

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

DECEMBER 2008

SEASONS

It's been a hot and humid month, ending with a week or more of overcast, damp, muggy weather, but not much rain. So far this season we have not had the traditional summer downpours of rain accompanying the spectacular electrical storms that we have experienced. Instead, our rainfall total has been achieved from drizzle, mist and light rain. The Mogalakwena River has not started flowing, due to the lack of rainfall further upstream. The grass is just starting to appear, and we hope that soon the ground will be covered with a carpet of green. We were worried that our grazing animals were going hungry, even though the browsers now have plenty of leaves to eat, so we have been feeding out lucerne hay at various waterholes to tide the grazers over until the grass can support them. Camera traps placed at the waterholes near the hay caught photos of zebras, eland and the occasional wildebeest making the most of the offering. At the lodge waterhole, several gemsbok and a beautiful waterbuck bull were attracted by the hay. The waterbuck took to lying contentedly in the middle of the pile of hay, protecting it from the gemsbok.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Not long after being released once again into the reserve, after a trip to the vet in Pretoria, Chaos, and his buddy MayDay, the captive-bred cheetahs, were found lying under a bush by the river. They seemed to be making good progress, having at last ventured further afield to new territory. However, on closer inspection, Narinda found that Chaos was wounded. It appeared that he had been gored by something with horns (possibly a bushbuck ram) or tusks (a warthog), as he had several punctures around his back legs. Once again, photos of the wounds were emailed to Dr. Peter Caldwell, the expert cheetah vet in Pretoria. This time it was decided to treat the injuries "in the field", rather than subject Chaos to the stress of another trip to Pretoria. He was fed lumps of meat with antibiotics secreted inside, and the injuries did not seem to worry him too much. He and MayDay moved about the reserve as normal. But after a few days Chaos stopped taking the meat and seemed reluctant to get up. Once again, he was sent off to Pretoria to the good care of Dr. Caldwell, who treated the injuries but did not think the cheetah's lethargy was due to the wounds he had received. He confirmed that the injuries appeared consistent with warthog tusks. Despite all the vet's efforts, Chaos died a few days later. A post mortem revealed that the cause of death was massive toxæmia from acute peritonitis caused by a perforated ulcer. Ulcers are not uncommon in cheetahs, particularly those bred in captivity.

When Chaos was sent to Pretoria, MayDay, his buddy, was put back into the boma for the time being, until Chaos returned. Poor MayDay called piteously for the first few days, wondering where his brother had gone. After the sad news of Chaos's death, MayDay remains in the boma. Peter and Jane shared Christmas dinner with MayDay, who graciously donated one of the legs of his impala carcass for the humans to roast on Christmas Day. Phoenix, the female cheetah, is still at De Wildt until her shoulder is completely healed. At the start of this project, none of us envisaged that there would be so many unexpected and sad turns-of-events. All those involved are giving serious consideration to the project and decisions on its future direction will be taken early in 2009.

On a happier note, Danny, the wild cheetah who fathered cubs first with Dottie, and then with Bubbles, the female wild cheetahs at Makulu Makete, is the father of another litter of five healthy cubs, born to Storm at Glen Lyon in the Northern Cape. Danny continues to be a nervous and elusive cheetah to track, but obviously has a way with the ladies.

GAME VIEWING

The first baby impala for the season was seen on 5 December. Since then we have been delighted by more and more of these delicate little creatures, bouncing after their mothers on their tiny, thin legs. Even when still wet from birth, the babies are able to leap to their wobbly feet and follow their mothers away from danger. It is hard to imagine anything prettier than three baby impalas lying in the shade of a tree, with their elegant mothers standing watchfully nearby.

As we mentioned last month, the leopard tortoises are very active at this time of the year. We are constantly stopping to move them off the road from in front of the vehicle, or wait while they plod across. They range in size from only as big as a hen's egg, to almost as big as a basketball, their shells adorned with lovely abstract patterns in black and earth colours. We watched one amorous male tortoise untiringly follow a female, twice his size, tottering on his back legs as he tried desperately to hold on to the female's shell while she grazed, apparently unaware of his ardour.

The hot, wet weather has brought on the annual invasion of termites. Some nights the air is thick with flying ants, which are drawn to the lights at the lodge, flying in clouds around the verandah and battering at the windows. After a few hours of crazed flying, they fall to the ground, drop their wings and crawl off to make nests in the ground. Next morning, the paths outside are covered with a thick drift of lacy, almond-shaped, fairy-like wings. The slightest puff of breeze lifts them, making them almost impossible to sweep up. The surface of the swimming pool is black with dead termites and they provide a feast for all the other creatures. Birds, squirrels, lizards and our dogs gorge themselves on the protein-rich ants. One morning recently, Narinda saw three bat-eared foxes, no doubt enjoying the termite windfall.

BIRDING

Now is the busiest time of year for the birdlife at Makulu Makete. Not only are the summer migrants flocking in, but the resident birds have donned their most gorgeous plumage and are entertaining us with their nesting and chick-rearing behaviour.

In December we recorded five species of bee-eater. The glorious pink and turquoise Southern Carmine Bee-eaters have arrived, swooping joyfully at insects down by the river. The resident White-fronted Bee-eaters, and cheeky Little Bee-eaters, as well as the elegant Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters have been joined by the migrant European Bee-eater, with its coppery and green plumage. Our favourite summer visitor, the Woodland Kingfisher, is everywhere, his lilting call filling the bush, as he darts past on electric-blue wings, lands on a tree and "flashes" open his wings. Barn swallows perch in their hundreds on the telephone and power lines, threatening to break the cables with the weight of their numbers. Red-backed Shrikes sit atop nearly every tree, watching attentively through their black masks. Infrequently seen species such as the Dusky Lark and the Southern Red Bishop have also appeared this month. The cuckoos are back in full force. The mournful cry of the male Black Cuckoo seems so at odds with the female's excited "whorly, whorly, whorly" reply. Diederik Cuckoos are plentiful, as are Red-Chested Cuckoos, with their "Piet my vrou" call, almost as annoyingly repetitive as the well-named Monotonous Lark's insistent call. Comb Ducks, the males encumbered by massive lumps on the top of their bills, are common along the river. All these species, plus the twitcher's delight – an African Finfoot, seen paddling quietly along the river – have helped boost our total birdlist for December to a very healthy 143.

But it's not just about quantity. We have had an enormous amount of pleasure watching the antics of the nesting birds at the lodge. A brilliantly plumed, male Red-headed Weaver has

worked tirelessly building nests under the thatched eaves and over our swimming pool. He delights in defiantly dropping discarded leaves into the pool below, usually just after it has been cleaned for the day. His wives fly in and out of the nests and the cheeping of babies can be heard from inside. A pair of handsome Gabar Goshawks has raised two chicks in a nest next to the lodge. The juvenile birds are now flying, but still reliant on their parents for food. This results in constant screaming from both juveniles and adults. The juveniles perch on the railing of our deck before dashing off to try out their new wings, and land unsteadily in a bush, announcing their presence with loud shrieks. The small birds at our bird bath have so far not taken the juveniles too seriously, but it won't be long before they are fair game. Next to the farmhouse, a pair of African Paradise Flycatchers, perhaps one of the prettiest of all birds here, built a tiny nest, not much bigger than an egg cup, and raised two fat chicks. The chicks were so big that one had to sit on top of the other in the tiny nest. With their chestnut plumage and wide, yellow beaks, they were unmistakable. The parents twittered in agitation as we took photos of the chicks in the nest, which was at the tip of a thin twig, and only about one and a half metres from the ground.

PEOPLE

We have had several visitors over the month, including Peter's accountant, Amanda, and her husband Ben, from Pretoria, who were lucky enough to see Chaos and MayDay out in the bush before Chaos's death. Peter's grandson, David, took a break from his hectic I.T. job in Johannesburg to chill out for a few days, cut off from cell-phone or internet contact. Pauline, Peter's niece, who usually visits us two or three times a year, got her "bushveld fix" between Christmas and New Year. Narinda's family spent Christmas with her at Makulu Makete, bringing with them the longed-for wet weather.

At the beginning of the month, Luke from De Wildt's Wild Cheetah Project, who has been based at Makulu Makete, and his girlfriend Vicky, returned from a two-month camping trip through Botswana, Zambia, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique. They enthralled us with their adventures: their old Toyota Hilux being bogged in sand in Botswana; the starter motor bursting into flames; and having to wire down the bonnet (hood) of the car after the catch broke off because of the appallingly bumpy roads. They were robbed at knife-point in Zanzibar, and although they persuaded the robber to give them back their passports, he got away with all their money and their camera. Vicky woke up in their tent one morning to find a spotted hyaena, one of the most fearsome predators, rubbing itself against her on the other side of the tent. They had close encounters with elephants and corrupt policemen, but it's a trip they will never forget. And, believe it or not, the Hilux is still going strong.

2008 has been a year full of wonder, excitement, action and some sadness at Makulu Makete. My cousin from Australia said she thought we were making up stories about our life here: it couldn't be as busy and full as we make it seem, but after just a few days staying with us during October, she said "I can't believe how much happens here. It's full on. There's never a dull moment. You were telling the truth all along!" We are looking forward to an equally interesting year ahead. We wish all our friends and readers a very Happy New Year and hope that by this time next year, perhaps the world will be in better condition than it is now.