

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

JULY 2006

SEASONS

Already there are pastel, cream-coloured blossoms on some of the acacia trees and bushes, a sure sign that spring is here. July went out with a cold and windy spell that extended all over southern Africa and into the Kalahari desert where Jane and Peter were camping with the Schneider family from Switzerland. There were even a few millimetres of very unseasonal rain at Makulu Makete. Compared with this time last year, the veld looks much greener and more healthy, with plenty of dry grass for the grazers and some leaves remaining on the raisin bushes. Although there is ample natural feed for the game, kudus, impalas, warthogs, gemsbok and waterbuck regularly visit the lodge waterhole to feast on the lucerne hay that is left out for them as a treat.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Our free-roaming male cheetah, Danny, has discovered Bubbles, our new female cheetah, in her boma (enclosure) near the lodge. He is spending much of his time close to the boma, getting to know the new cheetah on the block. Even when we can't actually see him, we know he is close because of his radio collar signal. Chris and Mike, from Brighton, UK, were lucky enough to see Danny drinking at the lodge waterhole on one of his visits to Bubbles. Shawn, our ranger, saw both cheetahs looking at each other through the fence one night as he drove past. We have been advised by the trainer in charge of Bubbles at De Wildt Cheetah Foundation, that even though she gets too close to humans for comfort inside the boma, she keeps her distance when she is out in the bush. Because of this, we feel she is ready to be released but we are holding off until after a meeting with the De Wildt team on 16 August when we will be discussing our future cheetah programme. If the programme does not include breeding, but perhaps, for example, "re-wilding" of male cheetahs, then Bubbles will be sent to another reserve for release.

GAME VIEWING

During the month Elisabethe, a Belgian biology student, spent a few days "shadowing" Rox, our ecologist, to get a feel for her future career. For some weeks, Rox had thought that one of our collared brown hyaenas, Anthony, could be dead because his signal always came from inside the same thick bush. Rox and Elisabethe went into the bush, convinced that all they would find would be a hyaena skeleton wearing a radio collar. They were therefore surprised when Anthony, far from dead, ran out from the bush, looking fit and healthy, if somewhat bleary-eyed, having been woken from his normal sleeping routine.

Our giraffe population has increased by one. A very small, probably male, giraffe has been spotted several times with his dark, lightly-built mother and a big bull giraffe called Makulu. The baby's dried-up umbilical cord was still in evidence when he was first seen. Like a toy giraffe, his head doesn't even reach as far as his mother's rump. He has fluffy pom-poms on his horns, a short chestnut-coloured mane, outrageously long curly eye lashes and big, strong legs. So far he has not visited the lodge waterhole with the main herd of giraffes which have been seen there quite frequently.

BIRDING

Although our resident pair of Verreaux's (Black) Eagles have rebuilt their nest this season, no eggs have been seen in the nest so far. However, keen birders from the Cheesemans' Safari group discovered a nesting Verreaux's Eagle Owl (Giant Eagle Owl) on top of a hamerkop's nest on the banks of the Mogalakwena River. The owl's tufted "ears" gave away its position as it peeped out cautiously over the nest. We have been careful not to disturb the owl since.

Two new species were added to our bird list in July. The African Redeyed Bulbul has appeared at Makulu Makete for the first time. Although they are common in many parts of southern Africa, we are further east than their normal range. They have joined their cousins, the Dark-capped Bulbuls at our lodge bird bath. The first Capped Wheatear was also recorded on the agricultural lands across the river. There was no mistake in identifying him with his distinctive markings, which was quite a relief after struggling with several unremarkable pipits and larks in the short grassland.

LODGE AND CAMPS

It was a busy month at our lodge and camps, beginning with the Mullers, a family group who camped at Lulu's on their way to Zimbabwe via Botswana. The Platjan border post is less than half an hour from Lulu's camp, making it a perfect stop over for Jo'burgers travelling north.

For the second year, Cheesemans' Ecology Safaris from the USA sent a group to Makulu Makete. Hailing from California, Alaska, Virginia and Idaho, the group totalled ten. Three couples stayed for a full week but due to various commitments, the other four were only with us for four days, before they all headed off to Namibia for the next part of their adventure. Nine of the group were enthusiastic and experienced birders, but pity poor George, the tenth member, whose main interest was reptiles. By the end of his stay, George was getting pretty good at identifying birds as well! The Cheesemans' clients are serious about all aspects of ecology and this group kept our ranger, Shawn, and our ecologist, Rox, busy. They now hold the record for the slowest birding walks - taking two hours to walk only two hundred metres along the river, such was their interest in every bird they came across. They sat up silently in the open Land Rover till one o'clock in the morning, out in the middle of the dark bush, listening to distressing amplified tapes of a wildebeest being killed and eaten by spotted hyaena. The tapes are designed to "call up" hyaenas to baits placed nearby, so that they can be counted and individuals identified. Unfortunately, our brown hyaenas did not co-operate, but the next morning the baits were gone and there were hyaena paw prints all around. The group was lucky enough to see more than 50 elephants on their day trip over the Limpopo River in Botswana. They were also fascinated to track a wild dog pack at Venetia Wild Dog Research Project, not far from Makulu Makete. We hope that Dennis and Alice, Diane and Bryant, Susan and Rudy, Unison and Joel, Joanna, and of course George, enjoyed the rest of their safari, and that George actually got to see some snakes.

While Jane and Peter were away camping, Chris and Mike, from Brighton, UK, were ably looked after by Shawn, Rox and Dawie, our chef. Having seen Danny at the waterhole on their first day, they subsequently realised how lucky they were to get such a clear view of our nervous cheetah. After morning activities and a sumptuous brunch provided by Dawie, Chris and Mike spent their afternoons watching the animals come and go at the waterhole from the balcony of their tent. An accomplished marathon-runner, Chris didn't let her training programme slip, and she and Mike would run for an hour before sunset each day. Before they set out, Rox would check with her telemetry equipment to make sure of Danny's whereabouts so that they would not tempt our wild cheetah to chase them. Fast as they might run, it is doubtful whether even the best marathon runner could outdo the fastest animal on earth!

Luisa and her family, from Johannesburg, spent a weekend at Madia Pala, our self-catering camp. Luisa had visited us before with a birding group and wanted her daughters and grand-children to have the bush experience. They also sampled Dawie's cooking, with a delicious venison lunch at the lodge.

John and Kathy, from Pretoria, came to stay for a couple of days at our main camp on the day that Jane, Peter and the Schneider family returned from their camping trip to Botswana. They must have wondered what they were in for, when the six dishevelled, dirty, hungry and tired travellers arrived at dusk, ready for showers. John and Kathy were regaled with stories of the trip over dinner that

night. The next day they climbed Kremetartkop for a look at the eagles' nest and the archaeological ruins at the top of the koppie, despite the cold and windy conditions. Their next stop after Makulu Makete was Mapungubwe National Park where they would be able to compare the famous archaeological remains with our own smaller version.

BOTSWANA CAMPING SAFARI

Two years ago, the Schneider family from Geneva, Switzerland, stayed at Makulu Makete. Peter showed them photographs of his latest camping trip through Botswana and the seed was sown for the Swiss family to go on their own camping safari two years later, accompanied by Jane and Peter. Jacques and his wife, Brigitte, and their two sons, Robin, 18, and Philippe, 16, hired a fully-equipped Land Rover Defender 4x4 camping vehicle and set off in late July for a two-week adventure with Jane and Peter, who were driving their own Toyota Land Cruiser and towing a specially-built 4x4 camping trailer. With Swiss precision, the Schneiders were always on time, and cheerful, even when it meant getting up at 5 a.m. and driving for 12 hours at a time over tortuous tracks. They never complained about the camping conditions, which sometimes left a lot to be desired, the lack of hot showers or flushing toilets. They treated it as a truly African experience and enjoyed it all. They were excellent travelling companions.

Heading north, our first stop was Kasane, a little town on the Chobe River, at the junction of Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Namibia and only about an hour from Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe. A little 6-seater outboard aluminium dinghy took us into the Chobe National Park along the river. It was a magic afternoon - elephants everywhere on the banks of the river, on grassy islands in the middle of the river and swimming from one side to the other. There were huge crocodiles and pods of fat hippos lounging along the mudbanks. The birdlife along the river is prolific, beautiful and amazing. We saw open-billed storks, African skimmers, a big flock of black-winged pratincoles, yellow billed storks, fish eagles, spur-winged and Egyptian geese, white faced and knob-billed ducks, coucals, spoon bills, ibis, egrets, kingfishers and a long-toed plover. There was a huge herd of buffalo, lechwes (water antelope) and pukus, kudus, impala, baboons, giraffes. What diversity of species. At sunset the pilot pulled the boat into shore so that we could watch the sun go down. Peter got some beautiful photos of elephants silhouetted against the red, setting sun. We did a couple of forays into the park by vehicle, the highlights of which were a single roan antelope and a herd of sable antelope. The male sables are shiny black, with white bellies, chestnut ears and huge curved horns which arch up over their shoulders. They are truly spectacular creatures. The young ones were chocolate brown, with small horns just starting to show.

From Kasane, it was a long and arduous trip to Moremi Game Reserve in the Okavango Delta, a trip which involved getting stuck in deep sand ourselves when we left the track to allow others to pass, and rescuing others in a similar situation. Because of the high rainfall this year, there was water everywhere and the game was not concentrated around pools of water as in the past. Spotted hyaena, elephants, zebra and yellow-billed oxpeckers were of interest, as was a large male baboon which climbed into the Schneiders' Land Rover through the open driver's window and stole a loaf of bread on his way out.

From the lush delta, we made our way east to the arid regions. In the dry Boteti River bed at Khumaga, dust hovered over wall-to-wall zebras at the end of their migration. They kept us awake at night with their continuous strange honking calls and the sound of thousands of hooves stampeding down the valley away from prowling lions. The greatest camping challenge of all was the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, the largest in the world, and bigger than Switzerland or Denmark. Here we had to be totally self-sufficient with water, fuel, firewood and food. Hardy desert species covered the grassy pans - gemsbok (oryx), springbok, ostriches, red hartebeest, kori bustards, korhaans, secretarybirds, bat-eared foxes and jackals. We were lucky enough to watch a

honey-badger foraging for food, with an opportunistic jackal in its wake. A couple of sleepy, black-maned Kalahari lions didn't even bother to open their eyes when photographed.

But the "elephant incident" at Nxai Pan National Park was the most memorable part of the whole trip for us all, except for Philippe and Robin who somehow managed to sleep through the whole episode!

After the dank, over-used, cold showers at Third Bridge campsite in Moremi, we were looking forward to staying at Nxai Pan, which had been our favourite camp in the past, where the "ablution block" was spotlessly clean and, wonder of wonders, there were hot showers, provided by a primitive but effective donkey boiler. We were more than disappointed then, when the ranger informed us on our arrival that there was no water in the camp, or anywhere in the park for that matter, because elephants had ripped up all the water pipes feeding the camp and the waterhole. The elephants had all moved on to the Boteti River, all, that is, except for one very large bull elephant who appeared in our camp after dinner, when Jacques, Brigitte, Jane and Peter were sitting around the fire. Brigitte was the first to realise that the elephant was looking for water. There was water on the ground around our camping trailer after washing the dishes and trying out the shower attachment on the trailer. As we watched from what we thought was the safety of our trailer, the elephant started digging a huge trench beside our Land Cruiser, looking for water pipes. He sprayed dirt about with his trunk, covering a nearby tree with a coating of sand. He then turned his attention to our trailer and started to pull on the shower attachment, hanging outside. As he pulled, the whole trailer lurched and rolled, with Peter and Jane inside. Finally, he ripped the shower out of the trailer wall and started on the gas bottles at the front, rattling the chains which kept them in place. His great, pale form towered above us, as he moved around us in the dark night. More pitching and rolling of the trailer and suddenly - crash - the nose of the trailer hit the ground as the jockey wheel collapsed. We were sitting in silence, at a steep angle, inside the trailer, not knowing what was happening outside, but sure that our trailer, and perhaps we inside, would be trashed. There was more shaking and crashing from the kitchen compartment outside the trailer as he explored the sink. What if the elephant realised that the water tank was under the trailer and tried to overturn it in his efforts to get a drink? After about half an hour of this terror and uncertainty, the elephant wandered off and we cautiously climbed up, out of the door of the trailer, to survey the damage. Jacques and Brigitte climbed down from their roof-top tent. Jane's teeth were chattering, but not because of the cold! Miraculously, the only real damage was the broken shower. The elephant had been quite selective in its search for water, but had left dirty trunk-marks in the kitchen sink and over the sides of the trailer and on the windscreen of the vehicle. The jockey wheel was not broken. The elephant had knocked the handle which kept it standing, and the wheel had collapsed. We couldn't fix the jockey wheel in the dark and we didn't know if the elephant would come back, so just to be safe, Peter and Jane spent the whole night sitting up in the cab of the Land Cruiser, wrapped in blankets. It was freezing, and after nine hours it felt like an economy flight from Jo'burg to Sydney, except there were no movies and no stewards handing out orange juice. Needless to say, we packed up and left Nxai Pan early the next morning.