

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### MARCH 2006

#### SEASONS

More rain has put the icing on the cake of this year's wet season and unexpected downpours in the last couple of weeks added the cherry on the top. The total rainfall for the season so far is around 350 mm, most of it in the last two months. Autumn is making its presence felt with cooler nights and dewy mornings. As the sun comes up, the lush grasses shimmer silver with dew drops. The veld looks like an English woodland, with tiny, delicate wildflowers sprinkled through the deep grass. Blue, yellow, pink, mauve, purple and white, with names like Yellow Mouse-whiskers, African Foxglove and Veld Violet, the flowers would not be out of place painted on a dainty china teacup. The Mogalakwena River is still flowing strongly, cutting off the southern portion of the reserve, including our camping ground, Lulu's Camp. We have made a few cautious crossings of the river over the dam wall, but it will be many weeks before the river drops enough so that we can assess the damage to the drift and use it as a handy short-cut once again. The tracks through the reserve have taken a beating from the heavy storms. It is a full time job for Samuel to repair the roads before the busy winter guest season. During one storm, lightning struck a section of our Big 5 electric fence, blowing the energiser which powers it into small, charred pieces. The fence is supposed to be protected by multiple lightning conductors, but they failed to save it on this occasion. The energiser was replaced, and the fence was operating again the next day at its normal 6,000 volts - enough to dissuade even the most ardent of animal suitors from looking for a mate on the other side.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

Our cheetah cubs are now just over five weeks old, but we have not seen them yet. Any day now we expect to see Dottie, the female cheetah, taking her brood on their first hunting expedition, but in the meantime it is too dangerous to walk in to where she is hiding them in thick bush. We still don't know how many cubs she has. We just have to be patient, but the suspense is killing us! Each day Rox and Jane track Dottie in the hope of getting a look at the cubs. If Dottie is with the cubs in her usual spot, about 500 metres from the lodge, we stand in a clearing nearby and talk normally. Sometimes Dottie comes out to acknowledge our presence, and sometimes she stays with her cubs. After her intimidating charge, reported in last month's Bush Diary, we are careful not to intrude. We also see Dottie out hunting or visiting the lodge waterhole for a break from her cubs.

On 23rd March Dottie's radio collar was changed. The batteries in the collars last for about 18 months, so it is important to change the collar before the battery wears out and we lose trace of our cheetah. We had to wait until after the cubs were born to be able to safely tranquillise Dottie. Both of our cheetahs came from the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, so Deon Cilliers, Conservation Manager of De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust, and Dr. Peter Caldwell, their consulting veterinarian, came out for the occasion. Dottie was called out of the bush from her cubs using a whistle - a signal she associates with being fed. As she ran towards us, Deon threw her an impala leg, which she grabbed and carried off to a nice shady corkwood tree nearby. As she walked away, Dr. Caldwell shot a tranquillising dart into her rump. She started slightly at the sound of the gun, and flinched when the dart hit her, but seemed quite unconcerned, lay down under the tree and started eating the impala leg. After six minutes she was asleep with her chin on the impala leg. An audience of interested spectators watched as Dottie's collar was changed. Dr. Caldwell checked her over and pronounced her in excellent condition. She weighed in at 48 kg - a heavyweight for a female cheetah. For the MM team, it was the very first time we had been able to touch Dottie. Stroking her soft fur and holding her big paws was a real thrill. (See a photo on the Bush Diary page of our website [www.makulumakete.com](http://www.makulumakete.com) of Jane, Peter, Shawn and Rox with Dottie.) An antidote to the tranquilliser was administered and finally she got up, still fairly wonky on her back legs, and

staggered off into the bush in the direction of the cubs. The antidote drug evidently erases any memory she might have of the whole thing. It was a copy book performance. The cooler temperature helped, and she showed no signs of stress at all. In his report on the procedure, Deon Cilliers wrote: "This is one of the most relaxed relocated cheetahs I have seen up to date and all credit should be given to Rox and the staff at Makulu Makete strictly following protocol which prevents this beautiful cheetah from becoming a stressed out cat."

Meanwhile, Danny, the father of the cubs, continues doing his macho thing. His preferred territory is the thickest and most inaccessible bush on the reserve. The long grass and lush foliage makes seeing Danny even more difficult than usual. When Rox does get a look at him, she says that he is in magnificent condition and is killing regularly. His taste is varied. His kills this month include a kudu calf, a young zebra and a waterbuck.

## VELD REHABILITATION

Peter could not be happier with the state of the veld. It's hard to believe that just a few months ago we were in the midst of a drought, with the game looking poor and thin. Now the gemsbok, wildebeest, impala and kudu are so fat that, according to one guest, their flesh is wobbling (*dril* in Afrikaans). Rox has recorded 27 species of grass in her surveys so far this season.

Peter's prime concern is the veld itself and even with such a good season, management of the numbers of game is still necessary, so this month we had another game capture, using a helicopter to round up the animals into a big temporary enclosure or "boma". Once inside the boma they are funnelled into a high-sided chute and up into specially-designed trucks to be transported to other game farms and reserves. The final game capture figures were: 115 impala, 7 gemsbok, 7 zebra, 7 waterbuck, 11 kudu, 3 giraffe, and 17 wildebeest. We were very impressed with the professionalism of the game capture crew. The helicopter pilot was so adept, that he managed to bring in a whole herd of 71 impalas in one drive, quite a feat since impalas are particularly jittery and hard to catch. All the animals appeared to be calm and unstressed as they left Makulu Makete after what can be a traumatic experience for them.

The necessity of removing game every year in order to maintain the correct balance for the veld, led Peter and Shawn, our ranger and farm manager, to inspect an alternative type of game capture system at Monate Reserve, at Rooiberg near Thabazimbi. Known as a "passive capture boma", it is a permanent enclosure, with several large openings, inside which there is a waterhole and salt licks to attract the animals. Once they get used to going in and out of the boma, groups of animals can be trapped inside by remotely closing the gates. They are then guided through a race and into holding pens, where they are kept until a buyer can be found. This method of capture is far less stressful for the animals than the normal helicopter round-up, and can be used all year round. They were so impressed by what they saw that we have now started construction of our own passive capture boma, which should be completed in a couple of months. It will probably take the game several months to get used to it before we can start operating it.

Another borehole was drilled during the month to provide a better supply of water to no. 13 waterhole, on the western side of the reserve, close to Madia Pala Mountain. In this part of the world, some farmers use water diviners to locate water. Old ladies wielding forked sticks claim to have the power to find water, with varying degrees of success. Peter used a more scientific method, based on geological structures, and hit good water first time. A pipeline will connect the borehole to the waterhole, a distance of 1.2 km.

## BIRDING

The Southern Masked Weavers have started constructing their meticulously-woven nests in the thorn trees around the lodge. The golden males, with their black faces and red eyes, expertly and quickly weave pear-shaped nests for the approval of their rather dowdy-looking mates. The trees are alive with these busy little birds, flying back and forth, trailing long stems of grass in their beaks, and chattering incessantly.

We are now seeing quails flushed from the long grass as we walk through the bush, and families of crested francolin take off in fright as we pass, the chicks able to fly when still quite tiny. For some reason African Hoopoes seem to be everywhere at the moment. These are favourites of ours, so jaunty with their bright chestnut, black and white plumage, long curved bill and rakish crest. Our pair of Verreaux's (Black) Eagles have lost the nest that they have been using for several years. The huge structure of twigs was perched on a rocky ledge high up on Kremetartkop hill. Strong winds during one of the recent thunderstorms must have blown the nest off the ledge. We hope that this will not stop the eagles from breeding again this year. The pair has been seen sitting on the bare ledge together, perhaps planning their next "dream home".

## LODGE AND CAMPS

The rain has brought the insect life, which in turn brings out the frogs, geckos and skinks. Lights left on at night attract a multitude of moths, the most common of which is the Cream-striped Owl (*Cylogramma latora*), a large, dark brown moth with cream stripes and white "eyes" on its wings. Along with the smaller, more rectangular White-barred Gypsy Moth (*Palasea albimacula*), they plaster the walls of the kitchen at night, like a psychedelic 1960s wallpaper. Foam nest frogs, which spend much of their time sitting inscrutably on the top of doors, window frames or on the armrests of our dining chairs, start chirping happily to one another inside the lodge as the first drop of rain falls.

A large troop of banded mongooses has been patrolling close to the lodge. About twenty-strong, these charming and inquisitive little creatures purr to one another as they stand up on their hind legs to get a better look at us. They are so nose-y that they creep as close as possible to us before scampering away to tell their friends all about us. Small babies accompany the adults on their foraging expeditions, digging in the sand and catching small lizards.

A ramp has replaced the steps on a second tent and the wooden decking on all the tents is being renewed. The new ramps got the "thumbs up" from artists Peggy and Mary who visited us again from Johannesburg during the month. Mary has painted much of the artwork which adorns the lodge walls, getting her inspiration from the bushveld animals. We are looking forward to seeing Peggy's latest painting of Kremetartkop, which is such a landmark here at MM. Also from Johannesburg, Pauline joined Jane and Rox on their daily visits to Dottie, and all three Jo-burgers were present for Dottie's recollaring.

Many of our past guests will remember our first ecologist, Engela, who left MM nearly two years ago to further her career with well-known ecologist, Gideon de Klerk, in Polokwane. You will be pleased to hear that Engela has recently become engaged and will be married in September this year. In true Engela-style, the proposal was made under a baobab tree!