

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### AUGUST 2008

#### SEASONS

Although technically still winter, August went out with a week-long hot spell, making it feel more like summer. At Makulu Makete the temperature peaked at 34 degrees C (93 degrees F), while down in the south of the country, around the Cape, fierce storms, high seas, rain and cold weather made the headlines. As the countryside gets drier, the animals become more brazen about looking for food. A female warthog and her three piglets found their way into our lucerne hayshed, making the most of the “free” food. When we tried to herd them out, they ricocheted off the walls and fences, like a pin-ball machine, trying to ram their way out. Unable to find an exit, even though the gate was wide open, they turned on us, heads down and trotters flying. Being charged by an angry warthog mother, equipped with big tusks, is not a laughing matter. We are now putting out bales of lucerne hay here and there at waterholes across the reserve to supplement the browsers’ feed. There’s still plenty of dry grass for the grazers, but the kudus, in particular, are in need of extra help. Hunger overcomes their natural shyness and some kudu bulls become brave enough to grab the hay from our hands as we put it into feeding troughs.

#### CAPTIVE CHEETAH PROJECT

After displaying unacceptably aggressive behaviour, Bones, the male captive-bred cheetah, was returned to the boma (enclosure) in July for more serious training involving the quad bike. It seemed that he had got the message that the quad bike was not to be chased, so he was released again a couple of weeks later. Unfortunately, his bad behaviour continued and it was decided, reluctantly, that he should be removed from the “rewilding” project and be replaced by another bonded pair of male cheetahs. Rather than wait for the vet to find a spare weekend to come and dart Bones again, Narinda decided to strike while the iron was hot. Bones was in a fairly open area and Narinda was able to lure him into a cage with a kudu leg, then let the cage door down behind him by hand. He was soon back in his boma for the third time.

Before the De Wildt team delivered the new pair of male cheetahs, they wanted us to bring Phoenix, the female captive-bred cheetah, back into the boma so that she would have a chance to get to know the two males through the fence that divides the enclosure. Phoenix had adapted well and was successfully killing regularly and looking after herself. She wouldn’t be as easy to trap as Bones had been. Luke and Narinda set out with a proper trap to look for Phoenix and found her in thick bush, on a newly-killed steenbok. Her location was inaccessible to a vehicle, so once again, Narinda took the situation into her own hands. Fearlessly, she took the dead steenbok away from the hungry cheetah and walked off, through the bush, with Phoenix close behind. Narinda put the steenbok into the trap and Phoenix followed, tripping the automatic door closed. Phoenix arrived back at the boma with her tiny antelope prey.

Bones was returned to De Wildt, and his place was taken by a pair of young brothers, 15 months old, which have been named Chaos and May Day. Chaos is much bigger than his brother and lived up to his name by chewing May Day’s radio collar to pieces in the first couple of days. The two boys are settling in well, and patrol the fence which divides them from Phoenix. Once all three cheetahs are comfortable with one another, Phoenix will be let out of the boma to resume her life in the wild. The boys will remain in the boma until they have adjusted to their new environment, the electric fence and their new diet of whole carcasses.

Bones' story has a slight twist to its end. Bennie, the Master's student who is using the rewilding project for her thesis, left MM to drive to De Wildt with Bones in a travelling box on a trailer behind her vehicle. Not half an hour after she left, at 5.30 in the morning, one of the tyres on the trailer blew out. There was a problem with the spare wheel for the trailer and Bennie had to limp slowly to Polokwane, 150 km away, where she drove into a tyre repair shop to have the trailer wheel fixed. Bones created a lot of interest as he sat in his box while the nervous mechanics worked below him. Bennie had several offers from people who wanted to take the cheetah home as a pet, and, unsolicited, some offered donations to the project.

## **WILD CHEETAH PROJECT**

With all the drama surrounding the rewilding project, we haven't forgotten our beloved wild cheetahs, who gave us such pleasure and, by comparison with the captive-bred cheetahs, were relatively easy to deal with. We have had news that Danny, who fathered the cubs of both our wild female cheetahs, Dottie and Bubbles, will soon be a father again. Being timid and elusive, he is hardly ever seen on the reserve where he now lives, but his spoor (tracks) were seen next to the spoor of the female cheetah on the reserve a couple of months ago, and it looks as if the female, whose name is Storm, could be pregnant. She should be due to have her cubs within the next few weeks.

We received very sad news from De Wildt that one of Bubbles' cubs, a female, which was released at Tswalu reserve a few weeks ago, was attacked by the resident male cheetah and died of her injuries. This is most distressing to us, who remember her playing so happily with her brothers and sister here at Makulu Makete. It reinforces the necessity to get Phoenix and the two male cheetahs used to each other before their paths cross out in the bush, as is bound to happen.

Narinda spent a weekend at Monate Game Reserve, where Bubbles' remaining four cubs are temporarily being held before being sent to their new homes. The cubs are still in a boma at Monate, but will be released shortly into the reserve. Narinda was pleased to see the cubs looking so well, but reports that they have become much more aggressive since they left Makulu Makete, and perhaps the influence of their mother. Narinda was charged by the cubs at first, but they eventually calmed down and she was able to watch them closely and renew her friendship with them.

## **GAME VIEWING**

While birdwatching at the river, Jane watched an otter (probably a Cape Clawless Otter) foraging in the shallow dam. It kept coming up to take a breath, like a breast-stroke swimmer, then it would duck-dive down into the water, the tip of its tail disappearing smoothly. Popping up again further down the dam, with a fish in its mouth, it headed to the river bank where it ate the fish and went back for more. As it swam and dived in the water, an African Darter sat above on a branch, wings outstretched and warming itself in the early morning sun. Another fisherman, this time a Pied Kingfisher, hovered over the water, spearing in now and again after its prey. It is an absolute delight to witness such a tranquil scene, without disturbing the key players.

It's not always easy to appreciate some of the wildlife here. Take baboons, for example. Fascinating as it is to watch the interaction amongst a troupe of thirty baboons at the lodge waterhole, we don't welcome their presence on the thatched roof at Bushbuck Cottage, one of the houses at Makulu Makete. At their destructive worst, the baboons have pulled out lumps of thatch from the roof, leaving gaping holes that must be repaired before the start of the rainy

season. Unless the thatched roofs are covered with fine-mesh chicken wire, the baboons will repeat their performance again and again. At Narinda's house, squirrels have burrowed into the thatch, so that now she can see the sky through her roof. Thatchers have been called in again to repair the damage. It's hard to keep squirrels, monkeys and baboons off the roofs, but we have foiled the bushpigs and warthogs in their nightly rampage on our rubbish bins by building a tall, V-shaped structure to keep the rubbish bags out of the reach of these nocturnal marauders. Let's hope the baboons don't turn their attention to the delights of the rubbish, once the roofs are covered with chicken mesh.

Jane's horse, Nduna, is doing his best to encourage the wildlife. He has two companions – a Fork-tailed Drongo, which sits on his back and rides around the paddock with him, flying off to catch the insects which are stirred up by the horse's feet. The second is a lovely kudu bull, which keeps Nduna company and shares his daily rations of hay. The contrast between the two animals is profound: the elegant, slim, long-legged kudu, with its beautiful striped markings and curly horns; and Nduna, the stocky, farm-bred horse. What he loses in the length of leg, Nduna more than makes up for in the size of his big head.

## **BIRDING**

The male Red-headed Weavers are already sporting their crimson breeding plumage; a sure sign that spring is here. Some of the Masked Weavers are also showing off their gold and black finery. This makes identification of the weavers so much easier and quicker. During the winter months, eye, beak and leg colour are crucial to distinguishing each species, but you can't confuse these species in the breeding season. At the river dam, a pair of Egyptian Geese, honking proudly, paddle around with two brown and fawn-coloured chicks in tow, and a mother francolin shepherds her tiny chicks through the orchard. Marico sunbirds, gorgeous in their fresh iridescent colours, hawk insects from the bushes beside the river, and sing from the tops of the blossoming acacia trees.

Jane ventured outside the reserve to extend the range of her bird atlas for SABAP (Southern African Bird Atlas Project). The Platjan border post, on the Limpopo River a few kilometres away, provided an array of species for the records. Neither White-breasted Cormorant, nor surprisingly, Pied Crow, had been recorded in the previous SABAP survey in that location. Although we hardly ever see Pied Crows at Makulu Makete, they are fairly common wherever there are cattle farms or human habitation nearby. Peter used his state-of-the-art digital camera to photograph the distinguishing features of an African Mourning Dove. He managed to get a clear photo of the yellow eye, surrounded by a red ring, that identifies this species, as the bird sat on the top of the baobab tree in our farmhouse garden. Jane's submission of that species, which had been queried by the SABAP experts, was subsequently accepted, thanks to the photo. The farmhouse garden has been resonating with the lovely, lilting call of Mourning Doves.

## **LODGE AND PEOPLE**

We were once again lucky enough to have six, cuddly, fat, fluffy Anatolian shepherd puppies stay overnight with us before they were distributed to farmers in the district to guard their sheep and goats against predators, such as cheetahs. This programme is part of De Wildt's efforts to prevent the killing of wild cheetahs by farmers who lose stock to predators. During the month, two wild leopards were brought in for us to house until they could be relocated to "leopard-friendly" reserves. These leopards had been caught by farmers in traps and were accused of killing game and domestic animals. Instead of shooting the leopards, which is common practice, these particular farmers called De Wildt to remove them.

Kelly, from the De Wildt Wild Cheetah Project, and her gorgeous muscle-bound hound, Diesel, the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, spent a couple of days prowling around “scat sniffing”. Diesel is being trained to find cheetah droppings (or “scats”) by sniffing them out in the bush. The scats are then analysed for hair samples, which gives a good indication of what prey the cheetahs are taking, if the actual kills are not observed. As we sat around the dinner table one night, Kelly arrived, proudly holding up two plastic bags of cheetah droppings that Diesel had just tracked down. Diesel had a wide grin on his face, but not as big as Kelly’s.