

ASKARI NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER 2009

Overview



October was a busy month on Pidwa with plenty of work and exciting events for the Askari team. Controlled management burns took place as well as an aerial game census. There were all the usual projects going on and an ostrich nest was discovered in the buffalo camp. Wildcat kittens are suspected to have been born and the bush is busy preparing its food for the arrival of many herbivore babies! Read on to find out more about all this and what

else the Askari team have been up to this month.

Events on Pidwa

Controlled management burns – October and 1090 ha of Pidwa north was due



to be burnt down. A professional fire team arrived on October the 7th to set up equipment and check the areas due for burning. When the day arrived the temperature went through the roof....and that was even before the fire started! Unfortunately the soaring temperature of 39°C, the humidity and wind combination meant that burning was delayed. We did however, finally manage to get underway a little later than planned at 4pm that afternoon. A small block

was burnt near the staff compound as a trial before moving onto the block between Grysbok, Steenbok, Buffalo and Central cutlines. With the fire team moving down one side and Pierre down the other, the bush was set alight using drip torches. Askari were spread in between with fire beaters to ensure no flames jumped across the road to areas not due for burning. With the delayed start, the burn continued way into the night which made for some spectacular scenery. Once finished, we were tasked to drive the perimeter and put out any remaining embers. Finishing at 10pm, there



was no rest for the wicked and we were out again at 6.30am the following day to burn the next section. This area was bordered by Flakythorn and Marula cutline, all the way down to Bushbaby. It was an all day affair, with lunch on the road, and followed much the same format as the previous day. With an atmospheric temperature of only 34°C, it felt relatively cool compared to the night before! All went well and we now await some heavy rains to bring up those new, green shoots!



African wildcat progress – Early this month, African wildcat Phelele did not turn up one night at the house. The following night she was back again and this time without her tummy lumps! It is suspected that she has given birth to the kittens and is keeping them somewhere in the block to the west of the Askari house. She continues to come for food every night and 3 of her nipples are more enlarged than the others. She seems extra hungry, after all it must be hard work looking after yourself and kittens! Her food has been increased and we will keep you updated with any progress, Kittens are immobile for the first month and only start to join mum from 6-8 weeks before becoming fully independent at 5 months. Fingers crossed!

Aerial game census – With the bush at its barest and only the knobthorns flowering, October is just the right time to carry out an aerial game census. First on the agenda was the buffalo camp to decide whether any game capture was needed for re-location into the open system. Carried out in a helicopter, the flight path is made in transects and animals spotted either side of the helicopter are counted and recorded. When big herds are seen, perhaps of impala, the chopper takes a swoop down to get close to the action which even allows sexing of the herbivores. 2 female rhino and the baby were spotted first off followed by plenty of impala, zebra, wildebeest and warthog. Eland were also counted along with nyala and many common reedbuck (rarely seen from the ground). Unfortunately



a rhino carcass was also found and with some clever helicopter manoeuvring, we were able to land to check the evidence. To our relief, the death does not appear suspicious as both horns were recovered. It was confirmed to be the carcass of Aphusa, the sub-adult female who had not been seen for a number of months. The cause of her death is unknown but may have been due to a scrap she had with

male Isikhumba (or Big Al as some of you will know him!). On a brighter note, an ostrich nest was also spotted. With 4 eggs close together and 1 pushed off to the side we will keep our fingers crossed for some baby ostrich in the coming weeks! After the buffalo camp, a census of Langa langa was carried out. As per last

year, the big male leopard was spotted running up the koppie during the census, so he definitely still calls that place home.

Volunteer departures meant the formation of a new group for October, “The B-boy Bush Bastards”.

Reserve work

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. Supplementary food to the camps has been increased this month with more lucerne and wildsbok going in whilst we await the summer rains. Unfortunately a very young baby nyala was found dead in the bottom camp this month, the cause of its death unknown.



Queen of the night and Prickly pear plants were treated on Langa langa and at the northern end of Boerbean road. 4 sessions of Lantana murder took place as well, mostly behind Lily pan. On one occasion however, we did turn up only to find Umfokazi & Azana sitting at the pan. Rather move that session to eland loop then....there's still plenty of plants to kill there!

Road clearing took place on Flaky loop this month, a road frequented by the elephants. In fact, whilst clearing up after them a large bull ambled round the corner, luckily with enough time for us to slip quickly into the vehicle and take in the view. Clearing also took place on Leopard loop in the buffalo camp and on a multiple of roads on the northern plains.

Three anti-poaching patrols were carried out in the buffalo camp this month. A number of old snares were found and removed from the block used by poachers in February. No signs of new poacher activity were seen.

One last session of road maintenance was carried out on “Smooth” loop. Pick axes and shovels were used to move built up soil from the sides of the roads into the ruts and the strip was then driven over repeatedly to compact down the soil.

Sleep out was again on the large eroded area off Flakythorn and lions could be heard throughout the night. Nothing unusual in terms of human activity was noted.



More reed re-location was on the cards this month during a session taking common reed grass from near the weir to the

buffalo camp. The newly pumped Buffalo pan was the target where reeds were planted in the mud around the edges of the pan.

Now that the Ground hornbill box is in place, contact has been made with the Ground hornbill association. Ann Turner from the hornbill project was absolutely full of praise for the box, a picture of which was included in our initial contact. Due to the complexities of the groups in which they live, it is not currently possible to re-locate any hornbills to Pidwa. Also, however, there is probably no need as they will find us themselves! Living



for up to 60 years, ground hornbills don't do anything in a hurry. Apparently however, our nesting box is perfect, in a great area and ideally situated on the river. If we can just be a little bit patient, we have been told **THEY WILL FIND US!** We will make regular checks on the box and also aim to put up a few more. Apparently the more there are the better. We will keep you posted but in the meantime many thanks again to those teams "Askari channel 4 News Team" and "The Reed Runners" who put in all the work on the boxes.

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 – As mentioned, we measured a scorching 39°C this month, which thankfully was the maximum recorded. The average minimum was 18.5°C, average maximum 29°C and we received 5 mm of rain.

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 – 51 bird of prey sightings this month from Bateleurs, fish eagles and lizard buzzards to gymnogenes, hawk eagles and varied vulture species. Also spotted was an African barred owl! Additionally this month we have taken on a new monitoring project, specifically relating to migratory birds. A number of these are birds of prey such as the Wahlbergs eagle and yellow billed kite but they also include other species such as European bee-eaters, a number of cuckoos and the woodland kingfisher to name a few. These records will note the first date this summer that the species is seen, along with its location and GPS.

These data will also contribute to the “Bird’s eye view” project, a nationwide data base relating to migratory birds arrival dates to South Africa each summer.

Identification kits & Reserve records – Reserve records continue to be updated with all sightings made by the Askari team. ID kits were completed this month for remaining sub-adult lions Tetemayo & Kali. Unfortunately we believe only they, along with brother Nkosana, now remain. New ID kits have been made for sub-adult male rhino “Thola” and female rhinos “Ondli” (in the buffalo camp) and “Balega” (including a photo of her new calf). Female rhinos “Nhangwa”, “Kenya” and “Memfuza” have had their kits updated to include their calves “Nono”, “Tsavo” and “Ingane” respectively.

Sightings & Other news

Lions – The cubs of Zingela & Tumblelela continue to keep a low profile this month with just one sighting near the lodge but unfortunately not by the Askari



team. Sub adult male Tetemayo was seen on 3 occasions, once with Nkosana and Kali, once alone on Jackal plains and a third time at Ranch dam with sister Kali. Unfortunately, all the sub-adults continue to struggle and look very emaciated. Umfokazi and Masana have been seen both together and with the Askari pride females. This month Thula’s sister was finally given her own name, instead of just ‘sister’ and will

be known as Azana. She was seen once with Umfokazi this month and twice with sister Thula. One sighting of Umfokazi this month saw him chasing down a female cheetah! Read the cheetah section to see who it was finding themselves in hot water!

Rhino – Isinkwe and Nembelala were seen 4 times, mostly around the northern plains, Langa fence and Honeyguide road. Isikhumba was also seen in the buffalo camp, on two occasions with female Memfuza and her calf Ingane. Adult cow Balega has been seen more regularly this month on Pidwa north. Normally using Pidwa south and Garonga it has given us some good opportunities to take ID photos of her and her 6 month old calf.



Elephants - There were 6 sightings of the breeding herds this month, on one occasion all combined totaling more than 60 individuals. During 1 of these sightings a herd was on the northern plains and ambling their way from Red gate dam towards the river. Unfortunately it was

during the midday heat and whilst moving through a drainage line, they disturbed some sleeping lions! Male lion Masana was the man on the receiving end when one of the elephant bulls objected to his presence and chased him across the plains. The bull then decided it was obviously our fault the lions were sitting there so came to give us a head shake too! With the hot temperatures, we were lucky enough to see the elephants cooling off on a number of occasions. Using those Selati river pools for a quick dip and splash around, it provided some great sightings for the team.

Cheetah – The Langa cheetah coalition were found with 2 kills this month, both adult impalas but one male and one female. The majority of sightings in the open system were actually provided by a new kid on the block, female cheetah “Aya”. She is a young female, approximately 2 years old and was initially released on the Garonga section of the conservancy by Makalali management. Female cheetah use larger territories than males so it’s not unusual that she has ventured so far a field. She seems to like it up this way and was seen on 6 different occasions throughout October. All sightings were in the airstrip, Boerbean, eland loop area but on one occasion she was seen near Brian’s house.



Unfortunately it was just a brief sighting, as hot in pursuit was male lion Umfokazi! Luckily that cheetah speed won her a second lifeline and she was seen a few more times in the following week, obviously not put off by her recent lion encounter! Old boy Makwavo was seen just once in the Selati river crossing.

- 2 honey badgers were seen on Langa langa this month, closely followed by a Dark chanting goshawk. This is a type of symbiotic relationship known as commensualism. The goshawks benefit as they hope to swoop down and prey on any rodents the badgers disturb from burrows in the ground. In the meantime, the badger is unaffected by the presence of the goshawk!
- 5 adult female elephants were treated this month with top-up contraception drugs. Darts were administered from a helicopter with no need for anaesthetisation. In addition to the contraception, 1 adult female was darted and anaesthetised to be fitted with a new collar. An old collar was removed and replaced with a new GPS tracking collar used to monitor the movements of the breeding herds.
- We’d like to congratulate Andy this month for not only being the first Askari volunteer to take their FGASA (Field Guides Association of South Africa) qualifications but for achieving a huge 89%. Now, having passed his Level 1 guiding theory exam, he faces the even more daunting task of an assessment drive with a FGASA assessor next month. We wish him luck with his studies.

- A dead common reedbuck male was found at Leopard pan in the buffalo camp, most likely to have fallen prey to a leopard.
- Unfortunately the carcass of a male ostrich was also found in the buffalo camp, again possibly prey to a leopard.