



MESSAGE STICK

May 2011

JMA's Musings!

We only have until Tuesday now to get well on top of our influx of requests for African Travel before Hilary and I head off to Africa again. We have a couple of days in Joburg meeting Welcome Tourism and then to Durban for Indaba - a massive travel expo. There are 1500 exhibitors this year so we will be very busy. We will catch up with many of our travel partners and also make some new ones. We are also going to visit a new and exciting lodge in the Timbavati region - Shumbalala (The Lion Sleeps) - more on our return. We do have two days at Savanna and I can't wait to get there again! The only non work days in three weeks! Anyway we gain so much from these trips that in spite of the fact that I simply hate the flights the end result is worth the discomfort. And we also get to maintain our high standards when it comes to recommending lodges, accommodation and activities to our clients.

Sandie takes charge and I leave very happy in the knowledge that she will have all under control. Faye is due back from maternity leave on 1st May so Sandie will have an extra hand that has been AWOL for a couple of months. Little Chloe is doing well by all accounts!

We have a very exciting announcement! No longer will our clients receive their Itineraries as a PDF document but they are now all Interactive Virtual Itineraries. We now can give a huge amount of information to our clients that was previously impossible. We now show an overview, detailed itinerary, day by day, detailed interactive map, zoom in to places, pictorial route on the map, details of all the lodges and accommodation, Video clips, U-Tube clips, voice descriptions and I-brochures, activities, other interesting information and much much more. Have a look on our website home page to see what I am talking about. There is an example of an itinerary to give you some idea. We are going to get even more information on this soon so keep an eye out for an absolutely super way to plan a trip. You can even forward it to friends and family via e-mail, Facebook or Twitter if you wish! We are the only operator or agent in Australia offering this at present although it will be available to one or two others later.

As an avid follower of what goes on in Zimbabwe this caught my eye the other day. It is really good news that the Zimbabwe side of the Victoria Falls is now receiving its rightful and well deserved increase in tourists.

Zimbabwe, Zambia in tug of war over Vic Falls

By Jean Liou (AFP)

VICTORIA FALLS, Zimbabwe — "Tourists are back!" said Knowledge, all smiles at the Victoria Falls tourism office.

His sentiment is shared widely in this resort town on the edge of the mile-wide waterfall, where it's hard to remember that three years ago Zimbabwe was trapped in a seemingly endless spiral of hyperinflation, hunger and political violence.

Victoria Falls had become a ghost town as tourists opted for the comforts and safety of resorts on the Zambian side of the Zambezi River, where the once sleepy town of Livingstone enjoyed a tourism boom as Zimbabwe collapsed.

"The Zambian side has definitively profited from all the problems in Zimbabwe," said Sarah, who sells excursions for at the Zambezi Sun, part of a South African hotel chain that opened on the Zambian side in 2001.

Hotels, lodges and other tourist attractions have mushroomed over the past decade around Livingstone, which became so popular that it now boasts several daily direct flights to South Africa.

But a brand new curio market on the main road lies empty as tourists fly in and hop across the border.

"We are not happy, the situation is bad," said the Livingstone Tourism Association. "They come here for activities and they go to Zimbabwe for accommodation."

Livingstone still runs a brisk trade in business travel by hosting conferences and corporate team-building workshops, but now faces stiff competition with Victoria Falls for leisure travellers.

Zimbabwe's tourism earnings jumped 47 percent last year to \$770 million, as the number of visitors rose 15 percent to 2.3 million nationally, with Victoria Falls the country's biggest attraction, according to the tourism ministry.

Tourism minister Walter Mzembi hopes to grow that number to five billion dollars by 2015.

"However, this is on condition that the current peace and stability in the country prevails and the country is able to spin a more positive image of

itself," he told reporters last month.

Since Zimbabwe adopted the US dollar two years ago, prices are lower in Victoria Falls than in Livingstone, where entrance to the derelict Railway Museum costs \$15 for foreigners.

"It is cheaper here, and people can walk to the falls. They don't have to take a taxi or whatever," said Duni, a Victoria Falls hawker offering sunset cruises, helicopter rides, rafting, bungee jumps and safaris to passers-by on the sidewalk.

While Victoria Falls sits at the river edge, Livingstone is 10 kilometres (six miles) away, with a fleet of blue taxis shuttling visitors around for \$10 a pop.

Opinion is divided on which side offers the better view of the 108-metre (360-foot) high falls, though the Zimbabwean side has a greater variety of viewpoints.

Confident in its renaissance, Victoria Falls has asked for Chinese aid to expand its airport to accommodate bigger planes.

Among the souvenirs on offer, a 100-trillion-dollar note from the old Zimbabwe currency, a worthless amount during the age of hyperinflation. Its relegation to the trinket shelves is what allowed to Victoria Falls to welcome visitors again.

News from Savanna.

With acknowledgement and thanks to Paddy Hagelthorn and the Savanna Team

The highlight of the week was definitely a young male caracal! Vehicles departing from Exeter River Lodge came across him simply sitting next the road outside the camp, completely unfazed by their presence. This is a long way from Savanna but we made the journey at haste to catch a glimpse of what is a very difficult cat to spot in this area. The light was fading and our first glimpse was of a ghostly figure moving through the grass, but we still managed to get some great photographs of him when he sat and groomed himself. He then moved down the road in front of us and spotted some spurfowls on the road ahead and made an attempt to stalk them but gave up after a few minutes. After about 20 minutes of following him he did eventually did move off the road and into long grass where we could not follow, but it was a sighting to remember for a very long time.



The Mapogo coalition continued their patrols for most of the week, but was not as united as last week. The older male spent the first couple of days on his own down in the south where he followed the large herd of buffalo for a while. His black eye is not looking as swollen anymore and he gave some good roaring displays. In the mean time the other two brothers were with three Ximungwe lionesses up north where they treed the Xinzele male leopard and the Dam Three female leopard one morning. They were very well fed and did not move at all even after the leopards had come down the trees and moved off. Later in the week the coalition did reunite but soon broke up again as one of the younger males started courting one of the lionesses. The other two males stayed with the other two lionesses that moved south and our last sighting found them very well fed again, suggesting the females are providing well for them.



The Ximungwe pride is still fragmented but again all the members were seen at one stage or another and all are in good. The older lioness with the 8 month old cubs is back down south and the cubs are growing quickly now. While on the move one afternoon they came across a colony of dwarf mongoose that scampered down the road straight towards the lioness without seeing her. The lioness lay flat and watched them come closer only to have the cubs come along and chase the small critters into the grass.



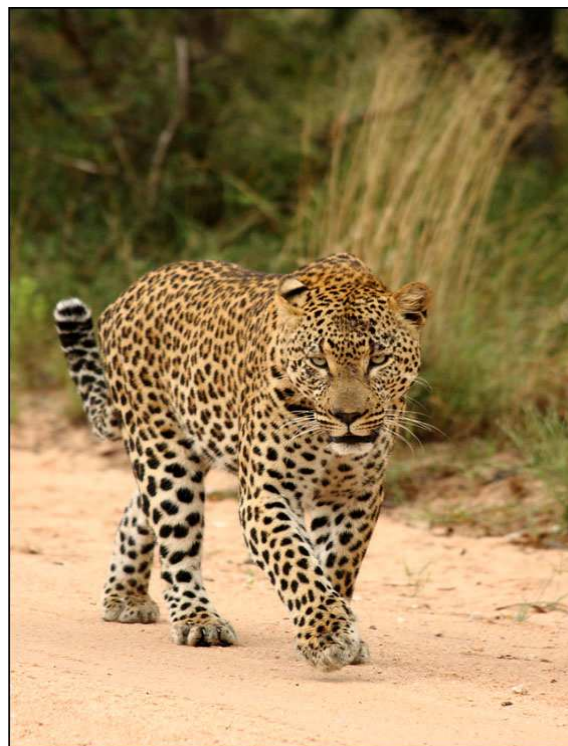
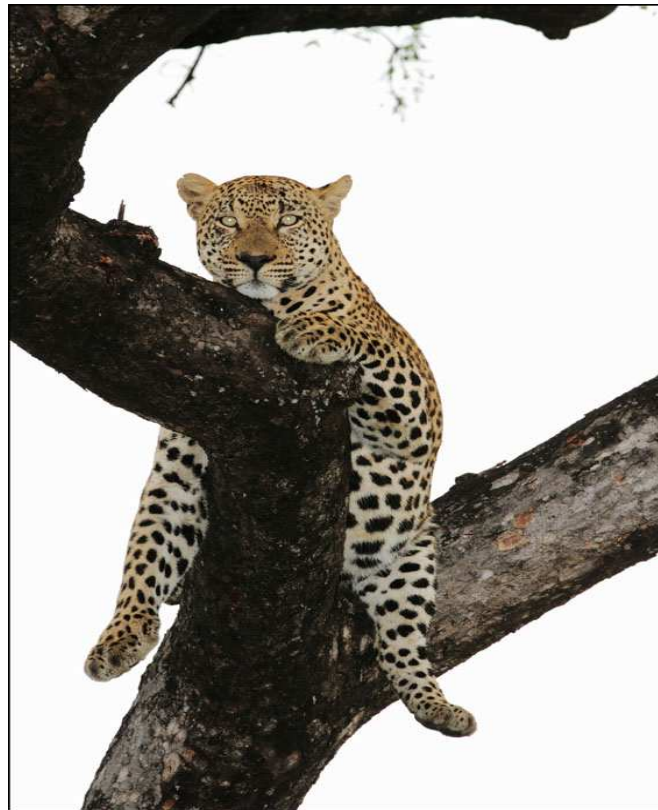
Later in the week they were once again found in the Day One River and we watched as all three leapt across the water. The mother is looking a bit hungry and the cubs are becoming more and more insistent for milk, even though they should be weaned off by now. Their teeth are getting bigger and razor sharp which is an obvious discomfort for her as she growls and rolls over to deter the cubs from suckling. The mother with the two younger cubs is still up north and all three are doing well.



The Ottawa pride made a very brief appearance one evening around portion 5 up in the north. The oldest female was missing but they seemed to have detected the Mapogo and two Ximungwe lionesses close by. The seven youngsters approached from the east, brazenly vocalising, but still somewhat cautious as without the adult female they are not quite confident enough to tangle with their fathers just yet. The Ximungwe lionesses could be heard replying in the distance and that seemed to be enough to send the Ottawa pride back east again.

As mentioned earlier, Xinzele had a bad start to his week by being treed by the Mapogo and Ximungwe lionesses. He must have had a kill in the area as he looked well fed and again he had a female with him, this time the Dam Three Female. When the lions eventually lost interest the Dam Three Female wasted no time in coming down and scampering away, not to be seen again in the week. Xinzele, however, took his time and sauntered off as only a male leopard can do! He dragged his full belly eastwards where he disturbed a lone impala ram which realised the leopard was not hunting and so stood its ground and snorted his disapproval. Xinzele decided to avoid the impala and entered a drainage line where we lost him. He did pop up again later in the week where he was found near Ulusaba old airstrip, intently watching some waterbuck. The antelopes sensed his presence though and moved off after which he decided to patrol some territory

instead. He must have picked up the scent of the Bush Lodge Male (a new young male in the area) having moved through that area the week before as he thoroughly marked and roared his way north up the western boundary.





Kashane made one appearance down in the south of his territory. He somehow sensed prey in the area while we followed him and crept up against the side of the vehicle for concealment which was quite a thrill! It became a little too close for comfort though and as we backed away a male reedbuck exploded from the long grass not even 10 meters from our vehicle. Kashane did not even bother to chase it though and moved further south where he found a perfect tree which he climbed, giving us some great photo opportunities. He then noticed something in the distance which he watched intently for a while before descending the tree and going to investigate. It turned out to be a big male warthog which he crept up on to within 10 meters again, however the pig noticed him just in time and high tailed it out of there in a flurry of grunts and squeals.



Hlabankunzi has been a bit more elusive now that her cubs are gone. The only times we saw her this week was when she had kills, of which there were two. The first was right at Dulini camp but she had it in thick bush and the visual was difficult. The second was again in thick bush and visual of her was limited. We hope to see a bit more of her this next week.

While viewing a sleepy cheetah (Makamisa) movement in the distance alerted us to the presence of Metsi who was making her way towards McKenzie Airstrip. Neither animals spotted each other so there was no interaction and we left the cheetah to follow Metsi. She became interested in something in the long thatching grass and all of a sudden leapt into it. All hell broke loose as warthog piglets came scurrying out but the high pitched squealing indicated that Metsi had caught one. Then an unbelievable scene followed as the mother warthog charged Metsi and forced her up a tree which meant Metsi had to

let go of the piglet which was luckily unharmed. Metsi remained in the tree until the warthog family moved off before coming down and choosing to hunt less dangerous prey like impalas and duikers. She made a few attempts but was not seen to be successful, although the next day she was found leading the cubs to a kill. It was a young impala which the cubs fed on intermittently. They did not have it for long though before a male leopard came in and stole the prize for himself. It was a nervous male so an ID was not possible but it may have been the shy male from Alicecot. As it turns out though Metsi had made two kills during the night as she lead the cubs further east and to another young impala carcass. This time they had the carcass to themselves and finished it in one morning.



Tlangisa was still up north in the beginning of the week and provided some good viewing as she lounged in trees and caught flies in the late morning heat. She did have some interaction with Xikavi up north who appeared to have stolen the remains of a kill from Tlangisa, but no interaction was actually witnessed. This seemed to convince Tlangisa that it was better to head south again towards her familiar area of McKenzie Windmill/Airstrip.

She did not get a warm welcome though as she bumped into the wild dogs and then got chased by Metsi. There seems to be some flexing of the muscles over the territory left vacant by Mambiri. Metsi is older than Tlangisa by just over two years, and seems to be moving into the western part of Mambiri's territory.



The pack has been spending a lot of time at the den during game drive times so we have had relatively few sightings of them. When we have seen them though they have been actively hunting with only five individuals which suggests the second pregnant female has now also given birth. A kill was witnessed on one occasion with the dogs taking down an adult male impala which was quickly devoured, after which the pack returned to the den to probably regurgitate meat for the two mothers tending the pups. We are not sure yet whether both mothers are using the same den or if the second litter had been born at a separate den close by, but hopefully we should get to see some pups soon.



Makamisa returned as anticipated at the beginning of the week and managed to catch an impala at McKenzie Windmill. The catch was however made between drives so nobody witnessed it but when we found him in the afternoon he was very full and soaking up the afternoon sunshine. He moved further south after the wild dogs appeared in the area of the carcass, but they did not see him as he had moved a fair distance away from it and so got away without being harassed. Tracks in the morning however suggested that lions had come across him during the evening and undoubtedly chased him as he was nowhere to be found for the rest of the week.



The great hippo viewing has also continued this week, with a few of the dams in the south having hippo. The cooler weather has also meant that the hippo have been active more during the day, giving great displays and on one occasion also being seen outside the water during the day.



There has been quite a few elephant on the property this week as well, with plenty of youngsters providing great entertainment for our guests!



The weather is turning colder now, and the bush is finally starting to show the browning colour of winter. This is often an exciting time for us, as it brings new challenges for the animals. Game viewing usually gets better now, with the bush thinning out and we look forward to bringing you these changes in the coming weeks.

News Snippets

Robin Pope Safaris

I guess, let's kick off with the palaver that we had in front of Luangwa House this morning when a young elephant took exception to a pride of lions relaxing in the shade so decided to chase them making all sorts of noise before the lions turned round and chased the young elephant back. Well the youngster took off at quite a pace and we could hear him constantly trumpeting for at least 20 minutes getting further and further away..... Shame - not a great start to the day for that guy!

So, then on to the last couple of weeks in the Valley - well, having decided that the rains were finished, I proceeded to announce it to everyone, only to be proven wrong by five days of constant rain - I do however now feel sure that it is nearing an end, but I shall keep you posted. We have also had Carnivore Week (used to be called Wild Dog Week but the research team have branched out into all carnivores now) Matt and Egil were out everyday with the guests, tracking gear in hand, and had a hugely successful week with heaps of leopard sightings, some great lions and even the first Wild Dog sightings that we have had in months so all in all a massive hit.



Nsefu has now closed for a couple of months before we can get there by road and open for the dry season and we were exceptionally lucky with the river staying high right up until the last day. It would appear that mother nature knew that we were finishing up on the river safaris as 2 days after the last guests left Nsefu the river dropped by a couple of meters, great sighs of relief all round I can assure you.

I also managed to get out on the river and took a trip up to Tena with the first team of guys for camp opening. I am not kidding you when I tell you that a group of women would have got themselves ready faster than that. It would appear that the excitement of it all and the fact that they are going to be rather isolated for a few weeks resulted in vast quantities of gossip and preparation and we finally managed to get everyone in the boat and ready for off a mere two hours later than hoped. And that wasn't the end of it as the guys nattered for the entire journey up. Gosh the journey down with just myself and Ruben was spent in blissful silence as we floated down stream finding elephants swimming and playing in the river, several scarily large crocodiles and plenty of other game scattered along the river banks.



Not to mention the birdlife with Pied Kingfishers hovering off the bank looking for the slightest movement in the water before diving down to catch some lunch and then the Fish Eagles plummeting out of the sky like a missile towards the water attempting to catch an unsuspecting fish. The river has now dropped so much that I think we will be lucky to get up there by boat so we are entering once again the time of limbo when we just cant get there and the nail biting time of are we going to be able to get to the camps with enough time to open them for the beginning of the season.



The game viewing down at Nkwali has been fantastic and since the Carnivore Week the wild dogs have been sighted a few more times, which is always a highlight.

Happy Safaris!

John

61 (0)2 4984 9747

61 (0)411 749 627

jma@destinationsafrica.com.au

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