

## Singita Sabi Sand

Ebony & Boulders Lodges  
Castleton House  
South Africa

Singita



### Wildlife Report

For the month of September, Two Thousand and Thirteen

#### Temperature

Average minimum: 13.3°C (50.5°F)  
Average maximum: 28.8°C (81.1°F)  
Minimum recorded: 07.0°C (44.6°F)  
Maximum recorded: 39.0°C (93.2°F)

#### Rainfall Recorded

For the period: 21 mm  
For the year to date: 985 mm

#### Buffalo versus lion versus leopard

As guests were having afternoon snacks on the riverside deck before game drive, we noticed a male lion sleeping on the opposite side of the river. Then a large buffalo bull ambled into the scene. Next, all drama broke loose. Two more male lions appeared and they set off after the now terrified buffalo. To our astonishment, teacups in hand, the lions killed the buffalo right in front of Boulders Lodge, rooms 9 and 10. Unbelievable! For the next three days we had ring-side viewing. The lions did not bother moving much as they had food and water right there next to them. The only activity seemed to be within their ever-growing bellies filled with buffalo meat.

On the first morning a male leopard, known as the Nyaletshi male, crept in to view. While the lions were feeding he would keep a respectful distance, never showing himself to his far larger relatives. All he was waiting for was a window of opportunity for a potential free meal. The moment all the lions lay down to rest, some 20 metres from the carcass, he deftly sneaked in and stole some meat. He did this repeatedly, and with such cunning that the males never even knew of his existence! Time and again over the course of three days the lions and leopard fed from the same carcass.

Leopards are extremely opportunistic and a free meal could mean the difference between life and death.



## The one that got away

It was a rather hot morning when we joined the Nyaleti male leopard for some shade along the Sand River. We had spotted him on the opposite bank where he lay sprawled out on the cool white beach-like sand, in the shade of an ebony tree (*Diospyros mespiliformis*). We saw his head jerk up suddenly at the sound of something approaching. It was a few waterbuck being led by a youngster. The young waterbuck felt the overpowering urge to quench its thirst before thoroughly checking the surrounding area for any signs of potential danger. The Nyaleti male immediately seized the opportunity and crept closer. As the waterbuck's lips touched the river water the male leopard dashed in...

I still, to this day, have no idea how the waterbuck escaped, but it must have heard something. It set off into the river and away from the claws of the leopard. It was such a close encounter with the leopard only missing by inches.



## Never underestimate an animal

Babies of any sort in the bush are always a highlight during one's stay. Summer time is usually the best time to view most of the 'bush babies', especially the delicate impala fawns. Not only is it heart-warming to watch them, but it can also give you a completely different opinion about the adults of a particular species.

We've been really fortunate to be able to view a hyena den site for the past couple of weeks. Some people, because of inaccurate media coverage, view hyenas as only aggressive sly animals that steal food from other predators. However, there is a lot more to these animals - on average, they hunt about 60% of the food they consume and are also caring and protective parents.



One afternoon, after waiting outside the den for a few minutes, the den seemingly inactive, we saw a precious little face peep out of the hole that had been dug in a fairly large termite mound. The cub wanted to see what was happening outside the den, but was too timid without mom around. The mother eventually returned with the rest of the clan members and, to our surprise, out tumbled not one, but two tiny cubs. The clan then started chattering and calling to each other, showing excitement to be back at the den, and the mother went straight to the cubs to check that all was in order. She gave them both a sniff, picked them up and placed them just on the edge of the den and let them suckle. When they were finished, playtime began with the rest of clan, which usually involves a bit of wrestling and biting.



Knowing that the spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*) has the strongest bite force of any mammal in the animal kingdom, we watched, somewhat anxiously, at these tiny cubs biting the other members and being bitten right back. They seemed to be having the time of their lives, until one member bit one of the cubs a little too hard, and it let out a yelp. Its mother was immediately at the cub's side, picked it up and moved it away, and warned the older rough player with a snarl.

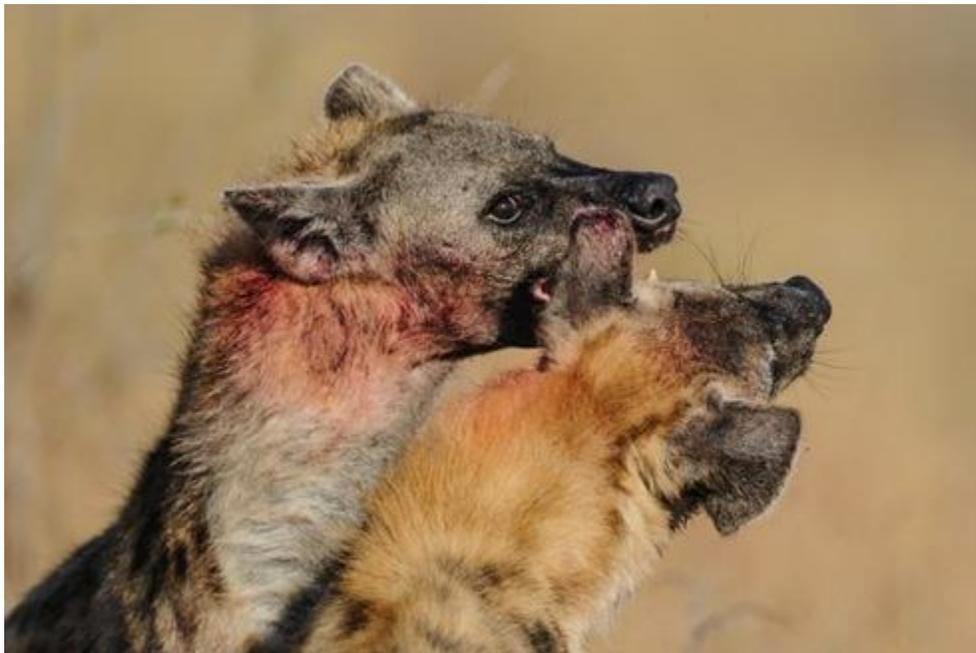
It was an amazing sighting, and showed that hyenas are not the sly and aggressive animals that they are often portrayed as, but rather very social, caring and adorable. This sighting was definitely a highlight for us. Since then the cubs have grown rapidly and a third litter of cubs are now using the den as well. The previous photos show the age and size difference between the various litters.

### The meeting of the clans (Article and images by Ross Couper)

The distinctive call could be heard several kilometres away and this could only mean one thing, food had been found. Hyenas were excited about something and this was a great opportunity to investigate, with the sounds leading us to the hype of activity.

A bloody hyena ran towards us, stopped short of the vehicle, lifted his head in the air and focused his intent on the thickets next to us. Another hyena emerged from the thicket. They both ran along the road and we stayed in pursuit. They paused at open grassland then, with heads held high, they moved on cautiously, and we spotted other hyenas ahead of us. Upon closer investigation it was evident that they had sniffed out a large buffalo cow that had died of natural causes. These large beasts are rarely seen when they die from natural causes because the scavengers do such a thorough and vital job of disposing of the remains.

It wasn't long before there were vultures in the air. As I began explaining the process of how the vultures and hyenas scavenge a dozen vultures dropped out of the sky and landed on the ground next to the carcass. They slowly loped towards the carcass in hope of a meal, but the hyenas had the first pickings.



### Charging leopard

There seems to be this notion that all the animals within the borders of the Sabi Sand Game Reserve are habituated and “easy” to view. This is, however, far from the truth as we recently found out.

As we came around a bend a leopardess, one that I have not seen before, confronted us. It was rather obvious that she did not like our presence one scrap and as soon as I switched the Landrover off she made a rather convincing charge at us. I immediately knew that this leopard was not relaxed and decided to give her some space. As soon as I backed up the vehicle she came at us again, this time a little less energetically. Most of the animals that we view on safari are seen very regularly. This allows us to habituate them to the presence of our vehicles, giving us a rare glimpse into the lives of some of Africa's most mysterious animals.

This story simply goes to show that even within a reserve like this, there are still animals with a very natural aggression towards humans and vehicles.



### Elephant day at the beach

An area known to the guides as “The Beach” recently played host to no fewer than 49 elephants. To see this many elephants together is extremely special. They paraded across the white sand and down to the river in order to slake their thirsts. There were so many it was nearly impossible to count them accurately. I also couldn't get all of them into my frame for a photograph. What a sight to see it was!

As soon as they arrived and had their fill of river water they set off back into the surrounding area leaving us with jaw-dropped expressions.



## Why do giraffes eat bones?

An animal the size of a giraffe requires additional nutrients and minerals in comparison to that of an impala. Giraffes require an estimated 20 g of calcium and 10 g of phosphorus per day, before the age of 5, in order for their unique skeleton to grow correctly. Thereafter requirements are lower, apart from lactating females.

Selective browsing will take care of the required calcium intake but the sources of phosphorus could be more obscure. Osteophagia, the eating of bones, is observed in giraffe behaviour. It is reported more frequently in giraffe than any other ruminant. The frequency of bone-eating is higher during the current dry season as the nutrient levels of available browse is lower than usual.

For osteophagia to be an effective adaptive behaviour in supplying phosphorus and calcium, the ingested bones must be able to be digested so that the nutrients can be released in a soluble, absorbable form. It is thought that prolonged exposure of the bones in the first part of a giraffe's 4-chambered stomach, the rumen, is the most likely site of digestion.

So next time you see a giraffe chewing on a bone fragment it is no longer as bizarre as it may seem. The function is clear and is necessary for condition and survival.



## Water – a controlling element (Images and article by Ross Couper)

As the dust swirled, the heat waves could be seen on the horizon. This was the toughest month in terms of food and water availability for the game. I want to focus on the various species that use the available water, from the largest to some of the smallest, along with those that won't survive without it. As summer is on our doorstep and the rain clouds will start building over the next few weeks, we are in for some exciting times of change.

Water is a source of survival. It sustains life and it has the ability to take life away without it. The majority of all species rely on water to survive. But there are a few species that don't require any water and most of these have adapted very well to their harsh environments.

Animals are moving great distances to quench their thirst and I noted on more than one occasion how the larger

buffalo herds were congregating around the water holes in the Sand River, a sign that the temperatures were increasing and that they needed to drink at least twice a day. Large herds of buffalo and elephants can be seen drinking and staying within the river areas throughout the day, often feeding on the vegetation around the water source.



Listening carefully to elephants drinking water stirs up a cacophony of sounds from slurping to spraying to snorting. Without the use of their trunks elephants would have great difficulty in drinking water. The trunk is the fusion of an elephant's upper lip and nose and was formed over millions of years of evolution. It is a long, prehensile tube with two nostrils cavities running down the centre and a mass of flesh, muscle, fat, nerves, blood and connective tissue. A trunk can weigh up to 140 kgs!

The key to the trunk's success is an extraordinary network of muscles that are divided into external and internal muscles. There are four big external muscles, covering the top and side of the trunk, another running along the bottom and a pair that sits on either side of the trunk's base. These control the trunk's big movements - up, down and side-to-side. The internal muscles are found in a highly complex network known as fascicles. By working together with the external muscles, they give the trunk extraordinary flexibility, and this is often witnessed when watching elephants at a water source.

Contrary to what is often believed, the elephant does not use its trunk to drink through. It does however play an important role in the act of drinking. The elephant uses the trunk to draw water and then sprays it into its mouth. A trunk can hold about four litres of water.

The ability to spray water is also an important part of basic hygiene and healthcare. Elephants use the trunk as a shower with various pressure settings. It can either send a power blast jet of water or offer a gentler alternative! Water is sprayed initially behind the ears to facilitate further cooling of their large bodies and thereafter on their back. Mud packing is often used to keep cool as well. Soft mud can be drawn up into the trunk and sprayed over their bodies.

Elephants also use the trunk to transfer a layer of dust or mud to their bodies that protects them from insect bites or the ravages of a hot sun.

The sun was setting on the horizon as we could hear the earth crunching under the Landrover's tyres, the dust elevated behind us and stayed in the air hovering over the bush. This was the end of winter and the smell of earth was evident in the air, in the late afternoon. Would rain touch the earth soon, or would the bush, trees and grass burn in the heat of the sun and wither away to nothing before the first summer rains? Just thinking about it I could smell the drenched earth - the smell of rain, the revival of life and the interactions of animals seeing the rain for the first time after so many months. I could not wait, however, neither could the animals that swarmed around the edges of the river. The water was murky due to large herds of animals that had been visiting earlier in the day.

We spotted some helmeted guineafowl making their way cautiously across the muddy flats, pecking and bobbing their heads in various directions as if they were having a continuous conversation. Slowly, one by one they moved forward, before one brave soul stretched his neck and drank. The rest of the flock then followed suit.



Guineafowl often roost at night in the canopy of large trees. They are a gregarious species, forming flocks outside the breeding season, typically of about 25 birds that also roost communally. Guineafowl are particularly well suited to consuming massive quantities of ticks, which might otherwise spread Lyme disease. These birds are terrestrial, and prone to run rather than fly when alarmed. They have a short-lived explosive flight and rely on gliding to cover extended distances. Helmeted guineafowl are great runners, and can traverse 10 km and more in a day. They make loud harsh calls when disturbed. Their diet consists of a variety of plant and small animals - seeds, fruits, greens, snails, spiders, worms, insects, frogs, lizards, small snakes and small mammals. Guineafowl are equipped with strong claws and scratch in loose soil for food much like domestic chickens. They live as long as 12 years in the wild.



Summer is on its way and spring was a warning to use energy sparingly - particularly for hippos. Hippopotamuses are located in central and southern Africa, south of the Sahara Desert and near the Nile River. They are vegetarians and mostly eat grass. They may travel long distances during the night from their water source to reach the areas where they graze. They also sometimes eat fruit that has fallen off of trees or crops grown by local people. Various researches have proven that these large beasts will move great distances in winter in search of food. Records have shown that they travel up to 15 km from their water refuge. Finding hippos outside of the water is a great highlight and in the cool winter mornings you can find them on land warming themselves in the sun.

As I maneuvered our Landrover towards the Sand River, my tracker Johnston excitedly pointed out, "A group of hippos on the bank still feeding!" I changed gear and drove slowly into the river, and we made our way cautiously across the shallow river crossing in the hope of viewing a hippo out of the water. As I slowly accelerated, Johnston lifted his hand up indicating to stop the vehicle. "This hippo is moving towards us," he whispered.

A large bull was watching us carefully amongst the reeds. It was reluctant to move, however his intention was to go into the water if needs be. A scuffle broke out amongst the reeds, it was a young hippo that pushed forward

to get back into the water. This forced the entire group to seek refuge and they plunged into the river in a non-acrobatic style.

Mature territorial hippos can be aggressive animals - old scars and fresh, deep wounds are signs of daily fights that are accompanied by much bellowing, neighing and snorting. Hippos have developed some ritualized postures like the huge open-mouthed 'yawn' that reveals formidable teeth. With sharp incisors and tusk-like canines, the hippo is well armed and dangerous.

These teeth never stop growing, but stay worn down. Hippo ivory is highly prized because it does not turn yellow with age. It is commonly believed that George Washington's false teeth were made of wood, however, they were actually carved from hippo ivory.

Their nostrils and ears are situated near the tops of their heads so that they can stay above water when most of their bodies are submerged. When a hippo goes completely underwater, its nostrils and ears will automatically seal up.

The name hippopotamus comes from the Greek "hippos," meaning horse. These animals were once called 'river horses.'

### A muddy affair (Images and article by Ross Couper)

Blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*) are strictly territorial and they will adamantly mark their territories throughout the year, even though females may only be in a breeding state for a few weeks of the year. With the first rains it became evident how territorial they are. With the concern that their scent may have washed away or diminished their territories, the males will move around re-marking their territories after the first rainfall. The size of territories ranges from one to two hectares. They mark their boundaries with dung heaps, pre-orbital gland secretions, hoof scent glands and pawing of the earth. When competing over territory, males grunt quite loudly, make a thrusting motion with their horns and perform other displays of aggression. Body language used by the territorial male includes standing with an erect posture, profuse ground pawing and horning, frequent defecation, rolling on his back and bellowing the sound "ganoo".

Often the scent marking incorporates rubbing their head in a muddy wallow. This animal is often described as a 'strange' looking one with a lack of beauty or elegance, unlike many other antelope species. After seeing this territorial bull with his muddy head, we had to agree that he was rather strange looking - but very dedicated indeed.



## Ravenscourt male leopard (Images and article by Ross Couper)



After the tragic loss of his mother a few months ago, the young male leopard that recently became independent has been granted an exception in terms of leopards being named. He has inherited his mother's name Ravenscourt. We thought it was fitting after so many years of knowing Ravenscourt the female. The guides and trackers all thought this would be fitting for the male leopard whose mother was a legend on the Ravenscourt farm.

The last few months have shown how adaptable this young male leopard is, and what an efficient killer of warthogs he has become.

The radio crackled and one of the trackers tracking the male leopard called in that he had found the leopard with a baboon carcass. If you have had the opportunity to watch baboons move through the trees, you will agree that these would be incredibly difficult animals to catch. Baboons' major predators are humans. Knowing that humans can easily kill or injure them when they are in trees, they usually escape through the undergrowth. Male baboons may confront predators like leopards by forming a line and strutting in a threatening manner while baring their large canines and screaming. Baboons are fierce fighters, but a demonstration such as this can scare a predator off. Baboons have exceptional eyesight and move in a troop. This adds to how difficult it would be to remain undetected if you were a predator.

After hearing the tracker's report we all smiled inside knowing that this male leopard was well on his way to becoming an efficient predator that we all respect. It seemed that the Ravenscourt male leopard killed the baboon during the night, based on how much was eaten from the carcass.



Creating bonds (Images and article by guide Ross Couper)



Lions spend much of their time resting and are inactive for about 20 hours per day. Although lions can be active at any time, their activity generally peaks after dusk with a period of socializing, grooming and defecating.

Coming across the Ximungwe pride it was evident how successful the pride has become. Currently it consists of three females and six cubs. All were in good condition and feeding on a wildebeest carcass. Cubs initially lack confidence when first introduced to the rest of their pride. But they soon begin to immerse themselves in pride life, and play amongst themselves or attempt to initiate play with the adults.

One thing that was very noticeable, only once the carcass was completed, was the strong bond that rubbing their heads and rumps on each other forms. Clear body language is very important for pride interaction - especially when hunting, and it's interesting to see the passive contact of touching and rubbing so soon after the aggression of feeding where it seems they might claw each other's eyes out!

Hyena versus wild dogs (Article by Sipho Sibuyi)

What a good morning it turned out to be as my four guests, tracker and I went in search of a pack of wild dogs that have been seen the night before. My tracker, Louis, spotted some hyenas running on the opposite site of the Sand River, vocalizing as they went. Suddenly Louis spotted wild dogs chasing a bushbuck and the bushbuck tried to cross the Sand River but the dogs were on top of it in a flash and dragged it back to their side of the riverbank. The hyenas ran in to rob the bushbuck from the wild dogs but the dogs retaliated by biting into the backsides of the hyenas. The sounds coming from the hyenas were so loud and then, out of nowhere, another three hyenas appeared on the scene. Having larger numbers the hyenas claimed the carcass but in the process of doing so they started squabbling and failed to notice that the wild dogs took the carcass back again. By the time the hyenas had realized it the dogs had nearly finished half of the bushbuck!

We were so fortunate to witness this event involving three different species, the wild dogs, the hyenas and the unlucky bushbuck.

The common wild fig tree (*Ficus burkei*) (Article by Jon Morgan)

Driving along the riverine forest guides will often point out a tree growing on and around another tree and call it a strangler fig. This is more than likely a common wild fig tree (*Ficus burkei*), which is often hemi-epiphytic. This means its seed germinates in the fork of another tree and sends its aerial roots down along the host tree's stem, ultimately out shading, strangling and killing the host tree. Thereafter it becomes self-supporting and can reach a height up to 18 meters with a mass of aerial roots hanging down. It is a beautiful large evergreen tree providing shade and food, and it occurs mostly along the Sand River throughout this region.

It has figs almost all year round, except for September to November, which can attract a huge number of birds, fruit bats, baboons, monkeys, warthogs, nyala, kudu, bushbuck and duiker all of which assist with seed dispersal.

Below are five interesting facts about this tree.

- The flowers are produced inside the fig and are pollinated by a tiny wasp. Each species of fig tree has a species-specific wasp that pollinates it. Take either the wasp or the fig tree out the equation and the other wouldn't be able to survive. The one millimetre impregnated female wasp flies to a fig and crawls inside through a tiny opening called an ostiole. Inside she pollinates the flowers with pollen from the fig she was born in, and she lays her eggs and then dies. The developing larvae are encapsulated in a gall and feed on the fruit and take about four months to mature. A wingless male pierces a hole into the gall surrounding a female and fertilizes her. He then chews the ostiole hole bigger for the female to crawl and fly out of and then he dies. The impregnated female then crawls out and on her way collects pollen to pollinate the fig she enters to lay her eggs.
- Fibres from bark of this tree are used in mat making across Africa.
- The tree provides larval food for the butterfly lesser fig tree blue (*Myrina dermatera*) and the common fig tree blue butterfly (*Myrina silenus*).
- Medicinally it is an ingredient of a snake bite cure where the root is mixed with that of the grass, *Sporobolus indicus*. The root is also administered for treatment of colic, as an antisyphilitic and in the treatment of skin conditions.
- The root is also pounded until an adhesive juice is obtained, which can be used to effectively trap birds and hares. If smeared on grass it is sticky enough to trap guineafowl.



## Game viewing summary for September 2013

### Statistical analysis:

Lions: Prides are moving in and out of the area.  
Leopards: Most sightings have been of males.  
Reedbuck: 2 recorded sightings.  
Elephants: Elephants in the river system are a daily occurrence.  
Buffalos: Sightings remain consistent across the month.  
Cheetahs: Comparatively this time last year, sightings have increased by 257%!  
Wild dogs: 2 brief sightings this month. The pups are starting to move with the adults.

Bird list: 139 birds for the month of September. Many migrants arriving back.

### September highlights:

The quality of the cheetah viewing (due to the nature of the species and quality of sightings and composition of the female and cubs) would have to be amongst the highlights for the month. One thing that often gets overlooked is the quality of the smaller species and nocturnal creatures. It has been a great month for viewing these animals due to the lack of vegetation cover at the end of a long dry spell. These include duiker, steenbok, klipspringer, white-tailed mongoose and owls to name a few. The other highlight has to be the young male leopard staying outside a warthog burrow for over 24 hours. His patience was however rewarded with a tasty piglet and his confidence is up!

Articles by Marlon du Toit, Ross Couper, Siphon Sibuyi and Jon Morgan  
Photographs on location by Marlon du Toit and Ross Couper  
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Thirtieth of September 2013