

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY AUGUST 2009

### SEASONS

It's blossom time at Makulu Makete. The acacia trees are covered with pale yellow flowers, attracting the brightly-coloured, iridescent sunbirds who flit from tree to tree, whistling happily. Vervet monkeys pluck off the flowers and stuff them into their mouths, watching us warily, their heads moving quickly from side to side, always ready to leap for cover. The veld is now bone dry and it's hard to imagine that it will ever recover once the rains come. It almost looks as if a bush fire has been through, leaving bare and lifeless trunks and branches and sand denuded of grass, but we know that the place will turn green and lush again when the rain falls. In the meantime, we have increased our supplementary feeding of lucerne hay to get the grazing and browsing animals through this long dry period. Already the daytime temperature is reaching over 30 degrees Celsius (around 86 degrees F) while the nights are still cold enough for open fires and electric blankets.

### CHEETAH PROJECT

Peter and I set off for a sailing holiday in Greece early in the month, knowing that if Phoenix, our captive-bred female cheetah, was indeed pregnant, she would produce cubs while we were away. We called Narinda anxiously every couple of days to get the latest news, seeing the dry veld and the thorn trees of Makulu Makete in our imagination, while surrounded by the brilliant blue waters and the glamour and glitz of summer in the Mediterranean islands. Narinda kept a careful watch and sent the following email on 17 August.

*"Well today is day 97 since Phoenix met with Mayday, sadly there is no sign of cubs anywhere. She had me running around and kept me guessing for quite a while... Day 90 and 91 she caught a bushbuck ewe and completely finished it then she moved a kilometre away from there, where she would normally loaf around. Well she stayed only the afternoon there. Day 92 she moved down to the river 2 kilometres from where I found her and what made it difficult was that I knew she could have been loafing around in the same spot, but she might also have cubs. Luckily I could see her from the road - she was a size 3. Day 93 she walked forever! Absolutely weird behavior and I thought maybe there is still a chance. The afternoon of day 93 she caught a steenbok and ate it so fast as if she wanted to get a move on (again unusual behavior) and her stomach was not a normal ball-size it was more a block formation. She looked really uncomfortable and I thought again maybe today. Well day 94 I was very careful and did not go in because she was in the same spot 5 kilometres from where she caught the steenbok and there might be a chance that she has cubs. By late evening she moved and I followed, got a visual and she looked like as if she always does after eating a steenbok. She never returned to the same spot. So no cubs...we will never know if there might have been or not."*

The response from Dr. Peter Caldwell, the expert cheetah vet who had thought that Phoenix was pregnant when he changed her collar in May, echoed our own thoughts:

*"I am totally impressed at your very thorough and careful observation skills of these cheetahs. I think the blood results were accurate and that she was not pregnant so nothing to worry about. Sounds like these cheetahs are thriving at Makulu Makete and that some day we will have cubs."*

While keeping a close eye on Phoenix, Narinda also had to monitor Stud, the young, wild male cheetah that was released late last month. In the first couple of weeks after his release

he proved to be quite a handful. He chased some of our workers who were making repairs to one of the roads on the reserve. The workers are used to gentle and relaxed Phoenix, who takes little notice of vehicles or people who pass by on foot. A very hungry Stud, on the other hand, ran after the workers, forcing them to take refuge on the tractor's big trailer. Luckily, Stud was distracted by the sight of a bushbuck ram nearby, which he immediately chased and killed. Once he started to kill for himself, he settled down and his aggressive behaviour disappeared. However, all of us, Narinda included, treat Stud with respect and always carry a stick to fend him off if necessary.

At the end of August, Narinda took me with her as a guinea pig to see how Stud would react to more than one person tracking him. We got within a few metres of him then stood watching. He seemed slightly uneasy at first, lowering his head and flattening his ears, with a low growl, but soon relaxed, rolled on his back and yawned. Thanks to Narinda's careful monitoring, he is making very good progress. As he wandered off into the bush, we were especially pleased to see him spray urine on a dead tree trunk. This is the very first time any of us have witnessed him scent-marking and it means that Phoenix should soon be aware that he is around. The following day both cheetahs were in the same area, along the fenceline near the dirt road. They were only 330 metres apart and could almost have seen each other, but to our disappointment, they walked off in different directions. How long will it take before they meet?

## GAME VIEWING

As the veld gets barer, the grazing and browsing animals overcome fear in favour of food and hang around the areas of human habitation, where green lawns and gardens provide sustenance. A big bull kudu quietly cropped the grass next to the swimming pool while I sat on the verandah with a cup of coffee, just a couple of metres away from him. The gemsbok ignore the vehicles that drive past, sometimes not even bothering to get to their feet if they are lying close to the road. With little dry grass left as cover, smaller animals that are usually hidden become visible. We have had another two sightings of African wild cats this month and just the other day Narinda had to stop her vehicle to let a honey badger cross in front of her.

I had another wonderful otter sighting when watching for birds on the weir across the river. It was before 7 a.m., with the sun just peeping over the trees, and still quite cold. The river is not flowing at the moment, so the pool behind the weir was mirror-calm. As I watched up-river for birdlife, I heard a sloshing noise from the river bank and saw the water weeds moving. An otter's head appeared through the weeds, looking around, but not taking any notice of me. Behind it came two more heads and the three otters made their way in single file, duck diving effortlessly, towards the weir. The first otter clambered up the steep concrete wall of the weir and slithered down the other side, like a wet towel falling, followed closely by the other two. I noticed that the first otter was bigger, with a loose belly hanging down and clearly visible teats. The other two were smaller, but well-grown. This was mother and babies out for the day. They climbed over the rocks and examined the pools of water downstream of the weir and disappeared into the vegetation. Last month I saw a big otter swimming in the same pool, but it had a broken tail. These otters all had undamaged tails. Perhaps the other otter was the father of the cubs? Cape Clawless Otters can grow to 160 cm long, of which 50 cm is tail, and they can weigh up to 18 kilograms. I think the mother otter would have been at least 15 kilos. They thrive in dirty water where they feel for their prey of shellfish, using their hands. How privileged we are to have such a charming family resident in our river pool.

## BIRDING

The red-headed weavers are starting to get their breeding plumage. One industrious male weaver, his head well tinged with red, has already started making repairs to one of his old nests hanging over the swimming pool by the lodge. The summer migrant species will be arriving over the next couple of months to add further variety to the resident birds.

As mentioned last month, the new wetland created by our neighbour's dam across the river, has changed the pattern of birdlife in that stretch of the river. African Darters, Reed Cormorants, Pied Kingfishers and White-fronted Bee-eaters are regular sightings. We even saw an African Hawk Eagle with a fish in its talons perched on a tree nearby. As these eagles are not known to be fishing eagles, perhaps he had stolen the fish from another hunter?

Our solitary ostrich, a female, and the only survivor from a group of three which have been preyed upon by the cheetahs over the years, has staked a claim to one of the feeding troughs that are regularly filled with lucerne hay. We always considered the ostrich to be a rather stupid bird, but this particular specimen is demonstrating some sort of intelligence by staying close to the food and water source. Narinda put up the camera trap next to the feeding trough to find out which animal species were taking advantage of the supplementary feed. Over a week the camera took 743 photos and the ostrich was in every single one of those photos, along with various gemsbok, kudus, an aardvark, warthogs and a big old eland bull which we call Ernie, after Ernie Els, the South African golfer, known as "The Big Easy".