

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### JULY 2007

#### SEASONS

A smoky haze is hanging over Makulu Makete - the result of huge forest fires which are raging to the south, and which have destroyed thousands of hectares of pine plantations. Here, the sun shines through an eerie fog of smoke, and goes down in a ball of fiery crimson at dusk. Last night the full moon rose as a big, shimmering, orange disk behind the haze. The veld (bush) is tinder-dry and only a few evergreen shepherd's trees brighten the monotone grey-brown of winter. Kudus blend into the scenery with their curly horns that look like tree branches, and their white-striped bodies that camouflage them so well.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

The biggest drama so far with the cheetah cubs occurred at the beginning of July. Somehow all five cubs managed to get through the supposedly cheetah-proof electric fence and into our neighbour's property. We suspected that the cubs had got out through a small hole under the fence dug by some other animal in a sandy, dry riverbed. One of our staff noticed the cheetahs wandering around next to our neighbour's pig pen early one morning and raised the alarm. Fortunately, Bubbles, the mother of the seven-month old cubs, was still on our side of the fence, pacing along the fenceline, desperately calling to her naughty cubs who were gambolling happily in unexplored territory. The electric fence was turned off while Peter tried to herd the cubs back along the other side of the fence towards the hole. Meanwhile, we wired an impala leg to a tree stump on our side of the hole and tried to persuade Bubbles to head in that direction, without letting her get out through the hole. Bubbles eventually spotted the impala leg and started eating it, calling to the cubs at the same time. The cubs, tumbling and playing, passed the hole several times without coming through, but finally one cub wriggled through the hole, then two, three, four, five cubs. It took us a total of four hours to coax the cubs back. Rounding up wild cheetahs is quite a different matter from rounding up domestic cattle or sheep and we felt very lucky that we had saved the situation. Imagine what might have happened if Bubbles had got through the fence with the cubs! Luckily, her initial three-month training period in the "boma" (one-hectare enclosure), surrounded by an electric fence identical to the perimeter fence, had taught her to respect the fence, unlike her cubs, which were able to dodge under the live trip wire through the hole in the sand.

We were still jittery from this escape attempt when, at the end of the month, Narinda found the cheetahs on a kill, within about five metres of another fence. Drag marks on the ground showed how the impala ewe had been killed next to the fence, then towed away amongst fallen orange and brown mopane leaves to the spot where the cheetahs, their coats merging perfectly with the fallen autumn-coloured leaves, were intent on crunching through the impala's bones and tearing at the meat. As we stood just a few metres from them, they occasionally raised their heads to look at us without interest, their faces covered in fresh blood. Before she left the scene, as the sun was setting, Narinda tested the electric fence and found, to her dismay, that instead of reading 8,000 volts, the current was only 1,600 volts - enough to give a small shock, but not enough for a big jolt to keep the cheetahs away from the fence. With the previous incident still fresh in our minds, Narinda kept watch by torchlight over the cheetahs, while Peter, Frans and Jim, a visitor from the US, tracked down the problem. During the struggle for the kill, the impala and Bubbles had twisted two of the electrified wires around some metal stakes, which shorted out the fence. Once the wires were back in their correct position, the current was restored and we could all go back to the lodge for a late dinner. The question we are all asking ourselves is: did Bubbles drive the impala into the fence deliberately to help her with her kill, or was it accidental? We have seen lions

using fences in the Makgadikgadi National Park in Botswana to trap zebras so that the lions can more easily bring down their prey. Will Bubbles repeat this tactic in the future?

Although we did not have the time, nor were we in the right frame of mind, to take any photos of the cubs' escape, we have added several new and beautiful photos to Bubbles' website ([www.makulumakete.com/bubbles/](http://www.makulumakete.com/bubbles/)). It's worth a look.

In the June Bush Diary, we told how our temporary holding facility was used to house a wild cheetah that was awaiting relocation. This month, we provided refuge for a small, female leopard, which had been trapped by a farmer because it was killing his stock. The leopard stayed with us until a new home could be found for it. What a magnificent animal is the leopard, but how terrifying to look into those big, golden eyes when the leopard flattens its ears and roars with fury, showing its huge canine teeth. Even though the animal was safely "behind bars", its anger and strength was palpable and blood-curdling. Jane and guests Karen, Pippa and Charlie, accompanied Luke, from the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, when he released the leopard at a property on the Limpopo River, about 80 kilometres from MM. It was a perfect spot for a leopard, next to the dry river, strewn with rocks and boulders right across to the other side, which is Botswana. Small groups of impala wandered past, and the branches of big trees along the banks would make comfortable resting places for the leopard to drape herself after a meal. For safety, we all stayed inside the vehicle, with the windows wound up, while Luke opened the cage using a pulley and rope attached to the vehicle. It was most gratifying to watch the leopard creep from the far end of her travelling cage and jump out into freedom on a property where the owner welcomes her. We wish her good hunting!

## GAME VIEWING

Guests this month have been lucky enough to see some unusual animals, including several sightings of African wild cats. An unexpected thrill was a quick glimpse of an armadillo disappearing into its burrow just on sunset. We think this could be the armadillo that we caught on our camera trap at nearby number 8. waterhole. There were more photos of an armadillo, this time at number 1. waterhole, which was probably a different individual. Another caracal was seen and a couple of bat-eared foxes. We had not seen these delightful little creatures for some time and were worried that black-backed jackals might have driven them away, so this sighting by Narinda was especially pleasing.

One rather less agreeable customer is a bushpig, which has been raiding the rubbish bins at the lodge on a nightly basis. Bushpigs look nothing like warthogs, but resemble wild boars. They will eat anything, and this one has discovered that the lodge left-overs make a tasty midnight snack. We have seen it several times just outside Peter and Jane's house, face to face through the wire fence with their irate Jack Russell terrier, Muscles. Another adult bushpig, with two babies, was photographed at no. 1 waterhole the other night. We have added a new feature to our website - the best of our camera trap photos. Click on the camera trap link on our home page at [www.makulumakete.com](http://www.makulumakete.com) for photos of brown hyenas, armadillo, leopard, caracal, honey badgers and more.

## BIRDING

At this dry time of the year, it is rewarding to sit at a waterhole for an hour or so and watch the birdlife that comes in. Number 9. waterhole is near the base of Madia Pala Mountain and the shepherd's trees dotted around the waterhole give good cover for birds. As I drove in, a big troop of baboons went shrieking off into the bush away from me and the waterhole. I pulled up fairly close to the waterhole, which was pumping well because the solar panel was in full sun. Immediately, wave after wave of little birds starting flying down to the waterhole from the shepherd's trees. I sat there for about three quarters of an hour and recorded twenty

species of birds - canaries, waxbills, barbets, finches, sparrows, doves, buntings, chats, bulbuls, guineafowl, go-away birds, hornbills and drongos. Intent on the waterhole, out of the corner of my eye I noticed a pair of klipspringer (tiny mountain antelope) coming through the bush. They were suspicious of the car and never actually had a drink, but they stayed the whole time I was there, jumping here and there and making a strange “beep” alarm call. They are the loveliest little animals with thick, olive-green coloured hair, high, platform-soled hoofs, and huge, black and white-striped ears. A baby vervet monkey also came down for a drink. He kept standing up and craning his neck this way and that to get a good look at me. He wasn't sure about me, but he did stay long enough to get a drink.

Having tried, without success, to locate a Verreaux's Eagle Owl last month for Birding Africa's special owl tour, last week we heard the owls grunting to each other in the very tree that the “owl-aphiles” stood under looking for the big birds. This is typical of birding, and game viewing generally. Birders always get the best views of big cats, while people who are interested only in cheetahs get to see the rarest birds. That's what makes every day so exciting here - you never know what you might see.

## LODGE AND PEOPLE

The Rogers group, from London and the United States, took over the lodge for a family reunion. Their visit coincided with wedding anniversaries for both couples - Jim and Lori from Wisconsin, and Rob and Karen from London. We celebrated with a meal of roast warthog, cooked slowly over coals on an open fire in the lapa outside the lodge. 12-year old Charlie, and his brother, Thomas, aged 16, wrote this in our guest book: “Thanks for the great week. I enjoyed everything, including the staff. The food was delicious and (chef) Lucas seemed to be enjoying himself. The animals were fantastic, especially the cheetahs. Releasing the leopard was fantastic and good to know their population is growing.” - Charlie. “A week full of excitement and good food. Not only did we spot cheetahs and leopards, but we got to walk up closer to a wild animal than I would ever have imagined. The driving lessons given by Shawn will also help in future life.” - Thomas. (We doubt that, in future life, Thomas will ever have to drive a more lumbering, perverse vehicle than our old game drive Land Rover, which Shawn handles with such ease.)

Our former ecologist, Rox, came to see us during the month with her entire family, also from England, and her new baby, Leila. Rox had been in charge of Bubbles since the cheetah's arrival at MM, supervised her release and monitored Bubbles' early stages here, but she had never seen the cubs. We were just as proud to show her our cubs, as Rox was to show us her baby - a very happy day for us all.

Shawn, our ranger, spent a couple of weeks socialising with the ambassador cheetahs at the De Wildt Cheetah Centre outside Pretoria and returned unscathed. He was full of praise for De Wildt's newest apprentice ambassador cheetah, called Shakespeare, who was born at MM in February 2006. Shawn and Shakespeare bonded immediately. Perhaps Shakespeare was aware that Shawn knew his mother Dottie, and his father, Danny. Although Dottie died tragically before her cubs were old enough to look after themselves, Danny's story has a happier ending. We got the following report from his new home, a property called Glen Lyon, in the Karoo-Kalahari area of South Africa:

“Danny is now living in a 8000 hectare part of Glen Lyon, with Storm the female cheetah. He is monitored by the game guards every second day, but he is still nervous and starts to move away as soon as he hears them approach, they seldom see him and they track him with the radio signal, but he keeps on moving. They also think he occasionally met up with Storm and she caught springbuck which they share.”