

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

OCTOBER 2009

SEASONS

We are still waiting for rain, as the veld gets more desperately dry every day. There have been some glimmers of the start of the rainy season, but while the rest of the country seems to be getting healthy thunderstorms, only a few drops have fallen at Makulu Makete. But the early signs of summer are starting to appear with the first leopard tortoises solemnly plodding out in the open, after their long hibernation. The baobab trees have sprouted tiny leaves and the apple leaf trees are covered with lilac coloured blossoms that fall on to the ground below in a purple carpet. The apple leaf trees pale into insignificance when compared with the magnificence of the jacaranda trees that line the streets of our nearest big town, Polokwane. The town is resplendent under avenues of gorgeous, bright purple trees and gardens full of brilliant red, orange and purple bougainvillea. The jacarandas, which are unfortunately not indigenous to South Africa, brightened up our normally dull and tiresome long shopping day in Polokwane this month.

CHEETAH PROJECT

As mentioned last month, we have been concerned that our two cheetahs, Phoenix and Stud, have not yet met each other although they have both been free-roaming in the bush for several months now. We checked the records about the chemical contraception that Phoenix was given before she arrived at MM and have discovered that she received a double dose, which will probably not wear off until January next year. This could explain why the cheetahs have shown no interest in getting together and mating. We will just have to wait a few more months for some action.

Meanwhile, both cheetahs have been hunting busily. They are concentrating on the area along the river, where most of the game is congregated at this dry time of the year. To Peter's chagrin, they seem to have a predilection for bushbuck. Makulu Makete's river habitat has always been famous locally for its bushbuck, and we are worried that the cheetahs might completely eradicate this species. In just four days, the two cheetahs killed three bushbuck ewes. Narinda and Lindy were tracking Stud in the reeds along the river bed when he suddenly charged towards them out of the bush, swerving to pass them as he chased down and killed one of the ewes. Next day, Phoenix killed another bushbuck ewe, but this time right under the washing line next to the laundry at the lodge. Sarah, our maid, came to tell us that she couldn't bring in the washing because there was a cheetah lying under the line, chomping on a kill. Phoenix stayed on her kill until she had demolished it and then spent the next couple of days lounging around on the lawn next to the swimming pool outside the lodge, lazily digesting her big meal. She completely ignored us as we went about our normal routines, but Sarah decided it would not be prudent to vacuum the swimming pool as usual, in case she disturbed Phoenix's nap. After two days Phoenix moved on, but how lucky we were to be able to look up from the dining table, to see the long, spotted shape of the sleeping cat outside under the tree. She used the swimming pool as a waterhole and found the soft, shady lawn just to her liking. If we walked too close, her head would swivel around to watch us and she would half-heartedly show one of her canine teeth in a lazy snarl, then drop back to sleep again.

GAME VIEWING

The antelopes, giraffes and zebras continue to gather daily at the feeding troughs to eat the lucerne hay that is being put out to supplement their feed. Although many of the thorn bushes have already produced fresh, green leaves, there is absolutely no grass for the grazing species.

Nine zebras appeared at the lodge waterhole but were chased away by the more aggressive gemsbok (oryx), whose long horns are lethal weapons. The gemsbok set up camp around the troughs, refusing to share the hay with any other animals except the occasional kudu bull. Warthogs clean up stalks of hay that have fallen under the troughs, but the gemsbok try to hunt them away, crashing their horns against the metal troughs as they charge the warthogs.

On the lodge lawn, the bravest kudu bulls push their spiral horns up into the branches of the trees, then twist their heads to break the higher branches which fall on to the ground where the kudus can reach the leaves more easily, like Phoenix ignoring us as we walk past.

Lindy and Narinda were thrilled to see a brown hyaena just on dusk one night at Madia Pala Camp. This was the first brownie that Lindy had ever seen and it put on a good show for her, rolling in the dust and then lying with its head on its paws to watch the two girls as they watched it, about twenty metres away. Next evening, the hyaena came back and further delighted Lindy by having a bath in the little waterhole, lying on its back and splashing the water over itself with its big front paws. Then it shook its long coat and wandered off into the bush.

While out birdwatching, I noticed a solid-looking lump in a tree on the other side of the river and zeroed in on it with my binoculars, hoping for an interesting raptor. But the lump in the tree was not a bird. It was a python, high up in the branches, curled around the dead fork of a tree, with its long tail end rippling down a dead branch. I could just make out the shiny, greenish body and diamond-shaped pattern of its scales.

BIRDING

This month we had a visit from John Swards, the Regional Co-ordinator of the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2), for which I am a registered observer. John was lucky enough to be here when Phoenix was lying on the lawn at the lodge, so as well as getting a few nice bird species, he got a very good look at a wild cheetah. One of the highlights of our birding morning was the sight of a Crowned Lapwing with two fluffy, long-legged chicks hurrying along behind her in the furrows of our neighbour's ploughed field. The chicks had dark bands around their heads that made them look like monks with a ring of hair around their shaven scalps. We have a painting, by Peter's sister Mary, in the lodge depicting exactly this scene, so it was especially delightful to see it in real life. Lindy has been watching a pair of Mocking Cliff Chats that laid three eggs in a fruit basket in the kitchen at Madia Pala Camp. The camp is at the base of a big, boulder-strewn koppie, or hill, perfect habitat for the chats. Three little chicks have hatched out and the parents scold Lindy loudly whenever they find her in the kitchen.

The cuckoos have started to arrive for the summer. For the first time this season, I heard the famous "Piet my vrou" call of the Red-chested Cuckoo and saw a Jacobin Cuckoo not far away. Elusive as they are, it is always nice to hear the calls of the cuckoos in summer. Flocks of Barn Swallows and colourful European Bee-eaters have already appeared and a lone Wahlberg's Eagle was seen circling over the farmhouse. Which will be the next summer migrant species to arrive?

PEOPLE

Since she arrived a month ago, Lindy has been learning the ropes of cheetah tracking from Narinda, whose knowledge of cheetah behaviour and ability to predict and prevent problems is astounding. Lindy could not have had a better teacher and is now confident enough to track and walk in on the cheetahs alone, having absorbed as much of Narinda's teaching as possible. Lindy is hoping to use the cheetah rewilding project as the basis for an academic

thesis. Bennie, who is in the process of completing her Master's thesis on the first part of the project, visited us for a couple of days to pass on some of her data-collection wisdom to Lindy. Bennie had a chance to see her beloved Phoenix again and was able to track Stud out in the bush for the first time. Next February, Bennie will start her PhD, involving eleven prides of lions in the northern part of Kruger Park, which is a giant step from studying the cheetahs at Makulu Makete.

It was a very sad day when we bade farewell to Narinda, who has been a part of our team and our lives for almost three years. She has left us to complete her final exams for her BTech degree and is looking at several possible job opportunities in the area of wildlife management. Narinda's dedication and dependability, her common sense and hands-on experience have been invaluable to us. We have relied heavily on her for all our dealings with the cheetahs in particular. Not only that, but we regard her and her lovely Labrador, Zoey, as our family. We will miss her as much as a daughter and we wish her and Zoey every good fortune in the future. We hope they will treat MM as their home and return to visit us often.

Narinda's last day here was typical. Alerted by Peter that the voltage on the electric fence was low, she led us down a narrow track to find Stud in a tight corner between the fence and the river, on an impala kill. It appeared that the fence had been involved in the struggle between the impala and the cheetah. The wires were broken and twisted, resulting in the low voltage, and an unacceptable barrier to our neighbour's farmland. In her usual, unflappable and fearless manner, Narinda inched down the river bank as close as she could to where Stud lay so that she could untangle the wires. Stud growled softly a couple of times, but Narinda knew he was not feeling threatened and was unlikely to charge her. This is the second time that the fence has apparently helped Stud make a kill in this same spot, raising suspicions that he is deliberately using the fence to trap his prey. This section of the fence will have to be replaced with strong posts and wire mesh so that even if Stud does drive his prey into it, the fence will not be damaged.

This incident will be Narinda's final memory of Makulu Makete, along with so many other times when her experience and uncanny affinity with the cheetahs has enabled us to avert a possible crisis. Wherever the future takes her, Narinda's next lucky boss will be getting one awesome young lady.