

ASKARI NEWSLETTER

SEPTEMBER 2009

Overview



Now that it's hotting up on Pidwa there was a huge variety of work to keep the team busy this month. From alien plant control and reserve clean-up to the challenge of positioning the ground hornbill nest in place. There was lots of reed re-location and baby eland have started to appear in the buffalo camp. Read on to find out more about all this and what else the Askari team have been up to this month.

Events on Pidwa

African wildcat progress – There is a hope this month that female wildcat Phelele may well be pregnant. Her normal routine has always been to arrive just after dark for food, combined with a little attention, and within 20 minutes disappear off for the night. Recently however there has been a noticeable change in her behaviour and the development of some funny lumps in her tummy! Apparently, when pregnant, their hormones cause them to look for more attention and hang around more than normal, yearning for affection. This is exactly what we've seen in her behaviour and we hope that the 2 very obvious little balls hanging down from her stomach are kittens. As first time mothers they may not always get it right, perhaps leaving the kittens in an unsafe hideaway. Gestation is approximately 60 days so our fingers are crossed and we will keep you updated with the patter of any tiny paws. Male wildcat Levi continues to drop in for some top-up food at Brians house each evening.



Members of "Askari Channel 4 News team" were still with us for some of September then new volunteer arrivals meant the formation of a new team, "The Reed runners".

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. Unfortunately, a young baby reedbuck was found dead in the bottom camp, the reason for its death remains unknown. Recently in the top camp, the feeding tyres have been moved further apart. This is to minimise the growing sable competing and jostling for food and has so far been effective.

Queen of the night and Prickly pear plants were treated this month using MSMA herbicide. The area targeted was in the block behind the Askari house where there are some particularly large Queen of the nights. During the murder spree a lesser bushbaby was spotted. He gave one of the volunteers a fright by jumping straight towards him but quickly found an old dead log to shelter in for the remainder of the day! Two sessions were also spent cutting down Lantana plants near the nyala shed and a further 2 sessions behind Lily pan.

The Askari team took a tracking and bush walk this month from Askari to Lily pan, across Jackalberry plains and back along the river road. We spent a long time at the dam watching a herd of impala enjoy a morning drink along with 2 adult nyala bulls. Zebra, waterbuck and kudu herds were also encountered as well as an adult lioness! Lying down in the thick riverine vegetation we took each other by surprise. She jumped up, ran along side us for a few seconds before disappearing down the bank towards the river.

Road clearing was finished on Double gate road in the buffalo camp this month and Boomslang road was also cleared. A session was spent on Eland loop clearing up after those pesky elephants and all the sicklebush they like to throw around!



2 reserve clean-up sessions were carried out this month. The first was near the nyala shed where a whole hilux load of rubbish was collected ranging from old pipe, wire and metal to a rusty spade and old vehicle spotlight. In a second session, metres of barbed wire and lots of posts were cleared from an old cattle fenceline on Langa langa.

Two anti-poaching patrols were carried out in the buffalo camp. The first was between Sicklebush and Double gate road where 1 very old snare was found. The second was east of Leopard pan where no evidence of poacher activity was seen.



Askari faced the logistical challenge this month of placing the large and heavy hornbill nesting box, 5 metres off the ground, in a large fig tree. For assistance in this matter we called upon trusty old conservation student Phil! With his climbing equipment and knowledge Phil set about some clever rope work to firstly secure himself safely in the tree. He was then able to attach a platform to the tree (using the hand drill,

generator and screws) which the box would sit on. A complex pulley system was next on the agenda so the box could be hoisted up into the tree. Once in position, the nest was secured to the platform and then had another branch placed in front of it to act as a feeding platform. The male hornbill will be able to stand on here when visiting the nest to feed the female and it will also be a platform from which the young chicks can practice their flying. Contact will now be made with the Ground hornbill association to find out ways of attracting the birds to the site or if there are any re-location options available to us.



Sleep out this month took place on the large erosion site off Flakythorn road. Lions were heard close by, calling and mating throughout the night. At about 1 o'clock a large spotted hyena visited the camp and in her curiosity visited each one of our lanterns in turn! She spent a few moments at the foot of one of the volunteer's sleeping bags before sloping off again into the darkness. Nothing unusual in terms of human activity was seen or heard during the night.



There was plenty of reed-relocation this month when reeds were collected from various areas and taken to Hide dam in the buffalo camp. Firstly, common reed grass was collected from close to the weir using pick axes, shovels and pitch forks. Approximately 30 plants were taken which were then placed just in and on the water line at the dam. A second session was carried out later in the month, again with common reed grass. A different type of reed, bull rushes, were also collected and re-located in a slightly muddier affair!

Sourced from boggy Klip pan there was no chance of staying clean but it was worth it to see the results at the dam. Although the reeds will need some time to fully take, they already seem



to be doing a good job. A variety of heron and stork species as well as southern masked weavers have been seen amongst the reeds. It is hoped that with time both these reed species will begin to proliferate on their own and attract even more bird species.

A number of road repair sessions took place on Eland loop. The rain last summer created lots of ruts and dips that were filled in and leveled out. Using pick axes and shovels, soil was taken from the sides of the roads and used to fill in the ruts, along with small rocks and gravel. It is now a much more comfortable ride and Eland loop even has a new name, "Smooth loop"!

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 – Temperatures are starting to hot up with the arrival of Spring. A maximum of 36°C was recorded and the average maximum for the month was 30°C. The average minimum was 17°C and we received just 3mm 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 – Askari recorded 45 different Bird of prey sightings this month. There were plenty of vulture sightings as well as lizard buzzards, bateleurs, gymnogenes and a number of African fish eagles. The slightly rarer gabar goshawk was spotted as well as an African barred owlet, black shouldered kite and brown snake eagle.

Identification kits & Reserve records – Reserve records continue to be updated with all sightings made by the Askari team. It can now be confirmed from ID kits that it was one of the 2 younger females of the Askari pride sub-adults that was killed by hyenas last month. Photos continue to be collated for ID kits of the remaining sub-adults. One of the remaining 3 females has not been seen for many months so it is unclear whether she is still alive. The other 2 females have been named Tiya and Kali and they are often seen with fellow subbies/brothers, Nkosana & Tetemayo.

Sightings & Other news

Lions – 5 new lion cubs have been seen this month, the offspring of Zingela & Tumblela. They were seen just twice but on both occasions were at Mopane dam. You'll remember we reported earlier in the year that 5 very young cubs were seen in January. In fact we now suspect that these newly spotted ones are different individuals. If the January cubs had made it they would now be about 10 months old. In fact the cubs we've seen only look about 6 months



old suggesting the last group may have been killed. Last year, Zingela & Tumblela were seen mating with the southern male, "Kalahari". It is possible that he fathered the first set of cubs which were then discovered by Umfokazi. Knowing that he did not father the cubs, Umfokazi will kill the youngsters in a

process known as infanticide. This will in turn bring the females back into oestrous and allow him to mate with them, hence passing on his genes. This way he does not waste energy rearing the genes of another male lion. The females and cubs now live in what we believe to be the territory of Umfokazi so it is most likely that he is the father. Other lion sightings this month included Nkosana & Kali of the Askari pride sub-adults and Thula and her



sister, the Askari pride adult females. Umfokazi was seen on 2 occasions, once trying to remove a thorn from his foot! Masana was also seen once this month with Thula and her sister on the airstrip.

Rhino – Nhangwa and her calf were seen twice this month, on both occasions with a male in tow. Photos were taken of the male as it is the one thought to have fought with Isikhumba over the buffalo camp fence last year. As of yet there is no ID kit for him. In the buffalo camp, both adult females and the calf have been seen as well as Isikhumba. The sub-adult female remains unseen, for what has been many months now.



Elephants - There were plenty of elephant sightings this month of breeding herds and bulls. The 2 main breeding herds have met up on a number of occasions providing a sighting of between 50 and 60 elephants at one time! The team had some great sightings

including fighting bulls and the 2 babies jostling with each other!

Cheetah – The Langa cheetah coalition were found very fat on a number of occasions this month suggesting they are making successful kills. On one occasion we did only find one of the boys, frantically calling for his brothers. Moments later he was chased off by some angry baboons. The boys had obviously had an encounter of the primate kind but lived to tell the tale!

Spotted hyena – As mentioned earlier a spotted hyena visited the sleep out spot on Flakythorn this month. An adult and sub-adult were also called in by reserve management on Main access.

- A family of porcupines was seen this month just to the east of Askari drive. A tiny baby followed its mum and dad across the road and into the bush on the other side.



- The new ostrich have all been seen in the buffalo camp and appear to be doing well. 1 male seems to be with 2 of the females and the other male has found the old remaining girl and teamed up with her.
- A caracal found itself trapped in the top nyala camp this month. Spotted by Issac during a fence patrol, the Askari team were treated to a great sighting before it found its way out again in the following days.

- 4 eland babies were seen in the buffalo camp in September. One had been left very near the side of the road whilst its mother went off to feed providing a great photo opportunity for us.
- A rare bird sighting on Pidwa was enjoyed this month when a Wattled lapwing (small water bird) was spotted at Eland pan.



- Plains game monitoring continued throughout September during which every herd of impala, zebra, wildebeest and waterbuck was counted. Results show that in Pidwa north the majority of mixed and bachelor



impala herds hold between 1 and 10 animals. Not many wildebeest and zebra herds were seen but those that were contained between 1 and 5 individuals. In comparison these herds in

Pidwa south are seen more frequently and carry an average of 6-10 individuals. This may illustrate the influence of predator activity on herbivore herds in the north which is comparatively smaller in the south.