

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA
For the month of June, Two Thousand and Twenty

Temperature

Average minimum: 11°C (51°F)

Minimum recorded: 7°C (44°F)

Average maximum: 22°C (71°F)

Maximum recorded: 32°C (89°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 4mm

For the year to date: 74 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 06:39

Sunset: 17:20

We have just passed Winter Solstice and the daylight hours will now start to lengthen again. There have been a few cold spells, where we have needed to bundle up in fleeces and jackets. The grass has mainly turned gold now, although there are still green patches in the valleys and along the drainage lines. We still have a fair amount of grass in the concession and this, hopefully, will carry us through the dry season until the rains return in November or December.

June is usually a dry month with concentrations of animals heading to one or two waterholes to drink. 2020 seems to be completely different as there is still quite a bit of water in the small drainage lines. The N'wanetsi River also has pools of water all the way from our western boundary to our eastern boundary.

Gudzani Dam still has a fair amount of water and the surrounding area has been plentiful with general game including good sightings of buffalo and elephants.

Due to the colder temperatures at night we have started to notice a pattern of animal movement, particularly elephants, moving east at sunset towards the mountains (as the temperature drops) and then heading back west to the lowlands in the late mornings. Since the grass has already pulled most of their nutrients into their roots the elephants have now started to knock over the trees again to get to the moisture and goodness in the roots.

Although there are fewer flowers in the concession during the winter months the aloes have been blooming in the hills and in the camps and are attracting numerous metallic-coloured sunbirds to the sweet nectar. The euphorbias / candelabra trees have also been flowering this last month and have been attracting numerous butterflies, wasps and flies. In the far north of the concession and on some of the cliffs we have been seeing the bright pink flash of the flowers of the impala lilies. These plants are typical of the lowveld savanna areas and brighten up the winter landscape. They are, however much favoured by porcupines, who eat their succulent stems.



Photo by Megan Waddington

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for June:

Lions

- Lion sightings have been very good. The Shishangaan pride has been seen around the lodge a couple of times and their movement has mainly been between the lodge and Dumbana pools. They are mostly looking healthy, so they have obviously been successful on their hunts. On the other hand, the Shish pride dominant male, the Kumana male, is not looking good and we really are hoping that he can stay around for longer because the cubs are still too young to defend themselves or run away from danger at the moment. Shish pride has nine cubs that they need to protect and if we have any change of males at this time their chance of surviving is very limited. The Kumana male has, however, been roaring a lot around the camp at night as he proclaims his territory and we have seen his footprints, from where he was walking through the camp, on quite a few mornings as we have headed up from the N'wanetsi

staff quarters towards the lodge. The oldest Shish female was seen on one or two occasions this month, although she is looking very thin.

- The Mountain pride lions with young cubs reunited with the rest of the family this month, which puts their number at twelve now. This family is doing well and we were lucky enough to see them feeding on a buffalo. They do most of their hunting along the Xinkelengane drainage-line and east, on the Lebombo mountains.
- We have not had many sightings of the Mananga pride this month. One lactating lioness was seen crossing our western boundary contact calling and heading towards Gudzani Dam while the rest of the family was seen waiting under a tree, resting in the shade, while a large male leopard was feeding on a waterbuck carcass high in the branches above them. Towards the end of the month eight of the Mananga lionesses and three cubs were seen near Gudzani Dam.
- The three dominant Shish Males are still well and healthy and were seen on a few occasions this month. The biggest of the three is often seen with either the Mountain pride or Mananga pride. The other two brothers are usually seen together.
- We were lucky enough to see four of the sub-adult Shish male lions (including the famous white lion) in the concession on two occasions this last month. Jemma has described one of these sightings in a story below.
- Southern pride, now consisting of seventeen individuals, were seen in the concession on two occasions in June. It is always an incredible sight to see this many lions together.

Leopards

- Some of the more interesting sightings include coming across a female leopard walking down the road as we were headed out to investigate a fire in the concession. She was very relaxed and walked right past the vehicle.
- We also had a sighting of a large male leopard feeding on a waterbuck high in a tree while the Mananga pride looked on jealously from below.
- We have had a few sightings of leopards in the camp (it is much quieter in camp now that there are few staff and no guests). One day Damian and Tash were walking up from Sweni Lodge to Lebombo when they came across a leopard that was walking around quite casually. Fortunately, the leopard was not interested in them.
- One morning Wessel heard the baboons shouting just below room six. He went to investigate and spotted a shy leopard that quickly ran into a thicket and hid away.
- One morning we spotted (pardon the pun) a male leopard near the lodge entrance. We watched for a while as he was staring at some impalas and then he disappeared into a thicket. We waited for a while but he did not re-appear and we left the area. Later, our head chef, Xavier, went to the guides' office and to his surprise he saw the male leopard through the glass sliding door. It was right outside the office! The leopard then headed to the boma and disappeared from view.



Photo by Xavier Francis

Cheetahs

- We were lucky enough to see two male cheetahs entering the concession one afternoon. These two cheetahs (presumably) were seen again in the concession, near the Sticky Thorn thickets, by the NATGEO crew towards the end of the month.
- We also saw another three males just outside the concession as we were driving along our western boundary road one morning.
- Right at the end of the month we were fortunate enough to find two male cheetahs lying in the shade very close to the lodge.

Spotted hyenas

- We haven't found any hyena den-sites that are active at the moment, but we had sightings of some hyenas particularly on the S41 dirt road, near the Dumbana drainage. We believe they might be denning west of the road, outside of the concession. We have also had sightings of single hyenas in the central parts of the concession.

Elephants

- There have been a few sightings of elephants in the concession in June. These sightings have mainly been of breeding herds. We have seen most of the elephants in the afternoons when they come down to the rivers to drink. There has been a small herd of elephants, with at least one small calf, that has been visiting the lodge regularly. One morning, as we arrived at the guides' office, we found them in the garden right behind the offices busy pruning the bushes for us and leaving rather large piles of compost behind!

Buffalos

- There have been at least three large herds of buffalos moving through the concession this month. Each of these herds consisted of a few hundred individuals. They were mainly seen in the basalt grasslands in the western half of the area. We have also had one or two sightings of dagha boys (old male buffalos) in the Hlangulene valley, in the northern part of the concession, where there is still quite a bit of lush green grass and a few pools of water.

Plains game

- The general game in the area has been good this last month. The impalas are looking fat and healthy after the rut and many of the adult females are probably pregnant now. They will give birth in December after a gestation period of six and a half months. There are quite a few zebras in the grasslands now, many with young foals. We have also been seeing many kudus, including some bulls with very large horns, as well as giraffes, wildebeest and waterbuck. The warthog population has been doing really well due to the good grazing and grass in the area and we have been seeing many more of them than we have in the past few years.

Rare animals and other sightings

- Due to the length of the grass at the moment we have not had many sightings of the smaller, more unusual mammals such as the wild cats or smaller antelope like Sharpe's grysbok. We will probably see more of these creatures when the grass starts disappearing.
- We have, however, been lucky enough to have a few sightings of a honey badgers (there is at least one honey badger that has been causing us a few problems by attempting to break into the rubbish cages and into the kitchen!
- We have had at least one sighting of a serval this month and one morning as the staff were coming to the lodge from the Shishangaan staff village they were lucky enough to see a caracal crossing the road. We have also had a few sightings of African civets and both large- and small-spotted genets.

- We have had a few sightings of snakes this last month, which is quite unusual considering that we are in the middle of winter and the temperatures have been quite cool. Some of the more interesting snake sightings have been of a beautiful puff adder and a large snouted cobra (approximately 2,2 meters long).

Birds

- In our winter months many of the birds here migrate north either towards central Africa or even further to Europe. This month we saw a total of 171 species, which is quite good for this time of the year.
- Some of the highlights include common ostrich, martial eagle, kori bustard, black stork, African wattled lapwing, trumpeter hornbill, African pygmy kingfisher, lappet-faced vulture, secretarybird, freckled nightjar and southern ground-hornbill.

Some exciting and informative Bush Stories follow, as well as a June Gallery of images.

Tracking lions

By Solomon Ndlovu

One weekend we went out and found the tracks of male lions. We decided to follow them because they were fresh and the chance of finding them was good as they were coming from Kruger side. We found the tracks at Nhuntlwa road heading towards the depression and so began what was one of most exciting trailing experiences that I have ever had in my career. During our trailing we come across some giraffe, zebras, wildebeest and other general game and could see where these males had tried to hunt some of them. We could see by the tracks where a male lion was chasing some zebras but after trying and failing the lions continued walking northwards. I think they were hunting the zebras opportunistically as they come across them, but their aim was to find the pride (the lionesses and the cubs).



Photo by Brian Rode

After trailing for about an hour and a half we starting seeing the tracks running and that's where they must have joined up with the rest of the family. The tracks of them running indicated to us that there was excitement to greet the lioness. During these occasions they tend to rub heads as a form of social greeting and to keep renewing their bond. We tracked them for about 10 to 15 minutes from there before we found them across the drainage line where they were lying. Coman, one of our guides, spotted them but once he stopped and tried to show us where they were one lioness spotted him and she jumped to the side while she was growling and that caused the whole family to run in different directions. The dangerous part (or should I say exciting) is that the three cubs (approximately two months old) ran towards us! While Coman was leading the rest of the people to safety one cub kept coming towards us and I had to walk towards it to ward it off. I waved my hand and at the same time saying, "Hay, hay, hay!" not loud but in a normal voice just for him to stop and think again, and it worked! The cub stopped, showed us its teeth for a second and then turned around very quickly towards mom. These few minutes standing in front of the lions felt like hours but was an excellent experience.

An unusual bird sighting

By Brian Rode



Photo by Brian Rode

During the lockdown and while we have not had guests we have been doing walking training with some of our guides in order to get them more logged walking hours and potentially dangerous game encounters, which they need in order to attain higher walking qualifications. One morning while we were crossing a large open area in the concession known as the Central Depression, we noticed a small brown and white bird sitting on top of a thorn bush. I immediately realized that this was not a bird that I had seen in the concession before. Upon looking at it through binoculars we realized that it was a marico flycatcher. I know this bird well from the western side of the country where I have previously seen it regularly in thornveld areas. According to the book - Robert's Bird Guide Kruger National Park and adjacent lowveld – the marico flycatcher is a “very uncommon near-endemic vagrant to the park, present during the dry winter months”. What an exciting find! The rest of the walk was quite amazing as we managed to trail and track down a pride of lions, as described by Solomon in the article above.

Sunday brunch

By Jemma Macmillan

After spending almost nine weeks in lockdown in Cape Town, the thrill of being called back to work, back home, was indescribable. I was elated at the thought of being back in the bush and immersing myself in the sights, sounds and smells of nature. The moment I got back to Singita Kruger National Park, I felt more myself than I had in months. All that was left to complete the picture was seeing a lion - something I had not seen since mid-March. With no guests and few staff on site due to the global Covid-19 crisis, we spent our first Sunday morning back exploring the beautiful concession. The team on site piled into a couple of land cruisers and we set off.

The first hour was sublime, and it just got better. The winter sun was glistening off the grass turning it to burnished gold, the euphorbias were verdant with flowers the colour of lemons against the backdrop of the

Lebombo mountains. Around each bend was something that made my heart sing - dainty impalas leaping and dancing through the grass, a brown snake eagle perched in the fork of an ancient leadwood tree and handsome kudus with their majestic horns nibbling on leaves. Along the edge of a sticky thorn thicket we spotted a tower of giraffe, the supermodels of the savannah, staring at something in the distance. Our guide, Solomon, had a hunch that they were staring at a coalition of lions known as the Shish subadults, who have recently moved back onto the concession. We went around the corner and there they were: the young Shish Males, including the much-famed white lion.

We were all over the moon to see the boys back in town and sat spellbound as they stretched and yawned while the skittish giraffes looked on. The white lion and two of his brothers got up and began moving towards the thicket and we decided to follow them for as long as possible to prolong the magic of seeing them up close. Solomon positioned our cruiser so that we had a good view of them walking past. The white lion and one of his brothers headed into a thick bush. I thought that they were trying to find a cool place to nap through the heat of the day- lions are notoriously snoozy! The next thing we heard a rattle and the bush started shaking and in the blink of an eye the white lion had burst out of the shrubbery with a porcupine clenched in his jaws and a snout full of quills. We were all awe-struck at the sighting that was happening just metres from us. Another porcupine scuttled out from the bush, with the other lion in hot pursuit but he was too slow and wary for the wily porcupine. The porcupine is no easy meal for a lion to hunt and these prickly rodents can cause some serious damage to even the fiercest of the African predators. This time however, the lion's heart won the lion's share and we watched as he shook some quills out of his muzzle and tucked into his brunch.

We left the lion in peace with his snack, all of us dazzled by our luck and reverential in our love for Lebombo: land of lions.



Photos by Adel Lombard

June Gallery



Puff adder

Photo by Brian Rode



Impala lily



Candelabra flowers

Photos by Brian Rode



Shishangaan male lion

Photo by Solomon Ndlovu



Zebra trio

Photo by Michael Kirby



Catch of the day

Photo by Brian Rode



White lion

Photo by Michael Kirby



Reflections

Photo by Benjamin Ackerman



Last light

Photo by Brian Rode