

# ASKARI NEWSLETTER

## NOVEMBER 2009

### Overview



This month the bush has become littered with herbivore young as the summer rains have truly arrived. The first Askari bat boxes have been made and usual projects continued from reed re-location to alien plant control and anti-poaching work. The Langa cheetah coalition defied the fence to reach the other side and Ground hornbills have been heard! Read on to find out more about all this and what else the Askari team have been up to this month.

### Events on Pidwa

**Cheetah escape!** – During a routine visit to the Langa cheetah boys we followed



a signal straight from the gate, along the fence, east towards the river. We laughed at Andy (duty telemetrist that day) when he suggested he was picking them up on the other side of the fence. Until, that was.....we got there! Sure enough we soon saw Nkuku sitting on Pidwa north open system directly opposite his brothers Xambila and Hwaqile still on Langa! It appeared

that he may have burst through the fence during a hunt as while Nkuku was looking rather full on Pidwa north side, his brothers, remaining on Langa, were thin. Reserve management was duly called and the decision made to bait him back through to the Langa side. A male impala fell victim to the cause and was shot to be dragged behind the cruiser for Nkuku to follow. He took the bait well and followed it all the way back through the gate. Here, he was re-united with his brothers and even had a whole impala to show for his adventure!



**African wildcat update** – For the first few weeks of November, female wildcat Phelele continued to visit each evening to receive chicks and supplementary food. After a few weeks however, she no longer turned up. Whilst we feared the

worst for her safety we started to think of other possibilities. Her previous owner reported that she once disappeared for a period of 3 months whilst with her. Other wildcat rehabilitators have reported similar situations, especially with females. Her disappearance did in fact coincide with the kittens estimated 2 month birthday. It is known that from 2 months old, kittens join their mother on learning adventures before turning independent at 5 months. We hope this may be the case and that perhaps she will return again in the coming months after showing the kittens the way. Fingers crossed and we will keep you posted.

Volunteer arrivals meant a new group was formed for the 1<sup>st</sup> few weeks of November, “The R-Andy darters”. They were replaced by “The Storm Troopers” for the last working month of Askari before the Christmas break.

## Reserve work

Road-clearing continued on Leopard loop this month in the buffalo camp. The section of “Dagga boy” road south of Buffalo dam was also cleared.

More bull rushes were collected from the ever muddy and slimy Klip pan in November. This time they were re-located to Hartebeest pan in the buffalo camp, newly filled by the seasonal rains. The reeds were placed in 3 different areas of the pan to see where they take best. It is hoped the reeds will further proliferate and begin to attract bird species to the pan. The bull rushes placed in Buffalo pan last month are doing really well. It looks like the common reed grass may need a little longer for the roots to fully take.



Sleep out this month took place in a new spot of the Selati river on Langa langa. Down the steep bank you come across a huge expanse of sand, perfect for some bush football and a sleep out. Lions were heard throughout the night and nothing unusual in terms of human activity was noted.



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.

Four lantana sessions took place this month to continue the fight against these alien invaders. All sessions took place in the area behind Lily pan dam wall. Queen of the night and Prickly pear were also treated with herbicide on Boerbean, Combretum, Main access and Jackal plains.

Three anti-poaching patrols were carried out in the buffalo camp in three different areas. No evidence of new poacher activity was seen although 3 old snares were removed from a block poachers are known to have previously used.



2 bat houses were made this month to provide habitats and suitable nesting sites for bat populations. A design was used from “Bat conservation international” and modified slightly to produce a wall mounted, single chambered bat house. One box has so far been attached to the northerly facing wall of the Askari house.

Work has started on a new tree this month for protection from elephant damage. The Transvaal saffron on Lily pan access was the tree targeted. Rocks were collected from the mine in the buffalo camp and arranged around the trunk of the tree with the sharpest edges pointing upwards. This deters elephants from debarking the tree as they don’t want to hurt their feet on the way in! Three trips were carried out but more will be needed to achieve a 2 metre rock perimeter around the tree.

This month, the decision was made to provide supplementary feed to the eland in the buffalo camp. Askari assisted reserve management with transporting lucerne bales from the nyala shed to the buffalo camp and spreading them out opposite Leopard pan on Double gate road. The majority of the eland herd were found to be using this area while a few bales were placed by Hide dam for 2 males down there. Unfortunately “Clicky - The one eared eland” (for those of you who met him) did not make an appearance this year and is believed to have died. Lucerne was provided just for 3 weeks until the 1<sup>st</sup> big rains arrived bringing natural browse back.



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 total of 160.5mm of rain has fallen during November creating many new areas of water for the animals to use. Small rivers have even

started to flow across roads where drainages cross. The average minimum temperature was 18°C and average maximum 29°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, rhino and lion were seen.

**Birds of Prey** – The usual array of birds of prey were spotted in November from Gymnogenes, Bateleurs and Lizard buzzards to varied vulture species, Hawk eagles and more.

**Identification kits & Reserve records** – Reserve records continue to be updated with all sightings made by the Askari team. ID kits were updated this month for pride male “Umfokazi” and Askari pride lionesses “Thula” and “Azana”.

## Sightings & Other news

**Lions** – There were plenty of lion sightings this month, mostly of the Askari pride adults. Umfokazi was seen alone, with the pride females and also with Masana. On one occasion we were treated to the rare sighting of all the adults, Umfokazi, Masana, Thula and Azana, together. They were hot and bothered lying in the shade near the airstrip pan. Zingela, Tumbela and their 5 cubs were seen in front of Brian’s house and sub-adult male Nkosana was seen alone on the Langa fence. He was very thin and appeared to have an injury to his front, left leg causing him to limp.



**Cheetah** –Makwavo was seen a number of times this month, once by the nyala shed, once on Marula cutline and then up by the Langa fence. The 2 collared Garonga males (named by Makalali as Browning and Purdy) were also seen on Pidwa north, at the junction of Double gate and Ted’s road. The langa coalition was not seen with any kills this month but continue to sustain themselves well.

**Rhino** – There were plenty of good sightings in the buffalo camp this month as the rhino took advantage of the extra lucerne placed down for the eland. Male Isikhuma, females Memfuza and Ondli and calf Ingane were all seen feeding together on a number of occasions. In the open system Kenya, Tsavo and Thola were seen on 2 occasions as well as Isinkwe &



Nembelela. Nhangwa was seen once with her calf Nono.

**Elephants** - Breeding herds were seen on 3 occasions this month at Lily pan, in the Selati bridge pool and on Flakythorn road. Other sightings were of adult bulls in groups of between 1 and 3. A new baby was reported on the 13<sup>th</sup> of this month, born to a cow undergoing reversal from contraception. The calf is yet to be seen by the Askari team so we'll be keeping our eyes peeled!

- The first impala lamb of the season was seen on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November
- Unfortunately it appears that the female ostrich incubating the nest in the buffalo camp has been killed. During a check of the nest, 5 eggs were found to smell rotten. 1 was still ok and taken back to Askari for artificial incubation. Sadly, it was too late and that egg also rotted a few days later. We hope another batch will be laid soon by one of the 2 remaining females in the camp.



- The lone Gemsbok was seen this month at Mopane dam
- Askari volunteer Andy took his Level 1 guiding assessment drive this month with FGASA assessor Mark Montgomery. We would like to congratulate him very much on passing and commend him for the many hours of work that went into becoming a fully qualified FGASA Level 1 guide. Good 1 Andy, proud of ya!
- Ground hornbills have been heard this month around Brian's house and along Flakythorn road. Hopefully they are exploring well and will turn up in the nesting box any day now! Very exciting.



- On the 6<sup>th</sup> of November a Tsessebe calf, just 1 or 2 days old was seen in the buffalo camp
- Two different sets of black backed jackal pups have been seen this month. One pair on Main access and a second pair using a den on Marula cutline.
- Summer has brought a number of rare bird visitors to Pidwa including comb ducks and spoonbills.
- A male boomslang snake was seen crossing the road on Langa langa.
- During nocturnal drive this month a lesser bush baby, a spotted eagle owl and a bull elephant were seen.

