



Leopard's View Newsletter – November 2016

Waterhole full after heavy rain



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Matsile Gabedi River flowing after rain, 11 November



Elephant damage by office – 2nd September



Elephant damage by staff quarters – 2nd September



Elephant damage by the bar area – 2nd September

In keeping with the last two years, the 4 months of August to November 2016 were once again all about two things: rain and elephants. Rain was the good news; elephants were, at least at times, significantly bad news.

The 2016-20217 rainy season saw a typical, normal-year start – a few storms here and there with big rains arriving in November. The normally dry river behind the waterhole flowed strongly on the 11th November and the waterhole was full to overflowing. By the end of the month we had had 134 mm (and at the time of writing this, mid-January, we have had 257 mm, equal to the total for 2014-15 and not far below that for 2015-16, with three months of rain to come - hopefully!) The bush returned to a lush green state that we have not seen since summer 2013-14.

The elephant story was less happy! On the one hand it is always good to see elephants but they have been very destructive during the drought. We had a major incursion at the lodge in the early hours of

the 2nd September after having been up half the night chasing elephants away. Five bulls (known locally as “The Gang of Five”) wrecked the

lodge fences in six places, even knocking down a brick wall! By the end of November there was sufficient food out in the bush but back at the start of September there was little and this group have been responsible for invading many lodges and camps. Ironically we had just finished upgrading the electric fence the previous day: however, if an elephant wants to come in then nothing will stop him. As luck would have it we were due to leave for a holiday that day but mercifully Pumori Projects in Hoedspruit rescued us, taking on the repair work at immediate notice to enable us to go as planned.

A look at our sightings record for the four months shows some interesting things, as illustrated in the graph below. The grazing herbivores, buffalo, zebra and waterbuck, largely disappeared: many of them moved east in search of better grazing (our grass was supply was virtually zero by the end of August.) In contrast, animals that eat leaves (browsers and mixed feeders) stayed put

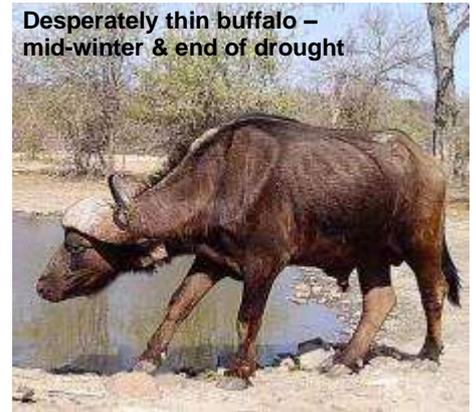
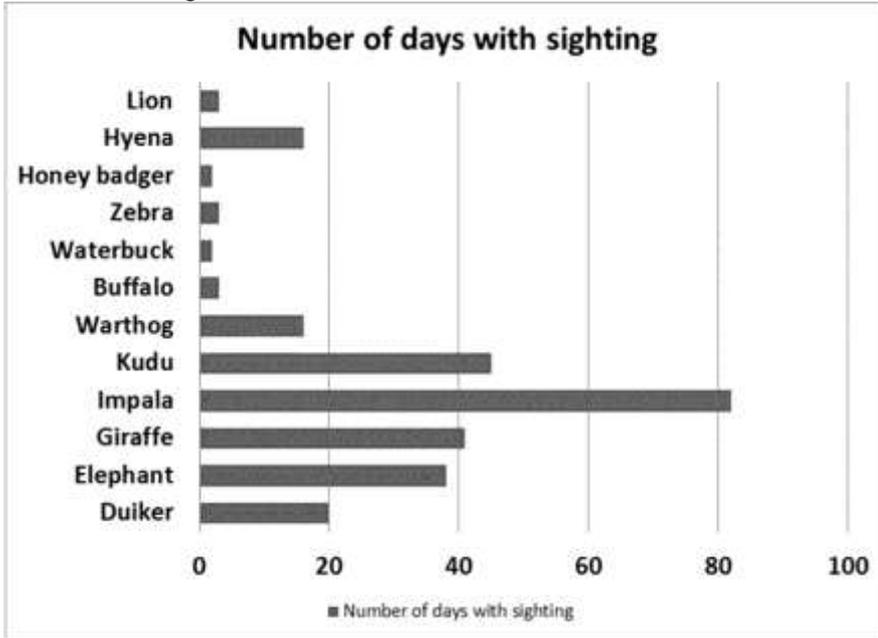


Elephant damage by Duiker hut – 2nd September



Elephant damage other side of Duiker hut – 2nd September

and we continued to see them on a regular basis, namely impala, kudu, giraffe, elephant, duiker and even warthog.



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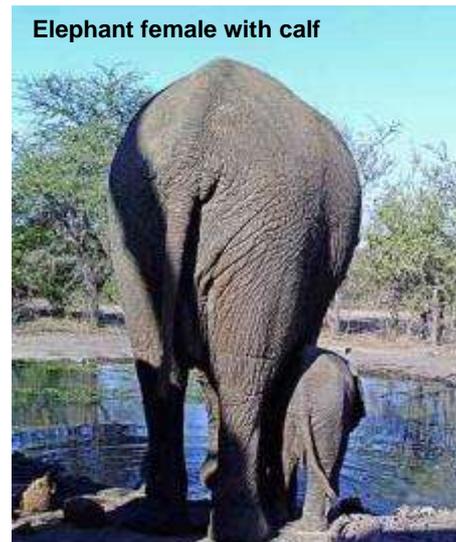


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As the graph indicates, we had at least one elephant visit on 38 days. Mostly it was bulls in ones and twos, sometimes in groups of up to eight, with just the odd visit by small breeding groups of females and young.



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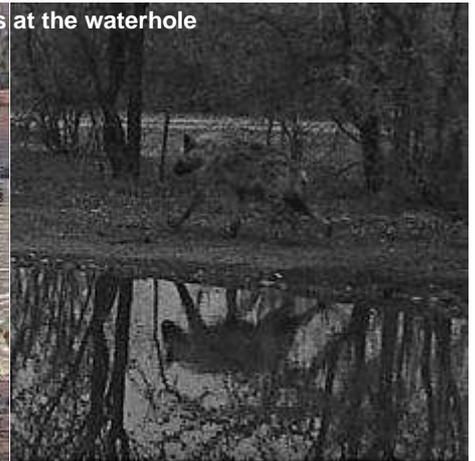
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The sightings graph above shows that we had a significant amount of hyena activity, both visual sightings and camera trap records. We also heard them calling on an almost nightly basis at times.



Spotted hyenas at the waterhole

09/30/2016 06:57:33



10/02/2016



One of our local pride males

09/28/2016 02:29



Honey badger

09/08/2016 10

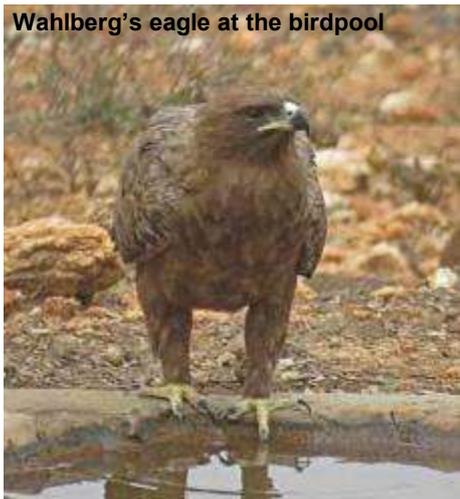


Dwarf mongooses – our smallest carnivore



Track of male lion – about 18 cm across

Summer is a good time for birds: the migrant visitors start to arrive from August onwards. The Wahlberg's eagle pair that was adversely affected by the hail storm in November 2015 returned but had not started nesting by the end of November. There are only some 50-100 pairs of saddle-billed storks in South Africa so it was a rare treat to have a pair at the waterhole at the end of August. It is only the second or third time we have recorded this species at the lodge. A pair of African hawk eagles nests in the area each year and have visited the waterhole on several occasions. The aloe flowers brought the usual burst of sunbird activity in winter: mainly we see the white-bellied sunbird but occasionally the Marico and the Scarlet-chested species make an appearance.

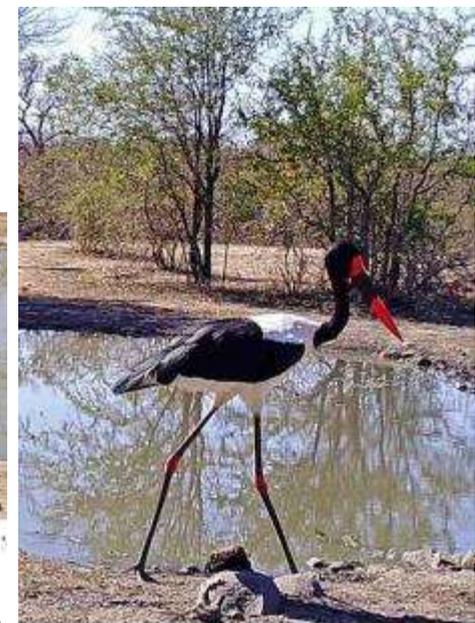


Wahlberg's eagle at the birdpool



African hawk eagle pair at the waterhole

10/22/2016 12:27:51



Saddle-billed stork at the waterhole

08/31/2016 10:09:05

Dark chanting goshawk



Hamerkop



White-bellied sunbird (m)

Not all that we see is wildlife related: in August all five of the planets visible to the naked eye could be seen in the evening sky at the same time. It was fascinating to watch them changing their relative positions during late July, August and September. The photo taken on the 9th August shows from the horizon upwards Venus, Mercury and Jupiter; Mars and Saturn were higher in the sky, above the moon.

Jupiter (top), Mercury (middle) & Venus (bottom) soon after sunset, 9th August. Mars & Venus were visible higher in the sky.



There are also always smaller things to see – leopard tortoises visited the small birdpools regularly during the drought, as did scrub hares; a monitor lizard struggled to find its way out of our garden; the rains brought an eruption of small, red, velvety spiders on the ground and all sorts of spring flowers of a wide variety of shapes and sizes appeared.



Leopard tortoise at one of the birdpools



Scrub hare at the waterhole

11/05/2016



Monitor lizard in the garden



Warthogs at the waterhole



Red spider after rain



Pancratium tenuifolium, an amaryllid flowering bulb



Boophone disticha – Cape poison bulb

We were kept quite busy with a number of maintenance and improvement jobs. We improved the electric fence wiring: the fence is there primarily to keep elephant out of the lodge but like all electric fence arrangements is not guaranteed to do so! Not a glamorous task (but a useful one given the number of trees ripped up by elephants over the last two years), we constructed a new firewood store. We also built a new braai (barbeque) facility on the main concrete deck. It has a large grill area as well as a smaller one that can also serve as a potjie cooking area (potjie is a traditional stew cooked in a cast iron pot over coals for several hours), plus plenty of storage area and work surface. All the grills and the safety covers store underneath. It has made doing a braai for our guests much easier. If we know that guests have an interest in fine wine we



Giraffe & reflection

often organise a wine tasting for them, sometimes sampling the wines of a particular winery, sometimes, for example, comparing the wines of different wineries in varying climatic areas.



Wine tasting – Remhoogte reds

All the best to our readers –

Neil & Ann

10/20/2016 16:51:58



The new braai by the dining area