

Singita



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

Temperature

Average minimum: 20.2°C (68.36°F)

Average maximum: 33.1°C (91.58°F)

Minimum recorded: 17°C (62.6°F)

Maximum recorded: 41°C (105.8°F)

Rainfall Recorded

For the month: 41mm

For the season to date: 546.7mm

Sunrise & Sunset

Sunrise: 05:57

Sunset: 18:11

The final short rains are beginning to ease and there is a change in the air. From hot, humid mornings come crisp chills in the air, warmed ever so slightly by the glorious rays of sunlight. Winter is on its way and we are beginning to feel it as it unfolds. The vivid colours of green have gradually started to lose their saturation and the abundance of water is beginning to diminish. This is an incredible time of the year, one of great change however, still plentiful in new life. Young impala, zebra and wildebeest have found their footing and continue learning life's great path, whilst the smaller spotted cats are beginning to make their way out of their den to explore the world around them. It has been a month of change for all of us, one in which we are able to change like the season and yet gain a deeper understanding and connectivity to nature.

Here's a Sightings Snapshot for March:

Lions

- Lions have been a highlight for us this month, with a number of prides present at the same time during the middle of the month. The Mhangeni Pride, Styx Pride, Othawa Pride and Matimba male lion have been on our property in different areas. We have also had the Nkuhuma Pride make a few appearances north of the river.
- The Mhangeni Pride were sighted in the south on a blue wildebeest kill. This was quite a sight as it brought many different scavengers, more than we would normally see. This included both black-backed and side-striped jackals, spotted hyenas and a number of vulture species: white-headed vultures, white-backed vultures and hooded vultures.
- The Othawa Pride prefer the northern part of the property, however during this month we tracked them to the central parts where they were seen hunting impala.
- With only four females and one sub-adult male now making up the Styx Pride, these lions are still a formidable force. The pride killed a female kudu which drew the attention of a local clan of hyenas resulting in an intense standoff between both species.
- The sound of a male lion roaring at dusk is an intense and dramatic audio to hear. We watched the Matimba male lion vocalising hoping to get a response from the Othawa Pride.

Elephants

- Herds of nearly 40 elephants have been wandering through the property, collecting the last of the marula fruit and gardening the green landscape. Apple leaf and silver cluster leaf branches litter the roads – traces of these huge land mammals feeding along the roads.
- There have been many young elephants within these large herds. Full of playful energy, we watch as they learn how to use their trunk as a tool, copying mom as she tugs at grass stems and bites off the roots.

Wild dogs

- Wild dogs can often be one of the rarer animals to find, however recently we have been lucky to view two different packs who are constantly moving in, out and around the property. Quite often keeping to the central parts of Singita.

Leopards

- The mysterious and shy Hukumuri young female leopard was seen north of the Sand River relaxing on a fallen knobthorn tree. This leopard isn't seen often due to her young age and shy temperament. Her mother – the Hukumuri Female leopard was only seen once this month and we believe she's nursing some small cubs somewhere in the Hukumuri drainage – a km or so north of the Sand River.
- The Schotia female leopard has been the highlight this month, treating us to viewing her two young cubs. She is now taking them out of the den to feed on the kills she makes.
- An exciting time as the Khokhovela female has been mating with the Nyeleti male leopard. This pair have been seen in action within the rocks of the Sand River and alongside the river banks directly in front of Boulders Lodge.
- The Tavangumi male leopard has been seen less and less as he branches out of his mother's territory. Gaining independence, he has some local competition with his father (Nyeleti) the local dominant male, as well as the Thamba male – a strong young male originating from the north.
- Hosana male leopard looks to be expanding his territory further, as he's been seen numerous over a very large area north of the Sand River.

Cheetah

- One of our guides was lucky to witness a female cheetah kill an impala in front of Castleton Lodge.
- We have been treated to a number of cheetah sightings over the past month with at least three different individuals identified.

Bird List

The bird list for March includes 13 new bird species, bringing our yearly total to 245. Special bird species include: black-headed heron, mocking cliff chat, red-collared widowbird and buffy pipit.

Reptile of the sunny season

Article by Marc Bowes-Taylor

Summer sure is the season of abundance. It is quite remarkable what rain and an extra hour or two of sunlight can do. Trees boast their best green leaves while flowers show their true colours in competition for the pollinator's attention.

One of these sun-loving creatures is the rock monitor (*Varanus albigularis*). The warmth of the sun's rays super-charge this reptilian into a formidable predator of the grasslands. Using its excellent sense of smell, the rock monitor gathers scent particles using its forked tongue which is then analysed by the Jacobson's organ in the roof of the mouth. Their diet is varied from insects, eggs, birds and even small mammals.



On one hot February morning while watching birds in a marula tree above us, we heard a distinctive crunching sound. Golden, our tracker, then noticed a rock monitor lizard at the base of a termite mound feeding on a giant land snail. The snail, just like the lizard, is usually seen during the wetter summer months in southern Africa. On this occasion it would be this snail's last summer. The lizard measuring roughly four foot in length made light work of the gastropod.

What fascinated us even more is that the lizard ate every part of the snail, including its hard shell. This is known as durophagy. For this rock monitor the shell has valuable minerals such as calcium, if this was a female rock monitor this would aid in egg production ensuring the eggs develop properly and are thick enough to protect the developing embryo. We watched in awe as the lizard ensured it did not leave anything to waste and eventually settled up to soak up the sun and digest its meal.



It was a beautiful morning, the sun was shining, birds were singing, it was like a paradise, everywhere we looked it was alive and all seemed at peace.

It was one of those panoramic game drives, along the river, getting to high vantage points to enjoy the landscape and talking about why certain animals prefer certain areas to others when a very large herd of buffaloes happened upon us.

They were spread out all over the place, old, young, bulls, cows – all were there. Many different bird species were following these animals as they moved along towards a watering hole for a drink. It was a magnificent atmosphere for all the creatures just to interact together and benefit from one another's presence.

Scanning the animals through a set of binoculars, one animal stood out immediately, she appeared to be restless, moving around and lying down for short periods of time and vocalizing constantly. I thought maybe she was having trouble dealing with flies until I saw a pair of tiny hooves sticking out of her behind! I then realized with excitement that we were about to witness a rare sighting of a buffalo giving birth. The buzz of excitement ran through everyone in the vehicle.

All the other buffaloes were milling around and seemed unfazed about it. She lay down one more time and that was it, she could not get up, you could almost see the pain in her horned face which under normal circumstances would give no indication of what was going on.

She started pushing hard and we mindfully cheered her on. After about five minutes the baby buffalo just popped out! The mom was up in a flash and started cleaning her new calf with her tongue, at the same time that it was already surging to get up, which happened after a few falls.

As soon as the baby was up, mom just turned and walked off and the calf had to wobble along to try and keep up. A thought came to mind, who was the dad and where was he? As I looked around I saw all the males were busy chasing the females for yet another baby to be born with no father to look up to. I was grateful to be human at that moment.



Take a breath, and then another.

Imagine looking up and seeing a dark blanket sky with a hint of wispy smoky clouds lying on the horizon. Let your eyes adjust to the twilight. Twinkling stars start to emerge. I focus my eyes on a bright star and as I do so, many fainter stars appear around it. A thought comes to mind – we live in such a fast-paced world, it can be so easy to overlook the small things, but these details can sometimes be life changing influences and stir something deep inside us.

Sitting in the game viewer, we're parked on a crossing in the Sand River. I can hear the steady flow of water as it travels past the vehicle tyres, navigating the rocks on our left and continuing towards the front of Ebony Lodge. Vocalisations from water thick-knees, crickets and nightjars break through the continual whooshing sounds, adding a different beat to the nocturnal orchestra. The shadowy dark silhouettes around us make the world look two-dimensional.



As the light fades further, another light appears. Drifting past us, as if gliding along its own air current, a firefly blinks its luminous neon glow. Taking us back to a three-dimensional world, we see more and more of these marvellous beetles light up the river in front of us. With the reflection of the stars waving in the water below us and the fireflies dancing around the banks, we truly are completely compelled and absorbed by this mystical scene around us.

Watching this mass silent communication, we tried to capture the scene through the lens of a camera. The picture above shows the static stars and with the long exposure, the blinking green fluorescent light of the fireflies as they move through the air. Each species has a specific pattern or rhythm in which they flash. The light is produced through a chemical reaction known as bioluminescence or 'cold light'. This is when oxygen combines with the chemical luciferin and the enzyme luciferase, with the presence of ATP (adenosine triphosphate) and light is produced. The fireflies are able to control the pattern of light by adding oxygen, thus when the supply of O₂ is halted, the light goes out. A layer of reflective uric acid crystals in the abdomen help to amplify the illumination, making them even more impressive as they scout the lowland for mates.

Although a mesmerising and spectacular scene to behold, not everything is always as it seems. Each firefly has a unique flash pattern used to identify other members of the same species and to attract mates. In some species the females use this unique pattern to their advantage and mimic the signals of other species, attracting curious males for a midnight feast.

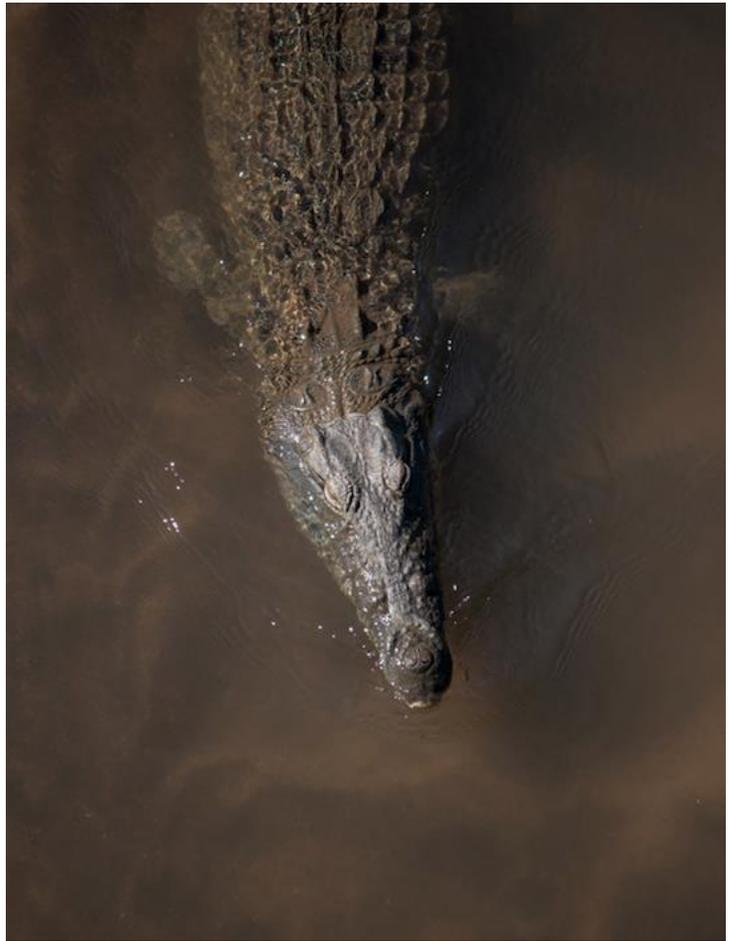
Watching the active fireflies zooming around us is such a contrast to the star constellations sparking motionless above us. Taurus the bull shines to the west, the head 'V' shape conspicuous in the sky. The brightest star within this constellation is a red giant called Aldebaran. When you look at this star, the light you see was actually produced 65 years ago and it has taken all of that period to reach us. Time is a representation of change and something we cannot pause. The Earth will keep rotating and the stars will keep on shining.

I challenge you, through this tricky time with the Coronavirus devastating the world, to look at how you spend your time. Time is something we all have, how we spend it is where it counts.

Ruel and I have been a guide and tracker team for well over a year now. In this time Ruel has become an incredibly close friend of mine and has taught me a number of things, from bush knowledge and craft, to his history and ways in which his culture intertwines with the environment, life lessons and everything you can imagine in between.

In learning about Ruel's culture, one thing which has always stood out for me was the earthly connectivity between ancestors and mortal men which, to this day, is still in practice. In the Shangaan culture, a family will often visit a marula tree with an offering to be able to speak to the ancestors and ask them in return for guidance and protection.

Now for Ruel and I, this has become quite a tradition of our own and often at the end of our afternoon sundowners, if there is a small amount of wine left in a bottle which guests have not finished, we will take what is remaining, pour it at the base of a large tree nearby (preferably a marula) and give this as an offering and sign of gratitude to the ancestors who have provided us with yet another amazing day in the bush together.



However, a few weeks ago we came across something which entered another level of association with the ancestors. Ruel and I crossed the Sand River to work on the northern side of the property and happened upon a deceased crocodile lying a few metres off the road. As guides and trackers spending our daily lives in the wilderness, we have become almost accustomed to the circle of life and have learned to deeply understand that death is a natural part of our existence, but for Ruel, this was no ordinary animal.

The Shangaan people have a profound connection to animals and many have the name of an animal as their surname, which in Ruel's case is 'Ngwenya' meaning 'crocodile'. Therefore, to Ruel the crocodile is greatly important to his family heritage and thus what sparked his attention when we came across the lifeless 'Ngwenya'.

In this moment I stopped the vehicle, Ruel and I climbed off and he asked me, "When you go to a funeral, what do you usually give as an offering?" to which I replied, "Flowers?" He agreed and suggested I pick some flowers whilst he versed the guests and I on what they do in his culture as an offering. He explained that they would usually place a coin on the burial site, however in our present situation we didn't have one and so Ruel grabbed his machete and cut a single button off his shirt.

With the red-star zinnia flowers which I had picked, along with the single button which Ruel was grasping, we

walked to a point a few metres away from the crocodile and placed them on the ground as an offering of respect to the ancestors of the great Ngwenya. This for me was such a humbling and uniting moment to share with both Ruel and the guests. It was incomparable with anything I have ever experienced throughout my lifetime and it was an event shared with Ruel which I will always cherish.

Fast forward to a number of days later, where Ruel and I were guiding a family down at Castleton Camp. One morning Ruel and I were discussing what our plans were for the morning and what we should be looking for when he began to describe a dream he had during the night. He said, "In my dream, we found a male cheetah, he had a full belly and was laying on top of a termite mound. The place was not familiar but the dream came through so strongly that I believe we should go in search of a cheetah this morning." With that in mind we headed out into the southern portion of the property where there is a magnificent open expanse, the ideal habitat for a cheetah.

It was a truly beautiful morning, with a slight crisp to the air and yet a comforting warmth from the sun. The birds were in full song and the scent of nature was awakened by the sun on the damp earth. It was one of those mornings where you can take a deep breath in silence and be truly grateful to be alive in that moment. We arrived at an area around 40K pan, a large waterhole in the south eastern part of the property where a large number of zebra had gathered together to bask in the morning sunlight.

As I stopped to look at the zebra, Ruel looked at me as though he had a thought in mind and with that, he climbed off the vehicle and asked me for the hand held radio. I asked, "What are you doing Ruel, where are you going?" to which he replied, "While you watch the zebra, I'm going to have a look around south of here for any track or sign of the cheetah." Now I always trust in Ruel's plans and ideas but for me this was seemingly a bit ridiculous, to say the least. Finding a cheetah with no indication was like going off in search of a very small needle in a very large haystack, however I agreed and let Ruel follow his instincts.

About ten minutes passed by, then fifteen, we continued to watch as the zebra danced in the morning light, chasing each other and jumping around. A little black-backed jackal even moved onto the scene and became the centre of attention for a few moments until I heard my radio. "Chene come in." I heard Ruel's voice say, "Go ahead Ruel." I replied with anticipation. "I have some tracks for a male cheetah moving in a south westerly direction but they might be old, I'm still going to follow up." This baffled me. How in the world did Ruel even find a track for a cheetah in this haystack! I informed the guests that Ruel had found some tracks and even they were astounded by this discovery.

Not another five minutes had passed when I heard my radio again. "Chene, I have located the animal." He had to be joking right? But he wasn't! I turned to let the guests know that Ruel had found the cheetah and the entire vehicle and I screamed with excitement! We quickly made our way around to where Ruel was waiting for us to guide me into the position. The smiles on both our faces stretched from ear to ear. There is honestly no better gratification than to see the happiness in your partner's face after finding something in such a way!

There he lay in the golden light, a male cheetah on a mound with a very full belly. We spent a long time with the cheetah and watched as he finally got up and moved off through the long grass. It was a marvellous sighting with an utterly gracious animal who so elegantly emanates his power and frame.

Decisively we left the male cheetah to continue in his ways and made our way towards a prominent Marula tree where we often enjoy a break from our game drive to reflect on the moments passed by.



Collectively and with the utmost exuberance, we discussed the morning's adventures over coffee (with Amarula for the guests of course!) and home-made shortbread. Ruel expressed to us that when he got off the vehicle, he couldn't explain the force that was guiding him to look for this cheetah and that whilst looking for footprints he came across a herd of buffalo which threw him off track and that was what ultimately lead him to finding the cheetah tracks, followed by the cheetah.

For me, this truly magical experience connected both nature and spirituality in an incredibly moving way. It was in that moment, under the marula tree, a place in which Ruel and I had given many offerings to the ancestors at sunset, where we realized that perhaps it was the ancestors of the great, fallen Ngwenya who were responding through divine acts, with respect to us both in the form of the cheetah.