

ASKARI NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER 2008

Overview



What a busy month October has been and finally some rain has arrived at Pidwa. Although not yet the real summer rains we have had a few sprinklings, hopefully a sign of wet things to come. October also meant the arrival of rare Sable antelope to Pidwa, an exciting addition to the nyala and reedbuck camps. Cheetah preparations continued, aerial game counts were made and poachers were taken down a notch or two! Read on to find out more about all this and what else the

Askari team have been up to this month.

Events on Pidwa

The 4th of October and the Askari team departed for the annual Sable auction held at Selati game pens. There had been a little talk of bringing Sable to Pidwa so we were excited about the day ahead. On arrival, once the bidding started, prices seemed to be a little crazy with the top bid being for an adult male with 46 inch horns fetching a mere 3 million rand! Luckily though, not all individuals were quite so pricey so Pidwa bought a great collection of 14 young males. Only 8 months old their horns have a long way to go until they're record breakers but what better place to grow up than in the wilderness of Pidwa! The group of boys were delivered the next day and released into the top nyala breeding camp. They were a little shy for the first few days but have now settled in really well and are an amazing sight from the Askari back door every morning and afternoon.

Preparations have continued at the cheetah boma site on Langa langa. Internal roads have been created and many of the sicklebush and raisin bushes cleared out. The 2 dams that the boma will incorporate have also been fixed and eroded areas of the boma brush packed and filled with rocks.



An aerial game census of the Greater Makalali Conservancy takes place every second year and this year it was in October. This is the best time of year as far as visibility goes when the veld is at its thinnest and the chances of counting all game accurately at its greatest. A total of 21 flying hours were carried out in the helicopter with a pilot, data capturer and 2 counters (Pierre being one) on board. As well as the all important numbers collected the census

provided some great sightings from the air including 3 leopards. One of these was a large male on the Langa koppie which Jekyll & Hyde will remember hearing during sundowners.

New volunteer arrivals meant the formation of a new group for October, "The International Lanyard Society".

Reserve work



Road-clearing was completed on Sable road in the buffalo camp this month and on Nyala river road. Lots of common spike thorn caused injuries on Nyala whereas Sable was mostly raisin species. Magnolia, the Natal mahogany continues to defy the giraffe that insist on eating her and 3 new saplings were planted this month in the buffalo camp. We hope that the roots of "Puppert" the sausage tree, "In memorial" the nyala tree and "Jack Russel" the Brown Ivory will help stabilise the soil of the erosion site being repaired.

2 reserve clean up sessions took place this month. One removed old piping from the Selati river and close to Lily pan and some old fencing was also taken out from near the Selati river crossing. Secondly an old rubbish tip was discovered and all metal, plastics etc sorted into bags and disposed of.

Sleep outs this month took place in the drainage line north of New road and at the Duiker road spot. Both were very windy nights and also wet. This meant it was very quiet on the animal front and not much action was seen.

Game counts took place in the nyala camps this month and sadly the younger of the two sub-adult males in the bottom camp died. He was seen with blood coming from one of his horns and we suspect that the older male gave him a bit of a go. Askari continue to assist Christof with feeding, particularly on the weekends. Each of the 2 water troughs were cleaned out this month and the old lucerne build up removed from the feeding bays.



Askari continued to assist reserve management with the feeding of eland in the buffalo camp. Rhino sightings occur almost daily now and the adult female with young calf has been named "Memfuza". This means 'to eat a lot of something you like' and relates to her fondness for the lucerne. Clicky, the one eared eland, continues to be our best friend and most popular with the Askari team!

Alien plants in the block behind Askari house were treated this month. We have started to use a small hand drill on the

Queen of the Nights to make sure the herbicide reaches the depths of the plants central nervous system!

Work at the common false thorns continued with a few trips into the buffalo camp mine. Progress is coming along nicely with only a few more trips needed before completion of the 2nd tree.

Anti-poaching patrols have been a huge part of Askaris work this month. At the beginning of the month some fish poachers were caught red handed. When Pierre confronted them they ran into the bush and Pierre gave chase. Upon catching up with them Pierre rugby tackled one to the ground. On seeing the tackle, their friend gave in and the 2



were promptly collected by Gravelotte police, great job Pierre! In the buffalo camp however there were no signs of the poachers themselves, just plenty of snares that had been left behind. The first of these were found by Pidwa staff just walking through the camp who then alerted reserve management and then

Askari. We walked through various blocks in a chain armed with pliers and on our first patrol alone collected 29 snares. The following day we went back and found another 31 and a few days later a whopping 65. Luckily we seem to have caught them early as some had not even been set yet and there were no signs of anything having been caught. Needless to say, patrols in the area will continue for weeks to come as we suspect there are more to find. A patrol was also carried out on the Langa langa koppie but so far so good and there are no signs of any poacher activity in that area.

As reported last month, we were searching for lionesses Zingela & Tumblela to be darted and removed. Time ran out however this month with permits and the sale going through so lions were removed from Makalali instead to be sold. We have recently suspected that one of the pair may be pregnant anyway so we are quite excited now they are staying incase we hear the patter of tiny lion feet soon?



Restoration work was completed on the hide at Hide dam this month. Support struts were placed under the shelf and a table made for the back corner. Windows were cut in the back wall to increase air flow through the hide and the bench was foamed and canvassed.

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. During research routes this month rhino, elephant and more spotted

hyena were seen. A nocturnal drive was also made this month but it didn't prove very eventful except for a large number of Lesser bushbabies!

Monitoring projects

Weather monitoring – October has been a really hot month with a top temperature of 38.5°C. Finally the sign of a bit of water on the way as one small thunder storm produced 7mm of rain. We also had a few other little dribbles giving us a total of 9mm for October.

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.



Birds of Prey – We've seen a huge number of White backed vultures this month. Often surrounding kills and with other vulture species and bateleurs mixed in. Other birds of prey seen include African hawk eagles, Spotted eagle owls, Dark chanting goshawks, Gymnogenes, Fish eagles, a Tawny eagle and a Black breasted snake eagle.

Identification kits & Reserve records – A new ID kit for one of the Askari pride females has been made this month. She has been named "Thula" meaning 'to be at peace'.

Sightings & Other news

Cheetah – Busayo & Makwavo were seen just once this month but what a great sighting it was. During sundowners on Jackalberry plains they were spotted strolling across the open grassland. Once we caught up with them it was obvious they had hunting in mind and we were then lucky enough to follow them and witness the whole thing in action. They took a sneaky approach behind the tree line on the river road so as not to be detected. They popped out at the bottom, close to the weir, but were unfortunately spotted just a few seconds before they gave chase. They gave it a try none the less but missed the group of nyala they were aiming for. Still it was amazing to see the build up and the way they went about it. You'll get them next time boys.....

Lions – The Askari pride have provided all the lion sightings this month and many very close to the Askari house. One morning they were spotted in the river below the nyala camp and the cubs were playing with a kill in the





sand. Just a few days later the females and cubs were all seen sprawled out on Jackalberry plains taking in the sunset like the Askari team. Again on Jacana loop they were seen with an impala kill. That was actually during a routine nyala count and the team was lucky enough to see the young male cub carry the head of the male impala down the hill towards them. He has been named “Nkosana” meaning ‘son of the chief’. Later in the month, the pride were relaxing on the airstrip, again with a kill but this time a warthog and also joined by pride male Umfokazi. He was seen with the pride again at Ranch dam a little later in the month where he was having a little problem with some rhino. 3 male rhinos, whom also wanted an evening drink, didn’t appreciate the presence of our male Umfokazi and chased him off into the bush providing a great sighting.

Rhino – All 5 rhinos in the buffalo camp have been seen on numerous occasions and Isinkwe, Nembelela & WRm3 were all seen out on the main reserve, in fact it was them who were giving Umfokazi some hassle!

Elephants - Like the cheetah, it was just the one elephant sighting this month, but one to remember. A breeding herd was seen on Big Pig road. At first just the one male was spotted, followed by another and then another and another.



Eventually 30 elephants crossed the road a few metres in front of us; males and females, young and old. Some were feeding whilst others were making use of a small muddy pool that had formed and throwing mud over their backs. We sat with them for an hour, during which time they barely even gave us a second glance and just carried on about their elephant business.

- Unfortunately 2 adult male nyala have been found dead this month, both in the buffalo camp. One showed obvious signs of starvation, a result of this hard hitting drought.
- The matriarch elephant of the main breeding herd on Makalali and Pidwa died this month. She was known to have moved away from the herd a few months ago and was found dead on the 26th of October. Her daughter has taken over the job of leading the herd.
- An interesting kill was found on Marula cutline this month. It was an aardvark that had been fed upon and half turned inside out. This is very characteristic of a leopard kill and in fact is one of their favorite prey species so our most likely murder suspect at this time.

