



News Letter for January – March 2009



Hello and welcome to a fresh new year with L.E.O. We are pleased to announce that we have gone through an exciting transition, and there is a completely new management team in place.



St Clair Finaughty (Manager) has joined us in January from Hluhluwe imfolozi game reserve in Kwa Zulu Natal where he managed a volunteer program (Earthwatch), called Walking with African wildlife. He has already settled, and is over seeing the smooth running of L.E.O. St Clair qualified as a field guide at Bushwise and has since then spent many hours in the bush tracking and guiding, guests and volunteers. St Clair shows enthusiasm for tracks and tracking of animals.

Sheldon Paton (Assistant manager) started with L.E.O in January and is looking to complete his first set of tasks for his Diploma in Game Ranch Management. In conjunction with his practical year, Sheldon is eager to pass F.G.A.S.A level 1 Field Guiding in June 09. Sheldon shows true excitement for the bush and is always looking for an opportunity to learn new things.



Kevin McCulloch (intern) is a Bushwise field guide who trained at S.A.W.C, but joins us all the way from his homeland of Scotland. Kevin has been with L.E.O since Dec 08, and has already delivered some wonderful lions sightings for our volunteers. Kevin is very passionate about nature. Currently, he is looking forward to passing his F.G.A.S.A level 2 Field Guiding in June 09.

For more information on the new team, and all the latest goings-on, please refer to our website.

Firstly please accept our apology for the lateness of this monthly newsletter; it has been a very busy and exciting few months and as a result L.E.O lagged with these newsletters. Nevertheless, what an amazing three months we have had! It truly has been jam-packed with lion, elephant, rhino, and various other creatures; the adrenalin has been flowing.

Lion News

L.E.O re-opened on the 15th Jan 2009 and it wasn't long before we caught-up with our resident lions. It was the 17th Jan, a new moon, and we joined Shaka, Mica, Selati, and their cubs for the first time. The pride was in the Lillie area of the reserve and we had joined them at the start of a hunt! They moved from East to West and back again, changing their approach in accordance to the prevailing winds. We followed them for as long as we could, but they lost us in the woods, and disappeared right in front of our eyes. A few nights later we had better luck, and we joined the pride in Mahoed Clearing. Mica was teaching her cubs to hunt, whilst the other lions lay hidden below the long deep summer grass. The cubs were practicing to stalk, but the impala were not alarmed in the slightest. Our volunteers were loving being part of this special moment, and we named one cub – the bravest cub – Impi; this is a Shangan word, meaning warrior. As we left the sighting however, the mood of the lions changed, and to our disbelief the lions chased our vehicle! Luckily we evaded being lion-kill, and our volunteers seen a different side to these cuddly cats.



Fortunately, the lions were relaxed around the vehicle at our following sightings, and one in particular was extra-ordinary. It was the 26th Jan, at Galon dam, and the usual suspects were lying in a row on the dam wall, basically posing for our volunteers. Sudden Selati's boys (Mburri, Stitches and Skinny) came charging towards us, but this time they weren't chasing us, amazingly they all jumped into a tree close by. Mica's cubs couldn't help but join in on the fun, and they both also scaled the tree. What an incredible sight, five lions right in front of us, in a tree! Funnier still, was the descent; as the lions clambered down the branches, one of the younger boys lost his balance, and he did a complete 360 roll from about 5ft. At this point our vehicle burst into fits of laughter, and it was decided to loosely call this cub Tarzan.

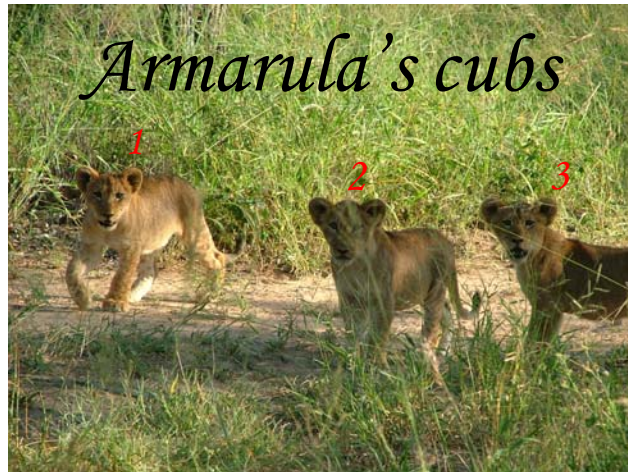


Below: Five Lions in a Tree



February

February was a special month. Amarula and her three new born cubs were spotted at Mahoed Koppie for the 1st time. Since then, they have joined up with the main pride and sightings are very regular. The three cubs are still un-sexed, but they are in good condition, and already developing their own little characters. Amarula's also proving to be a good providing mother, as she was seen on a giraffe carcass down at Lillie. Volunteers have especially enjoyed sightings of her cubs, and they appreciate just how lucky they are to be experiencing such young lions.



Towards the end of the month there was an interesting occurrence; a zebra carcass was found along Middle Galon Slood, strange however, that there were spoor of two adult lions, as well as Shaka prints. Furthermore, there were clear signs that mating had taken place. Telemetry revealed that Shaka and Mica had ventured southwards, and that Selati was in a gully near East Galon Slood. Could it be that Thamboti and Rooibos had driven the others down south, and then mated with Selati – her cubs are reaching two years soon, so she could be available for mating. These two brothers have been hiding up north for sometime now, and it is in their nature to find a pride of their own, even if that means stealing Shaka's. This is just a theory of course, but ever since this event the lions have spent the vast majority of their time down south.

Although, on the 28th, the L.E.O team was very surprised to find the lions lying only a few meters away from the base! This resonated as a reminder to the volunteers, that dangerous animals are all around the base (which has no fences) and that everyone should always be aware of their surroundings.

March

For the first week of March the pride (excluding Amarula and cubs) stayed at Lillie, providing some wonderful sightings on koppies and various dams. On the 9th, unexpectedly to L.E.O, the vet arrived on the reserve with the intent to spay Mica and Selati. Unfortunately the dart hit the wrong lion, and young Stitches received a little fright. Faced with this opportunity, we took advantage, and placed a collar on him - this may be useful in the upcoming months when Shaka eventually chases off the three young boys. For the time being, Mica and Selati have escaped the vet's darts.



Left: Stitches new collar.

Right: Stitches out for the count, waiting on his collaring.



In response to the darting, the pride had retreated deep down south, as far down as the South perimeter fence. In the first few days following the darting, the L.E.O team struggled to get visuals of any lion. All we could do was to follow the telemetry direction, which pointed high into koppies which were inaccessible to us. The pride had found a perfectly secluded retreat.

Thankfully on the 14th the pride, including Amarula and cubs, were found relaxing at a dam down south. Two days later, a hive of vulture activity led us to Shaka feeding on a fresh giraffe carcass; the others were also there, but were hiding in thick bush. It was an amazing sighting, thoroughly enjoyed by everyone.

Right: Shaka on a fresh giraffe carcass.



On an evening drive on the 18th, we joined Shaka as he patrolled the southern Lillie fence line at the very bottom of the reserve. He was calling vigorously in the direction of the neighboring reserve. Most surprisingly, our telemetry indicated that Mica was in that reserve...Mica had left the Selati reserve! Fortunately, she and the rest of the pride were spotted walking past Keith's house in the early hours of the following morning. Since then, the pride slowly made their way back up towards the water pump and the cement reservoir in the Lillie area, and has remained there ever since. Why the pride has remained in this region for such an extended period is unclear. Possibly it's because of 1) the collaring of Stitches 2) an encounter with Thamboti and Rooibos, or 3) this area simply meets the requirements of the lions – there is plenty of water, lots of game, and many places to conduct an ambush.

Whilst the pride has been down south, an unknown male lion has been spotted along the North bank of the Selati River. As he was feeding on a wildebeest carcass at the time, we couldn't approach too closely, and unfortunately no one managed a clear photo of him. Whether this lion is Thamboti or Rooibos remains a mystery for the time being; but stayed tuned for further updates.

Elephant News

January was a very quiet month for elephant sightings, it wasn't until the 30th that we encountered a herd of seven females with two calf's, at Mahoed Sloot South. This sighting was a long time coming, and was appreciated by the volunteers. Fortunately this was the beginning of a lot of elephant activity. On the 5th Feb, whilst we were tracking the lions, a helicopter circled above, and a large herd of elephants were herded in our direction. Thankfully we escaped and joined-in the pursuit of this herd. It transpired that two elephants were collared that day, a young bull named George, and a female with rather long tusks called Lillie.

For the next two weeks the elephants eluded us; they always seemed to be deep in a block of Mopani trees. Our patience was rewarded though, and we met George (he is a very friendly elephant) and his companion named Pea-nut (who is a tusk-less elephant) and two other young bulls. Since that day, George has become quite the celebrity among our volunteers, and sightings have been regular.

On a separate occasion, at Mabottle dam, whilst on a tea-break, our volunteers got more than they bargained for. One of the biggest bulls on the reserve, an absolute giant bull, ironically named Junior, graced us with his presence. Fortunately for us he was at the opposite side of the dam; needless to say, the volunteers returned to the vehicle in double-time.

Towards the end of February, elephant 1 & 2, and Lillie, supplied L.E.O with some excellent photos and memories. Although, it wasn't until the 3rd of March, when George was spooked by our vehicle, and decided to mock charge us, that our volunteers really had something to write home about.

Rhino News

We have been very lucky over the past few months regarding rhino sightings.

In January we seen 12 in total including notched individuals: **1, 35, 55...**

In February we had a total of 34 rhino: **1, 4, 8, 11 ...**

In March we seen a total of 38: **4, 55, 33...**

Many of these sightings were shorter that we would have liked, due to the skittish nature of these animals, especially when accompanied with young. Nevertheless, we have encountered dozens of sightings, and some individual rhino have become volunteer favorites.

Female (55) and her calf are very relaxed and typically allow our vehicle in close proximity; these two rhino are a common feature at Mahoed clearing.

Female (1) and her daughter will generally be found around Galon dam and West Galon Slood. She is a bold rhino and will not shy away from the vehicle; this comes as great delight with our camera-happy volunteers.

A clear favorite is a large male (4), his territory is vast, but he can usually be found in Mahoed clearing. He is an impressive size.

Of particular interest is a large male rhino that we encounter frequently around Lillie airstrip. This rhino has a notch on the inner side of his right ear, about half way down the ear. To our understanding, no rhino has been notched in this manner!?

In ending, we are happy to report that all rhino that we have had the pleasure of viewing have been in good general health, and an average body conditioning of 4.



Left: rhino (55) and her daughter.

Leopard News

Cleo has been an absolute nightmare to track down, and regretfully L.E.O hasn't had a single sighting of her. We have had her on telemetry on a 5 on a few occasions, but the shy nature of these cats, coupled with the thick bush and long summer grass, has allowed Cleo to elude us on more than one occasion. She spends most of her time around the Paw paws area, and along the Selati Riverbed (mostly on the North side), and frustratingly she is still leaving the reserve. Admittedly we have not been spending as much time specifically looking for her (as the lions take up most of our time) but we are going to make an extra special effort to track her down. Fortunately on a night drive, down near Lillie airstrip, we were fortunate enough to see a beautiful male leopard lying in the grass. We sat with him for ten minutes before he decided to walk off into the woods. It truly was an amazing experience, and definitely a highlight of many of the volunteers L.E.O experience.

Special sightings

These past few months have also been rewarding through sightings of other, less common animals. We have enjoyed sightings of hyena (along south river road) honey badgers, civets, porcupines, marabou storks, servals, and several black mambas. A Mozambique spitting cobra even tried to sneak into our house, but staff were at hand to remove it safely from the premises. The L.E.O pond has also proved a hit with several sightings including warthogs, impala, and vervet monkeys. Excitingly there is a male leopard frequenting our sable paddock (thankfully we have no sable in there at present), but sadly our volunteers don't seem to be utilizing the paddock for their morning jogs anymore. We have also witnessed an adult black impala and a young white waterbuck, (presumably the result of recessive genes linking up), these were very unusual sights. Lastly, on two occasions at Lillie link, we have spotted a male ostrich; he scatters away at the every sight of our vehicle, but we endeavor to get him on camera.

Other News

The L.E.O base is currently undergoing refurbishment, and our volunteers have been wonderful through helping us decorate various rooms around the house. They have also aided us in clearing a breath taking view from our front porch. L.E.O would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved for their great effort and sweat poured, in order to constantly improve our base.



Additional News

On several occasions we have driven along roads only to find that those lovably but troublesome elephants have knocked trees onto the road. Rather than calling for assistance, we set-about all those Knobthorns, Marula's and Mopani's with a small saw and two panga's.

In addition, all the wood that was cleared from our base (whilst we cleared a scenic view from our porch) was brush-packed along Impala road.



Well that's it from L.E.O for now; we promise that next month newsletter will be on time. It's been a fantastic few months and we hope you enjoyed sharing the experiences with us. See you in April.

Kind regards

The L.E.O team

St Clair, Sheldon and Kevin

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