

MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

DECEMBER 2009

SEASONS

It's swimming pool weather at Makulu Makete, with muggy, hot days and warm nights. Despite the humidity, we have had little rain over the past month and are greedy for more to revitalise the withering grass, which is now so dry that it is crunchy to walk on. The animals spend much of the hottest time of the day standing or lying dozing under the shade of the bushes and trees. The human inhabitants do much the same, especially after the festivities of the Christmas season. A mighty summer electrical storm in the middle of the month produced only a couple of millimetres of rain but a huge sound-and-light display. Next morning we discovered that our new two-way radio base station in the lodge had received a direct lightning hit and had been blown up. This was just two days after replacing the previous base-station which had also been destroyed by a lightning strike.

CHEETAH PROJECT

January 2010 is the magic date for our female cheetah, Phoenix. We have been told by the vet that her contraception should wear off during January and we are hoping that soon she and Stud, the male cheetah, will finally get together. Since their last encounter in November, they have remained separate. Both cheetahs have taken advantage of the impala lambing season to hunt the baby impalas that can be seen all over the reserve, bouncing along with their mothers. Sad though it is to find the cheetahs chewing on such tiny prey, one of the reasons we introduced cheetahs into Makulu Makete was to keep our impala population under control. At least while they are killing baby impalas, the cheetahs are leaving our precious bushbucks alone. We had become concerned that the cheetahs were targetting bushbucks to such an extent that they would wipe them out completely. Although we don't see as many bushbucks as we used to, we are hoping there are a few left in the thick bush along the river to keep the species alive at MM.

One day this month Lindy found Phoenix lying with an impala lamb that she had just killed. The cheetah was panting and recovering from her exertions before eating the baby antelope. But as Lindy watched, Phoenix noticed a second baby impala and took off immediately, abandoning the first kill, and taking down the second, which she then proceeded to eat. The first poor, little impala lamb was left untouched. Phoenix never returned to polish it off and it took a couple of days for scavengers to remove the tiny carcass. Such wasteful behaviour by a cheetah has not been witnessed before.

Lindy's parents, Bobbie and Geoff, stayed with Lindy over Christmas and the New Year and went out tracking with her each day. Bobbie captured an amazing episode on camera when they saw Phoenix strangle, presumably to death, an impala ewe, then flop down next to the impala to get her breath back. While she was panting, the impala staggered to its feet and predator and prey were face to face, both exhausted from their tussle. After a few seconds, the impala ran off, with Phoenix in pursuit but it was the impala's lucky day and it got away.

GAME VIEWING

The impalas aren't the only ones with babies. In the heat of the day, female warthogs come running in to the waterhole below the lodge, tails up, and wallow in the water. Like remote-controlled toy cars, their babies come skittering along behind. For such ugly adults, warthogs have the cutest babies. Five tiny piglets sucking under their mother next to the waterhole is a sight to make anyone smile. Elands, waterbucks, wildebeest and gemsbok all have little calves amongst the herds that run off into the bush when we drive past.

Each evening giraffes visit the lodge waterhole, just on dusk, when the pink sunset gives their coats a rich, chestnut glow. Carefully they look around before spreading their front legs and lowering their necks to drink. In such a position they are vulnerable to predators and at the slightest sound they throw up their heads and bring their legs together, ready to retreat if threatened. Once satisfied that they are safe, they continue to drink then wander off into the bush. The white backs of their ears are visible in the fading light, over the top of the trees and far into the distance, even when their bodies are hidden by the foliage.

BIRDING

There is so much birdlife activity at the moment that it is difficult to decide what the highlights have been. The Southern Carmine Bee-eaters arrived at MM for the summer on 7 December. Lipstick pink and turquoise, they glide overhead, catching insects on the wing. Just as welcome are the equally pretty Broad-billed Rollers, regally coloured in purple and navy blue, with wide, yellow beaks. The pair of Mocking-cliff Chats that have already raised a brood this season in a fruit basket in the kitchen at Madia Pala Camp have laid another clutch of eggs in the same basket, bravely scolding anyone who ventures into the kitchen.

While walking our dog, Muscles, early one morning I heard a low, hooting sound like someone blowing across the top of an empty bottle. This is a sound I know well, so I followed it into the bush to find a single Southern Ground Hornbill ponderously walking through the bush as it made the mournful hooting call. I reported the sighting to the Southern African Bird Atlas Project (SABAP2) and was pleased to see it appear on their website map of species distribution. Our MM Ground Hornbill stands out on its own, far away from the well-known habitats in the big game reserves like Kruger Park. It is particularly satisfying to know that this threatened species has a refuge here.

Along with the antelopes, many of the birds have babies to look after. Sitting by the lodge swimming pool one day, we watched a female Diderik's Cuckoo fly into the nests of a Red-headed Weaver and a Southern Masked Weaver, looking for somewhere to lay her eggs so that she wouldn't have the bother of feeding the babies herself. As she sat on a branch after inspecting the nests, a pair of Long-billed Crombecs, which have a nest in the same tree, attacked her furiously and finally drove her away. The weavers should thank their neighbours, the crombecs, for their help in discouraging the cuckoo's parasitic conduct.

CAMPS AND PEOPLE

We had many family visitors over the Christmas/New Year period. Lindy had a nice Christmas with her parents. Bobby and Sophie were joined by two of their daughters and their families. Peter's three grandchildren Trevor, Tamsin and David, and his daughter-in-law, Loudine, spent Christmas with us, and Peter's niece, Pauline was here for a week prior to Christmas. As she drove out of MM, she had to skirt around a black mamba that was lying on the dirt road. The mamba reared up to strike at her car when she drove past. Bobby discovered another black mamba in the workshop near the farmhouse and several others have been seen already this season.

Our first guests at the refurbished Lulu's Camp, Frans Glanville and his family, arrived a couple of days after Christmas and spent almost a week relaxing at the camp, enjoying the bush and the respite from their busy city lives. Frans got a very fleeting glimpse of Stud when he and the cheetah bumped into each other near the camp. Surprised, Stud took off with a growl.

2010 will be a big year for South Africa with the World Cup Soccer competition being held here in June. The lead-up to the World Cup has been growing more and more feverishly as the time draws closer. It was a good excuse for massive New Year celebrations all through the country, but New Year's Eve at Makulu Makete was a quiet affair. There were no fireworks, no police sirens, no drunken parties, no car horns blaring at midnight, just a full moon and the night sounds of the bush to welcome in 2010.