

ASKARI NEWSLETTER

DECEMBER 2009

Overview



Although only a half month for Askari there were still plenty of projects taking place and great game viewing too. A second ground hornbill nesting box is now in position and the team had a very eventful sleep out! Road clearing and anti-poaching continued and the Langa cheetah coalition staged a second escape! Read on to find out more about all this and what else the Askari team have been up to this month.

Events on Pidwa

Cheetah escape.....again! – “Oh they’ll have escaped again” we joked as we picked up a signal at the gate, pointing once again down towards the river. In fact we didn’t even need the telemetry as sure enough, driving along the fence line we spotted not just one but all 3 brothers on the Pidwa north side! They hadn’t gone far at all and were literally sitting right next to the fence, just on the wrong side. Reserve management was called and the decision taken again to bait them back through to Langa. Again an impala fell victim to the bait and was tied to the back of the land cruiser for them to follow back through. Unfortunately however, it wasn’t quite as straight forward as last time. While 2 of them slowly followed the bait back into Langa, brother number 3 was rather hot and bothered by the whole affair. As we neared midday and the temperature started to soar he simply sat down, in a nice shady spot that he found under a tree! The decision was made to return a little later once the temperature had dropped. Patience paid off and a little after 5pm, all 3 brothers were re-united and back in Langa langa.



Cheetah death – We are very sad to report this month that our old cheetah male, Makwavo has died. His body was found on the northern fence line, just a few hundred metres from where his brother Busayo was last seen before his death in April. Unfortunately Makwavo suffered and most likely died from some

nasty injuries on his back and around the neck. These were most certainly inflicted by a group of 3 lions (1 male, 2 females) whose tracks were present at the scene. He was approximately 15 years old meaning he had done well and already lived longer than a wild cheetah male would be expected to.

Members of “The Storm Troopers” were still with us for the first half of December.

Reserve work

Sleep out this month took place next to Ranch dam and what an exciting one it was. Around 9pm, just as everyone was starting to think about bed, a strange gurgling noise came from the dam. Upon shining the spotlight we were treated to the sight of a group of elephants having a swim. We quickly loaded onto the game viewer and travelled round to the dam wall. Here we enjoyed watching 13 of them cavorting around, jumping on each other and squirting water with their trunks. All was going swimmingly until they suddenly all ran for the waters edge and started trumpeting from the bank. We soon saw the cause of the problem when a number of barbels (a type of catfish) began surfacing; making bubbles that had spooked the elephants! Although it put an end to the swimming, the elephants made some impressive trumpets which echoed all the way down the drainage line. They then continued about their business, some dripping dry and others finding food. On return to the campsite, 6 individuals moved within 100 metres of the fire to have a look. We stayed on the vehicle for a while before getting into our sleeping bags and settling down for the night. Night watch really was an important job that night as the elephants remained in the vicinity of camp all night. We had no problems at all though, just every now and then an inquisitive bull would pop his head out of the vegetation and see what we were up to. A great experience for the whole team.



A second Ground hornbill nesting box was made this month following designs from the Ground Hornbill Association. Through communication with the EWT (Endangered Wildlife Trust) they have recommended that we place some additional boxes to the one on the Selati river to help attract the birds. Once the box was built, old knobthorn bark was collected and attached to the outside. When complete the box was transported to Lily pan where it was placed in a large Weeping boerbean tree just behind the dam wall. Again the rope work logistics were carried out by Phil with assistance from the Askari team. Nesting boxes will be checked regularly in the new year for any new inhabitants!

Road clearing was carried out this month in the buffalo camp on the section of Dagga boy road south of buffalo dam.

Two anti-poaching patrols took place in the buffalo camp where three old snares were recovered, one with an impala carcass attached. It appeared that a leopard had fed on this snared impala so although we were too late finding the snare, at least it didn't go completely to waste. When poachers leave an area they don't bother to take any 'un-used' snares with them and these remain just as lethal as when the poachers are present. Continued anti-poaching patrols are vital to clear any snares left behind as well as look for new activity.

Askari continued to assist with nyala feeding and carry out game counts in the camp. There is a total of 40 nyala now between the 2 camps so early next year we will look at the translocation of some of these animals down to the buffalo camp.

The second bat box, made last month, was placed on the southerly facing wall of the Askari house.



Work continued on protection of the Transvaal saffron against elephant damage. Another trip was made to the mine to collect rocks. It is looking good now and will just need a few more trips in the new year.

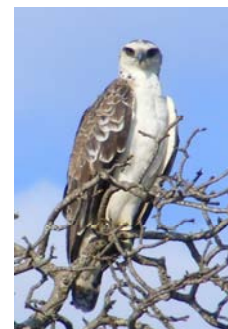
A fence patrol was carried out along the Pohl fenceline. Once short circuit was repaired and some debris removed from along the predator wire. We also enjoyed the rare sight of a Marsh owl during the patrol, just across the fence on the Pohl property.

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 – Temperature data was collected for the first half of December and the average minimum temperature was 21°C and average maximum 28.6°C. The highest temperature recorded was 32°C. Rainfall data was collected throughout the month and a total of 88.5mm fell.

Birds of Prey – Amongst the birds of prey spotted this month were Eastern red footed kestrel and Amur falcons. Bateleurs,



Wahlbergs eagles, a variety of vultures and a juvenile Martial eagle were also spotted.

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 elephant and lion were seen.

Identification kits & Reserve records – Reserve records continue to be updated with all sightings made by the Askari team. ID kits were updated this month for sub-adult male lion Nkosana and adult male Masana. New kits were also made for the male lion “Kalahari” whose territory is Makalali and for the male hippo in the river “Maganga”.

Sightings & Other news

Lions – It was a quiet month for lion sightings with just 3 in total. For one of



these though, Askari was on foot whilst enjoying a bush walk on the northern plains. Umfokazi was spotted about 200 metres in the distance. Whilst making a glimpse in our direction every now and then, he seemed quite relaxed with our presence and did not move off or change his behaviour. He was seen again later in the month on Eland loop, this time with Masana and Thula. Nkosana was seen at Ranch dam and thankfully seemed to

have recovered from his leg wound last month. He was even looking a little plumper but still a long way off a well fed lion.

Rhino – Isikhumba was seen taking a mud bath in Sable pan and then again with females Ondli and Memfuza and calf Ingane. On the open system Isinkwe & Nembelela were seen twice around the Ranch dam and lodge area. They appeared to be receiving some VIP treatment whilst wallowing in Ranch pan, when terrapins were seen removing ticks from their behinds! No doubt the terrapins got a good meal out of it as well.

Cheetah – Unfortunately the only sighting of Makwavo this month was when his body was found along the Langa fence. There are some new kids in town though who seem to be taking the chance to explore some new territory now the competition has gone. The 2 collared males released on Garonga were seen scent marking near the lodge. They are named by Makalali as Browning and Purdy.



Elephants - Plenty of elephant sightings this month, mostly of bulls but a few breeding herds as well. One herd provided a great sight on Buffalo cutline as they fed, ambled around and wallowed in some nearby muddy puddles.

- Many more herbivore young have been born including warthog and blue wildebeest.
- Askari were lucky enough to come across a live Giant African land snail this month! This was an exciting sight as it is much more common to just find the empty shell.
- A nocturnal drive was carried out on Pidwa north which included sightings of lesser bushbaby, plenty of African bullfrogs and a centipede!



We'd like to add a massive THANK YOU to all Askarians who have passed through during 2009 and contributed so much. None of this great work would be possible without you and the huge efforts you have all put in. Also, a big thank you for the continued support we receive from our families, colleagues and friends that help us make Askari such an amazing place. A very Merry Christmas from the Askari team and we hope to see you again next year!

