum: 26°C (79°F)
Minimum recorded: 10°C (50°F)
Maximum recorded: 31°C (88°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 0 mm
From Aug 2017 to date: 568.2 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:38
Sunset: 17:21

The term 'surreal' was fitting for this month's sightings, and it describes countless experiences that will be cherished forever. The winter has been filled with excitement, not only for the relief of cooler temperatures from the summer, but the first sight of 11 wild dog puppies had everyone beaming with enjoyment. In addition we have been eagerly awaiting the introduction of the new litter from the Mhangene lionesses. Field Guide, Joffers McCormick, had a fortunate encounter with one of the lionesses as she moved her cubs into the Sand River – it was a sighting that will remain very high on most lists of memorable occasions of guiding in the bush. We have had some brief long distance viewing of the cubs since that sighting. We look forward to the new pride members settling down in the area. Interesting though that one of younger lionesses from their previous litter has been 'adopted' and remained with the three remaining adult Mhangene lionesses. Time will tell how long the young lioness will be tolerated with the new cubs.

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

Lions

The sub-adult Mhangene pride members continue to roam large areas of the Sabi Sand and most recently have been sighted on a few occasions feeding on various carcasses. Current sightings have only reported six young males and two females. As these lions continue to grow and fend for the fittest to survive, they will certainly fragment due to the higher number of males to females. The males being larger in size will overpower the females when feeding on smaller prey.

Leopards

The Schotia female and her two cubs have continued to dominate the sightings and it has become more evident that she has settled right into her mother's territory (Hlab'Nkunzi). She continues to prove her success in hunting, with three different carcasses reported within a five-day span of each other. There have been occasions where she has lost the carcass due to the high concentrations of hyenas in the area. A clear error of judgment unbeknown to the Schotia female was that she successfully hoisted an impala carcass right above an active hyena den-site. This was evident as several hyenas circled the hoisted carcass waiting for scraps to fall from their feeding on the meat. Smaller hyena cubs appeared and whilst viewing the leopards feeding, several more hyena cubs appeared from the den-site and were blasé about the leopards, so much so that they continued to suckle on the mothers as if nothing had changed. It was quite the sight.

Elephants

Elephants have been moving through the area in some large numbers. On average most herds in the area are approximately 20 individuals, however during the last week a few sightings have exceeded this with almost doubling in size and in some rare occurrences along the river with herds being reported as large as 100.

Buffalo

Buffalo bull groups and single bulls have been encountered mostly along the Sand River. Larger herds continue to stay predominantly further in the south-eastern regions.



The unique and rare

Article by Ross Couper

An extremely rare sighting occurred this month with the next one only happening in eight year's time. A phenomenon that would have been seen in only a few counties this time, a well known sight to some, the blood moon. The occurrence of Earth and the moon being in perfect alignment for the shadow to be cast over the moon leaving it with a reddish color for over three hours during the total eclipse.



Several guests opted to stay out in the bush and watch the eclipse from the comfort of blankets and cushions next to the Land Rovers on an open clearing, whilst others had dinner under the stars and watched it unfold with dancers hypnotically swaying to drum beats.



Whether it's seeing a leopard for the first time, or listening to elephants communicate, the essence of the wild draws our attention and often mesmerizes us with her beauty all the time, this was one of those moments that many will not forget in the wild.



Taking in all of the rare encounters in one week was hard to imagine, but it did indeed happen. Field Guide, Leon van Wyk, and his guests were enthralled when their tracker Renneck excitedly put his hand up for Leon to stop the vehicle, and pointed out a pangolin waking through the dry grass. This was a sighting no-one wanted to miss out on!





As guests cautiously climbed off the Land Rovers to take a closer look without disturbing this elusive creature, it moved occasionally, and this was greeted with whispers of excitement and the flicker of camera shutters going off. As guides explained the reasons for its rarity, it was hard to imagine what the bush would be like without these secretive animals. Even though we don't see many rare creatures, one in particular as rare as this always comes to guests' and guides' minds when we discuss what would be the rarest sighting to see.



To add to the value of this month's incredibly rare sightings, a female in a pack of wild dogs has had 11 puppies. The den-site is secluded in thick bush and a visit to it can be a hit or miss affair. Often the pack covers large distances and on most occasions the only time that we have been able to witness the puppies emerging from the den has been after the guides were able to follow the members back to the den-site.



We look forward to further prospects of seeing the wild dogs actively hunting in the area. Last week guests staying at Boulders Lodge were fortunate enough to watch the pack hunting in front of the lodge before they departed on their morning game drive. Now that's a very exciting start to the day!



The uncertain future of the Othawa pride male

Article by Renain Venter

Contrary to popular belief, lions don't have it as easy as everyone thinks. They have the title "King of the Jungle" and it's not easy keeping the title. Firstly, everything that they try to catch has evolved to evade and outrun them. They would need to get really close (less than about 10-15 yards) to their prey before even standing a 30% chance of catching it. This sometimes leads to lions going without food for up to a couple of weeks. With these statistics not being in favour of the lion, there are even more statistics against male lions. A lion at birth already only stands a 50% chance of making it to adulthood and for males it is even less, possibly reduced by another 50% on top of that. The male lion at birth, if lucky enough, would try stick with any brothers or male cousins, as they would be a much stronger force to be reckoned with than if they were solitary. They would have to leave the protection of their mothers as they would by that time have new youngsters to take care of. The fathers of those young male lions would also not be very happy with their presence as they might see them as a threat. Off they go into the dangerous world where they would have to try stay under the radar and avoid any confrontation with any males until they reach the age of five or so, where they stand a chance to possibly take over a pride. This all the better if you have brothers to join.

If you don't have anyone to join, life becomes so much tougher! You would have to feed yourself, fend for yourself and find your own way around. Sometimes an option is to join up with other males around the same age and hope you don't get killed. The male would have to be very submissive and it's not going to come without any battle scars. Currently there is one male roaming the Sabi Sand region that comes from the Othawa pride which spends much of its time just north of the Sand River. Unfortunately he doesn't have any brothers to join and his fathers have also met their eventual fate, so it is going to be tough on him, especially with new groups of males moving in to see if they can take over the unoccupied territory. Currently he has left the territory and is on the run to find either other males to join, if they allow him to, or maybe he could one day stand a chance of having his own territory. Probably his best hope would be to try to get accepted into another band of up-and-coming almost-adult males, in the bid to become a part of a strong coalition.



Seeking lions, but found a leopard

Article by Mike Moth

The beauty of the bush is that every single day out here is different!

We set out for our afternoon drive with the plan being to find lions. About an hour into the drive, another guide called in a set of lion tracks. Making our way to where the tracks were called in, time was against us as the light was beginning to fade, so tracking would become challenging.

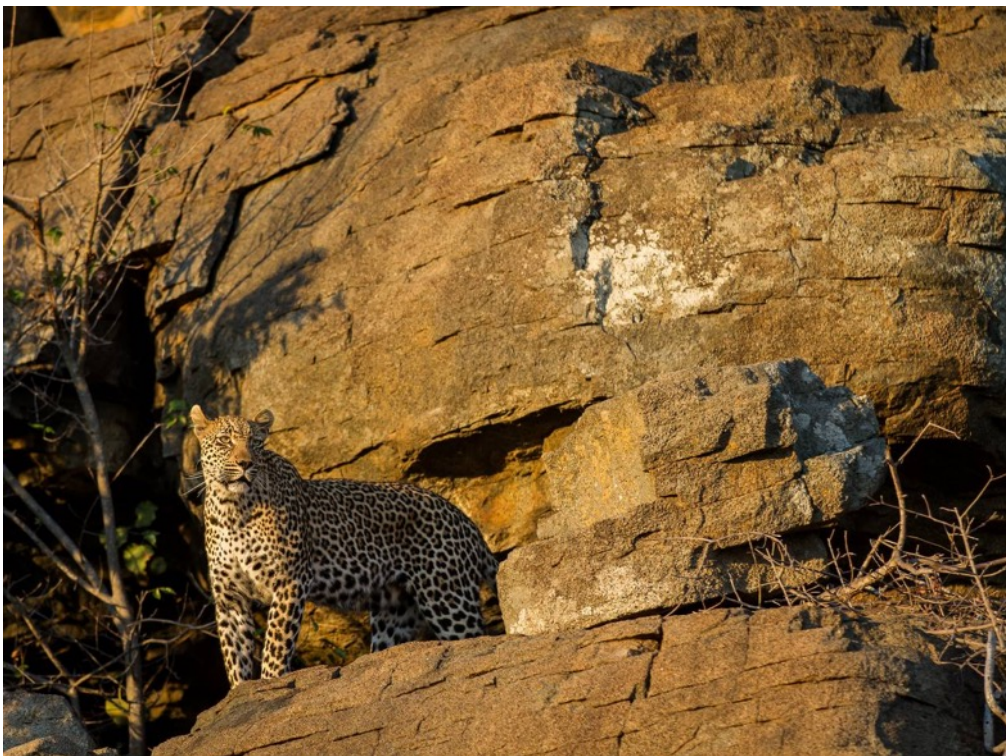
We arrived at the area where the last tracks were seen, told the guests that we would be back shortly and that they would be safe as long as they didn't get off of the vehicle. My tracker and I set off on the tracks, our focus and senses heightened due to the fact that we didn't have the protection of the vehicle anymore. We figured out by "reading" the tracks that there were at least three lionesses, and they were moving quite quickly, as we could see that the hind feet of the tracks were well forward from the front tracks.

Suddenly, a snort, a distinct sound from an impala that indicated there was potentially a predator in the area. My tracker moved with excitement back towards the vehicle, believing that with the intensity that the impala was calling, that it had located the lions for us.

We began to drive off-road in the direction of the calls, finally spotting the impala, standing tall, alert and still snorting. Next moment my tracker shouted out... "Leopard!" Completely not what we were looking for, but we would definitely take it!

The guests' cameras came out, the sound of the shutters going sounded like a machine gun being fired, trying to capture both the impala and the leopard in the same shot.

Having the privilege of working in a specific area for a while, we are able to distinguish the different identities of the territorial animals in our area; this particular female we were following has two cubs and it was our hope that she would lead us right to them, so when we saw her approaching a rocky outcrop, we really started to get excited. Unfortunately for us, she just stopped on the outcrop for a few moments, had a good look around from her vantage point and just wandered off. We were not able to locate the lions that we were tracking, but thanks to that impala, we were rewarded with an amazing sighting of a leopard.



Tracker's leopard encounter

Article by Andries Mohlala

This is a story narrated by Peter Ubisi, one of our experienced trackers here at Singita Sabi Sand. Let me say that tracking requires a lot of bravery and it takes guts to master. One needs a sharp eye and acute hearing to walk into the middle of nowhere to find the “nobodies” that live where you do not belong as a human.

The skill of finding a footprint of an animal on a sandy patch or gravel patch and be able to tell which animal left the print and work out how old the print is and still launch an investigation, does qualify as madness... but only in the “real world.”

On this one afternoon game drive, Peter got a report from his guide that there was a leopard that had crossed the Sand River towards the area they were working. As per usual, he took a hand-held radio with him, left the vehicle and said his “goodbyes” and “see you later” and smiled eagerly as he made his way into the bush in the direction of where he thought the leopard might come out. One might ask “why not use a vehicle to try locate the animal, because surely it would be dangerous to encounter a leopard on foot?”

The answer is, yes he did encounter the leopard, and it was quite awkward, very unsettling indeed. When Peter left the vehicle, he took a game path which would allow for an easier walk with fewer obstacles. About ten minutes later, he heard footfalls, the sound of animals running towards him on the game path that he thought was going to be easy to walk on. But it sounded like this time the owners or frequent users of the path were home - he could not see them yet but they were coming his way at what sounded like full speed and that was not good news! He did not know what was going to come around the corner any second now. When the animals did show up, his immediate thinking was “this is it, my map ends here and now.”

The female leopard took a corner at an alarming speed with a rather oversized male baboon close on the leopard's heels! These two are known to be sworn enemies and Peter Ubisi was in “no man's land” and it became a desperate situation more for man than animal. The baboon was winning, the leopard was losing, and they were hurtling towards Peter who had no plan but to make a call on his radio. For some reason or other, the radio communication failed at that moment, and Peter had to turn to his experience and instinct, trusting that what he had always practiced in tight situations would preserve him once again: “stand your ground, make yourself look big and aggressive.” And as fast as the animals appeared, so they disappeared! What was left was a loud sound within his chest, banging loudly against his ribs, and he believes he smiled, thinking “what an experience!”

Later on, when Peter was safely back on the vehicle, it was discovered that the leopard had a kill and the baboons had stolen some of the meat. Baboons can be very intimidating creatures, and leopards (especially female leopards) are very wary of them indeed.

Editor's note: *It should be mentioned here that there was nothing reckless about what Peter did. On a daily basis, our trackers spend time on foot, actively following up on predators. They are experienced and well trained, and know what to do in the event of a close encounter. The leopard was not charging the tracker, it was being chased by the baboon. Even if the leopard had been aggressively charging Peter, the correct thing for him to do would have been to stand his ground. Most of our trackers and guides feel safer on foot in the African wild than they would feel in a strange city.*

July moments



The beauty of bush, whether it's the fluttering flashes from sunbirds or the silent movement from elephants as they quietly walk over the dry grass, has a way of captivating us all.



The cool early mornings have been a blessing with clear blue skies and crystal clear water, that only later gets disturbed as the temperatures rise and wildlife move towards the water sources.





Photographs on location by Ross Couper
Singita Ebony and Boulders Lodge
Sabi Sand
South Africa
Thirty-first of July 2018