

ASKARI NEWSLETTER

MAY 2009

Overview



With the winter temperatures have come more great sightings; again plenty of lion and elephant, on one occasion both at the same time! Askari have continued with ongoing projects as well as taking on a new one to home an African wildcat. A new sable enclosure has been erected and a new road made behind Askari house. Read on to find out more about all this and what else the Askari team have been up to this month.

Events on Pidwa



An exciting new project presented itself to Askari this month in the form of an offer to home 2 African wildcats. The present owner died and so the wildcat brother and sister, of about 2 years old, need a new home. The female is unfortunately not able to hunt for herself and will need support feeding. The male however is able to hunt and will hopefully be released onto Pidwa after a short time in a boma. As they are siblings the male will be taken to Langa langa house where a 4x4 metre boma has been built for him. He will be released from there and the female will be based at Askari. Unfortunately African Wildcat populations are at risk through inbreeding with domestic cats. This threat to their genetic diversity means that pure bloods, like the ones Askari is receiving, are really important to the future of wild populations. We hope that the female will meet a wild male and that her pure blood kittens can be released onto Pidwa.

So this month, hours and hours of work went in to building a holding boma for her in the Askari garden! The plan for the boma is that once she has moved out, it can hold other species in the future such as caracal and serval if an animal presents itself in need of rehabilitation.



The first task was to mark out the 12x6 metre area and dig 8 holes in which to place the upright poles. Poles then needed to be collected from Langa langa which involved plenty of trips to do chain-sawing,

lifting, carrying and manouvering! All poles then needed treating with carbolineum to prevent weathering and attack from termites.

Once all holes were ready there was plenty of concrete mixing to be done and poles were secured into the ground. Cross beams were then measured, cut to size and attached using wire. Trenches also had to be dug around the entire structure in which we could bury corrugated iron. This is to prevent any digging or burrowing animals from making an escape!



When the main structure was complete it was time for the roof. One third of it is corrugated iron to provide shelter and shade for the cat. The other roof section is covered with shade cloth. Now with a roof, the boma needed some walls. Chicken mesh was used for this and attached to the corrugated iron in the trenches at

the bottom and to the cross beam poles at the top. There was plenty of nail hammering to be done and lots of binding wire involved to hold everything together. Finally, a small water hole was made and branches, trees and climbing logs moved in.



Here you can see some photos as the boma progressed. There are still a few finishing touches to be added before the arrival of the cats in early June. The next newsletter should contain snaps of the finished product and hopefully a little African wildcat inside!

“The Lone Mulanger” was still with us for the month of May and we owe a huge thank you to Maja for all the blood, sweat, tears, hours and concrete mixing that went into the boma!

Reserve work

Sleep out this month took place on Jackal plains north of the Selati. Just after camp had been set-up we heard a commotion in the river. With all the splashing of water we assumed an elephant herd were on their way through. A few minutes later though a herd of wildebeest stampeded their way up the bank and onto the plains. It later became clear that lions must have chased them through as we then heard a male and female calling from the river throughout the night.

Askari continued to assist with nylala feeding and carry out game counts in the camp. Now that winter has started the nyala are also being fed lucern along with thier wildsbok dry food.



The fight against alien plants goes on and this month prickly pear and Queen of the night populations on Langa langa were targeted. The death of the chosen victims will be monitored in case there is need for a second treatment, especially to some of the larger Queen of the nights.

The corridor between Askari garden and the nyala camp was closed off this month so we set about making a new road allowing access to the river. The clearest path possible was chosen meaning that only minimal vegetation was removed or cut back to form a two track. The road winds from the south western corner of the Askari garden round the back of the houses and comes out again at the north west corner.

Still on a mission to fill Askari pan, the team collected clay soil from the pan near Askari on main access. Clay soil in particular is great for retaining water so a hilux load was put into the far end of the pan. A few more loads will probably be needed and then compacted down for full success. Already though, with just a little water each day, pools are forming in the pan. There is a great collection of wildflowers, attracting a wide range of butterfly species. There are frogs and toads and the grass and fever trees are growing like wild fire.

Sapling tree populations continue to be watered by the Askari team to help them through the increasingly dry winter months.

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 continues to send us some extremely chilly morning and evening temperatures at Pidwa. The lowest recorded temperature was just 8°C and a maximum of 31°C was reached during the day. 15 mm of rain fell.

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 rhino were seen.

Birds of Prey – Bird of prey sightings continue to be good with a huge group of vultures seen on an old giraffe carcass near Nico Fouries gate. African fish eagles, Dark chanting goshawks and Tawny eagles have also been seen.

Identification kits & Reserve records – Reserve records continue to be updated with all sightings made by the Askari team. A new ID kit was made for a female rhino this month who has been seen a number of times on the airstrip with a young calf. She has been named “Nhangwa” which means ‘rounded’ in Zulu referring to the strange shape of both her horns. She has a young male calf with her of approximately 2 years old.

Sightings & Other news

Lions – Again, the Askari pride has provided all the lion sightings this month. It appears that the cubs are now braving it on their own and although still with their mothers on some occasions, have also been seen alone. We were lucky enough



early one evening to come across them hunting. On main access the 2 males headed off into the block. We could hear impala alarm calls and the other 4 lined themselves up on the road. About 10 minutes later there was suddenly action. 2 impala darted in front of the car, 1 just an inch away from the claws of a female cub. Another female had a close miss to the right of us and with that it was all over. Unfortunately no meal for the cubs at the end of it

but it was amazing to watch the build-up and the planning and just how close they came. Other sightings of the pride were on Eland loop, by the Selati pool under the bridge, Pidwa main gate and 4 times on Main access. Early morning on the 29th of May the whole pride made their way down the Askari house western fence. When Joe popped his head out the bathroom window to check the weather, he was greeted by Nkosana staring right back at him!

Rhino – Isinkwe was seen alone this month oddly enough as he is usually with



Nembelela. We hope Nembelela is well, it's possible he was just off mating. White rhino male number 3 was also seen, down in Pidwa south and an unknown female and calf briefly on Central cutline. This photo shows a new rhino. ‘Nhangwa’ as she's been named and her calf seem to call the airstrip home these days and have been sighted there on a number of occasions.

Elephants - A mixture of breeding herds and bulls have provided sightings this month. It has been reported that a new calf has also been born although the Askari team are yet to have seen it. During one elephant sighting we were watching a couple of bulls. They moved out onto the road behind us, just as the whole Askari pride started walking up the road towards us from the front! We couldn't decide which way to look but the lions then moved down into the river before they met up with the elephants.



Cheetah – The Langa langa cheetah coalition continue to be monitored closely with at least 3 visits to them each week. Although not seen with any kills this month they are obviously managing to feed themselves successfully and continue to range over a wide area of Langa. Makwavo was just seen once this month, relaxing on the airstrip. He continues to do well keeping himself alive without his brother, even in the core of the Askari prides territory, go Makwavo.

Leopard – There were 3 leopard sightings this month. The first one was most likely the same male seen back in March as it was at the same spot near Askari drive and again a young male. The second sighting was of a small female wondering down Marula cutline near Brian's house and the third a small female dashing across the road in Langa langa.

- A new sable camp was erected this month to the north of the Askari garden. In future this new camp will house a new population of female sable with 1 breeding male.
- The tracks of a female, male and **BABY** hippo were reported this month! You'll remember we reported the break in of 2 hippo earlier this year. Well it appears one of them was obviously a pregnant females and now there is the patter of little hippo feet. We are yet to have a sighting of the baby itself but we'll keep you posted.