

## MAKULU MAKETE BUSH DIARY

### JANUARY 2010

#### SEASONS

For weeks we watched the television news reports of widespread flooding in Johannesburg, washing cars and roads away, while up here in the north of Limpopo Province, no rain was falling. Each night we eagerly waited for the weather forecast, which showed heavy rain across much of the north east of South Africa, except for a tiny triangle, where South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe meet – and that's where we are! Finally, a week or so before the end of January, we got 45mm of rain overnight and some cool days to follow, giving the veld a chance to start again. We are hoping that this late rain will be followed by more, which will save us for the season. This year, perhaps because of the long wait for the rain, the Lowveld Cluster Leaf trees (*Terminalia prunoides*), better known as purple-pod terminalias, look spectacular. The bush is heavily sprinkled with these normally non-descript trees that are now covered with seed-pods that look a bit like pea pods. The pods start off green, then gradually change from pink to reddish and finally a deep, russet colour, vividly splashing the veld. The pods are a favourite food of the cheeky and noisy little Meyer's Parrots that zip happily from red bush to red bush, screeching with delight.

#### CHEETAH PROJECT

The heavy rain upstream on the Mogalakwena River has meant that the river, stained red with soil run-off from the surrounding countryside, has been rising and falling over the past month. Some days we are cut off from the eastern section of the reserve by the high river and, as Murphy's Law dictates, often that seems to be when the cheetahs are already on the other side of the river. This means Lindy can't track them until the river drops enough for a vehicle to get across. Occasionally she has been forced to use a tiny boat, not much bigger than a baby's bath, to paddle across to the other side at Lulu's Camp. Our new camp caretaker at Lulu's Camp, Lorraine, had never seen a cheetah so one day, when Phoenix was resting with a kill under a bush not far from the camp, Peter and Lindy took Lorraine in to see the cheetah. Phoenix behaved impeccably, giving Lorraine confidence to deal with the situation if the cheetah decides to visit her at Lulu's Camp.

We had hoped that the two cheetahs, Stud and Phoenix, would have got together during the month of January, as Phoenix's contraceptive is due to wear off about this time, but so far no luck. They have remained apart. Jane and Peter were called in to help the other night, just on dusk, when Lindy found Phoenix with a dead young impala ram that the cheetah had killed but in the process the impala had got caught on the electric fence. Phoenix could not pull the impala off the fence because she kept getting shocked, so she lay on guard, right next to the kill. While Lindy and Jane kept the cheetah at bay, hitting sticks on the bushes when she approached too close, Peter managed to get the impala off the fence and dragged it clear. When we stepped back from the impala, Phoenix immediately ran in and, sinking her teeth into the skin on the shoulder of the dead antelope and using her whole body, pulled it backwards under a tree with very little effort, such is the strength of these cats that look so fragile.

Tracking the cheetahs is sometimes more exciting than others. With her antenna aloft, Lindy was listening to Phoenix's signal close by when she looked down to find a large hole dug in the sand at her feet. Looking up at her from the hole was a warthog. Warthogs retreat into their burrows stern-first, leaving their heads facing upwards to intimidate a would-be intruder. Not many predators would be brave enough to tackle a warthog front-on. This particular warthog ran out of its hole, past Lindy, followed by a stream of baby warthogs. There was a

scuffle as Phoenix, nearby, saw the fast-food snacks racing past, but on this occasion she missed her prey and the baby warthogs got away.

## **GAME VIEWING**

As part of her research, Lindy wants to get an idea of the prey species population at Makulu Makete. One method of doing so is to drive along a pre-planned route at a constant speed, counting the animals as you go. Jane and Lindy have been doing this for the past couple of months. The thickness of the bush at this time of the year makes visibility very difficult. Counting a herd of impalas as they leap away into the bush is not easy, and trying to distinguish male and female animals is even harder. Sometimes we see so few animals that it seems there must be a big hole in the fence somewhere and all the animals have escaped. Game viewing is like that – it's a matter of luck if you are in the right place at the right time.

With no rain for so long and no new grass appearing, Peter has decided on an early game capture for the year, to take off some of the grazers, in particular waterbuck. So that the animals do not get stressed by the summer heat, the earliest time that a game capture can take place is late February or early March. There are many young waterbuck bulls and some big “trophy” males along the river as well as groups of females gathering on the open areas near Lulu's Camp to graze each evening. Peter wants to remove 100 waterbuck, about 60 impalas and 25 gemsbok to take the pressure off any grass that might appear in the meantime.

It has been a month of frustration, watching the thunder clouds build in the distance and knowing that someone, but not us, is getting rain. The rumble of thunder and possibility of rain excites the foam-nest frogs that live around the lodge into a lovely chorus of chirping back and forth to one another. After the first drops of rain, frothy, white balls of foam can be found hanging from trees and branches above deep puddles in the road or along the river or over our swimming pool. These nests protect the eggs of the foam nest frog. The tadpoles wriggle out of the foam and drop into the water below. These dear little frogs spend all year at the lodge, often behind pictures or on window sills, turning white in the sunlight and so still that they look like plaster-of-Paris frogs.

Another summer visitor to the lodge was a young puff adder, which was found by our Jack Russell terrier, Muscles. Even though it was only about 20cm long, Muscles warily backed away from the little snake which, for its size, gave quite a loud hiss. Adult puff adders are not as attractive as the babies. This little snake was black with pale chevrons patterning its body, and its triangular head was raised ready to strike, tongue flicking in and out. We relocated the little snake far away from the lodge where it could grow up in peace and not be a danger to us or Muscles.

## **BIRDING**

Good birding conditions continue, especially after the rain and with the river flowing well. On one of my bird atlasing mornings, I drove through the water running across the dam wall and noticed a flurry of feathers on the dam. Could it be an African Finfoot? Grabbing my binoculars I saw the bird swim away out of a clump of reeds and, sure enough, it was a female finfoot, cruising around on the mirror-still water of the dam. I had the best viewing ever of a finfoot as I stood on the back of my Nomad 4x4 to see the bird striking out across the dam. Unlike a swan or a duck, which shows very little effort when swimming, the finfoot's body pushed from side to side through the water in its effort to paddle, probably because its feet are not webbed like swans or ducks. I have been lucky enough to see finfoots (is the plural “finfeet”?) several times over the past year and every sighting has been of a female, which is brown with a more heavily marked head than the male. Since their status is “uncommon” and

they are shy and furtive birds, I wonder whether it is the same female bird I have been seeing, along a stretch of river about 3km long.

This time last year we had juvenile Gabar goshawks around the lodge. This year there is a new brood. The adults nest in the same area each year but not in the same nest, this year's nest being close to the cheetah boma, about 100 metres from the lodge. Two young goshawks have been behaving like 18-year-old boys who have just got their driver's licence. They scream noisily to each other, as if encouraging more and more outlandish aerobatics, as they dart through the bushes, harassing doves and francolins. Like many 18-year-old boys, however, they go home to their parents' nest after each foray, not yet ready to venture out alone into the big, scary world.

## PEOPLE

Last September we were sad to see Narinda leave us, after three years at MM as our Conservator. She was instrumental in our work with cheetahs and we still miss her. We are pleased to report that Narinda passed her exams for Bachelor of Technology in Nature Conservation at the end of last year. She has taken up a position as the Animal Care Supervisor for the Al Ain Zoo and Wildlife Park in Abu Dhabi. She has a three year contract, during which time the wildlife park will be expanded from 50 hectares to 900 hectares. This is a big step up on the career ladder for Narinda and we wish her every success. She was due to arrive in Al Ain this morning and already we are waiting eagerly to hear her first impressions of her new surroundings and job.

Peter and Jane are leaving at the end of the week for three months in Australia, leaving Bobby and Lindy in charge of MM in their absence. We are hoping that the cheetahs will get together while we are away and that by the time we return cubs will be well on the way.