

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### FEBRUARY 2009

#### SEASONS

February has been a cooler month, with the daily top temperature not exceeding 35 degrees Celsius. We've had a few overcast days and a bit more rain too. Our "farmer's tans" are starting to fade. The bush looks green and lush, with plenty of groundcover, but on closer inspection there is not much grass, but lots of weeds or "forbs". Our neighbours have noticed the same phenomenon and we have all come to the conclusion that the lack of grass this year is due to the fact that the rains came very early in 2007 (September) and very late in 2008/2009, leaving a big gap in between. Peter is already planning to take off substantial numbers of grazing animals in a couple of month's time to relieve the pressure on what little grass we have. The weeds are covered with beautiful wildflowers – tall purple spikes, yellow flowers like giant buttercups, yellow daisies, delicate veld violets, pink, orange and white blooms that attract gorgeously-coloured butterflies. After reaching a high level at the beginning of the month, the Mogalakwena River dropped far enough to replace the floating fence across it. When Peter and his team went to take the pontoons across the river behind our inflatable dinghy, they discovered that the boat had been ripped to shreds by baboons or brown hyaenas and was a total write-off. Only baboons or hyaenas have teeth strong enough to shred the tough fabric of the inflatable. To complete the task, the team was forced to use the little tub of a boat called "The Boss" that has no oars and looks decidedly unseaworthy. There was much slipping and sliding in the mud beside the river when launching "The Boss", with Oubaas (Old Boss – Peter) aboard. The fence is now in place and should stop animals, and cheetahs in particular, from crossing the river into our neighbour's farm.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

The three remaining cheetahs in De Wildt's project to rewild captive-bred cheetahs arrived back at Makulu Makete on 3 February. The female, Phoenix, was released from the boma (enclosure) just four days later, while the two males were to remain inside until Phoenix had moved far enough away. At De Wildt, the two males (Bones and May Day), known as "the boys" had been bonded into a coalition just before they came back to MM. We were quite nervous about how they would react to feeding together, but when Bennie and Narinda took them an impala carcass, they settled down together to eat without any sign of aggression. The first hurdle in the bonding process was overcome. Unfortunately, the boys had to be split up again into separate bomas soon after so that they could be wormed. For a period of five days they were fed worming powder in raw impala meat "hamburgers". When the treatment was finished, the gate between them was opened, but there seemed to be a definite cooling in their relationship. They are not sticking closely together as the previous partnerships of Bones and Scruff or May Day and his brother Chaos. We are getting used to the idea that perhaps the boys might split up when they are released and go their separate ways instead of hunting together.

Phoenix made her first kill a few days after her release, and it was another impala ram like the one that caused the injury to her in October last year. This time she was not injured by the impala's horns, but we were hoping she had learnt her lesson about taking on prey that could be potentially dangerous. When Phoenix left here in October last year the ground was bare and there was very little foliage on the trees. Now she is faced with a different hunting environment of long, thick groundcover and dense foliage. This must make it harder for her to see what she is doing. Added to that, the impala herds are now much larger, their numbers swollen by the babies that were born at the end of last year and are now almost as big as their mothers. With so many eyes watching for predators, someone in the herd would be sure to

spot an approaching cheetah and raise the alarm. The bachelor impala rams are easier to hunt because they are either in small herds or solitary.

Unfortunately, during her absence from MM, Phoenix seems to have reverted to her captive cat ways. She has been jumping on to the back of our stationary bakkies (pick-up trucks) to look for food. This is unacceptable behaviour which has so far not been discouraged by being blasted with a high-powered water pistol. Bones is showing his former interest in chasing the motorbike and the quad bike as they pass his boma. We are hoping that this behaviour will stop once the cheetahs start hunting in earnest and no longer associate the vehicles with food. As Phoenix starts to move further away from the lodge environs, we are expecting to release the two males any day now.

## **GAME VIEWING**

Summertime is insect time at Makulu Makete. At night the lights attract hundreds of moths and little, black stink bugs to the windows. When squashed or touched, the stink bugs emit an unpleasant odour and when they cover the pathways outside the lodge, walking through them is a smelly experience. Grasshoppers, locusts and praying mantises are everywhere, as well as giant stick insects, so well camouflaged that they resemble small branches. We often find big scorpions drowned in the swimming pool but lift them out very carefully in case they “come back to life” without warning. There have been more sightings of snakes this month - a couple of very attractive baby puff adders and a young python, and yet another black mamba, this time in the television room with our staff! After that, fishing suddenly replaced watching tv as the preferred weekend pastime amongst our workers.

As we drive around the reserve, or take the dogs for walks, we see many wonderful sights and we never get tired of them. Peter missed taking a lovely photo at number one waterhole where a group of gemsbok were lying next to the waterhole with some zebras standing behind and overlooking them all, five giraffe watched as he drove past, without a camera to record the scene. We see impalas, kudus, waterbuck, bushbuck, wildebeest and even eland on a regular basis, but at this time of year, when the groundcover is thick, the little steenbok and warthogs are not so visible. At night we hear the evocative cry of jackals and the eerie yowling of the brown hyenas as they engage in neck biting competitions.

We must not forget the hundreds of vervet monkeys, baboons, banded mongooses and tree squirrels that roam all over the reserve. Our own baby squirrel, Sammy, is still going strong. At his last weigh-in he was 115 grams. He has more than trebled his weight since he was found clinging, cold and weak, to an outside tap, abandoned by his mother. Now he has the run of Narinda's house and has made a friend in Narinda's lovely labrador Zoey. Sammy and Zoey play together and Sammy even tries to groom his enormous canine friend as he would another squirrel. He is not yet ready to go solo outdoors, but we won't stop him when he decides it's time to return to the wild.

## **BIRDING**

The lodge verandah provides plenty of birding interest at this time of year. The little Red-Headed Weaver has now been joined by several Southern Masked Weavers, which all arrived within a day or so of one another and have been competing to build the most attractive nest. Cheeky male X waits until his neighbour Y is off collecting grass for his nest, then flits across and pulls out stalks of grass from Y's nest and uses them in his own nest. Spurred on by the competition, the Red-headed Weaver has built another nest on the same site as the one that was blown away in the storm. Not to be outdone, a pair of Southern Black Tits is building a nest in the hollow of the leadwood trunk that serves as a pillar to hold up the thatched roof of the lodge verandah.

On the second last day of the month, we were thrilled to find a magnificent Martial Eagle next to the track between the lodge and the farmhouse. It was on the ground eating a monitor lizard, and ignoring an African Hoopoe and a Cape Glossy Starling that were dive-bombing it. A flock of Helmeted Guineafowl surrounded the eagle, almost deafening it with their crazed squeaking, but the big bird took no notice. It was late in the afternoon and the light was not good but we sat and watched the eagle from our bakkie for some time, taking photos. The following morning the eagle was perched on a dead tree opposite, looking as regal and intimidating as ever.

Since July last year, when my Nomad jeep fell apart on a birding expedition to number 9 waterhole, the vehicle had been repaired and was going well until it developed a problem with reverse gear. It is now impossible to get the vehicle into reverse gear, which means all birding and dog-walking trips around the reserve must be planned in advance so that I am able to keep going forward or find a big enough space to do a U turn. This has not been too much of an issue, but it is frustrating not being able to back up to get a good look at a bird when required.

Phoenix was hanging out in the area of where I wanted to make a birding survey for the Southern African Bird Atlas (SABAP). Not wanting to disturb the cheetah's hunting and not wanting Phoenix to jump into the open Nomad with me, I waited until the river was low enough to cross at the dam wall in the vehicle. I would be able to bird safely on the other side of the river without interfering with the cheetah. I mapped out my route in my head, making sure I would not get boxed in and unable to back out. Up at 5 a.m., and ready for a nice Sunday-morning's birding, I set off from the lodge in the Nomad, heading for the dam wall. I didn't stop to check Phoenix's signal in case she decided to join me in the car. There are a couple of steep gulleys on the way to the dam wall where I had to pump the brakes a few times to slow the Nomad down, but the brakes are always a bit soft, so I was not concerned. I was driving quite slowly by the time the gate leading to the dam wall came into view. I braked, but my foot went to the floor. I pumped the brakes but there was no response. The Nomad is not equipped with a hand brake. I was coasting inexorably towards the eight-foot high, 7,000 volt electrified gate. Behind it I could see the slope leading down to the river which was flowing across the dam wall, and I had no brakes. I was too close to do anything but turn the wheel hard right and come to an abrupt halt in front of a low rock wall next to the gate.

It was 6 a.m. on Sunday morning and in two hours our neighbour, who used the gate as a short cut to get to church in Alldays, would be arriving with his family in their Sunday best. I was blocking the track and couldn't back up. I heaved against the front of the Nomad, trying to push it back but it wouldn't budge. I started walking back the five kilometres or so towards the lodge, loaded down with all my birding equipment, a bottle of water, the cheetah tracking receiver and antenna and a big stick in case I came across Phoenix on the way. Eventually I made contact with Narinda on the radio and she came to my rescue, but even with the two of us, we couldn't push the Nomad. Finally Peter arrived with his Land Cruiser and our "mechanic", Johannes. Peter seemed sceptical about my claims of having no brakes - the usual lady driver story, but Johannes looked under the bonnet and found the brake fluid container completely empty. They filled the brake fluid and towed me backwards until I could make a U turn. By this time it was 8 a.m. and getting too hot for the birds, so I abandoned my plans and followed the Land Cruiser back to the lodge. We passed Narinda on the way, sitting on the back of her bakkie, with Phoenix lying in the shade next to the vehicle. After such effort and no reward birding on the lodge verandah seemed a much more attractive prospect.