

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

SEPTEMBER 2007

SEASONS

After steadily increasing through the month, the daytime temperature reached the mid-thirties Celsius (mid-nineties Fahrenheit) towards the end of September. But, just as the swimming pool was starting to look more and more inviting, black clouds gathered, thunder rumbled and lightning struck. For three days, intermittent rain and electrical storms flooded local roads and caused constant power black-outs. It was back to candle-lit dinners and open fires. At the lodge we measured 50mm (two inches) of rain, which was totally unexpected and a very welcome early break in the long dry season. Already tufts of green grass are starting to appear and we hope that the rain will encourage the first leaves to sprout on the trees and provide sustenance for the hungry browsers, such as the kudu.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Our five wild cheetah cubs are now ten months old and, just like human teenagers, they need plenty to eat. Their mother, Bubbles, has to kill every day or two to satisfy them. Having decimated the population of young kudu over the past few months, Bubbles has turned her attention to bushbucks to feed her family. The six cheetahs can consume an adult bushbuck within an hour, leaving very little for scavengers like jackals and brown hyenas. Defying the conventional view that cheetahs need open grassland and savannah areas to chase down their prey, Bubbles makes her kills in very different habitats all over the reserve. One bushbuck kill took place in thick, tall reeds in the middle of the dry river bed of the Mogalakwena River, and in the past couple of days Bubbles has killed male bushbucks along the fenceline further downstream. After tracking Bubbles for 18 kilometres one day, Jane eventually found the cheetah in the middle of the staff quarters, just one kilometre from the lodge, where Bubbles and one of the cubs had just pulled down an impala ewe. The staff members were standing around, watching with interest and wondering how they were going to get to their rooms past six cheetahs gnawing at an impala carcass. Bubbles appears to have injured her left front paw and has been limping badly after pulling down prey. We think that the cubs have just started to help her hunt, but whether this is natural progress, or whether it is because she is handicapped by her sore paw, we don't know. We have watched the cubs follow Bubbles along a road, then all dash into the bush with her when they spotted a bushbuck. Less than one minute later, when we caught up with the cheetahs, they were already chewing on the bushbuck ram. We estimated that by the time we got to the cheetahs, they would not have had time to suffocate the antelope. Perhaps it was not dead before they started on their meal, but one cub was gripping the bushbuck's neck in a strangle-hold for some time. On a less gruesome note, the cheetahs have been seen several times stretched out, relaxing on the lawn and admiring the scenery at Lulu's camp - what a beautiful sight. Bubbles' website will be updated again soon - www.makulumakete.com/bubbles/

On 27 September another female cheetah was delivered to Makulu Makete from the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre. This cheetah, whose name is Motsomi, will be the subject of a Master's thesis by Nkabeng Maruping (or Bennie for short), a student at Pretoria University. With the help of Narinda, our conservator, Bennie will be studying how this female cheetah and two male cheetahs, all of which were born in captivity, adapt to the wild when released at Makulu Makete. Motsomi (which means "hunter") will be kept in a special boma (enclosure) for three months before being released, and the males will be released a month later. She has a big learning curve ahead of her, having been fed a twice-daily diet of dry cat food and minced meat for most of her life. Her first challenge is to learn how to eat large, fur-covered joints of wild game. We were glad that Narinda was on hand to give the cheetah her first feed

at MM. Having worked closely with captive-born cheetahs at De Wildt, Narinda calmly stood her ground as Motsomi charged towards her, body turned sideways, tail under, snarling and spitting. Narinda expertly kept the cheetah at a safe distance with a long stick, directing the cheetah to where she wanted it before she put down its bowl of food, while we all watched in admiration at her bravery. We are wondering whether Bubbles and the cubs will realise there is a new cheetah on the block and come to visit her. As luck would have it, the day after Motsomi arrived was the day we lost power because of the electrical storms. We had to set up a generator next to the new cheetah's boma, to make sure the electric fence which surrounds her was continuously working.

GAME VIEWING

The electric fence at the cheetah boma is an exact copy of the perimeter fence that encloses the entire reserve and makes it cheetah-proof. Unfortunately, the fence has its disadvantages, an example of which was the death this month of a 3.4 metre (just over eleven feet long) crocodile, which got itself tangled up in a corner of the fence on its way from a pool in the river to a dam on the other side of the fence. The electric shocks from the fence killed the big croc. It took five men to pull the crocodile off the fence and drag its body to the road. We were all sad to see such a magnificent creature killed for no reason and hope that such an incident will not happen again.

After the aerial game count conducted in August, we decided to remove some of the bigger herbivores to prevent overgrazing and conserve the health of the veld (bush). Another helicopter was called in with a game capture crew and over two days they took off 52 waterbuck, 12 gemsbok (oryx), 19 wildebeest and one kudu bull, bringing the numbers back to more manageable levels. Since the game count, a new baby giraffe has been spotted peeping over its mother's rump as Narinda drove by.

BIRDING

In the last bush diary we mentioned the familiar chats that had nested in the seat pocket of the old Land Rover. The two eggs hatched out on cue, and within fourteen days the babies, which were so helpless when they first hatched out, had developed proper feathers and left the nest. Their parents kept looking after them until they could fend for themselves, feeding them worms and fiercely chattering and defending them as they hopped about in the grass and bushes nearby.

The African hawk eagle chick, which had been seen for some time, sitting up on the edge of its huge nest in a baobab tree, must have plucked up the courage to take the plunge and fly off into the big, wide world. The nest now appears to be empty, but we hope the adults will hatch out another youngster next year.

We added three new species to our birding list this month, none of which are particularly rare but for some reason we had never recorded them at MM before. An African jacana has been spotted several times, elegantly picking its way across sandbanks in the Mogalakwena River. Another kingfisher species - the striped kingfisher, gave us a very good sighting this month. In the past, we might have assumed this bird was the very common brown-hooded kingfisher but at close range it is a much cleaner-looking bird, with a black and red beak, not an all-red beak like the brown-hooded. The striped kingfisher brings the number of kingfisher species at MM to eight. The third new species was the red-headed finch, seen feeding on the ground with cut-throat finches and queleas.

Gabar goshawks are fairly common at MM, but this month we had an excellent view of the unusual melanistic (black) form. This is not the first time we have spotted melanistic gabar goshawks at MM but it is exciting, nevertheless.

LODGE

There was an “Australian invasion” of guests during September. Jane’s family - brother Scott, his wife Ann, daughters Vanessa and Nicole, arrived from Melbourne for their first visit to MM, bringing with them Dottie, Jane’s mother, who had stayed here 18 months previously and met her namesake, Dottie the cheetah. By coincidence another Melbourne couple, Brett and Michele, accompanied by vet, Peter Brothers, were here at the same time. Brett and Michele were on one of Peter Brothers’ special “behind the scenes” tours, and had already been to the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre where they witnessed Motsomi being sedated and having a radio collar fitted. They were present here at MM when the cheetah emerged from her travelling box for her first look at her new home. Brett and Michele have sponsored Motsomi so it was especially thrilling for them to see her first steps towards becoming a “wild” cheetah. Peter Brothers was able to give us his professional opinion on the injury to Bubbles’ front leg when they all went tracking Bubbles and the cubs with Narinda.

After hearing about MM from Jane for so long, Scott and his family finally got to see at first hand the camps, waterholes, people, birds and mammals. They were just as excited as everyone else to see the cheetahs on a bushbuck kill, or the tiny bushbabies leaping around the lodge at sunset. They climbed Kremetartkop and Madia Pala Mountain, walked the baobab trail, went on game drives in the open Land Rovers and marvelled at the diversity of colourful birdlife around the lodge. During the three days of stormy weather, they experienced “real” Africa, without power and unable to pump water. Scott and Peter spent a whole day out in the rain fixing shorts on the electric fence, close to where Bubbles and her cubs were waiting out the storm in the bush. The Aussies mystified the local South African contingent with talk of “AFL” (Australian Rules Football), Vegemite and surfing, but the locals retaliated valiantly with rugby, biltong and braais.

Over the past few months, Peter and Jane have made a major decision about the operations of Makulu Makete. Peter will be 75 in February next year and, while we always enjoy having guests at the lodge, we want more time to travel ourselves, particularly to do more camping trips in remote areas of Botswana and Namibia. So from the beginning of October we are closing down the lodge and converting it into our own home. Our camping ground, Lulu’s, will remain in operation, but our self-catering camp, Madia Pala will be used to house Bennie, the research student, Luke from the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, and other visiting De Wildt staff. Our website www.makulumakete.com will soon be up-dated and revamped to reflect the changes.

Closing the lodge to guests also means that we are losing some of our staff. Rhima and Janet, our housekeeping team, have already started new jobs together at a lodge at the top of the Soutpansberg mountain. Lucas, our chef, has been snapped up by a nearby lodge, whose lucky guests are in for some wonderful meals. Shawn, our ranger and manager, is setting out to find his fortune in the Eastern Cape. Shawn has been with us for six years, and has become a member of the family. We will miss his loyalty, his good nature, his dependability and his cheeky sense of humour. We know he will do well and make many friends wherever he goes. Thank you for everything, Shawn - Makulu Makete won’t be the same without you.