

ASKARI NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 2009

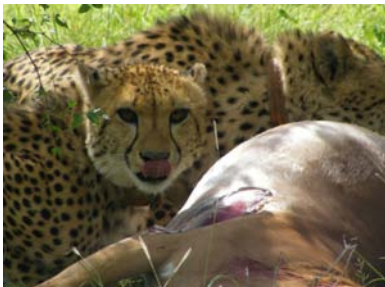
Overview



February started with the biggest rain of the wet season so far causing huge floods and a raging Selati river. There have been some great animal sightings, alien plants to kill and plenty of mud to get vehicles stuck! The cheetah in the boma are doing really well, poachers were caught in the buffalo camp and Colin has left home. Read on to find out more about this and what else the Askari team have been up to this month.

Events on Pidwa

A sleepy Sunday morning was disturbed this month by a call from the specially called in anti-poaching unit operating in the buffalo camp. The team had come across 2 poachers, 1 of which they had managed to catch. Time was then spent with the police and anti-poaching unit being shown the butchery the poachers had been using and the area where they had been sleeping. "Colin's Angels & Beakface" will be surprised to know that this was all very close to Sickleshub road where we had spent many sessions cutting sickleshub. Unfortunately the poachers had managed to snare 7 zebra (including a tiny foal) and 1 wildebeest. The afternoon was spent collecting any remaining snares and picking the strung up meat off the wires. The butchery was disassembled and the meat left for vultures and other scavengers. The second poacher has been caught since and both will appear in court to hear their jail sentence.



The cheetah coalition in the boma are doing really well. They are not at all shy and we have to run at them each time we take their lunch these days to move them away from the gate. They are still being fed every 4th day and are in great, healthy condition.

New volunteer arrivals meant a new group was formed for February, "The Inconceivables".

Reserve work

Sleep out this month took place north of the Selati river on Jackal plains. Just before settling down around the fire we nipped down to the river to have a look, only to find the one lone hippo relaxing in the pool below us. Lions were heard throughout the night and although none were seen we did find the tracks of an adult male heading south along the western fence on the way home.

Askari members continued to assist Christof with feeding of the nyala. Both feeding bays were cleared of old lucerne and water troughs cleaned and re-filled.

Alien plant treatment continued this month with many different species now on the hit list. Datura was removed from the buffalo camp, merely pulled out by hand. Lantana plants were panged, sawed and poisoned around the nyala shed. Queen of the night and Prickly pear cactus were also targeted in the block between Main access and Eland loop.



One final session was carried out on the erosion site near Hide dam in the buffalo camp. Old brush packing was removed, the soil re-picked, seed sown and new brush packing laid down. There was already great progress on the areas that “Colins Angels & Beakface” had worked on with new shoots of grass sprouting up all over the place. Work was started on a new erosion site on Central cutline to try and rehabilitate the soil.

An anti-poaching patrol was carried out in the buffalo camp this month. Walking and looking for snares took place to the south west of Hide dam where poachers operated last year. Unfortunately this seemed to be the wrong spot for this years poachers but that area was at least found to be clear of any snares, old or new.

With the wet weather and flooding this month there has been plenty of fence maintenance to carry out. Fences have been checked, cleared and the grass around live wires poisoned. In some cases whole new posts and strainers have been erected which involved digging some very deep holes and welding fence posts in place.



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 – A storm on the 4th February brought 138mm of rain! Many roads were impassable, the Selati was absolutely pumping, with rapids in parts, and pretty much every drainage line on Pidwa was flowing like a mini river. That wasn't the end of it though, there has been another 78.5mm this month and the water table is well and truly full! Temperatures have ranged from 20-32 °c.

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, cheetah, lion, rhino and spotted hyena were seen.

Birds of Prey – Sightings this month have included White backed vultures, Wahlbergs eagles, Bateleurs, a Brown snake eagle and a Steppe eagle.

Identification kits & Reserve records – Reserve records continue to be updated with all sightings made by the Askari team. Great face and tail shots have now been collected for the 3 cheetahs in the boma. Their ID kits will be put together in the coming month in preparation for their release onto the open system.

Sightings & Other news

Lions – There has been a steady stream of lion sightings this month starting with an up close and personal encounter with Umfokazi. Just as we were watching the snake eggs hatch we heard a roar just down by the river. Upon jumping in the vehicle and heading out the gate we found him right next to the fence of the nyala camp. He proceeded to walk up the corridor between the camp and Askari, vocalising as he went and with us in tow. We caught a very quick glimpse of an adult female darting across Main access a few days later. The Askari pride were seen lounging on none other than “the loop” with Umfokazi and again close to Ranch dam later in the month. On two occasions a pair of lionesses were seen. They are thought to have been Zingela and Tumblela and therefore the females with cubs. Both times they were seen was on Steenbuck road so perhaps they are keeping the cubs close by?



Rhino – Isinkwe & Nembelela were seen twice this month on Jackal plains and then the following day on Jackalberry plains. Isikhumba, Memfuzza and her calf were also seen twice in the buffalo camp. A new group of rhino were spotted in the open system. A female, with no notches in her ears, with 2 calves. 1 was approximately a year old and the second about 2 and a half.

Elephants - On nocturnal research drive this month we had 3 different sightings of elephant. Just 3 to start off with on Central cutline but then we bumped into a breeding herd drinking from the airstrip pan. It was time to head home so as we couldn't get past them we took an alternative route up Buffalo cutline. Low and behold there were another 3, elephant invasion! Breeding herds have also been seen on Double gate road and Central cutline this month as well as 1 lone bull on Burchells' loop and a mother and juvenile by the Ranch dam pump.

Cheetah – Busayo & Makwavo were seen twice this month, once on Bushbaby and once in their usual spot on Marula cutline.



Spotted hyena – 2 spotted hyena, an adult female and a younger individual were seen on Marula cutline. We were lucky enough to follow them up the road a little and see them carry out anal pasting on some nearby grass stalks just a few metres from the vehicle.

- We welcome a new student to the Pidwa team this month. Philip is doing the practical year of his nature conservation studies on Pidwa and we look forward to working with him in 2009.



- Reddy and Orangy became the proud parents to 17 offspring this month. The eggs started to hatch on the 3rd of February and by the 4th, all had emerged. They each live in their own little flat in the apartment block (the wardrobe). Whilst some are doing really well, shedding and feeding regularly, others are a bit slow! Whilst we don't expect all to survive it's amazing to have even got to this stage and we will keep you posted.

Monkey Business



Colin has flown the nest this month and left for boarding school. Just half an hour down the road his troop went to check out the facilities earlier in the month and hear about the studies he would embark on there. The following week was the big move to the Vervet monkey foundation rehabilitation centre. On arrival he was happy with the pears and grapes offered to him and settled into his new accommodation. A week later we went back to visit. Colin already had a friend, Felix, who was busy grooming Colin when we arrived. It is hoped that by the time we go back and visit next time, Colin will be swinging in the trees as part of a troop. That will depend very much on Colin himself and how the integration with other monkeys goes. Oh.....did I mention

Colin is actually a girl! Turns out "she" is probably about 2 years old and if he doesn't have the bright blue testicles by now "he" is in fact a "she"! Colin will always be Colin to us though and always our little boy!