

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

JULY 2008

SEASONS

The earliest fluffy, pale yellow blossoms are appearing on the acacia trees, and the Grey Go-away Birds are enjoying nibbling off the flowers with their parrot-like beaks. With the bush so dry and dead at the moment, there are slim pickings for all the animals. Brave warthogs graze our lawn at the lodge, just a couple of metres from us. At night our kitchen herb pot plants are ravaged by hungry gourmets. Not content with chives and green peppers, they have chewed off the decorative strelitzia plant on the lodge verandah. Only the rosemary and mint have been left untouched, which means we are eating a lot of lamb dishes. Growing anything around the lodge is difficult: if the salt-laden borehole water doesn't kill it, then the wildlife or the insects will. After one particularly cold night this month, our neighbours lost their entire maize and potato crops to frost. Baboons, warthogs and birds are also responsible for much crop damage, but the farmers persist. Because of our relatively mild winters, they are able to get their products to the markets earlier than farmers in other, colder parts of the country.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Phoenix, the female captive-bred cheetah, who was released in April, continues to fend for herself, successfully killing a variety of prey, and preferring to hunt along the river and across on the southern side of the reserve. Bones, the male captive-bred cheetah, who lost his buddy just before he was released last month, is not faring so well. After his initial surprise kill of a male impala, he has had little luck with his hunting. Narinda watched him try to bring down a baby gemsbok. He managed to grab the little antelope by the throat, and had it on the ground, but the gemsbok struggled until a couple of adult gemsbok arrived and drove the cheetah off. Adult gemsbok have long, sweeping, sharp horns, which they use expertly to defend themselves or their young. Bones was no match for the angry antelopes but managed to get away uninjured. Yet he soldiered on, and some days later killed another male impala. Both his impala kills were made in the afternoon and by the next morning both carcasses had been stolen from Bones, probably by brown hyaenas. So Bones' hunting experience has not been reinforced by rewarding results, and we have had to give him supplementary feeds.

Bones continues to spend too much time close to human habitation around the lodge and the farmhouse. Perhaps he associates this with being fed? Our Jack Russell terrier, Muscles, escaped from the safety of his fenced garden recently, when Bones was not far away. We soon heard Muscles barking hysterically. Peter and Narinda ran to the rescue, to find Muscles fearlessly dancing around Bones and yapping. Bones made a couple of half-hearted lunges at the little dog before Peter was able to scoop Muscles up and return him to the lodge. The next day, Muscles killed a puff-adder which had the temerity to slither into his garden. Heedless of the danger, Muscles grabbed the snake behind the head and shook it till it died. One bite from the snake would have been enough to kill the dog, who seems to have more lives than a cat.

Speaking of cats, back to Bones..... He has disappointed us by his continued interest in the quad bike, the motorbike, Narinda's bakkie (pick up) and the horse paddock, causing much anxiety to Nduna, Jane's horse, as well as recent signs of more serious aggression. This behaviour, coupled with his less-than-stellar performance as a hunter, resulted in discussions and meetings between the Makulu Makete team and the team from De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre. More intensive aversion therapy was prescribed and the loan of a safer vehicle for Bennie was offered by Pretoria University. Until the vehicle arrives, it was

decided that Bones should be put back in the boma (enclosure). This operation was much easier to achieve than you might think. Conveniently, Bones was hanging around the farmhouse, so Narinda and Bennie drove the bakkie slowly past him. He followed them for more than a kilometre, back to the boma and through the gate. Once locked inside, he quickly scent-marked a tree and sat waiting for his room-service meal to be delivered.

GAME VIEWING

Not all game viewing is done from the back of a Land Rover. One night recently Narinda went to help Bennie, whose car would not start, at the top of Vodacom Hill (one of the few places on the reserve where you can get a cell phone signal). After they had jump-started the car in the dark, they were rewarded with a very rare sighting of an aardwolf – a shy, nocturnal carnivore that feeds mainly on termites. The aardwolf looks like a small, slim version of a hyaena. Another insect-eating mammal spotted this month by Narinda was the charming little bat-eared fox.

When Jane and Nduna go for a ride, they usually see plenty of game. Kudu, impala, duiker and gemsbok are not frightened by the horse and rider. At Number 1. waterhole they rode past four gemsbok, eight kudu, two wildebeest, several warthogs, three eland and a giraffe. Sadly, there was no “partridge in a pear tree”.

We were amazed to find a new antelope species on the reserve this month. While out birding early one morning, Jane couldn't believe her eyes when a blesbok appeared on the road in front of her. Blesbok are not indigenous to this area, so when Peter was restocking the reserve with game, he deliberately did not include this species. However, blesbok are popular with hunters and they can be seen on hunting farms nearby. Later in the day, as if to corroborate Jane's extraordinary sighting, Samuel came to the lodge to report seeing a blesbok. Fearing a hole in the fence big enough for a blesbok to get in and for a cheetah to get out, Peter and Frans checked all the fences, but found nothing amiss. Blesbok are notoriously stupid, and the only explanation we can find for the presence of this animal is that it ran through the electric fence that crosses the river. Since first seen, it has popped up here and there all over the reserve and been spotted by most of the staff.

BIRDING

Although perhaps the quietest time of the year for birding, because of my (Jane's) more active birding for the SABAP bird atlas project, I have recorded some interesting species despite the season. Collared Sunbird and Grey Penduline Tit were species that required confirmation from the SABAP committee, as they had not previously been recorded in this area. Another new bird species has been added to our list this month – the bronze mannikin. This is a small, widespread and fairly insignificant bird, but it is the first time we have seen it at Makulu Makete. It is always a thrill to get a new species, though a Pel's Fishing Owl would have been the ultimate excitement, instead of another l.b.j. (little brown job).

To most people, birding is a nerdy occupation, but it has its moments, as the story of one of my atlas forays proves. Having started my latest survey of pentad 2230S_2850E in cold, cloudy, gloomy conditions, with the birdlife consequently sparse, I was pleased to see sunshine and clear skies on the fourth day. I filled a thermos for coffee, and loaded all my birding paraphernalia into my little Nomad 4x4 jeep. I had only had the Nomad for a week. With no roof or windows and able to handle any terrain, it's perfect for birding on our rugged roads. I set off down the drive from the lodge, eager to get to a favourite waterhole at the base of Madia Pala mountain, where I hoped to find the odd raptor, and drive to our workshop to pick up a two-way radio from my husband, Peter.

We don't have the Big 5, so walking and birding on our reserve has always been safe, until recently, when Bones was released and has been unpredictably chasing our quad bike and bakkie and charging Bennie. This was one of the reasons for the purchase of the fourth-hand Nomad jeep. It would be safer for me to go birding in a "proper" vehicle than on the quad bike, and I could also take our dogs in the Nomad for walks on the property away from the cheetahs.

When I got to the workshop, Bones was lying right outside, very relaxed under a lemon tree, with the tip of his tail twitching. He seemed placid enough, and Peter passed me the radio with no reaction from the cheetah. Off I went, looking forward to a couple of hours of pleasant birding. Perhaps four hundred metres down the track there was an ominous "clunk" and grinding noise from the Nomad. Getting out, the situation didn't look good – there was a long, serious-looking piece of machinery dragging along the ground under the vehicle, with oil dripping into the sand underneath. I picked up the stout stick I carry for just such contingencies, and walked back to the workshop. Bones got up and came towards me – was he just purring or was he growling? I put the stick out in front of me and spoke soothingly to him. Peter came out of the workshop, also armed with a stick, and Bones wandered off, bored. We drove back to inspect the damage to the Nomad. According to Peter, the drive shaft had disconnected from the diff and when it fell, it had bounced up and punched a hole in the sump, hence the dripping oil. Not a good start to my birding.

Understanding the importance of "finishing my pentad", the long-suffering Peter took me back to the house, where I transferred all my things to the quad bike, and took off again towards the mountain, taking a different route, which avoided the cheetah. Finally, about one and a half hours later than expected, I pattered in to the waterhole. Was it worth it? Of course it was. Just as I arrived a Verreaux's Eagle took off from the edge of the waterhole and cruised low over the mountainside, causing noisy consternation amongst the dassies. I sat astride the quad, drinking my coffee and watching waves of red-billed queleas flying down to drink, yellow-fronted canaries, blue waxbills, acacia-pied barbets, Namaqua doves, familiar chats, red-billed and yellow-billed hornbills, a couple of yellow-throated petronias and overhead an African hawk eagle, all as pleased as I was to see the sun again. The usual suspects, and nothing really spectacular, but after the lack of birdlife over the past couple of days it was a joy to see so many birds, and it soothed my conscience about tearing off and leaving my husband saddled with a disabled Nomad.

Thanks to Peter and Johannes, the Nomad was back on the road within a few days – just in time for the start of my second pentad!