

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

OCTOBER 2008

SEASONS

We have had not a drop of rain for more than eight months and the veld (bush) is looking depressingly dry. Despite the lack of rain, new green leaves have started to appear on the baobab trees. The occasional floppy, white flower, rather like a big camellia, hangs amongst the leaves, looking delicately out of place next to the heavy, gnarled old branches of these ancient trees. Usually the hottest month of the year, October has been relatively cool, with many overcast days when the temperature drops too low to generate thunderstorms, which produce rain. Because of the dry conditions, we seem to be experiencing more problems than normal with pumps and waterholes. Pipes leading from the various pumps, which are dotted across the property at waterholes, are frequently bitten through by thirsty brown hyaenas looking for water, causing leaks that empty the waterholes. The hard, salty water that comes up from many of our boreholes plays havoc with the pumps, which have to be serviced often. Peter and his crew spend much of their time pulling out pumps from boreholes, repairing and replacing them. Many of the pumps are solar-driven, so testing them becomes a problem on overcast days. We have increased our supplementary feeding of lucerne hay to help the browsers get through this most difficult time of the year. Abandoning their natural caution in favour of food, kudu bulls wait next to the feeding troughs to take a mouthful of hay from Narinda as she fills the troughs. Humans and antelopes alike are waiting for the first rainfall to transform the bush.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Making three kills in the first week after leaving the boma (enclosure) again, the female cheetah, who is one of the captive-bred subjects of the rewilding project for the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre, demonstrated that she had not lost her hunting knack. Flushed with her own success, Phoenix tackled and killed a very big male impala, but in the process was badly wounded in the shoulder by the impala's long, sharp horns. The wound was photographed and an email sent to Dr. Peter Caldwell, the expert cheetah vet in Pretoria. Next day, Peter arrived with an entourage of interested people, including his assistant, two final-year veterinary students and Kelly, from De Wildt. Phoenix was duly darted out in the bush and carried back to the lodge for another operation on the kitchen table. There was standing-room only in the kitchen to witness the deft stitching of Dr. Caldwell. Apart from the group from Pretoria, Bennie and Narinda were not going to miss out, nor Jane and her cousin, Mandy and Mandy's husband, Mick, from Australia, who had just arrived for their first visit to Africa. The cheetah's hair was shaved all around the wound, leaving the skin with its dark spots bare. The torn skin, which had dried out in the heat, was irrigated and dragged back over the raw flesh, and neatly stitched up. Phoenix was then transferred back to the boma for recovery. Let's hope she has learnt her lesson about taking on dangerous prey.

While he was at MM, Dr. Caldwell sedated MayDay, one of the male cheetahs, and put on a new radio collar. The old one had been chewed off by MayDay's buddy, Chaos. The good doctor also treated Jane's big boerboel dog, Sharp, who had become very lame. After the veterinary team left at dusk for the long drive back to Pretoria, Narinda kept a watchful eye on the two cheetahs to make sure they were recovering from the tranquillisers. To her dismay, she found Chaos chewing on the groggy MayDay's new collar, so she called for reinforcements from the lodge and went into the boma in the dark, dragging MayDay by his tail into the safety of a corner enclosure, while Peter and Mick fended off Chaos, who was living up to

his name and seriously charging them, Narinda and the other cheetah. Having only been at MM for a couple of days, Mick and Mandy were overwhelmed by all this excitement.

Narinda and Bennie kept Dr. Caldwell updated on Phoenix's wound by email photos but unfortunately, towards the end of the month, the wound became infected. Once again, Mick and Mandy were conscripted into helping get the unsedated Phoenix into a travelling box so that she could be sent to Dr. Caldwell's practice in Pretoria for specialist care. It seems to our visitors that every day at MM produces some kind of unusual action or drama!

MayDay and Chaos will be released from the boma in a couple of days. They are very active and show great interest in any antelope that walk past their boma, so we are looking forward to watching their progress in the outside world.

GAME VIEWING

This is the best time of year to see game. The animals are drawn to the waterholes and the river to drink, and the lack of leaves on the trees makes it easy to see them. The added attraction of the feeding troughs means that there is a constant stream of animals at the lodge waterhole. Kudus, gemsbok, impalas, waterbuck, warthogs, baboons and giraffe are frequent visitors.

Having survived a near miss in the old Land Rover, with Jane at the wheel, Mandy and Mick bravely agreed to go on a night drive with her. It was a hot, still night: perfect for a game drive in the open Landy, and we really hit the jackpot. With Mick on the spotlight, our first exciting sighting was a caracal, sitting quietly under a bush, watching us. Jane was ecstatic, as she had never seen a wild caracal before. Further along the road, Mick picked up the bright eyes of a small animal hiding behind an anthill. We couldn't work out what it was, as it looked straight at us with its ears up. Was it an African wild cat or a baby brown hyaena? Then it stood up, turned sideways and all was revealed – long legs and vertical stripes on its body. An aardwolf! An aardwolf and a caracal in one night – both first sightings for Jane, and of course for Mick and Mandy - what a thrill! A bat-eared fox slinking away under bushes was the third unusual species for the night. Over the next few days, but in the daylight hours, Peter saw a small leopard cross the track in front of his vehicle. Jane saw a brown hyaena running away from a dead warthog. A dead impala was found, apparently killed by a caracal – could it be the same caracal that we saw on our night drive?

BIRDING

The first red-chested cuckoo was heard late in the month. This is one of the earliest of the summer migrants, usually arriving at MM in October. Timid and difficult to spot, its repetitive, three note call of "Piet my vrou", will echo through the bush for the next few months. On a short camping trip to Kruger National Park at the end of October, we saw and heard the African cuckoo in the north of the park, at the Pafuri picnic spot, but we have not seen this species or the other migrant cuckoos at MM so far this season.

Both in Kruger and in the Tuli Block of Botswana, where we spent a couple of days at a remote bush camp, several species of vultures were seen greedily haggling over kills. In Botswana, we watched a group of about 30 vultures – mainly White-backed vultures, one Cape vulture and a few Lappet-faced vultures – completely demolish a dead, young kudu in less than an hour. The carcass had been untouched when the birds arrived, but when the vultures departed, just the skin and a bare skeleton was left. In Kruger, a feeding frenzy of White-backed, Lappet-faced, White-headed and Hooded Vultures, and one Marabou stork, fought over a dead elephant. Although rarely seen at Makulu Makete, we also spotted some White-backed vultures circling above Madia Pala Mountain this month.

Jane continues her bird atlassing forays and has been disappointed this month not to have received any "Out of Range" verification notices for efforts. When she first started sending in records from MM, she was required to prove her sightings of many species which had not been recorded in this area before, but it seems that she has caught up with all the unusual species for a while. Perhaps the arrival of the summer migrants will stir up some more action!

BAOBABS

A German film crew spent a few hours at our big baobab tree, which split earlier in the year, leaving half lying on the ground like a beached whale, and half standing, with a gaping cavity in its side. They were making a documentary for a German/French educational television channel, following Professor Adrian Patrut, who is the world expert on baobabs. The professor, a rather eccentric Rumanian, carbon-dated our big tree recently at around 1,000 years old. His research has proved that baobabs do not live for thousands of years, as was previously believed. He thinks our baobab is the second-oldest yet recorded by carbon-dating. He believes that the biggest baobab trees are not necessarily the oldest. The very big trees, such as the famous Segole Tree which is the biggest baobab in the world and is located directly east of Makulu Makete, grow in better conditions and put on a big growing spurt when they are younger and may not survive as long as trees, like our baobab, that grow in more natural conditions. While the camera rolled, the Professor took measurements and nine samples from inside the remaining trunk. The samples, costing \$US1,000 each, will take at least six months to be processed in America. Jane and Mandy acted as extras in the film, holding the tape measure and climbing over the rotting tree trunk, listening to the Professor's fascinating explanations, but not always understanding his rather "unique" English. It seems strange that his study of baobabs is being funded, not by any African countries where baobabs are found, but by institutions from Rumania and the United States, countries in which the baobab is not a native species.