

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

MAY 2006

SEASONS

The nights are clear and cold; the wide, black sky sparkling with stars. We stand with our backs to the blazing open fire in the lodge before dinner, drink in hand, discussing the events of the day. It is even cold enough on braai (barbecue) nights to gather close around the fire in the lapa, waiting for the perfect cooking coals to form. Braais in summer are an endurance test for the cook, while the rest of us try to keep cool, well clear of the flames, or dangle our sunburnt legs in the swimming pool. The veld is drying out for winter, but there is still plenty of long, dry grass to keep the grazing animals going until the next wet season. Most of the baobab trees have lost their hand-shaped leaves and now rise up naked and massive above the green foliage of the lesser trees and bushes.

CHEETAH PROJECT

After our sad news last month about the death of our beautiful female cheetah, Dottie, we received messages of sympathy from all over the world. It seems that her fan club extended even to those who never met her. Thank you to all who sent such touching emails. Peter and Jane visited her four cubs in Pretoria in the middle of May. The cubs were being looked after at his surgery by Dr. Peter Caldwell, the Consultant vet to the De Wildt Cheetah Foundation, and his assistant, Janel. We were thrilled to see them doing so well, even if they didn't seem at all pleased to see us. They are definitely wild animals and did not appreciate being picked up and cuddled. Spitting and growling was the order of the day until their food was brought out, whereupon they called to each other in excited, bird-like chirrups and whistles. Their menu was ostrich, impala, chicken, high-quality dry cat food, and vitamin supplements, which they consumed with great relish. We have since seen photos of the cubs, which have been returned to De Wildt now that they have passed the most difficult period. They are bright and inquisitive, still wearing long, pale fur on their backs, but looking much more lanky and less like ordinary kittens than before. The smallest of the cubs, a male, has not been as healthy as its brothers and sister and it has been spending more time with Dr. Caldwell. While a single female cheetah somehow manages to keep all her cubs fed and well, it takes a team of dedicated human carers and veterinary staff to do the same job. The cost of raising the cubs until their release will be met by De Wildt and Makulu Makete. For De Wildt, sponsorship and fund raising is a major preoccupation and any help they can get towards the veterinary costs for the cubs would be appreciated. They can be contacted by email at cheetah@dewildt.org.za

Discussions were held with the Founder of the De Wildt Cheetah Foundation, Ann Van Dyk, about the future of the cubs. It has been agreed that the female cub, which we have named "Legacy" in tribute to her mother, will return to Makulu Makete when she is 12 months old for "re-wilding", and subsequent release into the reserve. As is usual with male siblings, the three male cubs will be raised as a "coalition" and will also undergo a re-wilding programme. They will then be released together into a reserve which is big enough to accommodate them. In the meantime, we are expecting another adult female cheetah to arrive at Makulu Makete from De Wildt on 7 June. Her name is Mohali, which means "The Angry One". She will undergo the same process as both Dottie and Danny, spending some months in our "training boma" before being released into the reserve to hunt and fend for herself. By the time Legacy comes back home to us, we might have cubs from Mohali and Danny. We will not be able to release Legacy until Danny has been re-located to another reserve, because of the fear of in-breeding. This process is part of management of the cheetah "meta-population".

All habitats of a suitable size to support a viable number of cheetahs in South Africa, currently have functioning populations, and so are not suitable for introducing further animals. There are, however, a great many smaller reserves, such as Makulu Makete, that are too small to hold a sustainable population by themselves, but are suitable habitat for cheetahs. By introducing smaller numbers to many of these reserves, and managing the population carefully, another viable population can be created in South Africa. This so-called meta-population is physically scattered across the country, but genetically managed as a whole. As appropriate, individuals may be moved between Makulu Makete and other meta-population reserves to ensure genetic diversity. This effectively greatly expands the area available to cheetahs in South Africa, by including reserves that would previously have been considered too small. An added bonus for cheetahs is that one of the major threats to their survival is also addressed. They have very low genetic diversity, which puts them at high risk of diseases wiping out an entire population. By being separated into many sub-populations, this prevents spread of disease, should it occur, as only healthy animals, like our Danny, are ever moved from one reserve to another.

GAME VIEWING

It's that time of the year again - the bush is full of the sound of rutting impala males. Their guttural grunts are a constant background noise and their snorts sound like a whale breaching. Lone male impalas lie in wait for a group of females to pass by so that they can claim them for themselves. They will spend the next few months seeing off rival males and keeping their little harem together so that they will scarcely get a chance to eat or sleep. Polygamy certainly has its downside.

Our male cheetah, Danny, has been extending his range over the past couple of months, roaming far and wide across the reserve. He has even ventured across the river, a cheetah first! Dottie never bothered to cross the Mogalakwena River, which runs through Makulu Makete. Even when it was dry it seemed to act as a territorial boundary for her. Not only did Danny pluck up the courage to cross the river, but he killed one of the three ostriches which are resident on the other side. The remaining two ostriches are now looking decidedly nervous.

While searching for Danny across the river, Rox, our ecologist, picked up the signal from Anthony, one of our radio-collared brown hyaenas. This was a relief to us all, since we were concerned that we hadn't been able to get his signal for some weeks. The tracks of Oubaas, the other collared brown hyaena, indicate that he has been keeping company with a younger, smaller hyaena, which raises doubts about Oubaas's gender. Perhaps Oubaas is a female, not a male, because it would be unusual for a male hyaena to consort with a juvenile. Hyenas are notoriously difficult to sex because of the similarity of their external genitals. We could have made a mistake assuming he was a male when Oubaas was originally trapped and we worked in the dark by torchlight to weigh and collar him/her.

BIRDING

The Helmeted Guineafowl is BirdLife South Africa's Bird of the Year for 2006. Very common in our area, the guinea fowl is a popular design motif for ceramics, fabrics, stationery and linen. Bunches of its attractive dark grey and white-spotted feathers are used as decoration instead of flowers. Flocks of adults and juveniles can be seen all over Makulu Makete, their noisy calls resembling the squeaky hinges of a rusty gate. Not blessed with above-average intelligence, they pound along the tracks in front of our vehicles, with panic-stricken faces, till one of them has a brain wave and peels off into the bush on the side,

followed closely by the others. Only occasionally do they remember they can fly and eventually, after being clocked at 25 kph, they take off in flight - the original bird brains.

Our pair of Verreaux's (Black) Eagles have started building another nest on the same rocky ledge on Kremetartkop, after their old nest was blown away in a storm earlier this year. The eagles have been seen circling over the koppie, with twigs in their beaks. The new nest is already quite a large structure and we are looking forward to following the progress of this year's chick.

Our ranger, Shawn, hit the jackpot this month, spotting an African Finfoot, paddling through the reeds on a quiet weir in the Mogalakwena River. This is the third finfoot sighting in as many years. The habitat along the river is perfect for finfoot (finfeet?), and if they weren't so secretive, there would be many more sightings of this shy bird, which is a twitcher's delight.

LODGES AND CAMPS

While on holiday to visit his family in Zimbabwe, our mild-mannered chef, Lucas, was detained by the police and has not yet returned to Makulu Makete. Communications with Zimbabwe are extremely difficult and we are not exactly sure where he is or what his situation is. We are hoping that he is OK and will be back with us soon. In his absence our kitchen has been in the expert hands of Annelize, a hotel management graduate, who is used to cooking for hunting safaris. Our guests, Carolyn and Christine from San Francisco, were forced to call for mercy after a few days of lavish brunches and generous servings of venison and other local specialties.

Christine was lucky enough to get one of the best sightings of our sometimes unco-operative cheetah, Danny. After a lengthy tracking session through thick scrub with Rox, she was rewarded with the sight of Danny casually emerging from a bush, parading up and down for photographs, then lying down nearby in full view.

Both Christine, and her mother, Carolyn, were keenly interested in the post apartheid social and political situation in "the new South Africa". Shawn took them on a tour of Alldays, our nearest town, often described as "wild-west", where they visited his friends and got a closer look at life in rural South Africa. They attended the local game auction, where many species of wild animals are on sale to the highest bidder to repopulate surrounding game farms. We were slightly concerned that Christine and Carolyn might return from the auction with a couple of zebra or a giraffe, but they managed to restrain themselves from bidding.

South Africans, Lilith and Colin and their party spent a long weekend at our self catering camp, Madia Pala, and despite the fact that baboons pulled out a water pipe at the camp and there was no water for a day, they enjoyed themselves exploring the bush and relaxing in the warm sunshine, away from the freezing temperatures and rain in Johannesburg.