

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### JUNE 2007

#### SEASONS

Down in the south of the country it has been snowing. Even Johannesburg was covered in a white blanket of snow. Up here in the far north, the nights are cold but the days are sunny, warm and pleasant. It's the middle of the dry season and foliage is getting scarcer and scarcer for the browsing animals, but there is plenty of dry grass left for the grazers. At the end of the month the Department of Water Affairs released water from the big Glen Alpine dam, upstream on the Mogalakwena River, to help the farmers with their irrigation. After filling all the private dams between Makulu Makete and the Glen Alpine, the water finally reached us and, although it has no real effect on the bush at this time of the year, the animals seemed to be as excited about the flowing water as we were. We drove down to the drift to see the unusual spectacle of the river flowing past, and on the way surprised herds of impalas and waterbuck, plenty of kudus and bushbucks, warthogs and big troops of baboons and monkeys, all drawn to the muddy flow.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

We have a new, honorary member of the MM team. Luke Strugnell has been appointed by the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project as Field Officer for a huge area in Limpopo Province and is based with us at Makulu Makete. Having majored in Zoology at Rhodes University, his job is to handle any problems that farmers have in this area with cheetahs, to advise them on ways to manage wild cheetah issues, and to place the Anatolian shepherd dogs with farmers to protect their stock from predators. He covers many, many miles every day and his accounts of his day's activities are eagerly awaited by the rest of us at the dinner table each evening.

MM has been chosen to help the Department of Nature Conservation in its efforts to protect wild predators. Early in the month we received our first "inmate" in our temporary holding facility, which was built to house wild cheetahs, leopards or hyaenas confiscated or removed from farms in this area by Department officials. Our first guest was a wild cheetah, that came from Swartwater, about an hour's drive away. A farmer had been losing cattle to a leopard and had applied for a permit to catch the leopard. Instead of a leopard, the cheetah turned up in the trap. It had not been killing cattle but could be responsible for killing smaller stock, like goats. So the farmer rang Nature Conservation and asked them to take the cheetah away. The cheetah was brought to MM that evening and fed and housed by us for a couple of weeks until a new location was found for it. This type of co-operation between farmers and the Department of Nature Conservation is gratifying. There are many instances where farmers take the law into their own hands and dispose of problem animals, especially if there is not an instant response to their call for help, as was the case with this particular cheetah.

Our own beloved cheetah, Bubbles, and her cubs continue to delight us and cause us constant anxiety. In the third week of the month, having not made a substantial kill for many days, Bubbles led her brood across the dry Mogalakwena River to the part of the reserve which is surrounded by public roads. She seems to enjoy watching the passing traffic, some of which at this time of the year are hunting vehicles, carrying excited, armed, foreign hunters. Narinda and guest, Bronwen, kept a careful eye on the cheetahs, trying to keep a balance between monitoring the cheetahs as closely as possible and not interfering with Bubbles' hunting expeditions. As the cheetahs got thinner and thinner, we contemplated intervention - "To feed or not to feed: that is the question". We want Bubbles to be able to survive without any help from us, but we don't want to put her or the cubs at risk. Bronwen was just as involved with these difficult decisions as the rest of the team. Finally, on the 7th month birthday of the

cubs, Bubbles made a celebratory kill, just a day after Bronwen left us. Narinda found them on an impala kill that morning and they finished the whole carcass off in about two and a half hours, leaving the feet, skin, guts and not much else. Compare this to the first time we saw Bubbles and the cubs on a kill, when the cubs were just over two months old. It took them thirty six hours before they had stripped the carcass clean. With the cubs growing so fast, Bubbles is now working hard to keep up with their teenage appetites.

Bubbles stayed on the wrong side of the river, but quite a distance from the road, which was one consolation to us, until we got word that the Department of Water Affairs had let water out of the big dam upstream and it would probably reach us that night. That meant we had to take out the electric fences across the normally dry river so they would not get washed away. However, until the water actually arrived, the cheetahs could get out into the neighbouring properties if they happened to wander along the river. If the water did not reach us before nightfall, there was an added problem - it was nearly full moon, when the cheetahs would be more likely to wander around at night. Rather nail-biting stuff, but now that they had killed, their bellies were bloated and they should just lie around for a day or so. Once the water did come down, we wouldn't be able to get across the drift to track Bubbles for a few days. All these issues are constantly on our minds, particularly Narinda's. Happily, the cheetahs stayed put and the water came down to close off the escape hole in the electric fence. Unable to drive through the drift to track the cheetahs, Narinda was forced to drive around the public roads until the water subsided - a distance of more than 40 km each way. To get an idea of how big and active the cubs are, have a look at [www.makulumakete.com/bubbles/](http://www.makulumakete.com/bubbles/) for the latest photos.

## GAME VIEWING

Narinda spotted a honey-badger this month while out tracking the cheetahs. The Afrikaans word for honey-badger is "ratel" (pronounced RAH TEL, with a rolling "r"). Somehow "ratel" seems a much more appropriate name for this fearless little animal which roams around with its pigeon-toed, sailor's gait, ready to tackle anything that comes in its path. Manufacturers give their toughest products (lawn-mowers, motorbikes etc.) the name "Ratel" to convey the feeling of indestructability.

Having had our new camera stolen a couple of months ago by a troop of baboons near the mountain, we ordered another one. This time Peter constructed a baboon-proof box for the camera, with a chain to attach it to the trees. Surely this would foil the baboon thieves. Narinda set up the camera trap near number 9. waterhole, next to the mountain, and got some good photos of brown hyaenas and a group of timid eland. We decided to move the camera trap to number 8. waterhole after Peter and guests Bronwen, Alan and Marion, saw a fresh leopard paw-print next to the waterhole as they set off on a climb up Kremetartkop. Luke gave us a tip about attracting leopards to a camera trap. Evidently the experts use perfume, sprayed near the camera, to draw in the leopard. Musky-scented perfume seems to work best. Next to the perfume, a comb is left so that when the leopard comes to sniff the perfume, some of its hairs get caught in the comb and they are used for DNA analysis. This beauty-salon approach to leopard trapping might sound a bit far-fetched, but we thought it was worth a try. Jane donated some expensive French perfume and together with Bronwen and Shawn we left our scent marks in view of the camera. Next morning we checked the photos - there were lots of antelopes, guinea fowl, a banded mongoose, and what looked like a bat-eared fox. No leopard came in to the perfume, but a big brown hyaena had a good sniff of it while it was hanging around the waterhole.

Several days later, after Bronwen had left, Narinda checked the camera trap again. As well as waterbuck and jackal, there were a few really good photos of a big, male aardvark, which had

been at the waterhole at 1.30 a.m. That was exciting enough, but at 8.30 a.m. in broad daylight, she got the big prize - a beautiful leopard drinking! Whether or not the perfume had anything to do with it, we don't know, but we hope to get more photos of this magnificent animal.

## BIRDING

Callan Cohen, of Birding Africa ([www.birdingafrica.com](http://www.birdingafrica.com)), brought a group of English birders to Makulu Makete as part of a special "owl tour". By the time they got to us, they had seen most of the owls on their list, including the rare Pel's Fishing Owl. They wanted to get a better look at a Verreaux's Eagle Owl and wanted to add the Pearl-spotted Owlet. Verreaux's Eagle Owls regularly breed along the Mogalakwena River, using discarded hamerkops' nests, and we had watched a pair of owls raise a chick only last year. However, this time the big owls, with their signature pink eyelids, were nowhere to be found. The Pearl-spotted owlets were much more co-operative and the group got excellent views of them, especially after Callan imitated the little owl's call and encouraged one to sit in the open nearby. On one of our drives we found a "bird party" - made up of one or two birds of several different species, all feeding together - barred warbler, brubru, long-billed crombec, brown-crowned tchagra, cape penduline tit, burnt necked eramomela, crimson breasted shrike, marico sunbird, marico flycatcher, chestnut-vented titbabbler, as well as hornbills, drongos and francolins. Birding with an expert, like Callan, is such a stimulating experience. He recognises every bird call, every flurry of feathers deep in the bush, and every speck flying high overhead. I can never hope to equal his knowledge, but it spurs me on to try and identify even those pesky lbj's that confound me every time!

## LODGE AND PEOPLE

Bronwen, from Cape Town, is a serious cheetah-lover and arrived at a good time to indulge her passion. She found that the shower in her tent doubled as a hide (blind) where she could stand and watch three elegant kudu ladies nibbling the trees outside. Bronwen spent as much time watching Bubbles as possible. She just couldn't get enough of the cheetah family. When Luke went off in search of a collared cheetah that had wandered into South African territory from Botswana, Bronwen, Jane and Narinda, were keen to tag along for the day. The cheetah had been seen close to the road, in an area where cheetahs are regarded by most farmers as vermin. We were hoping to be able to trap the cheetah and remove it to a safer location, but after several hours of searching, we returned empty handed. Sadly, a couple of days later, the cheetah was found shot dead, a tragedy that upset us all.

Peggy and Marion, from Johannesburg, are both artists, who have been to MM before. This time they brought Marion's husband, Alan, with them for a few days of R&R, away from his busy office. They were so busy walking the baobab trail, climbing Kremetartkop and going on game drives, that neither Peggy nor Marion had a chance to get out their paints. Bubbles and the cubs put on a wonderful show for them one morning. The cubs were in playful mode, tumbling over and chasing each other, pouncing and stalking, while Bubbles watched over them, probably wondering where their next meal would come from.

Our ranger, Shawn, is spending several weeks at the DeWildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre outside Pretoria, where he is learning to handle the "ambassador" cheetahs. The ambassadors are used by the De Wildt education team when they visit schools and community centres to spread the word about conservation, in general, and cheetah conservation in particular. With his exceptional people-skills, wildlife knowledge and experience, and his natural charm, it is hoped that Shawn will be able to help with the education effort. We just hope he isn't freezing his butt off down there in chilly Pretoria!