

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

JANUARY 2007

SEASONS

After such a promising start to the rainy season, not a drop of rain has fallen since New Year's Day. The temperature has been hovering around the mid to high 30's Celcius (90 to 100 degrees Fahrenheit), but we need a few really hot days (over 40 degrees) to get the rain started. The grass has already seeded and is drying off. The leaves on the raisin bushes are starting to curl shut to avoid losing too much moisture. The early, good rain resulted in a burst of re-growth on the bushes which had already been cut in our bush rehabilitation project. Since our workers returned from their Christmas holidays, they have been spraying the new shoots with herbicide and clearing the firebreaks along the fence lines in an effort to preserve the cleared areas.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Well, it took just over eight weeks, but we finally got our first glimpse of the wild cheetah cubs which were born on 28 November 2006. Keeping a close eye on their mother, Bubbles, we were able to pinpoint when the cubs left the nest and started moving with her, just a day before they were eight weeks old. We have had some wonderful sightings of Bubbles this month - as she walked across a track in front of a big bull giraffe, her stomach bloated from a kill; drinking at a waterhole; chasing impala across a clearing and into the bush where a strangled scream seemed to indicate that she had been successful in catching her prey; and giving our chef, Lucas, a fright when she walked through the main camp and past the kitchen door. But the best sighting of all was the day we saw the cubs for the first time. When our newest team member, Narinda, called on the radio one morning to say she had Bubbles and the cubs in sight, Peter, Jane and Shawn dropped everything and sped to meet her. There was Bubbles, relaxing under a bush with the fluffy cubs crawling over her and rolling and tumbling with each other. They were talking to each other and Bubbles in bird-like chirruping and purring noises. Occasionally, an inquisitive little face would pop up out of the long grass to stare at us. Then, after a few minutes, Bubbles stood up and walked off with one, two, three, four, FIVE little cubs following her in single file. What a thrill! None of us ever thought that, as a first-time mother with poor hunting skills, she would manage to raise five cubs. We realise that in the wild, the survival rate of cheetah cubs is very low, but we are hoping that our five little babies will confound the statistics. That night at the lodge, it was champagne all round to celebrate our first look at the cubs.

Just six days later Bubbles surprised us by killing an impala ewe right next to the A-frame building near our workshop, known as the "hunters' hut". Once again, Jane, Peter and Shawn hot-footed it to the spot, alerted by Narinda, at about 4 pm. As we watched from a distance of about 20 metres, Bubbles was still panting from her exertions at bringing down the antelope. She had torn open the skin of the impala's rump so that the cubs could feast on the meat. The babies were gnawing away as if they couldn't get enough. They had blood on their little faces and kept walking away to lean against a tree for a rest before climbing back over the others to get at the meat. Bubbles lay next to the impala and occasionally took a few big bites herself, indulgently letting the cubs crawl over her. They are quite dark, with lots of little spots and a white tip on their tails. They have long, greyish, fluffy manes covering their backs, right down to the base of their tail. This makes them very hard to see in the long grass, and one theory is that it makes them look like a honey-badger, a notoriously ferocious fighter, which is enough to scare off most other predators. It was marvellous to see Bubbles handling the whole thing so naturally. She seems somehow more mature and regal with the cubs - no longer the skinny little waif who

reduced one of our guests, Nancy from South Carolina, to tears of compassion. We had been so worried about her hunting ability, but her instincts seem to be taking over now with the cubs and she's doing everything right. Three cheers for Bubbles! More champagne at the lodge that night to celebrate. Bubbles and the cubs stayed at the kill all night, watched over by Narinda. It is generally accepted that in the wild cheetahs eat their fill after a kill, then leave quickly before bigger, stronger predators move in to take the carcass. Cheetahs are no match for the heavier carnivores like lions, spotted hyaenas and leopards and meekly give up their kills to avoid being injured in a fight. It is slightly worrying that Bubbles stayed so long with the kill. However, so far she's done everything right with the cubs instinctively, so perhaps she will know what to do if she ever gets into that situation.

Getting photos of the cubs is not easy, but we are adding photos to our website - www.makulumakete.com - as quickly as we can. Keep checking the website for updates, because the cubs are growing fast.

GAME VIEWING

There were several interesting and unusual daylight sightings this month, and all south of the river - another caracal, a honey-badger and three bat-eared foxes. We were especially pleased to see the bat-eared foxes again, such delicate and delightful little creatures whose enormous ears are designed to listen for the sound of insects underground.

Our camera trap, set up near the mountain at number 13 waterhole, has revealed all sorts of species, both at night time and during the day. Baboons, impala, a kudu bull and a waterbuck bull, as well as Bubbles the cheetah, were all photographed in daylight. We weren't expecting to see Bubbles there, nor were we expecting to get a night-time photo of a giraffe, but that's why checking the digital photos each day is such fun, just like a lucky-dip. We have several photos of our main target - brown hyaenas, but none yet of our two collared brownies, Oubaas and Anthony.

BIRDING

Obsessed as we have been by our cheetah this month, birding has taken second place, but we still managed to record 128 species in January. Because of the lack of rainfall in the catchment area, the Mogalakwena River has not flowed so far this season, affecting the variety of water birds we would expect to see at this time of year. However, a temporary dam, which filled with rain before Christmas, has been a magnet for birdlife. It has now been reduced to a mere puddle, but it was always worth having a look with the binoculars when driving past for good sightings of reed cormorants drying their wings, hamerkops on the water's edge, little grebes, blacksmith lapwings and a dead tree full of Eastern Red-footed (Amur) falcons. In the acacia trees surrounding the dam, we had an excellent, close-up view of another olivetree warbler, chortling away and picking fat caterpillars off the branches.

Flocks of white storks have been seen spiralling high in the sky above neighbouring farmlands where ploughing turns up all kinds of tasty treats. A lone black stork flew so low along the river over our heads that we almost had to duck to avoid it. The Wahlberg's eagle chick is now nearly ready to leave its rather small and tatty nest. It appears to have adult plumage and sits up on the edge of the nest as if it wants to take the plunge, but still manages to hide itself inside the nest if frightened.

There's been a huge amount of activity amongst the masked weavers - they have been madly weaving intricate nests of grass which hang, like Christmas decorations, over the swimming pools, river and waterholes. There has been fierce competition amongst the males, which are in their most gorgeous breeding plumage - bright golden yellow, with black heads. They hang upside down at the entrance to their nest, flapping their wings to attract the females, who inspect the nests and either accept the male or go elsewhere. At the swimming pool by the lodge there are two species - Southern Masked and Lesser Masked Weavers. The lesser masked have a pale eye and build slightly messier nests. The Southern Masked have red eyes and their nests are a work of art. Cooling off in the swimming pool, you could watch the antics of these little birds overhead for hours. There are red-headed weavers with nests under the eaves at the lodge and in the baobab tree near the workshop. The bigger, red-billed buffalo weavers have built a communal nest in the same baobab tree. The chicks can be heard cheeping noisily whenever an adult comes near.

LODGE AND CAMPS

Our newest staff member, Narinda, arrived with the rain on New Year's Day. Her title is "Conservator" and she is in charge of all conservation issues, from supervising the bush rehabilitation operation, to monitoring Bubbles and her cubs. She has a diploma in Nature Conservation from Tshwane University of Technology and comes to us from the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust where she worked for two years with cheetahs in captivity. The local farmers have dubbed her "the cheetah chick". She is finding working with cheetahs in the wild an exciting and rewarding experience, so much so that she sat up all night watching Bubbles and the cubs on their kill, then put in a regular day, starting work at 6 a.m. There's a photo of Narinda on our website.

Early in the month our volunteer, Martin, left to see more of South Africa, after spending three months at Makulu Makete. Martin had become a valuable and well-liked member of the team, with his electrician's skills, his sense of humour and easy-going temperament. He has vowed to come back to see the cubs. After living through all the highs and lows of Bubbles' pregnancy and the arrival of the cubs, he deserves to see those babies.

For the third year in succession, Kevin and Martella, from Johannesburg, spent a week camping at Lulu's Camp over the new year period. They spend their time walking through the bush and getting rid of the stress that has built up in their busy, city lives over the past months. They have identified several stapelia species, and this time they added another new species to our flora list - a hoodia, or carrion flower, (also known as a Ghaap). We will have to wait until the prickly little succulent plant flowers to positively identify the sub-species.

Frog expert, Julian, from Melbourne, Australia, and his three colleagues, spent a couple of days at our self-catering camp, Madia Pala. Julian was up most of the night in search of amphibians and helped us identify the cute little fat frog that runs across the paths near the lodge at night in the wet season. Because its legs are so thin and short, the bushveld rain frog can't jump like a regular frog, but scuttles instead.

Our first volunteer, Michel, from Holland, came back to see us for a quick visit, 18 months after his first stay with us. Africa made a big impact on Michel. He has lost 10kg in weight, he has started running marathons and he has a life-sized tattoo of the paw print of our first wild cheetah, Dottie, on his shoulder. During his time as a volunteer, Michel was lucky enough to be with us

when we trapped and collared a brown hyaena, and was able to hold a tranquillised young leopard in his arms. Unfortunately, his luck didn't hold this time, because the cheetah cubs appeared for the first time the day after he left. You'll just have to come back again, Michel!

It gave me (Jane), an enormous amount of pleasure today to up-date our species list, which has estimated numbers of the different mammal species to be found at Makulu Makete. I changed the number of cheetahs from 2 (Danny and Bubbles) to 7. We don't know what will happen from one day to the next, but after the unforgettable tragedy of Dottie and her cubs last year, it is now even more gratifying to follow the progress and development of supercat, Bubbles, and her family.