

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

JANUARY 2009

SEASONS

The rain has finally arrived. In the last week of January it rained just about every day. The Mogalakwena River is surging through the reserve, loaded with soil from upstream, the water level as high as the debris left in the trees by the famous floods of the year 2000, when the whole of the south east part of Africa was under water. Violent electrical storms cause regular disruptions to the power supply and lightning has already knocked out energisers on two of the electric fences, water pumps, our television and our neighbour's telephone. At this time of the year, maintenance is high. The fences are under constant attack from lightning, flooding and falling trees. Grass growing at the base of the fence causes electrical shorts when it gets wet. Peter spends most of his time mending pumps and mobilising our team of workers to repair fences and roads washed away by the rain. Using the new spraying equipment on the tractor saves many hours of laborious herbicide spraying by hand with backpacks along the fencelines to kill the grass, which seems to grow so much faster than anywhere else. It seems ironic that we have been longing for the grass to grow and now we are desperate to kill it. Out in the veld (bush), the ground is covered with carpets of wildflowers, but here and there the grass is starting to appear. The humidity is almost unbearable, and everywhere there is a smell of rotting vegetation and damp.

CHEETAH PROJECT

The new year has brought with it optimism for the cheetah rewilding project. May Day, the only cheetah remaining at Makulu Makete, was taken back to De Wildt. Both he and Bones, the other male cheetah who had been removed from the project earlier, had lost their coalition buddies. Scruff, who was in a coalition with Bones, died unaccountably in the boma, and Chaos, who was the brother of May Day, died in December of the effects of a perforated ulcer. It was decided to try and bond Bones and May Day so that the project could be continued with the same demographics as it started out with – a single female and a bonded pair of males. Phoenix had recovered from her shoulder injuries and was ready to return to MM. At De Wildt, the two male cheetahs were placed in small adjacent “camps”, divided by a mesh fence, each with its own little shelter or “house”. Everyone involved in the project felt that these two cheetahs were missing their buddies and would respond well to a new partner. That's exactly what happened. They got used to each other through the fence and after a week or so the gate between them was opened. What a thrill it was when we received this text message from Kelly, at De Wildt, just a couple of days later. “Bones and May Day are lying in house together.” The three cheetahs will be back at Makulu Makete tomorrow and the project will be resumed. We were relieved not to have cheetahs on the property when the river came up so high that the fences were under water.

It's now nearly one year since Bubbles and her cubs left Makulu Makete. We received photos last week of the remaining three male cubs, looking very grown up and sporting new radio collars, relaxing in their boma at their new home at Pidwa. Once they are released, this triumvirate should be a formidable hunting team.

GAME VIEWING

We have a new member of the MM team – Sammy the Squirrel. The name might sound like a mafia gangster, but Sammy is a baby tree squirrel, which Jane found clinging to an outside tap early one morning, just inches away from the gaping jaws of Muscles, our Jack Russell Terrier, on the other side of the fence. Sammy was very cold and had probably been spread-eagled there on the tap most of the night. He soon warmed up in Jane's hands. We were

hoping his mother might find him, so we left him nearby, safe from the dog, in a small box for a few hours. Sammy curled up, tail over his head, and went to sleep, but his mother never came. Since then, Narinda has been raising Sammy on a diet of baby cereal. A week after we found him, he weighed 35 grams on our electronic kitchen scale. For such a tiny creature, he is full of life. Active and healthy, he loves to run all over us, making little talking sounds. Having just spent several thousand rands having our thatched roofs repaired from the damage made by squirrels, Peter was not impressed with us hand-rearing one of the “enemy”, but one look at cute little Sammy was enough to change his mind.

Last month we saw a total of eight black mambas. Jane came across two one morning while walking the dogs. Narinda had one outside her kitchen door. Another was spotted disappearing under one of the tents at the main camp. Three others were seen from vehicles at various locations, and the eighth was in the rafter’s in Luke’s bedroom. Luke moved out of his room.

After hours of rain, when the sun finally comes out, the animals start to appear in the clearings and along the roads, trying to dry off. We have seen many zebras in the last couple of weeks. Groups of four and five, and one big group of nine, gallop off into the bush as we pass. A small foal has been seen galloping along beside its mother, leaving little hoofprints, like thimbles, in the wet sand. Another baby giraffe has appeared. We spotted the new female calf with Makulu, one of the original bull giraffes that were introduced to Makulu Makete about eight years ago. “Makulu” means “big” in many African languages. He has distinctive scars on his rump and a spiderweb pattern on his neck, which earned him the nickname of “Spiderman” from our first volunteer, Michel. Browsing beside Makulu was another big pale, male which has peculiar folds of skin on his back, as if his skin is too big for his body. He is known as “the wrinkly male”.

While on their way to repair yet another pump, Peter and his gang saw a leopard cross the road in front of them. Leopards come and go as they please, because they can climb trees next to the fence and jump over, just like baboons and monkeys. It’s always a thrill to see one of these normally nocturnal big cats, and Peter said this was such a big leopard it looked almost like a lioness. At the other end of the scale, Jane saw three bat-eared foxes, cute and harmless.

BIRDING

The muggy weather, rain and consequent increase in vegetation and insect life, means excellent birding. Jane’s records for the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP) have included some of her favourites – Great Spotted Cuckoo, Broad-billed Roller and Grey-headed Kingfisher. Its distinctive call led Jane to an Olive-tree Warbler on our neighbour’s farm. This earned an envious “congratulations” from the SABAP co-ordinator for the region. Although non-descript, the Olive-tree Warbler is difficult to find and therefore on many birders’ “wish lists”. We have seen this species at MM several times in the past, but this month Jane got her first sighting here of a Crested Guineafowl, when a single bird surprised her down by the river. There must be thousands of Helmeted Guineafowl on the reserve, but this particular bird was well out of its usual range. Resident Spotted Thick-knees have produced a couple of chicks near the lodge. Formerly known by their Afrikaans’ name of “dikkop”, literally “thick head”, these are strange, long-legged birds, with big eyes (and thick knees and thick heads!), which usually slink off into the bush on approach, perhaps because they are embarrassed by their names.

At the lodge, the male Red-headed weaver has been so busy with his second wife and nest under the eaves, that he neglected his first nest, hanging over the swimming pool. It came

adrift from its anchor one night in a wild storm and fell into the pool. Jane fished it out straight away and the next morning found a gaping-mouthed chick in the nest. We tied the nest back up with string and were relieved to see the female bird take up her feeding duties again. Soon after, foam nest frogs laid their eggs on the side of the nest. Incensed, the male weaver pecked at the fluffy, white foam, spitting beak-fuls into the pool below but it was like trying to demolish fairy floss with a toothpick and he was defeated.

One of the juvenile Gabar goshawks was back again at the lodge the other day – juvenile delinquent more like it. He was making a lot of noise, perched next to the birdbath. Just like a teenager showing off, he swooped down on a lizard on the path, but missed it. Zooming back to his perch, screaming, he saw a little Long-billed crombec in the next tree. He flew into the tree, and crashed through the leaves after the crombec, losing his balance and flapping his wings. The crombec calmly kept on foraging, cleverly hopping through the bush, ignoring the goshawk. Eventually the goshawk gave up, miffed, and went back to his perch, screaming again. Then he spied the red-headed weaver's nest over the pool and swooped over to it, hanging on with his talons and flapping his wings, getting covered with foam-nest frogs' foam. Back on his perch, he suddenly took off fast, straight for the lodge window. Crash! He hit the window and bounced off, but he wasn't hurt. After this last effort he decided to move off. He is a beautiful bird, with brown back, orange legs, rufous stripes on his chest and bars on his belly. He will eventually turn grey and get a bright crimson beak and legs to match. Maybe by the time he gets his adult plumage he'll have more brains as well.

PEOPLE

By coincidence, or some sort of ecological force of nature, both our previous ecologists have just given birth to babies. Rox, who now lives with her husband, Morné, on their farm located between Alldays and Pontdrif, had a boy, Robert, at the end of December. Robbie is their second child and they will have their hands full because their daughter, Leila, is not yet two. Engela, our first ecologist, had a little girl, Anneke, at the beginning of January. This is the first child for Engela and her husband André, who live in Makhado, one of our nearest towns, about 160 km from here. Needless to say, both mothers are pleased and both fathers proud.

We hope that having a black mamba in his bedroom was not the reason that Luke left us to take up a new job with the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT). He and his girlfriend, Vicky, are now based in Johannesburg, far from mamba country. We miss them and wish them every success in their new lifestyle.