

# Singita



Photo taken by Sean Bissett

**WILDLIFE JOURNAL**  
**SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA**  
**For the month of September, Two Thousand and Nineteen**

**Temperature**

Average minimum: 15.3°C (59.5°F)  
Minimum recorded: 09.0°C (48.2°F)  
Average maximum: 30.3°C (86.5°F)  
Maximum recorded: 40°C (104°F)

**Rainfall Recorded**

For the month: 8 mm  
For the year to date: 258 mm

**Sunrise & Sunset**

Sunrise: 05h33  
Sunset: 17h51

It has been another amazing month here at Singita Kruger National Park. The sightings have been phenomenal! We have now turned the seasonal corner and have officially welcomed spring back. The bush has yet to change, but we are starting to see more clouds in the sky. Most of the trees are still bare and the grass is yellow in colour. In patches the evergreen bushes, such as the guarris, add a splash of emerald to the brown and gold. A few of the trees have new leaf-buds just starting to emerge. The flame combretums have been in full flower this last month, adding scarlet to the otherwise dull palette, and are now coming into seed with their interesting four-winged pods. The bright pink and white impala lily blooms have also been showing in areas such as Golf Course Clearing and on some of the ridges. They are beautiful! The blackened, burnt area on the western side of the concession is showing new grass growth which is rapidly getting eaten by the large herds of

zebras and wildebeest that have come here specifically to feast on the emerging shoots. These burnt areas have been amazing with the numbers of herbivores and the many kori bustards (supposedly the heaviest flying bird in the world) that have been striding around the area looking for insects to feed on. The water level in the river is very low and there are only a few small pools left which have been attracting large numbers of game late in the mornings when the sun is high and the temperatures are hot. Fortunately, Gudzani Dam, in the western side of the concession, still has a fair bit of water which has attracted a large herd of buffalos (up to 1 000 individuals) into the area. This, in turn, has given us great viewing opportunities of the lions as they have attempted to hunt them. Some of the migrant birds have already arrived back and we have been excited to see amongst others Wahlbergs eagles, Klaas's cuckoos and European bee-eaters. We are expecting many more of our summer visitors to arrive back next month. We are looking forward to see them again.



Photo taken by Brian Rode.

### Here's a Sightings Snapshot for September:

#### Lions

- The lion viewing has been phenomenal this month. We had a total of 145 different lion sightings for the month of September.
- The Mountain Pride are doing well and have been seen predominantly in the central and western parts of the concession. At present there are nine individuals, including four adult females, one juvenile male, two juvenile females and two young cubs. (Unfortunately they do seem to have lost two young cubs). On the few occasions that we have seen them feeding they have killed wildebeests (this seems to be their favourite prey species). On one occasion they were seen feeding on a buffalo that they had just killed. The Mountain Pride are, on occasion, seen in the company of the Shishangaan Males, particularly the male that we know as Xihamham.
- We have also seen the Mananga Pride a few times this last month. Mananga Pride is a fairly large pride and consist of up to seven lionesses. They presently have seven young cubs. They are often seen in the company of Xihamham and, on occasion, with the other two Shishangaan Males. The Mananga Pride have mainly been found near Gudzani Dam in the west of the concession, where they have been hiding their youngsters. They were seen on a few occasions hunting buffalos that had come down to drink at the dam.

- The Shish Pride presently consists of six lionesses. We have mainly been seeing them in the southern portion of the concession. We believe that at least one of these females may have cubs hidden near our solar panel field. We have seen a few of these females mating with one of the Kumana Males. They were seen feeding on a young giraffe, just over the Mozambique border, towards month-end.
- The Southern Pride have been seen a few times this last month. This is a large pride consisting of over twenty individuals (including quite a few sub-adults). Towards the middle of the month the guides heard lions fighting just to the west of the concession. Since the fight occurred outside of the concession we were not able to see who was involved, but the next day many of these lions were seen sporting injuries and two or three individuals were missing. When we saw the Kumana males a day or two later they were also injured and so we assume that the fight involved these males.
- The Kumana Males consist of three adult males. They have been seen a few times close to camp and we have heard them roaring frequently from the lodges at night. They have been seen in the company of the Shish females and at least one of the males was seen mating with a few of the Shish lionesses.
- The Shish Males (three adult male lions) still hold the territory in the central and northern regions of the concession. The bigger male (Xihamham) has fairly frequently been seen in the company of either the Mananga Pride or the Mountain Pride and we believe that he is the father of the new cubs in both of these prides.
- On a few occasions this month we found five sub-adult male lions near Dumbana Pool. We are not sure who these lions are and where they came from.
- The white lion (originally from the Shish Pride) and some of his brothers were seen once this last month. We have heard that they have been seen by tourists on the S100 public road.
- The Xhirombe Male was only seen once this last month at the Poort, where the N'wanetsi River flows into Mozambique.

### Leopards

- We have had 21 sightings of leopards this last month. Most of the sightings have been of shy individuals.
- Towards the middle of the month two leopards (a male and female) were seen treed by the Mountain Pride.
- The Mhlangulene female has been seen a few times in the central area of the concession. She is very relaxed with the vehicles and we have had good views of her. She was seen feeding on an impala that she had killed.
- On one occasion we saw a female and young leopard feeding on an impala near the Granophyre Ridge. We believe that this could have been the Xhikova Female.
- On the last night of the month we were lucky enough to see a female leopard and her cub feeding on a male impala in the N'wanetsi riverbed.

### Cheetahs

- We were lucky enough to have 25 recorded sightings of cheetahs this last month.
- Towards the beginning of the month we found a female cheetah with three young cubs. They were feeding on an impala. They did not stay long and headed west out of the concession.
- Two male cheetahs were seen on a few occasions (they were originally seen in the far northern reaches of the concession, but then also headed west out of our area).
- A coalition of four sub-adult male cheetahs was seen on at least twelve occasions this month, particularly in the short grass area of the Central Depression, near Gudzani Dam and in the burnt area between the two.
- A single female was also seen at least twice this last month. She was seen feeding on an impala in an area known as Kori Clearing.

- A coalition of three sub-adults (two young males and one young female) were seen on at least two occasions during the month.

### **Spotted hyenas**

- We had 23 recorded sightings of these incredible creatures this last month.
- On one occasion eight members of a clan managed to chase some of the Shish lionesses away from a kudu carcass.
- On another occasion a single hyena was seen feeding on the scraps of a buffalo carcass that had been killed by the Mountain Pride.
- A single hyena and a black-backed jackal were seen disturbing a Shish lioness who was feeding on an impala carcass, just north of camp, early one morning. Since the carcass was almost finished the lioness decided to leave the scraps to the scavengers.

### **Elephants**

- We have had some fantastic elephant viewing this last month, with a total of 181 recorded sightings.
- There is very little water in the concession at the moment and we have seen fairly large herds (sometimes exceeding 40 individuals) coming down to the last water points during the heat of the day.

### **Buffalos**

- We have had 29 recorded sightings of these majestic bovids this last month.
- Most of these sightings have been of three different groups.
- There has been an extremely large herd of buffalos moving in the western side of the concession. This herd has split up and re-joined a few times. When together we estimate that there were at least 1 000 individuals in the herd. They have been coming down to Gudzani Dam every few days to come and drink and have then come into contact with the Mananga Pride. We have seen the lions chase them around a few times during September, although the lions were not successful and the buffalos managed to drive off the lions.
- A group of seven big males has been hanging out in the Ntsibitsane and Xinenene Valleys, coming down to drink at Dumbana Pool every second or third day.
- A small group of bulls was seen a few occasions in the Mhlangulene Valley until the Mountain Pride managed to kill one of them, where-after the others fled west out of the concession.

### **Rare, unusual and nocturnal sightings**

- Some of the unusual and interesting animals that we have seen on some of the night-drives include African civets, small- and large-spotted genets, a single sighting of a serval, a single sighting of an African wild cat, a few sightings of honey badgers, a sighting of a white-tailed mongoose and a few sightings of Cape porcupines.

### **Birds**

The bird numbers have started to rise again, as opposed to our winter months, and the migrants have started returning. The pale-morph Wahlberg's eagle and its darker partner are back and have been seen collecting sticks for this seasons nesting. Altogether we have recorded 184 species of birds this last month. Some of the special birds seen include a few sightings of the rare melanistic form of Gabar goshawk, yellow-billed oxpecker, white-backed night-heron, eastern nicator, squacco heron, red-capped robin-chat, lappet-faced vulture, white-headed vulture, Cape vulture, goliath heron, martial eagle and saddle-billed stork.

## Spring has sprung

Article by Henry Parsons, photo by Margaux Le Roux

Unlike the Northern hemisphere which is experiencing autumn or fall and seeing a spectacular change in colours as the trees' leaves are all turning beautiful different shades of orange and yellow, we are going into spring and witnessing many changes of our own. We are nearing the end of our dry season and are all anxiously awaiting our first proper rain. As with everywhere on our beautiful planet we've also seen a change in our climate; rains arriving later; warmer weather etc.

Everything is still dry and awaiting the rain; pools of water are shrinking and animals are all concentrated around or near water. This makes for incredible game viewing at the moment and with our first proper rains only expected in late November, is due to continue until then.

The first signs of spring are the blossoming of some trees; beautiful bright yellow flowers of the long-tailed cassia are often amongst the first; the scarlet red of the flame creeper along the Lebombo mountains is another that starts blooming in spring.

As some of you will remember, we had a controlled burn a few months ago and many of the different species of both *Senegalia* and *Vechelia* (previously both *Acacia*) are all flushed green. This means they are often frequented by giraffe and even some elephants.



The lions are also feeling rather amorous with spring in the air. We've witnessed the pride in the south mating on several occasions; the most dominant male of the three brothers mating on three different occasions with three different females which could mean the three females in question could all give birth relatively close together and ultimately rear their cubs together.

Photo by Margaux Le Roux

Speaking of cubs, both the Mountain Pride and Mananga Pride have now introduced their cubs to their prides and us, for that matter. To say they are incredibly cute is an understatement; the two cubs in the Mountain Pride and the seven cubs in the Mananga Pride are all growing and exploring their surroundings. Watching them play and develop the skills they will one day use to survive and hunt as adults is a real privilege. None of us can wait to see what will happen in the coming months through spring and into summer; exciting times to be on safari.

LBJ's, also known to the birding community as "Little Brown Jobs" refer to birds that are extremely difficult to identify. The difficulty birders have in distinguishing them from one another, is due to them being small, brown and generally featureless. There are over two hundred of these species in southern Africa, representing almost a quarter of the birds found in the region.

There are five main groups of LBJ's, and they can be classified as follows:

1. Honeyguides and honeybirds
2. Larks and pipits
3. Chats, wheatears, scrub robins and flycatchers
4. Warblers and cisticolas
5. Seed-eaters: sparrows, petronias, finches, weavers, bishops, widowbirds, queleas, canaries, buntings, indigobirds and cuckoo finches



White-browed scrub robin

Identifying LBJ's in the field requires practice and persistence. In order to narrow down the possibilities, one has to look at which species occur in the area that you are birding, as well as what habitat the bird is currently in. The time of year is also important, as well as how likely it is that the bird is found there. Additionally, the following need to be established: status, size, shape, voice/call, movements and general behaviour. Colours and markings (even though described previously as brownish), can be of assistance if you know what to look for.

In general, the main colours and markings to consider are the following:

- the colouration of the upperparts and underparts, and the degree to which they contrast;
- streaking, mottling or barring on the mantle and/or breast;
- the general face pattern;
- markings found on the folded wing;
- tail patterns (paying attention to the outer tail feathers)

Below find some clues that could assist you in distinguishing the five main groups of LBJ's:

### **Honeyguides and honeybirds**

They prefer fairly dense vegetation, and can be described as arboreal (living in trees). At close range, the arrangement of toes of a perched honeyguide can be seen as: two toes facing forward, and two toes facing backwards. When flying, they often loop in flight, and flash their outer tail feathers, exposing the white colouration.

### **Larks and pipits**

Larks and Pipits are usually found walking or running on the ground, and have thin shaped bills (some seed-eating larks have stouter, conical shaped bills). Both groups have a distinctive dipping or undulating flight, and their movements can be seen as being leisurely. Both groups are difficult to identify, but paying attention to what habitat they are in, as well as their song and behaviour, could assist in distinguishing them from others. Most larks have some degree of dark spotting on the upper breast area, and have pale underparts that are whitish, creamy or buffy in colour.



Dusky lark

Most pipits have dark streaking or blotching on their backs and are streaked on the breast. Their outer tail feathers are usually either white or buff in colour.

### **Chats, wheatears, scrub-robins and flycatchers**

Chats usually hold their heads high and have a very upright stance. They also like to flick their wings when perched. They collect their food on the ground by means of pouncing from a low perch. They are related to robins, and are mostly found in treeless areas.

Wheatears forage by running or hopping on the ground. Most are found in bare, grazed or burnt grassland (open areas). Most species vary regionally and with season, age and sex.

Scrub-robins are always found in areas with available cover. They resemble large warblers to an extent, but have heavier bodies and do much of their gleaning on the ground. Their songs and calls are a useful aid in identification.

Flycatchers require habitat with bushes or trees. They often fly out from an open perch to grab insects in mid-air (also known as hawking). Their bills can be described as being slightly flattened from the top to the bottom, and they have hairy bristles fringing the sides of the bill.

### Warblers and cisticolas



Red-faced cisticola

Warblers are found in all types of habitats. They are generally small in size and have dull colouration. Their bills are thin and pointed, and they find their food by gleaning (inspecting bark and foliage for small insects.) They have distinctive calls that can aid in identification.

Cisticolas generally occur in low, dense grassy areas or low vegetation. They do not forage inside tree canopies or dense leafy thickets, but can take refuge at the top of trees or bushes when they are flushed from the ground or when singing. Cisticolas have sexual, age-related, geographical and seasonal variations which aid in their identification.

### Seed-eaters

This major group includes females and non-breeding males and juveniles of weavers, bishops, widows, queleas, whydahs, finches, indigobirds, sparrows, brown canaries, petronias and cuckoo finches. The most distinctive feature of these birds are their short, strong, stout bills. Their body shape is also chunky in appearance. They generally move with purpose and precision, and a number of the above species move in organised flocks.

Remember to use the 5-step guide below:

1. What group of LBJ's does the bird belong to?
2. Where are you?
3. What habitat is the bird in? (woodland, grassland, marshland, fynbos, Karoo and semi-arid areas, desert, forest, coastal bush or suburbia)
4. What time of year is it?
5. What species is it?

Happy birding!

It has been another great day with some incredible sightings and as we stand on the rocky ridges of the Lebombo hills and raise our glasses to toast the setting sun, which is lighting up the western skies in glorious bright red and orange hues, we realise how fortunate we are to be here. The wilderness stretches as far as we can see. We know that there are numerous wild animals walking in the plains below, living out their lives in the way that nature intended, and in the distance we can see a giraffe browsing peacefully on one of the knobthorn trees. One of the iconic African animals.

The seasons are starting to change now. Winter has officially ended and spring is upon us. The rains will only really arrive in a few months' time. When they come the bush will green up as the grass starts growing and the leaves flush out from the bare branches. Already some of the migrant birds have returned and over the next few months more will arrive. The insects will also make an appearance, as will the other invertebrates. The scorpions will wander across the roads in search of prey, rather than wandering across the sky at night. Tonight the largest scorpion will shine directly overhead and will only go into hiding when its mortal enemy, the great hunter Orion, appears on the horizon in the east. The scorpion's bright red heart will glow in the night sky. Red is the rival of Mars. Antares. Red is the colour of the full moon as it rises opposite to the setting sun, making silhouettes of the candelabra trees as they stretch their fingers upwards into the darkness. The moon is full and bright tonight. It is a beautiful, ominous sight, as the red reminds us that somewhere in the park a colossal beast will probably die. Red, streaming from its face where its horns used to be. Red drops falling into Africa's red soils. It is full moon tonight, a pregnant moon rising as the sun sets on another day in the bushveld. And as the moon rises it changes colour. A stunning silver orb in the velvet-black backdrop. Her face constantly shining down on us, lighting up the darkness. The white light casts shadows in the grass where tired rangers wait in ambush in the shadows hoping to stem the tide, to stop those who seek to exterminate our heritage. Another iconic African animal. Lions and leopards too, are hiding in the shadows. Waiting, stalking, pouncing. Trying to survive in these wildlands.



The moon shines down and the shadow of a scrub hare darts across the road, a reflection of the rabbit etched in basalt-blue on her glowing face. These darker patches on the moon's visage are the scars of ancient volcanic eruptions and form vast flat plains in the lunar highlands. They are the "seas" of the moon and have evocative titles such as the "Sea of Tranquility" (where Apollo 11 landed over 50 years ago), the "Sea of Crises", the "Sea of Serenity" and the "Ocean of Storms". Scattered across the surface of the moon are craters, memories of past collisions with other space matter. Plato, Copernicus and Tycho are some of their names.

The moon is a magnificent satellite orbiting the earth approximately 348 400 km into the sky. It is thought to have originated when a Mars-sized object called Theia crashed into the earth throwing debris into orbit in space which coalesced to form our moon. Some of the moon rocks that were brought back by astronauts have supposedly been aged as being older than the oldest rocks on earth. It is huge (with a circumference of approximately 10 921 km) in relation to satellites that orbit around other planets and is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest satellite in our solar system after Ganymede, Calisto, Io (some of Jupiter's moons that are visible to the human eye from Earth) and Titan (one of Saturn's moons). Perhaps by coincidence, the size of our moon and the distance of the moon from earth allows the moon to cover the Sun nearly precisely during a total solar eclipse.

The moon orbits Earth once every 27.322 days and it takes approximately 27 days for the moon to rotate once on its axis. As a result, the moon does not seem to be spinning but appears to us, on Earth, to be keeping almost perfectly still. This is known as "synchronous / captured rotation". This is the reason that we always see the same side of the moon.

Each synodic month we, on Earth, watch as the moon changes phases going from completely black, to crescent-shaped, to quarter-moon, to gibbous and then to full as the sun illuminates part of the observable surface of the moon. When the moon lies on the opposite side of Earth to the sun we then see a full moon (unless we are witnessing a lunar eclipse). Our calendar months are generally based on the moon's synodic month, although sometimes we do have months where there is more than one full moon. In this case the second full moon in the month is known as a "Blue Moon". Both the Moon's natural prominence in the night sky, its control of the ocean tides and its regular cycle of phases, as seen from Earth, have influenced human societies, cultures and art since time for us began.

Tonight, as we travel back to the lodge with the moon illuminating the bushes and landscapes with a ghostly glow we stare at the beauty of the full moon in complete awe.



July Gallery

Photos by Brian Rode unless otherwise stated



Photo by Sean Bissett

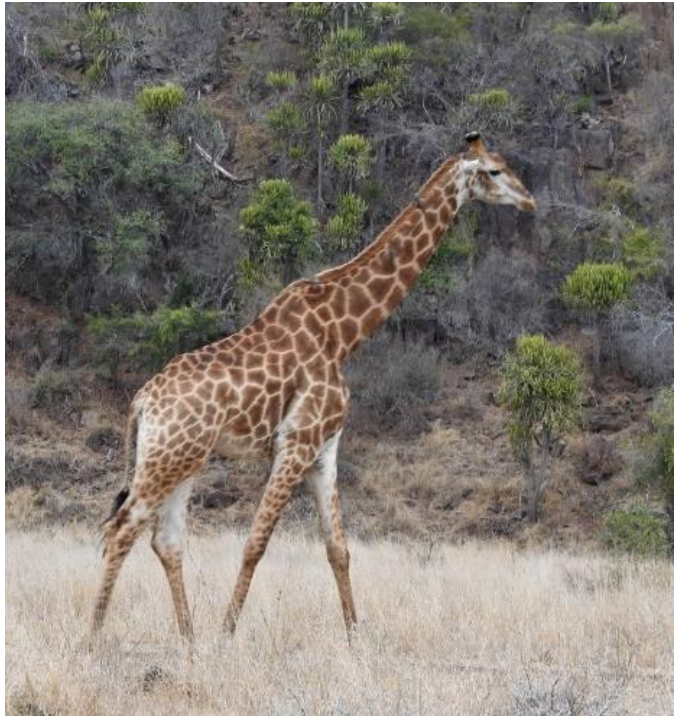


Photo by Margaux Le Roux



Photo By Sean Bissett

Photographs by Brian Rode, Sean Bissett and Margaux Le Roux  
Articles by Brian Rode, Henry Parsons and Chantelle Venter.