

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### JUNE 2008

#### SEASONS

Clear winter skies mean cold, starry nights and sunny, warm days. So far this year, our coldest night has been a frigid 3 degrees Celsius (about 37 degrees Fahrenheit), but the daytime high can get up to 27 degrees C (about 80 degrees F). When Jane goes birding in the early morning on the quad bike, she has to rug up in several layers of sweaters, jackets and vests, with gloves and a beanie, and sunglasses to stop her eyes watering in the cold. With so much thick padding, wielding her binoculars becomes difficult. By 9.30 a.m. it is warm enough to peel off the outside layers and bask in the sun. The birds are harder to identify these cold mornings. Fluffed up to keep warm, their plumage looks quite different. A small herd of female kudus with their calves has moved into the bush around the lodge, where there are more leaves on the trees than in the dry bush because of the run-off when the lawns are watered. These elegant and gentle antelopes stand stock-still as we walk past, just a couple of metres away. Their dun-coloured coats and vertical white stripes provide perfect camouflage. Their huge ears, always alert for danger, are lined with soft pink and their big, soft eyes follow us carefully. A white line between their eyes and a thick white line above their top lip, like cappuccino foam, add extra character to their lovely faces as they browse close by.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

There has been a sad and unexpected development in our “rewilding” project. After Dr. Peter Caldwell performed gastroscopies last month on the two male cheetahs, Scruff and Bones, who were scheduled for release on 25 June, they were both pronounced healthy and in excellent condition. Both cheetahs were relaxed and eating well and showing interest in the animals that walked past their boma (enclosure), which boded well for prospective hunting skills. On the morning of 11 June, only two weeks before their release, we were therefore shocked to find Scruff dead in the boma, with no obvious cause. Both cheetahs had been seen the day before, acting normally. A post-mortem examination on Scruff’s body was inconclusive. Bennie, who is doing her Master’s thesis on the rewilding project, Narinda, our conservator, and the team from the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre were at a loss. After consultation with all parties concerned, it was decided to release Bones on his own and not try to bond him with another male cheetah at this stage. So Bones was released on schedule just last week.

Perhaps because he was used to having his buddy, Scruff, with him all the time, Bones was nervous all by himself. In the first couple of days he charged Narinda both in her bakkie (pick-up) and on foot, and chased our fencing man, Frans, on his motorbike. Narinda immediately started intensive work with Bones, to get him more settled and less anxious about people and vehicles. This seems to have been successful. Narinda took Jane, a relative stranger to Bones, into the bush with her to test Bones’ reaction. Jane was armed with a powerful water pistol in case of trouble, but Bones was completely relaxed and showed no signs of anxiety or aggression. Jane, the “bait” in the exercise, was especially pleased about this. We were concerned that five days after his release Bones had probably not found any of the waterholes and would be thirsty. He had explored quite a wide range, up to 10 km from the lodge but he had come back to hang around outside his locked boma, where he knew there was water. He had not discovered the lodge waterhole, just a hundred metres away. Narinda managed to get Bones to follow her bakkie to the waterhole, where at last he crouched down for a long, long drink of water. Later that day, Bones surprised us all by making his very first kill right opposite the boma – a fully-grown impala ram, equipped with horns capable of inflicting injury on a novice cheetah. Well done Bonesy!

Meanwhile, Phoenix is happily settling into her new lifestyle and becoming more independent. She has killed a couple of bushbuck and a steenbok and is spending most of her time on the southern side of the river, next to our neighbour's gate. From here she has a good view of our neighbour's sheep pens, which she watches for hours on end. One of our neighbour's farm workers complained that he could not use the gate because we "had the cheetah tied up there"! Phoenix had been there so long, and the worker could see her collar, that he assumed she was on guard duty at the gate!

## **BIRDING**

A rare African finfoot was sighted twice in the last two months – just days apart – at the drift. Narinda disturbed the bird, or birds, as she drove across the remnants of the Mogalakwena River to track Phoenix on the other side. Envious of this unusual sighting, Jane went off early one morning on the quad bike to look for the finfoot, but to no avail. A beautiful young Martial Eagle has been seen several times over the past few weeks. The eagle has not yet developed its adult plumage and is still almost all white. It seemed unconcerned by us getting as close as 50 metres as it sat on a tree on top of the "Dassie" Koppie. We have seen it circling overhead in the same vicinity and hope it will stay in the area. Even at a distance, the immense size and strength of the bird is striking.

Jane is continuing her SABAP bird atlassing project. It is rewarding to look at the SABAP species map on their website and see a red spot for a particular species, recorded by Jane, far from any others. It is easy to see Jane's sightings on the map because there are no other birders in the surrounding areas. Jane feels as if she is a bit of a pioneer.

## **THE VELD (BUSH)**

We have another new, baby giraffe. It's a female, which was spotted with its mother who is a very dark giraffe, and a dark male giraffe. It's so tiny that its ears barely reach the top of its mother's tail and its umbilical cord is still visible, though dried up. It's hard to imagine anything cuter than a baby giraffe.

In January we reported the purchase of a new tractor, fitted with fire fighting equipment, in preparation for the forthcoming dry season. This month a small fire broke out in the bush near our "main" gate and the new tractor was put to the test. The high-powered hoses and sprays on the tractor were instrumental in putting out the fire quickly and efficiently, with hand-held beaters as back-ups. A 750 litre water tank, permanently installed on the back of Narinda's bakkie, was used to refill the tank of the tractor during the fire-fighting operation. Our staff handled the situation with professionalism and the fire was soon under control.

## **THE BAOBABS**

There are more than 200 baobab trees on MM, and most of our guests have walked our baobab trail – a six kilometre marked trail around the base of Kremetartkop, linking thirty of the biggest baobabs on the reserve. The "piece de resistance" is our prosaically named "Big Baobab", which stands alone about 800 metres from the nearest vehicle track. At 21 metres in circumference, it is one of the biggest baobabs in South Africa. We were therefore eager for two visiting baobab experts, Sarah Venter, from nearby Makhado, and Diana Mayne, from Johannesburg, to see the tree when they visited MM at the end of the month to gather data for their studies on baobabs. Jane guided them in to see the Big Tree, but as they approached, she was speechless to find that half of the tree had fallen to the ground. It appeared that the tree had split in half, tearing a huge hollow out of the remaining half that was still standing, out of which two barn owls flew as we got closer. To the MM team, the Big Baobab was a symbol of strength, endurance, timelessness and solidity. It was an icon of the reserve. It had

featured in Thomas Pakenham's book "The Remarkable Baobab". Countless people had their photographs taken in front of it, dwarfed by its mighty bulk. It was unthinkable that it should be so diminished. To Jane, it looked like a foundered ship, wrecked on a reef. To the two baobab experts, however, here was a wonderful opportunity to gain rare data. We estimate that the tree must have collapsed several months ago. The fallen trunk has not yet started to collapse. Sarah and Diana took fibre samples from deep inside the tree which they will send to the United States for the latest technology in carbon dating. At least we might soon know how old the tree really is. Our feeling is that the tree is just so old that it is time for it to die or to start to die. We will keep monitoring the tree over the next few months to find out whether the rest of the tree stays alive. No longer the "Big Tree", it is now just an "Average Tree", its former title now held by a baobab of 19 metres circumference near Madia Pala camp.