



NEWSLETTER FOR

July 2010

July has been an interesting month for us here at Leo, jam packed with awesome sightings; and not only our lion pride but almost all the animals on Selati came to party. The morning and afternoon temperatures have dropped considerably and Winter is now in full swing, the grasses are now all uniform brown and the trees are losing their leaves. This is all good as it means the animals are having to move around more for food, so we get to see more of them. All the water that was lying around after our Summer rain has dried up and disappeared making our bigger waterholes definite hotspots for game viewing.

LION NEWS

The pride has spent most of its time up in the northern section of the reserve this month, whilst Shaka, Mbhurri and Skinny have been spending some quality time with each other in the south.

Everyone will be pleased to know the swelling that Mafadi had on her face has gone down and she is only left with a scar on her cheek; other than that she is in good health and doing well.

Selati has been off on her own for a while, occasionally meeting up with Shaka before heading off by herself. The reason for her split from the pride is unclear but perhaps she needs some time away from the demands of pride life. The good news is that she has settled in the Mahoed area which isn't far from Leo base, making her an easy find for us.

One of the best sightings of the month was an afternoon drive around Jan Fouries' open area. We were looking for Shaka and the boys; just before we got to the large open area we checked for Shaka's signal, and 12 o'clock on a 5 was the call from the volunteer. Awesome; he must be in the road and not too far away, so we drove on, and about 10 seconds later Shaka appeared, walking down the road towards us. He passed right past us, showing off his massive size, 1.5 meters away from us. That experience on its own was unbelievable and everyone was silenced in awe. But it wasn't over yet. Shaka moved down into the river and we thought the sighting was done, when suddenly Skinny and Mbhurri appeared. As we got closer and turned the car off, we heard Shaka contact calling, and the boys answered. There was some rustling in the bush and Shaka emerged. The boys ran up to him and greeted him like a long lost friend. The three of them proceeded to playfully chase each other around; at one stage they came running straight towards the car. I guarantee there was many a volunteer with their hearts in their mouths at that moment. However, the boys dodged the vehicle and ran out onto the open area, where they seemed to play like children, jumping on one another. The sun was setting and the boys soon tired of their game and flopped down for a nap. We decided that was a perfect end to a tough day in Africa and left the lions.



Photo of Shaka



Photo of Skinny lying down



Photo of Mbhurri

ELEPHANT NEWS

There weren't many elephant sightings this month. We have got signal for the various collared elephants, but more often than not they elude us when out on drive. Recently, the reserve collared another elephant; Elza, the matriarch of one of the herds, was darted and fitted with the collar. She has remained elusive since, but this is to be expected as it's never a pleasant experience being darted. Having another collared elephant means that we should start to see more of these magnificent giants.

RHINO NEWS

We had quite a few rhino this month, but the sightings are very brief and we usually only see them crashing through the bush. But every now and then we do manage to get very good sightings. On one drive, Leo staff and volunteers came across a crash of rhino and soon noticed there was tension in the air. A male was obviously feeling a bit amorous, but the female he was keen on didn't feel the same way; every time he approached she would fend him off with short rushes and lots of noise. Amongst all the chaos, two younger rhino got separated from their mum and, being short sighted and confused, they charged the vehicle; luckily, the guides, ever-alert, managed to get the car out of the way and everyone lived to tell the tale.

On another occasion, we came across a rhino bull having a good wallow in Galon Dam. He was enjoying it so much that he paid no attention to us. We watched as he got out of his mud bath and rubbed himself against a fallen tree before he wandered off into the bush. With the bush thinning out we should start seeing more rhino and as always we look forward to what next month will bring.



Photo of a rhino

LEOPARD NEWS

There are only two words that can describe our leopard viewing this month: absolutely unbelievable. On a morning drive a female leopard was seen not far from Leo base. It was a quick glimpse, but a leopard is a leopard and the volunteers were happy; not satisfied, though, rather it gave them a taste of the beauty of these big cats. So we decided it was time for a Cleo drive, especially after the awesome sightings we had been getting from her recently. We initially could not get signal for Cleo and things weren't looking good for us. We were driving down Telegraph Road when two of the volunteers saw something down one of the roads. When we reversed it was gone; the description was "it looked like a baby zebra". So we drove down the road to get a better look, when suddenly the "baby zebra" ran across the road in front of us; it was Cleo! She was so quick that not everyone saw her. We tried as best we could to see her again but were unlucky and we left the area. This, however, was not the sighting we were looking for from Cleo and decided to try again a few days later.

Once out on drive, our first telemetry check gave us signal for Cleo, north of the river towards Jan Fouries' house. We made our way around to that side and a wild goose chase ensued. We drove up and down and around in circles, but the signal stayed constant and we weren't getting any closer; until finally I heard the volunteers say she is on a 5 and a half. I knew we had to be pretty much able to see her and scanned the bush with the spotlight; but nothing. I showed the volunteers where to shine the light and where to look and we drove in. I was expecting to see her running away from us as we got closer but as I rounded the thicket she was in, we saw her lying down in the open under a Marula tree, totally relaxed. We drove to within 5 metres of her, then turned off the car and enjoyed 45 minutes with her posing for us to take photos at will. Once she had enough of us, she casually got up, had a lazy stretch and disappeared into the night. I have rarely heard or seen people as excited and happy as the volunteers on that vehicle. It was the best sighting of Cleo and it's great to see she is getting more relaxed with our presence.



Photo of Cleo lying down in the grass

Just when we thought it couldn't get better, the leopards surprised us. Ash was out with the volunteers one morning looking for the lions, when he bumped into a female leopard on Middle Dip Road. On his arrival, the leopard got up and started moving off; but to the amazement of both Ash and the volunteers, up popped the head of another leopard from the long grass; a cub, roughly 6 months old. The pair didn't hang around for very long and disappeared into the dense bush. It is always really special to just see one leopard, but two is amazing, so the lucky guide and volunteers will have a memory of a lifetime.

But the leopard sighting of the month came from Cleo yet again. The key to habituating leopards is to see the leopards more often, so that is what we are trying to do with Cleo. With new-found confidence, the Leo staff and volunteers headed out on what was to be an epic game drive. The drive started very well with us getting a strong signal on Cleo. We thought it would be a good idea to wait for the cover of darkness to find her, so coffee came out and we waited. However, it's never as easy as we think and the next time we checked her signal it was a lot weaker and she was on a mission, so we packed up our coffee and set off after her. Again there were lots of circles being driven, but it seemed we couldn't gain ground on her. After many hours of driving, we finally managed to get Cleo on a signal 5; by now it was well into the night and it was looking up for us. We decided to wait and see where she was going to move to. Regularly checking the signal, we discovered that she was actually moving towards us and we listened with growing excitement as her signal strength increased. The next thing it was a 6, so we had to be able to see her. I scanned the bush as I had before and caught the reflection of her eyes in the light; there she was! The outline of her head was just visible in the dense bush. Everyone got to see her, until she got up and moved away from us. We thought that was it, but then she appeared again, heading straight towards us. She got to about 15 metres from us and then sat down in full view of us. After posing for a while, she got up and moved off again, but this time we were extra happy; some of the volunteers got some good photos of her. Just when we thought it was all over, she appeared yet again in the road ahead of us. We followed her as she walked down the road; at one stage she moved off the road and sat down, and I saw this as a chance to see how close we could get to her, so I continued to drive until she was about 2 metres from us. She was perfectly relaxed, so much so that she actually got up and approached us. She then stood next to the vehicle. Here was Cleo, a shy, rarely-seen leopard standing 1 metre away from us, going about her business as if we weren't there. We couldn't ask for more than this. Once she moved off, we decided to call it a night, and we turned around to head back. We didn't get very far when Cleo appeared in front of us again. It was almost like she wanted to be seen. We followed her again until she stopped, turned back, looked at us, then moved off the road and back into the bush. We really couldn't have asked for more and headed back to base, all of us filled with happiness. Hopefully things with Cleo continue to carry on as they are and we are excited to find out what kind of sightings we will get from her in the future.

And on that note, we wrap up this month's newsletter. Come back next month to read about what happens here on the Selati Game Reserve.

Until next time regards from the bush!

Greg, Amy, Ash and Koos.

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