

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

DECEMBER 2006

SEASONS

Santa Claus brought us a gift of 100 wonderful millimetres of rain in an overnight downpour just before Christmas. The day before we noticed swallows, swifts and bee-eaters swooping and diving against the grey, towering clouds, excitedly feeding on the insects that were being blown in before the gathering storm. Leopard tortoises were out in numbers, purposefully plodding around looking for water and mates. More rain and the steamy, hot-house conditions have spurred on the vegetation growth. The raisin bushes are growing so fast that you almost need a machete just to get to the washing line to hang out the laundry. The sweet scent of wild flowers and blossoms perfumes the bush. Martin, our volunteer, says that it smells like bubblegum as we drive past some of the acacia trees, covered with pale, fluffy blooms. Welcome as the rain is, it means much more maintenance work - fences washed out and the swimming pool at Lulu's camp turning green like thick, spinach soup. Thanks to our continuing efforts on the roads, there has been little damage in that department.

CHEETAH PROJECT

It's official - Bubbles, our female wild cheetah from the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, has cubs. They were born about 28 November and although we haven't seen them yet, Bubbles is acting like a new mother. She has stayed in the same place for over a month now and we have tracked her signal at least once a day. She spends most of her time with the cubs, but when she is out hunting we occasionally have an opportunity to see her. Four nipples are clearly in evidence, which could mean she has two or three cubs. We are dying to see the cubs, but we will not jeopardise their chances by disturbing Bubbles or trying to find her nest. In the last few days, she has moved her position by about 200 metres to a new location. Cheetahs should move their cubs every now and then so that the smell of the nest does not attract unwanted visitors.

Our main concern was that Bubbles still wasn't a good hunter and might not be able to provide for herself and her cubs. One day during the month, Peter and Jane tracked Bubbles' signal and found her hiding in long, dry grass. Anxious to see the size of her belly, which would give some indication of whether she was successfully hunting, we waited. Suddenly she sat up and, completely ignoring us, her eyes fixed on something behind us, she took off. A steenbok (small antelope) was running past and Bubbles closed in on it fast. With a running stride of nine metres, she covered the ground in a flash. The steenbok dodged around a tree, and Bubbles swerved her long body to follow. Prey and predator disappeared into the bush, and we don't know what the outcome of the chase was, but at least we could rest assured that Bubbles knows exactly what she is doing. Later in the month, Bubbles was spotted returning to her nest with a huge belly (probably 7+ on a scale of 1 to 5!). She paused to take a long drink at a waterhole as we watched. Perhaps motherhood has been the catalyst Bubbles needed to improve her hunting skills.

The male cheetah, Danny, was also giving us anxious moments. As mentioned last month, the battery in his radio collar will soon run out and the collar will have to be changed before that time. He had become very secretive and elusive, so that we were worried that we would not be able to get close enough to him in the bush to dart him with a tranquilliser. There was talk of bringing in a trained tracker dog from De Wildt, or using a helicopter to find him. One morning, one of our workers, aptly named Lucky, was working on the fence of the one-hectare boma (enclosure) in which the cheetahs are kept on their arrival at Makulu Makete. The boma had been vacant, with the gate left open, ever since Bubbles was released in

August. Noticing movement behind him, Lucky turned to see a cheetah pacing along the fence, INSIDE the boma with him! Somehow Danny had managed to get himself into the boma during the night and was still there. The gate was quickly closed, the electric fence reconnected, and hey presto Danny was caught! This must rate as the least traumatic capture of any cheetah. How silly Danny must have felt once he realised what he had done. He is now safely in the boma, being hand-fed, waiting for his collar to be changed and to be relocated to another reserve. We still can't believe our amazing good fortune.

GAME VIEWING

Three caracal have been spotted this month. Peter saw a very big caracal and another of our workers, Samuel (alias Chillies) saw two caracal just the other day. Samuel has never seen a caracal before but identified them from photographs and said that they looked like youngsters. All of us who have not seen a wild caracal are jealous. We would love to get a look at these beautiful, red cats that look like a lynx, with their long tufted ears and three-quarter length tails. Caracals are particularly unpopular with sheep farmers because of their predisposition to killing as many as 30 sheep a night, just for the fun of it. We suspect the caracals are probably having a field day with the young impalas that were born last month.

Our visitors from America, Nancy and Diane, were privileged to see our big bull eland. He gave us a wonderful viewing and we have decided to christen him "Ernie", after Ernie Els, the South African golfer whose nickname is "The Big Easy". We think Ernie Els would be proud of his magnificent namesake. Martin took photos of a couple of very new giraffe babies, bringing the total to at least three more giraffe for this year. Another very nice sighting was of a chameleon, crossing the sandy track in front of our vehicle. The chameleon was decked out in what appeared to be psychedelic, lime-green patterned 1960s wallpaper. As he climbed a bush beside the track, his colour changed to army-issue camouflage brown and green. He puffed himself up to double his size and as he reached the top of the branch, he turned pale green and blue, to merge in with the leaves and sky. All the while, his bulging eyes revolved and his tail hooked and unhooked on the branch as he climbed.

BIRDING

The gorgeous, lolly-pink and blue Southern Carmine Bee-eaters arrived a few days before the end of the month, adorning the power line near Lulu's Camp and joyfully darting and rolling through the air after flying insects. Their European bee-eater cousins are here as well, joining the swallow-tailed and little bee-eaters found here all year round. More migrant cuckoos have been seen and heard - Diederik, European, Great Spotted, Klaas's and Levillant's. Trying to recognise all the bird calls in the bush at the moment is a full-time occupation. There's a large and very inquisitive Wahlberg's eagle chick sitting up in a nest in full view of the main track.

A very worrying absence over the past few weeks has been the pair of Verreaux's (black) eagles, normally resident on Kremetartkop. We have seen them there almost every day for the past four years and suddenly they have disappeared. There is another pair on Madia Pala Mountain, but they are less often seen. The Kremetartkop eagles' chick died mysteriously last year and they did not breed again this year, after beginning to build another nest. Perhaps the cause of the chick's death was poisoning. The eagles are often seen eating carrion and they could have picked up a poisoned carcass from another property to feed their chick. They could also have met the same fate. We hope they are just visiting relatives somewhere for Christmas and will return in the new year. Their graceful soaring, high above the boulders, is sadly missed.

Having shot many mallards during his hunting days in the United States, Peter was able to identify a pair of mallard ducks swimming on a dam, which is normally dry but filled up overnight after the heavy rain. The mallards had gone by the next day, but their presence is unwelcome as a feral species which has hybridised with the Yellow-billed duck in some areas. It's one species we don't want to add to our bird list.

LODGE AND CAMPS

Nancy and Diane, from North and South Carolina, USA, respectively, braved the heat of December to stay at our main camp. Both seasoned African travellers, Nancy is a wildlife artist whose colour pencil drawings of African animals are sought after in her home country. Her website, www.nancystrailey.com, displays a gallery of some of her beautiful work. They were here for the excitement when Danny captured himself, and they saw Bubbles at her most pathetic, pre-hunt skinny state, hoping for a free hand-out of meat, a sight which reduced Diane to tears. Later that day, Bubbles lay in the shade of a tree at the waterhole below their tent, as if to reassure Diane that she was not starving.

Robin Schneider, the elder son of the Swiss family who accompanied Peter and Jane on their camping trip to Botswana earlier this year, returned to Makulu Makete for a week as a volunteer. Having just completed an intensive English-language course in Johannesburg, Robin spent his days at MM walking through the bush, measuring the cleared and rehabilitated areas using a GPS.

Martin, our long-term volunteer, is now confident enough to correctly identify many bird species and has overcome his fear of cheetahs to the extent that he will walk into the boma with us when we are feeding Danny, and he has no hesitation in going out on his own to check on Bubbles' whereabouts. His hyaena baiting has not yet produced any photos of our two collared hyaenas, but we will persevere.

We had a quick visit from Jeff from Melbourne, Australia, who is interested enough in big cats to give up his flourishing architectural practice and come out to Africa to see how he can help in re-wilding captive lions. He was here early in the month when we were unsure of Bubbles' hunting ability and were just walking into the bush with an impala leg as a supplementary feed, when Shawn, our ranger, spied a freshly-killed impala in the direction of Bubbles' signal, so the feeding was abandoned and we celebrated her kill instead.

At Lulu's Camp, birders Carol and Ian, from Johannesburg, spent a couple of nights searching in vain for pennant-winged nightjars to add to our species list, but their expert bird watching skills helped bring our total bird species count for December to 145. Janet and Neil, also from Johannesburg, camped at Lulu's during an extremely hot spell, just prior to the rain, and were pleased at the variety of game and birdlife to be seen from the cool of the camp. They were just too late with their camera to get photos of an African harrier hawk (gymnogene) ripping apart the nest of a pretty masked weaver in an effort to get to the chicks inside. When first-time African visitors Ellen and Gijs from Holland, arrived at Lulu's in their rented camper, Janet and Neil showed them how to spot the tiny bushbabies (lesser galagos) in the trees and helped them identify some of the birds.

Some of you will remember our first ecologist, Engela du Toit, who was with us until 2004. Engela came back to see us, this time as Mrs. Grobler, with her new husband Andre, and stayed at our self-catering camp, Madia Pala. Engela was able to see the successful results of the bush rehabilitation work she started, as well as some of the more recent innovations in the conservation effort, including meeting Danny, the cheetah.

After such a good start to the rainy season, we have a huge amount of work ahead of us in 2007, with the prospect of tracking our cheetah cubs and more involvement in the re-wilding of cheetahs to look forward to.