



MESSAGE STICK

August 2010

The World Cup is now over and by all reports it went well. It seems the fans all had a great time and with only a couple of exceptions, did not get in to too much trouble! Now that this is done and dusted we can resume some normality and get back to sending clients to southern Africa as accommodation is once more back to reasonable prices. The game lodges are very full from August to October but we are still able to find space for late bookers. We have had a few of these over the last few weeks. We have even had people call and say that they have booked and paid for their flights and can we now arrange a safari to fit the dates! Always happy to help and we have been able to do so!

Winter is now past halfway and it has been very cold in many places. However rains continued much later than normal and so the animals are still in great condition. If summer arrives early then it will have been a tremendous year for wildlife. The very high water level of the Zambezi River has caused some distress to animals marooned on islands. (See the report from Chiawa below). This was exacerbated by the Kariba dam flood gates being opened, as the dam was full, thus affecting the Lower Zambezi.

We are busy with a very exciting project at the moment. We are hoping to arrange a number of small group safaris next year and in to the future that will be hosted by well known Australian and International sporting personalities. Negotiations are in place for a true Australian sporting icon to host the inaugural safari. More of this later when we are closer to pinning down dates. These safaris will be open first to you, our Destinations Africa friends and then targeted at people interested in the particular sport. We are initially looking at motor racing (Formula 1 and Touring cars), rugby, cricket, tennis, swimming, soccer and athletics. Watch this space!

News from Savanna Private Game Reserve

(With thanks and acknowledgement to Savanna Owners, Paddy Hagelthorne and Neil Whyte)

We have had a warm winter so far, except for a few days when the early mornings went down to about 4° C. For us this was extremely cold and, together with the wind chill factor of the Land Rovers, made it quite uncomfortable unless you were appropriately dressed. These cold crisp mornings have brought with them the most incredible sunrises with vibrant colours that seem to be unrivalled anywhere else. We also had a couple of days of rain which is unusual for this time of year. However, the bush is finally starting to dry out and the animals are being forced to the more permanent waterholes.



The game viewing has been spectacular this month, but we have had a few highs and lows with regard to the animals. Firstly, one of the Ximungwe lion females came out with

another three cubs which we think are the survivors of the hyena attack we mentioned a few months ago, whereby the hyena got one cub but the others obviously survived. Another female has brought out one cub which is slightly smaller than the other three new ones.



In our last newsletter we mentioned the one Mapogo male that had been killed to the east of our property. The remaining Mapogo has now come to the west and has joined up with the four that reside on the western sector. Unfortunately, this new Mapogo has not been part and parcel of the mating with the females in the western sector and as a result, it seems that when he came across the Ximungwe females with the larger cubs, he killed one and badly injured another. The cub that we refer to as "super cub" was the one that was badly injured, so we really hope that this cub pulls through.

The Mapogo recently killed a buffalo in the Sand River, which has provided us with great

viewing for three days. It was incredible to see all five male lions together again and the Savanna rangers were very privileged to be there when all of these five males were roaring one evening, in their amazing earth-trembling fashion.



The Ottawa pride seems to be moving further and further south and, if they continue to do this, there will undoubtedly be conflict between them and the Ximungwe pride. We hope this does not happen, as we certainly don't want to lose any more of our lion population in the west.



We have recently had some wonderful viewing of the Hlabakunzi female leopard and her two cubs. Even though one cub is still a little nervous, the bigger bolder one has become extremely relaxed and comfortable around the vehicles.



We had some very bad news two days ago when we heard that Makubela had been attacked in one of the camps in our sector by a large male leopard who we believe was the Lisbon male. Unfortunately, Makubela died the day after this attack. We are not sure what has become of her one remaining cub, but we think it is likely that the cub was also killed in this incident. Makubela was a seven-and-a-half year old female that we had all watched growing up in this area and she provided us with superb viewing all her life. She was a very relaxed female and, although she seemed to be a very good mother, a combination of bad luck and the absence of a strong territorial male in her area resulted in her never being able to bring a cub to independence from the five litters that she had had. The Lisbon male seems to be making a bid for new territory within our driving area. Whilst we think this is going to be a good thing, it is very sad to have lost one of our special leopards.



The Lisbon male is one of the largest leopards we have encountered in the Sabi Sands. He is in his prime and I am sure will do a wonderful job of stabilising the leopard population in this area. This is necessary to enable the females to bring their cubs to independence. If nomadic males are allowed to roam these territories unchallenged, they will kill any cubs that are not their own.



The male cheetah continues to frequent our area on a regular basis and it was absolutely beautiful to see him silhouetted on a termite mound early one morning just as the sun was rising.



At this time of year we often see the hippo out of the water, either sunbathing or feeding well into the morning in order to get warm and to find sufficient food during these dry periods. This is when you have to be very careful if you are walking that you don't get caught between them and the water, as this is when hippos are probably at their most dangerous. We have a number of lone bulls frequenting different waterholes on Savanna's property. We are not sure if one of these is the original one called George who used to perform for us on a regular basis. These hippos all perform now and we frequently get wonderful photographic opportunities of capturing the hippo opening their mouths in a threatening posture.





We have a large number of rhino on Savanna's property and we are extremely fortunate in having some young bulls that are very relaxed with the vehicles. Two young bulls fighting in a clearing kept the game drives enthralled for hours. Whilst this particular fight was not serious and rather more of a sparring session, it still gave an indication of what these powerful animals could do to one another should the fight get serious.



We are also seeing large groups of up to eight rhino together.



This month we seem to have had an influx of elephant into the Western sector and we have never seen so many in our area at any one time. With the bush drying out, there are visible signs of what damage these elephant are doing to the scrub. However, this is not necessarily a bad thing, as we need to open up a lot of our areas and return them to open wooded savanna. There have been many breeding herds and small elephant calves are always a delight for our guests to see. Again, seeing young bulls sparring has also provided us with a great deal of entertainment.





Talking of animals sparring, it was fascinating recently to see two nyala bulls doing what I refer to as the "ballet of the bush". These bulls strut around each other with all their hair standing on end and this is normally enough to encourage one of the parties to back off. If this does not work, then you will often find the bulls making physical contact which can end up in one of them being hurt. However, the ballet I have mentioned is a beautiful ritual to watch and may go on for hours before the bulls resort to violence.



This time of year provides us with good bird viewing and we are very lucky to have seen a group of ground hornbills in our area this month. These birds are extremely rare and on the endangered species list. We also had a fantastic sighting of a beautiful saddle-billed stork killing a catfish (barbel) in the Sand River.



As the grass is shorter, we are seeing many nocturnal species and we were able to get some wonderful photographs of this rare serval.



Zambia News - Chiawa Camp
With thanks to Grant Cumings and his team



At last, the Zambezi has dropped to its regular levels and our winter seems to be on its way out. What a few months it has been, let's start with the record high river levels which cut off much of the Lower Zambezi, covered most of its islands and brought the river uncomfortably close to our camps. This caused us a logistical challenge of having to triple handle all our supplies and boat everything into Chiawa Camp and Old Mondoro however it was the wildlife on the islands, surrounded by a fast river and hungry crocs, that suffered the most to the point that we had to truck and boat in hay, feed pellets and licks and deliver them to all the islands between both camps. Although we got there too late for some we saved many a buffalo and waterbuck, and it was interesting to watch one herd of buffalo after their hay delivery - they spent a week venturing never further than a few meters from the bales.



Now that the Zambezi has dropped it has left behind a multitude of snow white sand bars the likes of which we haven't seen for a decade and perfect for sundowners - also perfect for the African Skimmers, and the crocs and hippos who are just loving having all this warm sand to lie down on. Every sandbar seems to have a herd of hippo and resident croc of gigantic proportions.

This has made canoeing the Waterbuck Island channel possible again which is full of saddle bill storks, cantankerous crocs and reluctant hippos - yesterday's trip enjoyed the spectacle of a herd of elephants crossing right in front of them.

Away from the river and on the drives we are having fabulous luck with lions, 6 new cubs are with us this year plus the lionesses and 3 males from last year. The large black maned lion in the pride killed a baby elephant minutes between two of our game drive vehicles and who was soon joined by the rest of the pride whilst later that day his two pals pulled down a bull buffalo right in front of our night drive and all within a few minutes of camp. The pride didn't know where to eat, swapping between elephant and buffalo until the black maned lion eventually impressively dragged off the buff's remains to a bush where he could eat in peace. The leopards have been harder work this year but we are still having great sightings at night, during the day, on foot and even from our floating lunch.



Of course we are also having magical visits from the massive elephant bulls that come wandering and browsing through giving us all hours of joy and some challenges too, dodging them to and from the tents, kitchen, dock and wherever else they choose to browse. One of the more special elephant sightings that I can recall is of a breeding herd slowly making its way towards us through the canyon with the full moon rise behind

- speaking of which, we have a new sandbar to try out in a couple of nights for Chiawa Camp's brilliant full moon island dinner.



Lot's of fun at the moment is a hyena with its young and very boisterous, inquisitive pup which is providing us hours of entertainment in the evenings - a great light hearted break before returning to camp or perhaps one of our fabulous bush dinners.

Note the red tinge to the photo, this from the red filters we put over our spotlights to minimise any discomfort the wildlife might feel from our night drives and yet another shining (no pun intended) example of Chiawa Camp's commitment to conservation. A new motto - low impact on the wildlife, big impact on our guests!





The birding as ever is excellent and as you can see from the photos, the Lower Zambezi has the most beautiful of our avian friends.



I quite like this unusual shot of a pair of white fronted bee eaters sharing a perch with a white helmet shrike. Three Pel's fishing owl sightings were the talk of our guides, as was the albino redbilled ox pecker (thanks for the photo Magali!) although last week one of our walking guides John turned up quite possibly the most unusual sighting ever at Chiawa - a family of 10 bush pigs - in Bush Pig Dambo of all places.

Speaking of flying I have included a photo taken with my iPhone of the propeller whilst flying the other week, odd effect which I can't explain so if any of you pilots/photographers out there know please share.



On that note I will leave you with one of John's photos which he took on the Jeki Plains down towards Old Mondoro and which I think is one of the most iconic shots I have seen of the Lower

Zambezi - showing not only the spectacular light and scenery that delights photographers of all skill levels from around the globe but also a herd of zebra, a herd of elephant, a herd of buffalo, waterbuck and to cap it off a prowling pair of lions. Good one John!



News from Kenya - Governors Camp

With thanks and acknowledgement to Justin Grammaticas and his team

As the rainy season tapered off June brought less rain, most of it falling at the beginning of the month. The temperature on average was fairly warm, 22 C in the mornings reaching 33 C by mid day. Towards the end of the month temperatures began to fall a little with a few chilly nights and early mornings warning us of the colder months to come.



Photos courtesy of Daryl Black and Philip McLellan

The savannah grasses are tall, lush and green with the orange tops of the red oats grass adding a tinge of colour to the plains. In the drier rockier areas the grass has dried out. Through July the grasses will be eaten and trampled down by the vast herds of Zebra and Wildebeest, giving the other plains game a chance to graze those areas.

THE BIG NEWS TO REPORT THIS MONTH IS THAT BOTH THE LOITA AND WILDEBEEST MIGRATIONS HAVE ARRIVED!

The lesser known Loita migration originating from the Loita plains, east of the Masai Mara arrived in early June. Lead by the zebra and followed by the wildebeest, they occupied the conservancies on the northern and eastern boundaries of the Masai Mara Reserve. Numbering 30 000 animals they are second to the Serengeti migration which is in the region of 2 million animals. The Serengeti migration arrived at the Sand River area of the Masai Mara on the border between Kenya and Tanzania on the 17th June, this was early in comparison to recent years. After the amazing rains we had this season, the grassland is rich and full of nutrients, this could account for the early arrivals. In June and some of July the wildebeest are still rutting, the males run ahead of groups of females on the move and set up temporary territories in order to cover the females in that area. This is a noisy time.



Photos courtesy of Daryl Black and Patrick Ngei

Zebra typically lead the herds, as they are bulk grazers and tend to eat at a higher level than the wildebeest, topi, eland and gazelles that follow. The first wave, moved quickly and were soon crossing near 'look out hill' in their tens of thousands.

Towards the end of the month the front runners had already reached one of the larger crossings opposite Serena, they did cross but in smaller numbers.

June has been much the same as May in the Musiara area, with most of the pains game concentrated along the river and up on 'Topi plain'. At the start of the month, we saw huge herds of elephant numbering two hundred individuals in the marsh area. With the drying of the grasses and sensing the imminent arrival of the wildebeest migration the elephant have now mostly moved into the acacia woodlands bordering the reserve. This area is where we do our walking safaris, so it has been a great treat to see so many elephant back.



Photos courtesy of Philip McLellan and Daryl Black

Large groups of giraffe numbering from fifteen to twenty five individuals have been passing by the camps on the periphery of the forest line browsing on the *Teclea* bushes. The resident herd of buffalo have been grazing around the marsh area with the bachelor males resting along the river edge in mud pools.

We have had regular sightings of three rhino from the balloon and on the game drives back to Little Governors' Camp. A male and a female rhino have been seen together a few times south of paradise plain, and we have also seen them mating. Which maybe be great news for rhino numbers in the area. The Kenya Wildlife Service were in the Mara

for about five days in mid June doing a rhino count. The 2006 census numbered between twenty five to thirty individuals, some moving between Kenya and Tanzania. We await their new findings.

The Marsh pride of lions spent most of the month in the areas bordering the reserve around the leopard gorge area in search of zebra which had moved in from the Loita plains. We have had the occasional sightings between the Musiara Marsh and Bila Shaka. One lioness and the nine three year old sub-adults had spent a few days near the airstrip, following a few zebra into the reserve. The two pride males have not been seen this month, but we have had a report of one of them getting into a fight and coming off second best.

Our guests have seen a lot of the Ridge Pride recently, remaining in their core territory up on Rhino Ridge they have had good hunting up on the short grass. The pride remains stable with the two pride males, three females and three cubs.

The Paradise Pride males have spent most of June on other side of the Mara River, Notch and one of the younger males returning to their lionesses on our side during the last few days of the month. The lionesses number six in total, with four lionesses, two seven month old and three five month old cubs spending time apart from the other two lionesses with four five month old cubs. There has been plenty of game near the river where the hippo have grazed the grass down, so their hunting grounds are in good supply and they have taken two hippo this month as well.



Photos courtesy of Samuel Kiplangat

A fully grown unidentified male lion was seen in our area around mid June, we suspect he is a nomadic male. He was in the Bila Shaka area feeding on an elephant carcass and at the same time chasing off some very excited hyenas.

The three cheetah boys have maintained a huge presence on the high plains. They have mostly been hunting warthog, but managed to take down two young wildebeest at the front of the migration.

Our guides and clients have also seen on a few occasions a new female cheetah with two almost adult cubs.

There have been a few sightings of a female cheetah and a young cub of about five months just on the boundary of The Reserve near The Marsh. The cub unfortunately has a bad eye, which will hopefully heal in due course.

The female cheetah and her eight - ten month old cub we were seeing fairly often near our airstrip has moved into the area bordering the reserve and is doing well

The cheetah we thought was pregnant in May, turns out to have just been very fat after a couple of large meals. She was seen with the three boys for about four days mating into the second week of June. She has since disappeared on us and them, hopefully she is now pregnant, time will tell.

Unusually at the start of June we found a young male leopard lying very comfortably up on a hammerkop's nest. The leopard lay there for the whole day much to the hammerkop's dismay who couldn't get near her nest!

Our resident female leopard has been seen a few times in the marsh and once up in a tree next to the road between Il Moran Camp and Governors' Camp.

Olive and her two cubs are doing very well, her cubs are now about fourteen months old and very playful. They are still to be found near the river.

Other interesting sightings during the month have been Serval cat, white-tailed mongoose, Egyptian mongoose and slender-tailed mongoose.

Lots of the larger birds have chicks at the moment including a family of Saddle-Billed Storks who are nesting in a *Balanites* tree on the other side of the marsh, the chicks are almost fully fledged and are wobbling precariously in their flimsy nest. Also a family of Crowned Crane living near the Marsh has some small chicks.

Interestingly on a recent game drive our guests came across a 2.5m Black-necked spitting Cobra who was busily chasing a skink into a termite mound.

We hope to share the magic of our corner of the Mara with you sometime soon.

Conclusion

We have so much exciting and interesting news this month that I simply cannot fit any more in! Our destinations continue to give our clients the very best of Africa. I hope to see you on a Safari soon.

Happy safaris!

John

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