



# Leopard's View Newsletter – July 2015

The story of the four months of April to July is one of too little and too much: too little rain and too many elephants! April brought another 35 mm of rain to give a summer total of 254 mm (10 inches). The annual average over three decades is 450mm and the average for the previous 6 years is 595 mm. As a result the water table was still very high as we entered winter and, amazingly after the dry summer, there were pools in some of the dry river beds. However, the grass cover rapidly turned brown and disappeared, and the situation was not aided by temperatures that were 1 to 2 degrees warmer both day and night than the averages for the last 6 years. All told, the animals face a long, dry and hard winter.



View towards waterhole - April



Same view –  
end of July



Drinking at the Lodge birdpool



Elephant bull "Soshangane" dusting



Breeding herd at the waterhole

Elephants were recorded around the Lodge on 60 days of the 122 in the four month period, mostly bulls either on their own or in groups of 8 or more.

These bulls have had a massive impact on our vegetation, especially when present in groups. Many large trees have been pushed over, broken in half or ring-barked, including knobthorns, marulas, corkwoods and bluethorn acacias. To some extent elephants have always done this but the scale here was huge and, more unusually, the elephants have uprooted many red bushwillows (*Combretum apiculatum*), tearing them out of the ground to eat the roots. A medium sized bushwillow will have taken perhaps thirty years to grow to that point. Needless to say, we have spent much time moving elephants on when possible, including several times in the early hours of the morning, or cutting up demolished trees. We love to see the elephants but we have not liked their tree-felling activities!



Marula tree toppled in the night across one of our tracks



Clearing operation – half way



Completed

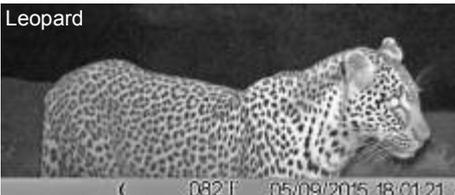


Elephants have been just one of 26 large mammal species we have recorded, including baboon, buffalo, bushbaby, cheetah, civet, duiker, elephant, giraffe, honey badger, impala, black-

backed jackal, kudu, leopard, lion, dwarf mongoose, slender mongoose, scrub hare, steenbok, tree squirrel, vervet monkey, warthog, waterbuck, wildebeest and zebra (plus various bats!)

Our local lion pride has spent many days close to the Lodge and we have recorded them on 15 occasions, ranging from the male on his own to the whole family (male, 3 females, 8 cubs). Even when not seeing them, we have heard the lions many nights, often close enough to disturb human sleep.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> June our waterhole camera trap picked up a passing cheetah – the image is a bit blurred but it is unmistakable. We wonder whether it is the same one that drank at our house birdpool in late January of this year.



These animals are rare (there are only some 250 in the whole of the Greater Kruger Park) so it was good to know that one was about. Sightings have included all the usual range of herbivores. We particularly enjoyed seeing a waterbuck family with three young calves: they were regular visitors during April and May.





Our lodge tally of birds has now risen to 152 seen and positively identified with 5 others heard but not actually seen. Winter birding suffers from not having the summer migrants present but the compensating gain is that the bush is relatively thin and there are fewer leaves on the trees so bird photography can be easier. The various aloe species flower in winter and that brings in transitory visitors such as the scarlet chested sunbird: regulars such as the grey go-away bird also enjoy feeding on the aloe flowers.



Despite the joys of seeing the larger mammals and birds the smaller and more unusual things can often be of special interest. For example, the peculiar little flowers on the candelabra euphorbias always attract a mass of flies, wasps and diurnal moth species as well as butterflies: this year the diversity of butterflies was particularly good. Or a baboon spider, 10 cm across from leg-tip to leg-tip, that we rescued from a bucket with water in it and put out to dry in the sun.



Baboon spider



Butterfly selection from

Euphorbia flowers



Strelitzia in flower

Two plants in our garden finally decided to flower this winter, one of them after steadfastly refusing to do so for the past 6 years. This was the crane flower, one of the Strelitzias. A "red-hot poker" brought back childhood memories as the garden of my (Neil's) youth was full of them.



"Red-hot poker" flower



"Currant resin-tree", possibly *Ozoroa sphaerocarpa*



Plated lizard

A "currant resin-tree" in the lodge garden produced fruits and one could finally understand the "currant" in the common name.



One of the most fascinating things we observed, however, was up in the sky rather than down in the bush. During several weeks in June Jupiter and Venus were wonderfully bright in the western sky soon after sunset. The two planets gradually came closer, eventually moving past each other, with the final crossover movement happening surprisingly quickly over two days at the end of the month. The photograph on the left is a compilation of three pictures taken from the same place and then put together, superimposing the Venus images so that the movement relative to Jupiter is visible. It is just possible to see 2 or 3 of Jupiter's moons in each of the Jupiter images.

