

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

MARCH 2005

SEASONS

Autumn is in the air. The leaves of some of the baobab trees are turning yellow and the corkwood trees are already dropping their leaves. Even as bare winter skeletons, they are particularly attractive trees, their papery trunks topped with a neat dome of twisting branches, reflecting palely in the gentler sunlight of the cooler months. A few falls of rain late in the season have given a boost to our grass situation. The place looks much greener and should provide more grazing for the dry winter months ahead.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Dottie, our first cheetah, is still in her "training boma", getting used to her new surroundings, the electric fence, and the presence of humans. She has become more active and spends a lot of time walking around her one-hectare domain, looking forward to the day when she will be released to hunt for herself in the 5,000 hectare reserve. She is muscling up nicely with the additional exercise, and will be capable of pulling down her own prey. She is now adept at opening and skinning the impala legs that she is fed every two or three days. Soon her feeding routine will be changed so that she will be given a whole impala carcass every five or six days, in preparation for her release at the end of April. While we have tried to accustom Dottie to the presence of humans so that she will ignore us when we follow her through the bush, we have been careful not to let her become tame. Her wildness is palpable, and she deserves our respect, unlike the cheeky baboons, which taunt her from the trees surrounding her enclosure, and which she regards with aristocratic disdain.

GAME VIEWING

The rainfall and hot weather has brought out the snake population, to the delight of our ecologist, Rox, who is a snake-oholic. Several species have been spotted, including a boomslang (tree snake) and the very venomous black mamba. Beautifully patterned African rock pythons, which are non-poisonous but can give you a nasty bite and a very strong hug, are the most common. A four and a half-metre long python was seen near the brown hyaena den, and Rox and Shawn, our ranger, nearly stood on a three-metre python one night opening a gate near the dam. Despite a tiring, 14-hour day shopping for supplies in Polokwane, they both found the energy and agility to leap back into the vehicle as the snake slid towards them. Tokumani, the Australian cattle dog owned by Marthinus and Noeline, was unlucky enough to be the target of a Mozambique spitting cobra, resulting in a very painful, swollen eye, but fortunately not causing permanent blindness. In the past our inquisitive puppy has been temporarily blinded by the "oogpister" beetle, which uses the same defence mechanism as the spitting cobra. "Oog" means "eye" in Afrikaans, and you can probably guess what "pister" means.

Over Easter, guests at Madia Pala Camp, Nelly and her group from Johannesburg, went on a very successful night game drive. Apart from waterbuck, bushbabies and a civet, a young male brown hyaena was caught in the spotlight at the baiting site. Unconcerned by the audience watching from the open Land Rover, he went on chewing on the kudu bones, all the time fending off a black-backed jackal which was trying to get in on the action. There is more evidence that the brown hyaenas at Makulu Makete have been killing bushbuck and not just surviving on carrion. This behaviour is probably due to the lack of lions and other big predators which would normally provide left-overs from their kills. Brown hyaenas have been spotted outside the reserve on the roadside, where they are in danger of being shot by farmers who accuse them of killing calves and maiming cattle.

VELD REHABILITATION PROJECT

In order to maintain a proper balance between the available feed and the number of grazing and browsing animals on the reserve, every year we have been taking off excess numbers of certain species. Impalas, kudus, eland, gemsbok (oryx) and waterbuck, have bred prolifically and, without enough major predators to keep their numbers in check, they put too much pressure on the veld (bush). A game capture took place during March to remove animals and sell them live to other game farms. Game capturing is an exciting operation to witness. A professional crew of more than 20 men erects a funnel-shaped enclosure in the bush, with the narrow end leading into a ramp up to a truck. A helicopter flies "reconnaissance" trips across the reserve to find herds different species of antelope. Then, like a sheep dog, it rounds up a herd at a time and brings it as calmly and quietly as possible through the bush, sometimes for several kilometres, and into the enclosure, using a siren to help push the animals along. Once inside the enclosure, curtains are drawn behind the animals, as they get progressively closer to the trucks. With some persuasion from men on the ground, they find themselves in the trucks, where the animals are kept in individual separate compartments so there is no danger of injury from fighting. Lengths of plastic polypipe are heated on a fire and pushed over the long horns of the antelopes to prevent them from hurting each other, and each animal is injected with a sedative to make it relax for its road journey to its new home. The capture crew works early in the morning and late in the afternoon, to avoid stress to the animals during the heat of the day. This time they captured 126 impala, 3 kudu, 7 waterbuck, 12 eland and 4 gemsbok, without a single injury. They will return in winter to remove more animals.

Our programme to eradicate the invasive and non-indigenous "opuntia" cactus continues. Cuttings of prickly pear cactus, infected with cactoblastus and cochineal insects, are placed amongst the offending plants at Makulu Makete. The insects multiply and spread through the bush, feeding only on the cactus, eventually killing the host plants. It is a long-term but effective method for the smaller cactus, but the tiny insects would have no hope of killing the giant "Queen of the Night" cactus, planted years ago by a misguided, former resident. The "Queen" is so big that it is a handy landmark, towering above the surrounding bushes. It will be cut down and burned.

BIRDING

The summer migrant birds will soon start heading north for the winter months. Telephone lines are festooned with gorgeous carmine bee-eaters, gathering for their annual migration. Flocks of Abdim storks and white storks appear mysteriously whenever the lucerne field is cut, following the tractor as it disturbs frogs and other tasty morsels. The incessant calls of the red-chested and black cuckoos have gradually subsided and soon the lovely little Woodland Kingfisher will disappear until November. Although not as melodious as the Woodland Kingfisher, francolin and guinea fowl ensure that the bush will never be silent, with their hysterical screeching marking the beginning and end of every day.

LODGE

Cornelis, the son of managers Marthinus and Noeline, and aged 7 months, is no longer our youngest team member. Two baby genets, only 7 weeks old, have usurped his position. The babies were found on a neighbouring property when their nest was inadvertently bulldozed. At the time they were new-born and the rest of the litter was killed. Rox has been feeding them kitten milk formula with a tiny bottle and they are thriving. Members of the cat family, at the moment they look like stretched and more pointed versions of a tabby kitten, with big rounded ears, and large eyes. They have long tails with ringed markings and are skilled tree-climbers. Their adult diet consists of rodents, reptiles, insects, birds, frogs and wild fruit but these two are making the most of Rox's patience and so far have refused to take anything but

milk from a bottle, so feeding them is a time-consuming chore. We are hoping that they will soon develop a taste for minced meat and start eating properly. Having been hand-reared, they will be unafraid of people and we hope they will stay close to the lodge when they are old enough to look after themselves, so that our guests will have the pleasure of seeing them up close, instead of under a spotlight on a night drive.

Jane and Peter are travelling in Australia and the United States, visiting relatives. They are looking forward to being back at Makulu Makete in time for the release of the cheetah. We are all keen to find out how she reacts to her new freedom. Tracking her through the bush using her radio collar and telemetry will be a real thrill, which guests will be encouraged to share with us.