

# Singita



## WILDLIFE REPORT SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA

For the month of December, Two Thousand and Eighteen

### Temperature

Average minimum: 21°C (69°F)  
Average maximum: 35°C (95°F)  
Minimum recorded: 18°C (64°F)  
Maximum recorded: 42°C (107°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 45mm  
Aug 2018 to date: 100.5mm

### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:06  
Sunset: 18:47

As 2018 comes to a close, the thought of the New Year is full of excitement. This time of the year brings blessed relief for the wildlife, with the nourishing rains. The month of December has been an incredible time of the summer season as dung beetles have been prevalent, along with many other smaller insect species emerging after the rains. With the influx of insects, this brings birdlife to the forefront of wildlife viewing, with some of the most spectacular raptor species returning from a long absence from the continent during the winter months. Weavers are breeding and the intricate nest builders are hard at work trying to impress the prospective mates. Each season brings its own special feeling in the bush and summer is no different with green engulfing the bush from ground level up to the tree canopies. Currently the yellow hue has been dominating the bush as the sjambok pod/ long-tailed cassia and knob-thorn trees started flowering in early November and the colour continues into the summer season for approximately six weeks. The natural excitement of being outdoors and on a game drive is amplified by the brilliant stage of greenery and the most majestic evening thunderstorms that occur. Lightning streaks across the sky illuminating the bushveld below, and often it can be the best show on earth – especially if you are enjoying dinner on one of the open decks, when the frog orchestra is in full swing with the promise of rain.

## **Here's a Sightings Snapshot for December:**

### **Lions**

The Mhangene pride continues to grow with 'pride' with the seven young cubs being a highlight of the group's dynamic. On a few occasions this month, one of the older litters of four cubs was missing a single cub for longer than a week and on these occasions, we had been under the presumption that the single cub may have been killed. However, fortunately this was not the case and it has since been seen.

Unfortunately, the mortality on cubs is high at young ages, particularly as there are dominant males moving amongst the pride at present. The only large male moving amongst the pride's females is the Othawa male who has shown no threat to the cubs, however he dominates over the lionesses during feeding opportunities due to his brute strength and instinct to survive. This is an interesting saga that continues to amaze us in every encounter that we have with this pride.

The Othawa pride has also been thriving extremely well, with a new litter of three cubs as an addition to the existing six pride members.

### **Leopards**

As the lion prides continue to grow, so does the leopard population. The Khokovela female was seen early this month with a new litter of leopard cubs. Unfortunately, since the initial sighting of the two cubs, only one cub has survived. We look forward to watching this single cub growing in the wild. This is Khokovela's second litter and with her recent movements she has shifted her territory further east into the Mhakubela drainage.

### **Elephants**

Large herds continue to move in wider directions from perennial water sources as the rains continue to fill the seasonal pans of water and streams.

### **Hyenas**

The drier conditions during the start of summer have continued to have the hyena dens flourishing with activity. As the season progresses, the young cubs start moving with the adults and rarely will return to the sanctuary of the den-site. The den-sites are often used during the following winter by dominant alpha females. Sub-ordinate beta females will also use the den-site later in the winter season. With very high temperatures of late we have been viewing a number of hyenas in and around our waterholes seeking some refuge from the sweltering heat.

### **Wild dogs**

The wild dog packs have been rarely viewed this month as they have been moving far less in search of food. With the abundance of impalas and other younger species that are vulnerable to the pack, the dogs will move less in the summer season and rarely will spend long periods of time in one particular area.

### **Unusual sightings**

Other unique sightings that have been reported this month, included three porcupine sightings, two honey badgers that have been very active in the open areas south of Castleton Camp, along with three different sightings of a male serval. The serval sighting has been very rewarding, as the single male has shown signs of being habituated to the vehicles which has been very exciting to see. Servals are shy by nature and often scurry off away from any sounds that don't sound familiar to them.



In early December the yellow hues in the grass stalks is prevalent, but soon to be covered in green.



The tree canopies have started to come to life after a long dry spell in the bush.

Living 'bush' allows us to watch the ebb and flow of nature taking her natural course with the circle of life. It is such a privilege to experience the unique feeling that we are a small part of an animal's life. Over the last seven years working at Singita, I have watched leopards come and go in various Singita regions, true to the peak and trough of leopard populations in the wild.



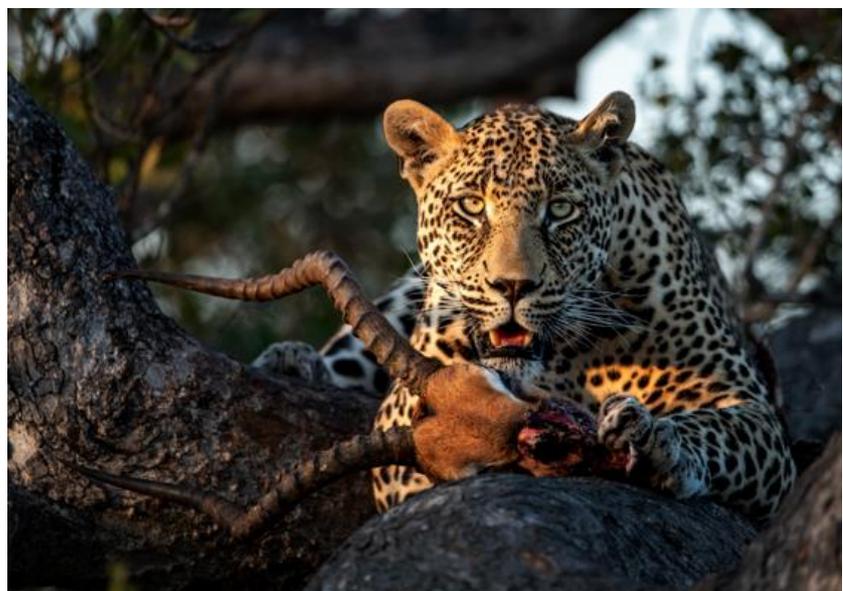
There is always one particular population of leopards that is extremely close to my heart, as I literally live with them. Often, I have woken up in the early hours of the morning listening a rasping roar, wondering who it is and in which direction they are going. Leopards have added significantly to my guiding experience, and I now understand them better than ever before, and this is all because of the frequent interactions that we are fortunate to have with the well-habituated leopards in the area.



As we watch them in wild, due to being able to see them frequently, we see how young male leopards soon become independent and instinctively move away from their natal territory that are maintained by their mothers. Conversely we see mother leopards often relinquish territory to their female offspring. We watch the males fend for themselves and occasionally we are lucky enough to have them establish a territory in close vicinity to Singita.

A leopard that is considered a highlight by the guides at Singita, is the Ravenscourt male. Unfortunately, he spends a greater part of his time west of Singita, but occasionally crosses the boundary and we encounter an old friend that holds a legendary story of survival.

The image on the right was one of the last recorded sightings of the N'weti young male just before he decided to move south in the Sabi Sand Reserve. The guides keep a record of identities with each of the leopards we encounter. We work closely with Panthera to attain the data required in order to create an historical analysis of movement of the leopards throughout a year, but more importantly through several years. This data adds great value to facilitate a conservation purpose and management strategies.



## **What a drama!**

**Article by Andries Mohala**

This all unfolded on an early morning game drive after we had located a drag mark that indicated that a leopard had dragged a carcass across the road. All the signs were there – including the clear paw prints on wet sandy soil from a female leopard. The kill was dragged to a tree close to the road, and we could see the hair of the carcass on the tree trunk, but we couldn't see the carcass or a leopard. So, we followed her tracks thinking that she must have gone to fetch her cub to bring it to the kill. To make things even more interesting the monkeys were alarm calling in the area for the predator, but finding the actual leopard proved to be more of a challenge...

My tracker and I split up to try and cover more ground in search of the elusive predator. There were fresh tracks all over the area, and birds joined the monkeys in an alarm chorus. This was all positive, but to no avail, as none of these animals were able to point us in the right direction.

After about fifteen minutes we decided to head back to the vehicle and as soon as we had sight of the Land Rover we saw hyenas running around and the guests were pointing at the very tree we thought the kill had been hoisted in. As we moved closer, and much to our surprise, we saw two leopards resting in the tree with a grey duiker kill! Apparently, the leopards appeared half a minute after we departed the vehicle!

As I was processing what had just happened, there was a loud thud and the carcass dropped down to the ground because the young cub had been toying with it. Within split seconds the hyenas flew in and the mother leopard and cub leapt to the ground to beat off the hyenas. The cub grabbed the rear end of the carcass and the mother grabbed the carcass by the throat. The cub began wrestling the carcass in a wild and confused attempt to take it away from his mother. The mother was instinctively trying to re-hoist the carcass away from the hyenas' reach. The mother leopard soon realised that she is going to lose both kill and cub to the scavengers. Her extraordinary strength came into play as she dragged the carcass, with the cub still dangling from it, up the tree, with the hyenas snapping and jumping up underneath it!

The mother managed to get the kill and her rebellious male cub into the safety of the tree. It felt as though we were holding our breath for minutes but this commotion all happened in a matter of seconds. We quickly forgot how difficult it was tracking the leopards earlier, as we all sat riveted to our seats, spellbound by the drama.

## **The onslaught of two spotted hyenas**

**Article by Quinton Paul Josop**

Spotted hyenas are infamous for scavenging from other predators! They go about their lives, opportunistically looking for the weak and injured, as well as any chance to rob large felines and canines of kills they make. Popular belief regarding hyenas is that they hunt and scavenge in clans, but here in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve we often see them roaming around alone and only see them in clans at their den-sites, around waterholes, or after calling for backup if the predators outweigh them in numbers or strength around a carcass!

Recently, on our exploration of the central parts of the reserve, we discovered a greater kudu cow standing dead still in one of the waterholes where our bird hide is situated! Driving around the waterhole to get a better look at what was occurring, we found a spotted hyena standing at the side of the hide staring at the kudu.

Thinking of the potential that could unfold we positioned our vehicle on the other side of the waterhole and sat patiently. A few minutes later a hippo bull returned to his waterhole. Slowly the hippo entered the waterhole noticing the kudu, hyena and our vehicle. Although the hippo wasn't fussed with the kudu being there, it did move closer to it and this is when the kudu responded...



The kudu struggled through the mud towards us, stopped on the bank of the waterhole and this is when we noticed that it had a broken front right leg! The hyena started running around the waterhole to the kudu which then took off to the tree line. The kudu, on three legs, ran back towards the waterhole with the hyena about a meter behind it.

The hyena missed and the kudu plunged back in!

Disappointed by its miss the hyena growled and watched the kudu again standing still, about three metres from the side of the bird hide. Another hippo arrived and entered the waterhole and was less accepting of the kudu finding refuge in their safe haven.

A second hyena must've heard the noise and came to see what was happening! The hyena greeted each other and soon became an alliance. Time past and the kudu remained unmoved. The hyenas lay down next to the hide and the hippos rested.

A while later the action erupted...



The kudu took the gamble and made its way out of the waterhole, stopped to shake off the water, looked over its shoulder to see where the hyenas were and then started running. The hyenas woke up and then came charging around the bank.



The kudu covered a few meters and then turned back to the waterhole. It was just about to enter the water when the hyena caught it!

Grabbing it by the withers the kudu struggled and dropped its neck and head into the water. It made gruelling grunts and tried to escape the powerful jaws of the hyena, but with no success.

The second hyena came in seconds later and now both animals had either side of the kudu and started pulling it out!



We sat and watched how the hyena dragged the kudu to where they were comfortable, not at all trying to kill the kudu by suffocating it, but instead targeting the hind quarters and groin area and ripping it open! The kudu still grunting and bellowing was now being eaten alive! Guts, blood and organs were being pulled out in front of us and the kudu soon succumbed to the onslaught.

We left the area and returned that afternoon to find vultures feeding on only a leg, vertebra and hip bones.

Photographs by guest, Iain Salteri



As we head further into the summer months, the bush is going through an incredible transformation from the grey and yellow colours to the vibrant tones of summer. Not only has the rain delivered a sigh of relief for the vegetation but it is providing the ever so precious food sources for the new mothers giving birth to their young. The rivers are yet again becoming a place of both life and death, as multiple predator and prey species spend the early mornings and late afternoons around the now flowing Sand River.

The sightings in the last month have been nothing short of spectacular, the game viewing has been some of the best that I have ever experienced. We have been treated to some phenomenal sightings from an elephant giving birth, to the Mhangene pride introducing us to their newest additions.

Some of our guests and I got to have the experience of a lifetime. We started the early morning drive with the sun peering through the clouds on an overcast morning. We were out for no longer than about ten minutes before we bumped into a large herd of about forty elephants. This already had proven to be a special sighting to see so many individuals together feeding through an open area, and what a treat it was to see them all from the newborns to the older individuals. We were viewing the elephants from an elevated point to allow us to see the entire herd. As we sat with them, we noticed one of the females displaying signs of distress as she was pacing left to right and vocalizing.

Out came the binoculars to see what the problem could be. To our surprise we noticed she was giving birth! As the new addition was introduced to the world, the entire herd came to welcome it. The herd then started to vocalize and surround the new member - it was something incredible to witness as it shows the bond between the various herd members and what a close-knit family bond they have. We then sat with the herd for a few hours watching in anticipation for the little one to take its first steps. The cow stood over her newborn protecting it from any potential threats, as she covered the placenta with sand trying to mask the scent of the birth in order not to attract any predators into the area.

She then proceeded to use her front foot as well as her trunk to help the little one stand-up and get its balance, from the wobbly first steps and a few attempts with walking, it finally found its balance and was guided through the open clearing into a thicket where we watched the herd disappear into a nearby thicket.

This was truly one of the most magical moments that I have personally experienced in the bush, it is a sighting that I will never forget and feel greatly privileged to have being able to witness such a spectacle.

December Gallery





Photographs on locations by Ross Couper and Quinton Paul Josop