

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### AUGUST 2007

#### SEASONS

The days are getting longer and hotter, and already many of the acacia thorn trees are covered with pale, lemon-coloured blossoms. Perfume from the blossoms fills the air. Happy sunbirds, perched atop the acacia trees, bury their long, curved bills in the flowers before flitting to the next tree, their iridescent green and blue plumage flashing in the sun. A couple of hopeful gemsbok (oryx) lie under the evergreen shepherd's trees at the lodge waterhole, waiting for their daily rations of lucerne hay, which we are putting out at several places to supplement the animals at this dry time of year.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

After the dramas of the previous month, the cheetahs provided us with more excitement this month when Bubbles and her five cubs, then eight months old and nearly as big as their mother, appeared outside the dogs' pen at Jane and Peter's house to look at Muscles, the Jack Russell terrier - a bite-sized snack for a hungry young cheetah. In typical Jack Russell fashion, Muscles flew at the fence, barking hysterically, ready to take on the first cub. Instead of being frightened by this behaviour, the cubs became more interested and started pushing at the fence. After several minutes, during which Muscles jet-propelled himself around his enclosure with the cheetahs running along beside him, outside the fence, Muscles realised he was out-numbered and made a tactical retreat to the safety of Jane's arms. He was put inside the house for safe-keeping, but immediately ran into the bedroom and up on to the bed to get a better look at the cheetahs through the window. Not knowing what glass is, the cheetahs came within inches of the window, looking in at Jane and Muscles inside. When it looked as if Bubbles was going to launch herself through the glass window, Narinda distracted her by throwing stones into the bush, while Jane closed the curtains. Eventually the cheetahs lost interest, and wandered off, leaving Muscles shaking with rage and indignation. The whole episode took about half an hour and it was the most incredible feeling to have the cheetahs almost inside our house. Peter and Narinda got some excellent photos, from inside and outside, of one of the cubs spitting at Jane as she stood inside the bedroom. We have posted these photos on Bubbles' website [www.makulumakete.com/bubbles/](http://www.makulumakete.com/bubbles/) along with some more good shots taken during the month. Keep scrolling down through the earlier photos till you get to the latest shots.

Later in the month one of our neighbours phoned early one morning to report that three cheetahs had been seen on the tar road, outside our fenceline, trying to get into the property. We sprang into action, believing that three of the cubs must have somehow got through the electric fence. The five guests who were staying with us at the time - Noel and Heather, John, Ann and Bill, jumped into the Land Rover with Shawn and headed for the fence, at least a 20 minute drive away. Peter went ahead in his Land Cruiser, Narinda and Luke picked up an impala leg at the cool room and followed in another vehicle. Jane brought up the rear in the VW. We thought we would need as many vehicles as possible to block off the road from passing traffic. By the time Jane got to the gate, Peter had radioed that all five cubs and their mother were safely inside the fence. There was no hole under the fence, nor any cheetah tracks outside the fence, so it appeared that it had been a false alarm. The question is - were there three wild cheetahs trying to get in or had the passer-by mistaken the power lines along the inside of the property as the fence line? We were very grateful that our neighbour had been good enough to tell us. Many of the nearby farmers are strongly anti-cheetah and call Peter "that strange American who breeds leopards". By leopards, they mean cheetahs. Peter is known as an American because he spent twenty years there, even though he is fourteenth

generation South African, was born in Cape Town and speaks Afrikaans as fluently as our neighbours!

Our temporary holding facility for the Department of Nature Conservation and the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre, was used briefly this month to house an African White-backed Vulture, which had been injured when it flew into power lines. It stayed with us overnight on its way to a vet in Pretoria, where, sadly, it had to be put down because its injuries were beyond repair.

We had another overnight guest this month with a much happier story. This was Delta, a seven-week old Anatolian shepherd puppy which was being placed with a farmer in the area to guard his stock against predators. De Wildt provides the Anatolians free of charge to farmers who are willing to train the dogs to protect their goats and sheep. Delta is one of the first puppies to be trialled with cattle, and was chosen because she is such a big puppy for her breed. She will probably grow to about 60 kilograms. She was a delightful guest - placid and friendly, with a black muzzle, thick fawn-coloured coat and her huge paws covered with long-white socks. We were sorry to see her leave, but Luke assures us she is doing well at her new home, where she is being habituated with calves.

## GAME VIEWING

A dead impala ewe was found one morning near the river, and it looked as if it had been killed by a caracal. The impala had hardly been touched, indicating that the killer had been disturbed and run off. We decided to set a trap, using the dead impala as bait, to see whether the killer would return. A humane trap was placed where the impala had been killed, covered with branches, with the impala inside. A camera trap was set up to record the action. Next morning at 5.15 a.m., we all set off from the lodge in the cold and dark to see what the trap had caught. When we got there, we could see that the trap door was down, meaning something was inside. Would it be a caracal, a leopard, or a brown hyaena perhaps? No, it was a rather irate-looking honey badger which must have stumbled on the carcass as it was out foraging. We released the honey badger and set the trap up again. Next morning, more bleary-eyed than the previous day, we arrived at the trap to find another honey badger inside. Was it the same honey badger as the day before? We weren't sure, but we released it and left the trap open. The carcass was eventually finished off by a brown hyaena, so we still don't know what killed the impala.

Although technically not occurring during the month of August, we conducted a game count on the first of September. An aerial game-count is the most accurate way to estimate the numbers of the various species, and thereby determine whether intervention is required to achieve the proper carrying capacity of the reserve. A four-seater helicopter took more than four hours to criss-cross the property, just above tree-level. For the first foray, Narinda and Luke went up with the pilot, covering the north and east section of the reserve. They were relieved after a couple of hours by Shawn and Jane, and the remaining area was scanned. As we buzzed along overhead, groups of animals ran away from the approaching chopper. Zebras galloped off in single-file, wildebeest thundered along, zig-zagging through the bush. The impalas were the most difficult to see - huddling under trees and dashing in all directions. We flew back and forth, between the mountain and the river, calling out through our microphones when we spotted anything below - "One jackal to the right!" "Big herd of waterbuck ahead!" "Eland bull underneath!" "Four pigs (warthogs) to the left!" The pilot would dip and turn, hovering over a big group of animals to give us time to count them, then flip around and off we would go again.

The bush is so dry and leafless at the moment that it is the best time to do a game count. A bird's eye view of the reserve gives you a completely different perspective. We zoomed through the saddle between the two peaks of Kremetartkop, and skimmed over the branches of the biggest baobab. The largest concentrations of animals were along the river and near the waterholes. Interestingly, Shawn and Jane saw no giraffes or gemsbok, which were all recorded on the other side of the property by Luke and Narinda, but the majority of the waterbuck and the wildebeest were seen by Shawn and Jane. Narinda and Luke even spotted a couple of porcupines and an African wild cat from the air. With some species, such as kudu, impala and waterbuck, we were able to distinguish males from females because only the males have horns. Others, such as wildebeest and gemsbok all have horns and zebras are impossible to sex from above. The results of the count were fairly close to our predictions, except for the number of waterbuck. We have far too many of this species and will probably remove some to restore a better balance. The numbers of the various species were as follows:

Impala 311 (109 rams, 202 ewes)  
Kudu 134 (38 bulls, 96 cows)  
Eland 6 (2 bulls, 4 cows)  
Wildebeest 40  
Waterbuck 125 (39 bulls, 86 cows)  
Gemsbok 47  
Zebra 26  
Giraffe 14  
Warthogs 89

## **BIRDING**

There's plenty of nesting activity amongst the birdlife at this time of the year. A male red-headed weaver, sporting his brilliant breeding plumage, has been busily building a nest over the swimming pool at the lodge. This is the first time a red-headed weaver has chosen this location. In the past they have built their nests under the eaves of the lodge, leaving the swimming pool to the masked weavers. Our industrious little friend has been working hard on his nest and at one time had four potential mates sitting on the branch above him, ready to inspect the nest when he flew off to collect another stalk of grass.

A pair of Familiar Chats has built a beautiful little nest in the seat pocket of our old Land Rover. Without realising the nest was there, Shawn took the Land Rover away from its normal parking spot for a couple of days. Heather, our guest from Australia, noticed the nest and identified it as a Familiar Chat's nest. Sure enough, when the Land Rover was parked back in its usual place, the little birds came back and two, bright blue eggs were laid in the nest. The eggs should be due to hatch any day now. The Chats put on their most aggressive faces and make a lot of noise whenever we approach to check the nest. It looks as if the Land Rover will be stationary until the chicks leave the nest.

We suspected there was a chick in the African Hawk Eagle's nest, high up in a baobab tree, but the nest is now so big, after several years of use, that we could see nothing sitting in it. Just recently, however, an adult was seen sitting on the edge of the nest with a large chick. We got a good look at the nest from the helicopter as we flew over for the game count, and it appears that the chick is almost ready to leave the nest.

An African black duck was seen paddling in the river shallows along the reeds at the drift, with a few fluffy ducklings in tow.

Other interesting sightings this month included a Secretary Bird (for the second month in a row) and the return of the Red-eyed Bulbuls, to join the more common Dark-capped bulbuls. We first recorded the red-eyed bulbuls in July last year, but they had disappeared by October. I wonder how long they will stay with us this year.

## LODGE AND CAMPS

We had our first visitors from La Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean. Eight years ago, Muriel and Alain left their jobs and their life in Paris and arrived in La Reunion, with just a suitcase each. In a complete departure from their previous office-based jobs, they established a delicatessen and restaurant and adapted to the tropical island lifestyle. They were charming guests, infusing the lodge with French flair, and enthusiastic about their cheetah sightings. Muriel was especially pleased to watch Bubbles and the cubs on a kill, while Alain watched France defeat England at rugby on television with Peter.

Second-time visitors, Noel and Heather, from Warburton in Victoria, Australia, took the long route, via Bangkok, to get to Makulu Makete. They finally arrived, after a delayed flight, and took it easy for the first few days. Muriel, whose English was exceptional, had difficulty with Noel and Heather's Australian accents, but had mastered the unconventional vowel-sounds by the time she left. Keen birders, with several visits to Africa under their belts, Heather and Noel enjoyed renewing their acquaintance with some of their old avian friends - Crimson-breasted shrike, African Fish Eagle, Orange-breasted bush-shrike and other species which are common at Makulu Makete. When they last visited us, in 2003, there were no cheetahs at MM.

The traditional Australian sport of "Pommy Bashing" came into its own when three visitors from Pretoria arrived during Noel's stay. Bill and John were both British, though Bill's ancestry is Irish. John, having been born in England, was fair game for Noel, but John was equal to the task and after a few hours, a truce was called, red wine was drunk and Anglo-colonial relations were restored. John and his wife Ann, (who is Norwegian), are sponsors of the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre, and came to MM specifically to see cheetahs in the wild. They also enjoyed walking in the bush without the threat of "The Big Five" (lions, elephants, rhino, buffalo and leopard). We all celebrated Bill's birthday during his stay, with champagne and a chocolate cake baked by our chef, Lucas. The cake said "Happy 28th Birthday". According to Ann, Bill has celebrated his 28th birthday for the last several years!