

Singita



WILDLIFE JOURNAL
SINGITA SABI SAND, SOUTH AFRICA
For the month of March, Two Thousand and Nineteen

Temperature

Average minimum: 21.3°C (70.34°F)
Minimum recorded: 18°C (64.4°F)
Average maximum: 33.9 (93.0°F)
Maximum recorded: 40°C (104°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 133.5mm
For the year to date: 340 mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:43
Sunset: 18:44

With dusk falling to a later dawn, and the last marula fruit disappeared, we realised that we are already in autumn. The crisp cool mornings are a relief from the searing summer temperatures. The bush blanket of green has started to shift slightly to warming colours. The longer grass stalks have a graduating tawny colour and sway back and forth as your drive down any of the roads. Autumn is a shift from green vegetation in the latter part of summer to warm winter tones with the beauty of healthy vegetation.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for March:

Lions

- This month brought on a few surprises with lions, one in particular was the reporting of the Styx Pride being located north of the river. Over the last few weeks, the pride has moved further west and has continued to explore some new surroundings.

- The three new lion cubs in the Mhangene Pride continue to be hidden along the Quail Donga drainage line. On few occasions we have been fortunate to see them exploring in open areas along the banks of the drainage line and they continue to pull at everyone's heart strings.

Leopards

- The Hukumuri female surprised us when we found her with her remaining female cub. The young female has been sighted on only a few occasions during the last few months. It is estimated that the young female is approximately a year old and should be independent within a few months. We look forward to seeing more of this female as it's likely she'll stay in close quarters of her mother's territory.

Elephants

- A large number of groups have been reported throughout the reserve during the month. With the large surplus amounts of food available the elephants continue to roam over vast areas. One of the most surprising things at the moment is noticing that elephants can be very well hidden amongst the greenery of summer!

Buffalos

- Sporadic smaller groups of male buffalos have been viewed along the Sand River. The larger herds continue to move along the open clearings in the south. The large expansions of grassland are preferred habitat during this time of the year.

Wild dogs

- Our wild dog sightings boomed this month with a few different packs moving through the property, with a particularly great sighting of a pack chasing an impala into one of the dams, only to have hippos force it out of the water and into the dogs' mouths.

Birds

- The total bird count for the month of March was 210 (201 in February). Specials for the month included sightings of: Fulvous duck, Cape vulture, lesser moorhen, marsh owl and grey-headed gull.



Dawn. The sun rays gently breaking through the horizon, lifting up the blanket of stars as a new day begins in the African bush. With the soundtrack of Africa already in full swing, it's hard not to smile as the larks and magpie-shrikes brighten up the morning, full of life and song. Every day, a different symphony plays and today's ensemble showcases the brightly coloured woodland kingfisher. These beautiful birds will soon be departing on their next adventure, as they migrate up through Africa as the dry season begins its chapter. Flashes of cyan can be seen as they take to the sky, a vast and prominent contrast to the greens and browns of the trees.



With the hum of life buzzing, we set out from Castleton to follow up on some recent signs of lions within the area. With Castleton Dam emerging on our right, we headed down the undulating slopes towards one of the properties most prominent drainage lines - an area filled with broad-leaved trees, tall grasses and shrubs. An ideal location for some tiny paws and wide young eyes to hide...

After scanning the area, we located some fresh tracks which led us deep into the thicket. Manoeuvring over some rocky terrain, we journeyed down into the drainage line. There was a canopy of trees above us like an umbrella, and the morning sun warmed our faces as it filtered through the leaves. Electric energy filled the air and a sense of anticipation held us in suspense as we scanned every fallen branch and tree for a flick of an ear or tail.

And then we saw them. At first just the Mhangene lionesses, calmly lying in the filtered sunlight. After a minute, two cubs emerged from behind her, with the third following suit. They had an energetic spring in their step, carefree and safe. I think we were all holding our breaths as we watched the scene in front of us unfold. Silently, we observed, privileged to see this playful family interact with each other.

The cubs' paws were no bigger than mom's nose; so perfect in shape, like a miniature version of mom's. Their eyes were wide and curious and their overly big ears still need to be grown into. What drew my attention the most was how innocent the cubs seemed. Each one on his/her own independent mission, stalking, playing,

listening and each one in awe of their surroundings. One cub climbed towards us, staring at each of our faces - a look of curiosity in his face. He lay down, not taking his eyes off the car, completely taken by our presence. I think we all shared that moment of wonder as we looked back at him. I was intrigued and in awe at mom's patience, as one cub began to attack her swishing tail. Pawing and biting, he clumsily tackled her, pouncing and grabbing the dark hair on the tip of her tail.



Artist Kirsten Tinkler

Playful behaviour from the youngster, but interesting to already see his innate need to stalk and tackle. Such play is vital for building these life skills, for one day these cubs will need to fend for themselves.

The minutes melted away as we sat, captivated by the young family in front of us. Engrossed and enchanted, we immersed ourselves in their world.

It's rare, in this day and age, to have the opportunity to disconnect from our crazy lives and be in an environment where we are completely present to everything around us. The bush provides us with such opportunities. It is a place where the unexpected happens. A place where magical moments unfold.

In my eight years of training and working as a Professional Field Guide I have never witnessed a pack of Cape hunting dogs (African wild dogs) making a kill! I've always just missed the catch whilst staying with the dogs on the hunt and then arriving to a scene where the prey is already dead and the dogs are savagely ripping the carcass apart!



This all changed a few weeks ago when the pack was found hunting around the northern parts of Castleton. Initially they had killed an impala ewe and then lost it to a clan of spotted hyenas. They continued their pursuit after other prey through very dense bush but didn't catch anything. Finding them at Castleton Dam, they flushed another herd of impala and the chase was on! Trying to stay with them, driving through sand, over bushes and losing them through some thick brush we again found them on the western side of Castleton, but without a kill.

Realising that a few dogs were missing, and after watching the dogs being chased by a herd of elephants, we found one dog, said to be the alpha male, with an impala kill north of Castleton Dam! On our arrival, the dog was nervously engorging himself, stopping every few seconds to see where the rest of the pack was and if there were any other predators making their way to steal his kill. A few minutes passed and the dog left the kill, headed south to find the rest of his pack and we watched a couple of vultures landing in the trees around the carcass.

Leaving the area and heading north for a quick coffee stop, we heard that a male leopard was making his way to the area of the impala carcass but was unsuccessful at stealing it as the entire pack returned in time to reclaim the carcass and, in doing so, treed the leopard!

By the time we were returning to the area of action, the leopard was still in the tree and the pack had finished off their kill. Turning a corner to get visual of the dogs a small herd of impala proned past us but the dogs weren't chasing them. It was then that we spotted a blue wildebeest with a young calf in very close proximity

to the pack. I knew that if the dogs continued north they would see the calf and that another kill would be on the cards!

My thought became a reality and the dogs spotted the calf! The excitement of witnessing the pack in action was right in front of us, but it was also tough to now see the brutality of nature as a vulnerable two-month-old wildebeest calf was about to fall prey to a pack of thirteen dogs!

The blue wildebeest bull tried to defend the calf for a few minutes but soon realised that he was out numbered! The dogs separated the calf from the bull, and started pulling and ripping it apart from the head and front legs. Throughout all of this, the calf was bleating in agony and trying to get away but struggled and was eventually pinned to the ground with the whole pack feeding on it from the hind legs and rump area.

This again was one of those sightings that I've always wanted to see but was extremely sensitive and not a sight for everyone! The dogs managed to finish off the wildebeest calf even though there were a few hyenas circling the area.



The red-billed hornbill (*Tockus erythrorhynchus*)

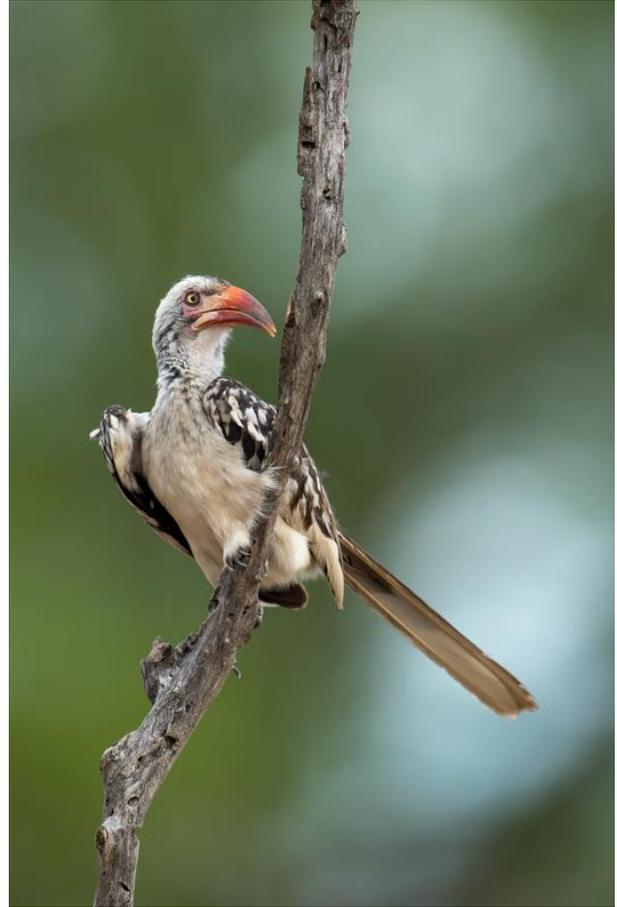
Article by Sipho Sibuyi

On many of our game drives we have spotted these hornbills on top of termite mounds, feeding on termites early in the morning. They feed mainly on insects, seeds and fruits, and rarely on small reptiles and mammals. We have seen one kill and consume a chameleon.

Red-billed hornbills are common residents here. They are monogamous and only have one mate for life. They nest differently from other birds – they choose a natural cavity in a tree and the female goes inside it. She then seals the opening leaving only a small hole for the male to feed her through. He passes food to her while she is safely inside the sealed cavity incubating her eggs.

Recently my tracker spotted this bird and we were able to photograph it. After few minutes we saw him fly to a dead tree close by, and my tracker spotted a nest. We zoomed in on the nest with binoculars and watched him fly back and forth feeding the female inside. It was early in the morning and he was feeding her termites. Termites are most active early in the day.

We have observed that they tend to nest close to termite mounds so that they have a constant supply of food nearby.



It was an amazing sighting to observe with our guests and it was the highlight of our game drive.

Gentle giants

Article by Joffers McCormick

We have been fortunate enough this year to receive sufficient rainfall over the wet season and, due to this, the bush has become a place of new life with the most incredible vibrant colours at every angle. The open clearings have become lush grasslands and the thickets have been blanketed by the greenery. One aspect that has really stood out over the last few weeks has been the influx of elephants into the area. We have been extremely privileged to see the large herds returning here.

Over the last few years we have not received much rainfall and the area is still recovering from one of the worst droughts experienced in the Sabi Sand region during the years of 2016 and 2017. That resulted in the large herds breaking up into smaller satellite herds. The herds did not have much option other than to be led by their leaders, the matriarchs, to better food and water sources. As a result of this we were not seeing such large herds and the biggest herds on average were of about 10 to 15 individuals.

Now that we have got the lush vegetation back, we are seeing herds of 50+ elephants! This is honestly one of the most incredible aspects to witness in the bush as they really are gentle giants. From the newborn calves running through the grasslands to the older stronger individuals pushing down large marula trees to allow for the entire family to have a feast, it really does produce some spectacular sightings for us and our guests.

One of the most fascinating aspects of these large herds is that they can actually be tough to find as they do not make a lot of noise as they walk through the bush - they are the “silent walkers”. Once they start feeding this all changes and they can be heard from quite some distance when one breaks a few branches for feeding or when you hear the crack of tusks as two bulls have a sparring session.

These gentle giants really are one of the most spectacular aspects of the bush. Without them there would be an overgrowth of vegetation, but if there were too many of them they would destroy multiple food sources for other species that roam the area. It is really great to see the bush balancing itself out once again over the years and completing the circle of life.



Photograph by Joffers McCormick