

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### AUGUST 2005

#### SEASONS

The fluffy lemon-coloured blossoms of the thorn trees are painting the bush with pastel as the days warm up. Iridescent sunbirds flit from treetop to treetop, burying their long, curved beaks into the flowers and chattering noisily. Nectar-sweet perfume wafts across the bush on puffs of hot air. The relentless dry weather continues. Bushbuck, vervet monkeys and duiker gather under the big nyala tree next to Jane and Peter's house, foraging for berries as they drop to the ground. A regular crowd of kudu, waterbuck and gemsbok (oryx) join hungry warthogs each evening at the waterhole below the lodge where lucerne hay provides some supplementary feed. One enormous and particularly bad-tempered warthog even manages to chase away the kudus and waterbuck from what he regards as his private lucerne. The bigger animals scatter in a cloud of dust as the warthog sees them off at a gallop, with much angry snorting, head down, like a small army tank.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

Dottie, our first cheetah released into the reserve in association with the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, continues to cut a swath through our antelope population. Normally considered too big and dangerous for a cheetah to kill, adult male bushbucks are still falling prey to Dottie. Our ecologist, Rox, and our volunteer from Holland, Michel, monitor Dottie's movements, behaviour and kills every day. Guests like to accompany Rox and Michel on their treks through the bush and, using the telemetry equipment, enjoy the opportunity to find the cheetah for themselves. Dottie's camouflage is so good, that she is sometimes only metres away before she is seen, which can be disconcerting for the person wielding the antenna. Meanwhile, Danny, our second cheetah, is making good progress in his training boma. According to Rox, he has graduated from "phase 1" (nervous and jumpy), to "phase 2", (bold and almost aggressive). "Phase 3" (relaxed and ignoring human presence), which Dottie has achieved, is what we are aiming for with Danny. He still manages to put on quite an exciting show when he is being fed, but he now seems less likely to retreat to the far end of his boma (enclosure) when anyone comes near. As she did with Dottie, Rox spends time in her "boma office" with Danny, her computer set up on a folding table under a thorn tree inside the enclosure. For about 10 days during the month, workmen were digging trenches just outside his boma. After a few days, Danny got used to having people around who were not a threat to him, and he seemed to ignore them. He is well on his way through his habituation programme.

#### PREDATOR PROJECT

August was an extremely exciting month for our predator project. A bushbuck was killed in the front garden of our ranger, Shawn, right next to the trap which was being modified at the workshop there. It seemed too good an opportunity to let pass by, so we moved the bushbuck carcass into the trap, hoping that whatever had killed the bushbuck would return for its prey. Rox and Michel kept vigil the first night and watched helplessly as a small leopard went in and out of the trap, helping itself to its kill, but not triggering the trap mechanism. Over the next two nights the leopard managed to elude us, in a comedy of errors. Even after running repairs on the trip mechanism, the trap, which had worked so well when we caught our first brown hyaena, refused to slam shut. On the second night, Jane, Peter and Rox watched enthralled as, in the fading light, the leopard appeared again and this time killed a small feline-looking creature which was walking down the track towards the gate of Shawn's garden. We all hope that this unfortunate creature was not the surviving genet, which Rox

had hand-reared and has been released into the bush to fend for himself. The leopard gave us plenty of chances to catch it, and finally we were successful, at midnight on the third night. It was tranquillised using a syringe on a pole, and as it slept we recorded all its vital statistics. A young male, it weighed 21 kg and it still had a lot of growing to do before it reached its adult weight of perhaps 60 or 70 kg. We decided that it would not be possible to collar this leopard because it would soon outgrow the collar. It was the most beautiful, perfect creature. Its eyes were open wide, even though it was asleep, and its big, soft feet kept paddling, like a dog suspended over water. Rox put ointment in its eyes to stop them drying out, and covered them. Marthinus showed us its claws – massive, curved and sharp. It is impossible to describe the feeling of holding a sleeping leopard in your arms. Its fur was beautiful, soft to touch, with a white background and brown and black rosettes. It had a very long tail, which seemed to have a life of its own, as if it hadn't been affected by the tranquilliser. The leopard was released the next morning, having recovered from the tranquilliser. It has since been seen, in the company of its mother, quite close to Shawn's house and the area where most of the farm workers live. This raises the question of safety, because this particular leopard does not appear to be frightened of humans and could become a problem as it grows up, if it stays in the same area. We might be forced to relocate it to another wildlife reserve.

Soon after the leopard episode, there were hyaena tracks around the trap, still lying outside the workshop. Why not try for another hyaena? On the first night of baiting in the trap, we caught our second brown hyaena. The whole operation was witnessed by our guests, Jim and Christine, from Washington State, USA. Much quieter and smaller than our first collared brown hyaena (known as Oubaas), this young male weighed 34 kg, compared with Oubaas's strapping 48 kg. It appeared to be quite scrawny and gave off a fairly powerful odour. Probably somewhere near the bottom of the hyaena pecking order, this one had many scars on its neck where more dominant hyaenas had been "neck biting" it – a ritual hyaena behaviour. As our first guests to witness a capture, Jim and Christine had the honour of naming the hyaena, which they called "Anthony", after their three-year-old grandson. Our Anthony is now back in the bush, sporting a radio collar, and has been seen since a couple of times not far from the lodge.

Both captures had been in the rather prosaic setting of Shawn's garden, next to the workshop. How obliging of the leopard and the hyaena to make themselves available to us in such a convenient location. We were able to take them into the garage, under electric light, instead of working with torchlight out in the bush. Once again, Michel has been lucky enough to see and hold a leopard, and be there for the capture of a brown hyaena, less than a month after he arrived.

Just as exciting, and very unexpected, were two sightings in the last few days of a single wild dog (Cape Hunting Dog), by Shawn and Peter. We have never seen wild dog at Makulu Makete, so these sightings have raised many questions. How long has it been here? How did it get in? Is it alone or is there a pack? If it got in somehow through our Big 5 electric fence, will it get out again? A small reserve like Makulu Makete would be unable to sustain a pack of wild dogs, but a single individual would not be a problem. We hope to have more to report on this development next month.

## **GAME VIEWING**

Another new species for our list this month was a larger cane rat. This unusual-looking rodent weighed a couple of kilos and had a big, square head and thick hair, each hair ending in a sharp point. It is entirely vegetarian and prized by people in some places as good eating, but no one at Makulu Makete seemed interested in having this one on the menu. A camera

trap, set up at a leopard baiting site, has revealed excellent photos of a pair of honey badgers, sniffing around under the tree and climbing up the trunk to get at the leopard bait. Although most of the photos were taken at night, the honey badgers returned during daylight early the next morning. There was another aardvark sighting this month, just on dusk, as the extraordinary-looking creature was pottering about on one of our main tracks. A family of tiny bushbabies (lesser galagos) has been delighting visitors at the lodge each evening just before dark. Up to six of these charming, big-eyed primates, regularly put on a firework display of rocket-powered leaping amongst the trees around the lodge. For such tiny animals, they are incredibly athletic, but they are so quick that they are almost impossible to photograph. Each day May, one of the Cheeseman Ecology Safari group, would wait in vain with her camera, trying to capture their feats of agility, but having to be content with getting a mental picture of their antics instead of a digital photo.

## **BIRDING**

Another African Finfoot has been spotted at Makulu Makete! This time it was a female and it was seen by experienced birders Alan and Janice from Johannesburg, who were camping at Lulu's Camp. As they sat having lunch in the camp one day, on the banks of the Mogalakwena River, they were amazed to see the finfoot calmly swimming past them. It cruised up and down a couple of times and even got out of the river to preen itself, before heading off again up-river, with a small crocodile in its wake. Unprepared for such an event, Alan didn't have his tripod set up, but managed to get a few shaky photos of the finfoot as unmistakable evidence. The birders amongst us at MM are extremely jealous and are keeping a watchful eye at Lulu's Camp, in the hope that the crocodile has not taken the finfoot and it will return. For all you non birders, the rare African Finfoot is the holy grail of birdwatching in this area, along with the Pel's Fishing Owl, as yet unrecorded at Makulu Makete. The habitat along the river is perfect for both birds and we are sure there must be a Pel's owl lurking somewhere in the tall trees which line the river.

Ireen and Mike, also from Johannesburg and also keen birders, spent a few days with us at the lodge. They climbed Kremetartkop to see the latest chick, which is being raised by the resident pair of Verreaux's Eagles, high on a rocky ledge overlooking the baobabs on the plain below. There were definite dark pin feathers appearing on the fluffy white chick and the remains of a dassie (rock hyrax) in the nest next to it. A couple of weeks later, the chick was covered with brown feathers and was fast filling the big nest of sticks.

## **LODGE AND CAMPS**

The Kern family, from the nearby town of Louis Trichardt (now called Makhado), stayed at our self-catering Madia Pala camp over a long weekend. Having been born close to Makulu Makete, Cornelis Kern loves the rugged bushveld scenery with its scattered rocky koppies and gnarled old baobab trees. The whole family enjoyed getting out into the bush, walking and going on a game drive with Shawn, as well as the added attraction of being present at a feeding session with Danny. Alan, Janice and Gillian, staying at Lulu's Camp at the same time, were also pleased to be able to hike and climb, and even brought their mountain bikes to tour around the reserve. Next time they will bring more bike tubes with them so their tyres can outlast the thorns and stones.

Cheeseman Ecology Safaris, in California, sent us six guests whose interests ranged from beetles to botany. Jan, from South Carolina, is an acknowledged expert on beetles, having been invited to visit Mongolia on a beetle study tour. May, from California, who was especially taken with the bushbabies, kept Shawn and Rox busy with questions about trees. Her husband, KM, managed to survive the baobab walking trail with his colleagues. This

group now holds the record for the longest time to walk the trail. Most people complete it in about two hours, but David and Judy, Jane, Jan, May and KM took four hours, such was their interest in everything they saw. They got a fleeting glimpse in daylight of Oubaas, our first collared brown hyaena, but for three nights had no luck at the hyaena baiting site. All seasoned travellers, Jane from California, Judy and David from Texas, and Jan, had spent the previous three weeks in Madagascar on the trail of lemurs. Their knowledge and understanding of ecology, and their opinions on world affairs made for stimulating discussions around the dinner table.

Peter's daughter Lynette, and her husband-to-be Geno, both from Washington State, USA, chose Makulu Makete as the location for their wedding. It was not the first marriage for either of them, so a relaxed and unconventional wedding was the order of the day. Guests gathered from the USA, Canada, Scotland, Pretoria and Johannesburg to be with them and their children. The party started several days before the wedding, and ended two days afterwards. They drank our bar dry on the first night, but we called in reinforcements and managed to keep up with them thereafter. This was the first wedding in perhaps a hundred years to be conducted under the "Nagmaal Tree", a baobab tree which stands aloof from all the others, a couple of hundred metres from one of our main tracks. "Nagmaal" means "communion". According to the local story, a century ago, when there were no churches in the area, travelling ministers of religion used to visit the area from time to time, to perform baptisms, confirmations, communion services and marriages. The services were all carried out under this baobab tree, which came to be known by the farmers in the area as the "nagmaal tree".

The wedding party drove in open Land Rovers to the path which leads through the bush to the tree. Peter escorted the bride along the dusty path, her bridal train held up away from the thorns by her daughter Sasha, her niece Tamsin and Sasha's life-long friend Alette. Patsy, one of the wedding guests from San Francisco, officiated at the ceremony. Lynette and Geno were pronounced "man and wife" under the dignified old nagmaal tree just as the red ball of the sun was setting. Back at the lodge the celebrations started with champagne around the fire and singing of some happy songs by our maids and our chef, Lucas. The menu included guineafowl potjie, cooked in a black, three-legged iron pot over the fire, and Lucas's special venison pie. There was a definite bushveld flavour to the wedding. We hope that the tradition of weddings under the nagmaal tree will not end here.