

Singita Sabi Sand  
Ebony & Boulders Lodges  
Castleton House  
South Africa

Singita

## Wildlife Report

For the month of November, Two Thousand and Fourteen



Temperature  
Average minimum: 18.2°C (64.7°F)  
Average maximum: 33.1°C (91.5°F)  
Minimum recorded: 11.0°C (51.8°F)  
Maximum recorded: 41.0°C (105.8°F)

Rainfall Recorded  
For the period: 51 mm  
For the year to date: 110.5 mm

Glorious summer

Article by Ross Couper

With our heightened lookout for young impalas over the last month, it's been hard not to notice all the other young around at this time of the year. A friendly wager amongst the guides as to when this season's first newborn impala would be seen had us all waiting in anticipation to spot a long-legged youngster and call it in over the radio. This year's winner was Dylan – the lucky date was 4 November 2014.

Lambing time has meant that impalas have had more human attention than usual during game drives, with very pregnant impalas moving off on their own and newborn lambs struggling to stand or wobbling on their stilt-like legs. There are lots of "ooohs" and "aaahs" being whispered during the game drives. The softer side of the guides is noticeable as well, as we study the little creatures with our binoculars and announcing we have seen an umbilical cord or reporting that the young are allogrooming (mutual grooming) each other already.



As the temperatures have increased we've noticed the larger species like elephant and buffalo spending more time at the waterholes, packing their bodies with mud to avoid flies and to rid themselves of ticks in the process. Large flocks of red-billed ox-peckers have been hard at work on the buffaloes, cleaning them of ticks and other parasites, even amongst the packed mud. Several herds of buffalo have been seen in the southern areas with wide-open grasslands that have flourished since the burning programmes were completed approximately six weeks ago.





The sight of any young animal during this time of year always allows us to admire how adept the animals are to the change in season. Survival rates of some species may be low, however with an influx of many young all at once there is an opportunity that a good percentage of the young will survive to maintain a healthy population amongst the species. It is watching that balance unfold during this season that makes it exciting.

Vervet monkeys are always in close vicinity to the lodges, along with many other species that move amongst the staff and guests alike, with no fear of our presence. This allows for great viewing during midday and often the monkeys are known to entertain guests with their comical behaviour - or is it their resemblance to humans that keeps us entertained?

There are a few vervet monkey troops that are currently moving amongst the lodges and most of the females have a young baby attached to their chest that's holding on tightly and often peering upside down at you. Newborns have black hair and pink faces and take about three or four months to acquire adult colouration. The infant spends the first week of life clinging to its mother's belly as she moves through the vegetation in search of food. It is quite incredible how they navigate through the treetops with the young attached to them, suckling in the process. After about the third week, the baby begins to move about by itself and attempts to play with other young monkeys. Young vervets chase one another, wrestle, tumble and play, and often take turns pushing each other off a high perch!

With the first rains there has been a fluttery of insects, butterflies and wild flowers in bloom. With all of this activity the migrant bird species have returned in full force. The dawn chorus in the morning is a perfect alarm clock with sunrise at 4:45 am, and particularly persistent in waking one up are the red-chested cuckoos and the woodland kingfishers.



With our ever-growing elephant population in the Sabi Sands that forms part of the Greater Kruger National Park, there is always the question of how their numbers are being controlled in a confined area, even with the conserved area as large as it is. Fences in the western section prevent animals from moving into the local villages and the fence to the east is the border between South Africa and Mozambique.

I have included a few quotes from Dr Ferreira, South African National Parks' large mammal ecologist in this article. This is the most recent information available on the population control within the area of Kruger National Park and the Sabi Sand area. Since the removal of the park fences separating the Kruger National Park and the Sabi Sand Game Reserve in 1993, wildlife has been able to move between the two parks freely with no restrictions. The research data will often have the same effect within the Sabi Sand and thus the reference to the Kruger would be including the Sabi Sand area.

The current elephant population is estimated at around 16 900, based on the last count in 2012. It was 8 000 in 1994. However, without the new, more natural methods of control, the population would have been over 25 000 by now, if the 6,5% increase rate had continued at the time when culling stopped.

Dr Ferreira noted that the new approach to manage the impacts that elephants have on various conservation values is a more 'natural' one, largely through limiting access to waterholes. Over two thirds of them were closed after 2003, starting in the drier, northern areas. As elephants moved away from newly closed boreholes, the landscape and vegetation got respite from elephant use.

Managing impact does not mean managing the numbers of a population – it's now all about how elephants use the landscape and managing that. "Elephants need shade, water and food and prefer avoiding people," said Dr Ferreira. "In the Kruger they used to have water within 5 km of wherever they were, and they had no reason to move around extensively."

“But now we’re restoring natural patterns. We’ve closed boreholes and we’re removing some dams, although that’s a much bigger operation. We’ve also dropped fences between ourselves and Mozambique in the north and private reserves in the west, allowing more spatial range.”

During the dry winter months, the elephant damage on the vegetation is always more prevalent. This is predominantly tree damage, due to the lack of nutritious grasslands, fruits or leafy material.

With the sparseness of vegetation in winter, you will notice the electric fence around the perimeter of the camp when entering or exiting during the game drives. The purpose of this fence is to act as a deterrent to the elephants as the camp area often looks like an oasis during the dry winter months. The height is specifically maintained to allow other species to move freely and not to affect their normal routine around or in the camp perimeter. Due to the elephant damage to lodge surroundings that has been caused in the past, we prefer that the larger animals be kept away from this area. During previous seasons we have encountered water pipes being pulled up and electrical cables being broken, which is a danger to the elephants.



Other options have been reviewed to keep the elephants at bay during the drier months. This could be done through various disturbance techniques, like noise or small fires, using beehives, or putting up a fence with chilli-pepper on it. The chilli-pepper option has been experimented at the Kruger’s tree nursery, where they used a cloth soaked in chilli pepper sauce. “Elephants just avoid it. But it only serves as temporary deterrent, they’re very clever and they’d eventually get used to it. As for the bees, the thing is that they have to survive long, dry seasons too.” There have been experiments with beehive sounds, but again, the elephants would work it out after a while. “It would need a reinforcement technique,” says Dr Ferreira.

As noted through the various techniques used in the Kruger National Park, elephants are highly intelligent. On numerous occasions we have noted that the elephants will often crawl on their stomachs under the perimeter fencing and will often step over the cattle grids that are in place on the entrance and exit points on the road.

What’s very interesting is that we have also identified individual elephants and groups that will return to feed within the lodge perimeters since they have learnt to overcome the obstacles that have been put in place.



An elephant cow, pregnant for 22 months, could in the best circumstances have a calf every three years, said Dr Ferreira. But now, with the water restrictions, elephants are giving birth every 4.2 to 4.5 years. "It's a classic population response." Cows have to walk further to get to water and food and it takes its toll on body condition, hence reducing the rate of conception. Calves suckle up to three years which is when they start to get their tusks. After that, they have to walk to water and food, like the rest of the herd.

The responses in the Kruger National Park have been different in different areas. For example, in the north, survival rates have declined, while in the south (where there's more natural water), the birth rate has declined. It's not yet clear why that's happening, "But basically, elephants are starting to look after themselves." Natural regulation is taking place.

*Article extracts from:  
South African National Parks Board,  
[Conservationaction.co.za](http://Conservationaction.co.za)*

## Once in a blue moon      Article by Marc Eschenlohr

This photo was taken on the 31 August 2012, the last time we had a blue moon. We were lucky enough to see a cheetah starting to get active and walk into the rising blue (or salmon pink!) moon.

Do you know what the term 'blue moon' means? It occurs when there are two full moons in one month. A full moon occurs approximately every 29.5 days, so should there be a full moon at the beginning of the month there is a chance of a blue moon at the end of that month.



The next blue moon will be on 31 July 2015.

Here are a few interesting figures relating to the moon:

- Circumference at its equator is 10 917 kilometres / 6783 miles.
- Diameter is 3 475 kilometres / 2159 miles.
- Average distance from Earth is 384 400 km / 238 855 miles.
- Surface area is 37.9 million square kilometres / 14.7 million square miles.
- Surface temperature is -233 to 123 °C / -387 to 253 °F.

Here are a few interesting facts about the moon:

- It is Earth's only natural satellite and was formed some 4.6 billion years ago.
- The moon is in synchronous rotation with Earth meaning the same side is always facing Earth.
- The moon is the fifth largest natural satellite in the solar system.
- Earth is about 80 times the volume of the moon, but both are about the same age. A prevailing theory is the moon was once part of the Earth, and was formed from a chunk that broke away due to a huge object colliding with Earth when it was relatively young.
- Since the earliest days of recorded history, the moon has been believed to have powerful influence over human and animal behaviour. To the Romans, staring at the full moon was thought to drive a person crazy (hence the term "lunatic.")

- The moon is moving approximately 3.8 cm further away from Earth every year. It is estimated that it will continue to do so for around 50 billions years. By the time that happens the moon will be taking around 47 days to orbit Earth instead of the current 29.5 days.
- The first spacecraft to send back pictures from the moon was Luna 3, built by the Soviet Union, in October 1959. The first man to set foot on the moon in 1969 was Neil Armstrong on the Apollo 11 mission, while the most recent man to walk on the moon was Gene Cernan on the Appollo 17 mission in 1972. In total only 12 humans have ever walked on the moon, all American males.
- The dark spots we see on the moon that create the image of 'the man in the moon' are actually craters filled with basalt, which is very dense material. The dark side of the moon is a myth and in reality both sides of the moon see the same amount of sunlight.
- The moon illusion is an optical illusion, which causes the moon to appear larger near the horizon than it does higher in the sky. This optical illusion also occurs with the sun and star constellations.
- The moon has no global magnetic field and no atmosphere. The surface of the moon is unprotected from cosmic rays, meteorites and solar winds, and has huge temperature variations. The lack of atmosphere means no sound can be heard on the moon, and the sky always appears black.
- Only 59% of the moon's surface is visible from Earth. The moon rotates at 16,09 km/h (10mph) compared to the Earth's rotation of 1609 km/h (1000mph). The surface area of the moon is approximately the size of Africa and Australia combined. The moon's diameter is about ¼ the diameter of the Earth and about 49 moons would fit inside the Earth.
- Between 1969 and 1972 six Apollo missions brought back 382 kilograms (842 pounds) of lunar rocks, core samples, pebbles, sand and dust from the lunar surface, from a total of 2200 separate samples.
- The moon appears as it does because it is reflecting light from the sun. However, when we see it rise on the horizon it sometimes appears red. This is caused by the Earth's atmosphere scattering the blue and green light and letting the red light pass through.



We often get asked whether the moon has an influence over the animal behaviour, which I haven't noticed over the years. But, it does favour prey species that can more easily see predators approach, compared to on a dark night. Cheetahs, which are diurnal, have been recorded hunting during full moons.

## Predators and patterns

Rain clouds were building in the south and in the north, and I knew this would be a touch-and-go game drive. On starting our afternoon drive I prepared the guests for the worst – rain. If it was going to rain it just might determine how far we would be going and if we could make it back before a complete downpour.

As we departed the winds picked up and the raindrops started falling. I turned back to see if everyone was okay and two couples looked back at me with an appeasing smile of adventure. "We are fine and loving it. When did rain ever melt someone?" they shouted back. I turned to my tracker Johnson and, with a grin, we moved south in search of lions. The rain continued but by being bundled up in rain jackets and ponchos we were actually enjoying every minute of feeling the droplets on our faces only, and the exhilarating atmosphere of being in the wilderness amongst Africa's giants. Thunder roared a challenge to any lions and the grey clouds started building up more to our south. The rain gradually slowed down and a golden light streaked across the sky providing a rainbow to the east of us as the sun started to set. The radio crackled and one of the trackers who had been on foot tracking lions announced that he had found a pride. With the sheer excitement of seeing lions, and not wanting to head back empty-handed on our sightings due to the weather, we proceeded to the area. As we approached the pride we noticed that one of the Majingilane male lions was present and had obviously secured the remains of a zebra foal carcass.

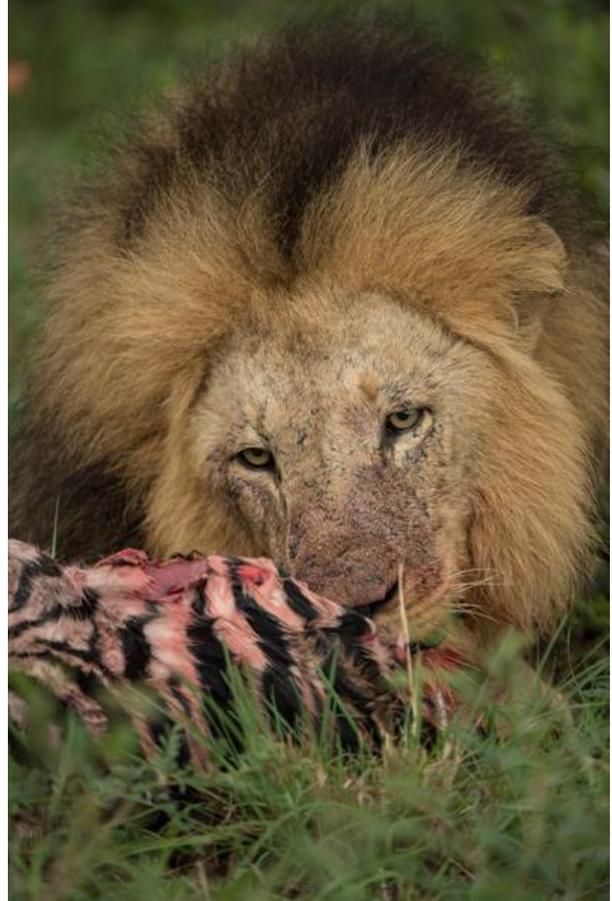
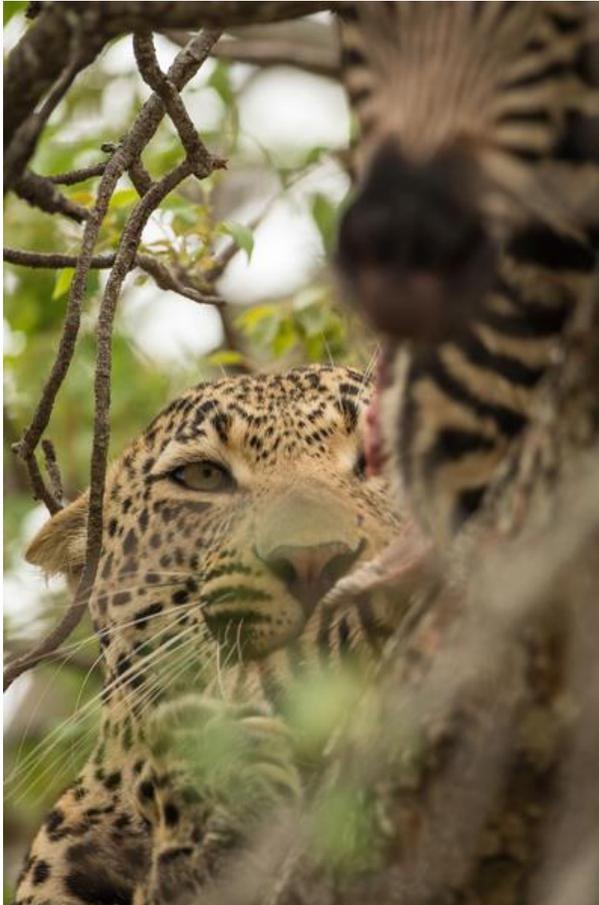


We watched the pride interact with the male and try several attempts to try and retrieve the carcass, to no avail. The male did not want the pride to depart but neither was he interested in sharing his meal. The thunder continued to echo in the distance, lightning streaked across the grey clouds in the south and this was enhanced by the growls and grunts from the male lion in our presence. It was a surreal sighting with high adrenaline and excitement. We returned to the lodge knowing that this sighting would definitely beat sleeping lions in the shade on a sunny day. One of the guests climbed off the truck and said, "Experiencing the African rain was what we came for – this was a memorable experience that will not be forgotten anytime soon".

The following day the rain continued periodically. The overcast conditions were perfect to look for predators. My experience of cool overcast days is that they often produce some of the best predator sightings. The predators

are generally more active in the latter part of the day and will often surprise you with just how much they will move during a cool overcast day.

It seemed that zebras were the meal of the day as we also encountered two male leopards, in separate sightings, feeding on zebra foals. The Ravenscourt male made an appearance with a hoisted zebra carcass in addition to the young Mobeeni male leopard. Medium-sized prey is often the bulk of animals that are killed by predators such as wild dogs, cheetahs, leopards or inexperienced young lions.

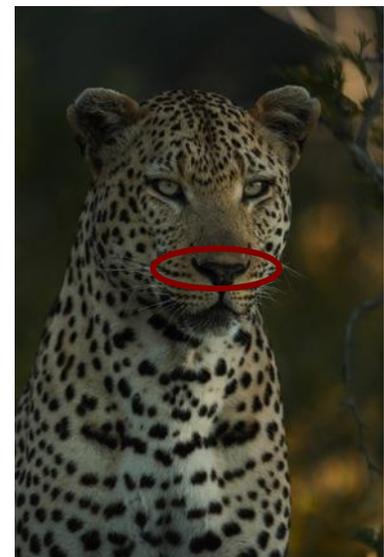


### Othawa male leopard

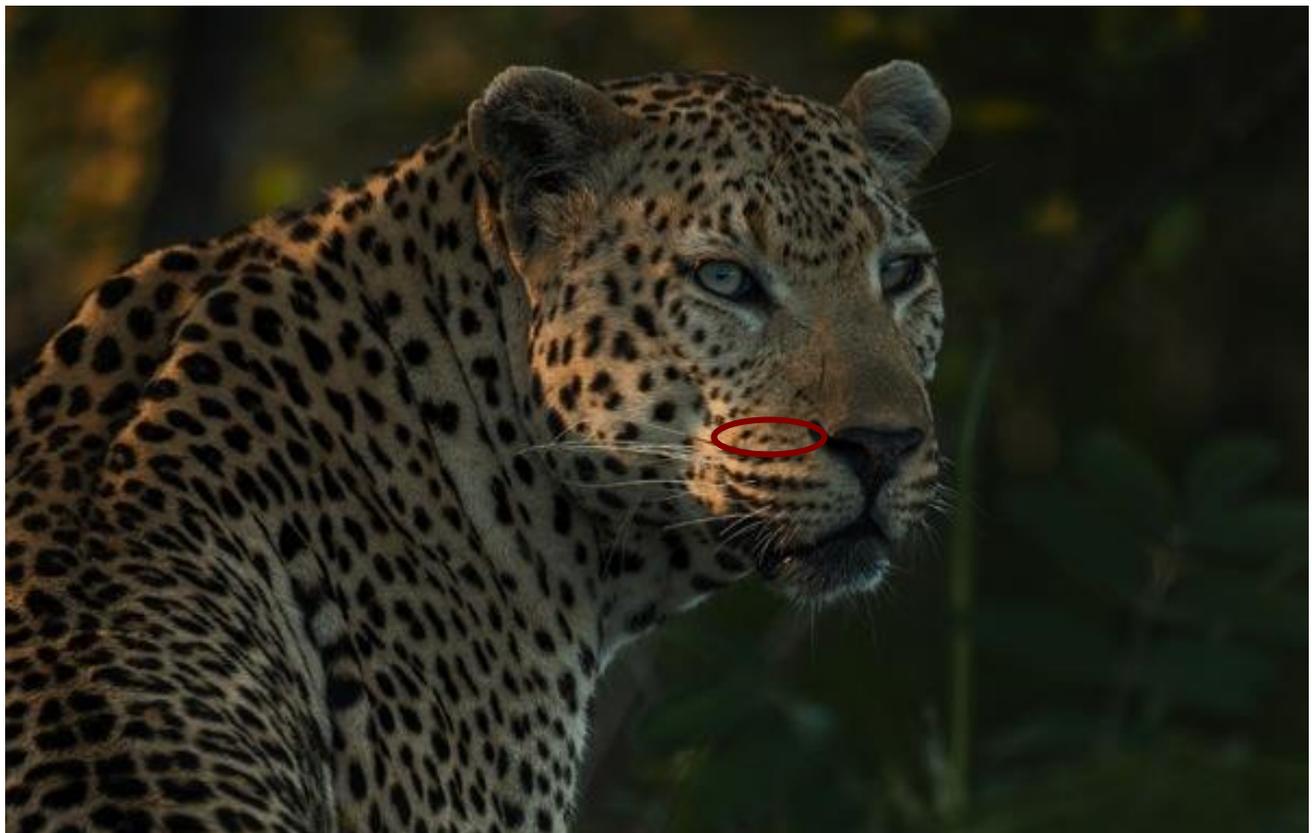
There is strong presence of male leopards currently moving in close vicinity of the lodges, with the Kashane male leopard defending his territory against the intruding Nyeleti male leopard and the young nomadic leopards that are seen periodically in the south.

Our sightings have been incredible of all of the individuals and it was interesting to find another male leopard venturing into the Othawa area just north of the river. This area has been predominantly occupied by female leopards and there has been an occasional sighting of male leopards in the north-western sections of it.

We have encountered this male leopard on a few occasions during the past few weeks and he has been actively marking his territory along the Sand River and further north from Boulders Lodge. All the leopards within our area are identified by markings that are as individual as a fingerprint to each other. At the top of the cheek pouches there are a number of black dots on the right and on the left that we use to identify them.



The Othawa male leopard's ID is 3:3. Three black dots on the right and three black dots on the left. (See the red rings around these.) We are looking forward to seeing more of him in the future.



	Lion	Leopard	Cheetah	Elephant	Buffalo	Wild Dog
No. of sightings	55	50	12	117	43	17

### Statistical analysis:

- Lion sightings: Sightings figures remain relatively consistent, 55 this month versus 58 last month. The Majingilane coalition disrupted the Ximungwe pride recently. We haven't, at the time of writing, accounted for all the members of this pride. These males are really starting to flex their muscles over the entire area, walking incredible distances from one evening to the next.
- Leopard sightings: We suspect that a female leopard (referred to as 'Hlabankunzi') has recently given birth (around 26 November 2014) but this is unconfirmed at the time of writing. The other female leopards reported last month as having cubs have continued to keep a low profile (as any good leopardess with new cubs should be doing) but the odd glimpse of the cubs keeps us wanting more! They will be revealed in good time and we continue to be extra sensitive in these situations.
- Elephant sightings: We average around three sightings per day for the month. What has been really special this month is not so much the quantity of the sightings but rather the quality thereof. Elephant herds are always entertaining to watch as they are always doing something.
- Buffalo sightings: Sightings remain relatively consistent, slightly down from 46 to 43, thus not much reflecting in the numbers. The size of the herds is what stands out for me; some sightings are in excess of 500 buffalo moving as a unit and many calves on the way!
- Cheetah sightings: Statistically sightings reflect a decrease by four sightings from the previous month. With the preferred habitat for this species being confined to the black turf soil areas and the good rains that have fallen, I feel that on average, a sighting every three days is a good reflection.
- Wild dog sightings: I possibly had one of my best wild dog sightings ever just a few days ago. Not for any specific reason other than the beautiful setting in a riverbed, fantastic light and the playful nature of a pack of 16 dogs. The new puddles of water after the rains meant a good excuse to get really muddy and dirty followed by a game of tag – what more could a wild dog wish for? Sightings significantly and surprisingly up from 6 to 17!



Predation analysis:

	Impala	Zebra	Buffalo	Warthog	Jackal	Duiker
Lion	1	1	3			
Leopard	2	2		2	1	
Hyena	2					
Wild Dog	4					1
Cheetah	1					

The leopard kills were on young zebra foals, but still a huge achievement for a leopard. One of the saddest sightings I've seen in a while was the young side-striped jackal pup that had been killed by a female leopard. The Tassleberry female leopard was seen with two cubs in the same area. The adult jackal female was still in the area vocalizing for her pup (a sound I'll never forget), yet the leopard seemed unfazed by the goings on around her. A reminder that Nature can be cruel sometimes.



## Game and weather summary for November 2014

237 bird species recorded. With an emphasis on birding this month, the arrival of the late migrants and a big birding day, the species count reflects a much more accurate figure of the birding potential in the area. A few bizarre and unusual suspects seen temporarily include broad-billed roller, Cape vulture and grey-headed kingfisher, whilst other more regular species, but still as special, include Amur falcon, lesser kestrel, secretarybird and numerous regular sightings of Verreaux's eagle-owl.

### November highlights:

The impala lambs have arrived en masse and the nursery herds are a sight to behold. For my first time ever, I got to see an impala giving birth. One would think that this would be a more regular occurrence due to their abundance, but it is surprisingly seldom witnessed. The first wildebeest calves have already been born whilst there are still numerous, very heavily pregnant females from various species just waiting to shed the additional weight they have been carrying.

The alate release from the termite mounds is a remarkable grand event for the specie, certainly their biggest event of the year, as the new potential kings and queens are set free to start their new colonies. The injection of protein due to all the 'flying ants' being released into the system is cause for many species to change from their usual diet and take advantage, for it only happens once a year. Frogs, snakes, eagles, waxbills, kudu and hyena have all been observed feeding at these 'all one can eat' buffets – truly remarkable.



Photographs on location by Ross Couper and Marc Eschenlohr  
Singita Ebony and Boulders Lodge  
Sabi Sand  
South Africa  
Thirtieth of November 2014