

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

MAY 2007

SEASONS

Towards the end of the month, a blast of freezing Antarctic air brought a cold snap to the whole of South Africa. The news reports were full of frost-laden trees and frozen water pipes. It even reached us, up here in the warm north, and we had to exchange our shorts and sandals for jeans, warm socks and boots. Now warm, sunny days are followed by clear, cold nights. We sit around the open fire in the lodge and listen to the jackals howling out in the bush - perhaps they are complaining about the cold.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Bubbles, our wild female cheetah, gave us cause for concern early this month by not making a decent kill for seven days. She started to look very thin, but her five cubs, now six months old, did not lose too much condition. We assume she was able to kill small prey and, good mother that she is, she stood aside and let her babies eat their fill. During this time, she moved across the Mogalakwena River for the first time since the cubs were born. This gave us another reason to worry about her, because a leopard had been seen several times in that area and could be a threat to her. Not only that, but if she got too close to the fence she could be seen by passing traffic along the road, and become a temptation for an over-enthusiastic hunter, now that it is hunting season. Fortunately, she crossed back to the safer side of the reserve and has been successfully killing since. The cubs are getting bigger by the day, and she has to hunt often to feed herself and her family. She killed an almost fully-grown kudu cow just metres from the fence that runs along the river. When we found her on the kill, the cubs were tucking in greedily, their paws, faces and even the tail of one cub covered in blood. The next morning all that was left of the kudu were the stomach and intestines. The gnawed ribcage and a whole foreleg had been dragged away from the kill site, probably by brown hyaenas, which had also taken the rest of the carcass. The day after, Bubbles killed again - this time an impala ram, equipped with sharp horns, quite a dangerous animal for a cheetah to take on.

Using telemetry, we track Bubbles and the cubs each day. As we get closer to the cheetahs, but cannot yet see them, we listen for squirrels chattering, or guinea fowl screeching, which are good indications that the cheetahs are close by. We watch from just a few metres away as the cubs cuddle up to Bubbles, while she licks each one lovingly in turn, and we can hear the contented purring of five little engines. Bubbles has her own website, which is regularly updated with new photos - www.makulumakete.com/bubbles/.

GAME VIEWING

We have two more baby giraffes that have just appeared with their mothers. Perfect miniatures of their parents, the two little females are almost the same age and bring our giraffe population to 17 or 18. They rival the cheetah cubs in terms of cuteness, with their long eyelashes and pointy tufts of hair on the end of their horns. Still wary of humans, they peep out at us from behind a bush, with the adults browsing casually on the trees above them.

We've had two sightings of African wild cats this month. This small feline could almost be mistaken for a domestic tabby and, by coincidence, domestic cats are perhaps the greatest threat to this predator. With the expansion of the human population and its pets into habitats once reserved for wild cats, domestic cats are interbreeding with African wild cats. When Jane and Peter were visiting the Kalahari Gemsbok Transfrontier Park, which straddles the border between South Africa and Botswana, they saw several African wild cats that had been

collared. A research project was being carried out on the collared wild cats to determine, by DNA analysis, the effect of interbreeding with domestic cats from nearby villages. We are vigilant in keeping domestic cats out of Makulu Makete because of the risk of hybridization.

Birdwatchers sometimes have all the luck. Jane, with Callan and Deidre, from Birding Africa, were watching a grey heron on a permanent stretch of the Mogalakwena River when a head popped up out of the water nearby - a Cape clawless otter. These intriguing creatures are about a metre and a half in length and weigh as much as a medium-sized dog. This one kept diving under the water and surfacing some distance away, looking around and then diving again. It remained in the water, so we didn't get an opportunity to see it on land. We often see empty freshwater mussel shells along the river, which constitute a good part of the otters' diet.

There have been a couple of animal-related incidents this month which could only happen in the wilds of Africa. Frans, our staff member in charge of maintaining the electric fence, put his army surplus leather work boots outside his room one night. To his embarrassment, and to the merriment of the rest of the staff, one of his boots was eaten by a roving porcupine in the night. Now Frans must, literally, "hop" onto his motorbike to do his fence patrols! Also during the month, Peter was trying to fix an elusive power problem in the lodge. One of the electrical circuits kept tripping, and Peter tracked it down to our computer. The computer runs our satellite telephone and internet connection, so it was urgent that he identify the cause of the power failure. When he inspected the back of the computer, he found a gecko's head sticking out of the casing around the fan. Somehow the gecko had got into the computer and as it was getting out, the fan came on, squashing the gecko and closing down our communication network! Once the dead gecko was carefully removed from the fan, the computer burst back into life.

BIRDING

All the summer migrant bird species have departed, leaving behind the old faithfuls. We have not spotted the crested guinea fowl this month, despite our best efforts to scan every flock of helmeted guinea fowl that we come across, and they must number in the thousands.

Callan Cohen, of Birding Africa (www.birdingafrica.com), added a new species to our bird list when he visited this month. The Bushveld Pipit is a small, inconspicuous, bird that is often overlooked because it is not easy to see, but despite its typical lbj (little brown job) appearance or perhaps because of it, it is sought after by birders who want to add it to their lists but don't get the opportunity to see it. Non-birders find it hilarious that birders can get excited over a little bird like the Bushveld Pipit, but we are pleased to be able to add it to our species list.

A much prettier, but much easier to see bird, is the white-throated robin chat, one of which has taken up residence outside Jane and Peter's house. A messy conglomeration of terminalia, raisin bush and the graphically-named "snot berry" bush, provides a wonderful refuge for the robin, which hops busily amongst the dead leaves on the ground and flits from branch to branch, whistling softly. It is a pretty bird - black back and head with white eyebrows, white wing bars, a white throat and belly, and softly rufous feathers below. It shares the bush with blue waxbills, black-faced waxbills, long-billed crombecs, bulbuls, go-away birds, firefinches, green-backed ptylias (Melba finches) and familiar chats. The comparatively drab-looking familiar chats are indeed very familiar. They often fly into the house through the open top half of the door, alighting on chair-backs and leaving droppings behind before flying out of the door again. Watching all these birds through the kitchen window above the sink makes washing up a pleasure.

VELD REHABILITATION

Because of the drought conditions throughout Limpopo Province this year and the consequent loss of crops and livestock, farmin organisations in our area are having serious discussions with the government for funding through the National Disaster Centre. By contrast, our veld (bush) is in such good condition that, for the first time in six years, we will not need to remove excess game this year. Our continued veld rehabilitation work has improved the carrying capacity of the bush and the introduction of cheetahs has steadily reduced the number of grazers and browsers to the point where there is a better balance of predator and prey species. With her cubs growing quickly and needing more food, Bubbles is killing two or three times a week. While Danny, the father of the cubs, was being kept in the boma (enclosure) for three months until he was relocated to his new home, we had to shoot impalas to feed him. All this adds up to a reduction in the number of animals to be supported. Our passive capture boma, which was completed last year, with the aim of capturing animals for removal to other reserves, will not be needed this season.

LODGE AND PEOPLE

As part of a special “Wildlife - Behind the Scenes” tour, Dr. Peter Brothers, of Brothers Safaris, (www.brotherssafaris.com) brought a group of cheetah lovers to Makulu Makete. They had already spent a couple of days at De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre near Pretoria, where they saw cheetahs being immobilised for veterinary procedures, and watched a “cheetah run”. They were keen to see the next step in the rehabilitation process for wild cheetahs, which is the successful reintroduction to the wild of cheetahs like Bubbles. With Narinda, they tracked Bubbles and her cubs and had the thrill of watching cheetahs in the wild from just a few metres away. Michael, from Melbourne, Australia, is a keen wildlife photographer but found his telephoto lens was not needed at such close quarters. He took some wonderful, candid shots of the cubs and their mother. Sandra, from Gympie in Queensland, Australia, was half way through a once-in-a-lifetime six-week tour of Africa, including Namibia, Uganda, Botswana and Zambia, as well as South Africa. She spotted a pair of bushbabies in a thorn tree at the lodge, cuddled up together for the daylight hours. Max and Margaret, from Rotorua in New Zealand were fascinated by the whole bush experience. Although Max is blind, he joined the rest of the group for target practice with an immobilising dart gun, after listening to the demonstration by Peter Brothers. All the group had their photos taken next to their darts in the target, just as proud of their “trophies” as big game hunters.

Our former ecologist, Rox, is now the very happy mother of a little girl - Leila Rose - who came in at a healthy 3.7 kilos. Rox is in her element with her new baby, and we wish her and her husband, Morne, congratulations on the new addition to the Brummer family.