

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA
For the month of February, Two Thousand and Nineteen

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.3°C (70.3°F)

Minimum recorded: 33.9 (93.0°F)

Average maximum: 18°C (64.4°F)

Maximum recorded: 40°C (104°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 133.5mm

For the year to date: 340 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:43

Sunset: 18:44

The vibrancy of colours is almost unbelievable... the emerald greens to warm golds in the late afternoon, coupled with endless puffy clouds in 'big sky' country - this is Africa. Garnished in flowers, drooping seedpods, and swaying grass stalks, the fragrant smells fill the air. It is sensory dream of endless rewards. Taking a deep breath, the sun lingers on the horizon in the early morning, waiting to fill the land with warmth, and so the day starts. Late afternoons have been filled with the rumblings of rain, as is the norm for this time of the year. The rainfall has kept us all sound asleep until we have woken with a clean bushveld canvas.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for February

Lions

- The last month saw an unfortunate decline in the number of cubs in the Mhangene Pride, with the loss of six of the existing youngsters, leaving only one older cub in the pride. The presence of the Othawa male although helpful when taking down prey, is also becoming a burden on the pride as he keeps all meals to himself and is supporting the malnutrition of both the females and cubs. However, through the loss of the six older cubs, new life comes with three newborn cubs adding to the pride and we can only hope that they survive.
- The Othawa Pride have been keeping a low profile but continue to do well with the two Matimba males by their side.

Leopards

- With the unfortunate loss of the Hlabankunzi female in January, it seems as though the female leopard territories have shifted slightly with the Schotia female filling in to her mother's home range and the Khokovela female leopard making her way further east into the previously occupied territory of the Schotia female. This has been a welcome change to our female leopard viewing with many sightings of the Khokovela female and her young male cub who is doing extremely well and becoming much more relaxed.
- The Nyelethi male hit a bit of a low in the past month having sustained injuries from what was thought to be a fight with another leopard, however he has bounced back and continues to patrol his territory.

Elephants

- With the large amount of rain we have experienced recently, the numbers of elephants have increased immensely. There appears to be quite a large number of single elephant bulls roaming around and they are enjoying every offering of the currently fruiting marula trees.

Buffalos

- Increasing numbers of buffalo have been making their way onto the property with many calves also present.

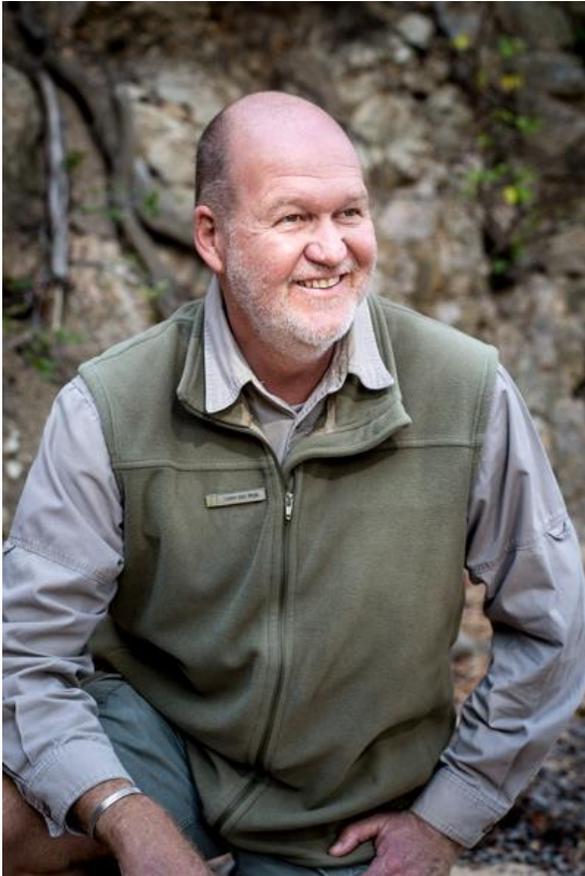
Wild dogs

- The Sands Pack of wild dogs made their way back into the area recently and spent a number of days around the central parts of the property.

Birds

- The total bird count for the month of February was 201 (212 in January). Specials for the month included sightings of black-crowned night-heron, lesser spotted eagle, greater painted-snipe, grey-headed kingfisher, southern carmine bee-eater, monotonous lark, mosque swallow, red-capped lark and fan-tailed widowbird.

Sixty. How can that be possible? Am I really SIXTY? Good gracious! What has happened to the years? What does it mean to be sixty anyway? It doesn't feel all that different from being thirty-something, to be honest. It's just a number. Or is it? It is a number that means it is time to hang up the last of several pairs of size 11 guiding boots that I have pulled onto and off my feet so many times since October 1991, when I switched careers from teaching high school pupils to becoming a guide... or a ranger, as we more typically called ourselves back then. It is very hard to believe that when I first started guiding, Singita's first lodge, Ebony Lodge, had not even been built yet!



So, looking back on a guiding career that has spanned more than a quarter of a century, you can imagine the various thoughts and emotions that are going through my mind, not least of all being the utter amazement and dismay that it is all coming to an end so quickly. Memories come flooding back of so many incredible experiences over the years, and this is not the time or place to even attempt to share specific examples of those in any detail. That will have to be done in a book, I feel, and I have no doubt that I have it in me to write at least ONE book. I do expect to have a lot more time on my hands in the coming months and years, in between (I hope) numerous short stints of part-time guiding and / or guide training.

Memories of my very first days and weeks of being a trainee ranger / guide are still very vivid, and I am sure I will devote at least a couple of chapters of a book to those times. I have fond memories of learning the roads, which, when I first saw a detailed map of the game reserve where I started, looked like an impossibly daunting task! Sometimes I would be out there alone with my maps, sometimes it would be with another trainee, and occasionally we would have an experienced (or at least relatively experienced) ranger with us, who would correct us when we went wrong. In a way, this was a time of such

great freedom, being allowed to take an open Land Rover out into the bush for a whole day, having packed a cooler box with water, fruit juice and ice, and having been given a packed lunch of sandwiches and fresh fruit by the caterer or chef in the camp kitchen. Apart from the food and drink, we would have our maps, reference books (such as field guides to birds, mammals and trees of the region), binoculars, sunscreen and "tools of labour" such as axes, pangas / machetes and saws, as we were expected to do some road clearing while out there. After 10 or 12 hours out in the field, we would return to the camp, sunburned, sweaty and thirsty, and a couple of ice-cold beers would be highly welcome. Life was good!

I have often been asked how long it takes to train to become a guide (notice I sometimes use the term "guide" and sometimes "ranger" – they are one and the same thing, really, although strictly speaking a ranger can be someone who only does field work, and no guiding). I frequently answer the question quite simply and truthfully, by saying "I am still learning!" One can be a very confident and competent guide after only a few months of formal training and a few months of in-service experience. But I do feel that experience is the best teacher, and one should have the attitude of being willing and eager to learn something from everybody one meets.

Knowledge about wildlife and the environment is obviously a very important part of the make-up of a good guide, but there is so much more to it than that. Far more important, I believe, especially if a guide wants to remain a guide and be happy doing so for a number of years, is to be a “people’s person”. One needs to be comfortable to be in the company of people from so many different walks of life, for many hours of the day, and often late into the night. Patience, humility, humour, energy, empathy, enthusiasm, tolerance, friendliness, generosity, integrity, authenticity and openness are just a few of the personal values that will go a long way to making a guide a good one. Arrogance, brashness and a condescending manner have no place in the personality of a good guide, in my opinion. Sharing experiences with guests, discovering with them, anticipating and predicting behaviour – surely this is much better than being a “walking encyclopaedia” who regurgitates excessive quantities of facts about wildlife?

During my guiding career I have experienced floods (again, I could write a couple of chapters on these, particularly the great flood of 2000), droughts, fires, outbreaks of anthrax and I have even seen snow on the mountain peaks to our west, from within the Sabi Sand. When seeing Nature in full force during some of these phenomena, I marvelled time and again over how insignificant and powerless we humans are in the face of Nature’s mighty forces.



I have witnessed more kills than I can remember, and I have also been privileged to witness a considerable number of births in the wild. I am not one who gets a big thrill out of seeing an animal taking many minutes to die while being devoured by a pride of lions, but of course I do like to see predators in action, and if a hunt is successful, I do in a way feel a sense of adrenalin-fed “elation”, but it is always coupled with a measure of sadness. When watching a hunt take place in front of us, it is sometimes a case of rooting for the hungry predator, and sometimes a case of backing the prey animals to make good their escape. Being sensitive to guest feelings and emotions is obviously critically important, and it is natural for a special bond to form

between guide and guests after a lengthy hunt has ended in a dramatic climax (or even an anti-climax). The feeling that one gets is that, “We were in this together!” It can be life-changing for guests to experience at first-hand a hunt, where sometimes the action is so close to the vehicle that one almost feels part of it! Witnessing any birth is uniquely special, but witnessing one in the wild is even more of a rare privilege. As I mentioned, I have been fortunate enough to have witnessed a considerable number of births over the years, all of them having been births of herbivores in the daytime.

Inevitably, as is the case with all guides who get to do game drives for any length of time, I got to know some of the individual animals or groups of animals quite well. I have watched the rise and the demise of numerous coalitions of male lions (perhaps most notably the legendary “Mapogo” coalition), the fluctuating fortunes of many different prides, including the heart-breaking loss of litter after litter of cubs. I have known certain leopards from the time they were tiny cubs until the time they died of old age or age-related stress factors. Individual cats can certainly “creep into the heart” of even the most hardened guides, and one does become rather fond of them. I have tried not to become too emotionally attached to any of them, and when a particular “favourite” individual has met an unfortunate end earlier than expected, I have tended to have a fairly philosophical outlook, seeing it as Nature’s way. Nature may be harsh at times, but she is generally fair.



Birds have always interested me, and I can clearly remember as a small boy paging through a very old copy of Roberts Birds of Southern Africa, admiring the colours of birds I had never seen, and getting a warm glow of satisfaction when I was able to say “I know that one.” Over the years of being a guide, I have learned a lot more about birds, and I would describe myself as a good birder, or a keen birder. Although qualified as a “birding specialist” for the area in which I have operated, I wouldn’t go quite so far as to call myself an expert birder or even an avid birder. Many of my guests and perhaps even some of my colleagues have viewed me as an expert or avid birder, but I have a more modest opinion of my own birding knowledge or skill. I am not one who can instantly tell you the exact number of bird species I have seen and ticked off over the years, and nor am I likely to make a special trip to a new area with the particular goal in mind of adding a specific bird to my life list. Having said all that, I will reiterate that I am certainly a keen birder, and it gives me great pleasure to develop and encourage an interest in birds among my guests, or even my non-guiding colleagues. An interest in birds can add a whole extra dimension to a safari experience, which can sadly be missed altogether by those who are only really interested in seeing the “Big 5”, or more extreme still, those who are only keen to see predators in

action.

Elephants have always been animals that I really love to watch, and I believe it is safe to say that over my years of guiding, they have elevated themselves to the status of being my absolute favourite wild animal. I have always had a healthy respect for them, and I watch their body language very carefully to see what their demeanour is like, before getting close to them. While I have generally been very comfortable even in close proximity to elephants, I have needed to take into consideration that a significant number of guests are quite frightened of elephants, and I would hate to spoil their experience by being too close to them.

I have never been a “cowboy” or “macho” type guide... I have always had what I consider to be a gentle approach to guiding, and if I am to act as a mentor to any novice guides, I would hope that the gentle approach would be something which they too would choose to adopt.

I have mentioned that a good guide needs to be, first and foremost, a “people’s person”. While the thousands of quality sightings that I have enjoyed over the years have been memorable (and a great privilege to witness), my fondest memories by far will be of the many wonderful people I have met and with whom I have worked. Again, chapters in books could be dedicated to some of these individuals, but space does not permit me to go into too much detail in this article. I shall always have fond memories of the many guides and trackers with whom I have worked side by side, some for only a few months, and some for many years. It is fair to say that I learned something from all of them (I don’t necessarily remember what I learned!) and I hope that most of them also learned something from me.



Other staff members have also left their mark, from gardeners and porters, boom guards and maintenance assistants, housekeepers and chefs, to lodge managers, directors and behind-the-scenes office staff. After a game drive that might not have been as productive as I would have liked, it is always comforting to be welcomed back to the lodge by a beaming front-of-house staff member, or a sommelier ready to introduce my guests to our amazing selection of great South African wines, with a passion that is so genuine that it is heart-warming. It is not only us guides who can be passionate about what we do in this beautiful place! In particular, of course, I have been privileged to have met tens of thousands of guests from dozens of countries around the world. A quick and very rough mental calculation suggests that I have had somewhere in the region of 70 000 different guests on my game drive vehicles during my career. Some of them have only done a single game drive with me, while others have done a couple of hundred, at least. Obviously, I cannot remember ALL of my guests, and of course not all of them would remember me either. That is not important.

What is important to me is that I have tried my best to give the vast majority of my guests the best safari experience I possibly can, and I certainly hope that a very high percentage of them have gone away feeling more than just satisfied with the experience we have shared. I don't see myself as the main actor in the show that they have come to watch, but rather as a gentle, subtle facilitator who has shared and interpreted where appropriate.

With some guests I have formed a good, strong bond that develops during their stay, and probably lasts the few days that they are on safari, as well as a couple of days beyond that. This might typically be the case with guests who are on a once-off trip to a game reserve, and who had a great time while here, but who then return to their homes and their work, allowing the safari to quickly fade into a happy memory. On very rare occasions, I have had guests with whom I just didn't "gel", who didn't appreciate my sense of humour, or whose personalities didn't have the patience for my unrushed style of guiding. Indeed, there have been guests (fortunately very few), who have complained about my way of guiding, either midway through their stay or after they have departed. I have had to write reports on feedback given by guests who found me to be disappointing as a guide. Yes, it does happen. It is actually much sadder when guests leave it until after they have departed before giving disappointing feedback, rather than addressing it when it first becomes an issue. Life is too short and safaris are too expensive for guests to just be unhappy with a certain guide (or situation), when all it takes would be to mention the issue in good time, so that it can be resolved and they can be given the opportunity of change, if that is what would make them happy. Fortunately, it is not even close to 1% of the guests that I have guided who have given feedback which was disappointing. I certainly do remember most of these instances, and perhaps in my book I will describe a few of them in detail, without necessarily using their names! Let me not dwell any longer on the negative thoughts associated with the handful of unhappy guests or situations that I have experienced!



Far easier to remember are the many multiple repeat guests, who I have guided on numerous occasions, and with whom I have formed very lasting, meaningful and powerful bonds. Indeed, some of them have become among my very dearest friends, and I don't mean this in a patronizing way at all.



I am a professional guide, and even when I am with those wonderful people with whom I have formed a close personal bond, there needs to be that understanding that I am there to provide a service to the client. That said, we are certainly able to relax and enjoy ourselves in each other's company, and this goes way beyond just our time shared on the Land Rover or doing bush walks. Fireside chats over a drink or two, boma dinners, a la carte dinners, surprise bush dinners are all good opportunities to bond further on a relaxed level. Of course, I have stayed in contact with many multiple repeat guests, and it is always great to know (or at least believe) that we can look forward to sharing some wonderful experiences again in the future. Oh, yes indeed, more than any of the most amazing wildlife sightings that I have ever experienced, what I remember most fondly of my years spent guiding, is the people.

I am hugely grateful to have had the opportunity to have been a guide for so many years, and now that it is all coming to a rather sudden end, there is a lump in the throat and a tear in the eye. It is my heartfelt wish to be able to return again from time to time to this fabulous place, to share this special piece of Africa with some of the many wonderful people who have touched my heart, and to whose lives I hope I have made a difference.

Hello sixty. I didn't expect you quite so soon. Welcome, anyway. You and I need to make friends fast! Let's do it, with the attitude that it is not going to be too different from being forty!

That once in a life time moment

Article by Ross Couper



After guiding for several years, there is wish list that starts to grow on what you would like to see or experience whilst being in the wild on a daily basis. I am privileged to have the opportunity to work daily in the bush, whether its sharing my love and passion for the bushveld with guests or taking a leisurely walking trail on my own. In my capacity of being the resident photographer for Singita, it has afforded many opportunities. The safari wish list is endless, whether it is adding to a bird list, seeing an elephant up close or a nocturnal creature like a honey badger – there is a thrill of ticking sightings off the list.

I have always stood by *‘if you are not looking for it, you will be surprised with what you find’*. Sometimes you will be surprised how much you miss if you are focused on ticking off that list of must see opportunities.

I recently discovered that I was always looking too hard for typical photographic opportunities and sometimes, a little patience, perseverance and a lot of luck are the perfect combination. Without realizing that, it is not necessary something that you look for.

We were aware of one of the Mhangene lionesses having a new litter of cubs which had been reported two weeks prior to this sighting. We had begun noticing that her tracks were returning frequently to the same location in a drainage line near Castleton. The rest of the pride was also viewed frequently in the area. It was inevitable that eventually we would see her with the cubs, but would she be introducing them to the rest of the pride? After scanning the thick bush with binoculars, we had noticed a single larger cub lying on a sandy embankment. The cub was not moving at all and there was no evidence of other pride members. We decide to move closer to have a better look. We stopped the vehicle a short distance from the cub which by then had moved into a thicket out of sight. Whilst sitting listening to the sounds around us, we suddenly heard a few small cries within a few feet of our vehicle.



Straining our eyes to see where it was coming from, we knew exactly that those distinct cries were from very small lion cubs. We eventually could see in a very thick bush the outline of a lioness lying in the long grass very well concealed with her colouring amongst the thickets. Focusing past all of the branches we could see the movement of the lion cubs. We elected to move away from the area now knowing that we accidentally found the lionesses with the young cubs. As we moved back to the road, we could hear the rest of the pride vocalising on the opposite bank. We moved around to the opposite embankment and found a single larger cub, three lionesses and a single male lion. It was evident that the male lion was annoyed by a young Mhangene lioness that was attempting to re-join the pride. This was a strange but this could be a different story that I will follow up with later in the year.

Whilst watching the behaviour between lions, a single lioness emerged from the drainage with a small cub gently gripped between her large canine teeth. Instinctively, as soon as the cub was lifted, it stopped crying and became very still. It did not take much for the clicking repeatedly of our cameras shutters to occur. It was a dreamy moment that felt like it was in slow motion when it occurred. The lioness moved the cub to an alternative den-site further down the drainage. Strangely enough the cubs were too young to be interacting with the remaining pride members, however they watched as she moved through the bush. Neither of the lions dared to follow her or show any signs of interest as this would create serious confrontation amongst the lions. We waited until the lioness was out of sight before moving away from the area as to allow her to continue to move the remaining cubs. Excitement was an understatement to what we experienced.



Trip of a lifetime

Article by Joffers McCormick



I, as well as two other guides, got the opportunity to visit our Zimbabwean colleagues at Singita Pamushana. What an incredible place to visit and what a great experience it was seeing the different landscapes and terrain. The mountains that occupy the property are mind-blowing as well as the open grasslands. The area has got a lot of diversity with regards to terrain, thus allowing for multiple different species to roam the area. We went on two game drives a day for two weeks and never was one drive even close to being the same. From visiting the ancient rock art sights, to caves that were inhabited by our ancestors, this was truly a magical place. We got to see most of the property but as it is such a large area, it would take one weeks to explore and discover it all. It was such a great opportunity to take note of how the area differs from Sabi Sand and how the two properties really go hand in hand. From the Sabi Sand area being predominately rolling hills with scatted rocky outcrops to the mountainous regions of Zimbabwe, this really does offer two different experiences.

Photograph by Joffers McCormick

One of the specials to do at Singita Pamushana is to catch a tigerfish, not only is this a challenge but once you have one on the line it is an experience like no other, from hearing your line getting taken out to watching the fish dash side to side as you try to bring it in onto the boat - this is one way to get the heart rate going! When we were out on the water fishing it was one of the most mesmerizing experiences due to the fact that while you are on the boat fishing, you are surrounded by the incredible scenery of the mountains that cover the dam. As you cruise along the dam various pods of hippo can be seen as well as incredible bird life, it truly is like letting your mind float off to become part of nature.

The wildlife was nothing short of spectacular, the open grasslands were covered by multiple species from impala to the all so majestic giraffes and zebra. The mountains were an amazing opportunity to get new bird species jotted down on the list and also allowed for the chance to see a rare black rhino in its natural habitat. It reminded me of being in our thicker more densely vegetated areas in the Sabi Sand and I found myself looking under the trees as well as into the trees for the all so elusive leopards.

One of the most amazing aspects for me was seeing the size of the baobab trees and actually being able to climb into the centre of one. I couldn't help but to imagine how many stories they could tell and what they

have seen over the hundreds of years during which they have become so big. It made me think a lot of the jackelberry trees that we find in the Sabi Sand region and as to how beautiful and large some of them become.

The river systems were mind blowing and we were lucky enough to have seen the river flowing strongly. From bird life to the animals and trees that engulfed the area, it was like being in a new world, the only place that I could think of having a similar beauty is that of the Sand River which flows through or Sabi Sand property.

This was truly a magical experience and one that I won't be forgetting any time soon, it was something incredibly special and mind blowing, it also reiterates the fact that Singita is helping to preserve so many tracks of land throughout Africa, and visiting Zimbabwe really showed me how it all comes together. From the efforts of the scouts and conservation teams doing an amazing job keeping the wildlife safe, to the lodge staff taking such pride in their work and keeping the lodge at an immaculate standard, it really was something I wish that all could experience.



Photograph by Joffers McCormick

All photographs by Ross Couper, unless otherwise indicated.