



Newsletter April 2009



A very warm hello and welcome from L.E.O. We trust you have all been well. We are very eager to share the past month's exciting news with you, for April has been a magnificent month, full of unforgettable encounters with our resident pride here at Selati. With the grass now dying back, and with some keen eyesight from our volunteers, sightings have really been plentiful.

Lion news

The pride has been very active this month, and we have had to travel from corner to corner in the reserve to keep up with them. Early in the month the lions spent the vast majority of their time near Mabottle dam, possibly waiting for an easy meal to walk into them. One morning, whilst tracking off-road, we came across a clearing in a block of mopani trees. With us in the open, surrounded by trees, we felt as if we were being watched...we were! All the usual suspects, except for Shaka were lying in the bushes in front of us. However, this sighting, lovely as it was, turned sour after about 10 minutes. Mica hadn't taken her eyes off of us, and she didn't seem as relaxed as usual. As I observed her body language, I noticed that her tail had stopped swinging from side to side, and was now jerking up and down quite rapidly – this is one of the signs that a lion is contemplating a charge. Rather than waiting for her to flatten her ears and charge us, we felt it was time to politely leave them be.

On the morning of the 8th, the LEO team was on scene as the lions chased down some giraffes between the block at rhino ridge and bush-pig road. Although the hunt was unsuccessful, we were very fortunate enough to spot Amarula and her three cubs. Amarula was unbelievably relaxed as she strolled across the road, less than five meters from us. Following closely were her most adorable six month old cubs, one of whom showed great curiosity as it bounded towards our vehicle; but as soon as we started the engine the cub ran back to mum. Words really can't do this sighting justice, it truly was a beautiful moment; and whilst our volunteers were still chatting about the cubs, nobody was listening to Lisa, who was nervously trying to tell us that there was a lion behind us! Luckily it was only Impi (Mica's cub) and it appeared that in the commotion of the hunt he had become separated from the pride. He trotted passed our vehicle, just meters away, calling with a little "umf...umf" contact call, then he returned and passed just behind us. Just then we spotted several lion heads raise above the grass, and we laughed as Impi joined them. All the lions, including Mica, were very relaxed, and we spent a great half an hour in their company.

We had a fun a bank holiday this month with many vehicles out and about on the reserve, and I think it's safe to say that everyone had a really enjoyable time. LEO really had its work cut out though, as the lions had previously spent the last week hiding deep in a large block near BVB cutline. So in order for some visuals, we did some serious off-roading to enable the landowners to see their pride. The lions eventually settled on top of Mahoed Koppie, and all but Shaka were available for viewing. The lions actually stayed in this area for a few days, with Shaka joining them in the evenings. One night was particularly memorable as we sat with the pride for over two hours, and our volunteers witnessed some lovely natural lion behavior.



Above: The lions at Mahoed Koppie on the Bank holiday.

Lion summary

As the rainy season has now passed, it seems clear that the lions are residing closer to waterholes than they had previously. The lions are all generally in good health, and more often than not, we find them with full bellies and either on fresh kills, or sitting by a carcass. We have even been fortunate enough to see Mburri (one of Selati cubs) dominate an impala kill, in Shaka's absence of course, this may possibly indicate that he is slightly more dominant than his two brothers. Shaka has spent a lot of time separated from the main pride, and more time with Amarula. It will be interesting to see if Amarula will join up with the pride on a permanent basis, for at present she meets-up with them and then leaves as she pleases. It's quite possible that there are just too many mouths to feed if she and her cubs stayed, and so she feels she can offer her cubs a better chance of feeding if she hunts alone. LEO has taken many drives on the Northern side of the Selati River, but alas, we still haven't encountered Thamboti or Rooibos, or any other rogues who maybe inhabiting that vast area.

Elephant news

April has been a strange month for elephant sightings by LEO; we had no visuals for roughly the first two weeks, and then we were amazed by the hive of activity that followed. We were on a peaceful evening drive, along Mahoed Slood South, when we found ourselves at the tail end of a breeding herd. A young female turned around and came in our direction, stopped, did a head-toss, and then left and joined the herd. We thought this was a bit uncalled for, as we were a fair distance back from them; so we let them move off, and then after five minutes we proceeded down the road. Suddenly there was commotion on our right-hand side, low and behold, it's old Skewy, (a miserable old matriarch, known for her aggression) and here she comes, her and six of her friends! So when a safe opportunity arose we are out of there, much to the delight of our new volunteers who felt slightly uneasy. So, rather than push our luck, we took the long way around to the lions that night.

A couple of days pass, and although there were signs of elephant activity on pretty much every road, we had managed to steer clear of Skewy – whom we later found out had recently given birth, thus explaining her aggressive behavior; she was simply being over protective. So on the morning of Bank holiday, we had two vehicles out, and as we were returning to base...guess what? Yes, we found ourselves smack bang in the middle of a huge breeding herd; there was easily forty elephants, spread all around us. Everything was under control and everyone was in awe of such a massive herd of elephants, and then as luck would have it, Skewy pops her head out and gets all the elephants all excited! As the leading vehicle pulled-off, the second vehicle waited for some elephants to move-off the road so as we could then escape the raff of Skewy. Luckily both vehicles and passengers were safe and we quickly left the area so not to stress these magnificent animals out any further.



Above: Skewy's breeding herd and the LEO Team

Many of our new volunteers were understandably feeling a nervous of elephants now, so it was fantastic when we encountered the relaxed bull, George (Collar No. 56) on two occasions towards the end of the month. His sightings were in the Galon dam area, and he was his usual charming self, curious but friendly.

On a final note, the behaviour of the elephants has been very skittish this month, and this has also been confirmed from Izel's monitoring, whereby she has found their movements erratic.

Rhino news

The month of April has resulted in extremely few rhino sightings. We have no explanation as to why we have had only eight encounters, totaling eleven individuals; half of which were the same rhino (4). This male continues to produce wonderful photo's for our volunteers, as he is in good shape (belly score 4) and doesn't shy away from the vehicle. In most instances he can be found at Mahoed clearing, especially in the evening. Our other sightings have been down south, near borehole road, and twice we met the same female and calf, which in both instances ran as soon as they spotted us; we are pleased however that they both are both in good condition (belly scores of four). LEO was under the impression that we would be increasing our sightings of large mammals, due to the grass dying back, so the reduction in rhino sightings has been unexpected. Hopefully we shall encounter more in May.



Above: Male rhino, notch number 4.

Leopard news

Well I wish we could say that we have seen Cleo, but alas she is still out smarting us! We are getting closer though, and on a few occasions we had her on a telemetry signal 4.5 (very close) on telegraph road, at BVB airstrip, and South river road near Paw-paws. She really is a sneaky so-and-so, and we will endeavor to catch a glimpse of her. On a more positive note, we did have a marvelous sighting of a young male leopard on Galon Mahoed main road on the 24th evening. This spectacular male calmly walked right out in front of the vehicle and stood looking at us, and then confidently, he vanished into the darkness. This was certainly a highlight of many of our volunteer's African experience. We are continuing to find a large male's tracks around Sable-camp, so hopefully we will have the pleasure of spotting him soon.



Above: A stunning young male leopard.

Special sightings

On our travels this month we encountered the same male ostrich as in march, he continues to inhabit the Joani dam area. There have been several snakes also, the black mamba sightings have been very fast, but those sluggish puff adders have provided better photo opportunities. Our top sighting had to be LEO's first cheetah of the year! It was on telegraph road, just before sunset, and it carted out in front of us and then ran off into the bush. We tried to get another visual, but it was too fast, and unfortunately we didn't get any photos, but at least our lucky volunteers will have the memories.

Other news

Mid way through the month we discovered that the waterhole below LEO base was leaking, and so everyone helped in mending the hole and refilled it. Since then many animals have been taking advantage of this, and consequently we have enjoyed some fantastic visitors. In the past month we have seen warthogs, impala, vervet monkeys, a martial eagle and numerous species of smaller birds.



Above: Sheldon cleaning out the pond prior to mending it and taking a swim.

Well that's about it for another month from L.E.O. We really hope that you have enjoyed reading this newsletter, and please feel free to contact us if you have any questions regarding anything what-so-ever. We would just like to thank all the passed volunteers for their hard work on an off of base, and we are looking forward to meeting all you new volunteers joining us in the forth coming months, and the seeing the landowner out on the reserve, until next time, goodbye.

Kind regards

The LEO team

St Clair, Sheldon and Kevin

LIMPOPO ECO OPERATIONS (LEO)

P.O. Box 41, Gravelotte, 0895, Limpopo Province, RSA

Contact No: +277 79 877 2717

Email: infoleo@polka.co.za

Website: www.leoafrika.org