

ASKARI NEWSLETTER

JULY 2009

Overview



have been up to this month.

Yet more lion dartings took place this month, but this time they were planned! Members of the Askari pride were contracepted whilst the African wildcat pair took their chance to settle in before release. There was still plenty of other work to carry on with from anti-poaching patrols to reserve clean-up and many great sightings of lion, elephant and even leopard. Read on to find out more about all this and what else the Askari team

Events on Pidwa

Lion contraception – The aim this month was to contracept the 2 adult females of the Askari pride, Thula and her sister. If possible, it was also planned to contracept either Zingela or Tumblelela. The search started early on the 8th of July and within just a few hours Askari spotted one of the lionesses, Thula, on combretum road. She was on a mission though with male Masana in hot pursuit. Unfortunately she ducked out of sight into the bush. Heading in the direction of Lily pan we expected her to come out there. She did indeed come for a

drink about half an hour later but unfortunately moved off again very quickly before Pierre got a chance to secure her with a bait. Pierre then continued to track on foot but unfortunately it seemed she didn't want to be found. Meanwhile 2 of the sub-adult females had been spotted with Nkosana & Tetemayo on Bushbbay road. The decision was made to contracept these young females and the vet was called. An hour or so later Dr Pete Rogers had arrived and travelled out in the land cruiser to dart the females.



The lions were given an impala to feed on so the darting would be easier. It went smoothly and Askari were on the scene a few minutes later to help carry the lionesses out of the bush on stretchers and onto the Land cruiser. From there, they were transported back to the Askari garden. Here they were contracepted by implantation of a chip under the skin. This was also an opportunity to take some ID photos and trial out a new type of dart for future contraception. A team of scientists from Australia were testing some new equipment so that potentially in the future, contraception does not mean the lion will need to be anaesthetised. The new dart simply releases the contraceptive chip on impact and then the lioness is free to move away as the dart falls out. The scientists took the opportunity to trial different distances with the new dart and then used an ultra



sound machine to see whether the chip had gone in. The work is ground breaking but still in the very early stages and will definitely need quite a few more trials. Both lionesses were successfully contracepted and then placed outside Askari where they received the reversal drug. They woke up about 10 minutes later and sat in the grass until moving off later that afternoon. The lion search continued the following day, again

with an early start. This day was much more frustrating and Thula & Masana were only found about 4pm. Unfortunately they were mating and not at all impressed with the vehicle trying to get near them for darting. The decision was made to leave them to it and possibly try again in a few weeks time.

African wildcat habituation and release – Every day this month there was an extra duty on the volunteer agenda. As Phelele settled into the boma we spent lots of time with her, talking, feeding and habituating her to our presence. Within just a few days she started to rub up against our legs and come running out when she saw a chick was being delivered. At one stage she even caught her own mouse which we put in to test her hunting skills. (Granted however, the mouse didn't exactly move very far!). At the end of the month the decision was made that she was ready for release. On a quiet Sunday afternoon we opened the door of the boma and then sat at the doorway calling her. She soon arrived and without almost a second glance strolled out of the boma and started to explore. She was very confident and bounced around in the Askari pan and sat on the small dam wall. That evening, and the next, she even turned up at the front of



Joe and Katies house and was caught red-handed sitting on top of the mouse boxes in the garage! It appears that she is off exploring at night, as the boma is empty, but then in the morning she can be seen returning and going back into

her box for the day. We hope she'll start to explore even more as time goes on and we'll keep you posted with her progress. Meanwhile, Levi was also released over at Langa langa. His door was left open one night and the next morning he was gone. It remains to be seen whether he will show up at any stage in the future as he is a lot more wild than Phelele.

Members of "TIA" were still with us for some of July and then new arrivals meant the formation of a new group "Askari Channel 4 News Team".

Reserve work

A morning was spent at the new Langa house this month assisting with the big clean-up operation. There was plenty of rubble, wood and old building materials left over as well as old pipes and general rubbish. Rubble and wood were sorted into piles of what was re-useable and what needed to be taken away. An old cattle fence was also taken out in the buffalo camp this month. Tens of metres of barbed wire was pulled out along with some posts and left over rubble from an old dam.

Askari continued to assist with nyala feeding and carry out game counts in the camp. The feeding bays and water troughs were also given their monthly clean out. It would appear from the most recent count that there has been some movement between camps. During last months break in by members of the Askari pride, some nyala broke through the fence and into opposite camps. Fortunately though, this was not the males so no damage is done!

Queen of the night and Prickly pear plants were treated this month using MSMA herbicide. The area targeted was between Main access and Eland loop where some of the plants are so large they need repeat treatments. Members of "Jekyll & Hyde" and "The Inconceivables" will remember treating these plants so rest assured the battle is still being fought!

The Askari team took a tracking and bush walk this month through the Selati river and out onto the northern plains. Fresh lion and rhino tracks were seen and we were able to have a great sighting of giraffe on foot as well as some zebra and wildebeest in the distance on the plains.



All fences of the nyala camp were skoffled this month. Using spades, vegetation touching or close to the live wires was removed to prevent shorts building up in the circuit.

Road clearing took place on Leopard loop in the buffalo camp and on nyala river road behind the house this month. Many cuts and scratches were sustained from the plants you all know to be evil, particularly the dreaded sicklebush and knobthorn!

Two anti-poaching patrols were carried out this month in the buffalo camp. The first was in the south west corner of the camp where no snares were found. The second patrol was just south of Sable road and quite near the Gravelotte fence. On this patrol 6 old snares were removed, 2 unfortunately still with carcasses in them of a wildebeest and red hartebeest. This serves to re-iterate the importance of continual patrols as unfortunately, long after the poachers have gone, some snares may still be active. Thanks again to everyone who has bashed their way through the bush and survived the ticks to help find these snares.

Sleep out this month took place by the 4x4 course in the Selati river. Nothing unusual in terms of human activity was noted and Spotted hyena were heard calling during the early morning.

A new tree was targeted for protection against elephant damage this month. A huge, old Mopane stands on the corner of Marula cutline and Burchell's loop and has had a large amount of bark removed from the trunk by those pesky elephants! Four trips were made to the old mica mine in the buffalo camp and rocks collected to pack around the tree. Rocks start from about a metre away from the tree and will extend out towards the road. Not wanting to hurt their feet on the sharp rocks this should prevent further ring barking by the elephants.



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

The Askari team joined the hunt for impala rations this month and then helped with the butchering process afterwards. An adult male impala was culled.



Poo was the name of the game this month when Askari took two separate drives to collect elephant dung. Ele droppings act as a great natural fertiliser and entire hilux loads were collected from the elephants favorite roads. Once loaded up, we travelled down to the buffalo camp to distribute the dung where it was needed. "Colins' Angels and Beakface" will remember putting plenty of hours into an

erosion site near Hide dam and “The International Lanyard Society” also planted some trees here. This area will be given a little helping hand with the extra fertiliser produced from the elephant dung.

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 – Winter continued to make its presence felt this month with a low of 4°C being recorded and a high of 28°C. There was still more rain to come, a total of 27mm near the start of the month.

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.

Birds of Prey – Askari recorded 39 different Bird of prey sightings this month. To mention just a few there were Bateleurs, Tawny eagles, African hawk eagles, White backed and Hooded vultures, Dark chanting goshawks and Brown snake eagles.

Identification kits & Reserve records – Reserve records continue to be updated with all sightings made by the Askari team. Photos were taken of the young lionesses from the Askari pride this month when they were contracepted. Hopefully ID kits will be produced in time for these females.

Nocturnal mammal survey – Nocturnal drive this month started with a lion sighting of Nkosana and 1 of his sisters on Flaky loop. A spotted dikop and scrub hare were also seen and a lone bull elephant crossing Honeyguide. Towards the end we had a great elephant sighting on Eland loop of at least 20 but probably closer to 40 elephants. Some were sitting down and playing and others were interacting and climbing on each others backs! Lesser bushbaby were also seen.



Sightings & Other news



Lions – Again there were plenty of lion sightings this month, both of the adults and youngsters and new man in town, Masana. At the start of the month Masana was seen mating with Thula. They remained together for at least 3 days that we know of but it was probably for longer. A week later, Umfokazi was seen with Thula's sister. Also mating, they remained around the Main access/Eland loop area for at least 3 days.

On other occasions Umfokazi and Masana were seen together, sometimes with a female in tow and sometimes just them. One of the sub-adult females was reported by reserve management to have a nasty cut on her stomach but Askari didn't get the chance to see this and confirm who it was. On two occasions one of the younger sub-adult females was seen completely alone. Although always in the vicinity of the adults she was always by herself. There were other numerous sightings of the sub-adults including Nkosana and Tetemayo around areas such as the airstrip, buffalo camp and Sid's road.

Rhino – Two rhino sightings this month. The first was called in by reserve management of a female and calf on Combretum road. Isinkwe and Nembelela were also seen up on the northern plains on the fence bordering Langa langa.

Elephants - There were 3 separate sightings of breeding herds this month including the herd with the brand new baby of just a few months old. 1 cheeky boy was particularly interested in the jack attached to the front of our vehicle on Boerbean road! Lone bulls were also seen on Honeyguide, Double gate road and Eland loop.

Cheetah – Male cheetah Makwavo was seen 3 times this month. On one occasion he was hot on the tail of a kudu herd just to the side of the airstrip but unfortunately was left empty pawed. Later that day he was still trying to fill his stomach, this time the hunted were an impala herd. He was seen again on the Marula cutline and Bushbaby junction heading south. The Langa cheetah coalition continue to do well and were seen to make 2 confirmed kills this month. On one occasion they caught a juvenile impala and on the second a sub-adult male. They have been spending a lot of time up in the northern section near Ladybird road and are definitely starting to show their favorite areas that they like to use.



Leopard – The Askari team spotted a leopard this month on Honeyguide. Next to the nyala tree this is much the same area where Issac saw a male leopard last month. It was a sub-adult to adult male and was relaxed as he sat in the grass watching us for a few minutes before casually strolling off into the bush.

Spotted hyena - There were 3 separate sightings of spotted hyena this month but unfortunately none by the Askari team! Pierre saw a group of 3 on the Main access early one morning followed by one alone later that evening. Phil also saw a lone individual by the gate leading through to Langa langa early one evening.

- There were 2 sightings of Serval this month. One by Pierre on Main access but one by the Askari team when we were on the search for lions. It stood watching us for a few moments before bouncing off into the long grass.
- On that same day, a Mozambique spitting cobra was seen on the Main access road which reared up at the car producing some good photo opportunities!
- The recently released tsessebe were seen in the buffalo camp on 2 occasions this month. There just seemed to be 1 bull missing from the group, who is most likely off alone, and they were very relaxed with the vehicle.
- There was also a sighting of one of the rarer mongoose species to inhabit Pidwa in the buffalo camp. Just a quick glimpse of a Meller's mongoose was caught as it dashed out the bush and across the road from one side to the other.