

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### JUNE 2006

#### SEASONS

Gradually the bush is turning from green to grey, as more and more of the deciduous trees lose their leaves. Unlike the drought conditions last year, there is still a good covering of dried grass to provide fodder for the grazers, while the browsing animals continue to do well on the remaining foliage. Very chilly mornings put a spring in everyone's step, but the days are pleasantly warm. It is the season for burning off the dead grass along roadsides and on agricultural areas to promote early fresh growth. Around the cities, towns and villages at this time of year a pall of smoke hangs from cooking fires and grass-burning programmes. The Mogalakwena River has almost stopped flowing, but still trickles quietly across the drift, which has been repaired and is passable once more.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

Since last month's report, there have been a few changes to our cheetah news. We have a new female cheetah ensconced in our "training boma" (enclosure), where she is getting used to her new surroundings. She's not Mohali, who we were expecting, but a bright and inquisitive young lady called Bubbles. When the team from De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project went to try and catch Mohali to bring her to Makulu Makete, she was so elusive that they brought us Bubbles instead. Bubbles (whose brother's name was "Squeak", hence "Bubble and Squeak" - a traditional English way of cooking left-over vegetables) is a wild cheetah of about three years old, and has spent two years of her life in captivity at a private reserve where she was registered as a male and kept in a cage with a male cheetah to disguise the fact that she was a female. The reserve intended to use her for their cheetah breeding programme. Luckily for Bubbles and for us, Deon Cilliers, Conservation Manager of the De Wildt Wild Cheetah and Wildlife Trust, discovered Bubbles and she was removed so that she could be returned to the wild.

Because she has been in captivity for so long, Bubbles has little respect for humans. Unlike her predecessor, Danny, who was very nervous, Bubbles tends to get too close for comfort and it is up to Rox, our ecologist, to teach her to keep a safe five-metre distance from visitors. Dick and Ann, guests from Oregon, USA, had several encounters with Bubbles in her boma, getting her used to remaining at a respectful distance. Feeding time is a bit of a challenge with Bubbles, as she rushes to the gate in anticipation and charges forward greedily. At one feeding session, she even managed to get her dew claw (a sharp, curved claw on the inside of her front leg) caught on the electrified trip wire of her boma, so that she received a couple of nasty shocks before Rox was able to push a stick through the fence and release the wire. Bubbles now associates Rox with being shocked and greets her with snarls and spitting, the cheetah equivalent of swearing. Bubbles will remain in her boma until she has learnt to keep her distance and until we are satisfied that Danny, the free-roaming male cheetah, will not be a danger to her when she is released. This will probably mean releasing her when she is in oestrus and when Danny has already become aware of her presence by visiting the boma.

The sad news is that our female cub, Legacy, died suddenly from a swelling on the brain. This was a great blow to us and to De Wildt, where the cubs are being raised, as we had hoped that Legacy would return to Makulu Makete. However, her three brothers are thriving. Jane and Peter visited them again during the month and were pleased to see how active and strong they are. One in particular, previously the smallest and palest of the three, has a delightful personality and seemed to want to come out and play with us, purring loudly when we scratched his ear through the mesh of their enclosure. Legacy's death demonstrates how fragile cheetah cubs are and how difficult it is to raise them by hand. Vanessa Bouwer, the Assistant Director of De Wildt, will be spending several

weeks in America in July to raise funds for cheetah conservation. Her presentation uses the tragic story of our Dottie to illustrate the vulnerability of this endangered species in its dwindling natural habitat.

## GAME VIEWING

There were two separate sightings this month of young leopard. Whether it was the same one or two different animals, we don't know, but leopards are usually only seen at night so these daylight sightings are especially exciting. The nights are full of the sounds of jackals calling eerily and urgently. Brown hyaenas have also been heard in the dead of night, their yelping and growling noises nothing like the famous "whoop, whoop" laugh of their cousins, the spotted hyaenas.

One of the loveliest sights this month was a tiny kudu calf, which arrived with its family at the lodge waterhole while we were enjoying afternoon tea on the observation deck. A big bull kudu, accompanied by several elegant cows and the tiny calf, made a dignified entrance from the bush, paused to drink at the waterhole, then moved off into the bush once again.

At Madia Pala, our self-catering camp, troops of noisy and boisterous baboons lope across the boulders high up above the camp on Kremetartkop. In the late afternoon, the silhouette of a tiny male klipspringer antelope can be made out, on the topmost boulder, surveying his kingdom as the sun goes down.

## BIRDING

The pair of ground hornbills with their well-grown juvenile have been spotted regularly this month. They have remained in the same area for well over a year, which is most encouraging, as this species is threatened in our part of the world.

It is interesting to compare the variety of bird species seen around each of our three camps. Staying at Madia Pala camp you are almost guaranteed to bump into the resident Mocking Cliff Chats. In fact, they are likely to join you in the shower at the Luxury Cottage. You will see tchagras, red-winged starlings, Little Bee-eaters, Ashy Flycatchers in the bushes, Green wood-hoopoes and scimitar-bills in the baobab tree around which the camp is built, and soaring above Kremetartkop the pair of Verreaux's (black) Eagles. The birdbath at Main Camp attracts the prettiest of birds - blue waxbills, black faced waxbills, Melba finches (now called green-winged ptylias), red-faced mousebirds and pied barbets, while familiar chats flip their tails as they alight on the outdoor furniture and crimson-breasted shrikes call stridently from the bushes. Lulu's Camp on the river is the haunt of herons, hamerkops, kingfishers and the wonderful African fish eagle.

## LODGE AND CAMPS

When the transformer at Main Camp blew up early in the month, we were totally without power for three whole weeks - no lights, no hot water, no fridges or freezers, no ovens, no washing machines and no satellite phone or internet. Both Madia Pala Camp and Lulu's Camp were not affected by the black-out, so we had to move to Madia Pala Camp, where at least we had hot water and electric light.

The next day, Ann van Dyk, Founder of the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust, Vanessa Bouwer and Peter Bouwer, one of its Trustees, arrived with Bubbles and stayed for a few days with us. Madia Pala is a lovely camp, so it was no real hardship to stay there, but logistically it was a nightmare. Annelize, our temporary chef, managed admirably under the difficult conditions, ferrying food from the big gas stove at the main camp, to Madia Pala. Unable to fit into the limited accommodation at Madia Pala, Jane and Peter camped in their house, with cold running water, and not much else.

As our transformer got closer to the top of the queue for repairs, we struggled on through the coldest weather and shortest days of the year. Dick and Ann arrived from the United States and joined us at Madia Pala camp for a week, instead of staying at the lodge. Peter and Shawn both came down with bronchitis and flu. So as not to keep the rest of the camp awake at night with his constant coughing, Peter selflessly moved back to his house, where he remained in isolation for several days, a rather Dickensian figure lying on his sickbed, with a single guttering candle providing light and a camping gas burner to make a cup of tea, since there was no invalid's gruel available.

Meanwhile, for the rest of the team, meals at Madia Pala were eaten outside under the stars on a heavy wooden table ... and talk about meals! ... We have a new chef, Dawie (pronounced Darvey) Groenewald. A graduate of the Wits Hotel School in Johannesburg, he has worked throughout South Africa and in the United States, and continues to delight us with innovative and delicious food. Not surprisingly, he has already become a popular member of the team. Dawie is more at home in the city, but is enjoying his indoctrination to life in the bush, even if for the first few nights he slept with his suitcase wedged against the inside of his bedroom door to keep out anything that slithers or has more than two legs. He has the use of a motorbike for transport around the reserve and, soon after his arrival, when we were all staying together at Madia Pala camp, he put a pudding in the oven for dinner and set off on his motorbike to collect a few supplies at the main camp, 5 kilometres away. On his way back, his route was blocked by a giraffe, towering above him in the middle of the track in the gathering darkness. The giraffe did not seem keen to move, so Dawie did a u-turn and determined to find an alternative route back to Madia Pala camp. In the dark bush, he got himself bamboozled, but finally managed to find his way back, just minutes before dinner time. Never so pleased to see the lights of the camp, he came in at a run, panicking that his pudding would be overcooked. Jamie Oliver never had to put up with this sort of thing! Our previous chef, Lucas, has not returned from Zimbabwe, but we have heard that he is safe. Perhaps the pressure of being separated from his family because of the terrible political and social situation in Zimbabwe became too great and he decided to stay with them. Such are the perils for chefs in Africa.

One of the other perils of life in the bush is the presence of unwanted visitors. A Mozambique Spitting Cobra climbed up the vertical wall of Jane and Peter's house and made its way into the air conditioning unit outside the bedroom. Jane watched its progress from inside the house and called for reinforcements by radio. Rox, our ecologist and resident herpetologist, and Peter both arrived. The front of the air conditioning unit was carefully removed and Rox peered into the darkness inside, wearing sunglasses to protect her eyes from the blinding venom which the cobra can spit with great accuracy. She was just able to make out the snake, lying on top of the fan cowling. Surely if we turned on the fan, the snake would take fright and come out of the air conditioner. With Jane and Rox standing at a safe distance, Peter went inside the house and turned the switch. Nothing happened. It was then that all three of us suddenly realised there was no electricity! The snake eventually fell out when the side of the air conditioner was prised off. While Rox kept the snake's attention fixed with an ostrich-feather duster, Peter dispatched it with his pistol. No one likes to kill snakes, but we cannot have poisonous snakes coming inside, as this one could have easily done through the air conditioning ducts. Out in the bush we leave snakes in peace, but unfortunately in the camps we cannot take any risks.

After Ann van Dyk and Vanessa Boucher's visit to Makulu Makete, Jane and Peter were treated to a royal tour of the operations of the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust, near Pretoria. Personally escorted by Ann and Vanessa, we saw the breeding and hospital facilities for cheetahs and wild dogs, we watched the cheetahs being exercised by chasing a lure at 70 kilometres per hour, and we visited Shingwedzi, Ann's property outside Warmbaths, where there are a further 30 cheetahs in the breeding programme or waiting to be relocated to the wild. We met the "ambassador cheetahs" whose job it is to visit schools and go out into the public to educate people about cheetah

conservation, and we were privileged to go on his daily walk with the most famous of all the ambassadors, Byron. We stayed at Cheetah Lodge at De Wildt, enjoying the beautiful garden surroundings and the friendly hospitality and marvellous cooking of the lodge manager, Eloise. What impressed us most was the professionalism and passionate dedication of all the staff at De Wildt to the cause of conservation of endangered species, and their complete devotion to the legendary Founder of the Trust, Ann van Dyk.