

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### MARCH 2008

#### SEASONS

This summer has been cooler than most. The temperature did not soar over 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) as is normally the case. With no rain since the end of last year the veld (bush) has dried off and we don't expect any more rain until the start of the next rainy season, which could mean almost twelve months between rainfalls. There are five rain gauges at various locations throughout the reserve, but instead of catching rain, for most of the year they serve as toys for the baboons. We are constantly replacing rain gauges that have been stolen or broken by our fun-loving primate cousins.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

Since our wild cheetah female, Bubbles, and her five cubs left Makulu Makete last month, the bush has seemed rather empty, although the prey species might not agree. But the impalas' holiday will be short-lived. It won't be long before the first cheetah is released in our new project, in conjunction with the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre, to "rewild" captive-bred cheetahs. Three cheetahs, Phoenix - a female, and two males - Scruff and Bones, have been held in bomas (enclosures) at MM for several months, where they have acclimatised to their new environment and learnt to respect the electric fence surrounding the bomas, which is identical to the perimeter fence around the whole reserve. They have had plenty of time to lose their homing instinct.

Narinda, our conservator, and Bennie, who is using the rewilding project for a Master's Degree at Pretoria University, have gradually introduced the cheetahs to their new diet of whole carcasses of impala. Their stomachs have to become accustomed to gorging on a kill, then fasting for days until the next kill, instead of the regular small meals they were used to at the De Wildt Centre. In the wild, cheetahs can eat up to half their body weight at one kill, then go for more than a week without eating. In a captive situation it is not possible to follow this natural feeding routine. Since they have been at MM, the two males have put on weight with their new diet, so much so that their radio collars were becoming too tight and had to be let out. Scruff, the larger of the two males, has put on 10 kilos since he arrived. We expect them to lose condition initially once they are released and have to start fending for themselves, just as our previous wild cheetahs, Dottie and Bubbles did, but as they become better at hunting, they should put the weight back on as muscle.

All three cheetahs seem to be taking interest in the game that walks past their bomas, which is a good sign. Having been born in captivity, they have not had the benefit of watching their mother hunt for food, so they will be relying on instinct when they are released. The female, Phoenix, is due to be released next month and the males a month later, when Phoenix has settled into her new habitat. The reason behind this is to give Phoenix a chance to become familiar with her new territory so that she can keep away from the males in case they become aggressive towards her. The males are not brothers, but are living as a coalition. There is always the possibility that they could split up when they are released, but it is likely that they will hunt together. Coalitions of male cheetahs are more inclined to become aggressive to females than single males. To minimise the chances of this happening, Phoenix has been kept in a boma adjoining that of the males, so that they are aware of each other. Phoenix has been chemically contracepted, temporarily, so that she will not have to cope with cubs at the same time as learning to hunt. Narinda and Bennie will be tracking the cheetahs at least twice a day, monitoring their behaviour and their kills and recording the data for Bennie's thesis.

## GAME VIEWING

Our nocturnal rubbish bin-raider, the bushpig, has returned, driving our dogs crazy and leaving a trail of upturned bins and rubbish strewn around the lodge as it searches for titbits. The bushpig looks more like a wild boar than a warthog, with a long mane and white markings on its face. Brown hyaenas have been more active at night as well, probably drawn to the remnants of the cheetahs' impala carcasses. A bat-eared fox, much prettier than the other nocturnal visitors, was spotted this month. Its huge ears make it look like the Sydney Opera House, but they are used to detect insects underground, the main diet of this charming little creature. Bat eared foxes are hard to spot in the thick bush at MM, but we see countless numbers of them on the open pans of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana.

Our black-backed jackals are looking shiny, fluffy and healthy, but we have heard that there has been an outbreak of rabies in the area, a disease often carried by jackals. So far there has been no evidence of rabies at MM and we are hoping that it will not spread this way.

During the month Luke, from the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, brought in another leopard for a few days stay at MM until it could be released. The leopard had been trapped by a cattle farmer, who called Luke and asked him to remove the leopard. This service saves many leopards from being shot by farmers. The leopard was a magnificent young female, which objected strongly to being cooped up in our temporary holding facility. The growling and roaring of an angry leopard literally makes the hair on your neck stand up through terror. The leopard was released in a different area, where we hope she will be happy and will not be a nuisance to farmers.

## BIRDING

Owls featured quite strongly this month, with sightings of a Barn Owl and a Verreaux's Eagle Owl (formerly called Giant Eagle Owl). Heard, but not seen, was the Southern White-faced Scops Owl. Pearl-spotted owlets are frequently heard and seen around the lodge. Pity this tiny owl, which is active both day and night, and which is universally hated by small birds. Even when the poor little pearlie is sitting innocently on a branch, having a snooze, he is constantly bombarded by angry waxbills, drongos, shrikes and chats, all trying to move him on. Just playing a tape recording of the Pearl-spotted owl's call is enough to get all the little birds in the area into a fluttering frenzy.

Although the resident pair of Verreaux's (Black) Eagles seem to have moved away from Kremetartkop, we have had several sightings of a pair on Madia Pala Mountain, not far from the koppie. Whether it is the same pair or not, we can't be sure, but just recently they were spotted, high above the mountain. One of the eagles was carrying a long snake in its talons and the other had a stick - hopefully nesting material for this year's brood. As they circled, a young African Hawk Eagle kept harassing them until the Verreaux's Eagle dropped its snake, out of frustration at the smaller eagle.

Jane and Peter have just returned from a two-week camping tour through Namibia. In Etosha National Park we were lucky enough to get a good sighting of a Denham's Bustard, which was well out of its range. Peter took an excellent photo of the bird, as proof, and it was confirmed by the bustard expert at Etosha. Other pleasing sightings included red-necked falcons, pygmy falcons and a pair of Blue Cranes with two ginger-headed chicks in tow.

Even though we live on a wildlife reserve, our greatest pleasure is to go camping in the wilds of the great national parks of South Africa, Botswana and Namibia. Not for us an island resort, or a tour of the vineyards of the Cape. Give us the solitude of the desert, with not another human being for miles around, for a real "busman's holiday".