

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### OCTOBER 2007

#### SEASONS

Thanks to an early start to the rainy season, with 80mm of rain recorded so far, the bush has been transformed from drab grey to luxuriant green. It's wonderful to see the kudus, which were so hungry just a couple of weeks ago, happily nibbling on the new leaves. All the wildlife seems more lively, but the thick foliage makes it more difficult to see them. Harbingers of summer, some reptiles and insects have made their first appearances. A harmless spotted bush snake had to be escorted out of the kitchen; unable to get traction on the shiny, waxed floor. Out in the veld, the leopard tortoises are moving about again after their hibernation. Several species of dung beetles are hard at work, gathering dung into balls and rolling their prizes across the sand. Less welcome are the scorpions, hiding under rocks during the day or found drowned in the swimming pool early in the morning. The calls of the newly-arrived summer migrant bird species add to the year-round sounds of the bush.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

As usual, our wild cheetah, Bubbles, and her five cubs, which will celebrate their first birthday on 28 November, have provided us with plenty of excitement and interest. Narinda, our conservator, tracks the cheetah family every day and keeps records of their behaviour, their location and their kills. One morning, with Bubbles' radio collar signal coming in loud and strong, Narinda stopped in the bush when she heard a large animal, probably an antelope, snorting. Suddenly, she was confronted with a group of nervous zebras, dashing about in panic but apparently trying to defend something from the cheetahs, perhaps a zebra foal. Taking shelter behind a tree in case the zebras stampeded, Narinda waited until they ran off in a cloud of dust. All went quiet, except for the strong signal beeping from the telemetry equipment, so Narinda took a few steps forward through the bush, expecting to find the cheetahs on a zebra kill. Instead, she was suddenly surrounded by the six cheetahs, which were working as a team to try and take down an eland calf, standing next to its mother. The female eland managed to keep the cheetahs at bay until they were too tired and flopped down on the ground, at which point the eland and her calf departed, unharmed. Meanwhile, Narinda had dived into a raisin bush for protection, from where she witnessed the scene. Although she didn't actually see them do so, it seems that the zebras were trying to help protect the eland calf - an amazing example of co-operation between two species.

Later in the month, we had an urgent phone call from our neighbour, to say that Bubbles was in their property, outside their house, which is very close to our fenceline, near Lulu's Camp. Narinda took off in her bakkie (pick-up), followed by Peter in his Land Cruiser, and Luke in his bakkie, with a warthog head for bait. Half an hour later, using a barrier of six vehicles, with people stationed in the gaps between the vehicles to block off any escape routes, Narinda lured Bubbles back into MM through the big gates, by dragging the warthog head on a rope. Looking at the fence where Bubbles went through, it is probable that she was chasing something fast towards the fence and couldn't stop when the prey veered away. Bubbles must have hit the fence at full speed and shot right through, leaving some of her hair on the wires. She must have been surprised, even shocked (by the 8,000 volt electric fence), to find herself on the other side. Luckily the cubs did not follow their mother, but were relaxing under a tree with fat stomachs and blood on their faces, digesting their latest meal.

Two captive-bred male cheetahs were delivered to MM on 24 October from the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre, to take part in a special research project. They are being housed in a boma (enclosure) next to the female cheetah, Motsomi, who arrived in September. The

two males, who have provisionally been named Scruff and Bones, are a bonded pair, and when released, they should hunt together and share their prey. The cheetahs will stay in their bomas for three months before being released into the 4,500 hectare reserve to learn to fend for themselves. In the meantime, Narinda has her hands full, feeding and training the three cheetahs and implementing their pre-release routine, as well as her daily tracking of Bubbles.

Early in the month we looked after a female wild cheetah and her three cubs, which had been caught during a game capture exercise elsewhere. Luke and Narinda went to pick up the cheetahs to find them inside a game capture truck. The cubs were probably a month or two older than Bubbles' cubs, and quite a bit bigger. Between them, Narinda and Luke managed to get the mother cheetah into a carrying crate and the three cubs into a mesh cage together. They arrived at MM after 8 p.m., in the dark. With car headlights lighting the scene, the crate and cage were manhandled into position and the cheetahs were persuaded to go into our temporary holding facility, where they stayed for a few days, before being relocated to De Wildt. These cheetahs were quite calm throughout the whole operation and were stunningly beautiful animals, even, dare I say it, rivalling our Bubbles and her cubs.

The next temporary guests at our holding facility were three, 10-week old Anatolian shepherd puppies, supplied by the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, and all destined for farmers in the area to protect their flocks from predators. The three puppies were big and fluffy with black faces and friendly dispositions. The recipients of one puppy were our former ecologist, Rox, and her husband Morne, whose farm is located next to a big nature reserve, and whose goats are targeted by leopards. Jane accompanied Luke when he delivered the second puppy, called Ghia, to a big cattle stud farm about an hour's drive from MM. It was heart-wrenching to leave the puppy on his own in a big pen with just goats and kids for company, but Ghia explored his new home happily and licked the faces of the tiny kids, which all came to greet him with curiosity. Ghia will grow up with the goats, going off into the bush with them every day and returning at night to the pen. He will have to protect his flock against jackals and caracals, which are the major predators at that particular property.

## GAME VIEWING

The biggest cat reported this month was a female leopard, seen one night after dinner by Luke, as he returned to his camp. A leopard-lover, Luke watched her for some time as she stalked something in the dark. Frans, our fencing expert, saw two caracals while on his rounds on his motor bike. Jane and Peter had a good sighting of an African wild cat, which sat for several minutes watching them through the bush. A dead brown hyaena was found during the month, wounds on its neck indicating that it had been killed in a fight with another brown hyaena. We were able to determine that the newest baby giraffe is another female, giving us three females and one male born over the past two years. Our biggest bull eland, known as Ernie, after South African golfing hero, Ernie Els, is usually reclusive, but we got a good look at him recently. He is a magnificent specimen - muscles bulging, and probably weighing in at the top-weight for elands, the biggest of all antelopes, around 900 kilos. At the other end of the scale, three tiny baby bushbabies fell, plop, on to the floor of the lodge one night from the very top of the thatched roof. Their worried mother looked down from the thatch and leapt, in the dark, with absolute precision, to the tip of the horn of the eland trophy (head) hanging on the wall below. Jane checked the babies, which appeared to be unharmed by their mammoth fall. The mother bushbaby collected her babies, one by one, and carried them in her mouth back up to their nest.

## BIRDING

The start of summer is a busy time for the birdlife at Makulu Makete. The early summer migrants have started to come in. The urgent, three note call of the red-chested cuckoo (“Piet my vrou”), can be heard all along the river, and the melancholy “I’m so sad” call of the male black cuckoo has begun for the summer. Other new arrivals are the Eurasian (European) bee-eater, the violet-backed starling, and the Wahlberg’s eagle, seen sitting next to last season’s nest.

Other species have donned their breeding finery. The Southern masked weavers make a colourful spectacle as they busily weave their intricate nests over the swimming pool at the lodge, flashing golden and black as they flit through the trees, and filling the pool with cast-off building material. Their fiery, red-headed weaver cousins are already nesting in shabbier-looking nests under the thatched eaves. Smart-looking black-backed puffbacks are displaying their white powder-puff feathers. The red-crested korhaan, a small bustard, has the most hilarious display. Here and there across the reserve the males can be seen flying up vertically from the bush after much clicking and whistling. When they reach a certain height above the trees, they turn upside down, feet upwards, fold their wings and plummet towards earth, as if they have been shot. Just before they hit the ground they right themselves. Evidently female korhaans find this extremely funny manoeuvre hard to resist.

The familiar chats, which raised a couple of chicks in a nest in the seat pocket of our old 1960s Land Rover, were so chuffed with their success that they immediately went up-market and built another nest, this time under the canopy of our “new”, 1980’s Landy. Three eggs were laid, but the new Landy is an operational vehicle and the nest was abandoned after the Landy had to be driven away. Undeterred, the same pair of chats, or perhaps another pair, have built a nest in the rolled-up canvas window cover on tent number 6. Lined with what looks like soft, golden hair from our big watch dog, Sharp, the nest holds three eggs. The parent bird fiercely chatters whenever you get too close to the nest, but in this case, there’s no danger of the tent being driven away with the nest.

## LULU’S CAMP AND LODGE

Campers from as far away as Holland and as close as Polokwane returned to Lulu’s for a second stay. Ben and Didi, from Ermelo in the Netherlands, on another annual visit to southern Africa, came back to Lulu’s on their way to Kruger Park. Last time they stayed with us, they met our first wild cheetah, Dottie, and this time they had the pleasure of following Bubbles and her cubs. Always adventurous, Ben and Didi had helped capture a pair of rhinos before they got to Lulu’s. Eileen, a resident of Polokwane, our nearest big town and 200 km away, wanted to escape the grind of her busy job and spent the weekend at Lulu’s. She was able to walk from her tent with Narinda to see Bubbles and her cubs just after Bubbles’ escape attempt. Eileen hiked for miles and soaked up the serenity of the bush.

Back at the lodge, a bedroom and bathroom addition is being built for Jane and Peter so that they can move into the lodge as their own home. Except from the thatched roof of the new addition, which has been done by professionals, the planning, brickwork, plumbing and electrical wiring are being done in-house by Peter with the help of our staff, Joseph, Lucky, Samuel and Johannes. Jane will be ready with the paint-brush once the walls are finished. There’s a lovely view of Madia Pala mountain from the window of the new room - a fine sight to wake up to each morning.