

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

NOVEMBER 2005

SEASONS

Compared with last month, the veld (bush) now appears much greener, even though there has been very little rain. As well as the baobab trees, the mopane, apple-leaf trees, umbrella thorns, knobthorns, bluethorns and white seringa trees have produced sparse foliage, but the ubiquitous raisin bushes are still bare of leaves. In the past few days, a few meagre showers have encouraged the first green shoots from the brown grass tussocks, but we are still waiting for the rainy season to begin in earnest. The typical summer pattern of electrical storms and frequent power black-outs has started. The storms are so localised that we watch with longing as rain falls on surrounding properties and passes us by. Rainfall in the catchment area of the Mogalakwena River, which runs through Makulu Makete, usually means that the river starts flowing again at this time of the year. So far the river has only managed to fill the big dams upstream and much more rain will be needed for the stream to build up enough to flow right down to its confluence with the Limpopo River, just a few kilometres downstream from the reserve. We continue to hope that the rain will come eventually – better late than never!

CHEETAH PROJECT

Danny, the second cheetah in our cheetah rehabilitation programme, in conjunction with De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, had been in a one-hectare “training boma” (enclosure) since his arrival at the reserve late in June. He had become used to his new surroundings, the electric fence, his radio collar, and after four months he had lost the instinct to head for his original home – the Kalahari Desert, some 1,000 kilometres away. Like Dottie, our first cheetah, he seemed totally at ease with human company. Although still wild, he ignored visitors to his boma, treating their admiring presence with complete lack of interest. It was time to let him out of his boma so that he could start to fend for himself in the 5,000 hectare reserve. We were all looking forward to his release. We speculated on how soon he and Dottie would find each other and how they would react when they did. So the week before his release, it was an unexpected thrill for Peter and Shawn to find Dottie lying outside the boma fence, and Danny lying inside nearby watching her. As far as we knew, this was the first meeting for the two cheetahs. Not wanting to interfere, we left the cheetahs to themselves. Dottie stayed there for several hours, rather like a family member visiting an inmate at a prison.

Wednesday 16 November was chosen as the day for Danny’s release. Deon Cilliers, Conservation Manager of De Wildt Cheetah & Wildlife Trust, drove up from Pretoria to be present for the occasion. The Millmans, from the UK, who were staying at our Madia Pala camp, and a film crew from Katjusha Films, making a documentary for German television, were also there to witness the event. Lying in the shade of a thorn tree, still digesting his last meal of a couple of days ago, Danny was not impressed by the momentous occasion. The boma gates were opened, but Rox had to throw the impala carcass into the air to get Danny’s attention, before he walked out of the gates and dragged the carcass away. The gates were closed behind him so that he was not tempted to run back into the safety of his boma, but Danny seemed happy to remain outside, getting down to the serious task of devouring as much of the impala carcass as he possibly could. After gorging himself for several hours, he stayed put, near the boma fence, replete, and content to watch the comings and goings from the Lodge for the whole of the next day. Eventually, when his bulging stomach allowed him, he set off to explore his new realm.

Male and female cheetahs don’t usually associate with one another except for a brief period during mating, when they might spend a few days together. Since his release, Danny has been seen lying under the same tree as Dottie, or within sight of her. This behaviour seems uncharacteristic, unless

Dottie has been in oestrus, which is the time when the cheetahs would normally get together. Perhaps the two are “just good friends”! After Dottie’s release, it took her about three weeks before she made her first kill. Once she got the hang of it, she didn’t look back and has been killing regularly ever since, her prey varying from tiny steenbok, to well-grown kudu cows, many times her size and weight. A week after his release, Danny had still not made a kill and Rox gave him a small feed, so that he would not starve, but to keep him hungry enough to encourage him to hunt for himself. It will take Danny some time to pick up his hunting skills and until then, could he be sticking close to Dottie and taking her kills? This is something we have not witnessed but it could also explain their proximity.

PREDATOR PROJECT

Our lone wild dog has been seen again, this time on a dead impala. The impala’s belly had been torn out, indicating that the wild dog had killed it. In a pack situation, wild dogs attack their prey, often from underneath, tearing it to pieces, while the other predators on the reserve - leopards, cheetahs and caracals - kill by strangling, leaving puncture marks on the neck of their prey.

As the drought continues, the brown hyaenas have plenty of carrion to feed on. The two collared hyaenas, Oubaas and Anthony, seem to disappear for days at a time. On their nightly tracking expeditions, Rox and B. (our volunteer from Holland), cannot always pick up their signals by radio telemetry. We believe this is because the hyaenas climb up into the valley over the peak of Madia Pala Mountain or take refuge in rocky caves so that their radio signals are interrupted.

GAME VIEWING

Supplementary feeding of grass hay, lucerne hay and special pelletised game feed continues. Darwin’s theory of “the survival of the fittest” is demonstrated to us on a daily basis. The weaker animals of the same species cannot stand up to the stronger animals at the feeding places, and therefore miss out. The theory is even evident amongst different species. Gemsbok (oryx) use their long horns expertly to fend off kudu cows, warthogs and other species around the bales of hay. Although there has been no proper rain, waterholes at Makulu Makete are fed by boreholes or pumps from permanent river pools, so while there is very little green fodder for the animals, they have a secure water supply. Some of the permanent pools along the river are drying up, leaving thick mud behind them. Sadly, a pregnant zebra mare was found dead in one of these mud holes. She was unable to drag herself out of the sticky sludge after walking into the pool to drink. We all find situations such as this one extremely distressing.

BIRDING

Unlike last year, because of the drought and lack of grass seeds, we saw very few red-billed quelea this year. We missed the huge flocks of these little birds, wheeling and swirling across the sky like massive, animated clouds. The drought has not put off the harbingers of summer – the cocky little Woodland Kingfishers, whose lilting song fills the bush right through until March. The Red-chested Cuckoo’s maddeningly repetitive, three-note call, is another reminder of summer. A very reclusive bird, this cuckoo is hard to spot, even when continuously calling from a nearby tree. In Afrikaans, the Red-chested Cuckoo is known as a “Piet My Vrou”, which may be what their call sounds like, but has a very strange meaning: “Pete my wife”. At Madia Pala Camp, a mocking chat has obligingly made its nest in the bread basket inside the kitchen, taking birdwatching to a new level of comfort for our guests at our self-catering camp. The striking brick-red and grey bird can often be seen amongst the boulders on Kremetartkop from the windows of the camp’s “luxury cottage”.

LODGE AND CAMPS

The film crew from Katjusha Films stayed at the Lodge for several days, making a documentary for German television on our predator project – the interaction of the various predators at Makulu Makete. They filmed our ecologist, Rox, on her daily tracking and monitoring tours, following the cheetahs and the brown hyaenas. They want to return and take up the story of Danny and Dottie when the first cheetah cubs are born at Makulu Makete.

Our lovely, sweeping lawns and cool, green gardens at Lulu's Camp, so carefully tended by Samuel and Sophy, have been ravaged by hungry warthogs, waterbuck and bushbuck. We didn't get a chance to sample any of the mangoes growing in Shawn's orchard, because a troop of baboons stripped the trees as soon as the fruit were ripe. Our vegetable gardens are surrounded by monkey-proof fencing to prevent the cheeky Vervet monkeys from stealing our salads. Such is the effect of the drought that even pots of basil and coriander near the Lodge have been severely pruned by gourmet kudus. Although we enjoy having these wild animals around us all the time, we are all looking forward to the day when they will have so much food of their own in the bush that they don't have to come and share ours.