

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### SEPTEMBER 2004

#### SEASONS

The lemon-coloured acacia blossoms, which softened the bleak winter landscape, have become tarnished and brown. Not a bud or a new leaf has appeared to add colour to the monotone bush. The parched veld seems to be holding its breath in anticipation of the first rains. At the end of each hot day, the sun goes down behind a few more wispy clouds, a portent of the thunderstorms which surely can't be far away. To assist farmers over the dry season, the Department of Water Affairs released water from the Glen Alpine dam, upstream on the Mogalakwena River. This resulted in our dams filling to capacity and flowing over into the dry river bed for a couple of weeks. Pied kingfishers celebrated the return of the river with displays of jack-knife dives into the water.

#### GAME VIEWING

The waterhole in front of the lodge continues to attract a variety of species, especially at dusk. Kudu, impala, waterbuck, wildebeest, warthog, duiker, black-backed jackal and even zebra have entertained us as we sip sundowners on the observation deck overlooking the waterhole.

We hit the jackpot this month with night sightings of genets, porcupines, bushbabies, a civet and a honey badger, as well as eland, wildebeest and the usual impala, waterbuck, kudu and spotted thick-knees (formerly known as dikkop). Our resident gemsbok (oryx) have been busy producing babies. A herd of about eight adults has been seen several times, with four young ones in tow. The baby gemsbok are quite fawn in colour compared with the spectacular dun, black and white markings of their parents. Tiny bumps on the babies' heads will eventually grow into the long, sweeping horns which adorn the adults, and which are used for digging up their favourite diet of roots.

During their stay, our guests Cactus and Sasha had a wonderful day tour in Botswana. The spectacle of more than 60 elephants, half of them just babies, splashing, drinking and playing together in a dam was something Cactus, Sasha, Shawn and Jane will not forget easily. For half an hour we watched from the top of the earthen dam wall as the elephants filed through the bush, to wallow in the mud and shallows. The antics of the babies made us all laugh. The elephants were so interesting that we didn't take enough notice of the birdlife on the dam – Egyptian geese, white faced ducks, blackwinged stilts, cattle egrets and a martial eagle flying overhead. There were impala, warthogs and a lone kudu bull at the other side of the dam, keeping their distance from the elephants.

#### BIRDING

Apart from the elephants in Botswana, another highlight was the sight of a secretary bird sitting on its nest on top of a thorn bush. Its long tail feathers and red face made it instantly recognisable as we drove past. So far we have not recorded this unusual species at Makulu Makete, so it was an added bonus to see it on our Botswana trip.

Our ecologist, Rox, has been keeping an eye on a Spotted Eagle Owl which is nesting in a hole in a rocky bank next to our new cheetah boma. The bird is perfectly camouflaged and has stoically remained on the nest despite the constant activity of fence building just metres away from her. The eggs should hatch in the next couple of weeks. Baboons, which spend a

lot of time in the trees nearby watching the fencing crew at work, could be cause for concern once the chicks hatch. We hope they will be safe.

Meanwhile, five kilometres away at the top of Kremetartkop hill, our Verreaux's Eagle chick, sporting its juvenile brown plumage, can be seen taking its first cautious steps outside the nest, along a rocky ledge 500 feet up. No one has yet witnessed the youngster in flight, but its parents seem to be encouraging it by sitting together on the opposite peak of the hill. It's not hard to imagine the chick's reluctance to take the plunge into thin air, high above the baobabs on the plain below.

## **VELD REHABILITATION AND CHEETAH PROJECT**

Our bush (veld) rehabilitation project continues apace. The work of our "bosvreter" crew, cutting down encroaching bushes, has just ceased for the season, but treating of regrowth will go on. The bosvreter team will be re-assigned to clear grass and small bushes along fencelines to prevent electrical shorts. Once the fencing work is completed, the crew will start reseeding a variety of grasses and packing protective brush over the reseeded area. This time last year, the ground was completely bare of grass, but thanks to an excellent rainy season early this year, our rehabilitation work has been rewarded with a good cover of dry grass remaining through the dry winter months. The rain can't come soon enough for the browsers, which must be feeling the pinch now that there is very little foliage left on trees and bushes.

The Department of Nature Conservation has approved our cheetah fencing, although a few finishing touches remain to be completed. The training boma, where the cheetah will be placed for the first few weeks to introduce them to their new environment and the special fencing, is finished. We are now waiting for formal approval of our application at a meeting of the National Cheetah Management Programme to be held on 18 November. We have been assured that the approval will be forthcoming and the long-awaited arrival of our first cheetah will take place soon after. Rox will spend time at other nature reserves in South Africa to study applied telemetry, an animal locating technique, so that she will be able to keep track of our cheetah once they are released at Makulu Makete. She will be happy to share her monitoring tasks with any guests who are interested.

## **LODGE**

Another exciting arrival occurred during the month. Our newest team member, Cornelis, surprised us all by arriving 5 weeks early on 6 September. The first child of our General Manager, Marthinus, and his wife Noeline, our Camp Manager, he must have been very impatient to see the wonders of the outside world. He has gone from strength to strength since birth and both he and Noeline are happy to be home at Makulu Makete.

Cactus and his daughter Sasha, from Bellingham, Washington State, USA, didn't want to miss out on anything during their stay with us. They were always ready for a game drive with Shawn, our ranger, or a hike or horse ride with Rox. Most of all they enjoyed sitting in the hide (blind), watching the interaction between the animals outside. From the hide, they got some close-up photos of the usually shy and elusive eland. Cactus admired the rehabilitation work that Peter is doing and generously gave a donation towards buying more grass seed for our reseeding programme. Our first honeymoon couple, John and Birgit, were married in London a few days before arriving at Makulu Makete by car from Johannesburg. John is a South African and impressed us all with his knowledge of all things from brewing beer, to geology and botany. He kept Peter and Rox on their toes during discussions on ecology. Birgit and Rox had plenty in common, both having spent many years in Malawi. Unfortunately, John and Birgit left us the day Noeline brought Cornelis home. Although

Noeline has had plenty of experience raising orphaned roan calves, impala lambs and lion cubs, Cornelis is her first attempt at a human baby. She would have welcomed Birgit's professional advice as a paediatrician had they been able to stay longer.

Our photographer friend, Carol Polich, from Montana USA, came to visit us again for a few days. Lighting is all important to a photographer, so while we were pleased to see the gathering clouds each evening, they spoiled Carol's carefully arranged photo shoot at the giant baobab. Carol spent a day with Jane and Rox visiting the new Mapungubwe National Park, just over an hour's drive from Makulu Makete, and famous for its archaeological sites. We were impressed with the beautiful treetop walkway and elevated hide (blind) overlooking the Limpopo River and plan to add Mapungubwe to our day tour options from Makulu Makete.