



Leopard's View Newsletter – July 2014

The four months of April to July represent autumn and the first half of winter for us. Season is everything, of course, and much of what happens here is dictated by it. After heavy rains in March it has been dry, with just 10 mm in April (five small showers really) and none since. With no late rains, the bush has become very dry but the water table remains high and there is still water in pools in the dry river bed behind the waterhole, especially where elephants have dug. This relative abundance of surface water is unusual: no-one can remember conditions like this before and it has impacted on the numbers of animals visiting the waterhole & birdpool. Winter brings not just an absence of rain but very low humidities and wonderful temperatures: average daily maximum temperatures were 29.9°C in April down to 27.2°C in July. Nights are cool leading to clear, crisp and fresh mornings: average minimum temperatures fell from 16.7 °C in April down to 10.7 °C in July, with the coldest being 5.5 °C in early July.

Winter also brings the aloes into flower and that in turn brings in the sunbirds, mostly white-bellied sunbird but occasionally the magnificent .scarlet-chested sunbird.

In early April we hosted our first wedding at Leopard's View. Given the size of the lodge it was of necessity a small event with just seven guests, including the bride and groom. However, the weather was fine, the sun shone and then set magnificently during the sunset ceremony held on the west side of the ridge above the lodge, looking out over the escarpment. We processed there and back to the accompaniment of traditional African singers who then put on a fabulous display of singing and dancing while the guests enjoyed champagne and canapés, followed by a South African braaivleis (or barbecue) with the addition of a bush-themed wedding cake.



Aloe in flower



White-bellied sunbird (m)



Scarlet-chested sunbird (m)



Sunset ceremony



Traditional dancers

Wedding 6th April



Wedding dinner

Traditional dancers





Perhaps not as glamorous as a wedding but an exciting event nonetheless was in mid-June when we took two prize-winning guests out on an operation to fit GPS transmitters to rhinos in Balule Nature Reserve. Leaving early in the morning in the open vehicle (very, very cold!) we eventually joined up with the helicopter, veterinary personnel and various Wardens' teams. A hugely successful day saw the fitting of new tracking devices and everyone on board the land cruiser covered in a thick layer of dust after high speed chases after the helicopter. The skill of the helicopter pilot was every



bit as impressive as the experience of being right next to the animals while they were tagged, blood samples taken and transmitters fitted.



Helicopter - vital to conservation



Keeping darted rhino cool



Rhino foot - three toes and tough skin



Turning darted rhino



Guests on the rhino darting operation

During any operation, the rhino has to be turned at intervals so that it does not spend too long with its weight on any one leg. It must also be kept wet to help it stay cool and the eyes are covered to reduce visual input and, therefore, stress and to prevent sunlight damaging the eyes.

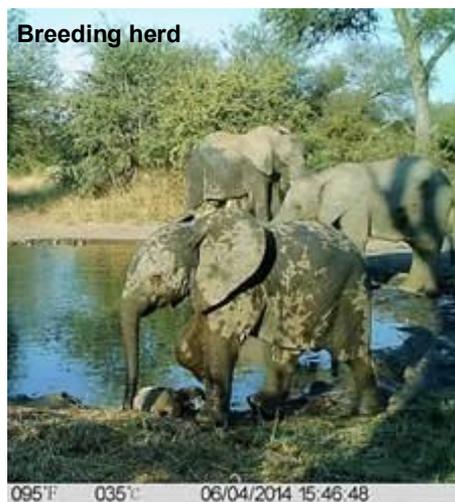
In amongst all this we have of course been observing the wildlife around us. The waterhole remains a constant source of interest, along with the birdpool and the lodge gardens. It is difficult to quantify visits to the waterhole and the lodge area but the table below gives some idea:

Species	% of recorded appearances
Impala	34%
Warthog	11%
Duiker	10%
Elephant	9%
Giraffe	9%
Kudu	8%
Zebra	6%
Carnivore	6%
Waterbuck	5%
Buffalo	3%

As can be seen, impala were the most frequent animal species and were recorded on 82% of days. Warthog and duiker are regular visitors as well, duiker being one of the most common nocturnal drinkers at the waterhole.



We had elephant around the lodge on 26 occasions, mostly bulls ranging from ones and twos up to groups of 8 plus. Breeding herds came through five times but whereas the bulls often come right up to the lodge the breeding groups tend to keep further away. The bulls have been quite destructive towards our trees and several knobthorns and marulas have been destroyed. A member of one group of bulls even had the cheek to push over the red-bushwillow tree to which our birdpool camera is attached: one picture was normal, next one all the elephants appeared to be standing on their heads. The next day we restored the tree to a vertical position but had to cut its top off to reduce the weight: we hope that it will still produce leaves when the rains come. We are slowly putting wire mesh around our tall trees but it is a slow job that has to be fitted in amongst everything else (and for several weeks Hoedspruit had run out of all forms of wire netting as a result of the national metal workers strike!)



The presence of the mesh helps deter the elephants from pushing the trees over and certainly stops them from ring-

barking the trees.

A selection of pictures below shows some of the other animals and birds that we have seen. Regular mammalian visitors to the waterhole include giraffe, zebra, waterbuck, kudu, buffalo and amongst the

birds, yellow-billed stork, black stork, spoonbill (including a group of four on one occasion), grey heron and, most often of all, Egyptian geese.





We have also had our fair share of carnivore sightings, with lions recorded seven times and leopard six: civet made three appearances. Our smallest carnivore is the dwarf mongoose and the lodge seems to be central to the territory of one group. They often overnight or rest during the day in a fallen tree trunk near the birdpool and regularly forage in the lodge gardens, around the huts, alongside the splashpool and even in the outdoor showers. Leopard's View sponsors a dwarf mongoose research project on a small reserve about 12 km away as the crow flies, about 25 km by road. Researchers are studying all aspects of dwarf mongoose activity but especially their calls and their sentry behaviour. Another lodge local is a scrub hare: it often rests by our tool shed and brick pile during the day, giving us a fright as it takes off in flight when we go round there. At night, though, it is in the lodge gardens as soon as it starts to get dark, eating our green grass.



Our two solar geysers are both up and running and after the damage caused in March are now both protected from baboons by wood and wire cages: it is very satisfying having a shower with free hot water!

Finally, best wishes to all our newsletter readers.....



Neil & Ann

