

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### MARCH 2007

#### SEASONS

It is starting to look like autumn, with golden leaves here and there on the mopane trees. Some of the baobab trees have lost their leaves already. We were convinced that we would get no more rain this season, when, totally unexpected at the end of the month, we had three days of cool, drizzly weather, which has revived the bush and freshened up everything. Just when Narinda had finished doing her grass surveys for the season, new green shoots have appeared, so it's back to the drawing-board for her. The leaves on the raisin bushes, which were already dry and curling closed before the rain, have opened again. It looks, after all, as if we will have enough grass and foliage to get the grazers and browsers through the winter with minimal supplementary feeding.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

Bubbles, our wild female cheetah, and her five cubs are being tracked every day. The cubs are nearly 18 weeks old and have lost much of their fluffy grey mantles. Their legs and bodies have become longer and leaner, so that they look more like cheetahs now than fluffy little kittens. When they are not devouring a kill or sleeping-off a big meal, they are active and playful, spending a lot of time harrasing their long-suffering mother. Despite our original concerns, Bubbles is proving to be an excellent mother and is providing well for her hungry and growing brood. Sadly, she has killed four baby kudus in the past couple of weeks. The mother kudu hides her small baby in long grass under a bush while she goes off to feed. The defenceless little kudus are easy prey for Bubbles. It is extremely distressing to hear a mother kudu barking, grunting and snorting with horror when she returns to find her baby has been killed and is being eaten by a family of cheetahs.

We have added more photos and text to Bubbles website, showing the development of the cubs over the past few weeks. Have a look at [www.makulumakete.com/bubbles/](http://www.makulumakete.com/bubbles/) for the most up-to-date information and some more delightful photos.

Meanwhile, Danny, the father of the cubs, had been in the enclosure (boma) waiting to be sent to a new home since mid-December when he inadvertently managed to capture himself. To properly manage the cheetah gene pool, cheetahs on small reserves like Makulu Makete have to be relocated to prevent in-breeding. The date for Danny's removal was getting close, so Narinda spent a couple of weeks training Danny to walk through a special, steel-mesh trap into a smaller enclosure where he was fed. This would make it easier to trap him when the time came for him to leave. On the appointed day, Deon Cilliers, from the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, arrived to take Danny away. Ropes were attached to the front and back gates on the trap, and Narinda enticed Danny through the trap with an impala leg. As he walked through, the back door of the trap was gently closed, using the rope. Nervous cat that he is, Danny seemed to suspect something was not right and tried to escape back through the trap. As soon as he was inside, the front door of the trap was closed and he was caught. While Danny went crazy in the trap, stamping his feet, hissing, growling and clawing, the enclosed travelling box was placed in front of the trap door. As soon as the trap door was opened, Danny ran into the safety of the dark travelling box, the box was closed up and he was loaded on to a trailer for his journey to his new home. Thanks to Narinda's careful preparation, the whole operation went like clockwork and took less than 10 minutes. (See photos of the operation on the Bush Diary page of our website [www.makulumakete.com](http://www.makulumakete.com)).

We had always thought that Danny was a very nervous cheetah and that he might feel more confident and relaxed if he was bonded with another male cheetah. Deon Cilliers agreed, and decided to give Danny a chance to bond with another cheetah before he went to his new home in the Kalahari. The bonding process involves putting two male cheetahs in an enclosure which is fenced down the middle so that they can see each other and gradually get used to one another. If things go well, the cheetahs will eventually lie next to each other on either side of the fence. Once they seem to have accepted each other, the gate is opened and they are allowed in together. The real test is whether they will feed together. If so, they are a successfully bonded pair. This process can take months, but we didn't want Danny to be cooped-up in another boma for more time than was necessary, so Deon decided to give it just two weeks before taking Danny off to his new home.

From Makulu Makete, Danny was taken to Shingwedzi, part of the De Wildt operation, near Warmbaths (now called Bela Bela). As Danny's travelling crate was being unloaded into the bonding boma, Danny caught sight of the male cheetah next door and started calling to him. As soon as the door of the crate was opened, Danny calmly walked out and went straight across to the fence separating him from the other cheetah. Within minutes the two cheetahs were licking one another through the fence. Deon says it is the most amazing thing he has seen - a process which can take months was reduced to just a few minutes. We hope that Danny and his new friend will be successfully bonded and sent off together to their new home. Danny is an excellent hunter, so his new "buddy" is a lucky cheetah, who should be able to rely on Danny to provide food for them both. We hope that Danny will feel more confident and relaxed with a buddy to keep him company.

## **BIRDING**

A pair of Verreaux's (black) eagles has been seen circling over Kremetartkop after an absence of several months. Perhaps this means that they will nest on the rocky ledge again this year.

We have recorded an exciting new species this month - crested guineafowl. Four individuals were spotted in a flock of the common helmeted guineafowl at number one waterhole, where Bubbles and her cubs were lying in wait for game. They have since been seen in several different locations. We would not expect to see crested guineafowl at Makulu Makete because their habitat is normally much denser forest. Let's hope the cubs don't practice their hunting skills on these few special birds.

Penny, from Hermanus in the Western Cape, won a prize of a couple of nights at MM at a birding fair some time ago and came to stay during the month. On the long drive from south to north, she was impressed by the vastness of the country and the continual changes in landscape and climate. Having never been in this part of South Africa before, she was thrilled to see so many "lifers" (first-time bird species). We would love to take up her invitation to visit her down by the ocean and watch the whales swimming past. MM is a long way from the nearest beach!

## **LODGE AND CAMPS**

Late this year, MM will be the location for a new project involving the release of captive-born cheetahs into the wild. The project is being sponsored by the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust and will be carried out by Masters student, Nkabeng Maruping (known to the rest of us as Bennie), from the University of Pretoria's Department of Wildlife Management, under the supervision of Professor Van Hoven. Bennie spent a couple of weeks at MM doing background research on habitats and getting to know the place in preparation for her studies next year. She will be assisted in her data collection by our Conservator, Narinda. We are

looking forward to having Bennie visit us again several times before she becomes a “permanent fixture” next year.

Aaron, from Animal Ark in Reno, Nevada, USA, joined us for a week at the lodge. Animal Ark is a sanctuary for animals which, for various reasons, cannot be released back into the wild (see [www.animalark.org](http://www.animalark.org)). It also hosts a couple of ambassador cheetahs which originated from De Wildt. With Jane out of action for most of the month, and Peter ferrying her to and from hospital in Polokwane several times, Aaron pitched in to help our maintenance team on fencing and pumps, as well as accompanying Narinda on her daily cheetah tracking and monitoring trips. One day Narinda and Aaron were so enthralled following Bubbles and the cubs through the bush on foot that they lost their sense of direction and could not find their way back to their vehicle. They had to radio for help. Peter found their vehicle on the road and blew the horn until they appeared out of the bush, very embarrassed. They had been less than 100 metres from the vehicle but, concentrating on following a meandering cheetah through the thick bush, they had totally lost their bearings. Aaron was also on hand to help with the capture and relocation of Danny. Such is his passion for Africa, we are sure that we have not seen the last of Aaron!

## VALE

Many of you who have stayed at Makulu Makete will have met Jonas, our foreman, who was always on call to fix all maintenance problems, with a huge smile. Very sadly, Jonas died at the beginning of March. It is no secret that HIV/AIDS is a huge social and cultural problem in South Africa, and Jonas was another of its victims. Unfortunately, until the government and authorities acknowledge and start tackling the problem in earnest, many, many more worthy people like Jonas are dying every day. The financial and emotional impact on their families is incalculable. We extend our sincere condolences to Sarah, Jonas’s wife, and the rest of his family.