

# Singita



**WILDLIFE REPORT**  
**SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA**  
**For the month of February, Two Thousand and Seventeen**

**Temperature**

Average minimum: 20.6°C (69.8°F)  
Average maximum: 30.5°C (86.9°F)  
Minimum recorded: 16°C (60.8°F)  
Maximum recorded: 39°C (102.2°F)

**Rainfall Recorded**

For the month: 109 mm  
For the season to date: 719 mm

**Sunrise & Sunset**

Sunrise: 05h50  
Sunset: 18h24

**Here's a highlights package of the month's sightings:**

The month of February should really be considered the green month, the recent rains have nourished the bush, making the grass a scenic backdrop to our sightings. The last few weeks of February, the level of the Sand River rose to the highest within the season which was exciting to watch, however it quickly subsided within a few hours.

In the following photo you can see Singita Ebony Lodge dwarfed in the distance.



During the last few weeks of February we experienced light rain and lower temperatures compared to our normal seasonal temperatures. Above, impalas cluster close together during the rain.

### **Lions**

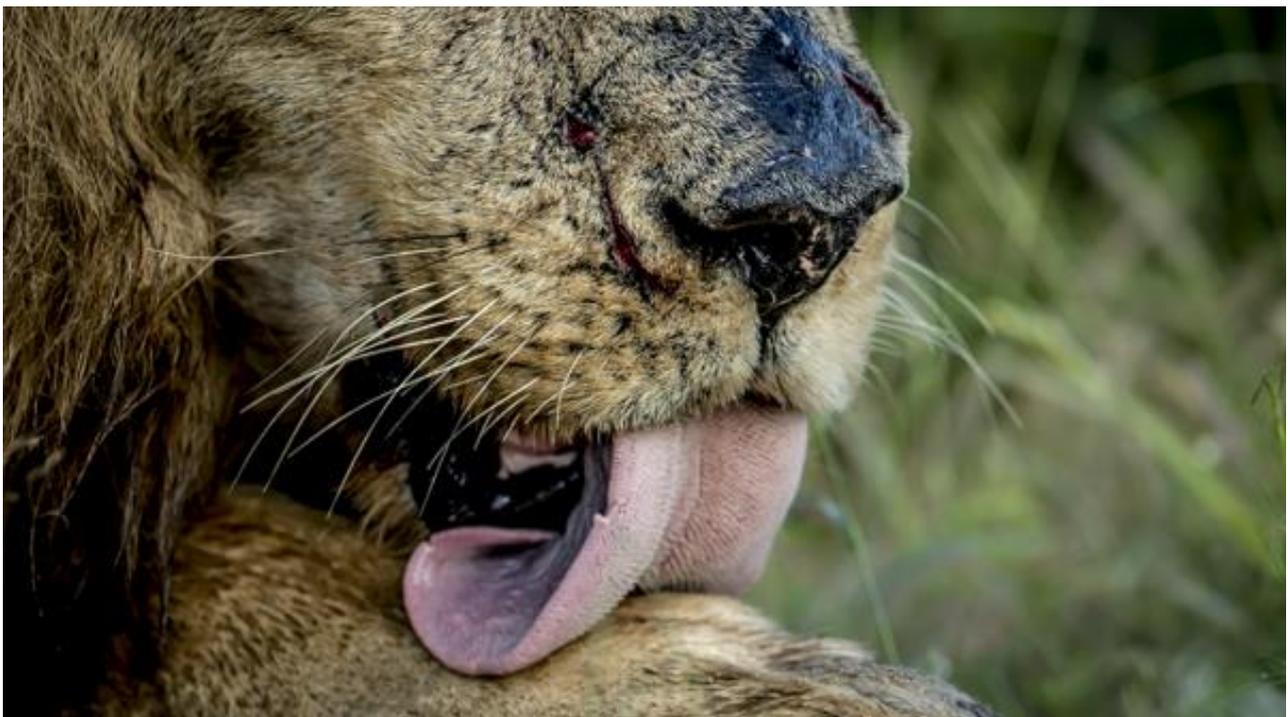
The icon prides have been quite accommodating during the rainy season as they have avoided the long grass and have spent much of their time on the roads. With the recent loss of one of the coalition

members, it will be interesting to see if the dynamics change between the prides, and already bush rumours have it that other coalitions are starting to move from the Kruger National Park to areas further west. Since the loss of this one male coalition member, the remainder of the Masingilane male lions have continued to stay with the Mhangene pride and they have capitalised on the kills that have been made by the successful females.

The Mhangene pride emerges from a lengthy slumber in the long grass as a dazzle of zebras approach the pride.



The Masingilane coalition may reign strong with their current territory, however they still compete with the prides in the area for food sources and often this results in wounds to all involved.



## Leopards

Since the recent sighting of the Schotia female and her cubs, only one other sighting of the Schotia female has been recorded and unfortunately only one cub was sighted at the last sighting. It seems that she may have moved the den-site again and unfortunately, due to the heavy rainfall, the site has been inaccessible for viewing.



The Hlab’Nkunzi female leopard has been sighted on several occasions and two very special sightings have been recorded of her as her two young cubs had accompanied her to the various kills. One kill was a Chacma baboon and the other was a female impala. The latter sighting of the Hlab’Nkunzi female and her two cubs was rather interesting as her previous offspring, the N’weti male (who is now two years old) was found within close vicinity. His behaviour was quiet interesting as he chuffed (made a soft snorting sound) and acted submissively as if he was still part of the family. This is not the first time this has been witnessed where a young male has stayed in close contact with the mother for several months, even years, after becoming independent. The Khashane male is rarely seen and it has been reported that he has moved further south, returning to his birthplace. This too is not extraordinary for leopards as many leopards that have passed their prime have been known to return back to areas where they were born.

## Elephants



With the lush green vegetation and the abundance of marulas, large herds of elephants have been recorded in the various areas of the property throughout February. In particular several large bulls that are in musth have been viewed trailing behind some of the large groups of females. Due to the nature of these bulls being temperamental, a wide berth is always being given to them.



### **Buffaloes**

Large numbers of buffaloes have been sighted throughout the month south of the railway road and due to the large amount of water in seasonal pans, along with the good grazing conditions they have not really moved much and few other sightings have been reported.

### **Hyenas**

With great excitement it was announced on the radio during a game drive that a hyena den that was last active two years ago was active again. Currently two females have been seen in the area along with two cubs of different ages. We look forward to the sightings that they'll offer and hope that they have found their home and will be there for a while.

### **Birds**

The bird count in February was of 207 different species. A notable special being of an Eurasian golden oriole.

### **A little hidden gem**

**Article by Renain Venter**

All too often a breeding herd of elephants walks right past you and there's something small, a little hidden gem that would have been revealed if the grass had not been so tall. This hidden little gem is an elephant calf that is always in touching distance of its mother for the majority of the first two years of its life. We often overlook the smaller things when it comes to a big elephant walking across the road and giving a bit of a show towards the onlookers. This is a very clever way of drawing attention away from the calf, but if you stay focused you will see what looks like a cut-out version of an adult - but just a hundred times smaller quickly scurrying across the road. Imagine that this little animal at birth already weighs in at an astounding 90kg, and increases to 3 500kg – 6 000kg over the next few decades. All this weight added by just eating vegetation! Soon this little calf will be big enough to create her own show while she covers her little one from any sort of threat.



### **Taking the plunge – is it worth it?**

**Article by Leon van Wyk**

People often discuss the topic of predator success rate and how often predators need to eat. There is not really a single definite answer to the question about how often predators eat, and sometimes a rather vague response like “whenever they get the opportunity” might be the safest and most appropriate. For example, if a leopard has stashed a carcass in a tree, it might feed on that carcass three or four times a day, until that food source is finished. It is eating frequently because it has the opportunity to do so. That does not mean, however, that a leopard always eats three or four times a day. There will inevitably be times when that leopard is unsuccessful in its hunting attempts for a few consecutive days, and it might not eat anything substantial at all for those few days.



What is fairly widely accepted, however, is that of the five large species of mammalian carnivores found in this area (hyena, lion, leopard, cheetah and wild dog), the species which has the highest percentage of success in its hunting attempts is the wild dog. The relative success rates of the five super-predators varies significantly, from region to region, season to season, and from one predatory unit to another.

Reasons for wild dogs having such great success in their hunts are multiple, and include the fact that they possess not only great speed, but also far greater stamina than the big cats. They are very intelligent and usually operate in fairly large packs, with pack members working together as a team in running down and pulling down their quarry. Generally speaking, the wild dogs are the most likely of the five to succeed in a hunting attempt.

So what do the prey species do, in order to somehow survive a hunting attempt from a pack of wild dogs? While a herd of impala will quite often watch a leopard or a pride of lions moving through an open clearing, sometimes even following the big cats to keep visual contact with the danger source, when wild dogs are moving into the area, they need to employ a different tactic. They usually leave the area as hastily as they can, sometimes without even giving the alarm snorts that accompany the “predator fascination” that they experience with leopards or lions. Often impalas will resort to a motion pattern known as “stotting,” in which they perform an exaggerated “rocking-horse” type of bounding, often seen in play. While this stotting is commonly simply a game among the members of a herd of impala (and they clearly seem to enjoy it) it could sometimes be a desperate and successful tactic to avoid being caught by the wild dogs. The impalas, though very fast and fit, do not have the speed or stamina to consistently outrun the wild dogs over a long distance. The stotting motion, however, does seem to mesmerise the wild dogs, and many a time I have seen impalas come bounding towards or past my vehicle, with eyes very wide, as they flee from the menacing predators. Although the stotting might not be the fastest type of running that impalas can do, it does seem to be the most effective under these circumstances.



Another tactic which prey animals will sometimes employ when being chased by wild dogs, is to plunge into a large body of water. Three times recently I witnessed, or at least partly witnessed, this behaviour, and all

three were clearly measures of great desperation on the part of the animal being chased. On the first occasion, which was during a morning game drive, five members of a pack of wild dogs chased a large male bushbuck along the banks of the Sand River, just upstream of Ebony Lodge, towards a vehicle crossing point, known as Pios Crossing. This was during the drought, and the overall level of the Sand River was very low. However, there was a fairly deep pool just upstream of Pios Crossing, which had become a very popular spot for a very large number of hippopotami. The wild dogs chased this bushbuck at great speed towards the crossing. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the bushbuck's choice of flight (escape) was to run directly towards the crossing, and the dogs were in hot pursuit.

There were many hippos in the pool and to many people's surprise, the bushbuck, without a moment's hesitation, plunged directly into the pool, right among all the hippos! Understandably the hippos were quite indignant about having their rest so rudely interrupted in this manner, but the bushbuck was not stopping to do any explaining! The wild dogs stopped suddenly at the water's edge, quite bewildered, but it was clear that they were not going to leap into the mob of angry hippos. The bushbuck ram, meanwhile, had not slowed down even slightly, and bounded through the confused hippos and out on the other side of the river, making good his escape! I don't know how much thought went into the bushbuck's choice of escape, but whatever the case, it worked! My opinion is that the fact that there were so many hippos present probably counted in the bushbuck's favour.

The second occasion was also during a morning game drive. One of my colleagues gave an update on the radio, that he had just found a large pack of wild dogs close to Joe's Dam, which is a rather attractive waterhole a short distance to the south of the Singita airstrip. The dogs had chased a male impala into this waterhole, and had now surrounded it. As I was not far from the area, I drove directly to Joe's Dam to join the sighting, and this is what was happening: the male impala was right in the middle of the water, which was about shoulder-deep on the impala. Several of the adult wild dogs were pacing around, clearly intent on the impala, but not keen to go into the water to try to get him. The wild dog pups, meanwhile, were engaged in games of "tag" with each other, clearly content to entertain themselves while leaving the adults to go about trying to secure the meal. I felt for the impala, which showed tremendous resolve and courage by staying put in the middle of the waterhole. Sometimes the adult wild dogs would seem to be losing interest, and would look to settle in the shade on the banks. When they did this, the impala sometimes made his way towards the shore, at a point furthest from the dogs. The dogs were restless, however, and each time the impala did this, at least one of the dogs would make its way round to be in a position to "meet" the impala and deal with any attempt at escape! It seemed like a little bit of a "stalemate" situation, and my guests were ready to move on, so we left the sighting after an intriguing 45 minutes. The end result was probably fairly predictable, and was witnessed by one of my colleagues and his guests. The impala evidently made the decision to leave its rather unfamiliar "sanctuary" and head for dry land, but as it approached the water's edge, the waiting dogs pulled it onto land and into thickets, where it was quickly pulled apart and devoured.



The third occasion was at the end of January and was during an afternoon game drive. We were just about to stop for a sundowner break, a stretch of legs and something to drink, when we received news that a

pack of wild dogs had been found at Mhlwareni Dam, east of the central parts of Singita Sabi Sand. Again, they had chased a male impala into this waterhole, and had surrounded it.

The impala was behaving in a fairly similar manner to the one which had been in Joe's Dam, and the dogs were all around, looking intent. A pair of Egyptian geese added to the drama, paddling around the middle of the water hole, the female honking and the male hissing, neither of them keen to venture close to the edge. As dusk was already upon us, and the impala was seemingly anxious to spend his night on dry land, it became evident that something was bound to happen quite soon.

Indeed, something did happen pretty quickly. The impala made his way towards the dam wall, and when he was only a few meters from the edge, one of the adult dogs plunged right into the water, swam swiftly to the front of the impala, grabbed him by the neck and started to pull him to the edge! It all happened quite swiftly from that point, as the unfortunate impala was dragged under a dense bush between the water and the dam wall, and was devoured at speed. For a while this activity was difficult to see, but later on the carcass was dragged more out into the open and consumed by the hungry pack.



Thinking back on all of these cases, my conclusion is that in each case, the antelope deliberately plunged into the water, hoping in desperation that the wild dogs would be reluctant to follow. It certainly seems true that wild dogs are reluctant to plunge into water, presumably because of a fear of the possibility of crocodiles. In the case of the bushbuck, his tactic worked, but I think the fact that he plunged in among the hippos was what actually worked in his favour. Maybe it was a crazy and desperate decision, but it worked, and he survived. In the case of the two impala rams, however, they probably sealed their own fate to a large extent. By being stationary in the muddy-bottomed waterhole, the impala would have placed themselves in a position of weakness, as they would no longer have had any kind of "head start." Perhaps if they hadn't plunged into the water, they would still have been caught, possibly much sooner, so in effect the plunge into the water might have extended their lives by a number of minutes, in reality just delaying the inevitable. Of course, we will never know, but I do have great admiration and respect for both predator and prey – in the wild, it is all about survival!

Drought? Severe drought? Extended drought? It was very recently that we were indeed in the midst of what was a rather severe drought, worse than any other drought that most of us can remember. Looking at how green and lush everything currently appears, the drought of the last couple of years seems almost a distant memory, almost something that we imagined. Articles that were written for this journal about the drought did mention the fact that a drought is part of a natural cycle, and while its effects may seem harsh, they should not be seen as altogether detrimental. The “cleansing” or natural selection process of a drought does actually have benefits.

Anyway, as the rainfall figures show, we have received significant rain this current summer, and a brief look at the state of the vegetation suggests that the drought is over. While this might be a somewhat over-hasty assessment of the situation, in that the effects of two very dry years will continue to be felt for some time, it is certainly safe to say that the ability of the veld to recover is nothing short of remarkable! Back in October 2016, there was very little grass to be seen in quite vast areas, and the large grazing animals were showing a great deal of stress, with a considerable decline in condition of many individuals, particularly among the buffalo and hippo populations. Those were tough times for them, and a large number lost their lives to predation (not so much in the case of hippo) or to drought-related stresses. Now, when we drive around this beautiful game reserve, we are immediately struck by how much green, lush grass there is, and how healthy everything appears to be.

It is the season of the marula fruit, and what a bumper season it is proving to be! I well remember a violent hail storm in October 2014, which stripped most of the marula trees of their blossom, with the result that very few marula trees bore any fruit at all in January or February 2015. The marula crop at the beginning of 2016 was also a rather poor one, perhaps influenced by the drought. This year, however, the volume of marulas produced has been particularly high, and the fruits have been particularly plump and juicy. This has been much to the delight and appreciation of the many marula-eating mammals, particularly elephants, warthogs and baboons, but also including impala, kudu, zebra, monkeys, humans, squirrels and even civets. They have just been so plentiful, though, that the animals that consume them are not able to keep up – there really is an over-abundance of them. Piles of elephant dung reveal dozens of partly digested marulas in them, and the seeds within these will have a greater chance of germinating and growing into new trees, than those that have not passed through an elephant. I must admit that I have really enjoyed eating the marulas this year! They are not quite ripe when they fall to the ground, but ripen within a day or two, and that is when they are best. Sometimes it is worth chilling them before eating them, because then they are even more refreshing, particularly on a hot day.

The white berry bush is another plant that is producing good numbers of fruits this year, and while these are not exactly delicious, they are certainly quite palatable. Birds such as green pigeons and purple-crested turacos enjoy them, and I’m sure monkeys eat them too.

It is heartening to see how the condition of the buffaloes has improved since the onset of the rains. Right at the end of the drought, they were really struggling, and it even seemed that many of them had lost much of their spirit, their will to survive. They had become relatively easy targets for lions, and were often subdued and killed by various prides, sometimes even by a single lioness. The survivors have bounced back, however, and they are no longer a “push-over” for the lions. It really is good to see them looking strong again, and the memory of finding buffalo carcasses and skeletons several times a week is starting to fade. It is interesting to note that, at the time of writing this article (8 February), I have yet to see a new buffalo calf, born this summer. In my past experience, I have seen newborn buffalo calves in the months from December to June (yes, a long season spanning from mid-summer to mid-winter), with a peak of births probably in January and February. I wonder if many of the cows did not conceive at all, or if some conceived but lost their embryos or foetuses at an early stage....? It will be interesting to see what sort of numbers of calves will be born in the coming months, and how they will fare. There is certainly enough grass now to ensure that their mothers are obtaining sufficient nutrition to be able to yield milk. My opinion, and it is by no means an expert one, is that during the height of the drought, the female buffaloes

needed all their energy resources just to survive, and were unable to also support a developing foetus. I predict, therefore, that a far smaller percentage of buffalo cows will give birth in the first half of this year, compared with previous years. This might then be partly countered next year, possibly with a slightly earlier than normal peak.

I think it is fair to say that there is currently an abundance of food for all the animals out there, from insects to mammals, and all the classes in between. It certainly is a time of plenty, but for some, the food is less easily obtained than it might have been a few months ago. This might apply to the carnivores more than the herbivores, and the specialist scavengers (notably the vultures) might have to travel much further and search much harder for their meals than they did during the drought.

Lions that were eating buffalo meat almost at will, and might have almost forgotten some of their more refined hunting skills, are once again having to work much harder for their meals, and use the available cover to increase their chances of success. They might have had it relatively easy during the late stages of the extended drought, but the wheel keeps turning and Mother Nature keeps balancing things out, as fairly and effectively as only she can.



## Stepping Stones

Article by Stacey Gerber

Last year and the year before, Singita Sabi Sand endured a serious drought as a result of the El Nino effect. This summer we have been exceptionally lucky in that we have already received in excess of 700 mm of rain for the season. We are still grateful for every drop of rain that we receive and I am sure the animals feel the same way – rainfall results in increased success rates of reproduction and therefore food, for both predator and prey. One fortunate afternoon we were lucky enough to come across a beautiful male leopard, which we call the Nyelethi Male.

One of the challenges that animals would associate with heavy rainfall is to deal with water crossings. Many different species of animals can no longer cross the river at most of its length due to the high turbidity.

Some animals however, including the Nyelethi Male, find stepping stones to cross the water course. We watched him navigate across a now rapidly flowing river until he finally found his way to the other side. What fascinated us most was the agility and elegance with which he conducted his movements and also his attempts at finding the route that enabled him to come into contact with as little water as possible – cats stay cats, no matter their size! He showed great discomfort whenever he had to submerge his feet, but since his territory extends to both banks of the Sand River, the urge to cross the river was stronger than the dislike of having to get his paws wet!



Photographs on location by Ross Couper, Leon van Wyk, Stacey Gerber and Renain Venter  
Singita Ebony and Boulders Lodge  
Sabi Sand  
South Africa  
Twenty-eighth of February 2017