

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### MAY 2009

#### SEASONS

Winter is upon us, but winter at Makulu Makete is perhaps the best time of the year. Nights are clear and cold, with millions of stars visible in the black sky, so far away from the distraction of city lights. Brisk mornings, down to 5 degrees Celsius, soon warm up by more than 20 degrees to hot and cloudless days. The bush is very dry, but not yet bare of leaves or dry grass. The brown coats and vertical white stripes of the kudu blend into the khaki-coloured bush, making them very difficult to see. The twisted horns of the big bull kudu mimic the curving branches of the corkwood trees that provide perfect camouflage. The Mogalakwena River, which was such a barrier during the wet summer months, is now reduced to a trickle so that vehicles and animals can cross freely.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

Much has happened with our captive-bred cheetah rewilding project since the last Bush Diary. All three cheetahs were at last behaving like wild cheetahs and hunting and killing regularly. In April we reported that Phoenix, the female cheetah, and Bones, one of the males, were seen together briefly. During May, however, Bennie found Phoenix and May Day, the younger of the two males, lying together in the bush “vocalising”, or talking to each other. In our experience, this could mean only one thing – that they were mating! On two occasions in the past we had seen similar behaviour between our wild cheetah male, Danny, and the two wild females, Dottie and Bubbles, in both cases resulting in cubs three months later. But Phoenix was chemically contracepted and that was not supposed to wear off until at least August. Perhaps May Day just wanted company? Later we saw him following Bones like a lost puppy, calling and tagging along when Bones was stalking game. This seemed to reinforce the possibility that May Day and Phoenix were just good friends, even though they stayed together for 24 hours. Bones was not as friendly with May Day as Phoenix had been and slapped the younger cheetah into submission, growling continuously.

On 27 May our hero, Dr. Peter Caldwell, the expert cheetah vet from Pretoria, arrived with his assistant, Janelle, to dart all three cheetahs. Bones and May Day were to be removed and Phoenix’s collar was due to be changed. The whole procedure was being filmed by a seven-man-and-woman film crew, headed by Michelle Garforth, the presenter of the SABC documentary series “Wild Limited”. They had been following Bennie for the two previous days as she tracked the cheetahs. Kelly, from De Wildt, and her scat-sniffing Staffordshire bull terrier, Diesel, were also on camera, demonstrating Diesel’s incredible ability to find cheetah droppings in the bush, which would be analysed by Bennie and Kelly.

Fourteen of us trooped into the bush to find Phoenix – the film crew, Peter Caldwell and Janelle, Kelly, Bennie, Narinda, Jane and Peter. None of us wanted to miss out. She was darted and a new radio collar was fitted in front of the cameras. At our request, Dr. Caldwell took a blood sample for a pregnancy test, just in case. He agreed with our suggestion that Phoenix’s contraception might have been disrupted by the medications for various injuries she had received over the past few months. We should have the results of the pregnancy test within a week. Before he administered the reversal drug that would allow Phoenix to wake up within a few minutes, Dr. Caldwell felt her abdomen and pronounced the magic words “She’s pregnant.” He could feel three tiny embryos in the horns of her uterus. We were not expecting such a sudden revelation. “She’s pregnant!” The words went around the group of people, now standing chatting together under the mopane trees. There was excitement and jubilation, hand shakes and misty eyes. We would have to wait for the results of the blood

test which would give us final confirmation, but in the meantime we were confident of Dr. Caldwell's diagnosis.

When darted, both May Day and Phoenix were on fresh kills and Bones had a full stomach, demonstrating the cheetahs' adaptation to their life in the wild. May Day and Bones were sent back to De Wildt where they are awaiting relocation to a new home. As reported last month, Phoenix and a wild cheetah male have been purchased for Makulu Makete. The plan was that the wild cheetah, whom we had already named "Stud", would be the father of cubs with Phoenix, when her contraception wore off in August, but May Day had put a spanner in the works. Stud was due to arrive in a week or two but his work was already done. Would we have to re-name him "Dud"? We have already appointed a researcher to continue the cheetah project into the next stage, which is to follow Phoenix as she raises her cubs and teaches them to hunt as wild cheetahs. But the new researcher is not due to arrive till later in the year. Now we could be expecting cubs in early August, three months earlier than planned! Although our carefully-prepared timetable is now in disarray, we are thrilled at the prospect of more cheetah cubs to be born at Makulu Makete.

### GAME VIEWING

Now that the veld has taken on its winter landscape, the game is much easier to see. Kudus, waterbuck, gemsbok and giraffe come in regularly to drink at the lodge waterhole. Perhaps because the grass is now dry and thinning out, we are seeing warthogs again. They seem to disappear during the summer months, but they are back, trotting around like miniature tanks, with their tails stuck up as antennae. While Jane was birding along the river, binoculars trained on a bird flying towards her just above the water level, a head popped up out of the river to look around – it was another Cape Clawless Otter. Narinda radioed in excitedly after letting the film crew out of our gates to say that she had just seen an aardwolf not far from the lodge. This species is rarely seen, even at night, so her day-time sighting was especially thrilling.

### BIRDING

I (Jane) continue every month to survey the birding population of Makulu Makete as part of the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP). Makulu Makete straddles two pentads (5 minutes latitude by 5 minutes longitude), which are the geographical units on which the survey is based. I am now tantalisingly close (less than 5 species) to turning both those pentads red on the SABAP map, meaning more than 180 bird species will have been officially recorded by me within the confines of the SABAP time limits for each pentad in the past few months. Our species list, compiled over several years, now numbers more than 270, so there is absolutely no doubt that there are far more than 180 species, but because of my inadequacy as a birder, I don't have the confidence to identify the more difficult l.b.j.'s (little brown jobs). Cisticolas, larks, pipits and swifts defeat me. The MM pentads would have been "in the red" months ago had I been able to include more of them. This month, however, I did manage to add a couple of new species to the southern pentad's list – a very nice juvenile Little Sparrowhawk, and some charming Kittlitz's Plovers – both species having plenty of easily-distinguishable characteristics. We have also spotted a couple of Kori Bustards several times over the past month. The birds are staying in one small location, close to Engela's Corner, in the middle of the reserve. According to the books, Kori Bustards are not monogamous or territorial. One of the birds is quite a lot smaller, so perhaps it is a mother and well-grown chick that are sticking together.

### PEOPLE AND NEWS

After tearfully saying goodbye to the “boys”, May Day and Bones, Bennie left Makulu Makete to return to Pretoria to write up her thesis on the cheetah project. She has promised to come back to visit when the cubs are out and about.

Our newest residents, Bobbie and Sophie, had to curtail their renovation work on the farmhouse for a couple of days when Phoenix decided to spend time lying at the front door. Narinda was particularly concerned that Phoenix might show an interest in their little dog, Dinky.

We received the tragic news late in the month that Danny, our first wild male cheetah, had been caught in a gin trap at the reserve where he now lives. Danny was relocated from Makulu Makete after the birth of his second litter of cubs, to prevent in-breeding and as part of the cheetah meta-population programme. He had recently fathered another litter of five cubs by Storm, a wild female at his new reserve. Very sadly, Danny’s front leg was so badly crushed by the trap that there was no alternative but to put him down. Gin traps have strong, spring-loaded sharp jaws that are barbaric and cruel. In this case the trap had been set next to the fence by one of the workers on the reserve, or from the neighbouring property, with the intention of poaching an antelope. Despite the growing awareness of the importance of conservation in South Africa, and better understanding of what constitutes cruelty to animals, gin traps are not outlawed. In fact, they are on sale at our local farmers’ co-operative.

Danny’s death was a shock to us all, and particularly to our former ecologist, Rox, whose responsibility it was to look after Danny when he first arrived at MM, a cheetah traumatised by his capture by farmers. Of all the cheetahs that have made their homes at MM, Danny epitomised the essence of a true wild cheetah. He never became relaxed in human company, always wary, elusive and difficult to see. He was an excellent hunter and a magnificent specimen – a big, powerful and well-muscled cheetah with an unforgettable stare. He didn’t deserve such a heartbreaking end.