

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

APRIL 2008

SEASONS

It feels like autumn now. Pleasantly warm days fade into cool nights. The baobabs have lost their leaves, the white seringa trees are turning golden and the leaves on the raisin bushes are dry and curling up, but there's still plenty of feed for the grazers and browsers. The impala rams have started their annual jousting matches in preparation for the mating season. Their angry snorts can be heard all through the bush and they can be seen chasing one another around the waterhole in front of the lodge, tails and noses high in the air. We had a surprise downpour during the month, adding 50 mm to the total rainfall this season and freshening up the tired and dried out bush.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Phoenix, a female cheetah born in captivity at the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre, was released from her boma (enclosure) at Makulu Makete early in the month. Phoenix is part of a special project to develop a formula to "rewild" captive-bred cheetahs so that they can be released into the wild and learn to hunt for themselves, raise cubs and teach their cubs to hunt, just like wild cheetahs. A photo of Phoenix's exit from the boma and first footsteps in the wild made the front page of Beeld newspaper in South Africa. Her everyday movements are being watched by Bennie, a Master's student from Pretoria University, and Narinda, our conservator. The girls take it in turn to track and record data for Bennie's Master's thesis.

Having been kept in captivity and hand-fed all her life, Phoenix was not aware of the delights of the bush waiting for her, as our previous cheetahs, all born in the wild, Dottie, Danny and Bubbles had been. The wild-born cheetahs very quickly left the environs of the lodge to explore their new domain. Phoenix, on the other hand, stayed close to human habitation for the first three weeks. Narinda and Bennie tracked her from the lodge one day soon after her release, following the signal from her radio collar. They found the cheetah in the horse paddock, lying under the shepherd's tree in the middle, which provides day-long shade for Jane's horse, Nduna. The indignant Nduna was standing off at a few metres distant, ears pricked and head up, watching the interloper who had stolen his nice shady tree. When he saw Bennie and Narinda near the cheetah, he came closer for a better look. While the girls have no qualms about walking into a boma to feed hungry cheetahs, carrying an impala carcass and armed only with a stick and a water pistol, they are too nervous of the horse to go into his paddock with a carrot. As the horse approached, Bennie and Narinda hid behind the cheetah for cover. Keeping a safe distance from the horse, they followed Phoenix closely as she had a drink from the horse's water trough then sauntered out of the gate and into the orchard. We had been considering getting a companion animal for Nduna, but we were thinking along the lines of a goat or a donkey - a cheetah is not exactly what we had in mind!

After a few days of using the horse paddock as her base, Phoenix moved on, much to Nduna's relief. Sarah, our housekeeper, raised the alarm early in the morning when she found Phoenix drinking from the swimming pool in front of the lodge. The cheetah then proceeded to inspect the lodge and even walked up onto the verandah of guest tent number four. Finally, after a few days, she moved away from the lodge and set off into the bush, with Bennie and Narinda in pursuit, twice a day, to monitor her behaviour, condition and attempted or successful kills. The bonded pair of captive-bred male cheetahs, Scruff and Bones, are due to be released in mid-May, giving Phoenix a chance to get used to her new environment first.

We have had some news about Bubbles, our wild cheetah, and her family, from Deon Cilliers, at the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project. Bubbles was released from her boma at Hlambanyati in Kwazulu Natal this week, and apparently is doing well. She has been contracepted to give her a well-earned rest from cub raising. Her cubs are still at De Wildt's holding facility at Shingwedzi. One female cub is to be relocated to Tswalu as soon as an import permit is obtained from Northern Cape. Two of the males are ear-marked for release into a 15,000 hectare reserve near Rooiberg. The remaining female is to be relocated to Metsi Pepa, an 8,000 hectare reserve in North West province, but the process of getting fences up, obtaining permits etc. are taking longer than expected. The third male will be bonded with another wild male for relocation.

GAME VIEWING

There have been some unusual predator sightings this month. Narinda saw brown hyaenas on three separate occasions and had her first-ever sighting of a caracal. She was outdone by Frans, our fence maintenance man, who also spotted a caracal, but with a cub in tow. Although caracals only weigh about a third as much as a cheetah, they make up for their smaller size by their spectacular appearance. They are chunky and powerful, with a three-quarter length tail and long, tufted ears. Jane was lucky enough to see another honey-badger this month. Following from behind, it looked as if the honey-badger had something in its mouth - perhaps something it had killed? The animal stopped in the middle of a sandy track and put down its bundle while it looked at Jane over its shoulder. When it picked up the bundle again and moved off, Jane could see that the bundle was a black and white baby honey-badger - quite a thrilling sight.

There has been a lot of snake activity recently. We believe the snakes are moving around looking for somewhere to hibernate with the onset of the cooler weather. Bennie had a close encounter with a black mamba, which she came across while tracking the cheetah. The snake reared up in front of Bennie, who carefully and slowly backed away. Luckily the mamba also retreated. Another black mamba has been seen, from the safety of vehicles, several times in one particular location. It is a huge snake that lives in a termite mound nearby, and has been seen over the past few years, each time reportedly longer than the time before, or perhaps that's just in the eye of the beholder!

Poor Sarah, who found Phoenix at the swimming pool, had another shock recently when she opened her broom closet to find a large puff adder curled up inside. Puff adders have beautifully patterned, thick bodies, and are notoriously slow and lazy. Puff adder bites usually occur when someone stands on a puff adder which hasn't bothered to get out of the way.

BATS AND BIRDING

Our bat populations were the subject of interest to Dawn, an Honours student from Pretoria University, who is doing research into bats roosting in baobab trees. She spent a couple of days traipsing from baobab tree to baobab tree (she had no idea we had so many) and eventually found a couple which had bat colonies in hollows inside the trees. Bat colonies can be readily pin-pointed by their unattractive smell! Narinda, Jane and Bennie, accompanied Dawn one evening try to identify the bat species in a big baobab near Madia Pala camp. This tree has a huge slit right up one side. When Dawn looked inside the tree with a torch during the day, she saw a lot of bats and a pair of barn owls all roosting in there. This is unusual because owls eat bats and it seems strange that they would share a roosting place. We went to the tree just before dusk and waited. The barn owls came out when Dawn put the ladder up against the tree and a bit later the bats started flying around. Dawn climbed the ladder with a big butterfly net, Narinda held a spotlight beneath her and she managed to swat

a bat as it flew out of the crack in the tree. It was tiny - smaller than a mouse - and Dawn identified it as a male Sondellin's Leaf-nose bat. We took photos and measured it, then she held her hand open and the bat sat there for a while, getting his GPS and sonar sorted out, then off he flew. Let's hope he wasn't heading for one of those barn owls.

The summer migrant birds have by now all departed. No more gorgeous pink Southern Carmine Bee-eaters or cocky little Woodland Kingfishers brightening up the bush with their bubbly song, but there are still plenty of species to keep us busy. Perhaps the most impressive sighting this month was of a Saddle-billed Stork - an uncommon visitor to our stretch of the Mogalakwena River. These beautiful, tall storks look almost as if they have been painted, with their bold black and white bodies, long black legs with red knees and feet, and their signature long red and black bill with the bright yellow patch at the base, like a saddle.

Jane has registered as an observer with the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2), which uses local birders to provide data on the distribution and changes in distribution of bird populations in southern Africa. I have already marked out my unique study areas, which are called "pentads" and consist of a 5 minute by 5 minute grid cell. Makulu Makete covers parts of two such pentads, the dividing line of latitude between the two running roughly through Madia Pala camp. The SABAP2 project will continue for several years, so I have many happy hours of birding ahead of me! If you are interested in contributing to SABAP, see their website www.sabap2.org.