

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY NOVEMBER 2009

### SEASONS

Rain at last! There's nothing like the smell of approaching rain in the African bush. You can almost taste it. It's a mixture of warm earth, damp impala droppings and the acrid scent of wet thatch, but after months of dryness, it's the most wonderful smell in the world. We had two days of good, steady, soaking rain which has transformed the bush from bare branches to dense, bright green foliage. A tinge of green grass is starting to appear on the bare sand and all the animals that were feeding on the trees and lawn around the lodge have moved back into the bush where suddenly there is plenty for them to eat. Wild flowers are starting to pop up here and there as the annual cycle begins again.

Some of us who didn't sleep through it were lucky enough to witness a rare phenomenon late one night when the sky was lit up with an extraordinary bright light as if someone was outside the window, shining a spotlight inside. Soon after, a single sharp crack, louder than any thunderbolt we have ever heard, shook the lodge and reverberated off into the bush towards Madia Pala Mountain. From similar reports by our neighbours, it seems that we had experienced a meteor exploding overhead, or entering the earth's atmosphere or colliding with the earth somewhere in our vicinity. Radio stations were agog with the news and there was talk of sending up a plane to try and find the location of the crashed meteor. We have not noticed any smoking craters on our mountain, but Peter says that a meteor is portentous of great things to come.

### CHEETAH PROJECT

Phoenix and Stud have been keeping Lindy busy. Often the cheetahs are at totally opposite ends of the reserve, so that Lindy has to drive many kilometres on her quad bike each day to make her observations of their behaviour. The difference in their personalities is quite marked. After making a kill, Phoenix spends a lot of time lying around relaxing and digesting her meal – days in fact. Stud, on the other hand, is much more active and athletic. He is usually on the move again within a day after his kill and he kills more frequently than Phoenix. We were sad when Lindy reported that Stud had killed a small zebra foal one day this month, since we had seen a little foal at the lodge waterhole with its mother just the day before. Two days later, and still quite fat from the zebra, Stud had made another kill – this time a big impala ram, which he proceeded to eat until he was so fat that he could hardly walk. Meanwhile, we watched Phoenix get thinner and thinner until she finally made a kill ten days after her previous meal.

On the first day of December, Lindy reported excitedly by radio at six o'clock in the morning that the two cheetahs had finally met each other. Lindy had been watching Phoenix lying under a tree next to number one waterhole, when who should appear but Stud? As far as we know, this is the first time the two cheetahs had met and Lindy was able to observe their behaviour for the whole day. Brash adolescent that he is, over a few hours Stud repeatedly rushed up to Phoenix and slapped her, but she did not react to his boorish advances. They lay about 40 metres apart, watching each other, Stud clearly restless and Phoenix unmoving but perhaps a bit wary of him. I joined Lindy at the waterhole from 10 a.m. and we sat in the car together, fascinated by the interaction between the two cats, but concerned that Stud might hurt Phoenix. Every time Phoenix tried to walk away, Stud ran after her and there would be a lot of chirping by Phoenix and growling by Stud, with the occasional slap on the face until things settled down again. Finally, a troop of noisy and aggressive baboons appeared out of the bush near the cheetahs and drove them away. We watched Phoenix sprint in one direction

followed by a couple of screeching baboons, while Stud zigzagged down the track in and out of the bush, with three big angry baboons in hot pursuit. Next morning, the cheetahs were still separated from each other. We rang our cheetah expert, Narinda, who has just finished her exams in Pretoria, to ask her advice on Stud's behaviour, but she was not concerned. She thinks that both animals are inexperienced and next time they meet they might be more comfortable with each other. It seems that Phoenix's contraceptive implant is still working and until it wears off, there will be no mating activity. We just have to wait a bit longer!

## GAME VIEWING

The rain and dense foliage make game viewing more difficult. Somehow the animals just seem to disappear. Lindy's parents, Geoff and Bobbie who live in Durban, arrived at Makulu Makete to spend a few days and brought the rain with them. They didn't see as much wildlife as we had hoped they would, but they enjoyed watching the two cheetahs with their daughter. But the rain brings out different creatures. The insect life explodes at this time of the year. After the rain clouds of flying ants (termites) batter at the windows to get to the lights inside the lodge at night. Next morning the ground is covered with drifts of fairy wings that drop off the ants, which then go underground to build their nests. Each day thousands of tiny caterpillars loop their way across the floors of the lodge and the dung beetles are busy again, rolling balls of dung here and there through the bush. The lovely leopard tortoises are out in force, munching on the new tufts of grass and drinking from puddles. In the snake department, there have been a couple of sightings of black mambas, and Lindy and her parents came across a puff adder by one of the baobab trees. Sarah, our maid, discovered a harmless Spotted Bush Snake in a tree by the swimming pool and there are plenty of lightning-fast Striped-bellied Sand Snakes, another harmless variety, flashing away to safety as we walk past.

A civet was seen running across a track early one morning. These dark animals, attractively spotted and striped, are about as big as a medium-sized dog, with a face a bit like a racoon's. They have a varied diet of insects, wild fruits, small rodents, reptiles, birds and carrion and can become quite tame around camping grounds, waiting for hand-outs. They are usually seen at night, so this sighting, in daylight, was as pleasing as it was unexpected.

Peter won this year's prize for seeing the first baby impala of the season on 30 November. This is a couple of weeks earlier than usual, but we expect to see many of these gorgeous, delicate little creatures within the next month or so. No doubt Phoenix and Stud will make the most of the impala lambing season.

## BIRDING

The bush is resounding with bird calls that haven't been heard for many months, such as the gorgeous, lilting call of the Woodland Kingfisher, one of our favourite summer visitors. Red-backed Shrikes have appeared from nowhere and seem to be perched on nearly every tree. Bobbie and Sophie's garden at the farmhouse, now so well looked after and watered regularly, is attracting countless species, including Diderik's Cuckoos, beautifully-iridescent Violet-backed Starlings and cheeky little Meyer's Parrots. A couple of Spur-winged Geese and flocks of Comb Ducks have joined the usual river birds, such as the Reed Cormorant and Egyptian Goose. It seems a pity that Comb Ducks have been renamed. The former name "Knob-billed Duck" was much more descriptive of the male bird's bulbous beak in the breeding season. They develop a huge lump on the top of their beaks, which can be seen from a great distance even when they are flying. The Comb Ducks are not the only ones showing off their breeding finery. Male weavers, whydahs and queleas, so drab during the winter months, are now brightly coloured and, in the case of the whydahs, displaying long, flashy tail feathers.

Thanks to the extra birding time by Jane as a participant in BirdLife South Africa's "Birding Big Day", this month's total species recorded at Makulu Makete was 137, including the rarely-seen Southern Ground Hornbill (a pair spotted by Lindy and her parents), and Crested Guineafowl.

### **LULU'S CAMP**

Although we moth-balled Lulu's Camp a couple of years ago when we retired from the accommodation business, we had so many enquiries about camping at Makulu Makete that Lulu's Camp will be reopened by Christmas this year. Peter and Bobby and their team have been hard at work refurbishing the camp. The thatched roofs, ravaged by thrill-seeking baboons, have been repaired and the swimming pool is sparkling and inviting. A new, computerised sprinkler system has been installed to keep the lawns looking good. We have employed a full-time attendant for the camp – Lorraine - who will be on hand to welcome guests and keep the camp clean and tidy.

Campers staying at Lulu's can walk or drive around the reserve and we will provide them with a map and information on what to do if they come across Stud or Phoenix on foot or in a vehicle. Unfortunately, because of the cheetahs, children aged 12 years and under are not permitted at the camping ground. The cost of camping at Lulu's will be R100 per adult per night and R50 for children between the age of 13 and 16 years old. Advance bookings are essential by email [pgr@worldonline.co.za](mailto:pgr@worldonline.co.za) or by phone 082 903 8697. Because the gates of the reserve are locked to prevent the cheetahs getting out, passers-by cannot just drive in and there is no cell-phone signal at the gate or at the camp to alert us that someone is waiting to come in. We have to know when you are coming so that we can meet you at the gate and let you in, hence the necessity for advance bookings.

We hope to see some of the readers of the Bush Diary at Lulu's soon and in the meantime we wish you all a very happy Christmas and a great year ahead in 2010.