

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### SEPTEMBER 2005

#### SEASONS

Although traditionally “one swallow does not a summer make”, the appearance of our first dung beetle, industriously rolling a ball of manure, suggests that summer is already here. Temperatures in the mid-thirties centigrade (high 90s fahrenheit) are building up to the hottest time of the year, just before the rainy season starts. One small cloud gave us some hope that perhaps the wet season would be early, but it vanished without producing any rain, which is so desperately needed. With only dried leaves and not much else to eat, the game are relying on our regular drops of lucerne hay to help them get through until the rains come. The trees are still bare of leaves, and the dry pods on the knob-thorn trees rattle in the breeze. Occasionally a small dust devil zig-zags past, swirling up dust and dead leaves like a tiny tornado.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

Danny, the second cheetah in our cheetah research in conjunction with the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, has been in his “training boma” for three months, losing his homing instinct for his previous home, getting used to his new surroundings, the presence of people, and the electric fence. When he is released into the reserve he will respect the fence and, just like our first cheetah, Dottie, he will allow us to approach him in the bush, monitor his activities and not feel that people are a threat to him. Danny’s main preoccupation seems to be with food. Although he is now quite relaxed about having people around him in the boma, he still gets agitated when a vehicle arrives with his rations of impala, kudu or warthog. He dashes to the fence and slams his front paws loudly on the ground, sometimes three times in quick succession, demanding to be fed immediately, like a child stamping its foot in anger. There is quite a contrast between the behaviour of Danny and Dottie. When Dottie spent her time in the boma she did very little, preferring to lie on her favourite anthill and watch the world go by. Danny is much more active. He roams around his enclosure and hides in the long grass to observe the comings and goings outside his fence. He is a truly beautiful physical specimen of a cheetah – well muscled and much heavier than tall and lanky Dottie. Danny should be released late this month. Once he starts hunting for himself, he will no longer associate the vehicles with feeding and will ignore us just as Dottie does when we are checking on her daily whereabouts.

Meanwhile Dottie continues to tackle prey which is normally regarded as too big or too dangerous for a cheetah, including several male bushbucks and well grown kudu cows. She gave us all some cause for concern recently when she was discovered lying under a bush with a couple of fresh wounds on her leg and her rump. It seemed that something had decided to fight back and this time Dottie had come off worse. A bushbuck’s horns are very sharp, and they are notoriously fierce fighters, so we suspect that the puncture marks could have been the result of a struggle with a bushbuck. The injuries did not slow Dottie down for long but we hope it has persuaded her to stick to easier game and get on with her job of reducing the over-population of impala.

#### PREDATOR PROJECT

There have been several more leopard kills in the area around the staff quarters and workshop. The young leopard which we trapped and released in August has been spotted again in the same vicinity and appears to be the culprit. This leopard is not afraid of humans and has made several kills in the garden and orchard next to the house of our ranger, Shawn. As the leopard grows up, his lack of fear could make him dangerous to humans. Because we have to

consider the safety of our staff and guests, we have asked for help from the Department of Nature Conservation to relocate the leopard to another reserve far enough away that he will not return here. This will mean trapping the leopard again, which, considering his nonchalant attitude towards humans, should not be difficult.

The two collared brown hyaenas, Oubaas and Anthony, keep our ecologist Rox, and our volunteer, Michel, busy at night as they track and record their movements. Anthony, the younger hyaena, has been seen several times during daylight. We are hoping that eventually he will become habituated to human presence so that we can monitor his behaviour just as we do with the cheetah. Oubaas, on the other hand, is a dominant, older male, and less likely to appreciate our intrusion on his social life. His radio signal indicates that he seems to spend his daylight hours holed-up on Madia Pala Mountain. Since Anthony's capture, we have had no luck with our hyaena trapping. Civets and jackals seem more interested in the bait than hyaenas at the moment. We would like to collar two more brown hyaenas to get a better picture of their interaction with each other and with the other predators on the reserve, and their feeding behaviour in this relatively small, by hyaena standards, territory.

The lone wild dog, which was seen for the first time last month, has been spotted patrolling the fenceline by our neighbours. Our camera trap, set up near number 8 waterhole, unexpectedly produced excellent night photos of the dog, enabling us to identify it by its unique markings. The dog is an alpha female, nick-named "Landy" by the team at the Venetia Wild Dog Project, about 80 km from Makulu Makete. It is believed that she is trying to find a pack of wild dogs and establish a new territory. She somehow managed to get inside Makulu Makete but, because of our state-of-the-art Big 5 electric fence, she can't get out to continue her journey. Her future is uncertain at the moment, but she will probably be relocated if we can catch her. Those of us who have not yet seen her are very keen to spot her. Rox has even offered a bottle of wine to anyone who makes a positive wild dog sighting during a game drive. Despite this incentive, Landy remains elusive to all but a lucky few.

## GAME VIEWING

Because of the lack of feed in the bush, many animals are becoming bold enough to browse around the lodge. Big kudus, with massive curly horns, nibble at the trees below the tents. A pair of bushpigs chomp noisily outside Peter and Jane's house in the dead of night. A chocolate coloured bushbuck ram looks just like a life-size garden ornament on the lawn in front of the lodge. The resident bushbabies put on their nightly dazzling display of dexterity, leaping from the apex of the lodge's thatched roof like tiny, rocket-powered kangaroos. Seventeen gemsbok appeared at the waterhole below the lodge one evening, locking their long horns, pawing the dust and jostling each other, and a tribe of warthogs, for the lucerne hay. In the middle of the night, zebra calls can be heard from the waterhole, and occasionally a few wander in for a drink, just as it gets dark.

Rox, our ecologist, is an avid herpetologist, but being a snake lover did not prevent her from being surprised and rather unnerved to find a Mozambique Spitting Cobra curled up in her bedroom. When threatened, these cobras accurately spit venom into the eyes of their attackers, often causing blindness. The snake was ejected from her room by the combined efforts of Rox wielding a broom and our ranger, Shawn, using a duvet as an eye-shield. While on the subject of snakes, Rox found the sloughed skin of a black mamba which the snake had shed by rubbing itself against a bush. The three-metre skin was perfectly intact, even down to the eye covers and the jaw skin. One can only imagine what the snake must have looked like, slithering out of its skin, like a stocking being peeled off a woman's leg.

## BIRDING

Tragic news – the young Verreaux's Eagle chick, which we had been keeping an eye on as it exchanged its fluffy white down for proper dark feathers, is dead. The cause of death is a mystery to us because the nest is in on an inaccessible ledge, high up on Kremetartkop hill. Peter's son Wayne reported the death on a recent climb and showed photos of the little eagle, with its head hanging limply over the side of the nest. We hope this sad episode will not put the eagles off trying again next year. The parent birds were last seen pulling meat off an impala carcass at the bottom of the hill. They had worked very hard to raise the chick, which seemed to be healthy and developing well.

Swallowtailed bee-eaters have been seen again, after an absence of several months, near Madia Pala Camp and along the baobab trail. Little bee-eaters and white-fronted bee-eaters are resident at Makulu Makete, but the swallowtails seem to move away over the winter period. We look forward to the return of the gorgeously-coloured carmine bee-eaters just before Christmas. All the bee-eaters liven up the bush with their flashy colours and swooping flight patterns.

The male redcrested korhaans have started their dare-devil displays. Their repetitive, strident call is a prelude to a death-defying plunge, as they fly up out of the bush, above the tree tops, then fold their wings and plummet earthwards, as if shot by a gun, opening their wings just before they hit the ground. It's a bit like bungee jumping without the cord.

## LODGE AND CAMPS

At the beginning of September, our camp manager, Noeline, and her husband Marthinus, left us to farm their own neighbouring property full-time. They have swapped houses with Jane and Peter, who have returned to the lodge from the riverside tranquillity of Bushbuck Cottage. Little Cornelis turned one year old as the move took place. Lucas, our chef, has taken over the job of running the lodge, which he seems to enjoy, judging by his happy, hip-swaying dances as he prepares dinner in the kitchen each evening, to the accompaniment of lively African music. The lodge is now equipped with a new satellite telephone system, which had a few teething problems, resulting in difficulty with emails for some time. We hope we have now managed to get the new technology under control.

Our second volunteer, Petra from Switzerland, spent three weeks with us before moving on to another lodge in Melalane. Petra was a favourite with us all, especially after she arrived bearing gifts of Toblerone and Lindt chocolate for the chocolate-starved staff at the lodge. We miss her good humour and her wonderful bush clothing. Our first volunteer, Michel from Holland, now known as "Dutch Boy", has extended his stay for another three months. He took a week off to do some touring around the Soutpansberg and into Kruger Park with his girlfriend, Karin, when she came to visit him at Makulu Makete.

During the month we had a short visit by Don, a mining colleague of Peter's. Don spends half the year in London and half the year in Plettenburg Bay, in between visiting mining projects in Botswana, Australia and Canada. We were fascinated to hear of Don's own lodge in Zambia, on the lower Zambesi River, where you can't leave the camp without an armed escort because lions and elephants roam freely. While he was here, Dottie put on quite a show when we took her some meat after she had been injured. Although not as terrifying as confronting a lion, Dottie's spitting, snarling, growling, charging and arching of her back, were enough to get everyone's adrenalin pumping.

The Hume family joined us from various parts of the world. Jack had some time off from his job of reconstructing an oil refinery in Iraq. The serenity, security and peace of Makulu Makete were a stark contrast to his dangerous existence in Baghdad. His wife, Candace, and daughter Jennifer, flew in from Denver, Colorado, and their second daughter, Amy, a freelance photographer, came from New York. They were keen to see and photograph a brown hyaena capture, and went as far as sleeping in their clothes so that they would be ready if called in the middle of the night. Unfortunately, the hyaenas didn't co-operate. Jack and Candace love desert landscapes, desert climate and lifestyle, and found this arid part of the world, with its rocky outcrops and primeval baobab trees, particularly appealing. They couldn't get enough of the hot, dry weather and have promised to come back for a longer stay next time.

Christine, from Littlehampton in England, arrived at the same time as the Humes but stayed on for two weeks. She especially enjoys sitting in our hide, in the cool of the morning or late afternoon, watching the variety of game that takes advantage of the lucerne hay that is being dropped there several times a week. A keen photographer, Christine eventually got her photos of giraffe, including the newest member of our giraffe population – a young calf which is only a few weeks old. Christine is still with us and has been joined by Mary and Pauline, regular visitors from Johannesburg, and Mary's husband, Will, on his first visit to Makulu Makete, who finally agreed to come and find out why Mary likes coming here so much. Walks and game drives have been the order of the day, as well as dips in the pool to cool off, tracking Dottie and watching Danny wrestle with a whole dead warthog at his last feeding session.

At the Getaway Travel and Camping Show in Johannesburg earlier in the month, Peter and Jane talked to many people who liked the sound of Makulu Makete, and were keen to get away from the city and walk freely through the bush, a pleasure which is becoming rarer as many reserves introduce members of the Big 5 and make it impossible for guests to get out on their own.