WILDLIFE REPORT
SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA
For the month of March, Two Thousand and Eighteen

Temperature
Average minimum: 20°C (68°F)
Average maximum: 33°C (91°F)
Minimum recorded: 17°C (63°F)
Maximum recorded: 40°C (104°F)

Rainfall Recorded
For the month: 81 mm
Aug 2017 to date: 478.7 mm

Sunrise & Sunset
Sunrise: 05:55
Sunset: 18:10

The transition between being out in the wild and feeling comfortable is so seamless at Singita that you often have to remind yourself that it’s not every day you get to stop for a sundowner and a group of zebra amble pass your temporary bush bar with little concern of your presence. It is one of those moments where for a few minutes you become part of the landscape, immersing yourself into the wilderness. There is something special about the sound of the bush whilst you have stopped, it is utterly indescribable when your senses become so in tune with the natural “quiet noise” around you, that at first - it sounds deafening to an untrained ear and later becomes more apparent with the acquaintance of being immersed into the serenity. The feeling of the African earth under your feet whilst being on safari is a must, whether you are experiencing a walking trail or climbing out of the vehicle to enjoy a sundowner. This is just the start of falling in love with a place that we are fortunate enough to call home, which has resulted in many of our guests referring to Singita as their home too.
Here's a highlights package of the month's sightings

**Lions:**
The sub-adult lions from the Mhangene pride continue to move vast distances across the reserve and have been viewed hunting buffalo on a few occasions. The hunts have been unsuccessful for the most part but the experiences are valuable lessons for the nomadic pride of young lions.

**Leopard:**
The leopard viewing never ceases to amaze us in the Sabi Sand region. Several sightings this month were recorded with the viewing of three different leopards in one sighting. For obvious reasons most of the recordings have been with a female and her litter along with a resident male in the vicinity.

**Elephants:**
As the last of the marula fruits have fallen from the trees, the last kernels are being collected by tree squirrels and stored for the winter ahead. Notably the elephant droppings continue to show signs of the fruits, and even some saplings have been visible emerging from the droppings as it is fertile compost and provides perfect growth conditions.

**Wild dogs:**
A resident pack of nine wild dogs continues to move throughout the area. A favourite tactic of the wild dogs is to herd their prey towards rivers, lakes and other bodies of water and this has been notable with many of the sightings being recorded this month. The bulk of the hunts have occurred along the banks of the Sand River as the pack aims to flush out the prey species from the banks and chase them away from the water. Generally the prey would normally avoid bodies of water, but on occasion will run into the water in desperation to escape from the dogs. As always the wild dog sightings are highly active and social and are endlessly fascinating to watch.

**Buffalo:**
Small herds have been viewed in the south of the reserve, however older males have been sighted at various seasonal waterholes, cooling off in the mud. Unexpected sightings have occurred in the most unlikely areas, however with the movement of lions, this has had a knock-on effect to the dominant prey species and buffalo, in particular, became sporadic to the predator pressure.
Interspecific communication – surviving by understanding the languages of others

Article by Leon van Wyk

In our busy lives, communication is such a vital element to ensure that we understand each other. Communication can take place through a variety of different media, including vocal communication, written communication and communication via body language. The best understood and probably most widely used communication can broadly be described as intraspecific communication, i.e. communication between members of the same species: humans communicating with other humans, dogs communicating with other dogs, elephants communicating with other elephants, etc. We humans also communicate with other species, for example with our dogs. This can immediately be described as a basic form of interspecific communication.

In the wild, there is also a tremendous amount of intraspecific communication, where the “language” and “vocabulary” are meant for other members of the same species. We do not need to dwell on the subject of intraspecific communication for the purpose of this article, but I am certain that the reader can think of numerous examples, such as lions roaring, female leopard calling softly to her cubs, impala lamb and its mother calling to one another, a male bird calling to its mate or uttering a territorial call. Most of these forms of intraspecific communication are fairly straightforward and usually the meaning is reasonably obvious.

What may not be quite so obvious, but is of key importance to a huge variety of wild animals, is the ability to understand and react to the communication from other species. I would go so far as to say that in order to survive, let alone thrive, in a challenging environment like this game reserve, creatures need to be able to understand the “languages” used by numerous other species, and act according to the meaning of this language. Let us consider some examples:

- A leopard walking along a road is seen by vervet monkeys in a tree. The monkeys immediately start uttering their alarm call, which communicates to the leopard the fact that it has been seen. Warthogs, impala and bushbuck in the general vicinity are also alerted by the monkey alarm calls. I do not believe that the monkeys were deliberately trying to warn the other prey species about the presence of a predator. However, the other prey species have heard and understood the meaning of the monkey alarm calls. Squirrels in trees and birds in the grass also utter their alarm calls as the leopard walks by, defiantly telling the leopard that it has been seen. A typical response from the leopard might be to raise its tail in a high arch, showing the prominent white tip, almost like holding up a white flag. The leopard, in so doing, is acknowledging the fact that it has been seen, and is communicating to the animals that have seen it that it is not intent on hunting them.

- Hyenas feeding on a giraffe (or other) carcass do so quite noisily, and their various feeding sounds are heard by a couple of hungry male lions that have been resting a few miles away. The lions listen intently for a while, and then walk purposefully in the direction of the sounds of the feeding hyenas. Sure enough, they come across the scene where the hyenas are feeding on the carcass. They might assess the situation briefly, and if they see that the numbers of hyenas are not too high, they would run boldly and aggressively towards the hyenas, perhaps even roaring as they do so. The hyenas would probably beat a hasty retreat, but would in all likelihood remain in the general area, hoping for a further opportunity to feed again, once the lions have satisfied their immediate needs.

- Lions on the lookout for food will also be alert to certain bird calls, particularly those of red-billed oxpeckers. Oxpeckers are frequently found in the immediate vicinity of prey animals, and if lions can pinpoint the source of the oxpecker sounds, they might head in that direction and find whatever herbivores might be in the area. Similarly, lions will watch the sky where vultures are circling, and if it appears that more vultures are gathering, the lions might start moving towards the area of vulture activity. So while this does not necessarily involve any vocal communication between the species, the lions are acting upon information received from the vultures.

- A young buffalo calf, left behind while the herd was steadily on the move towards a waterhole, starts calling out aloud to its mother, who is nowhere to be seen. This loud bleating sound is meant
for its mother’s ear, but it is also heard by other animals, one of which might be a hungry hyena, or an injured female leopard. The female leopard might have cubs, and because of her injury, she is temporarily less able to hunt normally, which could be problematic, even life-threatening, to both herself and her cubs. Yet she is given a lifeline, because she understands the language of the lost buffalo calf, which to her sounds like a dinner bell ringing! She takes full advantage of this unintentional interspecific communication, and secures a vital meal as a result of it. While her life and the lives of her cubs may have been in jeopardy, she has seized an opportunity to extend their lives, which may have been hanging in the balance.

- A snake or a pearl-spotted owl in a tree is noticed by a few Burchell’s starlings, which immediately start uttering their disapproving calls of alarm. These calls are heard and understood by a variety of other birds, and within a few minutes there could very easily by ten, twenty or even thirty bird species in or around this particular tree, all because they understand one another’s languages and act accordingly. They come to see the predator (I have previously written an article on Predator Fascination), mob it and perhaps attempt to drive it off.

Without a doubt there is a whole lot more interspecific communication going on than we realise, and while probably the bulk of such communication is meant to be intraspecific, animals are savvy and learn to read or listen in different languages. Those that have learnt to understand the most different languages should, in most cases, stand the best chance of surviving longest in a wild world which is unforgiving.

The best time to view leopards is DAYTIME!

I touched on the subject many months ago in an article entitled “Dispelling a Few Myths”. One of the myths that I aimed to dispel in that article is that leopards are nocturnal, a notion that is still claimed in many reference books on mammals. Not for a moment am I suggesting that leopards are not active at night. They certainly are. But they are also often active in broad daylight. Like all cats, leopards spend more of their time resting than moving, and this is true both day and night.

Of the 25 years I have spent guiding, 21 of those years have been in the leopard-rich Sabi Sand Wildtuin. In this area we are privileged to be able to extend our game drives well into the night. Certainly the night drive is something many guests want to experience, and wild Africa does take on a different dimension under a night sky. While I have probably seen more activity from lions and hyenas at night than during the day, the same has not applied to leopards. Without a doubt, my best and most memorable leopard sightings have been during the hours of daylight, and not only the cooler hours. Indeed, many a time a leopard has been seen to be highly active during the midday period.

I would like to give a few examples of some fine leopard viewing that I have experienced during the day in very recent weeks, and perhaps some of the photographs accompanying this article will help me make my point.

A couple of weeks ago my tracker Renneck and I had decided to work along the banks of the dry Hukumuri river bed, north of the Sand River. We had been the first ones to find the Hukumuri female leopard with her new cubs a few weeks prior to that and had not seen them again since then. We were really keen to try to find them for our guests that afternoon, and we carefully worked the area for any sign. News came from one of my colleagues, who was south of the Sand River, that he had heard the alarm call of a bushbuck on the northern bank of the Sand River, not too far from the confluence of the Hukumuri and the Sand. We doubled back towards the area, and soon found some anxious-looking impala, staring towards a muddy wallow in a small clearing just off a less driven track close to the Hukumuri.
Renneck spotted a leopard, and my pulse quickened, realising that it was the very beautiful Hukumuri female... and that there were cubs with her! We remained on the road and kept the movement of our vehicle to a minimum, as these cubs were still shy, being just over three months old and not having had much exposure to Land Rovers. Keeping our voices low and limiting movement, we were soon rewarded with some very good views of one of the cubs close to their mother. The more confident cub appeared to be a little male. His sibling remained more shy and kept to the bushes a little more. My guests and I were able to take some pleasing photographs of the mother leopard and one of her cubs in the natural light of late afternoon.

Just a few days ago, on the morning game drive, we followed up on some monkey alarm calls not far from Pios Crossing (a pretty crossing over the Sand River just upstream of Ebony Lodge). We had already crossed north over the river, but crossed back south again towards where we thought the alarmed monkeys had been. By now the monkeys had gone quiet, which suggested that they had lost sight of the predator. Renneck spotted fresh tracks of a female leopard crossing a road, so we started carefully working the area of these tracks, and within 15 minutes had the satisfaction of finding the Schotia female leopard, heavily lactating and presumably on her way back to her young cubs. She was, however, in stalking mode, as she had seen some unsuspecting impala rams less than 30 metres ahead of her. This was at about 7h30 in the morning, and the light of the sun coming at an angle across the leopard (she was almost backlit at times, from where we were parked on the road), allowed for some very satisfactory photographic results. As things turned out, the leopard was suddenly detected by one of the impala rams, so she did not make an attempt. It seemed actually that she was quite well fed, so had probably just finished feeding on a recent kill. Over the next month to six weeks, we hope to start seeing the Schotia female’s cubs, as she will by then be moving them to areas further afield. Typically, leopard cubs are introduced to meat when they are about three months old, but will continue to suckle from their mother for a few more months, as long as she has milk.

Also just a few days ago, while my guests and I were enjoying some good hippo viewing at Pios Crossing, one of the trackers (Johnson) who was on foot about a kilometre west of that position, followed up on some agitated monkey alarm calls, and he found a female leopard in a marula tree. As we were closer to that position than any other vehicles, it made sense for us to “respond” to the sighting, which we did. By the time we reached the area, which took only a few minutes, the leopard had already caught a young vervet monkey, and was eating it on the ground. This leopard turned out to be the young and beautiful Khokovela female, yet another lactating individual. We have started seeing this leopard more and more, since my first sighting of her late last year. To my knowledge, nobody has yet seen her cubs.

Just a few days ago, we were on a morning game drive, and having been out for more than two hours, it was time to stop for a leg stretch and coffee break. As we were approaching our spot of choice, Renneck noticed some very fresh male leopard tracks on the road. Eager as ever, he took the handheld radio and started to follow the tracks. Within a few minutes, he called me to say that he had just found the male leopard, so I turned back and drove into the bush at the point he indicated. I said to my guest “I bet the leopard is lying on top of a termite mound,” and indeed he was. But not for long! Halfway up the termite mound was a burrow, and peering out of the burrow was a warthog. Seconds later, the warthog rushed out of the burrow, followed by two or three more, and the leopard gave chase. A cloud of dust and a squeal, and the leopard had grabbed a young warthog and had its neck in his jaws. It was a quick and clean kill, with the leopard maintaining a tight grip on the hapless pig’s neck until the struggling had ceased and the body was limp. We then watched as the
Torchwood male leopard dragged his fresh kill about 100 metres to a sheltered spot at the base of a marula tree, where he rested for a while before plucking the hair from the carcass. He would feed at leisure several times during the course of the day, and just before sunset, somebody saw him take the kill up into the marula tree, safely out of reach of hyenas.

These are just a few examples that come to mind of leopard sightings in the daytime that could not have been of anything like the same quality at night. Indeed, some of the sightings would have had to be abandoned almost immediately if they had been at night. Viewing leopards during the hours of daylight is great because no extra light is needed, and we can follow what the leopard is doing. Particularly if a leopard is hunting, we are much better able to monitor the developments of the hunt when there is natural daylight. Furthermore, we would not ever want to influence the outcome of the hunt, and this often means remaining still and quiet as events unfold... surely much easier in daylight. I think it goes without saying that photography of animals is much easier and better during the day, under natural light, than at night, when artificial light enhancement would be required. All in all, considering the fact that leopards in the Sabi Sand are generally just as active in the daytime as they are at night, it is (for me) a “no brainer” that the best time to view leopards here is in the daytime! When you read that leopards are nocturnal, don’t be misled!

A room with a view

The eloquently placed Singita Ebony Lodge overlooks the banks of the Sand River that draws multiple wildlife species within close view of the lodge. It is not an uncommon event that sightings have been reported by guests staying at the lodge of game moving past the grassland clearings or along the river during the midday period.
With the open spaces along the main deck and each individual room, there is ample opportunity to immerse yourself into the wilderness that surrounds the lodge further as you watch time stand still for wildlife and it will encompass you along with it.

A moment to reflect on how we connect with nature on our own level, whether it is through a specific sense, or sighting, however at some time during your stay, you will be wondering why it took you so long to visit Africa, as we are all connected to her in some way or form.

**Life with leopards**

With the start of the first game drive with guests that have just arrived at the lodge, I would raise the question to everyone on the vehicle to enquire if there are any special interests that the guests may have, hoping to delve deeper into the various natural aspects throughout their stay. As most guests express their intention to view everything on safari and experience it all, one of the most prominent species that often comes to mind to first timers and experienced safari goers is a request to see a leopard.

Privileged to be living with leopards, this is one of the species that I have had a keen interest in during my six years guiding at Singita Sabi Sand. During the first year of guiding at Singita Kruger National Park, I would utilize the time during the midday period to track potential leopard sightings that might set us up for later that afternoon. Only some of the leopards were habituated enough that you could track them with the positive result of hoping to see them in the area later, but the effort put in seldom rewarded us in the afternoon as we would inevitably still be tracking later that afternoon. My tracker Given never understood my theory of hoping to find the same leopard later in the afternoon. However, provided that I had a place to start tracking, Given soon become converted and would join me on my midday quests. It never really worked out as we planned but the camaraderie between us was strong and we would be heading back in the afternoon to collect our excited guests ready to start the venture all over again.

Upon being transferred to the Sabi Sand region, it was apparent that leopards were frequently viewed in the area and they had been habituated over a much longer period of time.
Moving into the region, I soon realised that leopards were very habituated, that viewing a leopard from the lodge deck or within the confines of the lodge perimeter was almost the norm, as the area was evidently part of their territories. With the resident female leopard, the Ravenscourt female, passing away shortly after I arrived, the loss of the resident female left a void in the area close to the lodges for some time, before another female moved into the area. The new female was well known in the Sabi Sand reserve and was extremely habituated to the safari vehicles. The Hlab’Nkunzi female was slightly younger than the Ravenscourt female at the time of her passing. What was astounding was that she moved through the lodge perimeter much the same as the Ravenscourt female had done, and began utilising the same pathways and den-sites as she became more familiar with the area. With further discussion to the den-sites it was apparent that this was not the second leopard that used some of the den-sites - trackers that have been with Singita well over twenty years, noted that some of the den-sites were used by 3rd or 4th generation females in the area and that they were often viewed in some of the same trees lounging across the same branches. Was this all by chance or was it connected in a way? A connection to nature with a circle and invisible circle that we all imagine but just never get to see in real life or our lifetimes if we did not intricately study the species. So within six years I have been fortunate enough to witness it and it goes without saying that it’s a privilege to live with leopards. As we watch the current territorial female leopard, the Hlab’Nkunzi female, age with dignity and grace, she moves silently through her old territorial grounds quietly now that it has been passed on to one of her litters.

A female leopard that was born approximately five years ago, the Schotia female, now holds the territory with two cubs in the vicinity to start that circle all over again. We look forward to watching the change of the guard as it takes place whilst living with leopards.
The age of innocence

Article by Ross Couper
As the summer fades into the autumn season, the cooler morning temperatures and soft breezes in the evening along the seasonal river courses remind us of the yearly change taking place. Through the summer we have been fortunate enough to watch the innocence of young members of various species play out in the wild and on some occasions been witness to them being delivered. The impala lambing season occurs at a time of abundance in the year, as it kicks off in mid-November with many guides placing a friendly wager as to when the date of the first impala being born will be recorded. A sighting of the first young commences with a win, no photograph needed in this competition.

As we travel out on a daily basis watching the young grow in the wild, it allows an opportunity to take in the innocence of the young in the wild as they playfully frolic in the open grasslands or curiously watch other species come down to drink at a waterhole. Young buffalo calves often have a very peculiar look about them as their two front lower jaw teeth often protrude from the jaw giving them quite a comical look as they stare back at you with an awkward grin. With leopard cubs it takes a while before they become independent, much the same with lions and other predators. We generally only get to see leopard cubs being introduced to carcasses at approximately 10-12 weeks old and this is a rare occasion to see them for the first time. It also a vulnerable time for the cubs as the dangers exposed during these ventures away from the security of a den may result in the loss of the cubs due to other predator or scavenger interactions at the food source. However, given that they are vulnerable, there is always a sense of instinct that is reassuring to watch to maintain their survival. Instinct can be noted in many forms as the cubs grow, but most notably is the ability to climb and explore and the innocent endeavours to being inquisitive to their new-found surroundings. In the past few weeks, we have been fortunate to record two cubs with the Hukumuri female, whose territory is just north of the river and the Schotia female who has been viewed in close vicinity of the lodges. She has also been reported to have two cubs; we are waiting in anticipation for the introduction, as this will be her second litter of cubs. Unfortunately, her first litter was killed by the Mhangene pride.

By far a firm favourite to watch, is a young elephant as they move with the herd shortly after birth. The herd will slow down for the addition. As the young calves become aware that there are other calves amongst them, they soon realise that playtime becomes a priority! Feeding becomes an overrated activity, especially when you have the opportunity to still suckle from your mother. The playful behaviour is closely monitored by the adult females and generally anything that becomes a part of their daily interaction soon becomes a game of some sort. Even if it means chasing away the birds that are capitalising on the movement of the elephant herd as they swoop down to catch the insects moving in the grass. The age of innocence can sometime be forgotten when we don’t have the time to watch it and it can be one of the
most rewarding finds in the bush whilst on a game drive that will have you laughing out loud sometimes, and leaving the sighting smiling all the way home.

March Gallery

A perfect end to an afternoon game drive, just north of the river, with a view of the Drakensberg mountain range in the distance. The sultry sunset made it worth taking in the view and enjoying a refreshing drink along with a short walk in the area, before continuing with our game drive.
The beauty of the early morning was added with capturing this scene of an elephant bull moving across a dam wall, almost watching his mirrored reflection as he moved without disturbing the surface of the water.

The beauty of the lilac-breasted roller makes it undeniably one of the most talked about birds in the bush. Not only are they relatively common, but they are resident throughout the year, and once the dry season arrives, the colours are far more vibrant against the tawny background of grasslands.

One of the summer visitors, the southern carmine bee-eaters, which have now returned north for warmer weather, migrating to equatorial Africa from March to August.
Often perched on the top of a rocky ledge, this male klipspringer moved down to the lower areas affording us a great opportunity of a photograph, but also he demonstrated his territorial scent marking with the very prominent preorbital gland. These glands are trench-like slits of dark blue to black, nearly bare skin extending from the medial canthus of each eye. The glands produce secretions which contain pheromones and other semi-chemical compounds. The male deposited secretions on twigs and grass stalks as a means of communication with other klipspringers in the area.

Photographs on location by
Ross Couper and Leon van Wyk
Singita Ebony and Boulders Lodge
Sabi Sand
South Africa
Thirty-first of March 2018