

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

JANUARY 2006

SEASONS

Rain at last! The smell of damp and rotting vegetation is in the air. Rumbling thunder sends our big, brave watchdog to cower deep in his kennel. A neighbouring farmer upstream alerts us that the river is coming down and there is a scramble to pull pumps out of the river and remove electric fences across two weirs. Those of us from countries where rain is a frequent nuisance stand shoulder to shoulder with the locals to marvel at the sight of the Mogalakwena River in flood. B, our Dutch volunteer, and Jane, from rainy Melbourne, join Ngara, Frans and Lucky at the dam wall as the muddy surge approaches, builds up against the wall and pours over. Tree trunks and rafts of broken bushes plunge over the spillway. Hamerkops, fish eagles and darters appear from nowhere to follow the fish leaping in the first tendrils of water as it moves downstream. A small crocodile is swept past in the turbulent brown waves. What a relief to hear the sound of water flowing after so many months. The steamy conditions are a welcome change from the intense, dry, glaring heat. Champagne all round before dinner to toast the arrival of the wet season.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Since our two wild cheetahs, Dottie and Danny, met for the first time in November, we have been watching for any indication that Dottie could be pregnant, but it's still too early to tell. After their brief time together, Danny prefers to remain aloof, keeping to himself in an area of thick bush. Dottie, on the other hand, roams all over the reserve and takes no notice of admirers who happen to come across her. Jane was walking her two dogs early one morning when she spotted Dottie calmly drinking at the waterhole just below the lodge, in full view of the tents and the observation deck. The cheetah ignored the dogs, which were both on leads, and just kept lapping the water. For the next couple of days she could be seen from the lodge, stretched out flat in the shade of a tree next to the waterhole, occasionally raising her head to watch the guinea fowl scuttling past. A more delightful scene is hard to imagine.

Jane's mother, after whom Dottie the cheetah was named, made her first visit to Makulu Makete from Australia this month. The original Dottie is 84 years old and had been taking a great interest in her namesake by email for the past year. It was an emotional moment when the two Dotties came face to face for the first time, the human Dottie overawed in the presence of such feline beauty. Needless to say, the feeling was not mutual, and Dottie the cheetah merely yawned and rolled over, so accustomed is she to adulation from her visitors.

PREDATOR PROJECT

The lone wild dog that somehow got itself into the reserve several months ago and has been unable to get out again, was spotted stranded south of the river when the flood came down. Confined in a relatively small area of about 500 hectares, it was a perfect opportunity to try and catch her so that she can be sent to join a wild dog pack on a much bigger reserve. At her original home she could be brought in by sounding the horn of a Land Rover and rewarding her with an impala carcass, hence she was christened "Landy", after the vehicle. Although it has been about six months since she went missing from her home, it was decided that it was worth a try here at Makulu Makete. The same Land Rover that the dog was habituated to was driven in early one morning and we waited inside, blasting the horn for a minute and waiting five minutes to see if the dog would appear. A kudu leg was tied to a tree nearby to keep the wild dog occupied so that it could be safely darted with tranquilliser. The process was repeated at four different locations south of the river, but the dog did not respond to the horn. Perhaps it was already over the river in the north part of the reserve, or perhaps it had just eaten and was not interested in a reward. Our next attempt to capture her will be

by using a couple of captive male wild dogs in a large enclosure to lure her in. Stay tuned for the next exciting instalment in the wild dog saga!

GAME VIEWING

Every day at about 7 p.m., the waterhole below the lodge starts to come alive. Peter and Jane were thrilled one evening to find five giraffe gracefully walking towards the water. As four of them splayed out their legs to drink, and the biggest, darkest giraffe kept watch behind, seven zebras trotted in, with a small foal amongst them and joined the giraffe at the waterhole. A lone wildebeest came cantering past, upsetting the zebras, which galloped back and forth, raising dust. One big warthog wandered in and then a small group of waterbuck, the white circles on their rumps still visible in the twilight. As it got darker, we could just make out the shape of a lovely kudu bull joining the party, his curly horns silhouetted against the sky. While we sat on the verandah at the lodge watching this beautiful scene, above us in the trees the family of resident bushbabies (lesser galagos) emerged from their nest and set out on their nightly hunt. Leaping from bush to bush, they looked inquisitively at us from the tips of branches, with eyes like saucers. Even David Attenborough would have been impressed by such a magic evening.

BIRDING

Kevin and Martella Murray from Pretoria stayed at Lulu's camp again over the New Year break. As before, they spent all their time walking and exploring the reserve. Thanks to them, we have added three new flora species (stapeliads) and Speke's hinged tortoise to our species lists. Kevin sent us the following account of their adventure with a honeyguide. "On our way towards Madia Pala the day before we left we rested near the big baobab closest to your western boundary near the base of the mountain. A honeyguide started chattering in the baobab, clearly wanting our attention. We have had mixed experiences with honeyguides over the years, with some leading us to a hive and others leading on what seems like a wild goose chase! While Martella was resting I said I would give this one a chance. It promptly led me in a circle around the baobab back to where I started. Then Martella noticed the beehive high in the baobab! I always feel a little guilty not leaving it something, as the legend requires, but robbing beehives in heat of the day (that far up a tree and on other people's property) is not something I can bring myself to do!"

A group of eight birders from the UK spent a couple of nights at Madia Pala camp during their birding tour of the region. They took some time out of their birding schedule to find Dottie, the female cheetah, in the bush. Their powerful birding scopes and telephoto lenses were not required as they stood only a few metres from the cheetah, who graciously consented to let them take photos of her as she relaxed under a tree in the heat of the day. One of the group told us that in the UK transmitters have been fitted to individual wild birds, to make them easier to find, just like the cheetah. The problems associated with tracking a flying bird through a forest must be even greater than trying to keep up with a cheetah on the hunt in the bushveld.

VELD REHABILITATION

A few days after the welcome rainfall at the beginning of the month, grass started to appear here and there all over the veld, but without timely follow up rain, the new shoots are already withering. Our rainfall total since March 2005 is less than 100 mm, so we are still in desperate need of more. By disconnecting the solar panels which operate the borehole pumps, Peter has closed waterholes numbers 4 and 6, in an area of mopane woodland, to try and give the over-worked area time to recover. The animals are instead moving to other waterholes, which is perhaps why the waterhole in front of the lodge has become so popular. A large leopard tortoise was seen looking disappointed at the dry number 4 waterhole, before plodding off in the direction of number 6. He would have a long way to go for water after discovering number 6 was also empty, but leopard tortoises are extremely hardy and we have no doubt he would eventually find his way to number 9 or number 1 waterhole for a well-earned drink.

CAMPS AND LODGE

The river pool at Lulu's Camp is once again full, but Kevin and Martella's stay there was before the river came down. Kevin writes: "As we were relaxing in the heat of the day in camp, one of the bigger crocs was sunning itself on the rocks. We carefully noted through binoculars (and sketched) exactly where the end of the tail and tip of the snout was in relation to individual rocks. Fortunately it was lying fairly straight. Later that day when it had moved on, we went down and carefully measured its length at 1.9 m. Not a bad size! We found a rather large croc dropping somewhat further down river on another day, suggesting that there have also been much bigger ones around in the past."

A male yellow-billed hornbill has been keeping us entertained as he flies tirelessly to and from his nest in a thorn tree next to one of the tents at main camp. His mate is walled into the nest, in a hole in the tree trunk, with just a small opening in the mud wall so that he can bring her sustenance while she sits on their eggs and raises the chicks until they are all ready to break out of the nest. The devoted husband catches grasshoppers and picks up grubs on the lawn next to the swimming pool and dutifully flies a few metres to the nest to deliver them to his mate, safe from predators inside her "prison".

With the aid of a new computer mapping programme, Peter has made a detailed road map of the reserve, with waterholes, camps and other points of interest marked on it. Guests are welcome to have a copy of the map so that they can explore the reserve by themselves on foot and with confidence that they will not get lost.

Alterations have been made to one of our tents, replacing the steep stairs with a ramp from the path, making access much easier for our less agile guests. The result is so attractive and user-friendly that we plan to modify more tents in the same way.

After many months of communication problems, we are at last getting our website up to date. It will be regularly maintained and photos will be constantly changed. New staff photos were taken at a "photo shoot" at the lodge this month. You might not recognise some of us since the last mug shots were taken - have a look at www.makulumakete.com.