

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

MARCH 2009

SEASONS

Autumn is definitely in the air. The top temperature in March has not risen above 30 degrees and it's getting down to a cool 14 degrees at night. The corkwood trees have been the first to show their autumn colours, their yellow leaves conspicuous amongst the overall green of the bush. The topmost leaves of the lovely white seringa trees, some of the tallest trees on the reserve, are turning golden and the odd baobab is showing signs of its autumn foliage as well. Vast stretches of the reserve have been covered with a weed that we have identified as *melhania acuminata*, which has no common name in any language. Its yellow flowers, like big buttercups, spread as far as you can see across the veld in some places. It looks very attractive, but it's no substitute for nutritious grass. After heavy rain early in the month, the Mogalakwena River rose again, overflowing the dam wall which serves as a short-cut bridge from the lodge to the main road. The water remained high for much of the month, necessitating the long drive around the public roads to get to Alldays, our nearest town, and beyond. By the end of the month the river level had dropped enough for us to get across the dam wall and soon we will replace the electric fences that cross the river to prevent the cheetahs and other game getting out of the reserve.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Phoenix, the female cheetah subject of the captive-bred rewilding project, surprised us all by swimming across the river to the other side, where she had previously spent much of her time. This has made monitoring her health and her kills difficult for Narinda and Bennie. When the river is too high to drive across the dam wall to track Phoenix, they are forced to drive around the roads, a distance of 35 km each way. Now that she is back in her favourite stomping ground, Phoenix has been killing on a fairly regular basis, her targets mainly impala ewes. She has lost interest in Narinda's bakkie and seems to be living the life of a proper wild cheetah. Her report card reads ten out of ten.

The two male cheetahs who had been artificially bonded a few weeks beforehand at De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Centre, were released from the boma on 5 March. We had been concerned that Bones and May Day were not acting as a normal coalition of male cheetahs, but seemed to be much more independent of each other, although they happily shared an impala carcass together when fed. We thought there was every possibility that the boys would split up after they were released and go their separate ways.

However, we were totally unprepared for what happened when the gates of the boma were opened and the boys were free to leave. Bones stalked out the gate first and turned right. A few paces behind him, May Day came out of the gate and turned left. The split was immediate. It appeared that the bonding process had been unsuccessful. Bones headed off towards the farthest fenceline, while May Day stayed close to the lodge. A couple of days later, both cheetahs were back at the boma, sitting together outside the gate. It was almost as if they had pre-planned it. "I'll go that way, and you can go in the other direction and we'll meet back here on Saturday afternoon." But it didn't last long and the two boys split up again after one night together and have been separate ever since.

On his first day out, the younger and less experienced May Day was spotted chasing our biggest and oldest bull giraffe, George, through the bush and we feared that he would have no

hope as a hunter if he thought he could take down a fully-grown giraffe. Instead, he was the first to make a kill - sadly a defenceless and charming little bat-eared fox was his first victim. Since then, he has chased a baby giraffe and he has killed three young waterbuck, a bushbuck ram and his most recent victim, a jackal. He is extremely active and covers long distances at a fast walk, losing condition quickly. His score card is eight out of ten. He hunts well but he is choosing the wrong prey. In monetary terms, May Day is becoming an expensive cat. Waterbuck can be sold to game capturers for 3,000 Rands each and bushbuck are highly sought after. On the other hand, Phoenix is being quite economical by killing impalas, the most numerous antelope on the reserve, which bring only about about 400 Rands each.

What can we say about Bones? After his first exploratory foray, he returned to take up sentry duty outside the boma gates, waiting to be fed. He kept us under siege for over a week. We could not take the dogs for a walk near the lodge, or drive the dogs past him in the vehicle. He recognised the sound of Narinda's bakkie and when she backed out of her car space each morning he would walk up the drive to meet her, hoping for a feed. Every couple of days, alerted by the frantic barking of the dogs, we would run out to find Bones walking past the dogs' fence and into the carpark. Peter would grab the nearest weapon - usually the double-ended paddle from the inflatable dinghy, and Narinda would arrive with a carbon dioxide fire extinguisher to administer aversion therapy. Bones would streak past the lodge, with Peter in hot pursuit, slapping his paddles and Narinda running beside the cheetah, belching out white steam from the fire extinguisher which made a loud spitting noise like a giant cheetah. This performance was repeated over and over again. The staff, leaning on mops, rakes or bakkies, found the whole spectacle hilarious. I wonder what they tell their families about their loony boss and the strange goings-on at Makulu Makete.

Even though Bones was getting very thin, we did not want to feed him anywhere near the lodge, which would encourage him to stay there. Only when he moved some distance away did Narinda give him an impala leg to keep him going until he was able to catch something for himself. Eventually he realised his presence at the lodge was not appreciated and he took off towards number one waterhole, where he lay next to the water, watching the game come in to drink and flicking his tail, without the slightest interest in chasing them. A giraffe spent a couple of days at the waterhole, watching the cheetah and leaning down to get a closer look, just a couple of metres from him. Finally Bones did make a kill - a young kudu - and we all thought that would be the beginning of great things. But he has disappointed us all by catching nothing else. After nearly 10 days without a substantial meal, Bones was fed a small impala leg. There is a fine line between making the cheetah so hungry he has to kill for himself, and starving him until he is too weak to hunt. Bones remains the dunce of the rewilding class.

GAME VIEWING

A troop of banded mongooses is in residence near the lodge. There must be about ten or twelve in the group and more delightful neighbours are hard to imagine. They busily rummage around in the grass and bushes along the paths around the lodge, chirping to one another and scratching up grubs. Standing on their back feet, they hold the grubs in their front paws and crunch them up with relish. Their behaviour is similar to meercats, made famous by the television documentary, but banded mongooses are probably twice as big as meercats, more like a ferret to look at, with thick tails, dark bands across their backs and pink noses. When you come across a group of banded mongooses, they stand on their back legs to watch you, then, one by one, they drop to all fours and run away, just like a wave breaking on the sand. Extremely inquisitive, they can't bear not to peep out from behind bushes or posts

along the pathways to check up on what the humans are doing, talking to each other constantly. Then they gallop off together along the wooden decks and around the tents, sounding like a herd of tiny horses.

Sammy the Squirrel, Narinda's rescued baby squirrel, is still going strong. He weighs 140 grams and is becoming quite protective of Narinda. He is inclined to bite anyone else and, in a fit of jealousy, he even drew blood from Narinda's boyfriend, Wimpie. Sammy is developing into a "guard squirrel". Sammy is not jealous of Narinda's labrador, Zoey, who lets him share food from her bowl, nibble her paws and even allows the squirrel to sleep on top of her. Although he still comes into the house at night, Sammy spends much time outside, climbing trees and running along the fence. It won't be too long before he decides to join the wild squirrels.

The large game all look fat, shiny and healthy. Small herds of gemsbok (oryx) are often accompanied by a single wildebeest bull which has separated from the main wildebeest herds. Giraffes and zebras congregate together and we have another new baby giraffe, just a few weeks old. It's another female, bringing the giraffe numbers to close to twenty. Peter and I attended the first game auction of the season in Alldays at the end of March to get an indication of the prices for the various species. On sale were gemsbok, eland, nyala (which are not present on Makulu Makete), impala, very few kudu, some ostriches, wildebeest and three giraffe. The auctioneer commented that the bush is so thick at the moment that catching animals using a helicopter to round them up is very difficult, hence the small numbers of game for sale. Alldays is a tiny settlement, and for a foreigner, an auction of African wild animals in such a setting is an interesting cultural experience, rather different from a cattle or sheep auction in other parts of the world.

BIRDING

The weaver nesting frenzy at the lodge has abated. Large flocks of weavers, swallows and red-billed queleas are starting to form. A single flock of starlings can consist of several species – Greater Blue-eared, Violet-backed, Wattled, Meves's – making a lot of noise and perching in dead trees.

This month there were several sightings of a Kori Bustard and a couple of reports of a pair of Southern Ground Hornbills. It is always a thrill to see either of these species of huge birds at Makulu Makete. Not so thrilling are the Southern Red-billed hornbills that crash noisily into our bedroom window every morning just on dawn, waking us with a mighty "bang". We are sure that one day they will break the glass in their assault, as they have already made holes in the insect screens with their heavy bills. Having made sure we are awake, they sit on the windowsill, head on one side, as if to ask "Well, when are you going to get up? The day has already started. We've been awake for ages!"