



Newsletter for July 2009



Dear Volunteers and Friends,

Welcome back for another months news from L.E.O. How can I sum up this monthWOW..... L.E.O staff and volunteers have had a fantastic month, with amazing sightings and great displays of the social dynamics changing and developing within the pride. As well as witnessing our cubs maturing and develop their own unique personality, it really has made it a memorable month.

We hope you enjoy hearing of our Selati Pride adventures this month, a special thanks to all the volunteers who were with us and a very warm welcome to any new ones on their way. Our work would not be complete and not nearly as fun if it was not for the special people who volunteer thank you.

Lion News

The beginning of the month had us running around left, right and centre while the lions played hide and seek with us. The much beautiful river bed that runs along south of the reserve that usually provides us with breathtakingly stunning views had turned into our curse. The lions had taken up residence along the river bed for the past few days; this was causing havoc with our telemetry and providing us with only the fleeting of glimpses of our lions.

On one evening after we all had but given up on our lions we were rewarded for our patience, just as the sun was setting casting a beautiful golden glow through the shrubs and across the sand all 12 lions embarked from the river bed and headed straight to our vehicle. As the volunteers held their breath the pride walked not even 3 metres passed us and provided us with the most wonderful view. The sub adult males (Skinny, Stitches and Mburri) showed great interest in our vehicle, the cubs lagged behind playfully wrestling each other while Mica up front grunted soft “oomph” calls to encourage the cubs along. The past few days of waiting had definitely paid off.

A Family's Outing

Thankfully, after their time along the river our lions made our job easy by resting up at Mahoed Clearing. This is a beautiful open clearing that is not far from our house. The first day that we came across the pride here, was nothing less than spectacular. Amarula's three cubs were climbing our beautiful Nyala berry tree and harassing the baboons within. Shaka was lying up in the gully, while the rest of the pride all relaxed in perfect view around the water hole. We stayed with them for more than 2 hours, and during that time our ever increasingly curious Skinny thought it a good idea to take a taste of one of our back tyres!!! While the volunteers thought this was fantastic L.E.O staff had to make a safe retreat promptly.

As mentioned in June's newsletter, it is getting increasingly obvious that the boys are due to leave the pride, at 18 months they are capable of looking after them selves and would not be tolerated by the rest of the pride much longer. While at Mahoed, Amarula once again showed substantial aggression towards the three sub adults, and would physically and verbally lash out if one of her cubs were to close, the boys did the best they could to stay out of her way. Shaka was also showing signs of discomfort at their presence and though

tolerated them at a distance he would charge if they came within 5-6 m of him, the offending boy would instantly drop and roll onto his back in a submissive manner but on a few occasions was too slow and received a hefty blow from Shaka's left paw.

This was the scene in till the following evening (which is when we noticed Mica's injury, but that is another story) as the sun was setting our pride began to part, with Mica, Amarula and cubs staying put, Selati and Shaka leaving in one direction and sub adult boys in another, could this be the last time we seen our family together.....

It's all about the boys

Though we knew that the boys leaving was inevitable, it was still very sad day to see them striding off alone, though a glimmer of excitement resided in us all as we watched them walk off to their new and one biggest challenges of their young lives. The first few days found our boys pacing up and down one of our eastern fence lines. Are our boys seeking new territories outside of Selati?? We continued to monitor them over the next two days but their interest with the fence line did not diminish, Skinny once again living up to his name as trouble maker, even bit onto the electrified fence!!!! He did not seem too impressed with that!!

Thankfully the boys tired of pacing the fenceline and took shelter in an area not far from Mahoed known as Galon Koppie; we did not get a good sighting of them for the next few days though tracks indicated they regularly returned to Mahoed Clearing, where the pride were last seen all together.

A brief visual of the boys not far from Mahoed showed Stitches with a porcupine quill stuck in his chest; though it did not seem to show him any discomfort I'm sure he will choose his fights a little wiser in future. The following day much to our delight, the boys were lying in the middle of the road with huge extended bellies. Looks like they are doing well for themselves, so we left them in peace and sought out the rest of our lions.

Family bonding

While keeping an eye on our boys we were also keeping track on Mica, who while at Mahoed keened eyed volunteers spotted that she was limping on her right back leg. Initially, after the pride moved in their own direction, Mica, Amarula and their cubs settled down in a clearing just behind Mahoed. It was quite obvious that it was painful for Mica to put weight on her foot, on the few occasions we witnessed her standing she would take just a few steps and fall back down.

Early the following morning we returned to the same spot and found the cubs very energetic and eager to wander, Amarula got up and walked into the bush, Mica raised but only took one step and sat back down, within moments Amarula re-appeared and with soft grunting noises approached Mica and a great display of body/face rubbing and licking followed, it was obvious to us Amarula would not be leaving her aunts side any time soon.

Later in the afternoon we had a great sighting of the two moms and cubs. Though Mica's immobility was obviously distressing and worrying, it did provide L.E.O Volunteers a good insight into family behaviour and

also the importance of play behavior in cubs, which we could explain over the beautiful setting of the cubs playing with a freshly killed warthog skull, which they showed great delight in. We stayed and watched for hours and though we did not see Mica move she had obviously eaten (fat belly) and was greeted often by cubs and Amarula.

The following day we lost sight of Mica as her signal indicated she was down south in a large koppie area, which was fantastic news as she was obviously mobile again. We were unsure if Amarula and cubs stayed with her during this time (no collar on Amarula) though the anthropomorphism in us would like to think they did.

The lone rangers

With all of this happening with the boys and Mica it was difficult to make time for Shaka and Selati, who had moved off on their own from Mahout. A few signals we did get indicated Shaka lying down south, while Selati was roaming all over the place. While at mahout we noticed Shaka doing a flehemen grimace which is when a lion (or other animals) inhales a female's urine over their vomeronasal or Jacobson organ, this is two slits at the back roof of the mouth, these organs can chemically pick up when a female is in estrous, which would explain Selati's wanderings.

On the 19th of July we picked up signal for Selati and Shaka both in the same area, so we decided to go down for a look, luckily for our volunteers we had an experienced trails guide with us who led them in on foot to where we suspected the lions to be. As they approached nearer and nearer they could hear fierce growling, it turned out they walked right into Shaka and Selati mating! What an amazing experience. The next few days signal for Shaka and Selati came and went with occasional instances where they seemed together but not for very long, also twice found Shaka with Mica and Amarula but not for more than half a day, and strange signals of Mica extremely close with boys. We never had visual of this and as Mica's telemetry can sometimes play up we just blamed a wrong reading. Then the unexpected happened.....

The boys are back in town

From the 22nd onwards we were getting signal that Shaka was in the Mahoed area, extremely close to the boys, we were all on tender hooks to see what would happen if (or more rightly when) they met up. On the 27th of July after having difficulties locating the females we drove up to another nice clearing, Paw Paw, to find all lions minus Shaka by the water hole, yep that's right boys included!! We observed them for hours and it was obvious the females wanted nothing to do with them but yet the boys persisted. The following day we found them once again together this time walking in the middle of the road, the females made sure that the cubs were up front and at least one, if not two females stayed at back spitting and hissing at the boys. It was fantastic behaviour to observe and the boys knew better than to get closer than 6-7m yet they continued to follow.

The next morning once again being luckily enough to find the lionesses and cubs walking in the road we followed at a safe distance behind the boys who were also still following at a safe distance, when OFF went

the lionesses and the cubs, there was a cloud of dust and we just made out a group of impala running frantically away. Our girls had just made a kill. After watching them eat allowing the cubs to feed first while Mica patrolled against the males, we witnessed Stitches sneaking slowly through the grass, was he daring enough to risk taking a kill from these girls?? At that moment a game count helicopter came flying low overhead startling our girls to retreat slightly, this was Stitches chance and without a moment hesitation he got his teeth in and ran!! Brave boy.

It was fairly quiet after that, with all of us at L.E.O anticipating and waiting for their next move. Selati continued to wonder occasionally visiting Shaka, the boys continued to follow the girls though they left periodically but not for long.

On the 31st of July the boys (Skinny, Stitches, Mhburri) made an Eland kill, we watched them throughout the morning eating away. An eland is a very large antelope and was proving to be a feast for our young boys. On the evening of the 31st a storm was in the sky creating the most spectacular sunset, with large dark clouds offset by blood red rays filtering through, as we drove into where the boys had made their kill, we were amazed at how lucky we were as the sun was setting in perfect line to the silhouette of the kill, it was a stunning sight. As we drove in, still appreciating the sun set, to our right we notice the boys, and they are not even 3 m away on the eland kill was no other than Shaka, as we look around more closely we see our Mica looking well, the cubs playing, Amarula resting and Selati eating, our pride seems to have rejoined for the time being. As we take one last look at all our Selati lions together under a magical sunset, I say thanks to Africa, and look very much forward to what lies ahead for our lions this coming month.

Elephant news

With all the excitement with our lions, we are ashamed to say we did not have much time to search for our wonderful Selati elephants. On a few occasions our paths did cross with our secretive elephants and as always felt humbled and honored in their presence. The 10th of July, close to Willie farm was our first sighting for the month, 2 females both with calves under a year old; they seemed comfortable with our presence and continued to browse. As an elephant has thousands of complex muscles in their trunk, allowing them to do wonderful things such as pull a whole tree out by their roots yet also gentle enough to pick a single leaf off a bush, you can imagine that it takes a while to use it correctly (bit like a child holding a crayon) so we had great fun watching the youngsters trying desperately to copy mum but without the desired result. The bull however did not seem so comfortable, as he approached us he let out a loud trumpet and all 5 moved off into the bush.

For 2 weeks after we only picked up very weak signals for our elephants, which seemed to be up north somewhere. Towards the end of the month however we were rewarded by Lillie (one of our matriarchal females), 2 other females and their calves appearing, seemingly out of nowhere, in front of our vehicle, they crossed the road ahead of us and with only a brief wave of her head in our direction, disappeared into the bush without a sound.... Hopefully we will have much more elephant encounters in the month to come.

Sheldon and Jenny

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