

Singita



Photo by: Monika Malewski

WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA KRUGER NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH AFRICA
For the month of December, Two Thousand and Twenty-one

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.4°C (70.6°F)
Minimum recorded: 16.0°C (60.8°F)
Average maximum: 32.5°C (90.6°F)
Maximum recorded: 40.0°C (104°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 106 mm
Season to date: 200 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05h05
Sunset: 18h43

December marks the first month of summer. This month there have been multiple thunderous showers where the lightning turned night into day. Some roads have been so inundated with the copious amount of water that they had begun to flow like rivers! We had many temporary pans forming on the side of the roads, in the middle of the bush, and in any small depressions in the ground that could hold water. For the first time, in a very long time, the weir below the lodge overflowed for the entire year.

A number of snakes having been sighted. The insects have also begun surfacing from the depths that they had been in during a state of torpor, filling the air with the humming of their wings and the gentle rustling of their busy bodies. This has been great for the birds and insectivores who have been swooping in to have their fill of the bounteous yield. The trees and shrubs have also begun to produce a great harvest with the fruit providing sustenance to all in need. Particularly the white berry bush and the sour plums which have pushed their nutrients from the leaves and their roots, to their fruit that look like white and red Christmas ornaments dangling on the branches, inviting onlookers for a nibble. The marula trees have begun fruiting but they are still small, hard and green and not yet ready for the harvest.

The great amount of rain we have received has all but transformed the bush with grass levels in some areas reaching over a meter, which is enough to conceal stalking predators. The abundance of water and vegetation has transformed the herbivores with their winter/spring physiques from slender and lean to muscular and bulky, providing them a little edge to flee from prowling predators - and thus continues the evolutionary arms race, with nature serving both predator and prey alike.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for December:

Lions

- A portion of the Shish pride, one adult and three sub-adult females have been sighted on a number of occasions in the southern part of our concession. One of the sub-adult females has taken on a personality of her own which involves a lot of sass and play, which is remarkable to observe and see her coming into her own.
- The Mananga pride have established their territory firmly in the north-west part of our concession, and their cubs are growing both in size and wisdom.



Photo by: Wessel Booysen

- What we believe to be the Northern pride have been, as their name suggests, sighted on a number of occasions in our northern parts of our concession.
- The newly founded coalition consisting of the experienced Kumana male and the strong Maputo male have been seen more apart than together in the month of December, but closer to the end of the month this changed and when observed, there seemed to be no tension between them. The Kumana male has also been seen on a number of occasion with some of the females from the Shish pride and,

on 30 December, a Shish female was seen with the Kumana and Maputo male and three very young cubs around the granophyre's, giving us hope that the once dominant pride in the south are on the journey to rebuild their pride numbers.

- The Xhirombe male has been seen across the Mozambican fence enjoying water that flowed from drainage lines in South Africa into Mozambique.
- The Mountain pride is still 11 strong and have been seen on a number of occasions in the north eastern mountainous parts of our concession, looking like they are in great condition. They have managed to consistently maintain their pride numbers between 10 and 12 for the beginning of the year until now, even with the losses they have endured this year.
- The two Shishangaan males have been seen on a number of occasions patrolling their territory and also spending time with the Mananga pride. We have not seen them in the presence of the Mountain pride this month, as they have focused their energy on the Mananga pride who still have very young cubs (younger than four months old).
- Two unknown young males were seen feeding on a giraffe carcass in the far north western parts of our concession with innumerable vultures and some hyenas descending for their share once the males left, which created an eerie symphony enjoyed by spectators.



Photo by: Benjamin Ackerman

Leopards

- The Euphorbia male, who has proven to be a capable hunter at his young age, has been seen on numerous occasions around the southern parts of our concession not wandering too far from Euphorbia Crossing from where he got his name. On most occasions, he has been seen feeding or with a satisfied belly.

- An unknown big male has been seen keeping watch of his territory which seems to extend west of our concession, stretching as far north to the Gudzane/Basalt area, east of central, and as far south as Nyala Road.
- A number of unknown females have been seen scattered in all corners of the concession - some relaxed around vehicles while others disappeared into the safety of overgrown vegetation the moment they were seen.



Photo by: Wessel Booysen

- The Mbiri-Mbiri male has been sighted on a number of occasions towards the central regions of our concession slowly being pushed a little further north and east possibly by the big unknown male.
- One of the two Dumbana female's cubs has been sighted on the concession around the Ntsibitsane area, extremely relaxed.
- An unknown male has been seen wandering the gorge that emerges from Mozambique into South Africa.
- The Lebombo male was seen around the lodge, heading east.

Cheetahs

Cheetahs have made a big comeback on our concession, after they spent a large portion of their time in the areas that underwent a controlled burn during the winter months, where the grasses are shorter, making it easier for them to run down their prey.

- A female cheetah and her sub-adult cubs have been seen moving in unison across all available grassland in our concession, hunting, feeding and playing.
- A female who was seen early in the year sporting a leg injury has been sighted again wandering the western parts of our concession, with her injury now being healed.
- A female cheetah was seen around the sticky thorn region with two very young cubs that were bouncing around the grasses that all but swallowed them.



Photo by: Wessel Booysen

- A number of males and females have also been seen in and around the public park roads.

Wild dogs

- A pack of ten wild dogs were seen dashing around the concession and around the western boundary road, always in motion, either feeding or attempting to hunt.
- A pack of six wild dogs were seen in the central part of our concession.

Spotted hyenas

- The hyena den off Xikelengaan Fly Camp is still active with two different aged cubs. All five of the cubs are starting to explore further and further away from the den, and they are slowly growing out of the blackened fur that they wore from a young age, and are slowly sporting spots on their tiny bodies.



Photo by: Monika Malewski

- A number of clans have been seen around the concession, some in the central parts of the property playing, some in the northern parts feeding on a giraffe carcass.

- Numerous solo hyenas of different ages and sexes have been seen in every possible corner of the concession, hunting, feeding, scent marking, trailing and/or stalking.

Elephants

- Large breeding herds of elephants have been seen gently wandering the concession, some as big as over fifty individuals and others less than ten.
- A number of elephant bulls both solo and in bachelor herds have been seen scattered around the concession.

Buffalos

- Buffalo breeding herds of over 100 individuals have been seen around the northern parts of the concession feeding on the new, lush green grasses.
- A steady number of buffalo bulls have been seen on the concession wallowing and resting.

Plains game

- We have had great plains game sightings with dazzles of zebras around all parts of the concession enjoying the plentiful grass.
- Wildebeests have also been seen in smaller numbers around the concession.
- Giraffes have also been seen across the concession with some towers as large as twenty individuals in one area.



Photo by: Benjamin Ackerman

Rare animals and other sightings

- A number of black-backed jackals with pups have been seen around the concession in our sodic areas. One particular pup was getting harassed by the cheetah mother and three cubs, they would catch it

then let it go and hit it around a bit until it finally managed to dash into the safety of the den, all while the adult jackals stood in watch as there was no way they could interject without getting injured

- Sharpe's grysbok and steenboks have been seen in their pairs and individually across the concession.

Birds

Most of the migratory birds have made their way back south and can be heard filling the summer air with wonderous songs. There have been 220 bird species recorded this month!

- There have been flocks of Amur falcons seen perching on trees across the concession.
- Flocks of red-billed queleas have been seen in large numbers blowing from one tree to another.
- With the abundance of food, a number of raptors have been seen all across the concession waiting in ambush and hovering in the sky.



Photo by: Monika Malewski

Some bush reflections and articles follow, as well as the December Gallery of images.



Cheetah sightings have always been a real treat for guides and guests visiting our lodges in Africa, especially so during the last few months here on the Singita Kruger National Park concession. Not only are they (arguably...) the most regal of the big cats in Africa, but they are one of the rarest carnivores found in the Kruger Park. It is estimated that there are about 7 100 cheetahs left in the world, with only a few hundred of them found here in the 2-million-hectare slice of wilderness in the Kruger Park. That's like looking for one very small needle in a gigantic haystack!

The rarity of the species is one thing, but I've always been fascinated in the finer details that make this predator so special. Unlike lions and leopards that largely rely on brute strength to take down a variety of prey, the cheetah has adapted and evolved into a species that has no rival on land when it comes to straight line speed. It is this unmatched ability of speed that sparked my interest in these unique and phenomenally beautiful cats.

Cheetahs have been recorded doing speeds of up to 115km/h (71miles/h), which is quite impressive at first glance, but when it is broken down into smaller measurements of speed it becomes mind boggling! Here is the math...

A cheetah will be able to accelerate and reach top speed in under 4 seconds. At full speed it will have a stride length of about 7 meters (21ft). This means that the cheetah is airborne for 7 meters between every time its paws touch the earth. In comparison, most safari vehicles have a total length of less than 5m. This feat is also repeated 4 times every second, which gives a total distance of 28 metres per second (92ft/second).



What makes this all possible?

A small head, long and slender body, small compact pads on small paws with semi-retractable claws, long legs and a tail that acts as a counter balance in high-speed chases are all main attributes to the ability of this unique cat. Furthermore, the shoulder blades do not connect to the collarbone of the cheetah, allowing for a greater range of the shoulders, resulting in greater movement of the limbs and allowing for incredible acceleration. The flexibility in the spine of a cheetah is where a lot of the speed is created. It simply allows the back feet to extend way past the front paws when running. This combined with specialised chest muscles and the free movement in the shoulders is what creates such an impressive stride length when running.

Cheetah have evolved and “sacrificed” a lot of the bulk and power needed in the hunt that’s typically associated with the techniques of lions and leopards. Smaller teeth on less muscular jaws and streamlined bodies turn these cats into specialist hunters of small to medium-sized antelope like impala and the gazelle of east Africa, that have thinner hides and the windpipe can be easily closed to deprive the prey species of oxygen. Larger antelope have been successfully hunted by cheetah but in most cases, it is when there have been coalitions of males hunting together.

I’ve often referred to cheetah as the equivalent of the F1 cars of the Grand Prix. Not just due to the relevance of speed, but to the finer details that make the cheetah and the F1 car so special. Lightweight, powerful and finely tuned. At rest the cheetah has a heart rate of about 120 beats per minute, but after only a short sprint that lasts a few seconds, it can go up to 250 beats per minute. This does allow for a huge amount of very much needed oxygenated blood to pump quickly through the body, but it does spike the core temperature of the cheetah very quickly too. This limits the cheetah to only reach these blistering speeds for 20 to 30 seconds in order to catch its prey. If they surpass this time, they greatly risk dying from pure heat exhaustion.

There are currently many conservation projects and efforts around rebuilding a healthy and genetically stable cheetah population in the wild. They are a spectacular species and one of many that need our help to be removed from the endangered species list. So, the next time you are lucky enough to see a cheetah in the wild, take a good look and marvel at the beauty, grace and finer details of the fastest cat on the planet.

The moving branch

Article by Tovhi Mudau

On an early morning game drive, my tracker David and I were driving around the concession enjoying yet another beautiful day, with glorious bird songs filling the crisp air. The tune changed when we approached a river crossing, because we began to hear a number of birds alarming. We stopped the car and our first instinct was to scan the ground for any terrestrial threats that may be sending these birds into panic but there were no signs of anything hairy and scary on the ground or feathery and weary in the trees. But the birds were still incessant! We drove a little further and stopped in the middle of the river crossing. Our big break came from a forked-tailed drongo which began mobbing a dead tree, which was a weird sight to behold but on closer inspection we began to see the branch moving, slithering in fact! A python!



A southern African python

Photo by Benjamin Ackerman

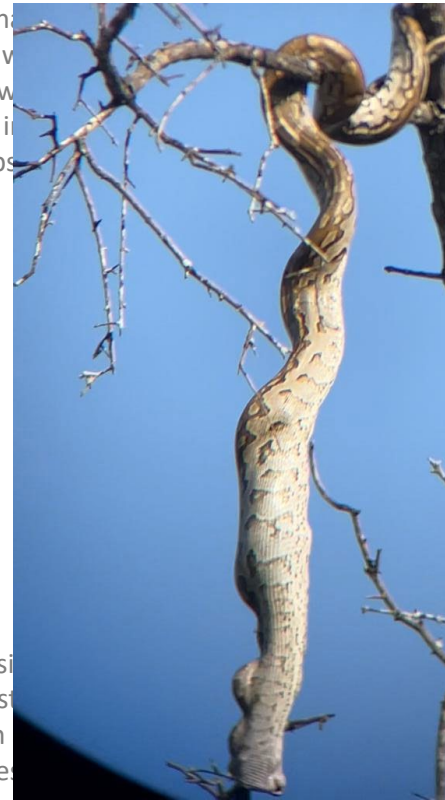
What we had thought was a branch was actually a southern African python (formerly known as the African Rock python) that had, seconds before, caught a striated heron. The striated heron had decided to perch on a tree, possibly after a morning filled with fishing and hunting frogs and some aquatic insects in the river just below. The dead tree selected by the heron was, on paper, the perfect perching tree, as it made it easy for the bird to land and take off at a whim. It was also just off the edge of the river where the heron would have been able to spot its own prey and with the lack of leaves and unnecessary branches it would have given a good 360 view to the heron to spot any aerial or terrestrial danger. Its one mistake was neglecting to spot the semi-arboreal danger, which was the southern African python that had been stretched across the length of a branch on the tree. The python wore the perfect camouflage for its hunt, it melted perfectly into its surrounding. It patiently awaited any unsuspecting prey to ambush.



The moment the heron was at a striking distance, the python launched itself towards the heron so quickly the heron did not have a chance to take off and it gripped the heron with its sharp needle-like teeth, so it could not wriggle itself free. The python then coiled its body around the heron in a deadly embrace and began squeezing tightly until it was dead.

This powerful snake, which was around two meters long (6.6 ft), (but had a length of six metres (19,7ft)) began opening its mouth by stretching it wide first and eventually the rest of the body made its way in, with its yellowish-brown python's mouth. We watched it muscle the heron down its throat but it was now unloosened 75% of its body from the branch, and was hanging upside down, dangling like a vine in the wind, which must have taken a lot of "core" strength and incredible muscle power. As the python was hanging upside down, almost at a 90-degree angle to the ground, its prey was defying gravity and moving up its body like an elevator going to the top of a building but in this case the rooftop was the snake's tail-end which it had successfully managed to wrap around a thicker part of the tree like a bow.

When the heron had been sent to the top floor, the python rose its head and worked its body back up towards the dead tree as if it was using the air particles as support to slither against. It eventually returned to the position it was in, stretched across the length of a branch on the tree and it then slowly slithered where I believe it found a safe spot to rest, to allow its strong stomach to work, which is dissolving every part of what made the heron whole. This digestive process for a meal of that size could take a few days. With luck the python wasn't preyed on itself, as they are usually vulnerable to bigger predators during this digestive process.



Needless to say, everything in the bush eats everything, and no nutrient is ever wasted but in one way or another cycled back. The circle of life can be cruel and beautiful at the same, it moves us and moves through us, until we find ourselves in the sky or in the ground, like the heron which will find itself becoming nutrients for the grasses and the trees, becoming food for the animals it once ate, and just becoming a state it has never known and can never return to but it will never be lost it will always exist in the circle of life, in one state or another.



A striated heron

Photo by Brian Rode



A southern white rhino crossing the river



A black shoulder kite



Burchell's zebra



Leopard walking against the sunset



Lioness watching us through the blades of grass



Members of the Mananga pride suckling.



Young vervet monkeys suckling.



Impala male with a red-billed oxpecker perched on his head.



A member of the wild dog pack.



A leopard gazing into the distance.



Giraffe



Rock Monitor