

# ASKARI NEWSLETTER

## JUNE 2009

### Overview



to this month.

This month the long awaited pair of African wildcats arrived on Pidwa and moved into their new bomas. Askari also continued with ongoing projects from biological alien plant control to road clearing. Mixed in with all that was the excitement of a lion darting operation when not 1 but 5 members of the Askari pride strolled into the garden! Read on to find out more about all this and what else the Askari team have been up

### Events on Pidwa

**African wildcat** – There were just a few finishing touches to be made first thing this month to the Wildcat boma in the Askari garden. Firstly the last side of meshing was placed on, again attached to the corrugated iron at the bottom and to the cross beams at the top. The doors were also hung using hinges and had locks and bolts attached. 4 trees, including lavender trees and snuff boxes, were planted in the boma to provide some vegetation. Finally, parts of the roof where the shade cloth overlapped, were sewn together using



fishing line to prevent monkeys or baboons being able to pull it apart and make their way inside. The Askari team then caught 20 fish from 1 of the dams in Langa langa to place in the pond of the boma. Now ready to go we waited, in true African style, for a few weeks. Finally the 26<sup>th</sup> of June was the big day and after a long drive from Johannesburg the cats arrived at Pidwa. The female was released first and her carry box placed in the boma and her door opened. She tentatively

took 1 step out followed by a quick look behind her. It wasn't long before she made her way all the way out the box and went for a stroll around to check out her new home. Within a few hours she had discovered her specially built box/kennel which has Colins old bed inside! Unfortunatley the male's release wasn't quite as smooth and stressed from the journey he ran straight into the fence of his home at Langa Langa and continued to bounce off the fences from side to side. He hit his nose which caused it to bleed but eventually also discovered his wooden house/kennel and moved in there. The female has been named "Phelele" meaning 'Perfect' in Zulu which was chosen by our volunteer who helped to build her home. So far the male is stuck with his previous owners name.....Levi! Noise and activity around the bomas was kept to an absolute minimum in the 1<sup>st</sup> few days but gradually as we go in to visit Phelele she becomes more used to us and even comes out to say hello. She likes to rub up against your legs and nudge you with her head! She is doing really well and expected to be in the boma for at least 3 weeks at which stage we will gauge her progress to see when she'll be released.



**Lion darting** – On the 10<sup>th</sup> of June, when Katie & joe had headed into town to do the food shop, our unwell volunteer remained at the house. Hoping for a quiet day to recover she was notified by Linda, at about 11am, that 5 lions had just walked into the garden! Quickly getting on the radio to let Pierre know, the adult female and 4 sub-adults casually strolled through and straight towards the new pedestrain gate in the corner which leads into the



top nyala camp. Unfortunately, this gate had not been closed properly so the lions proceeded to make their way into the camp! At this stage Pierre arrived to find the 5 lions and some very inquisitive but possibly slightly mental sable antelope in a stand off. A few hours of driving ensued to try and separate predator and prey and get the lions out of the camp. The decision was later made to call in the vet in order to dart the lions and remove them that way. In the meantime, 2 sub-adults were encouraged out of the camp using an impala carcass dragged behind the cruiser. Unfortunately the other 3 did no such thing. Dr Peter Rodgers was able to

dart the remaining sub-adults and adult, Thula, and they were transported out of the camp and into the open outside Askari. Here, they were woken up using the reversal drug and left to think about what they had done! Luckily no lions or antelopes were any worse for wear after the event.

**Lions in Langa** – There seemed to be a theme this month of lions being in places where they shouldn't on Wednesdays! Just 1 week later, on the 17<sup>th</sup>, Pierre received reports of 2 young lions having been seen in Langa langa. Sure enough, some tracks were found just inside the gate and followed down towards the river. At the end of the tracks was 1 sub-adult female. Meanwhile, Askari were sitting with the cheetah coalition. They, unfortunately, were just 500 metres away from the gate we were hoping to coax the lioness out of. Once again, an impala fell victim to being bait and was tied to the back of the land cruiser.



Thankfully, the lioness must have been hungry, as she followed the bait all the way along the fence and out through the gate. Askari were quick to shut the gate behind her and she was rewarded for all her hard work by being given the bait at the end! Safely out of Langa langa we continued to search for tracks. It later became obvious though that in fact just 1 lion was actually in Langa langa and the other was simply sitting on the other side of the fence.

New volunteer arrivals this month meant the formation of a new group “The Lion Whisperer”.

## Reserve work

Plenty of reserve clean-up took this month in various areas of the reserve. Some old water pipes were removed from the Selati river where elephants had been kicking them around. These were cut up and taken back to the dam at HQ. The pump house around the borehole in Askari garden was also knocked down and all the rubble from this was placed in the eroded spot just to the east of the nyala camps. Other old rubble was taken from the Askari garden and placed up at HQ. There were still more telegraph poles and wire to be collected from Langa langa and coals from previous sleep outs were also cleared up.

Askari continued to assist with nylala feeding and carry out game counts in the camp. The feeding bays and water troughs were also given their monthly clean out.

Now that winter is truly with us, it is the perfect time of year to carry out some biological control on the alien plant population. Mealybugs and stem boring beetles have been spreading on our control plants over the summer months but that is a bad time to transfer them due to the rain. Now however, the insects cannot be washed off by the rain so it's the perfect time to move them from infected plants to healthy ones. Scissors and tongs were used to



remove infected parts of moon cactus. This was then taken to healthy prickly pears on Eland loop to spread the insects. These insects work by attacking and feeding on vascular tissue, destroying the plants transport system and eventually killing it off. We continued to use MSMA poison to treat some large Queen of the night plants which are growing on the new road that's been created behind Askari house.

A small area of the Askari pan was dug out this month and lined with concrete. This will allow the pan to hold water all year round and continue attracting wildlife such as birds and amphibians to the garden.

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 Combretum and on the new road behind Askari. After plenty of elephant activity in the area there were some big trees, even needing the chainsaw, to clear out the way.

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** – There were a number of mornings this month where frost was visible on the grass. Askari recorded a low of 4°C but Brian, down on the river, recorded minus 2! The highest temperature recorded was 29°C. We also received some rare rain for this time of year, 13 mm.

**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, lion and cheetah were seen.

**Birds of Prey** – This month the first Black shouldered kite spotted on Pidwa was seen. That was over on Jackal plains north of the river. There were also sightings of gymnogene, little banded and dark chanting goshawks and an array of eagles from Tawny to African hawk and fish eagles. Both White backed and Cape vultures were seen.

**Identification kits & Reserve records** – Reserve records continue to be updated with all sightings made by the Askari team. This month the ID kits for male lions Nkosana and Masana were updated.

**Nocturnal mammal survey** – There was plenty of elephant activity on Eland loop this month during nocturnal drive with a number of bulls being seen but plenty more that we could hear. Other species spotted included lesser bushbaby, spotted dikop and scrub hare.

## Sightings & Other news

**Lions** – There were 20 different sightings of lion this month and we found ourselves in the middle of a real lion mystery. To name a few of the sightings, the Askari pride sub-adults were seen hunting near the nyala shed but unfortunately narrowly missed an impala. Their mums however succeeded the day before when they caught a warthog on the airstrip. The whole pride also strolled past the braai area at Askari one night and sat at the gate for a few minutes before moving off. Masana appears to have turned



up again on Pidwa after a year of no sightings. It has been reported that he was on Garonga during this time but was recently seen with a female (suspected to be Mumu) at Mopane dam. Later on in the month 2 dark maned males were seen in long grass in the heart of Umfokazis territory. At first we suspected 2 intruder males but on closer inspection and after a few more sightings it became clear that Umfokazi and Masana have joined up! Masana has now been seen numerous times this month, sometimes with Umfokazi and sometimes alone. The pair are not believed to be related so the reasoning behind the formation of their coalition is not clear. One

adult lioness was seen by Pierre at Silica dam. We suspect it may have been Zingela or Tumblelela who have not been seen since January. There was no sign of any cubs (5 of which were seen with them in January) so we can only suspect that the cubs are no longer alive. Askari will continue to spend some time in that area to try and establish the situation.

**Rhino** – There was just the one rhino sighting this month of males Isinkwe and Nembelela near Klip pan.

**Elephants** - Adult bulls have provided the majority of elephant sightings this month around the Askari house and surrounding roads. A breeding herd was seen however near the fence across the river and a breeding herd also spent numerous nights feeding in the block right behind the Askari house.

**Cheetah** – Lone male Makwavo was seen a number of times this month in his usual spots of Honeyguide, Marula cutline and near Brians house. The 2 new male cheetah released onto Garonga/Makalai were also seen for the first time and seem to be spending a little time exploring Pidwa.



The 3 males on Langa Langa had a successful month hunting as far as we could tell. At the start of the month we found them feeding on two juvenile impala which they had killed in the same hunt. A few weeks later we saw them narrowly miss an impala during a hunt and a week further on kill a juvenile impala by chasing it into the fence of the boma.

**Leopard** – Again 3 leopards were spotted this month but unfortunately none of them by the Askari team. Brian saw 1 by his house and a visitor to the reserve also saw a male wondering around near Theo Dickies house. Issac, who does the fence patrols, bumped into a large male just across the Selati river on the road leading up to Langa langa.

- 3 new nyala lambs were born this month, 2 in the top camp and 1 in the bottom. It was also the first time since release that all 4 reedbeek in the top camp have been seen
- It has been reported by Makalali that a new baby rhino was born in May. Unfortunately it's to one of the females who we never see but we will do our best to look for any signs
- The male hippo was seen twice this month in a pool just east of the bridge in the Selati river.

