



## ***MESSAGE STICK***

**March 2011**

### **JMA's Musings!**

February ended somewhat suddenly with only 28 days and I was nearly caught out with this issue - thinking that I still had a few days to write!

We have an exciting month with some great bookings to both Southern Africa and East Africa and I am sure our guests will thoroughly enjoy their safaris. We have also had an unprecedented number of clients pay for their safaris a head of time to take advantage of the strength of our dollar. The A\$/ZA Rand has been steady but has dropped slightly over the last couple of days. As mentioned before this is an opportunity to arrange your safari at best cost advantage.

This month we welcomed Michael Read to our ranks. Mike is an expat from South Africa and will be rather busy from the end of this week. Faye takes a well earned break for a couple of months to have her baby that seems to have reached delivery time very quickly. She is determined to be back in May but I guess that depends on just how good the new bubs is and how much sleep she gets! Mike will have to take on her share of activities until her return.

We have also come to an agreement with Smartguide - a South African/UK company that has developed an amazingly interactive online itinerary. This will be ready for launch shortly and will enable our clients to view their itineraries on line including a route map and full descriptions of all accommodation, transfers, photos, videos and will include recommendations for add on activities and places to visit at each destination as well as the client being able to add additional destinations and activities by means of a wish list. It will now also be possible for potential clients who visit our website to design their own itinerary from a "basket" of destinations and then submit it to us for recommended changes, quotation and finalisation. The map will show all road and flight routes giving distances and approximate time of travel and so will help those who are not too familiar with African geography to visualise their safari. We will also be able talk to the client via Skype and share the PC screen and so assist them with any changes they may wish to

make. Once this is available on our website we expect life to be made easier for our clients and far more involving. Our itineraries will continue to be available in the current format for those who do not wish to use the interactive system.

We look forward to visits this month from Christa Wolmarans who is the Australian manager of Welcome Tourism Services and a great friend of Destinations Africa. She is a delightful lady who has been incredibly helpful to us for many years now. Our staff always look forward to her training sessions. Julian Camm and his wife Jennifer will also spend a few days with us. Julian heads up the East African operation of Albatros Travel who manage all our ground handling in that region. He is touring Australia to drum up more contracts from the travel industry. We had a few days with them on safari in Kenya at the end of last year and had a great time. It is now our turn to return the hospitality and he will do some training of staff.

My very good friend and co-owner of Savanna, David Blumberg, has just returned home to Grafton after a number of weeks at Savanna and he has brought back some very sad news. Mambiri - a favourite leopard of mine - had a severe injury to her foot (as reported in last months Message Stick) making it very difficult to hunt successfully. She consequently made a number of forays outside of the reserve. After being darted and returned to the reserve she persisted with this activity and was eventually shot. We will miss her greatly but on the positive side her grown up cub is now taking over her territory so the next generation will come through.

### **News from Savanna.**

#### **With acknowledgement and thanks to Paddy Hagelthorn and the Savanna Team**

Once again we have been having great viewing of the Tlangisa female. She is fast becoming a favourite leopard and is as relaxed as Hlabankunzi and often walks under the vehicles instead of around! She seems to be taking over Mambiri's territory in her absence and is constantly marking as she moves about. Speaking of Mambiri, it has been confirmed that the leopard which has been seen outside the reserve is in fact Mambiri. The Sabi Sands Reserve, together with the State Veterinary Department, and with assistance from all the lodges are trying everything to capture her, to bring her back into the reserve.

This week must rate as one of the best we have had in a very long time, and it started with the Tlangisa female leopard near Windmill Mackenzie. She is fast becoming one of our favourite leopards, and is giving us fantastic viewing! One of the highlights for most people is to see a leopard going up or down a tree, and she gave us a perfect show!



The next morning, we found her again, on the large rock in the Day One drainage line. After lying on the rock for a short while, she started chasing lizards all over the rock, before coming down into the drainage line for a drink.





The wonderful leopard viewing continued, with the Kashane male making his regular appearances. After following up on a report and some guineafowl alarm calls, we found him heading west across Shipene clearings, walking straight into the setting sun, allowing for fantastic photographs. A few days later, we found him again north of Nkombe dam lying majestically in a marula tree, before coming down.





Interestingly, she and Metsi had an altercation north of Mackenzie Cutline and, although Metsi made it very clear to Tlangisa where the boundaries were, Tlangisa managed to get in a lucky punch, leaving Metsi with a swollen right eye! This was visible when we found Metsi the next day in a tree at Treehouse Mackenzie, having patrolled the area thoroughly the previous night!



Later in the week we found her and her two cubs with an impala kill along Ululapa/Ulusaba Cutline. The one cub is still pretty skittish, but the second one always gives us great sightings while with Metsi.



The Ottawa pride has returned to the north, and we have seen them on a number of occasions. Interestingly, the cubs seemed to have developed a habit of climbing into small trees to play and rest. On three occasions we found them in a weeping wattle tree, which they seem to prefer.



The definite highlight of this week was the arrival of three young male cheetahs onto our concession. They were initially a little skittish, most likely because of the new area and them being unfamiliar with the layout. By the end of the week they had relaxed visibly, although one of the three is still a little nervous. Late one afternoon, we as we arrived at the sighting, the three got up from where they had been resting and started stalking a herd of impala that had been grazing closer to them.



The setup seemed perfect as the impala started walking past them by no more than 15 meters and we were sure that we were going to witness a kill! Somehow, when the cheetah chased, they managed to miss the perfect opportunity and the impala got away, although one was particularly close to the end!



They settled down again, but had to jump up soon again as one of the lionesses from the Ximungwe pride walked towards them! They watched the approach of the lioness very closely, constantly growling as she got closer, until they decided to flee. The lioness chased after them, but did not have the speed to match that of a cheetah, and they easily escaped!





Later in the week they were found near our western boundary with an impala kill.



The Ximungwe pride has been scattered all over our area, with the one lioness with the two cubs remaining down in the south near Cheetah Flats, while the others have been seen north of the Sand River. This is pretty normal with three of the five suspected to have cubs. The one female has been seen with the three Mapogo bothers on a number of occasions but is hopefully also pregnant, having mated with them last week. The two cubs down in the south has been full of energy, and as soon as it cools down, just at sunset, spend a lot of time chasing each other and practising their hunting techniques on each other! Fortunately there are two of them, so they do not have to bother the mother for entertainment too much!



One area of concern with the mother of the two cubs, are patches on her fur which seems to be sarcoptic mange. This is a condition affecting the fur, caused by mites which occur naturally within the hair follicles. This is not a serious condition, but the state veterinarian was called out just to make sure. We were fortunate to witness the capture of the lioness to take tissue samples, and then a few days to see them all back together again. Our thanks and congratulations go to the Sabi Sands and State Veterinary department for a successful operation.



The elephant viewing has been fantastic as the bulls and herds have flocked to our area to feed on the marula fruits. We also had a great sighting of a herd at the Sand

River, where quite a few of them were lying down and playing in the soft sand. At one point a young calf slipped into the water, and was gently helped out of the river by its mother!



One spot we really enjoy having sundowners, is Flat Rocks, and one evening, as we planned to have our customary stop, we found that it was already taken... by a rhino cow and calf! We had to wait until they had moved off, before we could enjoy our gin and tonics!



The hippo population is also doing very well, and most of our dams have one or two hippos present. One particularly entertaining hippo was at the small Tawny Eagle Pan, and Paddy was able to get these two great photos of it.



This time of the year is fantastic for things other than the high profile game, such as insects, flowers and of course birds! On one particular occasion, we had the very unusual sighting of a Spotted Flycatcher which was caught in the web of a Golden Orb spider! These webs are renowned for their strength, and one can only imagine how strong it must be to catch a bird in full flight!



## News Snippets

### What's happening at Ndotu?

With the rains starting late in mid December the weather pattern so far of "stop" and "drop" has brought on rather erratic migratory movements!

These erratic rains normally force the migration off the plains and into the western and southern Serengeti woodland border in search for food and water.

Two periods of heavy showers were followed by a mixture of hot, airless days, with howling winds which in turn did a very efficient job of drying the new, young vegetation and it really only took some 7-10 days for the wildebeest to be on the move again.

Consequently, there have been impressive lines of wildebeest in big concentrations going west and east with the animals starting to form long lines leaving the plains...

This is the time we sometimes get our famous 'lake-crossings', their sheer numbers bringing them galloping down the north-eastern steeper side of the lake. This year has already brought quite a few spectacular crossings. With the present level of the lake being so low, most times the wildebeest can walk straight through the middle of it, making it easy for the few calves already born to keep up with mum!



*Picture by Aadje Geertsema*

Wildebeest calves have now been seen in small numbers since last week of January.

As we move into February, the calving will continue and hopefully take place on the plains around us. Wide open space is important when calving occurs, with so many predators lurking nearby! Here is where the wildebeest want to be when that momentous period in their wandering lives occurs. There are even reports already of lost calves searching for their mothers and trailing tourist vehicles, always a sad sight!

Let's hope the remainder of this wet Season rainfall will be as close to normal as can be, so we will be able to see many more migratory movements!



*Picture by Aadje Geertsema*

The new rains always bring out some interesting flowers too like the beautiful *Crinum Macowanii*, more popularly known as 'pyjama lily', that can be found around Ndotu. Also several orchid species starting to flower towards the end of January.... Two of the dominant Acacia species here, acacia tortilis and kirkii exploded into flower in the beginning of February, and during a very brief moment it looked as if Ndotu had had a light snowstorm, with many trees sporting white crowns!

Cheetahs as usual have been the focus of attention although one cannot help but feel sorry, with constant visits of vehicles, exhaust fumes, chattering of the guests and drivers using radios and mobiles.... In high season our resident cheetahs hardly have an undisturbed day! Our three brothers, Mocca, Latte and Espresso are still wandering in the Two Trees area, holding their own and one known male roves the Kusini plain beyond; there are not less than 6 females with a variety of cubs spread out on the Meadow, Caracal Plateau, and Big and Small Marsh.... Hard work for the mothers to cope not only with ever-demanding growing youngsters, but also the competition of other predators in the area.



*Picture by Simon Pettit*

For the lions the same applies, it appears the male "Half-Tail" has disappeared, the Marsh pride and the Masek pride are still there in their changed ranges, accompanied by a confusing mixture of different sized cubs including three tiny, adorable small ones in the big marsh. The huge lone female is doing very well, managing to hunt for herself and her three cubs, often in the area around Lake Ndotu. She looks enormous and is a clever, successful huntress, all by herself most of the time!



*Picture by Simon Pettit*

Two other "specials" need mentioning: the female Caracal with 2 kittens that roams the Causeway area has been seen several times by our guests and was a wonderful extra... best time to spot her is dawn and dusk, when often you see her hunting amidst the sueda bushes that grow all over the causeway.

The second one is the striped hyena! I know it is not the first time I have talked about this very handsome animal which was sighted a lot during the past two months, both at Masek and the Causeway as well as around Long Gulley. Solitary, mostly nocturnal, these



*Picture by Simon Pettit*

beautiful creatures are often seen just before dark. When excited they raise their bushy mane, which makes them look even larger!

Several guests showed me their photographs and I am always again so impressed by the difference between the striped and the spotted hyena, but also just how handsome this rather secretive animals is!

Most of the time after the first showers of rain the little waterhole in front of the Lodge filled up enough to hold water for some time; day and night 'residents' started to drop by, and for 2 weeks over Christmas and New Year we were entertained sometimes 3-4 times during the day by herds of elephant. Great and small would plunge into the pool, play, drink and bathe.... Then out the water and looking for the bare patch on the ground to finish off with a nice dusty swirl! It was a highlight over the festive period and ended when the wellness mud bathing exercise had turned the mud into rock-hard crusty squares! Since then, all the elephants have disappeared and we hope that after more good rains they will return for more fun at the poolside!



Picture by Simon Pettit

The Fork-tailed Drongo (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) is an attractive black bird with a very distinctive fork-tail; although definitely part of the 'home' birds around the Lodge, for some reason they appear to be more noticeable this year at dawn and dusk.. They seem to work up a frenzy of calls and highly variable songs, their winning imitation the call of the pearl spotted owlet! They use a perch and from there "fly off the handle" chattering and calling non-stop just when darkness sets in.... quite extraordinary and it has been fun watching them display and listen to their many calls! Of course the pearl spotted owlet (*Glaucidium perlatum*) is very present around the Ndotu woodlands, and being quite active during the day, their distinctive call easy to imitate for those that love stealing sounds!!



Picture by Aadje Geertsema



Picture by Aadje Geertsema

What am I doing wasting much paper space below on birds? It is just that amidst the constant, never ending hang to see the carnivores, people sometimes tend to forget all the other interests around here!! And the birds are so spectacular, especially at this time of the year, with many migratory species thrown in as well!



Picture by Aadje Geertsema

From the beautiful Eurasian roller to the plovers, the various birds of prey, European storks, the cuckoos, ruffs and reeves, all in all they form a most wonderful feathered collection!

Rarely have there been so many flamingos and the numbers of shorebirds has been amazing.... Stints, Chestnut-banded Sand plovers, Avocets and Black-winged Stilts, ducks and huge clouds of Terns are all feeding frantically.

As the rains have not filled Lake Ndutu to the brim this year, it apparently created just the right kind of delicious un-deep soup which seems to lure all manner of water fowl!!! Some of the flamingos have been displaying, flocking into a tight group, flicking their heads left and right and marching necks tall, while joined by stragglers in their wake....



Picture by Aadje Geertsema

During at least 4 weeks from just before Christmas, an unlikely small area next to the road into the Lodge just near the barrier was home to a family of Spotted Thick-knees (*Burhinus capensis*) or also called Stone Curlews. We normally associate these rather strange looking large-eyed birds with the night, as their hauntingly beautiful call is heard especially during full moon time. Stone Curlews often sit or stand immobile, well camouflaged. Unnoticed by many safari vehicles, it was quite funny to see the parents with a charming, gangly fluffy youngster just 3 feet off the side of the road, with all traffic in and out of the Lodge apparently not ruffling their feathers!

Whereas Lake Ndutu is in bird mode, Lake Masek has its numbers of hippo! At the moment the population stands at approximately 22 individuals, four being still very small calves born recently.... What foxes me is where they get enough food, as the Maasai and their cattle have done a first-class job of clearing in the area.... not a blade of grass standing and hippos need lots of grazing!!

The resident crocodile does not have to worry about grass.... Nearly every afternoon it is seen napping away on the little island often surrounded by a few black-winged Stilts. One presumes it would only take just one or two wildebeest calves to be sufficient to keep him/her hibernating more for the rest of the year!

Why is it that during night time so many animals seem to lose their fear of us humans? While sitting around the fire, the dikdiks, the hares, an acacia mouse, wildebeests and zebra all close in, unfazed by people chattering away. Of late, we have watched a group of zebra regularly graze in front of the rooms and work their way to the fireplace with us sitting quietly talking. One evening we were better prepared and had our cameras ready and even then the flash did not chase them away! In the end, they came as close as 2 meters from the nearest safari chair and still did not mind! A memorable experience again!



"One Horn" has taken over the guarding of the Lodge. Actually the first reports originated from the guests, who commented on this 'gnu with the broken-off one horn'.



He has been in residence now for 3 or 4 weeks, grazing away all around the premises, at times welcoming safari vehicles along the entry to the Lodge!

He clearly has decided to call the Lodge area his temporary home and can be seen somewhere near at all times of the day! When not long ago I returned early morning he

stood and grazed along the entry sign to the Lodge, right along the track, checking everybody out!

Inside the Lodge our famous -all-time- Genets have recently been very active in the roof of our dining room...Photogenic they may be, when they lounge on the specially constructed poles and little feeder every evening to the great delight of the guests. But up in the roof is where they sleep, meet, mate, give birth, and fight! As a result, the inside ridge became a disentangled mess, and the other day while we were having dinner a piece of "migomba" (banana thatch) fell down between the tables!

Normally this sort of maintenance is done outside the High season, but since the last job just before December, the genets must have had an all-out....

To be able to reach the ridge we have had to make a scaffold that needs to be carried in, and we have no option but to operate after the last guests have gone to bed! Sure enough, first night up there and working, a curious genet came to inspect what it was all about...not the least taken aback by all the commotion!

The main entry door to my house is like a stable door, the top part opens independently and is mosquito screened. About four evenings ago I was just leaving the house, heading for the guests and fireplace, when as I opened the top part of my double 'stable-door' out of the corner of my eye I noticed a red-brown form on the ground outside lying against the wood. I quickly quietly shut the bottom part again, and looked from above: lying next to my door was a very young impala calf! We looked at each other a few moments, and I retreated, got my camera and shot a few pictures, then left the house via the veranda and walked around. I left it lying there and was told that a small impala herd was nearby and that a little while later the calf jumped up and joined its mother again, so Happy Endings!!

Happy safaris.

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