

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

JULY 2009

SEASONS

We are now well into the dry season and have started supplementary feeding of lucerne hay at several places across the reserve. The amount of hay will gradually be increased as the dry season continues and there is less and less feed for the animals in the form of leaves on the trees and dry grass. A wily old kudu bull has worked out that there are always fresh leaves around the lodge, where the lawns are watered year-round. He spends all his time foraging next to the swimming pool and outside the office, totally unconcerned by the humans who walk past him. A couple of pregnant gemsbok (oryx) cows also have moved into the lodge garden, grazing greedily on the grass around the lodge and outside Narinda's house - easy pickings compared to the surrounding dry and dusty bush. This dry time of the year puts more pressure on the river from the farms in the district that use the Mogalakwena River to irrigate their crops. Late in the month water was released from the big, government dam upstream, the Glen Alpine dam, to refill all the private dams on the river. After several attempts over the past couple of years, our neighbour has at last repaired his dam, which has created new permanent ponds along the river. Our original "drift" across the river is now flooded for most of the time and we have had to build a new crossing-point further upstream. It will be interesting to see how this new habitat affects the wildlife and birdlife along the river.

CHEETAH PROJECT

Phoenix, the captive-bred cheetah who was part of the rewilding project, appears to be totally relaxed in her wild environment. She is killing on a regular basis and has spent much of this month in the mopane bush in the northeast corner of the reserve, far from her usual haunts across the river. One of her other favourite spots is around the farmhouse, where she caused slight alarm when she arrived at the back door to say hello to Sophia, who saw the cat on the doorstep, from over the top of the stable-type door. Not long afterwards, Bobbie found their little Pomeranian dog, Dinky, walking along beside the cheetah in the garden. Luckily, Phoenix had a full belly and didn't seem interested in Dinky as prey. Eleven members of Bobbie and Sophia's family came to stay for a weekend reunion and were lucky enough to see Phoenix on a kill. Bobbie has now mastered the art of telemetry and has been standing in for Narinda while she was away at university for a week during the month, though with Phoenix in his garden for a couple of days, tracking was easy.

Our new wild male cheetah, Stud, has proved to be quite a handful. Feeding him in the boma was a fairly perilous operation. He suddenly materialises from the long grass, running in fast, spitting and slamming his big feet repeatedly and getting too close for comfort. He shows the whites of his eyes and makes a continuous, threatening, low growling sound. He is a big, strong, young cheetah and used to being out in the wild and feeding himself. He did not take kindly to being fed "portion control" quantities in the boma and always appeared to be hungry and consequently aggressive. We decided that the best thing for Stud was not to try and habituate him to our presence. Our main focus for the second stage of the rewilding project is Phoenix, and as long as we can pinpoint Stud's location and make sure he is healthy, then there is no need for us to get too close to him every day.

Rather than subject Stud to more time in the boma, we released him on 30 July, early in the morning when it was still very cold. He was waiting for us at the gate and came out of the boma tentatively at first, with his eyes firmly fixed on the impala leg that we had tied to a tree outside the gate. We pulled the gate shut with a rope as soon as he walked out, so that he

would not try and run back inside, and left Stud to eat the leg in peace. He has moved off into the bush and seems to be gradually finding his way further from the lodge area. We are hoping it won't be long before he makes a kill, but with his habit of charging anyone coming near him when he is eating, it might be more difficult to keep track of his diet. We are not going to endanger anyone by walking in on him too close. We think that Stud will settle down and might eventually become as relaxed as Phoenix. One thing is certain, he is a most striking animal, especially when he comes charging towards you, body twisted and tail under, snarling!

GAME VIEWING

The kudus and gemsbok that seem to have disappeared last month are now visible everywhere and there is a constant stream of animals at the lodge waterhole. I was woken by something that went "bump in the night" and got up to look out into the bright moonlight. Outside the window was a gemsbok, grazing around the trunks of the trees, and occasionally bumping its horns against the branches. It was worth getting up from a nice warm bed to see such a lovely sight. Another unusual sighting, again very close to the lodge, was an African wild cat, which ran across the driveway, its long legs and orange ears very distinct. Down at the dam by the farmhouse a big otter was spotted, surfacing and diving in the still water. As its tail came up out of the water it seemed to be broken about ten centimetres from the tip and hung limply, so that identification of this particular individual should be easy in future.

While Narinda was away at university, she left the camera trap attached to a tree down by the river and came back to find hundreds of photos of creatures walking past in daylight and at night. The procession of nocturnal animals included a brown hyaena, a small-spotted genet, a civet, a porcupine, an armadillo, a mother and baby bushpig and a leopard. We have sent the best photos to our webmaster to update our camera trap link on our website.

BIRDING

I saw another African finfoot this month, bringing the total to three over the past few months. Of course, it could be the same bird each time, because they were all females and seen in a one-kilometre stretch of the river, part of which has now been flooded by the water from the dam. Our birding friend, John Isom, used to pose the question: "Do three African finfoot equal one African finyard?" If so, I've seen a finyard!

One of the most spectacular and unexpected sightings for the month was a Saddle-billed Stork, standing precariously on the very top branch of a bare baobab tree. These huge, black and white storks are endangered in South Africa. They have black legs, with red knees and red feet and long red beaks with a yellow patch at the base, like a saddle. They are normally associated with water and this bird was only about a kilometre from the river, which from his high vantage point in the baobab tree, he could probably see clearly.

PEOPLE

We received the very sad news this month of the death of our first chef, Brett Wiggill, from cancer. Some of our very earliest guests will remember Brett. Our condolences go to Brett's devoted wife, Barbara.

Following the rift between the De Wildt Cheetah and Wildlife Trust and Ann van Dyk, the founder of the De Wildt Cheetah Centre, Ann has established her own trust, called The Ann van Dyk Cheetah Trust, and will continue her work with captive-bred cheetahs and wild dogs. The Wild Cheetah Project now comes under the aegis of the Endangered Wildlife Trust. Kelly Marnewick and Deon Cilliers, both staunch supporters of all the cheetahs at Makulu

Makete, have transferred to the EWT, where Kelly is Senior Researcher of the Carnivore Conservation Group and Deon will continue to manage the cheetah metapopulation as before. We have always been grateful for their help in the past and look forward to a strong relationship in the future.