

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### SEPTEMBER 2008

#### SEASONS

The temperature has see-sawed through September, rising to 37 degrees Celsius (100 Fahrenheit) in the last week of the month. A familiar summer sound has already started - the repetitive call, "Good Lord, deliver us", of the fiery-necked nightjars in the still of the night. A few tentative, distant rumbles of thunder were heard after one particularly hot day, but no rain eventuated. People, birds and wildlife wait irritably for the first rain. Frogs are calling at night, in anticipation of precipitation. An Eastern Olive Toad laid its eggs, just like a thick skein of black wool, in our dogs' water bowl one night. The eggs were transferred to the waterhole below the lodge to join the schools of tadpoles already swimming around. At the end of the dry season, with very little feed left in the bush, the animals gravitate to the green lawn beside the swimming pool at the lodge. What a pleasure it is to look out of the window and see a beautiful bushbuck ram standing outside, his white spots and stripes contrasting with his red body. Warthogs continue to dig up the lawn and a kudu bull has discovered Narinda's bakkie (pick up truck) parked under shadecloth with the other vehicles at the lodge. Narinda uses the bakkie to fill feed troughs, dotted throughout the reserve, with lucerne hay. The clever kudu is monopolising the left-over hay in the tray of the bakkie, standing in a spare parking spot between the bakkie and a Land Rover.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

The coalition of two young male cheetahs, brothers Chaos and Mayday, have been getting used to their new environment inside their boma (enclosure). However, like Bones before them, they began to take an unhealthy interest in the quad bikes that are used by Bennie and Narinda to monitor them. For the safety of our staff and Master's student, Bennie, it is unacceptable for the cheetahs to chase the quad bikes or the motor bike that our fencing maintenance man, Frans, rides around the perimeter fence every day. The De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust arranged for animal trainers Sled and Tamara Reynolds, from the United States, to spend some time with "the boys" and reverse this behaviour. Sled and Tamara, whose company is called "Gentle Jungle", have trained big cats and supply animal actors for some major Hollywood movies, such as *Tales of Narnia* and *Zorro*. Bennie and Narinda will continue to use the methods demonstrated by the Gentle Jungle team to ensure that there will be no further bad behaviour. Just yesterday, while we were watching "the boys" lying on their favourite termite mound in their boma, sleeping off a meal of impala, a monitor lizard appeared in front of them. Both cheetahs hissed and showed their teeth, but the lizard stood its ground, then walked deliberately towards a hole at the base of the termite mound between the cats. This was too much for the brave boys, who both got up and backed away, like a frightened lady confronted by a mouse. What a pair of wimps! Could it be that the training by Gentle Jungle went too far?

The female cheetah, Phoenix, who had been returned to the boma so that she and the male cheetahs could get used to one another, from different sides of a dividing fence, was released again at the end of the month. The three cheetahs were showing no signs of aggression towards one another, so it was considered time to let Phoenix out again. Shortly after she found her way out of the open gate, she was seen streaking across the clearing around the lodge waterhole, scattering kudus, impalas and gemsbok, as she singled out a male impala and chased it into the bush. Although she missed that impala, within an hour she had killed another impala ram and was lying proudly next to her kill just below tent number one at the lodge. She had not forgotten her hunting skills during her brief return to captivity.

This month, Narinda was invited for a second visit to Monate Reserve, where four of the wild cheetah cubs that were born at Makulu Makete in 2006 are being held. Her interest in Monate was understandable, as she was devoted to the cheetah family, which she followed every day for more than a year, watching the cubs grow. But it seems that the cheetahs at Monate are not the main attraction. It is the Monate ranger, Wimpie, now looking after the cheetahs, who Narinda is visiting. Is this the first occasion that a cheetah has played Cupid?

### GAME VIEWING AND BUSH

We have had some nice sightings of game this month. While birding at the weir by the farmhouse, Jane saw something swimming across the river in the very far distance. It seemed too big to be an Egyptian goose, and it was swimming too fast. Her binoculars revealed a male bushbuck swimming strongly, only his head sticking out of the water, horns clearly visible. The bushbuck's natural habitat is the thick bush along the river banks, but they do not look well designed for swimming, with their thin legs and small, sharp hooves, so this sighting was quite a surprise.

Another lovely bushbuck sighting occurred at the farmhouse, where a female bushbuck had "stashed" her baby in the garden while she went off foraging each day. The tiny baby, with legs like chopsticks and hooves as big as a thimble, folded its legs under itself elegantly and sat under the oleander tree, watching the comings and goings as the farmhouse renovations continued.

A beautiful African wildcat was seen just metres from the garden fence at the lodge. Similar in size to a domestic cat, it had orange-coloured ears and a grey and black striped tail. Brown hyaenas seem to be quite active recently. They have been seen several times at night and even during the day. We were woken the other night by the unearthly screeching wails of brown hyaenas, probably complaining that they couldn't get into the cheetahs' boma to steal the impala carcass the cats had been fed.

One of the smallest plants on the reserve is a hoodia, which was discovered some time ago and marked by regular camping guests from Johannesburg. We have been watching the hoodia for months and at last we were rewarded this month with a view of the little succulent flowering. The flat, brownish-red flowers give off a smell like rotting meat, to attract insects. The flowers confirm that this plant is a *Hoodia currorii*. Hoodia has been used by bushmen as an appetite-suppressant, and to treat indigestion. With natural remedies being all the rage these days, hoodia has become quite popular as an alternative medicine.

On the other end of the scale is the huge baobab. To our great sadness, our biggest baobab split in half some time early this year. Formerly 21 metres in circumference, only half of the tree has been left standing. In June, a sample of the fibres taken from the middle of this baobab tree was sent to the United States for carbon dating, using the Pelletron CFAMS system, which is unique in the world. It is the third major advance in carbon dating technology and only commenced in May of this year. The result shows that the tree is 1,001 years old, give or take 19 years. It has been suggested that if we dig deeper into the centre of the tree, we could possibly find that the tree is even older. This new technology is giving answers to the question that has been asked for centuries: "How old are baobab trees?"

### BIRDING

Jane and Peter joined a camping tour with the Greater Limpopo Birding Route through the Venda tribal area, which extends from Makhado (Louis Trichardt) right across to Kruger Park. As well as being an interesting cultural region, Venda has some unique birdlife. We were lucky enough to see such tasty morsels as Pink-throated Twinspot, African Broadbill,

Green Twinspot, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Mottled Spinetail and the “regional rarity”, Grey Waxbill. Peter became a hero in the group when he spotted the gorgeous, but elusive Narina Trogon when he was having a pee under the tree in which the bird was perched. Thereafter his services as a spotter were in great demand. All the birders wanted Peter to drink more and more water. Jane got twelve “lifers” (species she had never seen before) on this trip. The group’s birdlist was submitted to the Birding Atlas and contributed significantly to broadening the understanding of the distribution of the species in this little-known area of South Africa.

Back at MM, we have another new species for our bird list - the Black-winged Stilt – two of which were seen wading in the river. There were three separate sightings of Kori Bustards this month. We recorded Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters for the first time this year, as well as Red-eyed Bulbul. It won’t be long now before the summer migrants start arriving to join the local residents. Roll on summer birding!