

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

AUGUST 2006

SEASONS

As I type at my desk in the verandah of our house, birds flit to and fro amongst the pale, lemon coloured blossoms that now cover the knob-thorn trees outside my window. The air is filled with bird song and the coo-ing of Cape turtle doves. Red-faced mousebirds whistle as they fly past in small flocks and tiny blue waxbills twitter busily in the bushes. Occasionally the sun glints on a brilliantly coloured, iridescent sunbird exploring the flowers with its long beak. In the background, on the slope behind our house, kudus walk through the dry bush towards the waterhole below the lodge. Despite their natural camouflage, they are easily visible through the bare trees at this time of year. We are hoping for our first rains of the season some time in September.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Bubbles, our female cheetah, was released from her boma (enclosure) on 22 August. The day before, we had given her a small feed from the open Land Rover inside the boma, with our Australian guests on board. Bubbles was not satisfied with our meagre offering and once she had finished it off, she circled the Land Rover hungrily, making it impossible for any of us to get out and open the gate so that we could drive out. It was a good photo opportunity for those on the Land Rover, getting close-up shots of a growling and prowling cheetah, but when it looked as if Bubbles was crouching ready to jump into the Land Rover with us, we banged on the side of the vehicle to make her back off. As Scott, from Melbourne, quipped, "That would have put the cat among the pigeons." Shawn, our ranger, came to the rescue by distracting Bubbles to the other side of the boma while we quickly drove out.

Bubbles' release went without hitch. As with the release of both Dottie and Danny before her, Bubbles walked out of the double gates of the boma and picked up the kudu leg that we had left for her outside, attached to a long rope. This was to prevent her trying to take the leg back into the safety of her boma. The gates of the boma were closed behind her by pulling on a rope, and we all sat in vehicles to watch how Bubbles coped with her first taste of freedom. Her audience consisted of the MM team - Peter, Jane, Rox, Shawn and Dawie, our chef, as well as the Sanderson family from Australia. After she had eaten the meat, she sat up, looked around and headed off down the road and into the bush, stopping now and then to check out her new surroundings. When she disappeared, we all went back to the lodge for a celebratory afternoon tea. Just as we were about to start on our scones, jam and cream, there was a yell from the kitchen - Dawie could see Bubbles on the front lawn of the lodge! We gathered around the front door to watch the unusual spectacle of Bubbles walking down the path towards us, then wandering off in the direction of the guests' tents. After exploring the area around the lodge and main camp, Bubbles went further afield and has since been roaming over an extensive area of the reserve. The next day we found her about six kilometres from the lodge, much to the relief of the guests who had visions of her waiting for them at the entrance to their tents when they retired for the night.

Tracking Bubbles is a lot of fun. She seems to like open areas and can often be found close to a road, lying under a tree. She also seems to like human company and gets up to follow us when we leave her. This was slightly unnerving at first when, on the day after her release, Jane and Rox had left her and were walking back down the road to the vehicle, about 150 metres away. As we rounded a corner, out of the corner of my eye I saw movement and turned to see Bubbles running towards us. We turned to face her and stood stock-still, but from her demeanour, it was obvious that she was not threatening us, merely trying to catch up with us. So we walked backwards to the vehicle, keeping our eyes on her as she followed us casually down the road. We have now become

used to this behaviour. Sometimes Bubbles even decides to take the lead and walk in front of us, which is a wonderful experience.

Six days after her release, Bubbles' radio collar signal was coming from the same place as our male cheetah's signal. Rox and Jane walked into the bush following the signals, to find both cheetahs lying together. One of our concerns when releasing Bubbles was that Danny could injure her, but here they were, stretched out back to back. Danny, as usual, seemed a bit nervous, but Bubbles was totally relaxed and after a while Danny settled down too. He "talked" to Bubbles with chirruping, clicking noises. Seeing them together was a real thrill. The difference in their sizes was immediately obvious. Danny is about one third bigger than Bubbles. As cheetahs go, Danny is a big cat. He probably weighs between 55 and 60 kilograms, while Bubbles tips the scales at less than 40 kilograms. The two cheetahs stayed together for about two days before separating. If they have mated, we could have cheetah cubs by early December. Nine days since her release, and Bubbles still has not made her first kill. We have given her two feeds in that time and hope that she will soon take the initiative and hunt for herself.

GAME VIEWING

Although we might seem obsessed with our cheetahs this month, there are plenty of other species to enchant us, and the lodge waterhole is one of the best places to watch them. After a week of seeing magnificent kudu bulls with enormous, curly horns, gemsbok, warthogs, impala and big troops of baboons every day outside their tents, the Sanderson family became quite blasé about these species. They also saw giraffes on several occasions, but only the keen-eyed Alicia was quick enough to get a good view of zebras before they galloped off into the cover of the bush. On their trip to the Venetia Wild Dog project, Meryl, Alicia and Kim were lucky enough not only to see a pack of fifteen wild dogs, but witnessed the dogs fighting with a brown hyaena over a kill, and saw two lionesses cross the road in front of the vehicle in the dark on the way home.

Novice birders, Sue and Geert from Johannesburg, camped at Lulu's camp on a birding tour of the Soutpansberg-Limpopo area. They were excited to report seeing an otter with a cub near the drift in the Mogalakwena River. We sometimes see otter paw-prints in the mud along the river banks, but the animals themselves are not often spotted, so Sue and Geert were very privileged.

BIRDING

We have given up hope that our resident Verreaux's (Black) Eagles will breed again this year, even though they have rebuilt their nest. However, they are a delight to watch, soaring so effortlessly, high above Kremetarkop. We can report breeding activity from other raptors - a goshawk is making a nest next to tent number 3 at our main camp, and a pair of African Hawk Eagles is nesting again this year in a baobab tree near Madia Pala Mountain. The Verreaux's (Giant) Eagle Owl is still resolutely sitting on its nest on top of a hamerkop's nest beside the Mogalakwena River. It peeps out cautiously if we drive by: only its "ear" tufts and pink eyelids can be seen above the nest.

LODGE AND CAMPS

The Ropers, from Johannesburg and beyond, chose Lulu's Camp for one of their regular extended-family get-togethers. With the entire camp at their disposal, they made themselves at home. They rode mountain bikes across to the lodge one day for afternoon tea and to see Bubbles being fed. They did a day trip to the archaeological site at Mapungubwe National Park and they added to our flora species list by identifying the mistletoe, *Tapinanthus forbesii*. Until quite recently, this part of Limpopo Province was relatively unknown as a tourist destination for South Africans, but it is becoming more popular, especially with those people, like the Ropers, who appreciate the vastness and stark beauty of the area, with its rocky outcrops and contorted baobab trees. An excellent guide to the area is the Greater Limpopo Birding Routes publication. Makulu Makete is a founding

member of the birding route and we recommend that anyone interested in the area have a look at the website www.limpobirding.com

The Sandersons, from Melbourne, Australia, will remember their stay at Makulu Makete for lots of reasons. Alicia discovered that she has a natural talent for game-spotting. According to her, the animals were “beautiful”, the food was “beautiful” and the whole experience was “beautiful”, but it’s the way Alicia says “beautiful” that really makes it beautiful! Kim wasn’t as gifted at game viewing as Alicia. She found it easier to point her digital camera in the direction of the animal and take a photo so that she could look at it later and find out what she was supposed to have seen. Kim’s husband, Scott, suffers from multiple sclerosis but, using his walking stick, he managed to get himself up to the viewing deck at Mapungubwe National Park, overlooking the junction of the Shashe and Limpopo Rivers, where Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe meet. Exhausted by the effort of the climb, Scott was unable to walk back to the car park. Once again, our gallant ranger, Shawn, came to the rescue, by piggy-backing Scott down the hill and back to the vehicle. The Sandersons christened him “Shawn Wheelchair Petersen” and were very appreciative of Shawn’s devotion to his guests. The long flight from Australia caused Scott’s mother, Meryl, a few health-related problems, so we took her to see our doctor at his weekly clinic next to the Limpopo River at the Platjan Border post. The small thatched, raw-brick building, filled with patients from villages across the river in Botswana, must have seemed fairly basic compared to Meryl’s doctor’s comfortable waiting room in suburban Melbourne, but the quality of care given by the South African doctor amazed Meryl, Scott and Kim. Out here in the backblocks of South Africa, we are lucky to have medical care equal to anywhere in the world. After her visit to Dr. Venter in the morning, later that day Meryl felt well enough to tackle a 4x4 bush-bashing trip in search of wild dogs, not bad for a lady who will turn 80 in January!