

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

APRIL 2009

SEASONS

Lazy autumn weather continues. The raisin bushes are starting to wilt and their leaves are curling. Soon they will be bare of foliage like the baobab trees. A couple of late, unseasonable thunderstorms have marked the end of the wet season and we don't expect rain until at least October or November. After the busy summer, when the rainfall caused floods and damage to roads and fences, we can look forward to many months of calm, sunny weather. Already it has been cold enough at night to light the open fire in the lodge and no one has braved the swimming pool for several weeks. The annual impala rut has begun, with rams staking out their territory, chasing each other with loud snorts and clashing horns, as they gather their harems of ewes.

CHEETAH PROJECT

At last all three captive-bred cheetahs, including the recalcitrant Bones, are making regular kills. Early in the month, Bones was given another supplementary feed when he was far away from the lodge area. This was supposed to keep him going until he made a kill for himself, but a couple of days later he stumbled across a dead wildebeest down by the river and made the most of that find to gorge himself on someone else's kill without having to do the work himself. We were not sure what had killed the wildebeest, but we knew it was not one of the cheetahs. Since then though, he has lifted his game. Both he and May Day have killed jackals during the month, but most of the kills have been antelopes.

Before the three cheetahs were released, the males were kept in a boma (enclosure) next to the female cheetah, Phoenix, so that they would get used to each other's presence and be less likely to attack the female if they bumped into her when they were released. Phoenix is chemically contracepted, which means that she would not be receptive to advances from a male. We were not sure what would happen if such a situation arose, but this month we found out when Phoenix and Bones met each other on the other side of the river. Fortunately Bennie was there to witness the event. Initially, Bones chased Phoenix and there was a brief moment of scratching but neither cheetah was hurt. Bones eventually left Phoenix alone and both walked away in opposite directions.

Occasionally we have groups of tourists visit Makulu Makete to see the cheetahs. This usually involves an early morning start for Bennie or Narinda, who meet the group at the gate and take them to see one or two of the cheetahs out in the bush. May Day is not a "people cat" and responds badly to groups of people, so he is left alone. Recently Narinda took a group of six visitors into the bush to see Bones, who was lying in the shade deep under a bush. The visitors had arrived an hour late and it was already hot. We have many safety rules for visitors tracking the cheetahs, one of which is that you must not bend down or put anything on the ground, because the cheetah might think it is meat and run in to pick it up. As the group was standing near the bush, watching Bones dozing, suddenly one of the young women fainted, presumably from the heat. Bones immediately sat up and looked interested. Was this an impala carcass that had been dropped on the ground for him? Narinda took hold of the situation and asked the other five people to surround the prone tourist to shield her from Bones until she regained consciousness. Thanks to Narinda's professionalism, no harm was done but the adrenalin was pumping hard through the veins of the "human shield".

GAME VIEWING

While tracking one of the cheetahs near the river, Bennie left her little quad bike up on the track and walked down to the river bank, following the signal from the cheetah's radio collar. Looking ahead, she saw a large spotted cat lying about 20 metres away in the long grass watching her and was surprised that the cheetah was closer than its signal indicated. Then she realised that the cat was not a cheetah but a big leopard, resting under a tree. The cheetah must have been further into the bush, beyond the leopard. Not waiting to find out, Bennie walked backwards towards her quad bike, keeping her eyes glued to the leopard. Bennie's quad bike does not have reverse gear, which means she has to push it back and forth to turn it around. When she reached the quad bike, Bennie somehow managed to pick it up and turn it around in a single, weight-lifting movement, before taking off at top speed. She didn't stop until she was more than a kilometre away and who can blame her. Leopards must be the most stunningly beautiful of all the big cats, but also the most dangerous. Perhaps the leopard had killed the wildebeest that Bones found.

Narinda was less concerned when she saw another brown hyaena this month. Unlike their spotted cousins, the brownies are not considered aggressive. Narinda said his mane was long and sleek and very shiny. It almost looked as if he had visited a salon for hair treatment. Narinda was able to drive up to within 10 metres of him before he moved off the road in an unhurried fashion.

Last year the Gauteng Bat Interest Group visited Makulu Makete twice and this month we received a report on their first visit. If you think birders are obsessive nerds, then "batters" are on another level entirely. They sniff around the cracks in rocks and the hollows in baobab trees for the stench of bat droppings, then happily spend all night catching the little mammals that so many people find scary. The Gauteng group was full of eccentric enthusiasts and we enjoyed having them stay with us. They were excited to find five different species of bats during their first visit, three of which were new to our species list. The five bats are: Banana bats (*Neoromicia nanus*), Egyptian Slit-faced bats (*Nycteris thebaica*), Sunderval's roundleaf bats (*Hipposideros caffer*), Flat-headed free-tailed bats (*Sauromys petrophilus*) and Egyptian free-tailed bats (*Tadarida aegyptiaca*).

BIRDING

After meeting up with the leopard, Bennie had a better day at the river when for the first time she spotted an African finfoot. This brings the number of sightings of this rare bird to four in less than one year, which is very encouraging. Bennie also managed to take a photo of a pair of Southern Ground hornbills, another rare species which we see from time to time at Makulu Makete. A single Crested guineafowl was seen several times with a flock of Helmeted guineafowls close to the lodge, bringing sightings of this species to three out of four months this year. The Crested guineafowl is more often associated with the thick forests of the Soutpansberg mountain a couple of hours drive east. Not uncommon, but not often recorded at Makulu Makete, African Green pigeons were seen in the garden at the farmhouse. Easily confused with parrots because of their behaviour of crawling around branches, it is always a delight to watch these colourful pigeons feeding amongst the fig tree leaves.

PEOPLE AND CHANGES

The first phase of the project to rewild the three captive-bred cheetahs is due to come to an end late in May. Unfortunately, funding is not available to continue the project into the next phase which is to let Phoenix have cubs and raise them as wild cheetahs. After all the dramas and set-backs we have encountered during the project, it seems a great pity not to go on to the

next phase. But fear not, Peter has a solution. He has bought Phoenix from De Wildt and she will remain at MM. The two males, Bones and May Day, will be removed at the end of May and their place will be taken by a single, wild male cheetah. Bennie will also leave us to write up her Master's thesis based on the first phase of the project. We are now looking for a researcher to collect data on the second phase of the project, which will involve tracking Phoenix and the wild male cheetah and eventually the cubs until they are old enough to fend for themselves. Peter will provide accommodation and transport on the property for the researcher but it will be a non-paid position. So far we have had more than fifty applicants for this position. If you, or anyone you know is interested, you could contact us for more information, but we are hoping to finalise the position by mid-May.

We have two new residents at Makulu Makete – Bobbie and Sophia Nel have been appointed caretakers. They will look after the place whenever Peter and Jane are away, which gives Peter and Jane much more freedom for camping and travelling. Bobbie's first job is to complete the renovations of the farmhouse so that he and Sophia can move in as soon as possible. They are both lovers of the bush and are already enjoying a more relaxed and peaceful lifestyle at Makulu Makete. We are pleased to have them with us and wish them welcome.