

# ASKARI NEWSLETTER

## MARCH 2009

### Overview



March has seen the arrival of a variety of new game to Pidwa including Common reedbuck and Tsessebe antelope. In the last few weeks the rain has finally started to slow down and been replaced with a real feel of winter in the air. Borat was stolen, lanyards obtained and the cheetah boys released from the boma. Read on to find out more about all this and what else the Askari team have been up to this month.

### Events on Pidwa

Early Sunday morning on the 15<sup>th</sup> of this month 20 Common reedbuck arrived at Pidwa having travelled all the way from Kwa Zulu natal. Amongst the 20, 1 young male and 3 adult females were released into the top nyala breeding camp. The rest of the group, made up of 4 adult males, 2 juvenile males and 10 females, went into the buffalo camp. The following day another 15 arrived. These were all released into the buffalo camp and included 2 sub-adult males, 2 juvenile males and 11 females.



There was more game release later in the month when 10 tsessebe arrived from the Waterberg region and were again released into the buffalo camp. The group was made up of 2 adult males, 4 adult females (3 of which are pregnant) and 4 youngsters. A few of the younger ones unfortunately broke their small horns in transit but nothing that was life threatening or that won't repair.

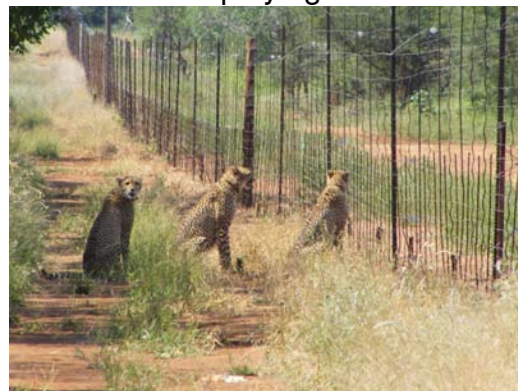
Askari continued to assist with feeding the cheetah in the boma this month, sometimes joining the hunt and often delivering lunch. The 28<sup>th</sup> of March was also the big release day for the boys and time for them to go it alone on Langa langas 2500 hectares. A large adult male impala was shot 1<sup>st</sup> thing that morning and tied to a length of rope held off the back of the cruiser. The gate was opened and the vehicle driven away down the road. The boys were so intent on getting their lunch that I don't think they even noticed as they passed through the golden gates and into the open! They had to work for it a little though and were made to follow the impala a good distance away from the boma before the rope was

released and the cheetah allowed to drag the meal away. They took it off into the bushes and tucked in, maybe not even realising they were no longer in the safe confines of their boma. We returned to Langa Langa a few days later with the telemetry kit to check on their progress. Their collars emit a radio signal which we are able to pick up with our receiver and aerial. We made our 1<sup>st</sup> check near the boma; thinking they wouldn't have gone too far. We didn't pick up any signal so carried on up the road towards the koppie. Just as we picked up a beep we got a radio call from Pierre that he had found them lying on the road between the



Langa gate and the boma. On trying to pass them, Pierre was pursued, probably expected to throw an impala off the back! We however, continued the telemetry mission and about 10 minutes later had tracked them quite far into the bush off the road. By walking on foot we came across the 3 of them lying down. Two put their heads up and the other one just stayed lying down. From about 15 metres away they didn't seem to mind our presence at all and rolled around playing. After a few

minutes a wildebeest snorted behind us. Suddenly their heads popped up, ears cocked and one of the boys led the coalition off in the direction of the noise. This was really encouraging. They didn't look too hungry but obviously realise what they must now do to fill their own tummies. They can be seen on the right here checking out their new surroundings and seeing what exciting things are to come on the other side..... the great Pidwa north. Their location and activities will be followed very closely for the next month or 2 as they settle in.



They obviously couldn't be released without finally being given their names so here goes....."Hwaqile" is the word for 'dark of colour' in Zulu which refers to the fact that one of the brothers has hardly any white on his tail tip. It is very dark as are the markings behind his ears. "Nkuku" means 'chicken' in Zulu and is the

name for the border which is always at the back of the group. The last name is “Xambila” which translates to ‘explore’ in Tsonga referring to his explorative behaviour since being out of the boma. We will keep you updated on the progress of Hwaqile, Xambila & Nkuku in the next few months.

“The Inconceivables” were still with us for the first week of March.

## Reserve work

Two road clearing sessions were put in on Steenbuck this month. With all the rain and summer growth it’s like a battlefield to drive some of the roads so that was seen to with the brushcutter, clippers and pangas. All cut stumps were treated with chopper herbicide to prevent re-growth.

On the alien plant hit list this month were Prickly pear and Queen of the night plants on Nyala river road. The area cleared of Datura in the buffalo camp by “Colins angels and Beakface” is looking great and a follow up session will be made soon just to catch the last few stragglers and completely rid the site.



Erosion control continued on Central cutline. The affected area was cleared of old, ineffective brush packing, picked and sown. Encroaching umbrella thorn from further up Central cutline was then used for new brush packing to prevent animal grazing and splash erosion. A Natal mahogany sapling was planted amongst the new brush packing in an attempt to bind the soil and help it collect nutrients. It’s looking so good I’ll have to find a new spot for the vegetation lecture and my demonstration of how “not” to brush pack!

Fence maintenance has continued to provide plenty of work for Askarians this month. A whole session of poisoning was carried out in the nyala camps, both inside and out. Follow up skoffeling (removal of dead vegetation) then finished the job off to ensure all wires are free of vegetation. Clearing of fences continued at Brians site on Main access using slashers to cut away the overgrown grass and bushes.

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 in the early hours of the 1<sup>st</sup> of March brought another 130mm of rain. With the water table already being so full, roads turned to rivers once more and again the Selati flowed vigorously. Another 20mm fell throughout the month and temperatures ranged from a low of 16 °c to a maximum of 30 °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, lion and honey badger were seen.

**Birds of Prey** – Sightings this month have included White backed vultures, Bateleurs, 2 separate sightings of Martial eagle and a Tawny eagle. Fish eagles have also been seen flying above the nyala camps and along Main access.

**Identification kits & Reserve records** – Reserve records continue to be updated with all sightings made by the Askari team. ID kits for the male cheetah in the boma have been completed ready for their release. An ID kit was also created for a new male leopard seen close to Askari and for Nkosana, one of the older male cubs of the Askari pride.

## Sightings & Other news

**Lions** – The 2<sup>nd</sup> of March was “Lion day” on Pidwa. First of all Zingela & Tumblela were seen briefly on Granite before dashing off into the long grass. We were lucky enough to follow Umfokazi down Marula cutline as he took an



early evening stroll and that evening the cubs of the Askari pride were waiting on Main access to welcome us home. The Askari pride were seen the following day by Theo Dickies and were back on Main access on the 11<sup>th</sup>. Umfokazi was heard vocalising the following night around Central cutline. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of March the pride provided an amazing sighting as all 9 of them fed on a female waterbuck. Just metres away, the

ripping of flesh, crunching on bones and the skuffles that ensued were quite a sight. Brian was lucky enough to see the whole event and it was in fact Umfokazi himself that took the waterbuck down all by himself.

**Rhino** – Isinkwe & Nembelela were seen twice this month, both times on Jackal plains. Isikhuma (aka Big Al) appears to have been causing mischief again on the eastern buffalo camp fence. Damage was caused to the fence and both Al and a second males tracks were seen on either side. Luckily the fence was still mainly in tact and no rhinos switched sides!

**Elephants** - 2 adult bulls were seen around the airstrip pan one night and they continued to use the area and that across the river for the following few days. A breeding herd of approximately 20 was seen feeding on Boerbean for a number of days in a row and a few members of the herd strayed across to Lily pan for a drink and splash around. An adult bull in full musth was throwing his weight around on Bushbaby so we made a turn and took a different route! A breeding herd of about 25 was also seen at Cutline dam.

**Cheetah** – Busayo & Makwavo were seen once this month in their usual Marula cutline spot and a following 2 times on Grysbok and Main access. The female with 3 sub-adults was also seen on the airstrip and again on Askari drive but they all seemed very skittish and the sightings weren't great.

**Leopard** – Askari were treated to an amazing leopard sighting this month just 100 metres from Askari itself. Heading back from HQ at 17.45pm a young male leopard dashed across the road only to stop a few metres off the edge to have a look at us. Just 5 metres away he spent a minute or 2 soaking up the last of the days sunshine before balancing along a log and having a quick look in the water below. About 3 minutes after first catching sight he had leapt off into the bushes, seemingly completely un-phased by his human encounter. He was just a young male, approximately 2 years old and not an individual we've seen before. We hope he stays around to provide us with plenty more sightings!



**Hippo** – It would appear that destruction of the fence by recent floods isn't necessarily an entirely bad affair. This month, 2 new hippos were seen entering Pidwa, under the bridge by the gravel road. Whether they stay and call Pidwa home will remain to be seen but for now our hippo number has increased to 3!

**Honey badger** – A sub-adult sized honey badger was seen making a run for it across the road on Big pig road during a herbivore drive this month. It's possible it was still young enough to be with mum and that mum was just a few metres ahead in the long grass.

- 2 new nyala young have been born in the bottom breeding camp during March bringing the total in that camp to 13 and 30 altogether.

- During a good will gesture of inviting the GVI volunteers for an impala potjie, the ultimate crime was committed. They did indeed, and I'm embarrassed to say it, manage to escape with Borat. While Askarians were having far too much fun and dancing the night away, our guard was down. Obviously abusive texts ensued but without even asking, Borat was returned a few days later. The only explanation for this can be that GVI finally admit that they know he is better off at Askari. But do not fear Askarians. Even though GVI are too weak to hack the pace of the competition and gave in so easily, Askari are not, they are strong! New plans have already been made to re-kindle the competitive spirit, watch this space!

- An "Askari wall of fame" has been created this month in the Askari kitchen. All past Askarians, their adventures, work and social 'goings on' feature.



- This months purchase of de-merit drinks had the added bonus of a free gift. Indeed with the green bottle of funky



monkey we received no less than a lanyard! A luminous green, funky monkey lanyard! The "International Lanyard society" will be pleased to hear it is hanging proudly in the Askari office!

- We are pleased to let you know that all the snakelings are still alive. Since the last update, 4 who were not doing too well, have had to be force fed. Whilst not a very pleasant experience for the baby, it may be the only way to get them going. The hope is that once inside them, the pinky mouse will kick their digestive system into action. Other babies continue to feed and shed well.