

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

AUGUST 2004

SEASONS

Suddenly it's spring. A couple of hot days early in the month inspired the blackthorn trees to produce haloes of pastel lemon-coloured blossoms to decorate the drab winter uniform of the bush. As if by magic, white bellied sunbirds have appeared with the flowers, their metallic green bodies glinting in the sun as they flit busily through the trees. The contorted limbs of the baobab trees, while still bare of leaves, make a spectacular image against clear pink and orange spring sunsets.

GAME VIEWING

There have been several sightings of African wild cats recently. These timid little predators resemble a domestic tabby and are usually seen at night in the headlights of a vehicle or a spotlight. One lucky guest, a regular visitor to Madia Pala (our self-catering camp) has seen a lone caracal in broad daylight on each of his last two visits. Caracals are notorious sheep killers and are regarded as vermin, to be shot by many sheep farmers. At Makulu Makete, the main prey of the caracal, with its signature tufted ears, are probably young warthogs, scrub hares and some of the smaller antelope species, such as steenbok.

Klipspringers often feature in our bush diary, mainly because they are the writer's favourite of all the antelopes. This month, at dusk one evening, Peter and Jane drove past Kremetartkop hill to see two pairs of these delightful little creatures standing on huge boulders at opposite ends of the hill, surveying the plain below. The following day another pair was seen on a small rocky outcrop near the river. Guests staying at Madia Pala camp are sometimes privileged to see klipspringer drinking at the waterhole next to the camp, at the base of Kremetartkop, or even grazing on the lawn inside the camp.

BIRDING

At last report, our baby Verreaux's eagle chick has started to develop proper feathers and no longer appears to be a ball of white fluff. It won't be long before it takes its first soaring flight from its nest high up on a rocky ledge, much to the horror of the dassies (rock hyraxes), which form the eagles' main diet.

Aptly-named bromvoel ("grumble bird") in Afrikaans, a pair of ground hornbills can often be heard calling to one another early in the morning. Their deep, booming cry resonates through the bush for miles along the river where they seem to have taken up residence in areas which have been cleared of encroaching scrub in our bush rehabilitation programme.

While spending time on Mornington Peninsula, just outside Melbourne, Australia, Jane and Peter have been enchanted by visits from brilliantly coloured parrots – pink and grey galahs, crimson rosellas and gorgeously colourful eastern rosellas. The African parrots found in the Limpopo Valley are very dull by comparison, but the lack of colour in the

African parrots is more than compensated for by the profusion of spectacular birds such as the lilac-breasted roller, the many species of bee eaters, kingfishers, sunbirds and waxbills, to name just a few.

BUSH REHABILITATION/CHEETAH PROJECT

The arrival of our three cheetahs seems imminent with the completion of a “training boma” at the foot of the lodge driveway. The one-hectare enclosure is designed to get the cheetahs used to the special electric fence, which now surrounds the entire 4,600 hectare (11,000 acre) property. After some weeks in the training boma, the cheetahs will be released into the reserve to explore their new territory. The proximity of the training boma to the lodge means that we should have a good opportunity to observe the cheetah at close hand. Once released into the bush to fend for themselves, the cheetah will be monitored by a tracking device. We are currently reviewing the best method for monitoring their whereabouts and guests will be welcome to participate with our staff in cheetah monitoring and research activities.

Many of our guests have shown particular interest in the day-to-day management of a game reserve and are keen to tag along with our staff as they go about their daily rounds, checking waterholes, repairing fences, inspecting the latest bush clearing areas or drilling for water etc. Our staff are pleased to share their experience and our guests appreciate the chance to get involved.

LODGE

The Schneider and Raetzo families from Geneva, Switzerland, stayed with us for a short time at the beginning of the month. They had chosen to visit Makulu Makete as part of a special tour of the northern part of South Africa, focussing on establishments which are particularly concerned with conservation. As well as being extremely interested in our bush rehabilitation programme, they relished the opportunity to walk freely in the bush, to climb Kremetartkop for a tour of the archaeological remains of an ancient village, and to ride horses through the bush in the hot African sun, instead of riding in circles inside an arena, as is the case in Switzerland. We all enjoyed Swiss folk songs around the fire at night, as well as gifts of Swiss chocolates kindly distributed to the chocolate-deprived staff of Makulu Makete.

In July we celebrated the 2nd wedding anniversary of our guests Ken and Brooke. In August Charlie and Judy, also from Maryland, USA, shared their 30th wedding anniversary with us. They stayed with us for over a week and really got into the swing of life at Makulu Makete. They enjoyed all the activities on the reserve, and had plenty of time to relax as well. Our General Manager, Marthinus, arranged for Charlie to go hunting outside Makulu Makete. The Alldays area, where we are situated, is well-known in South Africa for its hunting. While Makulu Makete is a non-hunting reserve, we understand the importance of hunting in the overall conservation effort, and can arrange for guests to hunt elsewhere, accompanied by a Professional Hunter. To many of us, hunting is a sore point, but it is a fact of life in South Africa, and contributes to the preservation of many at-risk species. Those of you who have stayed with us will have

heard Peter's explanation of the economic and environmental benefits of hunting in South Africa.

LULU'S CAMP

The finishing touches are now being added to our third camp, Lulu's Camp, a tent and caravan camping ground on the banks of the Mogalakwena River, about 10 kilometres from the main camp. Only 30 minutes drive from the Platjan border crossing, it is a perfect stop-over for camping tours into Botswana. It has all the facilities you would expect – clean ablutions with hot water, flushing toilets, potable water, a lovely swimming pool overlooking the river, and a communal lapa and kitchen as well as individual braais (barbecues). But its location and atmosphere set it apart. Established shady trees and green lawns sweeping down to a permanent river pool, with its cruising crocodiles, make it seem like an oasis in the surrounding bushveld. The camp is a favourite haunt of bushbuck and waterbuck. Fish eagles and goliath heron are just two of the bird species which frequent the stretch of river where Lulu's is located. With only 5 camping sites, Lulu's is quite exclusive.

WEDDING CELEBRATIONS AT MAKULU MAKETE

On their trip to Australia this month, Peter and Jane were married in a civil ceremony at the registry office in Melbourne, with just seven guests, including Jane's parents (90 and 83 years old). It was a very happy and simple affair. Melbourne, notorious for its wet and cold winter weather, turned on a lovely, sunny day for the event. The team back at Makulu Makete is threatening further celebrations on their return.