

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### OCTOBER 2006

#### SEASONS

“Suicide month” has come to an end, with tensions mounting as the temperature increased in the lead-up to the rainy season. On the last day of October, a cathartic thunderstorm and downpour delivered 10 mm of welcome rain, reducing the physical and emotional strain and cooling the parched veld. Leopard tortoises started to emerge from their hibernation earlier in the month, a sure sign that rain was on its way. Now we have to take extra care to shake out shoes and clothes before putting them on, in order to evict fat, black scorpions that delight in hiding in dark crevices. Already there are shiny, green leaves on some of the baobab trees, always the first to spring to life after the long dry spell. As the rain continues into the first day of November, let’s hope that it’s the start of a good wet season.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

Our female cheetah, Bubbles, continues to display herself to passing traffic along the fenceline at the main, tarred road. While this exhibitionist behaviour delights some motorists, it is likely to attract unwanted attention from farmers who are less sympathetic towards cheetahs, which are sometimes responsible for the death of their stock. After Bubbles’ first proper kill last month, she seemed to be subsisting on small kills, which would not sustain her if she has cubs in a couple of months time. She never looked as if she had a full stomach, which is rated 5 on the “fullness scale” for predators. To us, she appeared to be a 2 on the scale of 1 to 5. However, during the month Ann van Dyk, the Founder of the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust, came to visit. In deference to Ann, the “alpha female”, Bubbles lifted her game. When Ann and Vanessa Bouwer, Deputy Director of De Wildt, saw Bubbles, she was relaxing under a bush with a bulging stomach. In the last week, Bubbles has killed two female impalas, so it looks as if she has once more got the hang of hunting for herself. Ann was also able to get a very close look at our male wild cheetah, Danny. Danny came too close for comfort to pay homage to Ann and had to be warned off with just three metres to spare.

Ann and Vanessa gave us the good news that the two remaining cubs of our original wild female cheetah, Dottie, will be studied for a Master’s thesis, which will compare their development and ability to hunt with two captive-bred brother cheetahs. The two sets of brothers will be released on different properties and their behaviour will be monitored.

#### GAME VIEWING

In the next couple of months we would like to remove the radio collars from our two collared brown hyaenas before the batteries run out. We have started baiting to attract hyaenas to a particular area next to a humane trap. Once the hyaenas start coming in and getting used to the presence of the trap, we will set the trap and try to capture Oubaas and Antony, the two collared hyaenas. Our previous ecologist, Rox, collected enough data on the hyaenas to co-author a paper on their behaviour. So far, the camera placed near the trap has only revealed two greedy honey-badgers gnawing at the old bones left out for the hyaenas, but we will keep on trying. At another location, the camera failed to get photos of whatever it was that killed an impala and cached an old impala skin in a tree. This is fairly typical leopard behaviour, but the tracks around the kill indicate it could have been a caracal.

Dusk at the lodge waterhole is still the best time and place to see game at this time of year. After the heat of the day a procession of species arrives to drink - big bull kudu with elegant curling horns, gemsbok (oryx) jousting playfully and raising the dust, waterbuck with the signature white circle around their rump, giraffe splay-legged as they lean down to drink, and busy warthogs

dashing here and there, tails sticking straight up. The tiny bushbabies (lesser galagos) have returned to the lodge to charm us every evening as they leap from tree to tree like miniature kangaroos. A female bushbaby seems to have taken up residence inside the lodge, carrying her baby in her mouth and scurrying along the top of the wall and the beams of the thatched roof. We suspect she has a nest in the thatch. She and her baby make a lovely picture as they peep out from behind the beams, with their huge, orange eyes, pointed ears and tiny hands.

The impala ewes are all looking heavily pregnant. It won't be long before they start dropping their tiny lambs and provide easy pickings for our predators, including Bubbles, who could also be expecting cubs by early December.

## **BIRDING**

Although the summer migrant birds have not arrived yet, this month has been a busy month for our raptors. We have had good sightings of both brown and black-chested snake eagles. Two pairs of Verreaux's (black) eagles have been seen, soaring around our highest peaks. A pair of African hawk eagles has a big chick in their nest in a baobab tree. The Verreaux's (giant) eagle owl chick is also big and fluffy atop its hamerkop's nest by the river. Symbol of the bush, the magnificent African fish eagle's call always sends a shiver down the spine as it flies down the Mogalakwena River. The attractive appearance of the African harrier hawk, previously known as the gymnogene, belies its evil habit of raiding the nests of other birds. Two apparently juvenile Southern white-faced owls were seen together on a night drive during the month. The soft call of these owls can often be heard around the lodge at night. Like the Pale chanting goshawk, Gabar goshawks are quite common at Makulu Makete: a pair nests in a tree outside tent number three at the main camp. Jane saw one of these keen hunters trying to out-manoeuvre a loudly-squeaking Meyer's parrot on the wing. The parrot managed to dodge its pursuer with some clever aerial arobatics. The only species of parrot found here, the Meyer's is not a particularly colourful bird, but its cheerful whistling and tree-climbing prowess make it one of our favourites.

## **LODGE, CAMPS AND PEOPLE**

At the beginning of the month, our chef Dawie left us to take up a position with a 7-star hotel in Dubai. We had always known that Dawie would not be with us forever, and we wish him every success for a stellar career. We expect one day to see Dawie with his own television cooking show to rival Jamie Oliver. By very happy coincidence, our previous chef, Lucas, returned from Zimbabwe and immediately took up his old post in the kitchen. Dressed in his white chef's hat, white jacket, black and white trousers and apron, the ever-smiling Lucas cuts a startling figure as he drives his quad bike through the bush, to collect ingredients from the cool room located a kilometre from the kitchen. Is this the African version of meals on wheels?

A new volunteer joined the team this month. Martin is a highly qualified electrician from London and, despite a phobia about cats, he seems to be enjoying himself. On his first day, we took him out to meet Bubbles and Danny. When Bubbles came right up to the Land Rover, circling and growling and looking Martin straight in the eye, our volunteer started to get nervous. He later told us that it was only quite recently that he could even walk into a room with a domestic cat, so coming face to face with a wild cheetah was a major event for him. Later that same day, stranded in the Land Rover with a flat tyre, it was another test for Martin as night drew in and the strange animal sounds and rustlings in the bush seemed to menace him. Already Martin has solved the "shocking" shower situation at Lulu's camp. He has fixed numerous pumps, faulty wiring and brought life back into dead electrical appliances. What did we ever do before we had a resident electrician?

Three individual guests - Mary from Queensland, Australia, Pam from Northampton and Mark from Leeds in the UK - shared a week together. One of their most memorable experiences was a walk with Bubbles through the bush. Purring and chirruping, Bubbles circled around us as we stood

watching her. Sometimes walking in front and sometimes following us, she stayed with us just a few metres away when we went back to the vehicle. Our progress was slow, waiting for her to sit or lie down before we moved off again, and stopping when she approached too close. Mary, Pam and Mark had a couple of sightings of Danny, at a discreet distance so as not to make him take flight. The contrast between the behaviour of the two cheetahs was remarkable. Mark enjoyed his climb up Kremetartkop so much that he persuaded Shawn and Martin to tackle Madia Pala mountain with him. We were sad to see our three guests leave, but when the keys of the minibus that was taking them back to the airport were locked inside the vehicle, it seemed that they would not be leaving us after all. Some quick work with a hacksaw by our ranger, Shawn, enabled us to open a sliding window and retrieve the keys at the last minute.

It's always a pleasure when guests return for a second, or third visit to Makulu Makete. American photographer, Carol Polich, spent a couple of days with us again on her way through to Botswana and Namibia. Unlike Martin, she was thrilled to see Bubbles circling the Land Rover and got some good cheetah action shots. Carol's photos of animals are used on calendars and postcards and her landscape works appear in books and magazines. She visits Africa frequently to up-date her photo portfolio.

After their first visit to Makulu Makete three years ago, Antonie and Susan Schouten from Vancouver, Canada, generously donated the funds to complete the cheetah-proof electric perimeter fence. They returned last year and met Dottie, our first wild cheetah. This month they came back again with their extended family from Holland - Antonie's father Adelbert, aged 87, his brother Jan Willem and sister-in-law Inkie, and his sister Joanne and her husband Hans. Our main camp was overflowing so Jan Willem and Inkie stayed in the luxury cottage at Madia Pala self-catering camp. Experienced campers and bushwalkers, they had no qualms about walking the five kilometres between the two camps instead of taking the easy way out and driving. Antonie in particular had wonderful sightings of both Bubbles and Danny. Perhaps the two cheetahs were aware of Antonie's personal contribution towards their return to the wild.

For the second time this year, Toby and Maiko from Hong Kong arrived at Makulu Makete. This time it was just a brief stay at the beginning and end of a camping trip into Botswana with Jane and Peter. Throwing them in at the deep end, we spent a week camping in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, where the camping sites are equipped with "rustic" long-drop toilets and bucket showers. There's no water, however, so you have to provide your own. Maiko's Japanese friends were horrified to hear that she would have to go for about eight days without the luxury of a shower. Like real troopers, Toby and Maiko put up with a rented Land Rover, parts of which kept dropping off at irregular intervals. They braved sand storms and a thunder storm one night which drenched their tent and mattress. A roaring male lion woke them up one morning as it strolled past the camp, looking for its lioness companions. Since the air-conditioning in their Land Rover was not working, they swathed themselves in weird head-dresses and makeshift long sleeves to escape the searing heat. But it was worth all the inconvenience. The breath-taking solitude and vastness of the Central Kalahari is unforgettable. Completely dry at this time of the year, the game was not so plentiful but stunning, nevertheless. Gemsbok, springbok, wildebeest, giraffe, ostriches, jackals, bat-eared foxes, kori bustards and secretary birds dotted the stubbly pans. We followed a belligerent-looking honey-badger as it muscled its way along, tolerating our presence with an angry stare. Toby was fascinated by the ground squirrels scuttling into their underground burrows with a flick of their feathery tails. The most memorable sightings, however, were of four wild cheetahs, which we were lucky enough to see on two occasions. We assume it was a female cheetah with three, almost adult cubs. It is a sight we long to see at Makulu Makete. Perhaps Bubbles will provide us with the opportunity.

From the Kalahari we travelled north to the tourist mecca of Kasane and the Chobe National Park. After seeing hardly a soul for a week in the desert, it was a real culture shock to be confronted with Toyota-loads of tourists on game drives. A sunset cruise on the Chobe River is not to be missed, even though it involves an armada of boats jostling for the best position to watch an enormous, prehistoric-looking crocodile guarding her nest of eggs. We had some close encounters with elephants as we drove through the park, but after our last camping experience with the thirsty elephant at Nxai Pan, we were careful to keep a safe distance. After years of city-slicker lifestyle in Hong Kong, Toby and Maiko should be proud of the way they handled the rugged and primitive conditions forced on them in Botswana. After screwing back on the front door hinge of the Land Rover for the last time, they rattled and clattered away from Makulu Makete with enough stories to keep the members of the Hong Kong Club enthralled for many nights.