

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

FEBRUARY 2007

SEASONS

We finally got the rain we had been hoping for, but it came in a half-hour long downpour accompanied by gale-force winds, which tore the roof off the staff quarters and uprooted trees all over the reserve. At the height of the storm, we could see lightning striking the ground nearby, with simultaneous sky-splitting claps of thunder. Tree branches and weavers' nests flew past the windows, and water poured in through the roof of the lodge, despite recent repairs made by the thatchers. The dry river bed beneath the observation deck briefly turned into a raging torrent. The power pole bearing the transformer near Shawn's house was blown over, leaving us without power for more than 24 hours. It was dinner by candle-light and paraffin lamps once again. Our radio communications, satellite phone and internet system were struck by lightning, cutting us off from the outside world for a week. Over the next few days, seven fallen trees had to be removed from the electric fence. 60mm were recorded at the lodge and afterwards the bush looked fresh and washed clean of dust. The effect of the rain on the dry bush was worth the damage caused by the storm.

CHEETAH PROJECT

The delightful daily job of keeping an eye on our wild cheetah, Bubbles, and her five cubs, falls to our Conservator, Narinda, usually with Jane tagging along as an observer. After all, why should Narinda have all the fun? The cubs are just over thirteen weeks old and we started walking in on them in the bush about two weeks ago. Until that time, we had been observing them from the vehicle so as not to disturb them, and because we were unsure of Bubbles' reaction to us. Now, standing sometimes only five metres away from them as they tuck into a freshly-killed impala or bushbuck, we are getting wonderful insights into the life of a cheetah family. The cubs are growing taller and sturdier and more boisterous every day. Bubbles is the perfect mother - placid and patient, as another little spotted attacker creeps up on her from behind, then leaps on to her head, to chew her ear and cheeks. She responds with a soft mewing sound and a loving lick. They are still nursing from her, but are now almost completely reliant on meat, meaning Bubbles has to make a kill about every second day. They totally consume smaller antelope, such as young impala or adult bushbuck, leaving just the bottom half of the legs and some skin. Even the skulls are gnawed. We saw Bubbles eating the intestines of a young impala, as if it was spaghetti - one long ribbon. The bones of the adult impalas seem to be too big for the cheetahs to crush, so the skeleton is left, but picked clean. One day we stood for over an hour watching them and trying to work out the sex of the cubs. It wasn't easy, because they keep crawling over each other, to find a better position at the carcass. We think we saw four males and one female, but in the end, all those spots and tails were getting confusing and we might have seen three males and two females, but we still can't be sure.

One of the cubs is much braver than the others and keeps heading off on its own to explore. Perhaps we should call that one Christopher Columbus - off to discover the new world! We think he was probably responsible for leading two of his siblings astray. One morning Narinda tracked Bubbles to the fence dividing MM from our neighbour's property, and found three of the cubs on the wrong side of the fence. The electric fencing is designed to keep adult cheetahs inside, but the cubs are still so small that they can get through and, if they are lucky, they will even avoid being shocked. Narinda radioed for back-up reinforcements. Frans, who maintains the fences, Peter and Shawn arrived. Bubbles was pacing the fence, calling to the cubs and they were calling

back. Two of them came back through the fence, but the third ran off into the bush. It didn't want to go near the fence, so perhaps it had got a shock on the way through. The fence was turned off while Peter and Narinda went into next door and finally managed to herd the third cub back under the fence. Bubbles was sitting about an inch away from the fence, calling anxiously. We are hoping that this little episode might deter them from going through the fence again, but the bigger they get, the harder it will be for them to get through.

We are so proud of Bubbles that we have given her her own website - www.makulumakete.com/bubbles/. It follows her story from the beginning, when she was first captured as a wild cub, until the present, using lots of photographs. We are getting beautiful photos of the cubs now, and we will keep adding to the site every week. The photos tell the story much better than I can in words.

Danny, the father of the cubs, is still in the boma (enclosure), being hand fed. A new home has been identified for him in the Kalahari area, where he will be able to resume his life as a wild cheetah. Red-tape is the only thing holding up the move. Transport permits are required to move wild cheetahs from one province to another. As soon as the permits are granted, he will be off on a new adventure.

GAME VIEWING

Just when we were having so much fun with our brand new camera trap, it was stolen by a troop of baboons which inhabit Madia Pala mountain near the waterhole where the camera was set up. Eager to see what animals had visited the waterhole over night, Narinda went to check on the camera one morning, only to find that all that was left was the chewed strap, which held it in place on the tree. Four of us spent an hour or so scouring the area around the waterhole and some way up the mountain, but we found no trace of the missing camera. Whenever we visit that waterhole now and hear the baboons shouting and swearing at us from the mountain above, we are sure that somewhere up there is a baboon taking photos of us humans to amuse his friends.

With plenty of feed around at this time of year, we are seeing lots of baby animals, apart from the cheetah cubs. In a herd of wildebeest seen drinking near the hide the other day we saw several young calves, which are brown or fawn in colour compared with the dark grey adults. Female warthogs, with three or four littlies in tow, all with tails up, scurry to the waterholes to drink. There are many pale, fluffy-tailed babies with the troop of banded-mongoose that frequents the area around the lodge. These mongooses are so cheeky that they have been seen drinking from the dogs' water bowls next to Jane and Peter's house. Another very cute baby actually made its way inside the house the other night. Two baby squirrels were crawling along the rafters inside the thatched roof of the house, when one of them suddenly fell with a plop on to the coffee table in front of us. It looked very surprised to find itself face to face with a couple of humans, but did not appear to be injured by its fall. We put it outside on the thatched roof, hoping it would find its way back up to its nest. Zebras are very skittish and usually all that is seen of them is striped rumps, disappearing into the bush in a cloud of dust. Therefore, we were pleased to see four adult zebras drinking at the lodge waterhole one evening, with one very small foal. It was full of high spirits and kicked and bucked its way around the waterhole. In typical bad-tempered zebra fashion, its mother aimed a double-barrelled kick at one of the other zebras for good measure.

BIRDING

A pair of black crakes was spotted on the opposite bank of the river at Lulu's Camp. They had a single, lanky, fluffy all-black chick which they were shepherding through the reeds and tree roots at the river's edge. The two parent birds kept fending off the advances of a young, probably hungry, monitor lizard, by pecking at it and jumping on it with their wings outstretched. The lizard fought back, standing on its back legs and biting at the birds, but it appeared much too small to be a real threat to the chick.

While watching white storks wheeling and spiralling above the river, a bigger, heavier bird caught my eye, much higher up, gliding fast down the river. Having seen plenty of Lappet-faced vultures on our camping expeditions in Botswana, there was no mistaking this mighty bird, with its distinctive white markings underneath. It must have been on its way back to the desert in Botswana.

On our two most recent trips to Polokwane to buy supplies, we have seen a long-crested eagle a few kilometres outside the town, close to the main road, both going into the town and coming out again. This makes it four sightings of what we assume is the same bird, either on the power lines or in a tree beside the road. With its long tassel blowing in the wind, it's worth watching out for if you are driving from Polokwane to Dendron.

LODGE AND CAMPS

A visit by a group from the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre near Pretoria gave Deon Cilliers, the Manager of the Wild Cheetah Project, the chance to see his protegee, Bubbles, once more. After her rather unfortunate early life, it was extremely rewarding for Deon to see Bubbles adapting so well to her wild environment. Alan Strachan, who is in charge of the captive cheetah breeding programme at De Wildt took marvellous photos of Bubbles and the cubs. Although he sees cheetahs and cubs in captivity almost every day, he was enchanted to see these cheetahs "au naturel" and said it was the best viewing he's had of cheetah cubs in his fifteen years of involvement with De Wildt.

Peter has successfully drilled another borehole for Lulu's camp, ensuring a better water supply. This brings the total number of active boreholes on the reserve to eleven, most of the pumps powered by solar panels, to fill tanks and waterholes across the property. The water at each borehole tastes different, and we all have our favourite sources. It might be an interesting exercise to have a "blind tasting" of water produced at the different boreholes on MM!

Peter's favourite Land Rover, the 1961 model, had just had an engine overhaul and was running better than it had for many years, when disaster struck again. A big crack developed in the chassis, which we discovered when the doors did not close properly any more and the fan was hitting the radiator because the vehicle was sagging in the middle. Not wanting the Landy to break in two, and suffer the embarrassment of having to get two tow-trucks to take it away, it was loaded on to a truck and taken for another overhaul. We have been assured that it can be salvaged and will be back soon, as good as new. Meanwhile we are managing with the "new" Landy - it's a 1985 model. Unreliable as they might be, Land Rovers will always be the vehicle that opened up Africa, and they hold a sentimental place in all our hearts, even when they are being towed by a strong, dependable Toyota.