

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

APRIL 2007

SEASONS

The bush is at its prettiest at the start of autumn. Long flaxen grass contrasts with the subdued green of the bushes and trees. Seringa trees provide splashes of yellow with their autumn foliage, while the mighty baobabs, now devoid of leaves, tower like steel girders above the surrounding bush. The days are balmy and the nights are clear and cool. The staff have switched to our winter schedule, starting work one hour later, at 7 a.m., the time when the monkeys sit in the tops of the trees, enjoying the first warming rays of the sun.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Our five wild cheetah cubs, now five months old, continue to thrive. We were concerned when we noticed skin irritations on three of the cubs. The red patches on their skin developed into sores as they licked them but the cubs' behaviour didn't change. They were just as active, playful and greedy as the other two cubs. Our Conservator, Narinda, checked with expert cheetah vet, Peter Caldwell in Pretoria, who advised that the sores were probably caused by ticks, not an uncommon problem with wild cheetahs. Thankfully, the skin irritations gradually subsided and there was no need for us to intervene. We had not worked out exactly how we would treat three wild cheetah cubs if the situation became critical. Our aim is to let the cheetahs grow up naturally, without interference by us.

As the cubs get bigger, Bubbles, their mother, must hunt and kill more often to feed her growing family. She seems to have discovered that baby kudus are, literally, "sitting ducks", and she has killed nine kudu calves that we know of over the past two months. Just the other day, Narinda was watching the cheetahs when the cubs, playing at a little distance from their mother, surprised a baby waterbuck lying hidden in the grass. The cubs spat and pounced at the calf, which got to its feet, and it was only then that our brave hunter, Bubbles, even noticed it. She immediately went in for the kill, with Narinda standing close by. The noise attracted the calf's mother and three more female waterbucks, which came charging out of the bush, scattering the cubs and almost flattening Narinda, but they were too late to rescue the little calf. A graphic photograph of Bubbles in the act of killing the calf will be posted on Bubbles' website soon (www.makulumakete.com/bubbles/)

Danny, the father of the cubs, has been flown to his new home in the Kalahari. Despite Danny's best efforts to bond with another male cheetah before he left, the other male wasn't interested, so Danny flew off alone. He was put in a boma (enclosure) on his arrival next door to his sexy new girlfriend called Storm. Storm will be released shortly and Danny will be released two weeks after her. Compared to Makulu Makete, at 4,500 hectares (11,000 acres), Danny's new home is gigantic - 50,000 hectares of Kalahari dune veld. However, we have no doubt that our Romeo, Danny, will soon track down Storm and start his romantic courtship routine, which was so successful with both Bubbles and, before her, Dottie, our first female wild cheetah.

GAME VIEWING

There have been two day-time sightings of a sub-adult leopard on the same side of the river as Lulu's camp. We estimate that probably three or four leopards use Makulu Makete as part of their range. Unlike cheetahs, leopards can climb the big trees which overhang the high electric fence that encloses Makulu Makete, and they come and go as they please. Sightings of leopards are rare, but their raspy call can sometimes be heard, particularly along the river. When Peter was up a ladder recently, adjusting a solar panel on a remote pump out in the

bush, he heard the unmistakable “sawing” cough of a leopard nearby, but, to Peter’s relief, the big cat didn’t show itself.

Another aardwolf was seen during a night drive. These unusual, nocturnal creatures look a bit like a small, striped hyaena, but instead of carrion, their diet consists mainly of termites. They spend their days asleep in burrows. Another burrowing, nocturnal visitor around the lodge is the porcupine. A large porcupine was responsible for destroying the vegetable garden so carefully looked after by our chef, Lucas. With his quills up and rattling as he walks, the porcupine looks formidable in the moonlight and, when foraging just outside the dogs’ enclosure at night, he drives our Jack Russell terrier crazy.

BIRDING

Lucky campers, Dirk and Grietha of Pretoria, hit the jackpot this month with a sighting of an African finfoot. The rare and secretive bird was seen on the river in the same location where our ranger, Shawn, spotted the last finfoot. The habitat along the Mogalakwena River is perfect for finfoot. There have been several sightings of a pair of kori bustards this month, and three crested guineafowl have been seen again at number 1. waterhole.

Narinda, our “cheetah chick”, and Jane, our would-be birder, made an interesting discovery when out tracking the cheetahs. Narinda, who spent two years working with captive cheetahs and cubs at the De Wildt Cheetah Centre, was sure she could hear a cub calling nearby. Jane could only hear the call of a black-headed oriole. In the end, Jane played a recording of the oriole’s call for Narinda. Just to prove the point, the bird in question flew in and sat on a tree to listen to the call. The two calls are almost identical, so birders should beware if they are in cheetah country. Don’t just tick off a black-headed oriole without making sure it’s not a cheetah cub calling its mother.

LODGE AND CAMPS

Peter and Jane spent most of April in Australia, visiting Jane’s family. Shawn and Narinda managed ably in their absence. Apart from Dirk and Grietha, the Muller family from Pretoria came back to Lulu’s for a second stay, this time with their German relatives. They were lucky enough to see the cheetahs three times during their stay, as they drove and hiked around the reserve. One German lady was so moved by the sight of Bubbles and the cubs that she burst into tears, just as Nancy, from Carolina, did when she first caught sight of Bubbles on her visit last year. Seeing a cheetah and cubs in the wild is a privilege which even the MM team does not take for granted, no matter how often we experience it.