

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### DECEMBER 2007

#### SEASONS

December has been a cool and wet month, with day after day of gentle rain, giving us a season total of 320 mm so far, which is more than the annual average, and the wet season should continue until about March. The veld (bush) looks absolutely perfect - lush, green and thick - and is buzzing with wildlife, insects and birds. Pretty wildflowers are popping up everywhere amongst the grass and weeds; little terrapins use the puddles on the tracks as swimming pools; the white, frothy nests of the foam nest frogs hang over temporary waterholes; and everywhere there are birds, swooping, flapping, whistling, chuckling, perching, soaring and filling the bush with their songs. The word "fecund" springs to mind when driving around the reserve and marvelling at the activity amongst all the creatures which live there.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

Our Christmas Day ended on a unique note. Peter and Jane were returning to the lodge after a short game drive when they came across our wild cheetah, Bubbles, stalking a young kudu close to the lodge. Bubbles took off at a run, but missed her prey and ended up at the waterhole below the lodge, where she had a drink, then started calling her cubs to join her in that weak, squeaky voice which sounds more like a bird than a big cat. Soon the five cubs appeared out of the bush in front of the lodge, and then all six cheetahs, Bubbles almost indistinguishable from her big cubs, lay at the waterhole while Jane, Peter and Narinda watched from the deck above, having our Christmas drinks and waiting for Christmas dinner to cook. We wondered how many other people in the world were having a similar Christmas experience.

The three captive-bred cheetahs which are being held in a boma (enclosure) prior to their release into the wild, are being fed on impala carcasses, which we shoot on the reserve. The cheetahs are getting used to this new diet in preparation for hunting themselves. One unexpected outcome of this feeding process has been the arrival of vultures at the boma.. In the past we tried to establish a "vulture restaurant" to attract vultures to the reserve by creating a vulture-friendly area with a waterhole and a long, clear runway through the bush so that the big birds would be able to take off after their meal. The idea is to keep the "restaurant" supplied with dead animals and carcasses to attract the vultures and other carrion eaters like marabou storks. This works very well on hunting farms and where domestic livestock is slaughtered. However, our restaurant failed because we never had enough carrion to keep it stocked. Any animals which died of natural causes out in the bush were soon cleaned up by jackals and hyaenas. The cheetah boma has become an ad hoc vulture restaurant because of the regularity of carcasses being fed to the cheetahs. African white-backed and Cape vultures have been seen hunched in the trees around the boma, waiting for a chance to take over the carcass when the cheetahs have had enough.

#### GAME VIEWING

The first baby impala for the season was spotted on 4 December, and since then the pretty little babies have been popping up everywhere. The impala ewes seem to leave the herd when they are ready to drop their lambs and return to the safety of the crowd when the tiny baby is up and running on its spindly legs. Very soon after birth, the impala lambs are able to run and leap and keep up with the adults. Unfortunately, they are no match for the cheetahs and impala ewes are defenceless against predators. Narinda, our conservator, timed Bubbles and her cubs after Bubbles killed one of this season's impala babies. It took the six cheetahs eight

minutes to demolish the little antelope, which would not go far enough to satisfy their combined appetites.

While the baby impalas look like tiny versions of the adults, other baby antelopes look rather different from their parents. Herds of gemsbok (oryx) have been seen this month with calves at foot. The gemsbok is a startlingly beautiful animal with a greyish body, boldly marked black and white face and impossibly long, sweeping horns. The calves are quite brown when they are small, and lack the distinct face patterns, but they are born with tiny horns which develop rapidly. Comically unattractive as adults, wildebeest calves are also much paler and browner than their parents and quite cute by comparison. There are plenty of baby wildebeest around at the moment as well.

A couple of brown hyaenas were spotted one night by Bennie, our resident Master's student, who is doing her thesis on the captive-bred cheetahs. A few nights later, we were kept awake by the eerie and terrifying sounds of brown hyaenas "neck wrestling" near the lodge. The hyaenas grab each other's necks and maul and bite each other for hours, emitting grotesque screams and wails which sound as if someone is being murdered. It's enough to give you nightmares.

The rain and the resultant growth in vegetation has caused an explosion of the insect population. Mopane "worms" (the huge, multicoloured caterpillars of the mopane moth) have already denuded vast areas of mopane trees as they munch their way across the province. You can actually hear them eating as you stand amongst the mopane trees - a steady crunching sound punctuated by the occasional plop as a sated worm drops to the ground. Roads are carpeted with squashed mopane worms, trying to get to greener pastures. Dried mopane worms are a local delicacy, and people go out collecting them in bucket-loads, just as people collect mushrooms or blackberries in other parts of the world.

Huge centipedes, some as long as 20cm, and known as "shongololos", make their way across the ground on their rippling feet, rolling up into a ball if they sense danger. Just before the end of the year, the annual invasion of millions of flying termites filled the night. The next day the ground was covered with their cast-off, fairy-like wings and the fat ants were dodging greedy birds as they disappeared into holes in the ground.

## **BIRDING**

The birdlife at this time of year is astonishing, colourful, noisy and everywhere. Summer migrants are still arriving. At last the gorgeous, pink and blue southern carmine bee-eaters have come in for the summer, swooping over the luxuriant grass in the old lucerne field with their cheeky cousins the little bee-eaters, with swifts and swallows and handsome, agile eastern red-footed falcons, all making the most of the abundance of food.

More cuckoos have appeared. We had an excellent sighting of a great spotted cuckoo hopping around on the ground, picking up grubs and insects. Its beak open and panting in the heat, it was reminiscent of a yellow-billed hornbill with its long white "trousers" and foraging behaviour. The more sober-looking, black and white Jacobin cuckoo can be heard throughout the bush, welcoming the new year.

We've added another three species to our bird list this month. Though quite common, the yellow-crowned bishop is an outrageously colourful little bird with gorgeous golden and black plumage. Two other new species were probably attracted by the "casual water", to use a golfing term, which is lying here and there in normally dry depressions - a greater painted

snipe and a white-backed duck. The greater painted snipe was probably the “twitch of the month”.

A pair of Wahlberg’s eagles is nesting in a big Ana tree next to the river. They soar over the lodge, calling to one another as they circle. We have also seen several spotted thicknee chicks hurrying along the ground after their parent. The adult thicknees (formerly known as “dikkops” or “thick heads” - a much more descriptive name), are strange-looking birds. The chicks have huge eyes and long legs like their parents, but instead of spotted plumage, they are fluffy and brown - delightful babies.

## **CAMPS AND PEOPLE**

Peter and Jane are now officially resident in the lodge and Narinda has moved into the manager’s cottage vacated by them. We have two new members of the MM team - Zoe, Narinda’s lovely, three month-old golden labrador puppy and Nduna, Jane’s new horse which was a Christmas present from Peter. Nduna means “chief” in Zulu, but unlike the Zulus, Nduna is not a warrior, but a placid and friendly individual.

2007 ended so sadly with the death of our friend and ranger, Shawn. Shawn was buried at his home town in Zimbabwe on 7 December. We have had more than 40 emails and letters from friends all over the world paying tribute to Shawn, which have been printed with photos for his parents. Thank you to everyone who sent us messages of sympathy from as far away as the USA, Canada, UK and Europe, Australia, Hong Kong and La Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean - such was Shawn’s magnetic personality that he will be remembered by so many.

We look forward to an exciting year ahead in 2008 and wish all our readers a very happy and prosperous New Year.