

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

NOVEMBER 2006

SEASONS

A few well-spaced thunderstorms have delivered an early start to the rainy season and the bush has responded by bursting into life. The grey, dried-out trees and bushes of last month are transformed with lush, new green leaves. Floppy white flowers and bright green, hand-shaped leaves soften the twisted limbs of the giant baobab trees. Pulsating with insect and bird activity, the bush is permeated with the heady, honey-laden scent of the terminalia blossoms. Succulent young shoots are springing up through last season's dried out grass - a sight to gladden Peter's heart. The bush looks so different that, after an absence of three weeks in Australia, Jane found it easy to get lost as the normal landmarks have receded behind a green curtain of foliage.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Our female cheetah, Bubbles, continues to entertain us with her unconventional behaviour. Early in the month, our ranger, Shawn, spotted Bubbles emerging soaking wet from the river, having swum across with a very full belly. A few days later Bubbles walked out of the bush to watch workers from the power supply company checking the overhead power lines inside the reserve. With no fence between them and a wild cheetah, the terrified electricity crew took refuge inside their truck until Bubbles got bored and disappeared. Bubbles was also caught on our camera trap at 2 a.m. one morning inspecting bait that had been left out to attract brown hyaenas. Normally active by day, cheetahs also hunt during a full moon, but there was little moonlight on the night in question.

For the last three days of the month, Bubbles has been staying in one spot, close to the old number 8. waterhole. This is a nice, safe area, almost dead-centre of the reserve and far from public roads. If she is pregnant, and if our calculations are correct, she should be due to have her cubs any day now. We are keeping a close watch on her, tracking her twice a day, in the hope that we will be able to notice any change in behaviour that could mean she has cubs. As at 30 November, there was no visible indication that she has given birth, but we have a strong "gut feeling" (no pun intended) that the cubs have arrived. We are hoping that, as a first-time mother, nothing will go wrong and that instinct will prevail. Keeping a respectful distance for our own safety, we have not ventured close enough to see Bubbles in her chosen spot and we will not interfere or disturb her until she comes out of her own accord, but the suspense is killing us!

Our male cheetah, Danny, has reverted to his old, elusive ways. He hides in thick bush and takes off before we can get a good look at him. The battery in Danny's radio collar is due to be changed soon, which presents us with the challenge of trying to get close enough to him to tranquillise him for his collar change. For this operation we will have the help of experts from the De Wildt Cheetah Foundation. When we did get to see Danny, for two days in succession he was on a kudu kill. Normally a cheetah eats its fill as soon as it has killed, then moves away in case a stronger predator, such as a lion or spotted hyaenas, comes in to steal its kill. This raises the question: has Danny realised that there is no threat from lions or spotted hyaenas at Makulu Makete? The only other large predators are leopards, brown hyaenas and, of course, Bubbles, who we suspect has stolen Danny's kills in the past.

GAME VIEWING

The first baby impalas were born during the last week of November. On their toothpick-thin legs, they spring along confidently behind their mothers. Impala lambing season is a good time for the predators. If Bubbles does have cubs, she will have a ready supply of food for them - a horrible thought, but that's nature.

The thick foliage makes it much more difficult to see game in the bush, but we had a wonderful sighting of our big eland bull. Eland are the largest of all the antelopes, the males weighing in at up to 900 kg. We think our eland bull must easily weigh that much. He is massive - his mighty shoulders rising up to a hump, with a heavy dewlap and wide chest supported by strong, pale front legs. Mostly dark grey, his face is almost black, with a curly patch of hair on his forehead. Birders would have been impressed to see a couple of red-billed oxpeckers busily picking ticks off his broad rump. Despite their size, eland are very athletic and have been known to clear six foot fences. It's hard to imagine this huge bull getting his enormous weight off the ground, a bit like a lumbering jumbo jet. The eland was standing with a group of three big male kudus, which looked delicate next to his mighty bulk, a gemsbok bull and a few impala rams, dwarfed by the other antelopes. Perhaps a group such as this inspired the expression "stag party"?

The greening of the bush has brought with it an explosion of the insect population - dung beetles laboriously rolling balls of dung, wasps buzzing in through open doors, tiny fireflies winking outside the windows at night, dragon flies, bees and butterflies everywhere, and in the background, the piercing song of cicadas. The whole place seems to be humming with activity.

BIRDING

This is a wonderful time of year for birdlife. The summer migrants are arriving and there are new birdsongs to delight us. Already we can hear the urgent call of the red-chested cuckoo (known in Afrikaans as a "piet my vrou"), the sad, three-note song of the male black cuckoo calling "I'm so sad", and the female's "whirly whirly whirly" reply. Best of all is the happy trill of the cheeky woodland kingfisher as he flits through the trees on his electric-blue wings. The red-backed shrikes are here and the other cuckoos won't be far away.

On a branch above the swimming pool outside the lodge, a male masked weaver bird is frantically constructing the most intricately-woven, pear-shaped nests to attract females, but so far they have turned up their noses (beaks?) at his efforts. With resignation, the pretty golden bird with the black head just starts building another nest, in the hope that a female will approve next time.

One very exciting summer visitor is the rare olive-tree warbler, notoriously hard to see but once you've heard its call, it's easy to recognise. Typing away in my office in the veranda of our house, I suddenly realised I had been listening to the warbler calling close by. Somewhere between the call of a fork-tailed drongo and the murmured conversation of an Australian yellow-tailed black cockatoo, the warbler's song is unmistakable (to me, anyway). Grabbing my trusty Zeiss binoculars, I stood at the steps of the veranda and zero-ed in on an umbrella thorn tree a few metres away. There was an indistinct little bird hopping about behind the branches and leaves. I walked right up to the tree and was able to get quite a clear view of the bird, eating a nice, fat, green caterpillar. It's hard to believe that this little bird has flown all the way from the northern Mediterranean to turn up here, on our doorstep. This sighting rated as the top for this month at Makulu Makete, followed by a pair of ground hornbills a couple of days earlier.

LODGE AND CAMPS

Shawn's mother, Maria, and younger sister, Judith, visited him during the month. Maria and Jane between them keep a motherly eye on Shawn. Having just graduated with a degree in marketing, Judith is spending some time with Shawn and, with her feminine touch, has made a great improvement to his bachelor living conditions. Like her big brother, Judith is charming, friendly and full of fun. It must run in the family!

Meanwhile, Shawn spent a week at the De Wildt Cheetah Foundation near Pretoria to learn more about cheetahs and, in particular, De Wildt's conservation education programme. As our

relationship with De Wildt becomes formalised, Shawn will be a key member in their education team, focusing on schools and local communities in the area surrounding Makulu Makete.

For an electrician from the heart of London, Martin, our latest volunteer, is proving to be an excellent game spotter. Taking himself off on a game drive the other day, he came back full of enthusiasm for the many species he had seen, including wildebeest, giraffe and the flighty zebras. Martin has been put in charge of the hyaena-baiting operation. We want to trap the two collared hyaenas so that we can remove their collars before the batteries run out. Martin put out bait at a hyaena midden, not far from the lodge, and set up the camera trap to record what happens each night. So far, apart from good photos of Bubbles sniffing the bait, he has also captured one or two uncollared brown hyaenas on camera. The bait will be moved closer to the mountain, where the hyaenas' signals are sometimes heard, and Martin will try again.

Anyone who has visited Makulu Makete over the past two and a half years will have met Rox, our ecologist, who left us in September this year. On Friday 24 November, Rox and her South African boyfriend, Morne, were married in England and are now living at Morne's property, Corea, not far from Makulu Makete. Busy as ever, Rox is undertaking research work, as well as helping Morne run his guesthouse and game farm business. We wish them lots of happiness and prosperity for the future and stay tuned for news of a baby for Rox and Morne!