

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### OCTOBER 2005

#### SEASONS

Still no rain, even a month later than the first rainfall last year. A few cool, overcast and windy days teased us into believing rain was on the way, but it never eventuated. The bush is parched, and we have increased our survival rations for the wildlife to include special feeding pellets and grass hay to supplement even more bales of lucerne hay. Warthogs, usually the first to show signs of strain during drought, are looking thin. Six or seven young warthogs, kneeling on their front legs, systematically mow the lawns at the lodge each day. The older, weaker and less dominant kudus are beginning to look poor. Peter was forced to shoot one emaciated kudu bull, which had been pushed aside at the feeding places by the dominant bulls, eager to eat their fill. Despite the lack of rain, the baobab trees have begun to sprout young, green leaves. Some of the huge trees are already dotted with big, white, floppy flowers and small fruit. The hand-shaped leaves, with their five “fingers” give the baobab tree its scientific name – *Adansonia digitata*.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

We have postponed the release of our second cheetah, Danny, until mid-November, not because he is behind in his development, but to give our ecologist, Rox, a chance to take a few days break. Once he is released, she will be busy tracking him and Dottie, our first cheetah, on a daily basis, as well as our two collared brown hyaenas every night. Both cheetahs came to us through the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project. Danny has progressed from the stage of being fed from a vehicle in the boma (enclosure). He is now confident enough to take food, which is thrown to him by hand, in a small section of the boma and drag it through a cage to eat it under his favourite bush. It is important that Danny gets used to walking into the cage in case we ever need to catch him after his release. If he gets used to the cage now, it will mean less stress for him in the future. Rox is gradually getting Danny to dissociate the sound of a vehicle from feeding-time, by driving vehicles into the boma without feeding him. None of us wants to be followed by a hungry big cat as we drive around the reserve checking fences and waterholes after he is released, especially a big cat that can match the speed of the vehicle with ease. Danny assumes that anything dropped in his boma by a human must be food. Our guest from England, Stephen, discovered this when a gust of wind blew his hat off while he and his wife, Sheena, were in the boma with Danny. Before Stephen could bend to pick up the hat, Danny had raced forward and grabbed it. Stephen staunchly stood his ground, as Rox instructed, and Danny retreated with his prize. The hat was retrieved the next day, torn and chewed, but a good souvenir of a very close encounter with a cheetah. Sheena and Stephen are cat lovers and did not miss an opportunity to go out tracking Dottie every day. While they were with us, they saw Dottie on two kills – both duikers (small antelope). As they left her to her meal, they were lucky enough to spot a honey badger nearby, hurrying through the bush in daylight.

#### PREDATOR PROJECT

With the continued drought and accompanying increased natural attrition rate amongst the game, the brown hyaenas have plenty of carrion to eat, and are not drawn to baiting sites. We will wait until conditions in the veld improve before we start baiting again and try to collar another two brown hyaenas for Rox’s research project. The lone wild dog, which somehow managed to get into Makulu Makete a few weeks ago, is still with us. From spoor and scratch marks along the fence, it looks as if a couple more wild dogs have tried to get in to join her, without success. Discussions with the Wilddog Action Group (WAG) have led to the

conclusion that our wild dog (an alpha female) must be relocated to an area where she can join a pack. Catching her will be a challenge, but one that interests the whole team here at MM. We might have to borrow a couple of male wild dogs and put them in the boma, once Danny has vacated it, to try and lure the female into an area where she can be darted. This will be an exciting operation.

## **BIRDING**

The European bee-eaters have arrived to join their swallowtailed cousins. They perch on power lines, their coppery backs glinting in the sun. While vultures are not often seen at ground level at Makulu Makete, a couple of Cape Vultures spiralled high overhead recently, on their way westward, rising so high on a thermal that they disappeared into a white fluffy cloud. Redbilled oxpeckers have been seen aboard giraffe and gemsbok in the past month, though without any grass there should be few ticks which need removing from their hosts.

A group of birders from the Rustenburg Bird Club camped at our Lulu's Camp by the river this month. With our birding expert friend, John Isom, in the lead, they recorded more than 150 species in the 3 days they were here, including a whitefaced owl and a Verreaux's (Giant) eagle owl conveniently sharing the same tree. While they didn't encounter the elusive African finfoot previously seen at Lulu's Camp, they were fortunate enough to see the wild dog on one of their early morning birding walks. Last time John Isom brought a group from the Rustenburg Bird Club to MM, they witnessed two Verreaux's (Black) eagles dive-bombing a leopard on Kremetartkop. Although he is a dedicated birder, John has the knack of bumping into the most exciting and secretive of all the mammals wherever he goes. We have called it "The Isom Factor". Last year, with our Birding Skills Course students, he was "responsible" for us seeing a female cheetah with four sub-adult cubs on our birding day trip to Botswana. On another birding expedition with John, this time to Kruger Park, Jane nearly drove into a lion and lioness, which walked out in front of John's vehicle. We can't guarantee it, but with his luck, those joining John's Birding Skills Course at MM in January/February next year have an excellent chance of seeing more than just exciting birdlife.

## **LODGE AND CAMPS**

Anyone who has anything to do with computers, (and that is probably everybody these days), will sympathise with us over the problems we have been experiencing with our website and emails. During the month, our website was down for a couple of weeks, due to incompetence by our website host. Since switching to a satellite telephone system, our email capability is irregular and unreliable. We hope that both computer-related problems will be solved soon. In the meantime, Peter is tearing out what remains of his hair, and we apologise for any inconvenience experienced.

Our first volunteer, Michel from Holland, and known to all as "Dutch Boy", left us at the end of the month. Like John Isom, Michel had incredible luck with game spotting. Not only did he get the chance to hold a leopard and a brown hyaena during his first few weeks with us, but he saw the wild dog on a couple of occasions. Michel had planned to stay longer with us, but family matters in Holland forced his early return. One of his legacies to us is the addition of 20 species of dragonfly to our species list, along with nine new butterfly species. With the aid of a GPS and a special computer programme, Michel also produced a new road map of MM, which will be especially useful to visitors at Lulu's Camping ground and Madia Pala self catering camp. We all wish Dutch Boy the best of luck and hope to see him back here some day. His place has been taken by Bregtje, also from Holland, a veterinary science student. With such a difficult name for us to pronounce, Bregtje has become simply "B". Her vet

science background will be very useful to her in her helping Rox with her ecological research projects.

Our chef and lodge manager, Lucas, is now the proud father of his fourth child – a boy at last, called Nyasha. According to Lucas, his youngest daughter is very jealous of her little brother for usurping her position as baby of the family. Lucas took a week off to join his wife soon after Nyasha's birth. Christine, our guest from Littlehampton in England, bravely decided to stay on at the lodge and take pot-luck at meal times with the rest of the team, without the services of our chef.

Sheena and Stephen, also from England, spent the first part of their honeymoon at MM. Apart from losing his hat to a cheetah, Stephen and Sheena had the adventure of getting bogged in the dry river bed on their way in to Makulu Makete at the beginning of their stay. They showed particular good humour, when, after a long journey from London, they waited while our vehicle was dug and towed out of the thick sand. Knowing Sheena and Stephen, had there been more than one shovel, they would have helped dig.

Ben and Didi, from Holland, spent a few nights at Lulu's Camp in their campervan while on a camping trip in South Africa. They must have been surprised to be welcomed by a fellow countryman when Michel met them at the gate during Jane and Peter's absence. The Kern family, from nearby Louis Trichardt, spent another weekend at Madia Pala Camp, this time with their daughter and son-in-law who live in London. Having seen Danny being fed a few weeks earlier, they were able to see the change in his behaviour as his habituation progressed.

Jane and Peter took a couple of weeks off to camp in the Kaa Kalahari Concession area of Botswana and the Kalahari Transfrontier Park. Having been impressed by the off-road "Oryx" camping trailer belonging to campers Leon and Pam Venter, who stayed at Lulu's Camp earlier in the year, they decided to buy one. This was the first trip with the trailer, through thick sandy tracks in remote areas of Botswana. They didn't see another vehicle for days at a time, after getting permission from the chief of the nearest village to camp at the beautiful Masetleng Pan. Conditions in Botswana were rugged, and Peter was at his resourceful best repairing problems as they arose. Howling winds and sand storms in the desert made them grateful they had a trailer to retreat into and not a tent, as table, chairs, crockery and glasses were carried off by the gritty wind. The transfrontier park covers both Botswana and South Africa, on either side of the Nossob River. There they encountered lions, a cheetah on a kill, herds of springbok, gemsbok (oryx), red hartebeest, ostriches with chicks, and dozens of raptors. Perhaps the most interesting of all was an enormous sociable weavers' nest, which covered a large tree like a thatched roof. Next to the honeycomb of weavers' compartments, a family of barn owls was in residence in a hollowed out section, and on top of the owls' nest a Lanner falcon was feeding four voracious, fluffy chicks. Three species in one nest! Jane and Peter were enchanted by colonies of meerkats, a Cape fox with her four cubs, ground squirrels, and thrilled to see two buttercup-yellow, sinister-looking Cape cobras. The journey back to Makulu Makete took them through the little town of Hotazel – and it was!

A sad ending to this month's bush diary – two of our horses, Red and Jack, died suddenly despite the extraordinary efforts to save them by Rox, and without being able to get veterinary assistance in time. The cause of death is still a mystery, as the symptoms were common to several causes. It was a traumatic experience for Rox, who was alone at the time, and who had looked after the horses since she arrived last year. The third horse, Mukwa, was unaffected and is now lonely and unhappy without his two friends. We are looking for a good

home for Mukwa. Red and Jack, will be missed by all of us, but especially Jane and Rox who are the horsey people at MM. We thank them for their fine service over the years. They will be forever remembered by their photograph, taken at our biggest baobab tree, which features on our website and all our advertising material.