

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### DECEMBER 2005

#### SEASONS

Overcast days and high humidity continue to tantalise us with the promise of rain, but the clouds disappear and the sparse covering of young grass withers in the sun. The greenest part of the reserve seems to be close to Madia Pala Mountain, where the grazers congregate to forage on what little grass is available. The bush along the Mogalakwena River, usually the favourite haunt of bushbucks, waterbucks and kudus, is almost deserted as the last pools in the river dry up. At Lulu's Camp, the permanent river pool has retreated to expose a large sand bank, where a couple of crocodiles laze in the sun, before nosing off into the warm, shallow water. We are now well into the wet season, but there have not yet been any decent falls of rain to provide the impetus for the grass to germinate and grow.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

Since his release into the reserve last month, Danny, our second cheetah from the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Foundation, has been sticking to a fairly well-defined area of thick bush and dry creek beds. This terrain makes tracking him with telemetry equipment quite difficult and he sometimes "disappears" for days at a time. Although he has not yet been spotted on a kill, it is obvious that he is now hunting and killing for himself, and Rox (our ecologist) reports that he is looking bigger, more muscular and extremely healthy since his release. Dottie, our female cheetah, tends to roam over a much greater area than Danny, but neither cheetah has ever been recorded crossing the Mogalakwena River, even though most of the river bed is dry. The river seems to act as a natural barrier to many species and it is only recently that our four ostrich have plucked up (no pun intended) the courage to cross north of the river. We have seen one pioneering gemsbok who found himself on the southern side of the river and the tracks of a single giraffe, but the wildebeest, zebra and even individual herds of impala stay on their own side of the river.

Because Dottie and Danny spent several days together soon after Danny was released from his boma (enclosure), we are hoping that they have mated, in which case cubs could be due around the end of February. We are all holding our breath until then. Cheetahs do not show any signs of pregnancy until just before they give birth and, true to form, Dottie is not looking broody nor has she started knitting baby clothes yet. She is keeping us all guessing.

#### PREDATOR PROJECT

One of our collared brown hyaenas, Anthony, has been caught on the camera trap next to a dead impala. When he was first collared, "Bony Tony", as he is affectionately known, was a rather weedy specimen and gave off a strong odour. Standing on the bathroom scales with him in my arms to weigh him was a pungent experience. However, he has been taking advantage of the abundant carrion during the drought to put on weight and he looks a much healthier hyaena than he did a few months ago. Because some prey animals weaken and some die during drought conditions, the predators find it easy pickings and there is no point in trying to bait them. They have plenty to eat without our help. Baiting, darting and collaring will have to wait.

The first baby impalas (called "lambs") were born about 21 December, which is quite late for the lambing season. The tiny lambs also fall victim to the predators. Jackals, leopards, caracals and the cheetahs all have a field day during impala lambing season. The wild dog is still with us and just the other day our ranger, Shawn, watched her devour an impala lamb that she had just killed. Wild dogs kill once a day, so this single wild dog is probably killing nearly 30 animals each month and helping to support our brown hyaenas.

The leopard, which we trapped a few months ago and released without collaring it because it was too young, has made another kill close to the staff quarters, and not far from the lodge. We have managed to find a home for the leopard at another wildlife reserve far distant from Makulu Makete. Now all we have to do is trap the leopard again so that it can be sent to its new home. The best way to trap the leopard is by using its own kill to lure it into a cage where it can be sedated for its journey. We have applied for the appropriate transport permits from the Department of Nature Conservation and once they are obtained, we can start the exciting trapping process.

## **GAME VIEWING**

We continue to provide supplementary feed to sustain the grazers through the drought. Now that the trees are in leaf, the browsers will gain condition. Sadly, we have lost several big kudus because of the drought. We have had good sightings of zebra, and large herds of gemsbok (oryx) and wildebeest with calves, all of which look healthy enough. A new baby giraffe has made its appearance, bringing our giraffe population to seventeen. Mopane worms (big, colourful caterpillars, which are prized as a delicacy by some of our local staff, who collect them by the wheelbarrow-full) are munching their way through the mopane forest, stripping the bigger trees of all their leaves and occasionally falling on to the seat of the open Land Rover from an overhanging branch. Another surprise visitor was a boomslang (tree snake) which peered over Rox's shoulder while she was at her computer in the lodge office. The snake came in through the window, taking refuge from a group of angry birds which were trying to evict it from their tree. A keen herpetologist, Rox was nevertheless relieved when the snake left the office for the sanctuary of the telephone switch box on the wall outside.

## **BIRDING**

The colourful and melodious summer migrant birds have arrived – gorgeous, lipstick-pink Southern Carmine bee-eaters, several species of cuckoos and Redbacked Shrikes. At Lulu's Camp, the bushveld's summer icon – the Woodland Kingfisher - announces his presence with a flash of his electric blue wings and his lovely lilting call. The big sand banks in the river at Lulu's attract Black Crakes and Threebanded Plovers which scuttle busily along the water's edge. Burchell's Coucal's descending-note call, like water dripping, can be heard all along the river bank.

## **VELD REHABILITATION**

Just 25 kilometres away, at our nearest town of Alldays, 200mm of rain fell during December, while at Makulu Makete we measured only 20mm for the same period. This demonstrates the fickle nature of the wet season so far. The lack of rainfall has meant that there is little regrowth on the raisin bushes which were cut and treated with herbicide last winter. Normally at this time of the year, the bush rehabilitation team would be spending their time spraying the new shoots. Instead we will be targeting small mopane bushes, which are popping up here and there, as part of our bush clearing work to prevent further densification.

## **LODGE AND CAMPS**

Main camp was closed over Christmas time so that our local staff could go home to their families in their villages. Shawn, Rox and B, our volunteer from Holland, generously stayed at their posts for the festive season, while Jane and Peter spent Christmas with her family in Australia. Jane's mother, Dottie, arrived with them at the end of the month for her first visit to Makulu Makete, and is looking forward to meeting her namesake, Dottie the cheetah. Lulu's Camp has been popular over the holiday period with campers escaping the city to the serenity of the bush during this busy time. Now, with all the staff back on deck, we are gearing up for a great year ahead in 2006, hoping for more rain and waiting for our first cheetah cubs.