



Leopard's View Newsletter – November 2015

Hail storm 15.11.2015



After the hail storm
16.11.2015



Drought has continued to dominate life in the bush here at Leopard's View. After very low rainfall last summer and, as normal, a bone-dry winter, spring and early summer brought some rain (about 105 mm) but nowhere near enough to begin to make up the deficit. With lengthy gaps between falls of rain and hotter than average temperatures the grass oscillated between green and brown and there was no increase in grass cover. The water table was still high as a result of the above average rainfall from 2008 to 2014 so the trees have had reasonable leaf canopies, even if less dense than previously.

Late in the afternoon of 15 November the area experienced a massive hail storm, with stones 20-30 mm in diameter. There was significant damage to plants and many trees were stripped of the bulk of their leaves: the following morning the ground looked as though it was covered in green grass but sadly it was just the leaves. Our dry river in the valley flowed briefly during the night. Some 30 km away, mango growing areas to the west of Hoedspruit were devastated by the hail, with stones there of tennis ball



size, and many farms suffered the loss of their entire mango crop at a cost of tens of millions of rands. On top of nationwide drought conditions this was something of a cruel blow.



Our animal sightings have been good on the whole although some species seem to have followed localised thunderstorms around the area. We saw almost too many elephants in that our trees took a real hammering. Many large trees, especially knobthorns and marulas, were pushed over and others were ring-barked, including one medium-sized knobthorn just outside our house: it will now die over the next year or so. Large numbers of small to medium red-bushwillows have been pulled up by elephants looking to eat the roots in the drought-induced absence of other nutritious vegetation: even a small bushwillow could be thirty or more years old. Our elephant population has a preponderance of youngish bulls and

they are responsible for far more tree damage than the breeding herds. Some of these bulls figured out that gates represented a weak point in electric fences and took to simply lifting them off their railings or hinges: they caused considerable damage to our lodge gate at the start of



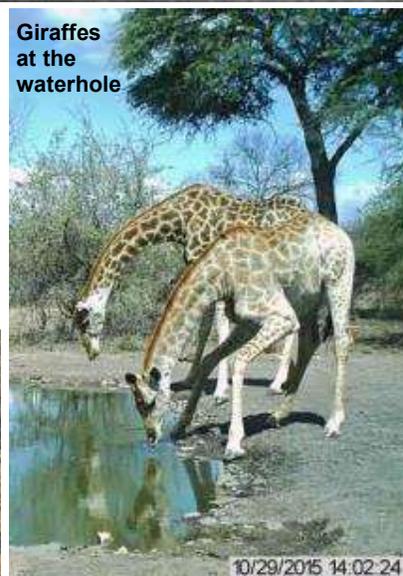
Ring-barked knobthorn

September and it was quite a problem to fix it. We have had to extend the electric fence wiring on the gate itself and also to add two high-level perimeter wires some 5 to 10 metres out from the existing wire on the lodge wall. We also electrified the garden fence at our house as the elephants had taken to eating the plants there by reaching over the top of the 1.8 m (6 feet) fence.

Our local lion pride has been active in the area, especially during the second half of October and November. The pride consists of one male, three adult females and six cubs that are now over a year old. Most of their visits were at night or at dawn and so caught only on the camera traps but our guests at the time saw the pride on a zebra kill just a couple of hundred metres away in November.

We enjoyed a superb leopard sighting in early September with a large male drinking at the waterhole for almost ten minutes: sadly no camera trap pictures – there is something in the way that leopards move that seems to avoid triggering the camera. The same happened with a caracal that spent ten minutes at the waterhole at 9.00 in the evening on 1st October: this was a very rare sighting indeed (we had not seen caracal here for 6 years!) Our birdpool camera trap picked up a cheetah passing by one night in early November.

Overall we have seen or recorded 29 different larger mammal species - the full list is: baboon, buffalo, bushbaby, caracal, cheetah, civet, duiker, elephant, giraffe, honey badger, impala, black-backed jackal, kudu, leopard, lion, banded mongoose, dwarf mongoose, slender mongoose, porcupine, black rhino, white rhino, scrub hare, steenbok, tree squirrel, vervet monkey, warthog, waterbuck, wildebeest and zebra.





Impala herd, late afternoon



Impala fawn and oxpecker

November normally sees the appearance of several summer species or summer events, such as the arrival of the woodland kingfishers or the birth of the impala fawns. The kingfishers arrived on time this year but the impala births were a week or two later than usual and seemed more spread out than we have seen in the past. Once the youngsters join the herds their behaviour is wonderful to watch: they combine exuberance with a high cuteness factor. We hope that there will be enough rain to provide them with food during the rest of the summer.



Zebra family group at the waterhole

Ltl Acorn

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Kudu bulls

11/04/2015 14:55:47



Waterbuck

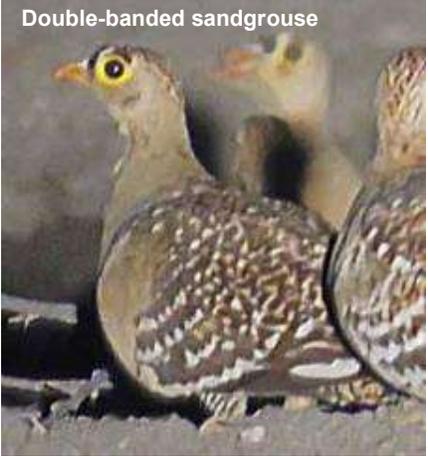
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Although the woodland kingfishers did arrive on time, our other colourful summer migrant, the European roller, had not appeared by the end of November. The Wahlberg's eagle pair that has nested close to the lodge for several years had mated and we think had laid eggs when the hail storm struck in mid-November: it appears that the eggs were destroyed or that the birds were put off breeding in some other way by the hail as there has been no sign of breeding activity since. During the later part of winter and well into spring we encountered flocks of double-banded sandgrouse

at the waterhole each evening at dusk. Having not seen these birds at the lodge previously we assume that their normal source of water had dried up and that our waterhole represented the back up plan.

Life in the bush is constantly bringing some surprise or observation of special interest: it could be a camera trap picture of a predatory bird in flight, a foam-nest frog sitting on the veranda croaking at the prospect of rain or the amazing

flower that appeared in a pot in our outdoor shower.



Double-banded sandgrouse



Wahlberg's eagles - courtship activity



Foam-nest frog



Blood lily (Scadoxus puniceus)



African hawk-eagle at the waterhole

10/05/2015 13:44:48



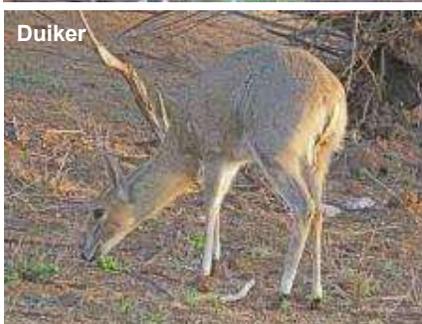
Bennett's woodpecker



Burchell's coucal



White-bellied sunbird



Duiker

2015 has proved to be quite a busy year for us at the lodge. In part this was due to a number of film and TV crews and journalists staying with us to film and cover the story of our reserve's all-female anti-poaching team, the "Black



Leopard's View Game Lodge



Drone taking aerial pictures

Mambas". We have had media people from Japan, Taiwan, Canada, Germany, USA and elsewhere. (We have had other guests from South Africa, UK, Hungary, Switzerland, Spain, Israel, Australia and the

Netherlands.) A couple of the film crews had drones and the Taiwan crew kindly flew their drone to take aerial photos of the lodge for us: the pictures really demonstrate the current dryness of the bush. The "Black Mambas" went on to gain a major conservation award here in South Africa as well as a United Nations "Champions of the Earth" award, which two of the ladies went to New York to collect from the UN General Secretary.



"Baboon's Tail" in flower



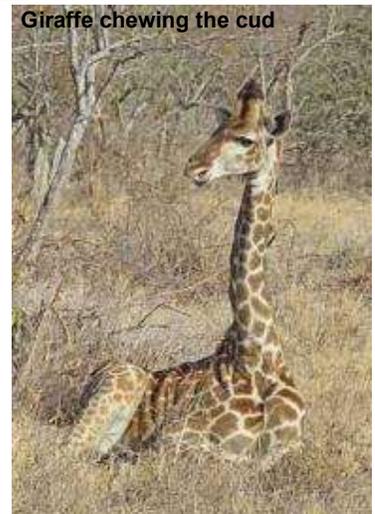
Warthog wallowing in the waterhole – their activities constantly erode the banks

10/28/2015 11:32:47



Passing the waterhole with guests on drive

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Giraffe chewing the cud



Steenbok at the waterhole

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Don't forget to follow us on the Lodge facebook page: "Leopard's View Game Lodge".

Best wishes,

Neil & Ann



Impala herd started at the waterhole