

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

JUNE 2009

SEASONS

It's been down to zero degrees Celcius for several nights this month, so cold that even the game has disappeared to hide deep in the bush where perhaps it is a few degrees warmer. Our open fire in the lodge is cosy and welcoming, especially as the dusk falls before 6 p.m. Small breeding herds of impala can be seen early in the morning, their hair roughed up to keep warm, in contrast to their sleek, shiny coats later in the day when the sun gives more heat. Now that the grass is withered and the ground bare in many places, once more we can see the pretty little steenboks that were hidden in the lush growth of summer. Huge eyes and big ears make these tiny antelopes one of the prettiest. Just as cute are their pale, plump behinds as they bob off into the scrub. They are usually seen in pairs, the male with a set of short, sharp, straight horns that he uses to defend his territory from other male steenboks.

CHEETAH PROJECT

After our elation last month at the news that Phoenix was pregnant, the official pregnancy blood test came back from the lab showing negative. Dr. Caldwell, the specialist cheetah vet, was 80% sure that she was pregnant after palpating her abdomen, and he is not often wrong so we are still inclined to believe that she might have cubs in August after all. Perhaps the lab test was incorrect, but we will have to wait until August to be sure, one way or the other. In the meantime, Phoenix continues to hunt and roam far and wide across the reserve, keeping Narinda busy tracking her twice a day and collecting data on her behaviour, condition, kills and location. Narinda doesn't get many days off, so one Sunday Jane and Peter gave her a rest and went off to track Phoenix for her. Phoenix had spent the past several days walking up and down one of the fences, but on the day that we went to find her, we could not pick up her signal in that area. After two hours and 35 kilometres of driving all over the reserve, we found Phoenix lying nonchalantly next to the river with a very fat stomach. She had walked at least seven kilometres from her last location the previous afternoon and had made a kill on the way. Perhaps the full moon had made all the difference.

The freezing temperatures delayed the arrival of our new male wild cheetah, but he's here at last, and what a magnificent specimen he is. We've called him Stud because that was to be his primary function unless he has been beaten to it by May Day. Stud is less than two years old, but when he burst from his travelling crate into our boma he seemed much more mature - tall, well-muscled and powerful. He reminded us of our first wild male cheetah, Danny. Stud's long tail looks as if it has been generously dipped in a pot of white paint. He is a handsome cheetah, sure to appeal to Phoenix. Having become used to the bold behaviour of the captive-bred cheetahs, who rushed to the fence whenever she appeared, Narinda was non-plussed when Stud ran away from her when she went to check on him after his arrival. We will revert to our previous practice of blowing a whistle when feeding this wild cheetah in the boma so that he associates the whistle with being fed and can be called out of the bush with the whistle if necessary.

Stud kept us awake all night after his arrival, calling in an urgent, high-pitched chirp like a shrike. Next morning Peter heard the call coming from near one of our guest tents and thought that the cheetah had escaped. But the culprit was a black-headed oriole, sitting on the bird bath, whose call is easily confused with the cheetah. This bird has led Narinda on a wild-goose chase in the past when she was tracking Bubbles' cubs in the very early days. Stud was delivered on Narinda's 26th birthday. How many young women can say they got a cheetah for their birthday?

GAME VIEWING

Having seen so many animals so often over the past few months, Peter was concerned that we would not have enough grass or foliage to sustain the numbers of game through the dry winter. He booked a game capture crew to take off a large number of animals to conserve the veld, but a week or so before the capture date, we were seeing virtually no game at all and started to doubt our estimates of the numbers of the different species on the reserve. Setting up a game capture is a major operation, taking a day or more for twenty men to erect the temporary boma in the bush. Once the boma is up, the chopper arrives to round up the animals and drive them into the wide funnel entrance of the boma. On the first morning seventeen zebras were herded into the big truck waiting to take them away, and almost twenty kudus. Standing on the top of the truck, looking down on the striped backs of the zebras was an unusual and stunning perspective. We have since seen several zebras, with at least one foal, which means that our original estimate of more than thirty five zebras was most likely correct and we have not totally depleted our zebra stocks. A total of thirty two kudus were shipped out in the first trucks, but gemsbok (oryx) proved more difficult for the helicopter pilot to round up, as the small herds had split up into solitary animals, here and there across the reserve. It was decided that the game capturers would come back at a later date to catch gemsbok, waterbuck, impalas and more kudus. The first boma was taken down and a special boma constructed in a different location to catch giraffes. The sides of the giraffe boma were high enough that the giraffes could not see over, and were funnelled calmly down the chute towards the waiting truck. Six sub-adult giraffes, four females and two males, left Makulu Makete inside the high-sided truck, only one of the bulls tall enough to peep over the top of the truck, watching the road ahead, as the truck slowly made its way towards Madia Pala Mountain and the gate. This game capture went smoothly, with the minimum amount of stress to the animals, and no injuries.

One day recently our housekeeper, Sarah, called me and said she had something very nice to show me. There, rocking back and forth on the lawn outside the lodge, was a large, brilliant green chameleon, eyes swivelling independently as he carefully put down one lemon-yellow soled paw at a time, making his way slowly across the grass. What a fantastic creature is the chameleon – it makes you smile to see one. This particular chameleon got tired of us and scuttled smartly away up the fence, big brown blotches appearing angrily as he climbed into a thorn tree and was immediately camouflaged amongst the branches. Peter's sister Peggy, and his niece, Pauline, both from Jo'burg were staying with us at the time and were just as enchanted by the chameleon as we were.

BIRDING

One of my greatest birding pleasures is to stand on the bank of the river, early in the morning, listening to the myriad calls of the birds that are invisible in the trees, trying to recognise each call individually. How satisfying it is to verify the identification by the appearance of the bird in question, warming itself in the early rays of the sun. It is even more pleasurable in winter when the birds don't start to show themselves until the much more leisurely hour of 7.30 a.m. No need to struggle out of bed at 4 a.m. to catch the early birds in winter. There's even time for a cup of tea and a rusk before donning my binoculars and heading off to the river. The rewards are many – a brightly-coloured, tiny malachite kingfisher glinting on a reed over the water; a black crane with red legs, red eyes and a yellow beak, as if painted by a child, picking its way across the sandbank; and a couple of honking Egyptian geese waddling into the water. But best of all this month was a sudden flapping of wings and feet on the water as an African finfoot exploded out from the grass overhanging the water beneath my feet and half-flew, half-walked across the river to dive into the reeds on the other side. Known in

Afrikaans as a “watertrapper”, or “water walker”, this finfoot was demonstrating its very descriptive name.

LODGE AND PEOPLE

The lodge was busy this month, as it was in the old days before we retired from taking guests. Jane’s cousin, Julie, and five of her friends from Australia spent three days with us after a camping tour through the national parks of Botswana. While the game did not co-operate well with the visitors, remaining well hidden for much of the time, Phoenix rose to the occasion and killed a steenbok almost before their eyes, making the trip worthwhile. Another highlight for the visitors was driving back to the lodge in the dark in our ancient Land Rover, without headlights, Narinda at the wheel negotiating the twisting, narrow tracks with noisy encouragement from her passengers. But perhaps the best part of staying with us at Makulu Makete after their camping trip was not having to take down and put up their tents every day and having the time to relax around the camp and watch the waterhole.

After leaving Makulu Makete at the end of the first phase of the rewilding project last month, Bennie was back here to witness her first game capture. She stood on the top of the truck, counting animals with Narinda and Bobbie and went tracking Phoenix for old time’s sake, before returning to Pretoria to resume writing up her Master’s thesis and to face the unpleasant task of analysing the many cheetah scats (droppings) that she and Diesel, the scat-sniffing Staffordshire Bull Terrier, had collected over the months. By identifying the hair contained in the scats, Bennie will be able to confirm which prey species the cheetahs had consumed, thus adding further information on the cheetahs’ feeding habits.