



## **NEWSLETTER FOR**

**June 2010**

Welcome to our June 2010 newsletter. This month, winter has really set in, with very cold mornings and evenings having become the norm. The bush is showing signs of the struggle to survive in the harsh, almost waterless conditions; and the volunteers have resorted to wearing their sleeping bags on game drives to try to keep warm! Nevertheless, it has been a great month with lots of fantastic sightings: read on ... !

## **LION NEWS**

### **Injuries ...**

This month the lions seemed to be getting a lot of injuries. It first started with Mica limping on her left front paw. A few days later Mbhurri was seen limping on his right front leg. Then Mophasa was seen with a small cut under his eye, and Skinny had a gash on his front right leg, causing him to limp.

The lion that we have been very concerned about is Mafadi, one of the younger cubs. She has a cut on her right cheek, which looks sore and swollen. We were worried that it might impede her ability to eat and that her health would deteriorate. The staff and volunteers have been carefully monitoring her health; recently, though, we have seen her feeding on a kill, so thankfully the injury does not appear to be affecting her appetite or her ability to eat. The volunteers were excited about the possibility that the vet would come out to dart Mafadi and treat her, thus giving the volunteers a unique opportunity to get up close to a wild lion! Hopefully, though, Mafadi will be on the road to recovery soon, without intervention.

### **Close encounters ...**

This month has been full of hair-raising encounters with the lions. On one drive, we found signal for the pride relatively easily not far from base and got sightings of a few of the lions quickly. We decided to head down the road in the hope that they would walk in our direction towards a nearby dam. We sat patiently waiting for their arrival. While Greg had his back turned standing next to the vehicle, the pride suddenly appeared behind him; there was no time for him to get back into the vehicle and so the whole pride walked casually passed him within 5 metres of the car!

One morning, we were happy to find the lions not far from base on Sable Camp Road on an eland kill. The pride was just off the road, so everyone had a great sighting and watched them eat the kill; the whole carcass was completely demolished in no time. In the afternoon, while one vehicle went looking for the lions close to home, the other group decided to look for Cleo the

leopard and then head back to the lions later when they might be on the move. This was a big mistake; they should not have left home at all! Greg, who had stayed behind at camp, heard a noise outside the house, looked out the window and was shocked to see lions staring in at him; the pride was in camp, walking around the house! Skinny was so cheeky that he stole the puppy's ball and was playing with it. The pride, minus Shaka, after investigating all round the house, made its way to the waterhole in front of Leo, and those few people who had returned in the nearest vehicle watched from the house. When the lions headed off, two staff members jumped back into a vehicle and followed them down Ekaya road; Skinny still had the puppy's ball ... . Eventually, the pride headed into the block and was lost from sight. On the way back, the staff recovered the ball from the bush, covered in lion saliva, smelly and completely destroyed! We later discovered that one lion had taken a liking for the taste of diesel and chewed one of the jerry cans! But it was amazing to see our lions prowling around our house, investigating ... .



*Not the best quality photo but evidence the lions were at Leo base!*

On another evening, we found the lions walking along a road in Farrel. We sat and watched them walk straight past the car, then continue on their way. When they headed off into the bush, we lost visual and decided to go for coffee. We headed off in the opposite direction to the pride and when we got to what we thought was a safe enough distance from the pride, we all got out of the car to make coffee and stretch our legs. Suddenly, out of nowhere, one of the female cubs

walked right past us, about 10 metres away! The volunteers who were standing next to the vehicle very quickly leapt back in, hearts racing! The young one must have become separated from the pride and decided to walk back the way they had come, looking for them; we later heard her contact calling as she searched for the pride. It just proves you always have to keep a look out when in the bush, because you never know what the lions are going to do next!

### **Shaka and the boys ...**

This month, the two sub-adult boys, Skinny and Mbhurri, have been spending a lot of time away from the pride and joining up with Shaka, the dominant male. They were found in the Lillie area of the reserve, while the females were still up north in Josephine. To all the volunteers' amusement, the males displayed some interesting behaviour, when Shaka showed his dominance over Mbhurri by mounting him.

Towards the end of the month, the boys again separated from the pride to join Shaka on his travels. On one occasion, we picked up signal from the house and followed up. Within 15 minutes we found Skinny, Mbhurri and Shaka, only 2 metres from the road. Again Shaka showed his dominance by mounting Mbhurri. Great movie moments ... .

### **Unfortunate timing ...**

On the 29th of this month, we headed out to find the lions and found them within 30 minutes without even using the telemetry. The pride, minus the boys (Shaka, Skinny and Mbhurri) was just laying around on Middle Dip Road. It was an amazing, close-up sighting and it is always great to find them so early on in the drive, maximising viewing time. We then headed off down the road to have coffee as the sun was setting. When we returned to where we had seen the lions, we discovered we had a flat tyre; everyone was a little on edge fixing the flat, knowing that the lions could be so close. Suddenly, out of the bush, we heard loud squeals of a warthog; everyone froze and held their breath. It was a little frustrating being so close to what was clearly, from the noise, a kill, but not being able to see it; still, the volunteers were amazed listening to the gruesome sounds of the hunt. Greg changed the tyre in record time, so that we could follow up on the kill. The lions were then found in the middle of a block absolutely demolishing the warthog. Mophasa was dominating the kill and would not let go of it; there was a lot of growling and snarling as he snatched most of it away from the others. Lions have no manners at dinner ... .

On the way home from this great drive, we were very lucky to see a serval on the fenceline close to base. This is a very rare sight and one of the animals that the volunteers were really keen to

see. All in all, this made the drive one of the best the volunteers had had since arriving at Leo...that was until the next day ... .

### **“The Dam”**

Just before drive, we heard that the lions were at Galon Dam, not far from Leo base. So we headed straight there; sure enough, the pride (minus the boys) was sitting relaxing on the dam wall in the afternoon sun. We then noticed that there was an elephant behind them in the bushes, which we hoped would come out and drink at the dam. We couldn't believe our luck when the bull elephant, named George, did indeed come to the dam – and spotted the lions! Most of the lions initially showed no interest in George; but when he came within their comfort zone, first Mophasa, then the others, ran off very smartly, especially when George came running at them, trumpeting and flaring his ears and kicking dirt at them! Selati, the brave old girl, was the only one not to flee; not too wisely, she decided to stand her ground. George certainly did not like that; he was in musth, so his testosterone levels were way up, making him particularly aggressive. With trunk raised and ears out, he trumpeted very loudly and charged at Selati who finally, sensibly, gave way. The volunteers thought they were lucky to see the pride in such a beautiful location, but to see an elephant-lion confrontation was amazing!



*George chasing away the lions.*



*Selati trying to stand her ground.*

After George retreated into the bush, the pride slowly made its way back to the dam wall. By this time, it was obvious by the noises in the bush that there was not just one elephant but a whole herd just behind the wall; this sighting was just getting better and better! As the sun was setting, the herd, consisting of 15 elephants, including Elephant 3, Junior and Hide, headed towards the water. The afternoon suddenly got surreal when we realised that there was also a male rhino walking towards the dam from the other side! So many animals in one sighting, no one knew in which direction to look! It was interesting enough just watching the elephants; there was a lot of mock fighting between the young male bulls, used to establish dominance. While keeping an eye on the elephants, the lions discreetly moved off into the bush, but the rhino was getting closer and closer to the dam (and hence to us); it looked at one stage as though it was heading right for the vehicle, but then he changed course and passed behind us to get to the dam. However, in heading towards the dam, he headed straight towards angry George, who charged at him and chased him away! Unfortunately for us, George then decided to check us out; having seen him chase away all the other animals, we were a little wary, but we were in an open area and made the best decision to hold our ground, sitting as still and quiet as possible. George walked along the water's edge towards us, eying us carefully. When he was close to us – 5 to 10 metres – he pretended to drink, kicked some dust around, sniffed the air with his trunk raised, shuffled on his feet and stared at us for what seemed like an eternity. None of us moved an inch; it seemed the volunteers had even stopped breathing, they were trying so hard to not draw attention to themselves! It was a heart-stopping experience to have this big bull looming over us, silently, in the growing darkness ... . Eventually, when we didn't react to his antics, George lost interest, and walked in front of the vehicle and away from us. The rest of the herd, during this episode, was busy drinking extremely loudly from the dam; it sounded as though the whole dam was surrounded with elephants. Then they too walked right past the front of the vehicle and away into the bush.

What an amazing experience everyone had on that drive! Not just the number of animals – and 3 out of the Big Five – but the interactions between them, and with us, were truly memorable; even now, we continue to refer to it simply as “The Dam” ... .

## LEOPARD NEWS

This month has not been that successful for leopard sightings, since we have been so busy keeping up with the lions. However, we did have a sighting of a leopard very close to home. Just after leaving the lions on that eland kill (see above), about 300 metres down the road, some

volunteers saw movement in the bush and then caught a brief glimpse of the back end and tail of a leopard. The volunteers were really excited, and keen to get a better sighting soon.

We were also lucky enough to see Cleo, briefly, on one evening drive, and we hope to see more of her in the near future.

## **ELEPHANT NEWS**

Again, we have been so busy with our lions that we have not had many elephant sightings; apart from the incredible events at “The Dam”! Also, one evening, on the way back to camp after seeing the lions, we saw 7 elephants feeding on either side of Willie cutline. We were also very lucky to see a large herd of 32, including 4 infants, between Middle Dip Road and the river on Arundel farm. We enjoyed watching them crossing the road right in front of us.

Before each drive, the volunteers do telemetry from the house to search for signal for all the collared animals on the reserve. One day, signal was picked up for the elephants close to camp, so we headed off in that direction. We ended up following the signal for hours and eventually caught up with the herd far north at the top of Jan Fourrie’s access road. The volunteers enjoyed watching the elephants show their super strength by knocking trees down with absolute ease.

Actually, not bad for “not many” elephant sightings! Hopefully we will have more encounters next month.

## **RHINO NEWS**

The same night that we saw the elephants feeding on the way back to camp, we had an amazing sighting of an adult female rhino with two calves (a female sub-adult and female juvenile) on Paw Paw clearing. The majority of the time, we see only brief glimpses of the Selati rhinos before they run off into the bush, but this evening they were unusually relaxed and allowed us to view them for a long time. They seemed to enjoy watching us as much as we enjoyed watching them! They were inquisitive of the vehicle, especially the juvenile, who approached within several metres.

There was another very close encounter one night when a rhino decided to run out in front of the vehicle, within about 5 metres, much to the surprise of everyone on board. The rhino seemed completely oblivious of the fact that it nearly ran into a car, and continued about its own business and walked off into the bush – with 2 other rhinos!

Another day, we decided to take out two vehicles, one to find the lions and the other to do a reserve task; occasionally, we get the volunteers out on the reserve to undertake maintenance tasks. This day, we asked them to help with the removal of alien plant species from Mahoed clearing. We split into 2 groups, walking either side of the clearing. One group was so absorbed in the task at hand that they did not see that they were walking straight into a solitary male rhino (albeit about 100 metres away), hidden from their view behind a bush; it wasn't until the other group shouted at them that they noticed! The rhino, though, was very calm in our presence and allowed us to watch him for a long time, until he slowly made his way into the bush. It was the birthday of one of the volunteers; walking with rhino made it a pretty special day!

## **OTHER NEWS**

This month, Leo is joined by two new staff members, Amy and Ash.

Amy is from the UK, and has always had a passion for Africa and its wildlife. After living in Malawi for a year, she headed back to the UK to continue her studies and gained a degree in Zoology. However, she knew she belonged in Africa, so made it a mission to come back and train to be a Field Guide. She is so happy to have the opportunity to work for Leo and is loving every moment so far.

Ash is a lawyer from Australia who has packed away the office to fulfill a lifelong dream to live and work in Africa. Having completed his training as a Field Guide at Bushwise at nearby Mahlahla and Makalali, Ash is relishing the opportunity to work with Selati's wonderful pride of lions and the great staff and volunteers at Leo.

On that note, we say farewell, until next time. Best regards from the bush!

Koos, Greg, Amy and Ash.

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