

Singita



Photo by Sean Bissett

WILDLIFE JOURNAL
Singita Kruger National Park
For the month of December, Two Thousand and Nineteen

Temperature

Average minimum: 21°C (69.8°F)

Minimum recorded: 16°C (60.8°F)

Average maximum: 33°C (91.4°F)

Maximum recorded: 43°C (109.4°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 100mm

For the year to date: 330mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05h05

Sunset: 18h43

The month of December started off very wet, we had 100mm of rain in the first two weeks and then not a single drop in the second half of the month. This allowed for a lot of growth, and in some places the lush green grass is over three feet tall. The large area which we burnt in the winter is flourishing and attracting an astounding amount of general game. The river has large pools of water but is still not flowing. We have noticed that the rain has been particularly localised and therefore the catchment areas to our west have not had enough rain to raise the water levels to allow the river to flow. We are hoping for good rainfall in January and

February in order for the rivers to flow, as we haven't heard the sound of water gushing over the weir since March.



Photo by Brian Rode

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for December:

Lions

- We had just short of 80 lion sightings for December, with a great deal of these being sightings of either the Mountain Pride or Mananga Pride. Unfortunately, the Mananga Pride has lost one cub, and now only have six cubs. The Northern Pride now have two cubs, that were only recently discovered whilst the pride was feeding on a giraffe carcass.
- A new coalition of young males could become a very interesting addition to our lion population. Seven young males have been seen twice now since Christmas. They all look to be between four to five years old and we speculate that they are from the Northern Pride. They have the potential to become an unbelievably powerful force, if they should settle in the area. The new coalition will however have to dodge the ever powerful Shishangaan males who, even though reaching the twilight of their lives are still very much the dominant boys on the block, so to speak.

Leopards

- We had 19 sightings of these beautiful creatures this month. With the impala lambing season in full swing there is certainly no shortage of food for these shy and seductive cats, who will always be a favourite for guests.

Cheetahs

- We had over 30 sightings of cheetahs in December, which is amazing! It is estimated that only three hundred remain in the Kruger Park in its entirety and we had a sighting on average, every day.

- The coalition of four males make up the bulk of our sightings. A young female in immaculate condition has also been seen often.
- Five young cheetahs have also been seen moving together recently. The group consists of two females and three males. We believe these animals recently came of age, and were “left” by their mother, therefore they are moving together for companionship. This relationship will not last, as the females will eventually move away by themselves (as they are traditionally solitary creatures) and are hanging around with other cheetahs initially to adjust to fending for themselves. Instinct will kick in and they will separate from their siblings in time. The three males however, may very well stay together in a coalition as this allows them the luxury of safety in numbers. It also allows them to hunt more effectively and possibly hunt bigger prey than usual.

Elephants

- With the rains that we enjoyed early in the month and now the hot weather, we have had an awesome amount of growth of trees favoured by elephants but more importantly the grasses are flourishing, and at this time of the year when nice, sweet, fresh, green grass is around the elephants are flooding into the area for it which is very easy to feed on. Why exert too much energy when you can find a nice easy meal?
- Breeding herds of up to 40 or 50 animals are seen on a daily basis at the moment as well as many lone bulls or bulls in small aggregations that are called bachelor herds or askaris.
- With the heat at the moment we are enjoying great sightings of elephants wallowing in the mud or drinking and bathing or simply just frolicking around for some relief from the very hot conditions.

Buffalos

- A large herd of buffalos have been seen frequently in the north of our concession. This herd has made up the bulk of our December buffalo sightings. We estimate this herd to be about five hundred strong, and is a real highlight when we see them. There is good grass cover attracting the buffalo at the moment, and when it starts to dry off a bit we will always get an influx of these beautiful beasts because our concession carries water throughout the dry season.

Spotted hyenas

- There have been a lot of spotted hyena seen just on route home on an average afternoon/evening safari. The Nyokeni den-site has also offered some really nice views of at least three youngsters and two large females. This is one of the oldest den-sites on the concession, and it has been a regular spot for hyena females to raise their young since about 2004.
- We have had at least two leopard/ hyena interactive sightings as well this month, which is always great value and a special treat when you get to witness interaction between two of the larger predators.

Plains game

- The Singita Kruger National Park concession has always been famous for an abundance of general plains game and is, in fact, one of the reasons why we have always had great lion populations (where you have the food you will get the predator). This December was no different with huge herds of impala (some herds of over 100 individuals), with the new lambs being an awesome attraction. Masses of zebra, wildebeest, giraffe, kudu and waterbuck are all moving into the area for the grasses and new green leaves which abound due to the lovely rains we have had. If you throw in the small antelope species such as steenbok, klipspringer, grey or common duiker and Sharpe’s grysbok, we are kept very busy showing off the diversity of our amazing concession. We haven’t even mentioned the hippos, crocodiles, baboons and monkeys, all of which you are almost guaranteed to see on a safari visit here.

Rare sightings

- This last month we had at least four sightings of two female wild dogs. We very seldom see these incredible animals in the concession as the major portion of the population of wild dogs in the Kruger National Park occur in the western half of the park, where the granitic soils allow them to burrow and den.
- Other unusual nocturnal sightings include a few views of porcupines, African civets, both large-spotted and small-spotted genets, white-tailed mongooses and even a few sightings of servals.

Birds

- This last month we recorded 224 species of birds in the concession. Most of the migrant birds have now returned and many of the male polygynous birds (where one male mates with more than one female) have already attained their breeding plumages (making them much easier to identify).
- Some of the bird specials for December include yellow-billed oxpeckers, martial eagles, kori bustards, southern ostriches, saddle-billed storks, white-backed night herons and even a sighting of a dwarf bittern.
- We have started to see flocks of red-billed queleas in the concession now that the grass is coming back into seed. It appears that some of these birds are looking for thickets to nest in again. When these birds build their nests they often do so in large colonies, sometimes numbering a few hundred individuals. It is spectacular when there are large nesting colonies of queleas in the concession (particularly at sunset when large numbers of birds return to nests for the night). When these birds are nesting they often attract large numbers of raptors into the area.
- Towards the beginning of the month many of the white-berry bushes were in fruit. These bushes can produce prolific numbers of sweet white berries which, in turn attract numerous frugivorous birds such as African green pigeons. These are very pretty pigeons that are bright green in colour and almost look like a cross between a pigeon and a parrot (because of the stunning colouration of its plumage).



Photo by Brian Rode

Some Bush Stories follow, as well as a December Gallery of images.

Two amazing leopard sightings

By Sean Bissett

Two highlights for me this month were both sightings of leopards. The first was of a beautiful female leopard that we know as the Hlanguleni Female. She is one of the older females in the concession and has been around a long time. She is one of our more relaxed leopards. One day we came across her just after she had killed a baby impala. She had to rush to hoist it in a knob-thorn tree due to the sudden arrival of a large female spotted hyena. This particular tree had no lateral branches for the first 20 feet at least, and to watch her pull this carcass effortlessly that high was mind-blowing! Over the next two game drives we watched her feed while precariously perched 20 feet high, whilst the hyena could only watch (as hyenas cannot climb trees). We even watched her run up the tree at one stage just to chase off a yellow-billed kite who thought it may be able to grab a free bite.



Photo by Sean Bissett

The next was a sighting of a large male leopard which had killed an impala. We found him near Gudzani Dam feeding on an impala he had hoisted in a schotia tree. Shortly after we arrived, he was interrupted by one of the Mananga Pride lionesses, who jumped into the tree before the leopard could get down or get away. The only way for him to be safe was to go up, which he did. Perched at the very top of the tree he could only look on as the lioness devoured his hard-earned meal. Other lions from the pride also arrived including the largest of the three Shish male lions, who made a half-hearted attempt to get up the tree to rob the lioness of what remained of the impala. The climb was too difficult for him with his big bulky weight, so he soon descended the tree only to lie in the shade grooming. When the carcass was finished the lioness descended the tree and walked off into the distance, and all the other lions including the male followed her one by one. The male leopard now knowing it was safe, slowly and very carefully came down from the top supple limbs of the tree. He sniffed briefly where his hard-earned meal had been 40 minutes before but there was nothing left. He kept moving down, then onto the ground, he paused briefly to make one last precautionary check and then moved off in the opposite direction to the lions.



Photo by Brian Rode

As a young boy I grew up setting traps to catch lots of different kinds of birds, including southern yellow-billed hornbills. I was not aware that when I caught one I could be killing four of them because the female and chicks could starve to death in the nest.

The southern yellow-billed hornbill makes a nest in a natural tree hole or cavity. The hole of the cavity is sealed with mud, plant material and faeces while the female is inside, and only a vertical slit for feeding is left open. Shortly after being sealed in the nest the female undergoes a flight feather moult as the nesting hole is often small and can get very hot inside. The male supplies the female with food, via the slit. At this stage, if the male is killed the female will be unable to get out of the nest and fly away (due to having no flight feathers) and catch food for herself, and will therefore starve to death (as will the chicks).

The eggs are each laid a day or two apart and therefore grow at different stages. The female breaks out after the chicks have hatched, and the oldest chicks will then reseal the entrance in the same way. She will then assist the male in feeding the youngsters. The chicks will break out when ready to fledge.

The purpose of sealing the entrance is to stop predators such as snakes and mongooses from entering the nest, until all the youngsters have fledged. The adults will then continue to feed the youngsters until they learn how to catch food for themselves.

Now that I am a guide I try, by all means, to teach young people at home to save all nature's creatures.

Adapt or die...

Article by Wessel Booysen and photos by Brian Rode

The idea of coming on safari has a massive appeal to so many people for many various reasons. Be it love and romance at the thought of a glass of bubbly during a one-of-a-kind and mind-blowing sunset or the adrenaline of a predator stalking and chasing down its prey... One thing is for sure and that this is all happening in a very naturally hostile environment if you call the bush your home. Using the term 'hostile' I'm referring to the relationship between predator and prey and this raises two questions in my mind...

1. How have predators evolved and adapted to give them the best chance of a successful hunt by staying undetected?
2. How have the prey species adapted and evolved to overcome these predatory adaptations to remain undetected or out of the clutches of sure death once the predator has been noticed?

In this article I would like to touch on a few (there are many more) of these adaptations and techniques used that have interested me over the years.

Camouflage – When reading this you might be thinking “well that’s obvious”, but is it really that simple? A definition of camouflage is when the animal in question is hiding itself within its immediate environment and or background. A fantastic example of this would be lionesses hunting in the long brown grass. Lions (*Panthera leo*) are considered to have evolved in Africa more than 800 000 years ago. This entails many moments of trial and error and natural selection which has now allowed the modern-day lion in Africa to have the tan colouration best suited for their current natural habitat. It’s worth noting that the lionesses have no standout features that could blow their cover from the front while on the hunt, but from the rear the black hair on the back of their ears is thought to assist in the different strategies used by lionesses in the same pride when hunting certain species of prey.



Disruptive markings – As guides we refer to disruptive markings when the animal has spots, stripes or markings that break up the obvious outline or silhouette of the individual. Leopards are the masters in this department. With their spots and iconic rosette pattern along the main part of the body they often fool even the sharpest of eyes in the animal kingdom as they lie motionless up in the canopy of a tree or move silently through the grass along drainage lines and gullies. Once the leopard does lie motionless in a suitable spot, the mottled effect of its coat distorts the silhouette and shape of its body and is almost impossible to see. The stripes of zebras do not blend into their environment, but rather create confusion in the selection process of a predator that could be hunting them. The clear outline of each individual zebra is broken by these stripes as they stand among each other and they all start blending and flowing into one. This effect makes it incredibly difficult for the predator to see which zebra head belongs to which zebra tail. The young zebra foals become very difficult to see when

standing pressed up along the side of the adult female as even their manes have stripes through them. These stripes may also be of great use and confusion to a predator once a chase ensues. The crisscross running lines of the zebra make it difficult for the predator to stay locked on its initial target and may result in a split second of doubt in the predator's attack in which the zebra can get away safely or with minimum injury.



Disguise and mimicry - In these forms of survival, centre stage has to be taken by the phenomenally large and diverse insect world. Some of the masters of disguise are the stick insects and leaf katydids that disguise themselves as... well, you guessed it... sticks and leaves. This form of survival works to its best potential when the insect in question moves extremely slowly or remains completely motionless as a predator moves on by without any idea of the prey's presence.



A rather different and risky approach is that of mimicry. Rather than trying to blend in or stay out of sight, this form of survival is effective when sending out a clear message of danger by using bright colours or posing as something dangerous, toxic or foul tasting. The monarch butterfly lays its eggs on toxic plants. The caterpillars then feed on these plants and carry the toxins with them to the adult form. Bright red, white, orange and black are clear indication to any predator to stay away. In the pictures below we can see the incredible resemblance between the African monarch and the female mimicking diadem butterfly. Can you spot who is who?

There are endless impersonators and disguises used by variety of insects, so next time you walk around in your own garden, have a closer look between the leaves and branches... you never know what you might find.



Startle and deflection displays – This form of survival adaptation comes to mind when certain animals don't possess very strong defences. What is trying to be achieved here is again creating a moment of doubt in the predator's approach and attack which allows the prey to get away or even scare the predator enough into looking for a more suitable and less scary food source. The marbled emperor moth uses this very interesting technique in the art of not becoming a meal to a hungry predator. The two oversized circles on the wings are mimicking the eyes of a larger animal, very similar to that of an owl. Flashing these 'eyes' at the potential predator could be good enough to create confusion or enough intimidation for the moth to get away or scare the predator away for good.







