

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY JANUARY 2005

### CHEETAH PROJECT

At last she's here! After months and months of anticipation, our first cheetah arrived today, Tuesday 1 February. Her name is Dottie, which has double significance – not only does it describe her appearance, but it is Jane's mother's name. Jane's mother, who is now 83 and lives in Australia, will probably never get to Makulu Makete to see her namesake, but at least she knows that every time we see Dottie, we will think of her.

Deon Cilliers, Project Manager of the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Management Project, personally delivered Dottie to her new home, travelling from Pretoria at night to avoid the heat of the day. Dottie is approximately five years old and has a sad background. She and her cub had been caught, using dogs, by a farmer in North West Province who accused her of killing his cattle. The farmer then tried to sell the traumatised cheetahs on the black market, but the Department of Nature Conservation heard about the plight of the cheetahs and confiscated them. They were sent to De Wildt, where mother and cub had to be separated so that a pin could be surgically implanted in the cub's hind leg, which had been badly broken during the capture. After much veterinary treatment, the cub has now been housed with another young male cheetah and will be released to a new home, when it is old enough, in about 14 months time.

The solid transport crate holding Dottie was carefully lifted from the back of Deon's truck inside the one-hectare boma (enclosure) which has been constructed to introduce the cheetah to her new surroundings. The electric fence enclosing the boma is identical to the perimeter fence around the whole 4,500 hectare reserve. Dottie will remain in the boma for about three months where she will learn about the electric fence, as we have all had to, by getting the occasional shock. Initially she will be fed every three days, with half an impala carcass, and later on the feeding will be reduced to every four days until she is finally released into the reserve to hunt for herself. It will be our ecologist, Rox's, job to spend as much as six hours a day in the boma with Dottie, further habituating her to the presence of humans and a vehicle. Once the cheetah is released, Rox will track her using radio telemetry and will be able to approach her and follow her through the bush, without disturbing her normal behaviour. When Dottie has completely settled in to her new habitat, she will be joined by a male cheetah, also under the auspices of De Wildt.

Before the crate was opened, we could hear deep growls and the bang of an impatient paw from inside. All of us – Marthinus, Noline, Rox, Shawn and Jane - were there as Peter and Deon opened the crate. We waited expectantly for several minutes before Dottie came out, quite slowly, and we got our first look at her. Cautiously, she made her way across the boma, unaccustomed to being in such a large enclosure, but not concerned by her audience or the radio collar around her neck. After such a long wait for her to arrive, she hasn't disappointed us. To all of us she is the essence of beauty, elegance, speed and wild Africa.

### SEASONS

The new year has not brought as much rain as we would have liked. Every day the Mogalakwena River shrinks a little further, improving the odds of the fishing birds catching something in the ever-diminishing pools. Rainfall in the area is quite localised. We can often see black sky, and rain falling just a kilometre away, while overhead the hot sun shines from a clear blue sky. On our supply trips into Polokwane, two hours drive away, we pass properties

covered in lush green grass, and envy those farmers lucky enough to get decent rain this season. Frequent electrical storms build our hopes with crashing thunder and flashes of lightning, causing our “brave” guard dog, a fearsome-looking young boerboel, to cower in his kennel until the noise stops. The storms usually fizzle out after a couple of hours, sometimes producing a couple of tantalising millimetres for our ever-hopeful rain gauges.

## **GAME VIEWING**

The impala lambs, born in mid-November, are already well grown. The game count in October last year did not include these babies, so we now estimate that our impala population must have grown to around 800. Despite the disappointing rainfall, the impalas and all the other species look fat, shiny and healthy. Not so one unfortunate wildebeest bull, whose carcass was found near the river. Jane, with camping guests Steve and Alison, was driving through the drift in the river when they caught a whiff of something dead. Following their noses, they discovered the dead wildebeest, with a jackal buzzard sitting on top, making the most of the free meal. Because the body had already been well chewed by other scavengers, we were not sure what killed the apparently healthy, young animal. Whatever the cause, nothing goes to waste in the bush, and the carcass was dragged to our baiting site where it was demolished over the next couple of nights by brown hyenas and jackals.

Warthogs are not usually regarded as “cute”, but there are some very tiny warthog piglets about at the moment, trotting along behind their mother with their tails up, which can only be described in terms normally used by adoring grandmothers. It’s difficult to imagine such sweet little creatures growing up to look like their ugly parents.

## **BIRDING**

Sue and David, from Melbourne, Australia, took some excellent night shots of a juvenile Spotted Eagle Owl near the lodge, much to the excitement of Rox, who is sure that this particular bird is one of the chicks which she so carefully watched over the past couple of months before they left their nest. After three attempts at raising chicks in a single season, we are pleased that at least one of the owl’s offspring has made it this far.

The juvenile Verreaux’s (black) eagle which left its nest on Kremetartkop late last year still has a lot to learn about hunting. It was spotted swooping low over the boulder-strewn hill, on the tail of a klipspringer. Klipspringers are small, as antelopes go, weighing between 12 and 15 kilograms, but it is doubtful whether a Verreaux’s eagle, even though it is one of the biggest eagles in Africa, could handle such a weight. Its normal prey on Kremetartkop consists of dassies (rock hyraxes), with an average weight of about 3 kilograms. The young eagle seemed determined to catch the klipspringer, which nimbly kept out of the reach of its talons. Meanwhile, one of the eagle parents soared above watching the performance, no doubt shaking its wise head at the enthusiasm of youth.

Following the success of last year’s Birding Skills Course, John Isom has agreed to conduct two more week-long courses, one in November this year and one in January next year. We are limiting numbers for each course to only six participants, which means they will get individual attention at the same time as learning a lot and having plenty of fun. Full details can be found on our website, [www.makulumakete.com](http://www.makulumakete.com) in the special events section.

## **PREDATOR PROJECT**

Our brown hyena baiting programme continues to be tremendously successful. Most nights we are treated to the spectacle of one or more hyenas coming to a bait, chained to a tree, just

100 metres from Peter and Jane's house. Sitting a few metres away from the bait in a vehicle, we can hear the bones crunching as the hyena's powerful jaws make short work of impala legs, whole skeletons and even an entire head, leaving only the horns and the jaw bones still embedded with teeth. We have identified at least three individuals. We now believe that Lefty, which was the first hyena to be seen last year, is a female. The other regular visitors appear to be one big male, with a particularly luxuriant blonde mane, and a smaller, young male, which Shawn, our ranger, christened Manyani, meaning "little" in Sotho language. Steve and Alison, who were staying at Lulu's Camp, managed to get marvellous video footage of one of the hyenas and Peter has taken some excellent photos using a spotlight. Shining the spotlight around past the bait, we see impalas sleeping and waterbuck grazing in the dark, and occasionally a civet going about its nightly business. The hyenas usually appear one by one, and it's the earliest hyena which gets the bait. Lefty is now coming in to the bait before dark, just to make sure she is not beaten by one of the others.

Jane continues to see hyena on her early morning dog walks. One morning she could hear a lone jackal calling as it zig-zagged through the bush, roughly parallel with the road along which she was walking. The jackal seemed to be getting nearer and nearer, so Jane stopped to watch as it came out of the bush on to the road. To her surprise, it was not a jackal which appeared, but a brown hyena. Shortly after it crossed the road, a jackal emerged from the bush behind it. It seems that the jackal had been following the hyena, hoping to get in on the action if the hyena produced some food. The very next day, Jane and the dogs nearly collided with a brown hyena, which was carrying half a freshly-dead bushbuck. This encounter supports our belief that the hyenas are making kills of their own and not just relying on carrion. We suspect that the hyenas have a den in the neighbourhood and hope that many of our questions will be answered when we manage to put a radio collar on one of the hyenas and follow their movements.

## LODGE

We have already mentioned Steve and Alison, from England, who pitched their tent at Lulu's Camp for a couple of nights, on their way back to Durban after an extended honeymoon camping trip through Uganda, Zambia, Botswana and Namibia. They had shipped their own Land Rover from England to Cape Town for the marathon journey. How we admired their adventurous spirit and envied their experiences.

David and Sue, from Melbourne, seemed to be jinxed where game viewing was concerned. Having seen no elephants on their day trip into Botswana, they diligently sat one night in the dark waiting for our brown hyenas to appear. After two hours, they finally had to call it a night, having seen nothing, but the next morning the bait was gone. How unfair of Lefty not to co-operate with our guests. They did see giraffe, zebra and many species of antelope during their stay, as well as lots of birds, a couple of beautiful pythons and a chameleon. They have vowed to come back to see our cheetah, which also didn't arrive as scheduled during their stay, adding more weight to the jinx theory.

Frank Black, photographer/journalist/artist from Johannesburg, came to see our baobab trees as subject matter for a book about places off the beaten track, which will probably be titled "The Road Less Travelled". Frank had some wonderful anecdotes from his days as a journalist in Belfast, London and Washington. We are looking forward to seeing our biggest baobab, with a girth of 22 metres, in his book and perhaps even featured in his artwork.