

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

APRIL 2006

CHEETAH PROJECT

It is almost impossible to write the sad news about our female cheetah, Dottie. Last month we changed Dottie's radio collar and she was pronounced in excellent health by Dr. Peter Caldwell, Consultant vet to the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project. Just two weeks later, on 8 April, Jane and Rox were tracking Dottie as usual, hoping to get our first look at the cheetah cubs which were born on 23 February. Dottie's signal led us to a clearing of long grass about a kilometre from where she had been hiding her cubs. Dottie raised her head out of the grass, then stood up and took a few steps before flopping down again. To our horror, we saw that she was badly injured, with her intestines hanging out from a wound under her belly. We knew that Dottie had been in the same area the previous afternoon. Perhaps she had been injured the day before and had not returned to her cubs overnight. It would have been folly to approach any closer to an injured, wild big cat. Our only option was to call a vet to tranquillise and try and treat her. Our second concern was for the cubs. Dr. Caldwell was contacted and immediately prepared to fly from Pretoria to an old military airstrip near Alldays, about 20 km from Makulu Makete. In the meantime, a search party was organised for the cubs. We knew the area where they were being hidden, about 500 metres from the lodge. All 14 of our staff, including Lucas our chef and the maids from the lodge, were mobilised to methodically comb the bush, 5 metres apart, like a police hunt. On the second sweep of the area, Samuel spotted the four cubs, lying in weeds and long grass where their mother had left them. The cubs were brought back to the lodge and placed in a cardboard box. The founder of the De Wildt Cheetah Project, Ann van Dyk, sent word that she wanted them flown back to Pretoria where they could be stabilised and she could personally look after them.

We had been so looking forward to our first sight of the cubs, but these were not the circumstances we had ever envisaged. The cubs (three males and one female) were just over six weeks old, almost as big as a normal house cat, strong and alert, spitting at us and biting, just as they should. Once in the cardboard box they kept low and quiet until they thought there was no danger, then they sat up, looked around and tried to climb out of the box. They still had their soft, long, baby fur on their backs and tiny spots all over their legs. We were entranced by them and proud of Dottie for bringing up such beautiful, healthy babies. The cubs were taken to the airstrip and sent back in the plane which delivered Dr. Caldwell and his assistant, ready for a long operation to save Dottie. But by the time they got to Dottie it was too late. She was already dead. From the nature of her injuries, Dr. Caldwell's opinion was that Dottie had been running through long grass, probably chasing prey. She must have run over a sharp tree stump sticking up and concealed in the long grass, which ripped her belly open. This type of incident is not uncommon with cheetahs because of the way they hunt, totally focussed on their prey. In fact, it was just such an accident by a wild cheetah, witnessed by one of De Wildt's major sponsors, American millionaire Howard Buffet, which prompted him to dedicate himself to the protection of this endangered species.

We all know that this sort of incident happens in the wild and that we should not get emotionally attached to any of our animals, but it was impossible for us not to feel that Dottie was actually one of us, part of the team at Makulu Makete. Our distress at her tragic death is hard to imagine. We have been devastated by her loss and still grieve for her. She is buried in the shade of a thorn tree by the lodge waterhole. The one consolation is that her lovely cubs have been saved. Their future is not yet certain. It is hoped that they will be "re-wilded" - a process which is having some success at De Wildt with hand-reared cheetah cubs. We would like to be involved with this process and have the cubs return to Makulu Makete as soon as possible, but strict permitting issues concerning keeping captive cheetahs could prevent us. De Wildt have been supportive and have promised us another female cheetah. Our only hope is that the next cheetah will be as much of a personality as Dottie.

None of this tragedy seems to have affected Danny, the male cheetah and father of the cubs. He has recently extended his range from impenetrable bush in the north of the property and has been seen venturing much closer to the lodge. While not as “laid back” as Dottie, he is nonetheless a magnificent specimen. When his flame-coloured eyes meet yours as he watches you through the bush, it feels as if you are face to face with the essence of Africa.

VELD REHABILITATION AND GAME VIEWING

It is ironic that the long-awaited rains produced the tall grass, which we needed to save our grazing wildlife, but which ultimately was the reason for Dottie’s death. The lush grass and thick bush continues to make game viewing more difficult than during the dry, winter months. All the animals are in peak condition, with sleek, shiny coats. Quite relaxed and not even bothering to get up, groups of impala and gemsbok chew contentedly as we drive past. George, our biggest and darkest bull giraffe, sat happily in a field of buttercup-yellow devil thorn flowers, and regarded us with mild curiosity when we stopped a few metres away to photograph him. Even sitting down, George was able to look down on us.

In our continuing efforts to maintain a balance between the veld (bush) and the wildlife, we must keep the numbers of grazers and browsers at a sustainable level. Predators such as the cheetahs help in this regard, but every year we must remove excess numbers of certain species to protect the veld. In the past this has been achieved by helicopter round-ups of animals, which are then sold to other reserves. As mentioned in last month’s Bush Diary, construction is now well under way on our “passive capture boma”. All our workers have been commandeered to erect posts measuring six metres each, to dig trenches and lay bricks, to sew the nylon fabric walls around the framework using wire, to create another waterhole and to ensure that the 10-metre wide gates operate smoothly. While Peter and Jane are spending a couple of weeks with her family in Australia, Peter has collected the necessary electronic equipment to install a closed-circuit tv camera, connected to a solar-powered battery, which will relay pictures of the inside of the boma to his house, enabling him to monitor the number and species of animal lured into the boma by water and salt licks. This method of capture is far less stressful for the animals than the conventional “wild-west” helicopter round-up and we are looking forward to its first test.

BIRDING

According to the books, the Red-billed quelea (rather appropriately, its scientific name is *Quelea quelea* - there’s never just one quelea!) is the most numerous bird species in the world, with flocks numbering millions of birds, and queleas have descended on Makulu Makete in their millions. At dusk, the trees and bushes along the river are moving masses of these tiny finch-like birds. They settle and fly up in unison, thick skeins of them sweeping and turning in the sky, more like huge shoals of fish in the ocean than birds in the sky. Around the waterholes the rocks and bushes are white with their droppings. Their combined, cheeping voices are like cicadas, deafening as you pass. Waves of queleas swoop down to the waterhole, take a beak-full and fly up again, to be followed by the next wave, in a circular pattern which goes on until all the birds have had their fill. In this way, a flock of queleas managed to drain No. 1 waterhole dry, something which even thirteen giraffe, all drinking at once, did not achieve. The queleas are making the most of our precious grass seeds.

We were surprised to find two Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) watching us from the rafters inside the lodge one morning. While it would be nice to be able to keep an eye on a barn owls’ nest from the dining table, it might become a bit messy. One of the owls solved the problem for us by making its own way out of the front door. The second owl was assisted outside.

Our birding expert friend, John Isom, and his wife Stella, visited us for Easter. John was fascinated by the spectacle of the queleas and added another new species to our bird list. This time it was the Kurrichane Buttonquail (*Turnix sylvatica*). Like the queleas, the ground birds seem to be enjoying the lush conditions. Baby guinea fowl, tiny red-crested Korhaans and families of Crested francolins have been seen scuttling through the long grass. Double-banded sandgrouse and common quail are regularly flushed out of the grass in front of us. John reported seeing a juvenile Ground Hornbill in an area where we have not seen this species before. Ground Hornbills are sometimes seen on the cleared grasslands near Lulu's Camp and along the river, but this one was almost in the middle of the reserve, in an area which is quite thickly bushed. Two other interesting and infrequently-seen species which John picked up during his stay were the Grey-headed Kingfisher (*Halcyon leucocephala*) and a female Black Cuckooshrike (*Campephaga flava*).

CAMPS AND LODGE

The Easter break and a long weekend at the end of April have meant that our self-catering camp, Madia Pala, and our camping ground, Lulu's, have been busy during the month. The Mogalakwena River is still flowing strongly, cutting off Lulu's Camp from the rest of the reserve. Being driven in the old Land Rover through the water cascading over the dam wall is an exciting experience for campers who want to explore other parts of the reserve.

The river has not flowed continuously like this for many years. Rox has not been able to locate Anthony, one of our collared brown hyaenas, for some weeks. His signal was last heard on the south side of the river, and we are assuming that he is still there, marooned by the river flow. Oubaas, the other collared brown hyaena, is regularly monitored by telemetry in his favourite areas on Madia Pala mountain.

Looking out from the observation deck at the lodge, we can't help but remember seeing Dottie lying there relaxing in the shade, or shoulders-hunched, lapping at the waterhole below. We have wonderful memories of her. Let's hope her cubs have inherited her unique character.