

ASKARI NEWSLETTER

MAY 2008

Welcome to the first copy of the Askari newsletter. We aim to produce a newsletter each month and send to all volunteers past and present so you can keep updated with what is happening on the reserve and follow the progress of projects you were involved with whilst here. We hope you enjoy it, please let us know of any improvements or additional things you'd like to see in the newsletter!

Overview



Winter has definitely arrived at Pidwa. The last recorded rainfall was on the 2nd of May, the bush is turning brown and the trees starting to lose their leaves. The summer residents are gradually disappearing. No more dung beetles, snakes or tortoises to be seen. There are certainly far fewer spider webs for us to drive through!

Events on Pidwa

The big event this month was the escape and subsequent re-capture of "Isikhumba", the bull rhino in the buffalo camp. On the 9th May fence patrol found the Eastern fence of the buffalo camp broken and rhino tracks on both sides of the fence. It was suspected that Isikhumba had fought with another bull across the fence and then left the camp onto the main reserve.

Days on end of tracking ensued as it became clear that Isikhumba was on the outside of the fence trying to get back in. However he proved very hard to find and could not be found even by the helicopter which was called in 3 times to search for him. Incidentally it is this elusiveness that earned him his name, "Isikhumba" meaning 'hide of beast' in Zulu.

It appeared that after the first few days Isikhumba decided to go exploring. We think he met up with a female in oestrous and even walked as far as Makalali and back before he was finally found sleeping in a drainage line near Mopane Dam.



On the 22nd May the huge relocation operation was launched to place him back into the buffalo camp. This was not without its' dramas as once darted he fell down in the middle of a thick block of bush. Getting the trailer in there and then him into the trailer proved tricky and at one stage he even managed to put his foot through the floor of the trailer! Eventually though the

operation was a success and he was re-released in the buffalo camp after being checked over by the vet and with a new identifying micro-chip in his horn.

Watch this space for updates as although now returned to the buffalo camp Isikhumba is still “patrolling” the Eastern fence-line. We are not yet sure whether he is looking for another fight or perhaps a lady friend he met whilst on the outside?!

Reserve work

Plenty of road-clearing has taken place this month of Sicklebush from Nyala, the river road that runs behind the Askari house. Also in the Buffalo camp and on a few roads east of Marula cutline, branches and bushes have been cut back and had poison applied to their stems to prevent re-growth. Magnolia, the Natal mahogany, is doing well from weekly waterings and the brush-packing seems to have done the trick as there was elephant activity very nearby this week yet the sapling remained untouched.



More rocks have also been added around the trunk of the common false thorn trees on Main Access. The elephants however are being defiant and have still managed to take a few branches off this month. They have not been able to remove any large sections of bark though and that is what's most important.

Monitoring projects

Weather monitoring - May has seen the coldest temperature recorded this year. A low of 13°C showed up on the thermometer on three occasions this 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 continue collecting information for animal ID kits.

Identification kits & Reserve records - Recently good photos have made it possible to create numerous ID kits for lion, cheetah and rhino. Part of these ID kits is to give each animal a name so they can be easily identified for research purposes.



The 2 sub-adult bull rhinos which use the area around Bushbaby and Ratel pan have been named “Isinkwe” and “Nembelela”. Isinkwe means ‘bushbaby’ in Zulu and Nembelela means ‘hang’ or ‘dangle’ in Tsonga. Those of you who have seen him will remember that he has a piece of skin ‘dangling’ from the top of his left ear shown in this photo.

The large male lion that appears to be the pride male of the Askari pride has been named “Umfokazi”. This means ‘stranger’ in Zulu and relates to the suspicion that he has come in from another reserve.



The 2 lionesses that use the area around the airstrip and Grysbok have been named “Zingela” and “Tumbelela”. These mean ‘hunt’ in Zulu and ‘ambush’ in Tsonga respectively. Members of “The Fantastic Four” will remember them as the 2 that were disturbed from the drainage line when we went shooting and who we then saw at the concrete pan on the way back to Askari.

The lone young male lion seen on Ranch Dam wall will be known as “Sehlane”. This means ‘lonely’ in Zulu.

The male and female sub-adult lions which are often seen in the Central cutline, Duiker road area are named “Masana” and “Mumu”. Masana (the male) means ‘sun rays’ in Tsonga and Mumu (female) means ‘sun’ in Shangaan. This relates to the fact that they have only ever been seen walking around in the midday heat.



The coalition of 2 male cheetah have been named “Busayo” and “Makwavo”. Busayo means ‘dominant’ in Zulu as we suspect him to be the leader of the pair. Makwavo means ‘his brother’ in Tsonga.

Birds of Prey – Bird of prey sightings continue to be good. Many Dark chanting goshawks were seen this month as well as Lizard buzzards and Bateleurs. A new White backed vulture nest was found in the drainage line south of the Duiker road sleep out spot.

Sightings

Cheetah - Busayo and Makwavo have been sighted numerous times this month. As always the majority of these sightings are around Marula cutline. Exciting news is that the female cheetah and her 3 cubs (who are growing fast) have been seen on 3 separate occasions on Pidwa north leading to hopes that they will use this area as their territory. They were also seen this month with an impala kill near the airstrip.

Lions – Zingela and Tumblela have been seen as far East as Ranch Dam and also relaxing down near the buffalo camp; not phased at all by the helicopter that was flying over looking for Isikhumba. Masana and Mumu were seen, again walking around in the afternoon heat at the same junction of Central cutline and Duiker road. The whole Askari pride (2 lionesses, 6 cubs and Umfokazi) were seen together one morning on Eland loop. The cubs were very inquisitive of the vehicle as can be seen in the photo above and Umfokazi was keeping a close eye on things. They were very active and restless and we left them moving down into the river, vocalising loudly.



Elephants



We have had quite a few sightings of adult bulls on Pidwa north and there is plenty of evidence of elephants being around with all the dung and branches scattered on the roads. The elephants generally move up to Pidwa more in the winter when the Makutsi river dries up on Makalali so we will expect to see plenty more in the coming months.

Rhino – As we spent so much time looking for Isikhumba this month we bumped into plenty of rhino! It was mainly Isinkwe and Nembelela but we also saw a female and male with a young to sub-adult sized calf. It was very hard to identify them in the thick bush so we will hope to get a better sighting of them in the future. On one of the helicopter trips over the buffalo camp we were very excited to spot a tiny rhino calf with one of the cows. Probably only a month old that puts the numbers up to 4 cows, 1 calf and 1 bull now in the buffalo camp.

Other – There have been 3 separate sightings of Honey badger this month. Two animals were alone but the third sighting was of a pair of adults. As they ran through the grass they were being followed by a Dark chanting goshawk, a great example of the symbiotic relationship that exists between these 2 animal species.

The Askari team also saw their first ever Ground Hornbills on Pidwa this month. There were 5 birds, 4 adults and 1 juvenile, on the border of Pidwa south and Garonga. This is very good news that these rare birds have found a habitat they can use on Pidwa.

Lion watch!



As we all know what entertainment Leon can be we plan to give you a monthly update on what “Lion” himself has been up to! Unfortunately our 1st month is a little quiet as Lion is on well deserved leave and therefore back at home but we hope to update you with some trials and tribulations from the world of Lion in future months!