

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY JANUARY 2008

SEASONS

The veld (bush) has never looked better thanks to more rain at the beginning of the year. The ground is carpeted with tall grass, each stalk tipped with seeds that wave gracefully in the breeze. Tiny, delicate wildflowers peep through the groundcover in soft colours of violet, yellow, orange, pink and white. The bush seems to grow thicker as we watch. Overhanging branches of trees and bushes make it difficult to follow the tracks and roads which are now obscured by grass. The Mogalakwena River is flowing strongly, surging muddily over weirs and dams, and cutting us off from the southern part of the reserve where our camping ground, Lulu's Camp, is situated. The camp will have to remain closed until the river subsides enough for us to cross by vehicle so that we can attend to the water supply, lawn and swimming pool.

Jane and Peter had to be rescued when their VW Caddy sank into a deep channel on the only passable track leading into MM during heavy rains. As dark closed in, Luke arrived like the cavalry, just in time to tow the little car to safety out of the rising water that threatened to drown the engine. We recorded 112mm (over 4 inches) of rain in that 24 hours, filling normally dry riverbeds and sweeping debris along to collect against the perimeter fences until the water pressure behind the debris broke through the fences in several places. A gap of about five metres, big enough for a herd of wildebeest to walk through, opened up in one place. Peter and his three helpers spent the weekend repairing the hole and reconnecting the electric wires, while Jane shadowed Bubbles, our wild cheetah, and her cubs, trying to keep them away from that particular fence. As usual, with 4,500 hectares to wander in, Bubbles seemed to be drawn to the one place where we didn't want her. With no power on the fence, we were concerned that the cheetahs would get out of the property, especially if they chased prey into the fence. Jane stayed in radio contact with Peter, following the cheetahs by sight and radio telemetry, as they moved along the fenceline, catching baby impalas as they went. When the cheetahs got too close to the fence, she drove the bakkie (pick up truck) between them and the fence and there was a lot of banging on the door of the vehicle to try and turn them away. Not only have the heavy rains caused damage to the fences, but the abundant long, wet grass comes in contact with the electrical wires and causes electrical shorts on the fence. Narinda has spent many hours this month patrolling the fences and keeping the cheetahs at bay when the voltage on the fences is low because of the long grass.

WILD CHEETAH PROJECT

For more than a year, we have been privileged to share in the life of our wild female cheetah, Bubbles, and her five cubs. Narinda has tracked the cheetah family every day, recording their location, behaviour, condition and kills. The cubs are now 14 months old and within three or four months they will naturally split from their mother to live on their own. Some time ago, a decision was made that when the cubs were big enough, Bubbles and her family would be moved to new homes to make way for a unique project to "rewild" captive-born cheetahs on Makulu Makete. The time for Bubbles to leave MM is drawing closer. She and the cubs will be captured early in February and taken away - Bubbles and the two female cubs to one reserve and the three male cubs to a separate reserve. This will be a very, very sad day for us all, and especially for Narinda, who refers to the cheetahs as "her cats". But in her usual, professional manner, Narinda is preparing for the removal of the cheetahs so that the experience will cause "her cats" as little stress as possible. It is envisaged that some, if not

all, of the cheetahs will be tranquillised with a dart gun. Narinda has been getting the cheetahs used to the sound of a gun by taking a .22 rifle with her when she tracks them, and shooting several rounds into the air close to the cheetahs, in the hope that they will be so used to the sound of the gun that they will not scatter when the first dart is fired. Our next bush diary will report on the capture and farewell of our wonderful cheetah family.

The cheetah family recently slept off a big meal at the waterhole by the lodge. They arrived early in the morning, in single file, each with a huge, full stomach and flopped down in the shade after having a drink. They were still there in the afternoon when a group of male impalas arrived at the waterhole. Sensing something was amiss, the impalas stood back from the water and snorted to each other in alarm, sounding like a school of dolphins blowing air from their air holes. The cheetahs were too full and content to be bothered with the impalas or a couple of warthogs that came in to wallow in the cool water. They stayed in the same spot all night, and finally moved off about 7 a.m. the next day, taking no notice of all the human activity around them. It was a thrill to see the cheetahs there for so long, but having six big cheetahs roaming around the reserve in a pack does have its disadvantages. Jane has to check on the location of the cheetahs each morning before taking her dogs for a walk. If the cheetahs' radio signal is too close, then there's no walk for the dogs. Bumping into six cheetahs, while trying to control two dogs on leads, is not an experience I ever want to report in the bush diary.

CAPTIVE-BRED CHEETAH PROJECT

In late December, Motsomi, the female captive-bred cheetah which had been in the boma (enclosure) for about three months, and was almost ready for release into the wild, developed a breathing problem. She was taken to Pretoria, to expert cheetah vet, Peter Caldwell, who decided that although the problem could be rectified, it would take a long time, and that in the interests of both the cheetah and the "rewilding" project, Motsomi should be replaced by another female cheetah. This was disappointing, particularly to Bennie, the Masters student from Pretoria University, who is writing a thesis on the rewilding project, and to Narinda, our conservator, who had been preparing Motsomi for her release. Motsomi appeared to have the right attitude to adapt well to hunting for herself and we were looking forward to her imminent release. Motsomi's illness has delayed the project by several months. On 21 January, a second female cheetah was delivered to MM from the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre. Bennie has named her Phoenix, because she has brought the project back on track, like a phoenix rising from the ashes. Phoenix has to get used to her new environment, the electric fence and her new diet of fresh antelope, before she can be released. Meanwhile, the two male cheetahs (Bones and Scruff) are progressing well and will be released about one month after Phoenix. They took great interest in the new female cheetah when she emerged from her transportation crate, on the other side of the fence. There was much chirruping from both sides of the fence as the males paced up and down, checking out the new cheetah on the block.

GAME VIEWING

The bush is so thick that it's not so easy to see the game, but when the animals emerge into the open around a waterhole, they all look healthy, shiny and fat. Zebras, giraffe, eland, kudu, gemsbok and impala are in peak condition. Warthogs are stained red from wallowing in the mud, and there are plenty of baby warthogs running after their mothers like clock-work miniatures.

The rain and lush growth has brought with it hordes of insects. We are invaded nightly by clouds of little black stink bugs, which are attracted to the lights and leave their unpleasant odour hanging in the air. Riding along, Jane and her horse, Nduna, are surrounded by flocks

of fragile and delightful dragonflies. Nduna stirs up hundreds of grasshoppers in the long grass as he grazes in his paddock. Beautiful pink and blue Southern Carmine Bee-eaters swoop down in front of the horse, catching the insects in mid air. The frogs are enjoying the abundance of insect food. When Jane put her foot into her shoe, still damp from the previous day's walk in the long, wet grass, she felt something blocking her foot - a large frog, with red patches on its back legs, was hiding inside and wasn't happy about being disturbed. One of our many electrical problems this month was caused not by the power company, Eskom, but by a couple of snakes which had found their way inside a transformer to escape the rain, and had been electrocuted when they shorted out the transformer. The energisers that power the electric fences have become dry refuges for ants, which cause faults in the energisers and in turn affect the electric fence.

BIRDING

Grey cuckoos are everywhere in the bush, swooping from tree to tree, but impossible to identify. Are they African Cuckoos or Common Cuckoos? It seems that the easiest way to tell them apart is by their call, but the African Cuckoo is silent and we never hear the Common Cuckoo. Whatever they are, there are plenty of them.

Now that the river is running so fast, many of the diving birds we normally see along its banks have disappeared. Even the Giant and Pied Kingfishers, usually perched on the power cable across the river, are absent. The ground birds are enjoying the thick cover of long grass. Tiny Crested Francolin chicks sit motionless as you drive past, hoping not to be spotted. I picked one up, thinking I had injured it. Sitting on my hand it was so tiny that I could feel no weight at all. It was beautifully coloured - a wide, deep chestnut stripe right down the middle of its head and back, flanked by creamy-coloured down. Its anxious mother charged at me with wings outstretched and tail spread like a turkey. What a brave little hen! Ground hornbills have been seen on a couple of occasions over the past month. They are so big that they cannot disappear into the long grass. Another much smaller ground bird - the Kurrichane or Small Buttonquail - can be heard hooting sadly all through the bush, but getting a look at it is another matter! Just like the Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike that calls so constantly and maddeningly from a bush next to the farmhouse, but seems to disappear as soon as I get my binoculars trained on the spot.

CAMP AND PEOPLE

Apart from the problems caused by the weather, our electric fences have been badly affected by the on-going "load shedding" inflicted on the whole of South Africa by the power supply company, Eskom. For many reasons, Eskom is not able to generate enough power to keep up with the fast-growing domestic and industrial demand in this country. The solution has been "load shedding", which means that the power is turned off to various areas at different times of the day and for varying lengths of time. Load shedding is affecting everyone and businesses are suffering. It is said that it will continue for years to come. One of the most irritating, and potentially dangerous, consequences of turning off the power to certain areas is that the traffic lights (known in South Africa as "robots") stop working. If you have driven in Johannesburg traffic, you will understand the chaos that results on the roads. At MM we have made provisions to get us through the hours without electricity. We have paraffin lamps ready, our gas stove is a godsend, and Peter has installed an inverter in the lodge to provide some lights and even television from battery power.

The electric fence which surrounds the reserve is a requirement by the Department of Nature Conservation for keeping free-roaming cheetahs. It has back-up batteries which kick in if the mains power stops, but the frequency of the power cuts has meant that the older batteries do not have time to recharge before the next blackout. At more expense, Peter has bought five

new, large, deep-cycle batteries to ensure that the fence always carries enough volts to give a decent shock.

As a result of the extraordinary growing season, modifications are being made to a tractor to be used as a herbicide sprayer, for killing the grass under the fence; and a fire fighter, for subduing veld fires which could arise from the abundance of dry grass this coming winter.