

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

OCTOBER 2004

SEASONS

Right on cue, the first rains of the season have brought some life and colour to the winter-dry bush. Just a few days after our first rainfall of around 30 mm, green buds started to appear on the thorn trees and the base of the dry clumps of grass began to turn green. Gaudy red flowers on the nyala berry trees give the bush a festive air. The monotonous three-note song of the red-chested cuckoo was heard for the first time this summer. Known in Afrikaans as a "Piet-my-vrou" for the sound it makes, this cuckoo is difficult to spot, even though its calls can be heard all through the bush during the summer months. Two other summer visitors, the gorgeously-coloured pygmy and malachite kingfishers, have also made their first appearance. Although the temperature is already in the high 30s C (high 90s F) we will know summer is here in earnest when we hear the lilting call of the woodland kingfisher, summer icon of the bushveld.

GAME VIEWING

On 18 October, our General Manager, Marthinus, conducted an aerial survey of the game at Makulu Makete. Taking off in a small helicopter at 6 a.m., he and the pilot counted the larger game species flying a grid pattern to cover the whole reserve, an exercise which took about 6 hours. Unfortunately, the weather on the day of the game count was overcast and windy, which meant that for safety reasons they couldn't fly close to Madia Pala Mountain or our largest hill, Kremetartkop. The pilot estimates that even in perfect conditions, about 15% of animals are not spotted from the air. On the day in question, he guessed that between 20% and 30% of game might be missed. The numbers counted were:

487 impala (130 rams)
200 kudu (more than 40 mature bulls)
100 waterbuck (37 big bulls)
21 wildebeest (8 bulls)
20 zebra
20 eland (including 5 babies from this year)
44 gemsbok (including 13 babies)
13 giraffe

The large number of impala was quite a surprise, but this species should form the basic diet of the cheetah, whose introduction is imminent. The cheetah will be kept inside their training boma (enclosure) for several weeks as they become accustomed to their new surroundings. Their release into the reserve should take place a few weeks after the impala lambing season, which normally starts in mid-December. There was no official count of bushbuck, but Marthinus and the pilot reported that they saw at least 40 dotted along the river and many more would have been invisible in the thick bush beside the river, which is their favourite habitat. The 25 hartebeest that were released into the reserve only 3 years ago have all disappeared, probably as a result of predation by leopards. While very fast, hartebeest are notoriously stupid and make an easy meal for the larger predators.

Knowing the number of each species on the reserve at a certain point in time is essential for the correct management of the bush. From these numbers we can extrapolate over time to estimate the number of each species, taking into account reproduction and attrition rates, until another count is made in 3 or 4 years time. For the good health of the veld, it is vital to maintain the correct balance between grazers, browsers and predators. From these figures we can decide whether we are overstocked in a particular species. Excess animals will be removed from the reserve and sold live to other reserves. Keeping the number of animals under control will bring the veld back to its optimum condition.

Our three horses have been doing some game viewing of their own. Until the grass becomes too rich, the horses have been turned out into the reserve to forage for themselves. They have been exploring the reserve, gradually becoming more and more adventurous. Our ecologist, Rox, has found them at various waterholes happily grazing or drinking in the company of giraffe and gemsbok (oryx), which should make them less likely to shy when, with riders aboard, they come across these animals in the bush on trail rides.

BIRDING

As a hobby, birdwatching can be as active or sedentary as you care to make it. On a hot day, just sitting on the verandah at the lodge or lounging in the swimming pool, the tired birder can be rewarded with the constant activity around our birdbath and fountain. Blue and violet-eared waxbills, canaries, quelea, green-winged pytilia (Melba finches), mousebirds, red-headed weavers, Marico and white-bellied sunbirds twitter and flit through the bushes, alighting at the fountain to drink.

Venturing further afield from the lodge, our young Verreaux's (black) eagle seems to have flown from the nest. We often see Verreaux's eagles soaring around the peaks of Kremetartkop, in the vicinity of the nest on a rocky ledge high above the plain, but we can't be sure if one of them is our juvenile. Let's hope it is learning to fend for itself.

Sadly, the eggs of the nesting Spotted Eagle Owl were destroyed just before they were due to hatch. The eggs were found broken at the base of the bank where the bird was nesting in a hollow in the rock. Was it baboons or a monitor lizard which raided the nest? Undaunted, however, the owl has laid two more eggs, her third attempt this season. We hope she will succeed this time.

VELD REHABILITATION AND CHEETAH PROJECT

While we wait for the meeting of the National Cheetah Management Programme, which will give formal approval for our application to introduce cheetah into the reserve, the fencing crew is installing a fence on top of Madia Pala mountain. This will ensure that in the unlikely event that the cheetah manage to scale the sheer rocky cliffs of the mountain, they will be unable to get out of the reserve across the impenetrable barrier of razor wire and electric fencing. Because of the inaccessibility of the site, all the materials for the fence had to be carried up the mountain on foot, using 8 men, and taking 10 days.

A non-indigenous, spiky cactus called *Opuntia imbricata* or Imbricate Cactus has been spreading insidiously through some areas of the reserve, attaching itself to the hairs on the legs of animals as they brush past. Until now, a laborious method of treating the problem has been to wrap a chain around the plants and pull them out by the roots, then burn them. Rox, our ecologist, has been given permission to try introducing the *Cactoblastis* moth, which is genus-specific and so poses no threat to our indigenous flora, and has been successful elsewhere in controlling the pest plant. The moth will be especially welcomed by the staff, who have to wear thick gloves to do battle with the opuntia and its wicked thorns.

LODGE

Our good friend, birding expert, John Isom, spent some time with us to prepare for the birding skills course which he will be conducting at Makulu Makete in November. We are looking forward to learning a lot more about birds in general, as well as our own favourites here. John has planned some special challenges for the keen participants. We will report on the outcome of the course in our next Bush Diary.

During the month, Peter and Jane spent two weeks camping in Botswana. Makulu Makete is only 20 minutes drive from the border crossing post at Platjan on the Limpopo River and is a perfect starting point for a trip into Botswana. Camping conditions in Botswana are basic: you have to be very well equipped with a 4x4 vehicle, your own water and fuel, as well as being prepared to rough it: no hot showers, no flushing toilets, no power. Some of our previous guests at Makulu Makete have expressed an interest in coming back to stay with us for a few days, before setting off with hired equipment for their own safari into Botswana, with our help. Our new camping ground - Lulu's Camp, will also provide a great overnight stopover for campers from Johannesburg heading into Botswana or a night of comfort on their way home, with hot showers, a swimming pool, and potable water in a lovely riverside setting.

The great zebra and wildebeest migration was at its tail end when we reached the Botetli River on the edge of the Magkadikgadi National Park in Botswana. Hundreds of zebras and wildebeest jostled one another around the few remaining muddy pools in the dry riverbed. Lions were having a field day with prey in such abundance, and the trees along the river were heavily draped with vultures waiting for the next carcass. While we were there, the first rain of the season fell in an almighty thunderstorm, and overnight the scene was transformed. The next day the zebras had disappeared but the wildebeest remained, relaxed and refreshed, beside the newly-filled pools. The hippos seemed to be out of danger of sunburn as the water level rose. We are planning to return later in the summer to experience the different conditions after the rain.

We were captivated by the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, which is the largest game reserve in the world, with an area bigger than either Switzerland or Denmark. For three days we saw not another human being or vehicle and felt as if we were totally alone in a wonderland of wildlife. The salt pans in the Kalahari support huge numbers of game, including herds of gemsbok and springbok, which attract the big predators. Lions are

common, and we were even lucky enough to see a female cheetah with four roly-poly cubs, a foretaste of the joys to come with the introduction of cheetah at Makulu Makete. Birdlife in the Kalahari is overwhelming, particularly the variety of raptors, including secretary birds by the hundreds. It's hard to believe that kori bustards are a threatened species when they are so commonplace in the Central Kalahari, and there are enough LBJs (little brown jobs) to keep you guessing an entire lifetime. The Central Kalahari was made famous by a book called "Cry of the Kalahari" by Mark and Delia Owens, who camped there for seven years studying brown hyaena and other predators. The book is fascinating and is recommended for anyone interested in African wildlife.