

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

MAY 2008

SEASONS

We are now well into the dry season and although the acacia trees are still green, the raisin bushes have taken on their winter-dead look. Warthogs are everywhere. Female warthogs scuttle away from the road as we pass, with three or four youngsters trotting behind them in a straight line, all with their tails sticking up vertically. Because the property is fenced with a special "Big 5" electric fence, the warthogs can't dig under the fences to come and go as they please. The reserve becomes overpopulated with warthogs and we are forced to cull them. The two cheetahs that are still in the boma and being hand-fed are enjoying a diet of fresh warthog. Adult warthogs would normally be considered too dangerous for a cheetah to hunt, but they have no problem eating the meat. Feeding them warthog instead of impala, their natural prey, preserves our impala numbers for the cheetahs to hunt for themselves when they are released.

CHEETAH PROJECT

At the beginning of the month, Dr. Peter Caldwell, the expert cheetah vet from Pretoria, came to Makulu Makete to perform gastroscopies on the two captive-bred male cheetahs, Scruff and Bones, before their scheduled release. The kitchen at the lodge doubled as an operating theatre, where Dr. Caldwell set up his complicated and expensive electronic gastroscope equipment - the same equipment that is used for human patients. Our stainless-steel food preparation table was perfect as an operating table, exactly the right length for an adult cheetah. It took nearly an hour to "scope" each cheetah, which were first darted with tranquillisers in their boma and carried into the kitchen on a special stretcher. Kelly, from the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, assisted Dr. Caldwell with the biopsy procedures and the rest of the MM team - Peter, Jane and Bennie, watched the progress of the operation on the video screen attached to the gastroscope. Narinda missed out on this occasion as she was attending her university course in Pretoria at the time. Both cheetahs were pronounced healthy, but Scruff's collar had to be let out again.

Bennie and Narinda had reported that Phoenix, who had been released a little less than a month before, had been limping badly. Dr. Caldwell decided to sedate her to get a good look at the foot which was causing the problem. So the third cheetah was treated in our kitchen/operating theatre. The outer toe of Phoenix's right back foot was injured. After stitching up a big cut between her toes, Dr. Caldwell found that her toe was broken and it was decided to send Phoenix to Pretoria to have metal pins inserted in her toe. Unfortunately, x-rays of the toe revealed that it was too badly smashed to repair and it was amputated. The story of Phoenix's toe amputation appeared on the front page of the South African newspaper "Beeld". The cheetah recovered well and was returned to Makulu Makete within a week. After another two weeks back in her boma, showing no ill-effects from the loss of her toe, she was released once again to resume her "rewilding". This delay has caused another set-back to the release of the two males. We are hoping that they will be out of their boma before the end of June, giving Phoenix ample time to settle in to her new territory once again.

After her first release, Phoenix spent several days with Jane's horse in his paddock, and some time inspecting the lodge and its surroundings. Shortly after her second release, she appeared outside the fence at the lodge, taking a strong interest in our Jack Russell terrier, Muscles, and our big watch dog, Sharp, a boerboel. Muscles seemed determined to end his own life by trying to force his way through the wire mesh fence to take on the cheetah. Phoenix seemed determined to grab Muscles as he poked his head through the wire. Meanwhile, Sharp,

spurred on by Muscles' barking, managed to bend the gate and, before we knew it, cheetah and boerboel were face to face, growling at each other. Sharp weighs about the same as Phoenix, who turned and ran, with Sharp following, howling with excitement. Within a minute the scene was reversed, with Sharp running fast towards the gate, howling with terror, and Phoenix in hot pursuit. Narinda stepped in to divert Phoenix. Sharp was then let into the safety of the garden. Phoenix appeared to suffer no injuries from the encounter, but Sharp had a couple of superficial bleeding scratches on his nethermost appendages, caused no doubt by Phoenix's sharp dew claw. The marks of her claws could be seen in the fur on Sharp's back, but no skin was broken. Sharp retired to his kennel to lick his wounds and Phoenix wandered off to the waterhole, unaware of the fuss she had caused.

More drama was to follow. Tracking a captive-born cheetah presents situations which we have never experienced with our wild-born cheetahs. Having got used to her food arriving on the back of Narinda's Toyota bakkie (pick-up), Phoenix recognised the bakkie when Narinda was tracking her after her second release. She would stand on her hind legs, sniffing the back of the vehicle, hoping for food, and then, with her front paws on the window sill, look into the cabin where Narinda was sitting, window wound up. When she climbed onto the bonnet (hood) of the vehicle and jumped up onto the roof of the cabin, Narinda decided it was time for some "aversion therapy". Every time Phoenix gets too close or too interested in the bakkie, she is squirted with a high-powered water pistol. She is quickly learning to keep her distance.

Late in the month our section of the Mogalakwena River was filled when the big Glen Alpine Dam upstream released enough water to fill all the private dams between it and the Limpopo River. This happens a couple of times a year, and without fail, our cheetahs choose the day before the water arrives to cross the dry river onto the southern section of the reserve. They are then cut off from us by the river. True to form, just like Bubbles before her, Phoenix took herself across the river for the first time a couple of days before the water came down, making the daily trip to track her more complicated.

GAME VIEWING

While we were inspecting the river level after the release of water from the Glen Alpine Dam, we saw a Cape Clawless Otter swimming in the weir just upstream of the drift. It kept putting its head out of the water, then ducking under the surface, its thick tail appearing as it dived. When it climbed out of the weir and down the wall to the river below, we noticed it was dragging something in its mouth. Whatever it was, it was covered with hair just like the otter's, and seemed to be almost as big as the otter. We had the feeling that it was dead. According to the books, these otters do prey on small mammals, so perhaps it was something the otter had killed. Or was it another otter - either a baby which the otter was moving to a better nesting site because of the higher water, or was it an otter which had been killed in a fight or by the water flood? Whatever the answer, it was an intriguing sighting.

Another intriguing otter sighting was of what Jane thinks was a Spotted-necked otter, which is much smaller than the Cape Clawless Otter, and was seen slinking through reeds on the edge of a dam. At first Jane thought it was a black domestic cat, but the animal looked straight at her and she got a good look with her binoculars at its black, pug-face and bright brown eyes.

Our leopard pen was used again this month by the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, when a big, young, male leopard was brought in by Luke after it was caught in a trap by a local farmer. Luke found a new home for the leopard, which was collared before its release, so that its behaviour can be monitored in its new territory. There is nothing more spectacular than

the raw power and beauty of a wild leopard, nor more terrifying than its roar and obvious hostility.

BIRDING

Having registered as an observer with the second Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2), this month Jane conducted her first surveys on the two pentads (5 minute square areas) that Makulu Makete straddles. Apart from spending many hours enjoying herself, her small contribution has already broadened the knowledge of the bird populations of South Africa. Because no formal birding surveys have been conducted in this area, several of the species recorded in Jane's first surveys had been officially called "marginally out of range" or "fully out of range". Jane had to justify her sightings of "marginals" - Verreaux's Eagle Owl, African Darter, Red-capped Lark and Giant Kingfisher, and submit for adjudication her sighting of Cape Penduline Tits and Reed Cormorant, both of which had not been recorded in this area at the last survey. All her sightings were accepted by the official adjudicator, which is very satisfying. The Regional SABAP2 Co-ordinator was encouraging in his response to the first records from Makulu Makete:

"Your area is in need of serious study..... Many of the nomadic species and the difficult to find species will not have been recorded in SABAP1. There is also usually a problem with the night species, owls, coursers and nightjars as the observations appear to have concentrated on the daylight hours.

This is why your involvement is so important, you are the only resident in the area. The rest of the atlasers operating in the general area are either tour guides who go to Mapungubwe and Den Staat, and people who have game farms on the Limpopo and visit on long weekends and December. If you can do each of your pentads on a monthly basis that will be great. If you could also include an occasional night drive that will further improve the balance of the data. There are two guys in Phalaborwa who do the same pentads on a weekly basis, but I need a bit more variety."

Now Jane has the perfect excuse for continuous birding excursions, leaving Peter to fend for himself at meal times - it's all for the advancement of avian demographics and the greater good of the birding community!

CIVIL UNREST IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Everyone has heard about the shocking economic, social and political situation in Zimbabwe, which has forced millions of Zimbabweans to cross the border illegally into South Africa to look for work. Makulu Makete is situated close to the borders of Botswana and Zimbabwe, and we are well aware of the misery in Zimbabwe as we see so many of its citizens desperately wandering the roads, looking for employment. Early in the month, on a shopping trip to Makhado, near the Zimbabwean borderpost of Beit Bridge, Peter and Jane saw a convoy of six buses, loaded with illegal Zimbabwean immigrants, returning to the border for deportation. Mass deportation has been a regular occurrence, and mostly a pointless exercise, as the deportees immediately come back into the country by bribing border officials or getting through holes in the border fence.

This particular incident occurred before the recent violence against "foreigners" inside South Africa. In the past couple of weeks, in the poorest communities, where the illegal migrants from all over Africa seek refuge, violence broke out against these illegal "foreigners" (Zimbabweans, Angolans, Mozambiquans, Somalis etc.) who the South African citizens accused of taking their jobs. Now busloads of Zimbabweans are streaming voluntarily out of South Africa and back into the chaos of their homeland, in preference to being targetted by some of the local citizens here in South Africa. The situation in the poor communities seems to be under control by the police at this stage, but the exodus of refugees back to their own countries continues. No one seems to have an answer for this tragedy.