



News Letter for June 2009



Hello everyone, and thanks for joining us for another run-through of the past month. June has been a totally tremendous month, we have had so many unbelievable sightings, and our volunteers have shared in many wonderful experiences. Not only have our sightings occurred out and around the reserve, but we have had some surprising visitors to the L.E.O base. We are sure you will enjoy this newsletter.

Lion News

The pride has been very active lately, and as a result our volunteers have been rewarded with fantastic sightings. At the start of the month we followed the pride as they moved around from Burren koppie to Galon dam, and to East Galon Slood, Warthogs seemed to be the food on the menu this month, and on several occasions we witnessed the lions snacking on them. One morning in particular, June 6th, we had been following slowly behind the pride, when they suddenly veered off to the left. Our volunteers heard screeching, as we approached we discovered the three sub-adults (Stitches, Skinny, and Mbhuri) digging up a warthog burrow. As they were fighting over the scraps of a large female, they missed two other warthogs running for their lives. Amarula was fast off the mark, and she caught one of them, allowing the other to escape. It was a bit sad to hear the screams, let alone witness the kills, but this is nature, and this is just everyday life in the Selati game reserve.

The Kudu trap

Following these warthog kills, the pride dropped-off the L.E.O radar for two days. We drove around the whole reserve, but we couldn't find them anywhere! On the morning of the 10th, whilst on a drive down south, we picked up a faint signal, finally, we had some direction to pursue. We came upon a road which we had only ever driven once, it led to a dead end. We knew that this road finished with the neighboring fence line at one side and a koppie blocking the other side, but the signal was strongest in that direction, so we continued. After driving for 5 minutes we had almost reached the end of the road, but then, we spotted them, incredibly the whole pride was sandwiched between the neighboring reserves fence and the base of a koppie. They were all looking huge, massively fat belly's, and then we spotted the remains of a large kudu bull. We believe they may have chased the kudu into the area, purposely knowing that it was a dead-end. The lions had set a trap, and in doing so they had displayed a pretty advanced set of hunting skills.



Above: the remains of a kudu bull, killed by the lions.

Thankfully, the following week the pride returned closer to their core territory, and L.E.O didn't have to travel as far in order to find them. Now that the pride is so large, 12 lions in total, sightings are much more regular, and its easier to spot them. Our volunteers have been lucky enough to witness some great behavior and activity. On the 13th, the pride, after having relaxed for a few hours, decided to dig up another warthog. This time the hyenas turned up, but unfortunately we never managed a visual, and all we could do was listen to them calling.

Giraffe for dinner?

A few days later, after devouring another carcass, we met up with the pride at Galon dam, and sat watching them drinking for over 30 minutes; it was a lovely sighting. On our return to base, we drove past an injured giraffe. It had a broken hind leg, and could barely walk; we all looked at each other and simultaneously said "he's dinner for the lions". That afternoon, we never managed to see the lions; they were sitting in the middle of a Mopani block, the same block that we had encountered the injured giraffe. They lay in the same place for over 24 hours, and we were pretty sure that they were feeding on the giraffe. Our suspicions were re-enforced when we next met the lions, as they were so incredibly fat that they could barely walk. We were unable to locate a carcass, so we cannot confirm it was the giraffe that was responsible for their bulging belly's, but one things for sure, we haven't seen the giraffe ever since.



Above: This is Mbhuri drinking out of the reservoir in Mahoed clearing, take a look at how fat his belly is bulging!

Angry Amarula

Amarula has always been a very relaxed and gentle lioness, very caring and a fantastic mother to her cubs. On the morning of the 18th we saw a very different side to her. Amarula and her cubs were drinking happily from the reservoir in Mahoed clearing. After roughly 15 minutes, the rest of the pride (except for Shaka) entered the clearing and proceeded towards the reservoir. Amarula allowed the other females and cubs to approach, however, when the three sub-adults came within 20 meters of the water (and her cubs drinking), she made her intentions crystal clear. She hissed and snarled at them, and was exposing her teeth; she was pretty intimidating! Amarula is a massive lioness; she's certainly formidable, almost rivaling Shaka for size. The three boys lay at the entrance to the clearing, and Amarula kept both eyes glaring on them. After several long minutes, Mbhuri had worked-up enough courage to try for a drink. Immediately she jumped to her feet, her intension was obvious, her body was rigid looking, her posture aggressive, she was glaring at Mbhuri. He was trying his best to avoid eye contact, and chose a wide route to the reservoir. Suddenly Amarula came charging, snarling, and teeth exposed. She roared viciously in Mbhuri's face, and he dropped to the floor in a submissive manner. Amarula tried to smack him with her paw, but he managed to avoid it and retreat to a safer distance. Meanwhile on the L.E.O vehicle, our volunteers were in shock, they had never witnessed this before, Amarula was usually so peaceful! Bravely, Mbhuri slowly made his way to the water again, this time he was allowed to drink, but she was still keeping an eye on him. A few minutes later the other boys decided that they would try their luck too; luckily for them, Amarula only snarled and hissed at them, and they escaped any real confrontation. L.E.O was at the sighting for well over an hour, and the entire time Amarula never took her focus away from the sub-adults.



Above: these were the moments prior to Amarula attempting to smack Mbhuri with her paw.

A few hours later, roughly at the same location, we joined up with the pride again, they were eating an impala for dinner, well Shaka was eating it and the rest fought for the scraps. The atmosphere in the pride hadn't changed; Amarula was still being overly aggressive towards the boys. We hoped that the tension would pass, and hopefully tomorrow things will be back to normal; we were wrong!

It sucks to be a sub-adult

It was the following morning, and we found ourselves back in Mahoed clearing; it was a beautiful day, and the silhouette of twelve lions against the back drop of an deep orange sunrise, was an amazing way to start the day. Unfortunately Amarula wasn't appreciating the simple joys in life; she was too busy glaring at the sub-adults again, still! At one point, in this two and a half hour sighting, we watched as the cubs ran over in to the middle of the three sub-adults, followed fast by Amarula. This time it was Skinny's turn, and he received a few paw-punches to the face (Mbhuri jumped to his feet, and looked as if he was moving towards Amarula, but he changed his mind, and distanced himself even further than before). Skinny ran for cover. Our volunteers began to sympathize for these three boys; after all it wasn't their fault that the cubs came over to them. Whilst we were watching the cubs playing, we failed to notice that the boys had moved off behind some bushes. Shaka and the females hadn't missed this though, and they made a fast paced trot behind the boys. As we drove around for a better view, we watched Shaka eating an impala, an impala which had obviously been killed by the boys moments ago. The boys seemed less than impressed, and now our volunteers really felt sorry for them. Not only were the sub-adults on the receiving end of Amarula, but they also had their breakfast eaten in front of them. Some days it really does suck to be a sub-adult.

The behavior that Amarula is displaying is in line with that in which any pride would display at such a difficult time. These boys are fast becoming adults, their manes are developing fast and thick, and these days they now resemble adult males. At their age of 18 months, it's very much approaching time to leave the pride and start their own lives. From our observations, the pride is barely tolerating the sub-adults now, and we feel that Amarula is worried about the safety of her cubs. It is only a matter of time before Shaka asks them to leave, and at that point their lives will change for ever...it truly is an exciting time for lion monitoring.



Above: the sub-adults, left to right -Stitches, Mbhuri, and Skinny.

The following week the pride was relatively quiet, they moved back and forth between the Eleamboorg fence line and Mabottle dam, before venturing down south to spend the rest of the month relaxing high up in the koppies. Thankfully, for the sub-adults, Amarula remained in the Mahoed area of the reserve, and this meant that sightings of both groups of lions were much more relaxing.

Elephant News

Overall the elephants have been hiding from the L.E.O vehicle this month, nonetheless, we had an awesome week from 12th to 17th, full of elephant action. The elephants on Selati tend to move in set trails, and usually begin with a few leading elephants, followed a few hours behind by larger herds, all moving in the same general direction. On the 12th we met George and his four close friends loitering around rhino ridge and bush pig road. Sightings of him are always really fun, he's has a great character and is typically relaxed around the vehicle, much to the delight of our happy-snapper photographers on the back of the vehicle.



The following day, whilst actually on the prowl for the lions, we found ourselves with George again; this time he had brought a bigger entourage. We counted at least 17 elephants, but there were definitely more feeding in the trees, either side of the vehicle. This was a humbling experience, to be so close to so many beautiful elephants! Most delightfully was the fact that this was a huge breeding herd, and there were several very young calf's - some even suckling in front of us - and not once did we receive a warning charge of threat. Most excitingly was the presence of Junior, the biggest elephant in Selati. None of our volunteers had ever seen him before and they couldn't believe just how huge elephants can get. Junior walked past us at a fast pace and at distance, so we didn't get a great visual...however, we only had to wait a few days for that!

Junior's Collaring

It was the morning of the 16th and we were tracking lions. I (Kevin) was driving, and whilst I can't speak Afrikaans, I knew that the conversations on the radio, and the helicopter that past next, meant that something fun and exciting was about to take place. We were at the right place at the right time! Ian, the reserve manager, and his team was about to collar Junior the elephant. As we approached the top of Thankerton cutline, we watched him being darted and fall to the ground. The chopper landed, and the vet and Izelle jumped into action. It was a complete adrenalin rush, and our volunteers were buzzing with excitement, never had any of us been so close to such a magnificent elephant before. We watched eagerly as the collar was placed around Juniors neck, and we laughed as Izelle entered him from the rear to obtain a dung sample (for nutritional analysis). The whole procedure was fast and professional, and before we knew it Junior was back on his feet again. What made this a special morning was that the memory will live with our volunteers for a life time.



Above: some photographs showing the collaring of Junior.

Over the next few days the elephant slowly returned up towards the Selati River, and L.E.O managed a couple more fantastic sightings; on one occasion we encountered twenty elephants drinking from a reservoir, and with the moon just rising behind them, it was an incredible backdrop for our photographers.

Rhino News

June has been a funny old month for rhino sightings. We haven't really had any outstanding visuals; all of the rhino encounters seem to run away at speed. Not that we are taking it personal or anything ha ha ha. There were some sightings at Mahoed clearing, mostly of our regular male (notch number 4) and two other females which he seems to be following at the moment. Whilst number four typically stands and poses for photos, this month, even he is avoiding the vehicle. On a few separate occasions he has fast-footed it in the opposite direction of us. Sadly for our volunteers, it's been frustrating, as this particular group was very fond of rhino in general. So alas, L.E.O doesn't have anything exciting to brag about this month, well, rhino wise anyway; but I'm sure our next section will surprise you!

Leopard News

And now for the moment you have all been waiting for! Are you sitting comfortably? Can you guess what it is yet? Yes, that's right! We saw Cleo! We finally saw Cleo. It's been a long time coming, and she's been a pain in the back side for several frustrating months, but on the 11th June 2009, at 5:45pm, we had an amazing sighting with Cleo.

Having been giving the run-around the previous week, the L.E.O vehicle set-out for another attempt to find our elusive leopard. As usual we had high spirits and lots of positive thinking, "this time, maybe this time, we would find her", but none of us could have imaged that tonight really was the night. We drove to her usual block of mopanies to find that she wasn't there. As we began our search, we were very lucky to pick up a strong signal coming from the end of Josephine farm; we headed off in that direction at double speed. As we checked the telemetry signal we found that we were getting closer and closer, and the roads were, for once, leading us directly in her direction. Before-we-knew-it, we had her on level 5.5, but as usual she was laying low, she's the master of camouflage. The terrain was pretty open, and this allowed us to move even closer, and more importantly quieter than usual. It was a game of hide and seek, and plenty of patience, but eventually we noticed her running, low to the ground, in a direction away from us. With hearts pounding, and quiet screams of joy from within, we followed her. We all sat very quietly, and then one of the volunteers caught sight of her. Cleo was about 20m away from us, just sitting still, just watching us. We all had a 'perfect' view of her! Cleo sat there for approximately 5 minutes, allowing us to photograph her; unfortunately all our cameras were auto focusing on the grass and bushes in the foreground, so we haven't really got a good photo to show you. Though the memory and fine details seen through binoculars will live with us for a long time.

Cleo is in great condition, she was incredibly stocky built, and her coat appeared every so glossy. It was an honor to finally find her. After she had graced us with her presence, she ran off into the bush, and we totally lost sight of her. The following weeks have been even more frustrating, as we have a burning desire to find her again, and now we know that it is possible. Since our sighting we have tried for her four more times, on each occasion we get her on a level 5 or more, but she has hides in thick bush...and well, you know the story by now.

Nevertheless, we found Cleo; and we will find her again soon, we promise...well were optimistic.

Additional news

This month we have had several wonderful sightings around the base, each encounter has been more thrilling than the previous.

It was early in the month, around 2am, and Richard (a volunteer) was rudely awakened to the sound of crashing outside the window. As he investigated, he realized that there was a honey badger staring back at him! It didn't even care that he was watching, the honey badger just continued eating the rubbish from the bins that it had knocked over. Richard watched the honey badger -which later became known as 'The Maniac' – for well over one hour; he even watched it chase a civet that was foolish enough to think it too could eat from the bins. A few nights later, and again, poor Richard was woken from his sleep, this time he heard an intruder in the house! There was some serious smashing coming from the kitchen, and Richard bravely went to wake up L.E.O staff. As they quietly entered the kitchen, expecting the worse, they were shocked and surprised to find the maniac rummaging through the bins! It quickly ran passed them, grunting as it fled, with a piece of bread in its mouth. It had pushed through a half closed door, enticed by the smell of our garbage. All other volunteers slept through this of course, and Richard now feels a bond with this little character. Since that night, the honey badger has been back repeatably. So now the L.E.O base is securely locked down from 6pm every night.

The L.E.O pond has continued to draw an extensive variety of visitors, including monkeys, impala, a big resident male warthog named Brutus, a resident female waterbuck, several hyenas, and an array of smaller mammals. One night we even think that we had a leopard (but this was unconfirmed), but we do regularly see wild cat, caracal, and genets. Incredibly one evening, we were shocked when a small herd of elephants came within 15m of the base! That really was a brilliant night.

Sad News

At the start of the month we said goodbye to St Clair, he has moved on to new pastures, and we wish him the best.

Once again that's us done for another month. We hope you enjoyed sharing our adventures with us, and we would like to thank all the previous volunteers for their hard work. We look forward to sharing our next month of adventures with all our readers. Until next month, good bye...

Kind regards

The LEO team

Sheldon, Kevin and Jenny

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