

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

JUNE 2005

SEASONS

The veld gets drier by the day. A few tinges of green can be seen along the river, relieving the monotonous grey of the leafless trees and bushes, and the bare sand underneath. The next few months will be the hardest for the grazers and browsers, with little dry grass left over from the meagre summer rains and scant foliage. Kudus visit the lawns around the lodge at night, nibbling on the leaves of the thorn bushes next to the swimming pool. Waterbuck crop the grass at Lulu's Camp, a green oasis in the middle of a dry wasteland, and families of warthogs cautiously nibble at the carefully-watered lawns surrounding our houses, their bulbous eyes keeping watch for signs of danger. Survival rations of lucerne hay are being fed out to the game at several places across the reserve, three times a week. Early in the month, the Department of Water Affairs released a surge of water from the big Glen Alpine dam upstream on the Mogalakwena River to help the farmers downstream with their irrigated fields. Appearing as if by magic, the fishing birds took advantage of the unseasonal flow of water to gather at the overflowing weirs and dams, on the look-out for fish. Fish eagles, herons and serious-looking giant kingfishers took up positions along the riverside, while lively little pied kingfishers hovered in jack-knife poses over the water, ready to dive in for their prey.

CHEETAH PROJECT

On Wednesday 28 June the second cheetah in our Cheetah Rehabilitation Project was delivered to Makulu Makete from the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project. This male cheetah originated in the North West area of South Africa and was captured illegally by a farmer. The Department of Conservation confiscated our cheetah along with five other males who were probably destined for the "canned hunting" trade or illegal export. He is a magnificent specimen - about three years old and big for his age. He has been kept in an enclosure on his own at Jubatus Cheetah Reserve since December. We have decided to call this cheetah "Danny", in memory of Danny Brink, who died tragically last year and whose ashes, according to his wishes, are now at rest beside a commemorative plaque out in the bush which Danny loved, here at Makulu Makete. Danny, the cheetah, seemed nervous as he emerged from his travelling crate at a run, and immediately headed for the other side of his one-hectare boma (enclosure), pacing the fenceline with his head held high. He will be kept in the boma for at least three months while he loses his homing instinct, gets used to the electric fence and becomes habituated to the non-threatening presence of humans. Just as she did with Dottie, our ecologist, Rox, will once again have the task of spending many hours in the boma with the cheetah to accustom him to human company, at the same time being careful to avoid making him tame. Once he is ready, he will be released into the reserve, and we are hoping that he and Dottie will eventually produce the first wild cheetah cubs to be born at Makulu Makete.

Meanwhile, Dottie has settled in well. She is hunting successfully for herself and recently made four kills in eight days, which is way above the cheetah hunting average. Her prey has included steenbok, impala ewes and a full-grown bushbuck ram. She continues to roam widely across the reserve, but seems to have established a couple of favourite spots where she spends more time. Our American guests, Jim and Sylvia, were especially privileged to watch Dottie demolish a whole steenbok, which she had killed just minutes before they arrived on the scene. Unconcerned by her audience, Dottie tore off the skin to get to the meat of the small antelope, her stomach growing bigger and bigger as she finished her meal. We are all

looking forward to comparing Danny's progress with that of Dottie, who at this early stage appears to be a much more laid-back character than her male consort.

PREDATOR RESEARCH

Early in the month, Chillies, who is in charge of our camping ground, Lulu's Camp, reported that a young bushbuck ram had been killed overnight at the camp. He showed us the kill site, where the sand and grass had been carefully scraped, the dead bushbuck which had been dragged some distance and partly eaten, and paw marks in the sand. Chillies was sure this was a caracal kill and that the cat would return for the carcass the following night, so we tied the carcass to a post nearby and set up our digital camera trap opposite. Next morning, all that was left of the bushbuck was the shin bone, where the chain was attached. The photos were exciting. Just as Chillies had predicted, a big caracal was caught by the camera returning to the carcass at about 7.15 p.m., eating more of its kill. A few hours later, around midnight, a brown hyaena appeared and finished off the carcass, leaving only the shin bone. Caracal is one of the species we are hoping to collar and track for our predator research and following this positive sighting, Rox has set up a special baiting area to try and attract one of these beautiful cats. The caracal saga will continue in future bush diaries.

After a final failed attempt at collaring a brown hyaena, using a free darting method, it was decided to try trapping instead. A bait was chained inside a trap so that if an animal pulled on the bait, the door would drop closed and an alarm signal would be sent to Peter and Jane's house. This system was very effective. The first time we tried it, after only an hour or so, the alarm went off and we went out to find a big, angry brown hyaena caught in the trap. Using a syringe on a pole, the animal was drugged and after about 10 minutes, the big hyaena was snoring peacefully. Carefully his eyes were covered and his ears plugged while all his vital statistics were recorded. Rox took some hair samples from his tail for DNA analysis, and he weighed in at 48 kilograms – “a real bruiser”! While Marthinus kept checking his heart rate, and Rox made sure his temperature was under control, Peter fitted a radio collar to the animal. Holding his big paw in my hand and stroking his wiry hair was an experience not to be forgotten. He was put in a special wooden crate to recover from the drug, where he would be safe from other predators, and the next morning he was released before dawn. Sporting his new collar, he took off at a fast gallop towards the safety of the bush, no doubt wondering what had happened. Since then, his radio signal has been picked up along the river quite close to where he was trapped, and further afield in the reserve. Because of their nocturnal habits, it will not be as easy to track the hyaenas as it is with the cheetah, but we hope that collared hyaenas will lead us to their den where daytime activity may be observed. Shawn, our ranger, suggested we call this particular hyaena “Oubaas”, which means “Old Boss”, and is Peter's title amongst the staff. The name is appropriate because the hyaena seemed to be quite a senior citizen. It also has big feet, wiry hair and an enormous head, which Peter protests are not attributes shared with the human Oubaas.

To get a good picture of their behaviour, we would like to collar four brown hyaenas. There are concerns that trapping causes injury to the animal as it struggles to free itself from the trap before it is tranquillised. Therefore, our next attempt will be with the free darting method again, but this time using transmitter darts, so that, with our telemetry equipment, we can find the unconscious animal in the dark in the bush once the drug has taken effect.

GAME VIEWING

The impala rut is still in full swing. Male impalas can be seen clashing, head to head, and their victory snorts and grunts resonate through the bush. Always on the lookout for evidence of predator activity, we investigated the mauled carcass of an impala ram, only to find that the

reason for death was a puncture wound to the lungs, caused by another impala ram's horn during a fight. Hyenas and jackals had quickly found the carcass.

Although snake sightings usually decrease during the cooler months, Rox was fascinated to observe two black mambas intertwined in a rarely-seen and elegant wrestling display. The two snakes were braided together, rearing up as each tried to push the other's head down to the ground. For our herpetologist, viewed from a safe distance, this was a truly exciting and unexpected exhibition.

Leon and Pam, birders from Pretoria who stayed at Lulu's Camp, were joined at their braai (barbecue) each night by a large and well-fed civet. We believe that this is the same animal that has been photographed by our camera trap, helping himself to the bait put out for the brown hyenas. Handsome, black and grey spotted and striped carnivores, civets are nocturnal and occasionally seen on night game drives.

Sad news to report on Rox's two baby genets. Now five months old, the brothers were doing very well and the larger of the two had even started killing mice for himself and eating the odd bird, but one morning recently Rox found the smaller genet dead in their enclosure. There was no apparent reason for his death, as he had been active and alert and had no signs of illness. We can only speculate that he was bitten by something. The bigger genet will now have to go it solo. The door of his enclosure is open a fraction, so that he can come and go as he pleases, but no predators can get in to attack him. As he gets more proficient at hunting he will return to the security of his cage less frequently until he is ready to make the final break.

VELD REHABILITATION

During the dry winter months, areas of thick bush densification, caused by years of overgrazing by cattle and game, are cleared using the "bosvreter" ("bush eater") machine. The cut stumps of the bushes are painted with herbicide to prevent regrowth and the branches are stacked to encourage grass to grow under their protection, where grazers cannot destroy the newly emerging grass seedlings which appear during the rainy season. The aim is to increase the carrying capacity of the reserve and return the habitat to how it would have been before the introduction of cattle, 100 years ago. In order to take the pressure off the bush, a game capture crew was brought in again to remove overstocked species. Using a helicopter to round up the game, the crew took off 34 waterbuck (half males and half females), 36 kudu (20 cows and 16 bulls), 6 gemsbok or oryx (half males and half females) and 61 impala (46 ewes and 15 rams). The live animals were trucked out to other game farms. This exercise will have to be repeated until a natural balance can be established between the veld and the browsers, grazers and predators.

BIRDING

While winter is the quietest time for birding, the resident bird population can be counted on to provide enjoyment for birders even at this time of year. Leon and Pam recorded 39 species around Lulu's Camp during their stay with us. Jan and Terry from Johannesburg, also camping at Lulu's Camp, joined Pam and Leon to watch an immature Verreaux's Eagle Owl, just downstream of the camp. The young owl appears each afternoon, calling to its parents in a soft scream, quite unlike its parents' throaty grunting call.

A new species for our birdlist this month was a couple of Lanner Falcons, which demonstrated their clever hunting technique on a group of Scalyfeathered Finches taking refuge in thornbushes.

LODGE AND CAMPS

Antonie and Susan Schouten, from Vancouver, Canada, visited us again this month. Their first visit was two years ago, when they heard about Peter's plans to introduce cheetah to Makulu Makete. So impressed were they by Peter's enthusiasm for his bush rehabilitation programme, that they donated \$250,000 Canadian to upgrade the fencing to accommodate cheetah. This time they were able to see the result of their generosity – a state-of-the-art, 38 strand fence, with 9 electrified wires carrying 8,000 volts, guaranteed to contain elephant, lion, buffalo, rhino and, more importantly in our case, cheetah. For the first time they met Dottie, face to face in the bush and saw her on a kill. At the end of a wonderful month of visiting parks in Zambia, they missed meeting Danny by only a few days, but he will be a good excuse for them to come back to Makulu Makete again.

A long weekend in the middle of June brought Jo'burgers and Pretorians north for the warmer weather. Abri and his group stayed at Madia Pala camp, and spent a day at Mapungubwe National Park while they were here. Jogging was on the agenda for one of the group, but because a running animal (human) could trigger Dottie's chase mechanism, the jogger had to run behind Shawn's Land Rover for safety reasons. Terry and Jan had a quick trip through the Tuli Block of Botswana while they stayed at Lulu's Camp, and enjoyed the chance to relax in the winter sunshine and watch the birds.

Emmanuelle, also from Pretoria, used Makulu Makete as a stopover on her camping trip through Botswana with her friends and family from Normandy, in France. Staying only two nights at the lodge, they managed to squeeze in a game drive, walking the baobab trail and tracking Dottie through the bush before heading off across the Limpopo River and north into Botswana, as far as Victoria Falls.

Our nearest town, Alldays, still hasn't recovered from the visit by two very bubbly young ladies from London. City slickers Jo and Alex never dreamed they would have so much fun in the African bush. Alex amazed herself by keeping a meticulous record of all the mammal and bird species she saw during her stay, even identifying a new species for this part of the world "the yellow-beaked big beak", (alias Yellowbilled Hornbill). With Jim and Sylvia, all kitted out in matching Makulu Makete shirts and caps, they ventured into Botswana for the day and really hit the jackpot on the elephant front. They counted 93 elephants wallowing in the muddy waters of a dam. At the pub in Alldays, tough, khaki-clad professional hunters were easy prey for party girls Jo and Alex, who have vowed to come back again next hunting season.