

# Singita



## WILDLIFE JOURNAL

### SINGITA PAMUSHANA / MALILANGWE, ZIMBABWE

For the month of November, Two Thousand and Twenty-Three

#### Temperature

Average minimum: 20.1°C (68.1°F)

Minimum recorded: 13.9°C (57°F)

Average maximum: 34.8°C (94.6°F)

Maximum recorded: 42.9°C (109.2°F)

#### Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 29.5 mm

\*For the season to date: 81.6 mm

\*Season = Sep to Aug

#### Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:03

Sunset: 18:22

We've had some lovely weather this month after the cold snap, with warm sun and soft breezes that whisper on your skin. The landscape is greening over quickly, and after the showers its satisfying to see leopard tortoises drinking from puddles and dung beetles earnestly rolling dung balls away from middens.

The sightings have been very good, sometimes exceptional, such as a mid-month afternoon and evening at Nduna Dam where guests were treated to a lot of plains game, then five lions, 20 white rhinos, a herd of more than 300 buffalos, 15 elephants and one black rhino.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> of November was when we spotted the first newborn impala lambs of the season – always an absolute delight and an annual challenge to see who sees them first.

However, our experiences are not all about rushing about and seeing how many of the big animals one can see – we encourage moments of meditation, reflection and simply listening. To close one's eyes and listen to the symphony of a frog choir singing, an African scops owl calling, cicadas chirping and have that audio pierced with the alarm calls of impalas as they spot hunting lions is as powerful a safari experience as any.

Here's a snapshot of November's sightings:

### **Lions**

The lion sightings have been excellent, and lions are tracked daily. One highlight was when guests were having coffee out of the vehicle, with their guide and tracker, and a lion and lioness walked past, giving the party a once over glance before going on their merry way.

- The Nduna Pride has been viewed the most this month. They've been seen as far east as the Chiredzi River, Banyini central areas, on the shore of Malilangwe Dam, and up at Nduna Dam.
- Members of the River Pride were seen - one male was with three lionesses. Two of the lionesses tried to entice the male to mate but he ignored them and kept walking, intent on his secret agenda.
- The coalition of three male lions have been seen together, and each is looking large and in charge.

### **Rhinos**

Multiple white rhinos are seen daily, and often black rhinos too. Singita Pamushana is the homeland for rhinos, where they are expertly monitored and protected by the Malilangwe Trust.

- Highlights with white rhinos have been seeing crashes of various individuals together, cows with calves afoot, and seeing these huge ungainly animals wallowing like slippery eels in various mud-wallow spots that occur at this time of year after the first rains.
- Seeing one black rhino is great, especially when they come closer and are curious about the vehicle, or give a little mock charge, but several times this month multiple black rhinos have been seen together, or on one drive. One group saw four black rhinos in different areas, one bull was in the Nyari area and relaxed to start with, and a further three were seen south-east drinking at a pan - a bull and a cow with a very small calf.

### **Buffalos**

- Large herds, often over 500 individuals, are seen emerging from the thickets and drinking daily.
- The buffalo are also taking advantage of the various mud-wallows around at the moment.
- Three dagga boys were flanked by some impressive company all in the same spot - an elephant bull on the one side and a male leopard on the other!

### **Elephants**

The best sightings of breeding herds have been when we are already at a body of water and a herd emerges to drink, splash and swim. Bulls, including some large tuskers, have been seen dotted about the reserve.

- Nduna Dam was very active with animals during one morning safari. A pride of five lions were lying on the rocks on the south of the dam and two white rhinos were standing under the shade on the eastern side. A breeding herd of about 60 elephants arrived to drink at the same time which was spectacular!

### **Leopards**

- Leopard sightings seem to have been best up at the lodge this month! We had a male stroll through camp early one morning, while guests were out on drive, and a couple of other sightings in the vicinity.
- The rest of the sightings seem to have taken place on the shore of Malilangwe Dam and at Sosiji Dam.

- It would seem that sometimes one has to go to great lengths to see a leopard here... We had a wonderful group of women visit us, and on one of their last drives together they wanted a group photo of themselves and decided to dress up for the occasion. They arrived for drive dressed to kill and leopard print featured a lot. Then, as they got to the Nduna area for their photoshoot they spotted a male leopard hunting impalas!

### **Wild dogs**

- The small pack of three wild dogs have been seen this month.

### **Hyenas**

Hyena highlights include:

- Finding a single spotted hyena at Banyini Pan carrying the back leg of a young giraffe, the rest of the carcass not in evidence.
- A clan of hyenas at the airstrip in hunting mode.
- A very special sighting of five young hyenas - two of them came up close to inspect us and the vehicle.

### **Plains game**

- There have been some very good sightings of sable and hartebeest, as well as every-drive sightings of impala, zebra and wildebeest. Klipspringer are doing very well, small herds of nyala are seen, as well as bushbuck with their babies. There have been giraffes galore in the central area. An interesting scene was seeing a kudu bull displaying dominance by horning the muddy ground over and over again.

### **Unusual/other**

- There was another lucky viewing of a brown hyena again this month.

### **Birds**

- All of the summer migrants have arrived and it's always such a pleasure to host these repeat guests.

### **Boat cruise**

- Safari boat cruises are like chocolate – totally addictive, and made even more so when there are lucky sightings on the banks of the dam – such as when the Nduna Pride were chilling on the shoreline.

### **Fishing**

- Fishing has been hotting up, but it's not easy to land a tiger. That said a couple have been caught and released, as well as some good sized tilapia and a 5kg catfish. A bonus on one fishing excursion was seeing a black rhino come to drink in perfect late afternoon light.

### **Walks and rock art**

- The landscape is still suitable to offer walks at this time, and many of those have included incorporating rock art sites to admire the intricate paintings on cave walls.

### **Photographic hide**

- We've snuck in a few last-of-the-season sessions at the hide which have proved successful.

### **Gonarezhou Day Trips**

- We've hosted various day trips to Gonarezhou and guests always return amazed by the beauty of Chilojo Cliffs and the sheer abundance of elephants they've seen.

**Some Bush Stories follow, as well as a November Gallery of images.**

## The killing fields

This was an extraordinary sighting. It took place early one morning as we arrived at the central area of the Banyini, which is always a good area to check first thing. There's a permanent water source in the middle, and the surrounding area is open, so it's ideal for spotting anything that might have come to drink in the night, or graze on the grasslands. The waterhole was quiet, in fact the whole area was fairly quiet, so we drove through the central area to give it a good once-over – and that's when we saw the first lion. She was leaving the water but walking away with purpose, and led us to a scene of carnage. We found not one, but two dead wildebeest, with various members of the Nduna Pride feeding off the carcasses. They must have ambushed a herd of wildebeest in the night, and in the ensuing stampede brought down two animals.

Almost as surprising was the fact that the old Nduna male was there, feeding alongside a lioness. He is so old, and we never know if we'll see him again. He was sporting a large raw wound to his head – but it was not too deep – more like a horn that had gone in and scalped him. He often looked up from feeding to check where the other males were. It's interesting that these males haven't overpowered and banished him from the pride. Tensions are running high, but for now this old lion is playing a very strategic game. He has tolerated the younger stronger males mating with the lionesses, and he was not fighting over food – fortunately in this case there was more than enough to go around.

Over the next few days the hyenas moved in to claim the remains, and following them the vultures. However the vultures were not keen on waiting their turn and harassed the hyenas endlessly, driving them to distraction. I came across some interesting research recently, being that hyenas actually help vulture chicks survive. Studies have shown that in the presence of hyenas vulture chicks grow stronger than in areas where hyenas are absent.





The old Nduna male, sporting a head injury, lays claim to a carcass.



One of the younger adult males tucks into the second carcass, alongside another lioness.

Scientists found that the hyenas chewed the bones of their prey and left behind smaller fragments that are a good size for a vulture to feed on. Chicks require calcium found in those small bone fragments for proper development of their skeletons. The calcium-rich bones are passed to the chick when the parent feeds it. Of course a chick has a better chance of hatching in the first place if it is incubated in a strong egg shell – egg shells are made almost entirely out of calcium.





Two hooded vultures squabble over the pecking order.

## Looking for elephants



It had been raining and we were on the prowl for elephants. A breeding herd had been seen briefly crossing the Orphan Road, so we went there, found their tracks and drove the block in the hope they would appear in a clearing. Back and forth we went, up and down, several times, but the herd was deep within the thickets and not making an appearance. We went back to where their tracks had crossed the road, and decided to wait there and listen for further clues. But intent on stealing the show were a gathering of giraffes. They displayed themselves so elegantly and it was an exquisite scene seeing them communing in the road and nibbling leaves between the arc of leaning branches.

As the world's tallest land animals giraffes exhibit a fascinating social structure that revolves around loose and dynamic associations. They are not territorial, and their social groups, known as journeys or towers, are often fluid, lacking a rigid hierarchy. Towers typically consist of both male and female members, with females forming the core of the group. Female giraffes establish strong and long-lasting bonds, often relying on cooperation for mutual protection and the rearing of calves. Bulls are less social and tend to form smaller, transient groups or roam solo. Their social flexibility allows them to adapt to changing environmental conditions and fosters a cooperative atmosphere within the journey.

While sitting there watching them a large bull elephant tip-toed swiftly across the road behind us, with barely a sound. It was only the movement in the rear-view mirror that alerted us to his presence. It is astonishing how these mammoths can be like grey ghosts when they want to remain undetected.

We carried on driving down the Orphan Road, to the airstrip, and counted more than 30 giraffes gathered in groups in the area. We wondered if the rain had somehow influenced them all getting together. On the airstrip was a family with a brand new giraffe calf. Its drying umbilical cord was still attached. Its older sibling and mother kept nuzzling it, while its father stood guard nearby.







Here the mother of the newborn calf affectionately nuzzles her new little one.

## Rules and rituals

I have a couple of game drive rules and rituals for myself which I try to remember, although before sunrise they can be a bit fuzzy and easily forgotten. One is to put on sunscreen while it is still pitch dark and cold outside, another is to manually reset my camera in the vehicle, from the night before's fading light settings, to dawn rising light settings, and a third is to say and do a little mantra and act that I've done on every game drive I've ever undertaken, which, I admit, is a little bit weird but it works...

I was sunscreensed up, camera was reset, and was on a solo scouting mission, driving down the driveway at 05:10, singing out my magic words to the world and delighted to be on drive yet again, when, barely out of second gear, a black rhino stepped onto the paved path ahead of me.

I stopped smoothly and quietly, picked up my camera, and got these shots thanks to a slow shutter speed, wide aperture and high ISO (1/160 sec; f/5.6; ISO 1600).

The bull couldn't quite believe the situation either. He had been browsing on some new bright green growth and stood there considering me for a while. His resident oxpeckers seemed a bit perplexed too, and were still all fluffed up from being cold. Then he stood directly across the road, thought a bit more, swallowed his mouthful and decided to investigate the situation.

Unimpressed by his findings he ran off, while I sat there in a bit of a daze before engaging in some chimping behaviour to make sure I wasn't dreaming. ('Chimping' is the habit of checking every photo on the camera display immediately after capture.)





There truly had been a black rhino in the driveway, and fortunately these photos prove that Singita is indeed the 'Place of Miracles' - and that you must believe in magic!

Needing a drink



Having arrived midmorning at a well-frequented waterhole we found it disappointingly deserted. Heading east we trundled along for about 20 minutes before seeing a couple of buffalo emerging from the mopane scrub. Realising they were the trailblazers for a large herd, and heading due west we predicted that they were on their way to the waterhole for a drink. Buffalo need to drink daily, and we needed coffee. We decided to double back, acquire our caffeine boost at the waterhole, and wait for them to arrive.

In due course they did, and it was a treat to see this bovine behaviour. Those that were first to arrive were so relieved and drank thirstily. More and more and more arrived, splashing and jostling to get their turn. Some waded in to the deep, cooling their bellies and relaxing in the water. It really is fascinating to spend an extended amount of time watching buffalos, with unobstructed views, noticing their individual differences and characters.



## Twitter

The birds alarm calling caught our attention and directed us to this hunting African harrier hawk. The hawk was focused and unperturbed by the birds mobbing it, and went from tree to tree in search of prey.





These hawks, often still referred to as gymnogenes (*Polyboroides typus*), have unique hunting behaviours that set them apart from many other raptors. They have unique adaptations that allow them to navigate through trees and extract prey from hidden locations. They have flexible leg joints and a bare facial patch – they can reach into tree crevices and holes and extract prey such as birds, eggs, rodents and insects.

This harrier hawk was leaving no stone unturned. It investigated every nook, cranny and cavity of the surrounding trees, continually probing for prey. It was incredible to see it hanging from the sides of trees and doing acrobatics to investigate every potential hiding spot. In due course it found its quarry and flew off quickly with it to a more obscured perch. From the looks of the photo it had caught some sort of rodent with a long bare tail. We left it to eat its meal in peace.





There was an unfortunate event late October early November. We in Zimbabwe, and most of southern Africa, experienced a very cold snap with heavy downpours and strong winds. It was at the same time as flocks of migratory house martins (*Delichon urbicum*) were arriving here from Europe, north Africa and the Palearctic. We found scores of them sheltering under the eaves of buildings and wherever they could rest after their arduous journey from the northern hemisphere. Sadly some of them perished. (We saw a genet feasting on the dead birds, and no doubt many other mammals, reptiles and raptors did too.)

Elsewhere in southern Africa the result of the extreme weather was devastating, with reports of numerous bee-eaters and swallows deaths. The underlying causes of this situation are complex and worrisome. A changing climate wreaks havoc on migratory birds, as does a scarcity of high-quality food (insects) necessary for replenishing energy levels, and the accumulation of toxins from pesticides (that are used to control insects) undoubtedly weakens their immune systems.

This phenomenon is known as a "weather whiplash," or more formally, an "ecological cascade." The disconcerting truth is that human-induced climate warming drives an increase of extreme weather events globally. The ecological cascading effects of these events are a severe threat to migratory birds.

We need to do what we can to slow climate change, preserve, protect and increase natural wilderness areas, and avoid using pesticides – all these and more that Singita and the Malilangwe Trust strive for in their daily operations and future purpose.



A grey-headed kingfisher (*Halcyon leucocephala*).

They are found near water, but unlike most kingfishers are not aquatic. They perch patiently on a branch watching for signs of insects or small lizards, then dive down on the prey.

## November Gallery

The sunken photographic hide at Hwata Pan is always an incredible activity and opportunity to observe animals at close range, and photograph them. During the very wet months it's not ideal to use, for various reasons, but the main one being that there is so much water available in natural pans all over the reserve that animals don't need to come to this permanent water source to drink. However, we've still been able to use the hide this month, and even if there is 'nothing' there, there are bound to be a few birds, which have often resulted in exquisite photographic captures.



The view from inside the hide, on a very busy afternoon, with a buffalo, zebras and white rhinos.

The photos on the following two pages are all taken from inside the hide:

A young rhino calf observes the passing traffic.

Zebras startle as a kudu bull lifts his head.

Two Egyptian geese ignore a white rhino.

A rhino is finally able to muscle in for a drink as the buffalo leave.







A young klipspringer nibbles newly sprouted leaves.



A black rhino contemplates its next move.



Hippos are a guaranteed sighting on a boat cruise safari, as is this old dead tree that's stood here for decades, but you just never know where you may spot our wonderful team of chefs, banakelis, sommeliers and spa therapists as they go the extra mile to make each stay of every guest special.





A jackal makes swift work of a hare, as two doves stay out of pounce distance.



A white rhino bull, so handsome in his natural habitat.

A white rhino cow with an unusually shaped horn, making her instantly recognisable. She's consistently produced healthy calves over the years. Her horn has become something of a hindrance when she is grazing grass as it ploughs into the ground ahead, so you can see how the tip has become sanded down at that angle.







Blue hour, after the sun had set, revealed this male lion looking into the distance where his pride lay far away.



Led by a series of roars, we found this coalition member lying in the road preparing for night patrol.

**All stories and photographs by Jenny Hishin, unless otherwise indicated.**