

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

SEPTEMBER 2009

SEASONS

This is the time of the year when we wait. We wait for rain; wait for the first shoots of grass to spring up; wait for the leaves to appear on the trees. The waiting becomes tedious as the veld looks even more barren and parched by the day. The pretty blossoms have already withered on the acacia trees, adding to the look of desolation. A day of gentle rain during the month gave us some hope but resulted in only 13 millimetres in our rain gauges, which was not enough to bring the bush back to life. There is no sign yet of the harbingers of summer – the tortoises, snakes and dung beetles, that herald the rain. And so we continue to wait, looking forward to the first summer thunderstorms.

CHEETAH PROJECT

At the beginning of September Peter, Narinda and I attended a meeting in Johannesburg organised by the Endangered Wildlife Trust with other owners of reserves that have cheetahs on their properties and representatives from interested government departments. The meeting agreed on some basic guidelines with regard to the co-ordination of management of all cheetahs on private reserves through a networking system, a data base and an interactive website to ensure the genetic diversity of the cheetah metapopulation – the term used to describe the cheetah population made up of animals on various reserves in South Africa. This new initiative will be of great benefit to the future of cheetahs in private reserves and should facilitate the exchange of cheetahs from one reserve to another to create a genetically continuous population. Makulu Makete was one of the smallest reserves represented at the meeting, at 4,500 hectares and with a population of just two cheetahs, but our daily monitoring of the cheetahs has produced an enormous amount of data which is useful for the overall study of cheetahs in South Africa.

Apart from waiting for the rain, we are waiting for our two cheetahs to finally get together. Both Stud, the young wild male cheetah, and Phoenix, the female captive-bred cheetah, have been active, moving all over the reserve and hunting well but as far as we know, they have not yet met up with one another. We first saw Stud scent-marking trees with a huge arc of urine last month and he has continued to spray busily. Phoenix, however, does not appear to be drawn to his marking posts. In our previous experience, when one cheetah was released from the boma into the reserve, within less than two weeks it met and mated with the cheetah which was already roaming freely. Stud has been out of the boma for a couple of months and has not found Phoenix unless it happened briefly and was not witnessed by Narinda. Normally the cheetahs stay together for a couple of days when mating. Phoenix, who is now officially regarded as a proper wild cheetah, having learnt to fend for herself in the wild, was chemically contracepted before being involved in our rewilding programme. Perhaps her contraception has not yet worn off and that is the reason that she and Stud have remained apart.

After being very nervous at first, Stud has settled in well and, thanks to Narinda's careful monitoring and habituation, he has become a much more relaxed cheetah, no longer charging her and other members of our staff. When I visited Stud one day with Narinda, he was chewing noisily on a bushbuck ram that he had killed earlier in the day. His stomach was stretched to its limit after demolishing most of the antelope. He watched us walk to within a few metres of his kill but took very little notice of us, which is exactly the behaviour we were hoping for. Just before we left him, he sat up, stomach bulging, face covered with blood, and gave a loud and satisfied burp in our direction. His table manners leave a lot to be desired.

GAME VIEWING

The antelopes continue to gather around the lucerne hay that is being dropped to supplement their feed until the grass and leaves reappear. A favourite place is the waterhole below the lodge, where at one time we counted seventeen kudus, a bushbuck ram, an impala ewe, a waterbuck bull, about thirty baboons, two warthogs and five gemsbok. Watching so many species interact is always fascinating. The warthogs seem to be the lowest on the pecking order and are chased off by the gemsbok. The baboons spend a lot of time shouting and screaming at one another while the kudus are content to munch on the hay while the other species argue with each other.

Another African wild cat and a bat-eared fox were seen during the month and just this morning, as I write this, a dead steenbok was found not far from the lodge, with all the signs pointing to a caracal kill. Narinda has set up the camera trap next to the carcass to find out whether the killer will return.

BIRDING

We wait for the rain. We wait for the cheetahs to get together and we wait for the summer migrant bird species to arrive. The earliest summer arrivals recorded in September have been Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters and Red-breasted Swallows. I was particularly pleased to see the swallows, since I had not seen them on the reserve for the past couple of years. However, I didn't have much time to enjoy them because as I watched them sitting on power lines near the fence, Narinda called me on the radio to tell me that Stud was on the move and getting too close for comfort to where I was birding. Although he is much less aggressive than when he was first released, we don't want to bump into him in the bush without proper warning. I had to abandon my swallows, join Narinda in the safety of her bakkie (pick-up truck) and leave Stud to his hunting.

PEOPLE

A new human resident arrived at Makulu Makete on the very last day of the month. Her name is Lindy Thompson and she will be taking over the monitoring of the cheetahs from Narinda at the end of November, when Narinda finishes her university exams. Lindy was born in South Africa and went to school here and in England. She completed a Bachelor of Science in Zoology at Edinburgh University in Scotland and a Master of Science in Wildlife Management and Conservation at Reading University in England. Since graduating she has been a research assistant in Kruger National Park in South Africa and in Ireland where she was studying birds. She worked in India on a project called "Mangroves for the Future" with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and has monitored gibbons in Borneo in Indonesia. She arrived after a long flight from a holiday in Australia and, before she could recover from her jetlag, she was off tracking the cheetahs with Narinda and learning the ropes. We are very pleased to have Lindy with us and hope that during her stay here at Makulu Makete she will have the privilege of tracking cheetah cubs, just as Narinda did before her, when Stud and Phoenix finally get together.