

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### NOVEMBER 2004

#### SEASONS

Summer in the African bushveld is alive with the sound of birdsong. The Woodland Kingfishers arrived in the middle of the month, filling the bush with their joyful trilling and flashing their electric-blue wings. At night jackals call to one another in thin, reedy voices, and bush babies belie their size with hair-raising screeches, worthy of a horror movie soundtrack.

The rains which fell early last month and promised a good season have not been followed by any useful falls. Late afternoon electrical storms produce spectacular lightning displays and noisy thunder, but very little rain. This time last year we were revelling in above-average rainfall. Unless the rains come later, it looks as if this wet season will be disappointing. Already the grass, which started to sprout after the rain last month, is shrivelling in the intense heat. Even though the bush looks green because of the new foliage on the trees and bushes, there is very little new grass for the grazers to eat. Almost a month earlier than the previous two years, the first impala lambs appeared in mid-November. Their arrival usually coincides with the new grass, so we are hoping their mothers know something about the rain that we mere humans can't predict.

#### GAME VIEWING

Our ranger, Shawn, was lucky enough to spot a sub-adult leopard close to one of our waterholes in daylight during the month. Could this be one of the cubs which were seen with their mother last October? Another exciting sighting, this time for Peter, was a brown hyaena early one morning quite near Peter and Jane's house. According to the staff whose quarters are close to Kremetartkop, brown hyaena regularly come foraging for leftovers at night. As far as we know, there are no spotted hyaena on Makulu Makete. Most people are repelled by spotted hyaena, with their huge heads, gaping jaws, sloping bodies and famous giggling call. On the other hand, the long-haired brown hyaena are much more secretive and less aggressive than their spotted relatives.

Samuel, who looks after our tent and caravan park, Lulu's Camp, proudly came to show Jane and Peter a 5 kg (over 12 lb) Leer Carp which he caught in the Mogalakwena River next to the camp. His fisherman's tale beats most. He saw a crocodile grab the fish, but before the croc could swallow his prize, Samuel hit the croc with a piece of wood. The croc dropped the fish and Samuel picked up the flapping carp – voila – fresh fish for dinner! Samuel has also witnessed a tussle between a crocodile and a spotted-necked otter which frequents the permanent river pool next to Lulu's Camp. Samuel swears the otter won the battle, which makes us think perhaps our crocs are not as macho as they should be.

#### BIRDING

We were very pleased during the month to see our juvenile Verreaux's Eagle soaring above Kremetartkop with its parents. At last we have proof that the chick which was raised this year is making its own way in the world. More good news – our Spotted Eagle Owl has managed, on her third attempt, to hatch out three healthy chicks in her nest in a hollow near the Lodge. The fluffy grey chicks sit up, hungry and hopeful, at the sound of movement outside their nest. Let's hope they don't attract the attention of greedy baboons or raptors.

## BIRDING SKILLS COURSE

Our first Birding Skills Course, conducted by birding expert, John Isom, was held during the month. A select group – Margaret and Roger from Australia, and Tony from the U.K. – joined Jane and Rox for a gruelling but hugely enjoyable week. Roger and Margaret had stayed with us in February this year and were eager to return for more. It was Tony's first stay at Makulu Makete, but as a frequent visitor to Africa and now a firm friend, we are sure to see him again. John had us up most days at 4 a.m., in time to catch the early birds catching the worms. Morning walks along the river, through the bush and around the nearby agricultural lands revealed many interesting species. As we walked, John explained the habits and behaviour of each species, pointing out its distinguishing characteristics, mimicking its call and broadening our knowledge and appreciation of the birds as we went along. We even started to get more confidence in identifying some of those difficult Little Brown Jobs (LBJs) and the endless variety of swifts and swallows. John's broad birding knowledge extends outside Africa and he was able to refer to Australian and British species so that our overseas guests could make comparisons with birds more familiar to them. Lectures on raptors, migration, birding techniques and other avian subjects filled the middle of the day, and then we were out again, to find more examples of what we had been taught. A pair of Gabar Goshawks had obligingly built a nest and, during the course, were still feeding a juvenile right next to the tents in the main camp. They graciously posed for photographs, one with a dead weaver in its talons.

Two day trips – to Botswana across the Limpopo River, and to Mapungubwe National Park and Ratho farm – provided us with even more species. Our hunt for the elusive Pel's Fishing Owl was interrupted in Botswana by the presence of too many wild elephants, but we were thrilled to come across five cheetah as we made our way to a nearby dam to watch water birds. A friendly policeman kindly pointed out a group of locally uncommon Meyer's Parrots in a tree in the garden at the border crossing post between Botswana and South Africa, but he wasn't able to come up with a Pel's Fishing Owl. In Mapungubwe National Park we spotted a rare Senegal Coucal, its unbarred tail the only characteristic which distinguishes it from the more common Burchell's Coucal, which is often heard along the river at Makulu Makete. From the tree top walkway in the Park we had excellent views of a Bennett's Woodpecker, as well as Lilacbreasted and Broadbilled Rollers showing off their rolling flight patterns. We had a picnic lunch next to the dry Limpopo River at Ratho Farm, where a herd of elephants arrived in time to entertain us for lunch. Here, at last, we were rewarded with a sighting of a rare Pel's Fishing Owl, high above us in a fig tree. Through the telescope we had a clear view of this imposing, chestnut coloured owl, with huge black eyes, blinking at us.

Tony, Margaret and Roger gave us some great feedback on the week-long course and we will definitely be doing it again. Apart from learning about birds, the social interaction between the participants was stimulating. We got to know each other very well in a short space of time and the joking, banter and good humour did not stop for the entire week, despite the 4 a.m. starts and 40 degree heat (100+ degrees F). Between us, we managed to rack up 141 species at Makulu Makete, including 14 new species for our bird list, and a total of 171 species for the whole week, including our day trips to Botswana, Mapungubwe and Ratho.

If you would like to register your interest for future Birding Skills Courses, please email us at [pgr@worldonline.co.za](mailto:pgr@worldonline.co.za)

## CHEETAH PROJECT

On 18 November we received official approval from the National Cheetah Management Programme to introduce cheetah into Makulu Makete. More exciting than the approval was the news that we would be getting a fertile female cheetah to start with, followed by a male, with the hope that they might mate and produce offspring. We had previously been told that we would not be able to have a breeding programme for several years, but our game count last month showed that we have plenty of prey species to support offspring. We are expecting our female cheetah to arrive within the next two weeks. We can hardly wait.

The cheetahs will be collared so that we can track their movements and monitor their behaviour. Peter, Jane and Rox spent a couple of days during the month with Philip and Cailey Owens at Karongwe Research Institute learning how to use the telemetry equipment for tracking cheetahs. It is an unbelievable experience to walk through the bush behind a couple of cheetahs as they set off for their evening hunt. The cheetahs at Karongwe are well habituated to the research staff, who track and monitor them twice a day, so they are totally unconcerned by humans watching them. Homing in on the cheetahs with our beeping radio, we watched them exploring their territory, scent-marking trees and just lying around relaxing. Our own cheetahs will be kept in an enclosure (boma) near the Lodge for several weeks to get them used to the electric fencing and people, so that they will be undisturbed by the presence of humans. Rox, our Ecologist, is looking forward to our guests joining her on her daily tracking rounds.

We were so impressed by the telemetry system, that we have also bought tracking collars for leopards and brown hyaena, which we hope to catch and collar over the next few weeks. This will involve leaving baits at a waterhole, over a long period, until the predators become relaxed enough for us to tranquillise them with a dart gun and collar them. Tracking leopards and brown hyaenas, as well as cheetah, will give us valuable information on their whereabouts, habits and numbers. Because they are both normally nocturnal predators, they are rarely seen and it is extremely difficult to monitor their behaviour.

## LODGE

November saw the christening of Cornelis, now 3 months old, the first child of Marthinus, our General Manager and Noeline, our Camp Manager. Although he was born 5 weeks premature, Cornelis is fast catching up and looked very grown up in his navy-blue and white christening suit, complete with bow tie and leather shoes. The occasion was celebrated with the appropriate beverages!

Lulu's Tent and Caravan Camp is now open for business and looks stunning. A new shower and toilet has been added, bringing the total to 3 of each. The 10-metre pool, overlooking the Mogalakwena River, is sparkling and the lawns and gardens are lovingly looked after by Samuel, the Crocodile Hunter. It is a green and secluded oasis under huge established trees, full of birdlife. Warthogs, bushbuck and waterbuck visit at night. It takes only 20 minutes to drive from Lulu's Camp to the Platjan Border Post on the Limpopo River, making it a perfect stopover for campers travelling to Botswana from Johannesburg and Pretoria. Birders will find it a particularly delightful spot and we are happy to arrange guided walks and game drives for those wanting to explore the rest of Makulu Makete.