

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### MAY 2005

#### SEASONS

With most of the bushes and trees losing their leaves, or already bare, the veld looks drab at this time of the year, but pleasantly warm days encourage activity amongst our guests and the wildlife. The male impalas are spending their days chasing one another and making noises like steam engines letting off steam. Some nights are cold enough for heaters and electric blankets in the tents at the main lodge, and it is too dark by six o'clock in the evening to see the kudu and waterbuck at the waterhole below the cocktail deck. Instead, we sit around a big, crackling fire inside the lodge, while delicious aromas emanating from the kitchen sharpen our appetites for Lucas's winter menus of soups, venison and dastardly desserts. Cloudless, winter night skies, studded with stars, give Peter the opportunity, with the help of the Southern Cross, to explain to our visitors from the northern hemisphere how to find south.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

Dottie, the first cheetah in our cheetah rehabilitation project, in conjunction with the De Wildt Cheetah Foundation, has been out in the reserve for a month. For the first couple of weeks she continued to rely on us for sustenance, having been kept in enclosures for several months after her capture on a farm in the Kalahari region, and being fed regularly. After a few teething troubles with our tracking equipment, our ecologist, Rox, has been finding Dottie on a daily basis. From the look of the cheetah's belly, it is possible to ascertain whether or not she has made a kill. When empty, the cheetah's outline is like that of a greyhound, with its stomach pulled right up under its backbone, and it is rated 1, on a scale of 1 to 5. When it has eaten all it can, and the stomach is very full and hanging down, it is rated 5. Just after her release, when she had not made a kill for herself, Dottie was so hungry that she grabbed the receiver tracking equipment from Rox's feet and dashed off into the bush, with the antenna trailing along behind. Dottie had been used to being fed by Rox and mistook the receiver box for a leg of impala. Rox kept giving Dottie small amounts of meat, trying to encourage the cheetah to kill for herself. The good news is that Dottie is now making her own kills, but the bad news is that she seems to be targeting bushbuck, rather than impala. Impalas are herd animals, and with up to 50 pairs of eyes on the look-out for predators, it is not easy for a cheetah to ambush an impala. Bushbuck, on the other hand, are solitary and tend to forage in thick bush – perfect for a surprise attack by a hungry cheetah.

Since her release, Dottie has explored much of the reserve. The tracking equipment has a range of up to 2 kilometres in open country, so it sometimes takes a little while to locate the cheetah if she has travelled a long distance since her last sighting. Accompanied by Rox, our guests are allowed to use the tracking equipment themselves to home in on Dottie. Their unanimous reaction is that coming face to face with a wild cheetah is one of the most exciting experiences of their lives. Because she is unafraid of humans, Dottie has the unnerving habit of walking determinedly towards the tracker, with her head down, shoulders hunched and her unwavering gaze fixed on the tracker's eyes. However, she always stops a few metres short and ignores the intruders, giving us ample opportunity for photographs. Ian and Retha Gaiger, from Lajuma Mountain Retreat, brought a group of Dutch and German students to track the cheetah and Dottie remained unfazed, even in the presence of 11 admiring visitors.

We are hoping that our next cheetah, this time a male, will be with us in a couple of months. Like Dottie, he will be kept in the boma (enclosure) for three months to accustom him to his new surroundings, before being released into the reserve.

### **PREDATOR PROJECT**

We have made four attempts during the month to dart and collar brown hyaena, as part of the predator project. The darting team – Marthinus, our marksman, with the dart gun, Peter on spotlight, and Rox armed with follow up medication – has kept silent watch at night by our baiting site for several hours at a time, on an open Land Rover, rugged up against the cold, while Shawn and Jane wait on standby to be called when the action starts, and all hands are needed. Although the hyaenas have been appearing regularly at night at the baiting site, so far they have not co-operated when the team is ready. On only one of the four nights did hyaena appear, and they were more interested in each other than the bait. A few minutes after a very big, probably male, hyaena came out of the bush in the twilight, a smaller hyaena also appeared. It crawled on its belly up to the big hyaena, and rolled on its back like a puppy in submission. Ignoring the bait, they played together before disappearing into thick bush in the dark. Meanwhile, hyaenas have been seen at the baiting site in the middle of the day, pulling off pieces of the baits and sitting under a bush in the shade eating them, before skulking off with a bone in their mouths. According to our ranger, Shawn, this uncharacteristic behaviour is due to the fact that these particular hyaena have not read the manual which tells them that they are nocturnal animals. Nevertheless, our darting team will persevere.

The most elusive members of our predator guild are the cats, but this month there have been several examples of leopard activity. A dead impala was found wedged in the branches of a corkwood tree - classic evidence of a leopard kill, because the leopard caches its kill up a tree, out of the reach of other predators such as lions and hyaenas. Clear leopard spoor and leopard droppings have been found near the mountain, and an impala was killed and dragged for half a kilometre before being hidden under dry leaves – another classic leopard-kill scenario. There have been several sightings of caracal over the past few weeks, another cat which we would like to study as part of our predator project.

### **GAME VIEWING**

One of the most exciting finds of the month was a 3.5 metre-long python, which crossed the track in front of Peter's vehicle, stretching from one side of the track to the other, with a noticeable bulge in the middle, probably a small antelope. We got a good view of the snake as it rested, coiled under a bush, before taking off again through the scrub and leaving a wide, straight trail behind it in the sand. It is always a thrill to see a big python, with its black and dark green diamond pattern, and try to imagine how many years it has been around, to have grown so big.

There are many baby kudus about at the moment, as well as young gemsbok (oryx) and waterbuck, but the cutest of all is a baby klipspringer, which was seen with its parents on one of the rocky koppies which are dotted across the reserve. Klipspringers are attractive, chubby little antelopes, specially adapted to living on rocky hills, with non-slip hooves which enable them to leap from boulder to boulder in places inaccessible to most antelope.

Our camera trap has given us some good photos of hyaena at night, as well as a close-up shot of the quills of a porcupine which happened to wander past under the camera. Porcupines were on the list of animals which our Swedish visitor, Ulla, wanted to see. True to form, Shawn was able to show her two porcupines on a night drive and some tiny bushbabies, another species on Ulla's wishlist.

## **BIRDING**

It looks as if our pair of Verreaux's (black) Eagles are once again sitting on eggs in their nest high up on a ledge on Kremetartkop. This is the third time in four years that they have nested, twice already rearing chicks, making them slightly more successful than the average for Verreaux's Eagles, which is two out of three years.

A mother Doublebanded Sandgrouse with three tiny chicks was spotted on the track in front of the Land Cruiser. When the vehicle stopped, the mother bird took off in flight and instantly all three tiny chicks dropped down, with their heads on the ground, mimicking stones. Their cryptic brown, fluffy down and pale markings were perfect camouflage amongst the stones on the track. What a thrill it was to gently pick them up and place them out of harm's way.

An unusual sighting this month was a melanistic Gabar Goshawk. A pair of the standard Gabars nested at the lodge last season, and the very striking, melanistic form has been seen several times on the reserve.

The noisy Grey Lourie, now called the Grey Go-away Bird, is very common at Makulu Makete. A tree full of Go-away Birds, perhaps 40 in number, made such a noise and fuss that they finally managed to flush out an adult and a juvenile Verreaux's Eagle Owl from their daytime roost near the river. The big owls flapped sleepily to a neighbouring tree, but the Go-away Birds followed them and forced them to move on again. Their screeching cries after their success sounded like a crowd cheering at a football match when their team had scored a goal.

## **LODGE AND CAMPS**

Ulla, from Sweden, spent a week with us and went tracking Dottie as often as possible, walking through the bush with Rox and the cheetah. She waited patiently with us for two nights as we watched for the brown hyaena, hoping to dart and collar one for the first time. Ulla participated in the lively discussions over dinner, when each member of the team had a different solution for our frustrated hyaena darting attempts. As bad luck would have it, two days after Ulla left, Peter and Jane spotted an armadillo, one of the animals which eluded her during her stay.

Camping at Lulu's Camp, Thea and Hans from Potgietersrus enjoyed walking our baobab trail and Hans was thrilled to spend an hour or so in the bush with Dottie. Marian and Graham are permanent campers, having sold their house in Cape Town to travel around South Africa in their Kombi. They have the sort of freedom that most people, tied to office jobs and mortgages, can only dream about. During their stay at Lulu's they visited Mapungubwe National Park and were impressed with the archaeological site and professionalism of the staff.

Professor Rick Bernard, of Rhodes University, stayed with us to finalise details of Rox's Master's thesis, which she will be undertaking with his supervision. Based on our predator project, Rox's thesis will examine "the feeding ecology, range use and interaction within the medium-large carnivore community in a small (5,000 ha) fenced

reserve". Both Rox and the Professor are excited about the results which will come from studying our brown hyaena population, as this will be the first ever study of this uncommon species carried out on a small, closed area – ground breaking stuff!