

# ASKARI NEWSLETTER

## AUGUST 2009

### Overview



Now in the height of winter, the bush is dry and sparse and has provided the Askari team with some amazing sightings. 4 new ostrich were released into the buffalo camp and new projects were started including the building of a Ground Hornbill nesting box. There has been a noticeable increase in Spotted hyena activity, this month leading to the death of a young lioness. Read on to find out more about all this and what else the Askari

team have been up to this month.

### Events on Pidwa

**Ostrich release** – On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 4 ostrich arrived at Pidwa with Bundox game capture unit. The 2 adult males and 2 adult females were released, in good health, on Double gate road in the buffalo camp. All four have been seen since. 1 male with 2 females and the other male has joined up with the 1 remaining old girl already there! We have been pleasantly surprised at how relaxed the new gang are with the presence of our vehicle.



**African wildcat update** – Gladly, both Phelele and Levi have been seen regularly since their release. During the start of the month a number of evenings passed when Phelele did not come in the evenings for food. She was then spotted in the bottom sable camp by Pidwa staff. Worried that she was trapped in the camp, Askari staff walked through the camp calling her. She came running out looking somewhat thinner than a few days earlier. Meanwhile, a tunnel had been created from old pipe to create a through way between Askari and the camp. She was led to the tunnel and, using a chick to tempt her on the Askari side, she passed through back into the garden. It is likely that when trying to come back through alone she received an electric shock as she was seen to be very wary of and hissing at the fence. Since that day Phelele arrives every night just after dusk to feed. It is not known where she spends the rest of her time.



Three more tunnels have now been set up for her so she can access the breeding camps and open system without fear of electrocution! The tunnels have been covered in dirt and rocks to make them look more natural. Also, at the start of the month a male wildcat turned up at Brian's house on the river. Assumed to be the male cat Levi, food was put out for him. He now returns every night for some dry pellets and chicks left out for him.

On the evening of the 30<sup>th</sup> of August an African wildcat was seen near the staff compound. Whilst not possible that it was the male Levi (as he was at Brian's house at the time) it is not known if this was perhaps Phelele or even a member of the wild population already present on Pidwa.

Members of "Askari Channel 4 News Team" were with us throughout August.

## Reserve work

Time was spent on Main access this month collecting more old telephone wire from the line the elephants knocked down. At some stage in the future all wire and old poles will be taken out.

Feeding bays and water troughs in the nyala camps received their monthly clean and the bottom camp fence was also skoffled all around the outside.

Queen of the night and Prickly pear plants were treated this month using MSMA herbicide. The area targeted was on Nyala river road behind Askari, Tamboti and Main access. Two walking patrols were also made into the block behind Askari. On the subject of alien plants, 5 sessions were spent cutting down Lantana plants around the nyala shed. At first it looked like a never ending mission but the team were happy to realise by the end that instead of it being everywhere you looked, you actually had to seek it out to kill it!

Road clearing was finished off on Nyala river road this month, all the way round to the main gate. Work also started in the buffalo camp on Double gate road from the southern end up.

Two anti-poaching patrols were carried out in the buffalo camp. One just to the north of Goshawk road near the Gravelotte fence. Here, 4 old snares were found but there was no sign of any new activity. A second patrol was carried out to the south of Hide dam where no snares were found. The poachers caught in the buffalo camp in February have been found guilty. They now await sentencing.

Sleep out took place again in the Selati river by the 4x4 course. At around 7pm a spotted hyena strolled to within 100 metres of the camp. Nothing unusual in terms of human activity was noted.

During a bush and tracking walk this month, male rhinos Isinkwe and Nembelela were spotted on the northern plains. They were locked in a duel and proceeded to spar and chase each other around like crazy kids! Luckily this meant they were oblivious to our presence so we were able to slip past them un-noticed. A large herd of waterbuck and impala were also encountered during the walk.

Road repairs took place on Nyala river road where water caused damage during the summer. Lots of small rocks were first collected from the Selati river. Arranged in the bottom of the ruts they filled a large proportion of the space before having gravel placed on top to finish the job off. It is now possible to drive this section of road without the vehicle tipping or having to engage 4x4.

A fence patrol was carried out along the Pohl fence during which voltage checks took place and removal of debris from the live wires.



A new project was embarked upon this month to build a nesting box for Ground hornbill. Considered as 'Rare' these large, ground dwelling birds, are pushed out of habitats due to destruction and therefore loss of nesting sites. Designs were obtained from the Ground Hornbill Association and the box put together using timber, screws and hand drills. Once complete, bark was collected and added to make it look natural. This was attached to the sides and roof using wood glue, screws and hand drills. A walk was also carried out in the Selati river to establish a suitable location for the box to

be placed.

Monitoring drives continued to collect herbivore age and sex ratios. They also act as a great opportunity to get out on the reserve and see what other animals are around.

## Monitoring projects

**Weather monitoring** – Only 14mm of rain at the very start of this month and there is a feeling that spring is on the way. The average minimum temperature was 12°C and average maximum 27°C but a high of 35°C was recorded.

**Herbivore Age & Sex Ratio monitoring** - Research drives have continued to collect data on herbivore age and sex ratios. These are also a chance to monitor as much predator and elephant activity as possible and to continue collecting information for animal ID kits. This month on research routes cheetah, elephant, rhino and lion were seen.

**Birds of Prey** – A whopping 44 bird of prey sightings were recorded this month. Amongst these were yellow billed kites, the return of Wahlbergs eagles, a juvenile martial eagle and many of the usual eagle and buzzard suspects. By far the most spectacular sight though was more than 60 vultures fighting over a giraffe carcass. White backed, Cape, Hooded and Lappet faced were all present and a day earlier Pierre even saw a rare White headed vulture on the scene.

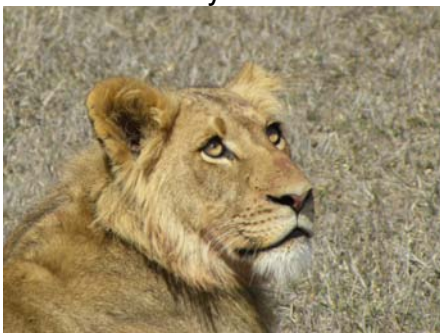


**Identification kits & Reserve records** – Reserve records continue to be updated with all sightings made by the Askari team. Photos continue to be taken of the Askari pride sub-adults, to now establish which one of them was killed.

**Nocturnal mammal survey** – Nocturnal drive this month started off very well with a great sighting of a genet right outside Askari. We peaked a little early though as there wasn't much else out and about. A black-backed jackal, water thick-knee and lesser bushbaby were all seen.

## Sightings & Other news

**Lions** – The month didn't start too well for the lion population when, during a set route drive, a young lioness was found dead in the road on Eland loop. It can now be confirmed that it was one of the younger 2 females of the Askari pride sub-adults, most likely the one seen a number of times alone throughout July. One side of the carcass had been fed upon by vultures and hyena. There were plenty of spotted hyena tracks around as well as the leftovers of a warthog carcass. It is most likely that one of the predators killed the warthog and then came to blows with the other over the prize. It is also suspected that one of the older female sub-adults may have also come to a sticky end. For the last 2 months now, only 4 of the subbies have been seen. On a happier note though the adults are doing well and providing plenty of sightings. Thula and her sister were seen attempting to hunt impala and waterbuck on different occasions. They also, along with Umfokazi, chased some zebra, waterbuck and impala into the fence of the bottom sable camp! Luckily for the prey, none were captured but 1 waterbuck and 1 impala did

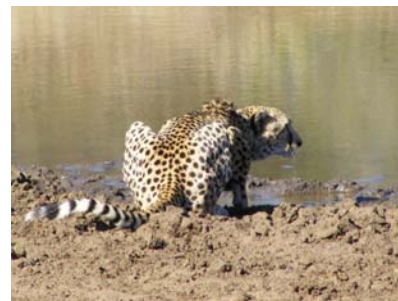


find themselves then trapped in the bottom sable camp after breaking through in the panic. Askari assisted reserve management to chase the waterbuck back out, rugby tackle the impala and pop it back through the hole it came in and make the necessary repairs to the fence....phew! The remaining sub-adults, Nkosana, Tetemayo, Kali & Tiya continue to struggle. We watched them make a failed attempt of hunting both warthog and impala on the airstrip. Although they had blood around their mouths it became apparent that it was only porcupine on the menu as poor Nkosana still had a spine sticking out the bottom of his neck! Masana is still on the scene and has been mating this month with one of the adult females.

**Rhino** – The apparent rhino drought most definitely came to an end this month with 7 different sightings. Kenya and calf, Tsavo, were seen twice in the Flakythorn and Ranch dam areas. Isinkwe & Nembelela were seen on the northern plains, locked in a duel and too busy to notice the Askari team on a bush walk just behind them! Isikhumba (who some will know better as Big Al) was also seen twice, on one occasion with Memfuza and her calf and the other adult female in the buffalo camp.

**Elephants** - There were 3 breeding herd sightings this month, mostly around the riverine and Double gate road areas. Bulls were also seen on Eland loop and Sids road.

**Cheetah** – Makwavo was seen 3 times this month. Once all the way down in Pidwa south drinking from Pronking dam and once near the Pidwa main access gate. On the third occasion he was on Nyala river road behind the new sable camp and looking particularly interested in the impala stuck inside after the lion chasing incident! The Langa coalition were seen feeding on an adult female impala this month and also seen to make 2 failed hunting attempts, once on a herd of impala and once an adult male warthog.



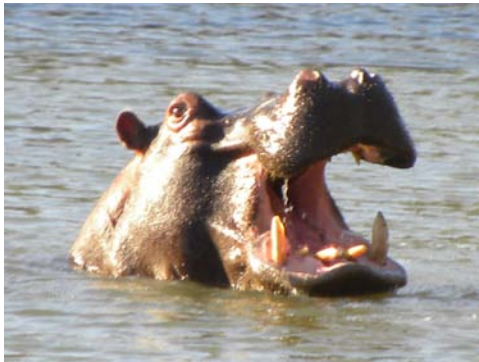
**Spotted hyena** – The team were treated to a great sighting this month when 3 spotted hyena were seen challenging the vultures for the scraps of a giraffe carcass. At some moments the vultures looked to be in charge but every now and then a hyena would charge in and snap at the vultures to claim their feeding spot at the carcass. As a bonus, one of the adult hyenas then nipped down to the dam for a quick drink and even a bath after feeding. It was a hot day after all and the dip in the



dam and roll around in the mud looked like a great idea! A lone individual was also seen in the Selati near the 4x4 course during sleep out.

**Leopard** – Three leopard sightings were called in this month. One of a female in the drainage between nyala camp and Eland loop, 1 on Theo Dickies north of the river and then 1 adult male on Marula cutline near Grysbok.

- A caracal was seen by reserve management one afternoon near the staff compound.
- A Serval was seen hunting impala at Mopane dam by reserve management.
- A porcupine was seen on Main access just east of Askari early one evening.
- Both the Tsessebe and Red hartebeest were seen in the buffalo camp this month



- The male hippo was seen again this month in the pool just to the east of the Selati bridge.
- Special note was taken during August of plains game herd numbers. After concern by management that the lions may be feasting a little too well, numbers of waterbuck, zebra, wildebeest and impala were

assessed during this month. While there are plenty of zebra and wildebeest down on Pidwa south, the number of herds in the north does seem a little thin on the ground. While impala numbers seem very strong, more counting will continue next month.