

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

NOVEMBER 2007

SEASONS

A few more showers and the odd cloudburst during the month have kept the bush looking green and lush. The less-used roads around the reserve are becoming overgrown with grass and weeds so that it is often hard to find where to turn off into the more remote areas. In the late afternoon, thick storm clouds gather, making for spectacular golden and purple sunsets over Madia Pala Mountain. Herds of heavily-pregnant impala ewes stand placidly in the shade of bushes, each herd watched over by a lord-and-master ram.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Our five wild cheetah cubs celebrated their first birthday on 28 November. They even received a congratulatory email from Bronwen in the Cape, who is one of their biggest fans. Our admiration for Bubbles, their mother, continues to grow. Ever since we first saw the cubs, at eight weeks of age, we have expected that they would not all survive, and yet here they are, almost as big as their mother, and one year old. When observing the cheetahs, we measure the size of their stomachs on a scale of 1 to 5, from very hungry to well-fed. When the cubs were very small, an impala or bushbuck ewe was enough for them to gorge themselves until they were all bloated, with stomachs at least 5 on the scale, and Bubbles looking equally fat. These days a single impala is not enough to fill the big cubs and they very rarely look more than a 3 on the scale. It is getting more and more difficult for Narinda, our conservator, to find the remains of kills because they are eaten so quickly and virtually nothing is left.

One morning, as we all sat in the lodge having breakfast, a baby bushbuck came hurtling out of the long grass behind the swimming pool and took off through the camp. Behind it, peering through the bush, was one of the cubs. Leaving our tea and toast, we walked down to the observation deck to see the whole cheetah family relaxing by the waterhole. The one adventurous cub returned to its brothers and sisters and the cheetahs stayed at the waterhole for a few hours. A family of warthogs arrived soon after, but instead of running away at the sight of the big cats, they inched closer and closer to get a good look, trotting back and forth with their tails held up like warning flags. The cheetahs yawned widely and were not at all interested in taking on the warthogs.

Apart from her twice-daily monitoring of Bubbles and the cubs, Narinda is now responsible for the three captive-bred cheetahs which are resident in the boma (enclosure), awaiting their release to learn to survive by themselves in the wild. Being captive-born, the two males (Bones and Scruff) and the female (Motsomi) are bolder and used to being hand-fed, but they are not tame. Narinda had a hair-raising experience with Motsomi when the cheetah managed to jump out of the enclosure, somehow missing the electrified wires, when she saw the vehicle arriving with her food. Motsomi grabbed the impala carcass off the bakkie (pick-up truck) and tried to drag it away, outside the boma. Narinda hung on to the horns of the dead male impala and pulled against the weight of the impala and the 40 kilogram, muscle-bound cheetah. The tug-of-war continued, with Narinda gaining one metre towards the gate of the boma, only to be dragged back two metres by the cheetah. Exhausted from the struggle, Narinda called for help on the radio. Two of our workers, Joseph and Lucky responded and opened the gate. Narinda chased Motsomi off the carcass so that it could be dragged inside the boma but the cheetah did not follow the carcass as Narinda had expected. Instead, Narinda had to act as live bait - running to catch Motsomi's attention, then teasing her to follow.

Finally, after about five minutes of teasing, Motsomi went into the boma, spied the carcass and settled down to eat. With shaking knees, Narinda left her to it.

GAME VIEWING

Our camera trap has photographed another leopard, this time at Number 10 waterhole. It is not the big male that we caught on camera a few months ago, but perhaps the female that was spotted one night by Luke more recently.

A group of eleven giraffes, including the two newest babies, visited the waterhole at the lodge. The record for the number of giraffes seen together at the waterhole stands at thirteen, but although the eleven didn't break the record, they were still an impressive sight.

The animals are not the only interesting things in the veld. We were excited to find a flowering stapelia plant at the main camp and sent a photo of it to regular camping guests and stapelia buffs, Kevin and Martella, to identify. Kevin's reply was: "It looks like *Stapelia kwebensis*. I have found two others at MM. It is an enormous specimen (many stems I mean). You don't often see them with that many stems. The flowers don't have a very pleasant smell (which is why the stapeliads are known as carrion flowers!)."

BIRDING

The summer migrant birds are still arriving. The jaunty little red-backed shrikes can be seen at the top of bushes looking through their black, Zorro masks. Our favourite summer visitor, the woodland kingfisher, makes his presence felt with a glorious, lilting song and a flash of turquoise wings as he flits through the trees.

A pair of lovely African paradise flycatchers has constructed a beautiful little cup-shaped nest, low on a branch, right outside the door of the farmhouse. There is much human traffic past the nest, but the little birds are fearless and swoop back and forth making angry "zweet, zweet" sounds to defend the nest. These birds are ridiculously pretty, with bright blue eye-rings, dark head and chestnut-coloured back and tail. The breeding males have long, chestnut tail feathers, longer than their bodies, which float behind them as they fly.

Narinda's adventure with the cheetah and the impala carcass drew the attention of a flock of vultures, which circled above the boma. We do not often see vultures at MM, so this was quite a thrill. About 30 African white-backed vultures and five Cape vultures stayed around for a couple of days to make the most of the free meal.

Narinda was lucky enough to see an African finfoot at the drift in the river. While the habitat along the river is perfect for this shy and reclusive bird, it is so timid that we rarely see it. The finfoot was a "lifer" (first time) for Narinda - congratulations!

SHAWN

The saddest news we have ever had to report is the death in a car accident of our beloved ranger, Shawn. Since we closed our lodge to guests in October, Shawn had found a new job at Hlosi Game Lodge, in the Eastern Cape. He immediately made a good impression on his new employers and was enjoying his new environment, new friends and workmates. We were distraught to receive the news that he had been killed on 24 November while driving home late at night. Many of you have met Shawn. He was one of our family, and we often joked that he had two mothers - his real mother, Maria, and his "other mother", Jane, who was so proud of him that she borrowed him as her own son. He was part of the fabric of MM, and we all have our favourite Shawn anecdotes and sayings. Our sorrow is indescribable. Wherever he went, Shawn made friends. We have had calls and emails of sympathy from all

over the world. Shawn was brought back to Makulu Makete where his mother and father and members of his family from Zimbabwe had gathered. He will be taken to his home-town, Chiredzi, for burial. For all of us this is a loss from which we will never recover.