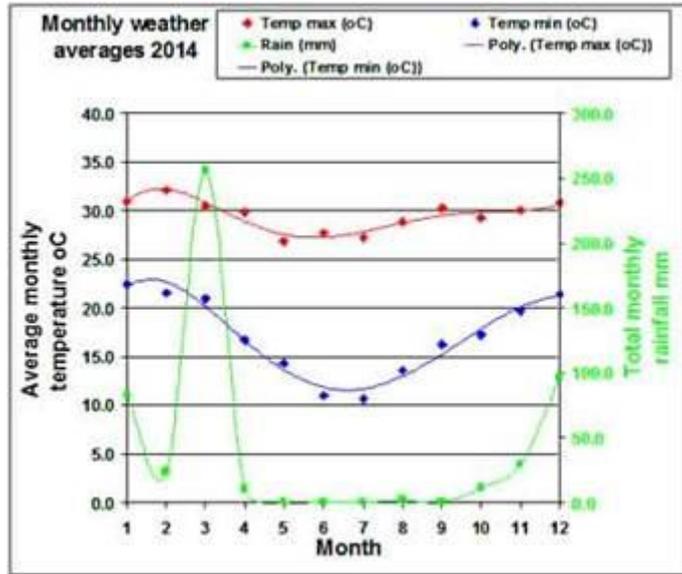




Leopard's View Newsletter – March 2015

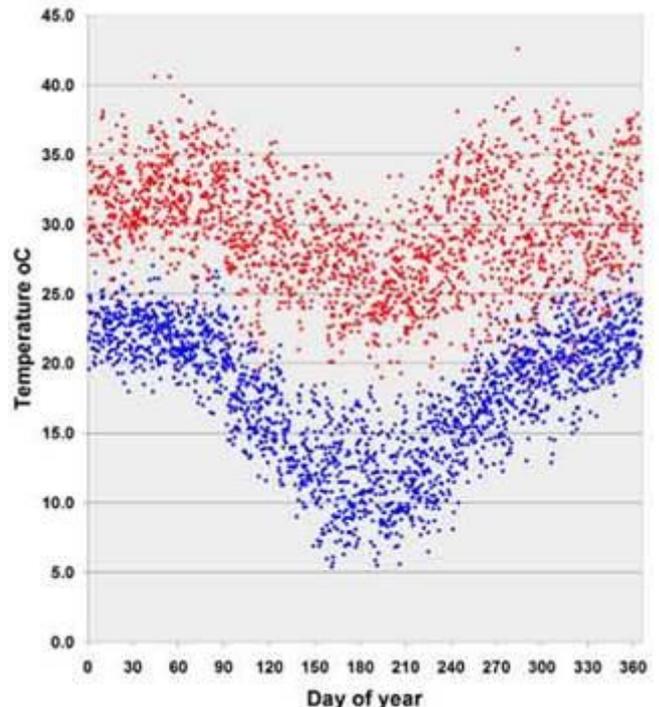
This newsletter covers the period from December 2014 to March 2015, so sees the end of 2014: as usual, therefore, the weather data summary for the year is below. It was a year of contrast with a wet end to the 2013-14 summer and an extremely dry start to the 2014-15 summer.



The new year saw no change in rainfall fortunes and in addition January and February were very hot: the average daily maximum for February was 34.4°C, the 2nd hottest month in 6 and half years here. We are now in a serious drought, with only 200 mm of rain by the end of March: the average over the last 30 years to end of March is 390 mm and the annual average is 450 mm. Strangely, the bush looks good despite this: the grass is green (just enough small falls to keep it going) but there isn't much growth (we haven't had to cut the firebreak areas like we normally do.) The trees are green owing to a high water table after 6 wet years but our rivers have not flowed and the dams have not filled so we have a long, hard winter ahead.

For fun, we have put 6 years of data (2009-2014) together into a single graph of daily maximum and minimum temperatures: it makes for a spectacular illustration of annual weather patterns and clearly shows that the fluctuations in daily minimum temperature are really what defines season.

Temperatures 2009-14 combined



Game sightings have generally been good, although we have had some leaner periods as animals have moved in response to localised heavy thunderstorms, and our list at the lodge for December to March has been as follows: baboon, buffalo, bushbaby (lesser), cheetah, civet, duiker, elephant, giraffe, honey badger, impala, jackal (black-backed), kudu, leopard, lion, mongoose (dwarf), rhino (black), rhino (white), scrub hare, steenbok, tree squirrel, vervet monkey, warthog, waterbuck, wildebeest, zebra: 25 species in total.

Cheetah by our house, 24.01.2015



On the 24th January we had one of our best sightings in over 6 years at the lodge. At around 5.00 p.m. we heard alarm calls from a herd of

Cheetah by our house, 24.01.2015





Lion cubs - 2 of 6 with three females

impala by our house, looked outside (curtains closed because of the heat!) and there was a cheetah at our house birdpool, where it drank for 10-15 minutes before lying down in the shade some 25m from the birdpool and right in front of our stoep. We were able to watch it from our house for another half-hour before it finally moved off.

In the first three weeks of December a male lion and variously one to three lionesses spent a great deal of time in the vicinity of the lodge. The male and at least one of the females were mating over 2 or 3 days. We also had a wonderful sighting in mid-February of 3 lionesses and 6



Lioness at the waterhole 06.12.2014

075°F 024°C 12/06/2014 00:15:41



Lion 26.03.2015

small cubs from another sub-group of a local prides and a month later came across the same 6 cubs with one of the females a few hundred metres from our waterhole. Leopards were recorded on our camera traps on a couple of occasions and on one drive with guests in March we had a wonderful



Leopard male, 26.03.2015

sighting of a big male close to the Olifants River.

It has been an amazing time for elephant sightings with elephant at the lodge on over 50 days during the 4 months, mostly bulls on their own or in small groups of 2 to 5 but with a couple of small breeding herds as well. Not all elephant visits have been entirely welcomed: in mid-February, for example, while having a poitjie (stew cooked over the fire in a cast iron pot for several hours) on the new bush braai and patio area close to our house we are forced to seek emergency refuge in the house when an elephant wandered close by in the dark. Just 3 days earlier we were woken up in the early hours of the morning by a one-tusked elephant that appeared to be in musth and had to chase him off as he tried to break a large branch off the marula tree by the solar geyser at our house and later when he tried to push over a big marula about 50 m away. Indeed in January we did a tree damage census counting only large trees pushed down or seriously damaged in the previous 12 months



Bull elephant at the birdpool

096°F 036°C 03.15.2015 17:33:58

and visible from our tracks, house and the lodge: the total was 69 trees, most of which were

dead or dying as a result, and there have been three more since then. About half were knobthorns and a quarter marulas: knobthorns are replacing themselves but marula there are no young marulas in the bush (which is why we are trying to put wire netting around the trunks of many of the larger trees - the wire acts as a partial deterrent.)



Elephants at the waterhole

Lil Acorn 113°F 045°C 02/19/2015 14:53:27



02/10/2015 20:10:50

We have recorded civet on our camera traps more frequently than previously. Buffalo herds have visited the waterhole on several occasions and for some reason (the drought?) zebras utilised the waterhole on a very regular basis during February and March. There have been many young animals about, including several small giraffes, a kudu family with two small calves and a waterbuck family with three females, each with a small calf that sticks to its mother like glue, and one male with a broken horn. We have even had a couple of visits from a lone wildebeest (our population is low but there has been a recent introduction of a large number into the Reserve so hopefully we will see more as time goes by.) Impala are,



02/09/2015 18:50:20



Giraffe at the waterhole

03/07/2015 10:23:47

of course, ever present and herds of 50 - 100 regularly visit the waterhole or birdpool (often resulting in hundreds if pictures of the same impalas milling around

for a few hours!)

Three new species joined our list of birds seen around the lodge (now standing at 146), grey-headed kingfisher, Temmink's courser and



Zebras



Kudus at the waterhole

01/25/2015 15:16:48



Impala reflections at the waterhole

white-faced duck, a small group of which occupied the waterhole on and off for 4 weeks from mid-December to mid-January. A trio of blacksmith lapwings has been active at the waterhole for the last two months or so, almost always there and almost always making a noise. At the

end of January a black-backed puffback chick fell out of its nest in the trees in front of Giraffe hut: the parents fed it on the ground over the next 2-3 days and we began to think it would survive but it was then caught by a boomslang in spite of the parents mobbing it.

Pied kingfisher



Shikra



Grey-headed kingfisher

Little bee-eater



Wattled lapwing

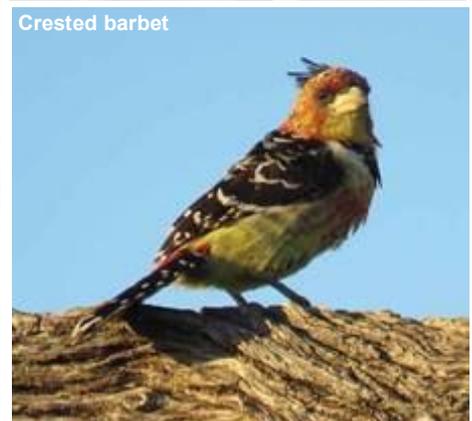


White-faced duck

White-crested helmet-shrike



Black-backed puffback nestling on the rocks outside Giraffe Hut



Crested barbet

Bennett's woodpecker (f)



Black-backed puffback (f)

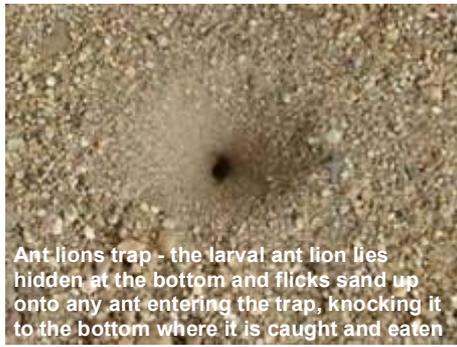


Wahlberg's eagle

Birding during summer is always good owing to the migrant species: a 90 minute bird-focussed drive in January



Adult ant lions



Ant lions trap - the larval ant lion lies hidden at the bottom and flicks sand up onto any ant entering the trap, knocking it to the bottom where it is caught and eaten

produced 23 species, including plum-coloured starling, hoopoe, Wahlberg's eagle, black-capped tchagra, grey-headed bushshrike, red-backed shrike and Marico sunbird.

There is always something new and unexpected happening in the bush. In January a new (to us) flying insect swarmed over a week or so on the Bulbina plants in the lodge garden: it turned out to be the adults of the ant lion: we see signs of the larvae all the time as they create perfectly conical holes in the ground in which they trap and

catch ants (hence the name.) In late January we noticed a few dead fish in the waterhole and by mid-February counted some 25 floating dead on the surface: apart from being surprised that there were fish in there at all we wondered what had caused the die off. The fish were red-breasted tilapia (or red-breasted kurper), Coptodon rendalia, and



Dwarf mongoose



Red-breasted tilapia from the waterhole



Braai, fire and patio area by our house

the die off was almost certainly the result of de-oxygenation in the high temperatures of January-February. How the fish got there we do not know - perhaps eggs or a female carrying eggs were/was brought in by a heron or other water bird.



New paths around Giraffe Hut

There is also always a maintenance or improvement job that needs doing. In December-January we built a braai patio with a fire pit by our house and then dug up the horrible painted concrete path outside Giraffe Hut and replaced it with a properly laid paving-brick path. The electric cooker in the lodge kitchen came to a combustive end in December and in view of the increased regularity of "load shedding" (scheduled power cuts resulting from insufficient power generation by Eskom, the state power company) replaced it with a large gas cooker - quicker and independent of electrical supply. Once installed we had to build a cover to hide the gas cylinders. In mid-March a new borehole pump motor and starter were required.



Waterbuck female and calf at the house birdpool



Leopard tortoise drinking at the birdpool



Neil & Ann