

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY NOVEMBER 2008

SEASONS

Having spent nearly the whole of November in Australia, Jane and Peter noticed a huge difference in the veld (bush) when they got back to Makulu Makete at the end of the month. After 80mm of rain since the beginning of the month, the trees and bushes have sprouted thick coverings of leaves. The foliage is so dense that it makes game viewing and bird watching more difficult. Arriving back at the reserve in the dark, the tracks seemed much narrower because of the overhanging branches. It was easy to lose a sense of direction in the unfamiliar, overgrown bush. There is still virtually no grass, but the browsers now have plenty of leaves to keep them happy and we have stopped supplementary feeding of lucerne. We are grateful for the rain so far, but, never satisfied, we need more - and soon, to start the grass growing for the grazing animals. Daily temperatures in the high 30s Centigrade (100+ Fahrenheit) mean that most of the outside tasks have to be finished by mid-morning, before it gets too hot. The swimming pool has become popular once again. Peter loves this hot weather, but even he has relinquished and had an air-conditioner installed in the bedroom to make the stifling nights more bearable.

CHEETAH PROJECT

It's been a busy month for our captive-bred cheetahs. Oh for the days when we had wild cheetahs at Makulu Makete! Wild-born cheetahs Dottie, Danny and Bubbles were so much easier to look after than Phoenix, Chaos and MayDay. The wild cheetahs were "bush-smart", having been taught by their mothers, while the captive-born cheetahs have to learn by their mistakes, often injuring themselves in the process.

The two boys, Chaos and MayDay, were released from their boma on 2 November. They walked out of the gate and straight up the drive towards the lodge. Peter shepherded them back down the drive in his Land Cruiser, and they set off into the bush for their first taste of freedom. Within 10 minutes they had caught and killed a large warthog, just a couple of hundred metres from the boma. MayDay still had his teeth in the warthog's neck when Bennie and Mick, a visitor from Australia, arrived on the scene. Off to a good start, the boys continued killing – two more warthogs, a bushbuck ram, a young waterbuck bull, and a fully-grown gemsbok (oryx). But then the trouble started. Chaos developed a sore eye and the specialist cheetah vet, Peter Caldwell, from Pretoria, was called in yet again. Chaos was taken back to Pretoria for surgery by an ophthalmologist who discovered that the problem was caused by an animal hair which had pierced Chaos's eyeball. While Chaos recovered in Pretoria, MayDay was back in the boma, having had an injury to his leg stitched up. Meanwhile, Phoenix, the female cheetah, was still in Pretoria waiting for her wounded shoulder to heal properly.

The boys eventually returned to the reserve and were released once again. So far they haven't ventured further than a 2 kilometre radius from the lodge and boma area. They seem to have cleaned up or frightened away most of the game in that area but, instead of investigating new territory, they are staying in the same area and starting to look hungry. Chaos gave everyone a fright when he was found on the wrong side of the fence, along the river. MayDay was keeping him company, walking along the fence inside the reserve, and Narinda managed to lure Chaos back under the fence with a tasty leg of impala. It seems Chaos ran straight through the fence, without even seeing it, as he went for something on the other side. Phoenix is due to return to MM in the next week or so. There's never a dull moment with these cheetahs.

WILD CHEETAHS

We have updated our website with photos taken in September of Bubbles' five cubs being released into a boma at Monate Game Reserve. See www.makulumakete.com/bubbles and scroll to the very end of the photos. Unfortunately, since our report last month that one of the female cubs had been killed by a male cheetah at its new home, the remaining female cub has also died. She was still at Monate with her three brothers when she became ill. Tick bite was suspected, as she was found to be infested with ticks. She died within a couple of days, but the vets believe that the reason she was so badly infested with ticks was that her resistance was down due to some unknown illness. Her three brothers were sedated and checked for ticks and found to be free of the parasites, even though they were in the same boma as the dead female. Narinda's boyfriend, Wimpie, who is in charge of the cubs at Monate was understandably very distressed at the cub's death. He has never lost a cheetah before and refers to Bubbles' cubs as the "Monate/MM kids". The remaining three male cubs are due to be sent for release at Pudwa reserve. We hope they will be happy there and adapt quickly to the wild conditions, having been so well prepared by their mother, Bubbles.

GAME VIEWING

The hot weather has brought out the reptiles. Jane's cousin, Mandy, stood on a snake (probably a Mozambique Spitting Cobra) in the dark on the verandah of the lodge just before she left MM. She quickly jumped away and managed to call out "Snake!", in a shaky voice, without being bitten. Since then, we have seen more spitting cobras and a 2-metre python was found in Bushbuck Cottage, where Jane and Peter used to live, and now being rented to Kerneels and Annette, a retired couple from Pretoria. Pythons are wonderful mice and rat-catchers, but Annette drew the line at having one in the house. Much more acceptable are the beautifully-patterned leopard tortoises that can now be seen bumbling around in the veld after their long months of hibernation. Scorpions are back, some ending up in the bottom of the swimming pool, almost as big as mini-lobsters.

The impala ewes are heavily pregnant. They should start lambing within a week or two. Another baby giraffe has arrived in the last month and this time it's a boy. We saw him with a slightly older female baby and three adult giraffes in front of a baobab tree. All five giraffes stood in line, watching us with curiosity. What a beautiful picture it would have made, if only we had had a camera!

On the predator front, Bennie reported two sightings of honey-badgers this month, as well as another caracal kill.

BIRDING

Bennie and Narinda had their hands full with cheetahs and university exams, and since Jane was away for most of the month, not much attention was paid to our avian population. Now that she's back, Jane can't wait to get out there to check on the arrival of the summer migrants and the status of nesting Wahlberg's and African Fish Eagles. December is always an exciting month for birds at MM and we hope to have plenty to report next month.

While they were in Australia, Peter and Jane spent some time in Far North Queensland. Knowing virtually nothing about Australian birdlife, they were nevertheless thrilled to see a Cassowary cross the road in front of their vehicle, followed by two large chicks, the size of turkeys. These huge, flightless and colourful birds walked into the thick rainforest that flanked the road and almost immediately became invisible.

BAOBABS AND PEOPLE

Having reported on sampling the remaining half of the “big baobab” for carbon dating at the end of last month, we are sad and shocked to announce that the tree has now totally collapsed. The trunk that was still standing last month split in two and crashed to the ground some time in the last four weeks. The “big baobab” is no more. Its massive branches and trunk are lying in the veld like rubble from a bombed building. Saying goodbye to the tree was a bit like grieving for a lost friend. It might just be a coincidence, but the tree finally fell exactly a year after the death of our never-to-be-forgotten ranger and friend, Shawn.

But back in the present – we are pleased to announce that Narinda passed her exams and will start her second and final year of a BTech in Nature Conservation in January. Another happy announcement is the birth of a baby boy on 30 November to our fence man, Frans, and his wife, Elisa.