

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

SEPTEMBER 2006

SEASONS

It's getting hotter and hotter by the day. Most of the acacia blossoms are dry and burnt by the hot wind. The trees are stark and lifeless. The country seems to be holding its breath for the first rain of the season. Even the non-birders amongst us spend a lot of time looking heaven-wards, for signs of clouds. After a few hot days, sometimes the clouds gather and it tries to rain, without much result. Water has been let out into the Mogalakwena River from the huge Glen Alpine dam upstream, to fill the dams and weirs along its length so that farmers can continue to irrigate their crops. On the whole, however, for this time of year, the veld looks healthy. We just have to be patient.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Our two wild cheetahs, Danny and Bubbles, have been together again since their first meeting in August. Early this month, when their radio collar signals seemed to be close, we walked into the bush to find the two of them together again. But when Danny made a half-hearted charge at us, we noticed a big wound on his back leg, which was obviously painful. It seemed difficult for him to sit or lie down and he was lame when he walked. He looked very thin and hungry and, after consultation with both Deon Cilliers of the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, and Dr. Peter Caldwell, the expert cheetah vet, we decided to feed Danny because his injury was preventing him from hunting for himself.

We didn't want to walk in carrying meat, because of the compound danger of two cheetahs together, one of which was injured, and both of which were hungry. So we bush-bashed with the Nissan bakkie (pick-up) as close as we could. We had an impala shoulder for Bubbles and a hind leg, laced with two antibiotic tablets, for Danny. Bubbles came towards us first and we threw her the shoulder, which she grabbed and started eating fast. Then Danny came forward, so we threw him the leg, but he was a bit nervous and hesitated, giving Bubbles the chance to run in and take his food back to where she had almost finished her own portion. Danny just let her take it! While she was busily chewing on the impala leg, he managed to sneak off with the smaller shoulder which had hardly anything left on it. Worried that Danny had not had his medicine, we found him again the following day, this time on his own, and gave him another feed with more antibiotics. We continued feeding him until his wound was healed well enough for him to start hunting again. A happy side-effect of Danny's injury and the hand-feeding is that he now seems much less nervous when we are tracking him. We are seeing a lot more of a more relaxed-looking Danny than ever before.

Meanwhile, Bubbles had still not made a kill. At the sound of a vehicle she would appear out of the bush and follow expectantly, hoping for a free hand-out of food. Deon Cilliers stayed with us at the lodge during the period and recommended that we let her go without a feed for seven days, which would encourage her to hunt for herself. We followed his advice, and could hardly bear to watch as Bubbles, very thin, followed our vehicle pathetically for long distances. Finally, 33 days after her release, we found Bubbles lying under in the shade of a Shepherd's Tree with a nice fat tummy, looking very pleased with herself. Success at last! We did not find her kill, so we don't know what she managed to hunt. Unfortunately, she made her kill across the river, near the main road to Alldays on the far side of the reserve and she seems to like it over there. As she parades along the fenceline, cars stop to photograph her. In this cattle-farming area, our concern is that she could be the target for a non-cheetah-friendly local, many of whom regard cheetahs as vermin. We hope she will soon return to the safety of the north side of the river.

The remaining three cubs of our original cheetah, Dottie, which are now being raised at De Wildt, were doing well, so it was a great shock to us when the Founder of De Wildt, Ann van Dyk, rang with the sad news that one of them had been found dead in their enclosure. A post mortem will be carried out to try and ascertain the cause of death. Dottie, their mother, and two of the cubs have died, illustrating the frailty of the species, which justifies the research and conservation work on cheetahs that is being carried out by De Wildt and other organisations.

GAME VIEWING

Now that the evenings are becoming warm and balmy, night drives are especially enjoyable. While you often see the eyes of the usual daytime animals (kudus, impalas, waterbucks etc.) reflected in the spotlight, we were lucky enough to get a good look at a couple of nocturnal mammals - a porcupine, which went rattling off at a fast pace, and a civet, which took no notice of us as it went about its business. Nightjars, owls and thick-knees add to the interest on the birding side. Regular visitors from Johannesburg, Mary and Pauline, didn't even have to leave the comfort of their chairs on the lodge's observation deck before dinner the other night, to see the shadowy, but unmistakable silhouette of an aardvark shambling past in the gathering darkness.

Deon Cilliers, from De Wildt, was relaxing (for the first time in many months, we suspect) on the deck at the lodge with a cup of coffee while Peter was out tracking Bubbles late one afternoon. When Peter returned, Deon called "I've found your cat for you", and pointed to the waterhole below, where Bubbles was stretched out lazily, her tail twitching, as she watched three nervous warthogs which kept coming closer for a better look at her.

BIRDING

The charming little red-headed weavers have started building their nests under the thatched eaves at the lodge. From inside you get a good view of the brightly-coloured male birds outside the window, busily stripping leaves off thin twigs and twisting and sewing the twigs to build their nests.

The Verreaux's Eagle Owls which are nesting on top of a hamerkop's nest near the river, have hatched out a single chick. We can see the fluffy grey head of the chick, with its prominent ear tufts, above the edge of the nest, while the two big parent birds flap off into nearby trees to keep a watchful eye on us.

We spotted two kori bustards in a section of bush which has been cleared as part of the bush rehabilitation programme. Opening up these overgrown areas has encouraged the return of these big birds, as well as occasional visits by a pair of ground hornbills.

LODGE AND CAMPS

Makulu Makete is a member of the Soutpansberg Limpopo Birding Route which has recently been incorporated into the Greater Limpopo Birding Route. This month we have had birding and non-birding visitors to Lulu's Camping Ground who have used the information on the Birding Route's website and in its excellent guide to the area, to find interesting places to stay. Lulu's Camp is especially pretty at the moment - a green oasis in the midst of the barren and grey bush. Its sweeping lawns and big trees contrast sharply with the surrounding dryness.

Peter's youngest daughter, Debbie, who now lives in Seattle, Washington State, USA, visited us for the first time since migrating to America ten years ago. Putting aside her fears of snakes and crocodiles, and convincing herself that she would only meet friendly animals here, she braved the rigours of the African bush like a real trooper. One night, worried that the strong wind would blow her tent away, she crept out with her torch, determined to spend the night on a sofa in the lodge. As she ventured out of her tent, two green eyes reflected back at her from the ramp leading to the lodge. That was enough to send her scuttling back to her tent, despite the wind. Debbie was

thrilled to have very close encounters with both Danny and Bubbles, and to climb to the top of Kremetartkop with her Dad. She came laden with chocolates for all the staff, a gesture which guaranteed her popularity.

For the third time, the Kern family from Louis Trichardt (now called Makhado) spent a long weekend at our self catering camp, Madia Pala. This time they brought the other side of their clan along as well - the Müllers, for their annual family reunion. Dressed in matching shirts, with the Makulu Makete logo and "Müller 2006" printed below, they dined on such traditional dishes as waterblommetjie potjie and stuffed, baked impala.

Many of you have met our ecologist, Rox Whittle. Over the past two and a half years, Rox was responsible for the successful introduction, habituation and release of our three wild cheetahs. She has amazed our guests with her vast knowledge of African birds, mammals, insects and reptiles and her understanding of all matters ecological. Tirelessly she has led our guests up Kremetartkop, along the river looking for birds and through the bush after cheetahs and brown hyaenas. Her lectures have enlightened us all on everything from snakes to conservation. Perhaps more than any of us, the death of our first cheetah, Dottie, had a profound effect on Rox, not only from an emotional point of view, because we had all become so fond of Dottie, but because it put an end to Rox's current research for her Masters. So Rox left us at the beginning of this month to move in with her boyfriend, Morné, and to look for a research project to continue her passion for predators. She has not moved far - just the other side of Alldays - and has already brought us day visitors to see Bubbles and Danny. We wish Rox (and of course her faithful hound, Snoopy) every success and thank her for her invaluable contribution to Makulu Makete. As well as her nightly "discussions" with Peter over the dining table, we will remember her "bush Barbie" gear, her inappropriate footwear, her willingness to do whatever needed to be done, whether it was cooking up a fantastic curry for dinner, or sitting up all night waiting for a leopard to appear. Thanks for everything, Rox!