

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### FEBRUARY 2008

#### SEASONS

We have had no rain for the past ten weeks, but thanks to the exceptional early and good start to the rainy season the bush is still thick and green. The grass has dried off, and a walk through the veld (bush) results in socks and shoes full of sharp grass seeds that are almost impossible to extract. We all wear oil-cloth sock protectors over our boots to minimise the problem. It's certainly not a fashionable look but it is practical! The Mogalakwena River is still flowing but we are now able to drive across the drift through the shallow water. At the end of February it looks as if it is trying to rain, but we are not holding our breath. Perhaps we have already seen the last of the rain until October.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

The date for the removal of Bubbles, our wild cheetah, and her five cubs, now 14 months old, was set for 9 February. The cheetahs spent a couple of days just prior to that time lounging around the lodge waterhole, their stomachs full, as if to give us plenty of time to say farewell to them. Then, just three days before the appointed day, they managed to get across the flowing river to the southern side of the reserve. Bubbles had been patrolling the river bank regularly for weeks, waiting for a chance to cross to her favourite hunting area, so the river must have dropped enough to let them swim or wade across. This made tracking the cheetahs a logistical nightmare. Although we could pick up the signal from our side of the river, we had to drive through our neighbour's property and across the dam wall to get to the other side to find them. The river was flowing too strongly for anything smaller than Peter's Land Cruiser to get across, making the capture of the cheetahs more complicated.

The prospect of darting and successfully catching six wild cheetahs was fraught with possibilities for disaster. Narinda had been habituating the cheetahs to the sound of a dart gun by firing a .22 rifle close to the cheetahs when she tracked them, but what if they scattered at the sound of the first dart, and we only managed to get one of the cubs on the first try? We had decided to leave Bubbles till last because she was wearing a radio collar and, if worse came to worst, we could find her by telemetry. If the cubs ran off in different directions we would not be able to find them unless they came back to their mother. We had allocated two full days to the capture, imagining that it might take several attempts to get all six cheetahs. As a last resort, if darting the cubs failed, we might be forced to dart Bubbles and put her in a cage to act as bait for the cubs. None of us wanted that to happen. There were so many "what if's" to consider.

Dr. Peter Caldwell, the expert cheetah vet from Pretoria, with Kelly and Luke from the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, arrived at MM early on the morning of 9 February. Narinda, Jane and Peter Philip, from MM, made up the rest of the capture party. While Dr. Caldwell and the others prepared tranquillising darts, drugs and monitoring equipment, Jane and Narinda went off to look for Bubbles and the cubs for the last time. They found the cheetahs lying under a tree not far from the fence along the dirt road. Our main objective was to keep them relaxed and together. Narinda walked in to within a couple of metres of the cheetahs, as she usually did, and made a sketch of the position of each cheetah so that she could advise Dr. Caldwell, before he walked in, which of the cubs he should dart first. Narinda had spent so much time with the cubs that she was able to identify the cubs individually. There was one particularly skittish male cub which was much more nervous than his siblings. This was the cub we would start with, hoping that if he ran away after being darted, the other, more laid-back brothers and sisters, would stay put.

To minimise the disturbance to the cheetahs, only Narinda and Dr. Caldwell walked in for the darting. The rest of us waited. Then we heard a dull thud - dart number one, followed at regular intervals by four more. Narinda's voice over the radio - "We have all five cubs and we are now going after Bubbles. She's walking away, but we will follow her easily." The cubs started passing out in the bush as they walked away from the darting location. It was hard to find them in the long grass and time was of the essence. The drug would wear off after one hour and we had six cheetahs to deal with. Using canvas stretchers, we collected the cubs, one by one, and laid them on the track next to the fence in the shade. Bubbles was the last to be brought in and put at the head of the line of her cubs, all with their eyes covered to protect them from the light, because when tranquillised, the cheetahs' eyes stay open. The team of people then set to work. Each cheetah had to be injected with antibiotics, to prevent infection from the dart wound, vitamins and an internal parasite treatment. The cubs had an identification chip inserted. Blood samples were taken, the cheetahs were measured, and treated with Frontline for ticks and fleas, just like domestic pets. Bubbles' radio collar was changed because the battery, which lasts up to two years, was nearing the end of its life. To keep the cheetahs cool, we poured water on their paws.

As Narinda straddled one of the cubs, getting ready to take blood, the cub suddenly came to, and jumped up, spitting. Narinda grabbed its tail, and Dr. Caldwell came to her aid. Between them they wrestled the loudly-protesting cub into a box and shut the door. Dr. Caldwell explained that the cubs' metabolism was much faster than an adult cheetah's and we must work quickly before any of the other cubs woke up. Finally, each cheetah was in a box, strapped to the trailer, and we set off for the lodge, across the dam wall, and past all of Bubbles' old hang-outs. The whole operation had taken less than two hours and went like clockwork, thanks to Narinda's careful planning and the professionalism of Dr. Caldwell, Kelly and Luke. All our fears had been unfounded. The cheetahs were healthy, unharmed and ready to go to their new homes. They left early the next day in the cool of the morning and Makulu Makete seems quite empty without them. (See photos of the final chapter of Bubbles Story on her website [www.makulumakete.com/bubbles](http://www.makulumakete.com/bubbles).)

Luke took Bubbles immediately to her new home, Hlambanyati reserve in Kwazulu Natal. The cubs will stay together temporarily in De Wildt's holding facilities at their Shingwedzi property until being delivered to their new homes. After their good start in life at MM, and with Bubbles' expert guidance, we are sure that the cubs will do well wherever they go. We have since heard that Bubbles has settled into the boma (enclosure) at Hlambanyati and allowed the owner, Charl, to get within five metres of her soon after her arrival, which is remarkably relaxed, considering the stress of her capture, transport and loss of her cubs. She will be kept in the boma until she is used to her new surroundings and loses her homing instinct. Just a day or so after she arrived, the free-roaming male cheetah came to the boma to inspect her. Female cheetahs come into oestrus very quickly after their cubs leave them, so once she is released, unless she is temporarily contracepted, it probably won't be long before Bubbles has another brood of cubs to bring up.

As Narinda wrote in her final report to De Wildt on Bubbles and her family: "They will be greatly missed by the staff of Makulu Makete, no more surprise visits to the lodge, no more cheetahs seen hunting, no more cheetahs obstructing roads, no more tracking of wild cheetahs. All the moments and adventures with the cheetahs will be missed by me – the tracker. It is not always that you are able to watch them hunt, play, grow and being naughty...even the near death experiences with them will be missed...not everybody can say that they almost got trampled by antelope, upon stumbling on the cheetahs while hunting. Not all can say that they tracked twice a day, seven days a week for nearly 13 months, the

cubs saw me first when they left the nest (we refused to disturb them while in the nest) and since then they grew up with me, and what joy and fun did they provide.”

## GAME VIEWING

While we frequently get new bird species visiting MM, it is not often that we add a new mammal species to our list, but this month we saw for the first time a striped polecat (*Ictonyx striatus*). Rather like a skunk, or a black and white squirrel, in appearance, it ran along the track in front of Jane and Peter’s vehicle one night for about two kilometres, giving us ample time to study it. We repeatedly pulled off the track, hoping the little animal would find its way out of the headlights and into the safety of the bush, but every time we turned back on to the track, there, up ahead was the polecat, scuttling along. It put to flight a couple of nightjars that were sitting in the dusty track, screaming at them as it ran past. Occasionally it lifted its tail to squirt at us, but luckily we were far enough away to avoid the smell.

There was another sighting of a honey badger, or ratel, this month. This fearless fighter was spotted waddling across the track in front of Jane while she was walking her two dogs on leads early one morning. The dogs got very excited but Jane was able to hang on long enough to see the ratel disappear into the long grass. She did not want to be involved in a fight between a honey badger on one side and a Jack Russell terrier and a 50kg boerboel watch dog on the other side. Despite the weight advantage of the boerboel, and the killer-instinct of the Jack Russell, the odds would probably have been with the honey badger.

We have finally been able to properly identify the frog that has been lurking in our empty shoes. Having ordered a field guide to frogs and frogging, the very day we picked up the book at the post office we were confronted with a large frog in the kitchen pantry. There was no doubt about its identification - an Eastern Olive Toad (*Bufo garmani*) - it even obligingly let us pick it up as we leafed through the pages of the book.

## BIRDING

Having half an hour to kill one morning, I made myself a cup of coffee and took my binoculars out to the stoop (verandah) to watch the comings and goings at the bird bath next to the swimming pool. Sitting in a comfortable chair, I was treated to an amazing array of colour and activity. In that short time I recorded 15 species; not just boring little brown jobs (lbj’s), but a gorgeous diverse collection. It was a bit like watching the Rio Carnival, as each species seemed to be trying to outdo the next in brilliance. Pretty, powdery-blue Blue Waxbills drank next to dusky pink Jameson’s firefinches. Elegant and suave Black-faced waxbills, the Cary Grant of waxbills, posed alongside the over-the-top Calypso-dancer colours of the Violet-eared waxbill. There were lovely Melba finches, (now saddled with the unlovely name of Green-winged pytilias), striking Golden-breasted buntings, Red-headed and Southern Masked weavers, a Red-backed shrike, a couple of Yellow-fronted canaries, a gentle and softly-spoken Emerald-spotted wood-dove, a Laughing Dove, and a chattering African Paradise Flycatcher. A stumpy-tailed Long-billed Crombec and an ordinary Southern Grey-headed sparrow made up the numbers. None of these species is particularly uncommon, but the constant parade of such variety and colour was enchanting. It just proves that you don’t have to get up at dawn and tramp miles into the forest to enjoy a spot of birding!

At the other end of the birding spectrum, a magnificent Martial Eagle made a rare appearance this month at MM on a dead tree next to the river. It stayed on the tree for at least an hour, and we were able to walk right underneath the tree to get a good look at the bird. What an imperious look in its eye! It ignored the fluttering and gurgling of a few wood-hoopoes, anxious to move it along, as if they were mere insects. It seemed to be a young adult, not yet having reached complete mature plumage but unmistakable as the biggest and most

impressive eagle in Africa, with its long white-feathered legs and huge, cruel talons. When it finally took off, it circled up and up lazily until it was just the size of a swallow. What a thrill to see such a mighty hunter.