

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### JULY 2005

#### SEASONS

Dry, dry, dry. Bare earth and leafless trees and bushes provide little nourishment for the grazers and browsers, which now congregate along the river where there is still some greenery to be found. Game viewing from the hide at this time of the year is most rewarding, as lucerne hay left at the waterhole attracts a continual parade of zebras, gemsbok, kudu, waterbuck, impala, warthogs and wildebeest. Except for one week of exceptionally cold, cloudy weather, (brought with them, we suspect, by some visitors from wet and windy Melbourne, Australia), the skies are clear and the temperatures are in the mid-20s Celcius during the day.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

Danny, the second cheetah in our cheetah rehabilitation programme, in conjunction with the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, arrived late in June and is being kept in a one-hectare boma (enclosure) while he becomes accustomed to his new surroundings and the non-threatening presence of human beings. Compared with Dottie, our first cheetah in this project, Danny is very nervous. It didn't take Dottie long to get used to the routine of being fed in the boma. She would approach the vehicle determinedly, drag away the impala meat and settle down not far off to eat it without much concern for those watching her. Feeding Danny is quite a different matter. Guests Annie and Heidi joined Rox, Peter and Jane on the open Land Rover inside the boma for a feeding session. An impala leg was thrown in front of the vehicle and we watched with excitement as Danny emerged from his hiding place in bushes and warily circled the Land Rover at a safe distance, growling with every breath. Three times he dashed in towards the vehicle and swerved away at the last moment, before finally plucking up the courage to run in, grab the leg and lope off to the other side of the boma to eat it in private. Danny is a bigger, stronger-looking cheetah than Dottie, more muscular and active than his intended. While Dottie has rows of very large, dark spots down her back, making her look dark, Danny has regular, smaller spots. Dottie's tail is much more generously tipped with white. We are not sure whether Dottie has been to check out Danny from outside his boma, but she should be impressed by such a handsome specimen.

Rox, our ecologist, continues to monitor Dottie's movements on a daily basis, tracking her through the bush on foot, using telemetry to follow Dottie's radio collar. Normally very relaxed about being followed, Dottie sometimes leads us a merry chase, when she is on the move or hunting. Regular visitors from Johannesburg, Mary and Pauline, had to try several times before they were able to catch up with Dottie and finally watch her at ease in her own environment. Dottie ranges far and wide over the reserve, successfully killing prey. In this bushveld habitat, she is adept at ambushing prey, rather than chasing it. Impala, steenbok, duiker, bushbuck, klipspringer and even a well-grown kudu cow have all fallen victim to Dottie's hunting skills. We have no control over her menu, but we would prefer her to stick to impala and leave the charming little klipspringers to hop about the hills untouched.

#### PREDATOR PROJECT

We have had several more attempts to collar a second brown hyaena. Sitting night after night in a vehicle next to the baiting site, dart gun at the ready, our capture crew have shivered through silent hours. Hyaenas have come in to the bait, but have been in the wrong position for safe darting or have taken the bait after our crew has left. Civets, black-backed jackals and a bushpig have made the most of the bait intended for the hyaena. The bushpig spent over an hour gorging itself on kudu meat and has since been seen foraging close to Peter and

Jane's house, much to the frustration of their Jack Russell terrier, just a metre away on the other side of the fence. The bushpig is much more pig-like than a warthog, with long reddish hair and a grey and white stripe down its back. Its long thin face is bearded with white bristles, its ears end in tufts of hair and it has bright little eyes, surrounded by white hair. Collaring a bushpig would be easy, but unfortunately they are not part of our predator study.

Meanwhile, Oubaas, the brown hyaena which was collared last month, has been wandering all over the reserve. Because of his nocturnal habits, Rox has to monitor his movements at night, sometimes getting just a few hours of sleep herself. Unlike following Dottie in daylight, it means that actually spotting Oubaas in the dark is improbable, but his position is recorded by GPS triangulation. Early one morning Rox was excited to pick up signals for both Dottie and Oubaas close together, near a waterhole and she was lucky enough to see them both in the same area. Dottie had made a kill and Oubaas had taken the carcass before Dottie had finished eating. This is the sort of interaction that we are particularly interested in for our predator research. Will the hyaenas start to depend on Dottie, and eventually Danny, to supply them with carrion? Will Dottie and Danny have to kill more and more often if the hyaenas take their kills before they have eaten their fill? Our camera trap has also produced night-time action shots of Oubaas fighting with another hyaena, both animals blood-stained and going for each other's necks, their long hair standing on end as they lunge at each other. Oubaas's collar is clearly visible as he left the scene, possibly the victor, with a bone in his mouth.

Having had little success lately with brown hyaenas, we have turned our immediate attention to caracals and leopards. A caracal trap has been set up, using dead guineafowl as bait, and leopard bait is being placed at several spots on the reserve. Baiting leopards is quite different from baiting for hyaenas. A likely tree is chosen, usually near a rocky hill, and a carcass is attached by wire in the tree so that it is out of reach of hyaenas. Unlike cheetahs, which prefer fresh meat, leopards don't mind their meat well hung – even old and stinking. The sand underneath the tree is swept clean to make it easier to see tracks. In some places a low barrier of thorn branches is built so that the leopard has to jump over it to get to the tree. This means its tracks will be clearly imprinted in the swept sand. Sometimes the camera trap is set up at the site as well. With all these baiting methods, patience is required because it could take weeks before a leopard or caracal comes to the bait.

## **GAME VIEWING**

Our guests this month have all enjoyed sitting in the hide at no. 10 waterhole, where lucerne hay is being dropped to help the animals get through the winter. Heidi and Annie, from Washington State, USA, got some good photos of the elusive eland at the hide. Eland are the largest of all the antelope, weighing up to 900 kg. Earlier this year, we removed most of the eland from the reserve because of the pressure they were putting on the bush, particularly their destructive treatment of the bush willows. One magnificent bull, a few cows and a smaller bull remain, but no doubt their numbers will increase quickly. Bernard and Cecily, from Melbourne, Australia, were amazed by the number of animals and variety of species which visited the waterhole while they were watching from the hide. Apart from the usual suspects – waterbuck, impala and kudu, they estimated a troop of about 50 baboons spent a noisy half hour at the waterhole, shouting at one another and disciplining their babies.

## **BIRDING**

Our friend and birding expert, John Isom, stayed with us for a couple of days at the lodge with a fellow birder, Brendan, from Johannesburg. John will be conducting our birding skills courses in November and January. Over a few leisurely birding outings we recorded 116

species during their stay, which is a pretty good number for winter birding. Brendan, an accomplished photographer, got some beautiful photos of finches, barbets and waxbills at the birdbath next to the lodge, but more spectacular were the photos of the Verreaux's eagles and their fluffy white chick, high up in its nest on a rocky ledge on Kremetartkop. The chick appears to be very healthy and quite active, flapping its undeveloped wings and bumbling around the huge nest. Climbing Kremetartkop is a favourite with guests, to see the archaeological remains at the top and for the view of the baobab-studded plain below. From the opposite peak, the parent birds keep a close eye on visitors to their eyrie and we are careful not to disturb them or their chick. One of the Verreaux's eagles was seen sharing a thermal with an African Hawk Eagle, about two-thirds the size of the giant black (Verreaux's) eagle. The two eagles swooped and soared in unison, as if dancing, but there appeared to be no competition or aggression between them. Perhaps they were just enjoying the sky together. While Shawn, our ranger, was welding outside our workshop, he heard what he thought was a swarm of bees go past. As he looked up, he saw a black-chested snake eagle take off from the grass just 10 metres away, with a snake writhing in its talons. The swarm of bees was, in fact, the sound of the eagle swooping in to catch its prey. The eagle (and the snake for that matter), was not bothered by the human activity all around the workshop.

## LODGE AND CAMPS

Michel, from Holland, has joined us as a volunteer to help Rox in her ecological projects. Tracking cheetah, watching for hyaenas, setting up camera traps, monitoring leopard baiting sites and investigating kills are duties that have replaced his city job for the next three months. Instead of negotiating traffic jams, he is driving around bush tracks at 30 kph in a very old pick-up truck, often with a fresh impala or warthog carcass on the back as food for Danny. It's hotter here in winter than his home town in summer. He's living in a stone A-framed building and being treated as one of the team. He's even been lucky enough to see an aardvark, and he's only been here two weeks! Michel came to us through Work Experience International. See their website [www.wei.co.za](http://www.wei.co.za) or email [johan@wei.co.za](mailto:johan@wei.co.za) if, like Michel, you would like to try something different.

Our guests this month have been the most active ever to stay at Makulu Makete. Will, Tom and James, who accompanied their parents Bernard and Cecily, from Melbourne, were full of energy. They took to heart the words from The Sound of Music to "climb every mountain" (and added another verse about baobab trees). Madia Pala was the first peak to be scaled, testing our ranger, Shawn, as he led them up and over the mountain. Kremetartkop is a fairly easy climb for most guests, but Will, Tom and James did it the hard way – up sheer rock faces and boulders – on both peaks of the koppie. The baobab trail presented multiple opportunities to climb the smooth trunks of these mighty old trees. They wanted to expend all their energy before heading off to Kruger Park where they would be confined to a vehicle for most of the time. But it was worth it. Having learnt the tricks of the trade at Makulu Makete, they reported that they saw everything from elephants to leopard, lion and cheetah in Kruger on their self-drive safari.

Not to be outdone by the Aussies, Heidi and Annie persuaded Shawn to take them up Madia Pala Mountain the following week. Rox showed them the eagle chick at the top of Kremetartkop, but they were content to admire the baobab trees from the ground. Annie was kind enough to chaperone Peter's nine-year-old granddaughter, Sasha, from the USA to stay for a couple of weeks with her Grandpa and get the feel of her African heritage.

Jean-Paul from Perth, Australia, and Natasha had spent some time at Mapungubwe National Park, before having a few days at our self-catering camp, Madia Pala Camp. As a

conservation scientist, Jean-Paul appreciated the work that is being done to try to restore the bush at Makulu Makete from the damage caused by more than 100 years of overgrazing. The veld rehabilitation project is Peter's passion. All our guests get an introductory lecture on the subject so that they can understand what our aims are and what is being done to achieve them.

Kevin and Martella, from Pretoria, wanted peace and quiet and to be able to explore the bush on foot during their stay at Lulu's Camping Ground. According to Kevin, "we donned our backpacks and walked and climbed all day, day after day". The calm and wisdom of our baobab trees soothed away the stress of the city. Kevin and Martella's impression was: "What a fantastic part of our planet!"