



## May 2009 Newsletter



Hello and welcome from LEO. It's been a very exciting May, and it has passed-by ever so quickly. Selati hasn't had a drop of rain in weeks, and consequently the bush has really opened-up, allowing for a much further view into the blocks. Thus, LEO volunteers have been able to spot game easier, resulting in many fantastic sightings. The month of May has seen many interesting volunteers come and go, and its with their help that LEO has witnessed several wonderful sightings.

### **New staff member**



Jenny Channing joined LEO at the beginning of May, she has FGASA level 1, trails guide and was previously working as a field guide in Hluhluwe-Umfloosi reserve. She has a huge passion for the bush especially for the smaller creatures. Originally from Wales she has spent much time in Africa either traveling or undertaking research expeditions. She loves to share her knowledge of the bush and will often be found picking up spiders, insects much to the delight (or not) of the volunteers. She brings with her much research experience, a good local knowledge of beliefs and traditional practices of the bush as well as great interest in animal behavior.

### **Lion news**

#### **Warthog for breakfast**

It's been an extremely busy month at LEO thanks to our highly active pride. Right from the beginning of the month the lions have been hunting non-stop. It was the 4<sup>th</sup> May on a crispy morning drive down south, and we were searching for Shaka. As we approached Lillie airstrip a very large warthog posed for photo's then ran off in the direction of the koppies. Literally only three minutes later, having checked telemetry, we drove towards the koppies. With all eyes scanning for Shaka, one keen volunteer spotted Amarula and cubs at the base of the koppie... munching on a kill. Further observations revealed that they were devouring a certain warthog, which we had only just shared his last few moments of life, with as heart crunching as this was, we were all glad to see the cubs looking health and enjoying breakfast. Closer inspection revealed that Shaka was also lying close by. Later that evening we found the other members of the pride, they were sitting about 50 meters high up on a koppie at mole road. After an hour or so, and severe neck cramp from looking up for so long, we decided that the lions weren't coming down to ground level anytime soon.

#### **Stitches goes A.W.O.L**

It was the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup>, and we set-off on our morning drive, but no body was prepared for the run-around we were about to be given. The pride was down south, and as we drove along water-pump road, the only signal we could pick-up was young Stitches. On a strong level 4 we were convinced that we were due a fairly easy visual, however, as we followed in his direction, and took telemetry again, Stitches had vanished! To cut a 1.5 hour story short, we drove around Lillie 1 farm, picking up signals, but each time we drove closer Stitches was further away in a different direction. At one point we picked-up the other members of the pride (in a more southerly direction) but we decided to continue after Stitches, who was frantically moving from one area to another. It wasn't long before both the staff and volunteers began theorizing why Stitches was behaving like this. Had Stitches and his brothers been evicted from the pride by Shaka? (This is a natural and is bound to happen sooner or later). No-body wanted to jump to conclusions, but we were all in suspense. We followed from water-pump road, all around the koppies, up to Mabottle dam, to Mahoed clearing

and then to Andries road, finally we stopped chasing and went home for breakfast. Luckily the three boys hadn't been evicted, as we encountered them all and the females at Mabottle dam later that evening, but Stitches antics remain unexplained!

### **The hunters**

The lions have been hunting lots this passed month, and whilst LEO usually is aware that hunts are taking place (through hearing animal distress calls etc) but unable to follow, recently we have been luckily enough to witness hunts visual (thanks to the bush opening-up). On three consecutive days, we watched the lions in action. On the 8<sup>th</sup> we spent a very long but fascinating morning down near Salajan road. Our volunteers were treated to the sight of the pride stalking and chasing wildebeest around within blocks of mopani and knobthorn trees. Unfortunately the hunt was unsuccessful, but the lions had more luck the following evening. It was a zebra kill, and LEO watched as Selati and Mica caused chaos throughout the Harem; the actual take-down wasn't seen, but the presence of vultures and the over powering stench of death was enough to confirm that the lions weren't going hungry today. With belly's still full, the following night, we watched the pride in Mahoed clearing as they tactfully tried for an adult male giraffe. Skilled as the pride is, there was no way that this giraffe was prepared to be dinner, and he made a sharp exit. It wasn't until the 10<sup>th</sup> May, that our volunteers were finally able to watch the lions on a fresh eland kill. Except for Shaka, all lions were present, including Amarula and cubs. This sighting was truly awesome, made even better by the fact that the pride were all very relaxed with presence of more than one vehicle watching them eating brunch. The sight of the young cubs covered in blood was also very cute (in a strange way). LEO returned to the sight of the kill later that evening in the hope of spotting a hyena or two. However the lions were still lazing around, and we knew that they weren't for sharing with anyone else. We drove off to Mahoed clearing in the search for Shaka. Right on cue, Shaka entered the clearing. He proceeded to bellow several extremely deep grunts, and then let loose many ground shaking roars (the vehicle and volunteers were actually vibrating through his roars). It was very humbling, and as he wandered off, we drove away in the opposite direction, heading home to reflect on a truly brilliant day.



**Above:** Amarula on an eland kill.

### **Baby sitting**

With a vehicle full of new volunteers, we drove round to Mahoed koppie in search of Shaka. As we drove to the clearing by his cave, we heard a rustle in the bushes. Expecting Shaka to appear we were all pleasantly surprised to meet three little cubs' heads peeking at us. Amarula was absent, but her little cubs were still very brave and slowly made their way up to our vehicles. It was a lovely sighting, definitely a highlight of many of the volunteer's trip. The expressions on the cub's faces were unforgettable. We spent roughly thirty minutes just sitting with them, in which time we managed to confirm that there are two females and one male.

When the cubs were bored with us they moved off behind the bushes they had originally entered from. As we took the road to follow them we immediately stumbled into Shaka. He had been watching us the whole time – no wonder the cubs were so brave, they had Shaka watching their backs. We shared another forty five minutes watching Shaka baby sit, and lets just say that he won't be winning any step dad of the year awards. He was rally a grumpy old lion! Thankfully the opposite applies to Amarula, whom we sat with the following evening in Mahoed clearing. She is the most caring and nurturing lioness imaginable.



**Above:** Shaka baby sitting the cubs.



**Above** Cubs wondered over to us, at Mahoed

### **Play time**

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> May in Mahoed clearing, we were very luckily to encounter the three teenage boys playing around as if they were little cubs again. Coming excitingly close to the vehicle, our volunteers managed to capture some brilliant photos. The lions were chasing around and play fighting over a stick, and at one point they were evening climbing trees! It was really special to observe such wonderful behavior. Watching these lions interacting as they were, it did bring forward thoughts that very soon these boys will have to leave the pride and fend for themselves. What an exciting time lies ahead for these young lions.



**Above:** Skinny is playing in some trees.

### **Lion summary**

Selati's resident lions are in good health and there are no immediate concerns for the pride. Shaka is still spending a considerable amount of his time with Amarula and cubs, which is of no surprise. The frequency of visuals of Amarula and cubs has substantially increased, and she can be seen almost on a daily basis now between the areas of Galon dam and Mahoed clearing. She remains in fine condition, and her cubs have easily doubled in size since April, so this is all very reassuring.

Selati is still very chilled-out, in comparison to Mica, whom barely takes her eyes off the vehicle in every sighting. The remaining young lions in the pride are all great characters, and Mburri's mane is really growing-in thick now, and he's really beginning to look like a mature young adult. Stitches mane on the other hand is barley noticeable, and he prefers to spend his time pestering any other mammal he can find, and climbing trees. Skinny remains the first and last lion to leave the vehicle alone when we are observing them; he is constantly curious of our presence. Little Impi continues to amuse our volunteers through his attempts of stalking prey, each attempt a failure, but he certainly has spirit about him. Tarzan is the complete opposite, and is always the only lion to be lying in the grass whilst the others are on a hunt; maybe he is just practicing for the day when he has his own pride and his females will simply provide for him.

In addition, we have found a set of tracks from a rouge lion that was walking along the perimeter fence very close to the LEO base; we can account for the resident pride's location on the night in question, and we can conclude with some certainty that this was a rouge lion.

Furthermore, we have found prints from a very large lion, along the Selati river bed (near the crossing). Whether these belong to the infamous Thamboti or Roiboos remains to be seen. We will keep you updated.

## **Elephant news**

Elephant activity was high in May, and LEO volunteers were treated to some wonderful sightings, and the odd little scare. It was the 11<sup>th</sup> May and a vehicle packed with tired and hungry volunteers made their ascent up Ekaya road to base. Suddenly a great trumpet blew at our right hand side. A female elephant was making her presence known. Seeing as it was very dark, and we weren't sure how many elephants were in the immediate area, we decided to drive on. We turned the corner and met a huge female right in the middle of the road; luckily she was really relaxed and she walked over to the right side of our vehicle and started to eat some branches. She was merely ten meters away from us and our volunteers were over-joyed with emotions. Her silhouette against the pale moonlight sky was a sight of sheer beauty; it's just a pity that we couldn't photograph her at such close range. Her curiosity brought her to within touching distance of the vehicle, and our volunteers were in complete awe of her size. We left her in peace and returned home to share our excitement.

The following morning, descending along the same road, we encountered a fine figure of a bull elephant. He was most likely following the trail of the females from the previous night. For fifteen minutes we sat in his company watching him eat, before he gently entered the bush. Our next bull encounter was slightly different, seeing as it was when we drove into a huge bull in musth, along Ox-wagon North road.

He was swaying from side to side and dripping urine onto his back legs, and yet we never felt threatened by him. Of course we were fully alert to the danger of a bull in musth, but this elephant was concentrating more in keeping his balance than he was of charging us. After a patient twenty minute wait from us, we managed to drive passed this impressive bull, and we continued on our pursuit of the lions.

## **Collared elephants**

LEO hasn't had much involvement with the collard elephants this month. It wasn't until mid May that we really encountered much activity. We had seen plenty of signs that elephants had been in the area, (smashed trees, boluses all along the road etc) but our collard friends were always deep within blocks whenever we were in the vicinity. LEO had to wait until the final week of May until we had some decent visuals. The elephants were in huge numbers spread all along the Selati riverbed close to Paw paws direction.

On two consecutive days we encountered the herds of elephants 1, 25, 33, and 56. However, sightings were cut short due to the over protectiveness of Skewy, who seem to enjoy rallying all her herd around her and then showing LEO who's the boss. It's a shame that Skewy is over aggressive. Sightings of Selati's elephant herds are usually so peaceful, and then Skewy turns up and riles up the herd to a small frenzy. Nevertheless, everyone is always grateful for the time we get to share in the presence of these great animals.



**Above:** The bull elephant in musth that LEO encountered.

## **Rhino news**

May has been an excellent month for rhino sightings; we have seen twenty individual rhinos in total. These sightings have been excellent partly due to the fact that the rhino have allowed us to spend a lengthy time in their company. A beautiful sighting took place on the 6th May, along East Galon Sloop. It was a very misty morning and visibility was poor, suddenly we found ourselves close to three large rhino (included were notched animals 3, and 31). The image of them standing motionless in the early morning mist was breathtaking. Four days later in Mahoed clearing we came across a female and calf, which were drinking from the reservoir. On closer inspection we realized that Stitches was also sitting close by them, and he had attracted the attention of the calf.

The huge female rhino however wasn't fazed by the presence of Stitches, nor the other six lions that just so happened to be there also, but their camouflage had hidden them for several minutes. This female was absolutely massive though, so it made sense that she wasn't threatened.



**Above:** Stitches goes head to head with a young rhino.

A few days later we encountered these rhinos again, this time however there was a new edition to the family. She must have given birth a day or so ago, and this was the first time anyone had ever seen this incredibly small rhino; so small in fact that it could pretty much fit underneath the mother's belly.

An equally great sighting occurred a few days later, when we were peacefully driving along Galon Mahoed main. We had only just commented on the huge quantity of rhino dung, when four rhinos burst out from the bushes and ran parallel to our vehicle. It was female notch 7, and her young juvenile son, and her much younger calf; they were being chased by the resident male notch number 4. He was chasing after the female frantically, and he was taking swipes at the young calf! We watched helplessly as they tried to lose him through the bush, but he constantly followed them. At one point there was even horn clashing between the female and the large male. We decided that it was best that we left the scene, as we didn't want to risk being caught in the middle of their domestic.



**Above:** the rhino family that was being hounded by the resident male notch No. 4

## **Leopard news**

Well here we are again and I wish we could give you some good news, but alas we still haven't had a visual of Cleo. Even with LEO doubling our efforts, still Cleo evades us. She has been spending the vast majority of her time within the Danie farm, deep within a big block of bush. She truly is very difficult to get close. Through frustration, LEO staff has even walked into blocks in the hope of spotting her, but she always remains on the move in the opposite direction. The Cleo saga continues.

A small consolation is that we are still finding female and male leopard tracks frequently. Excitingly we found the tracks of a mother leopard and her young cub, along Sable koppie road.

## Special sightings

In the past month our volunteers have been treated to some very special sightings. On night drives we have encountered serval's and civet, and amazingly a Verreaux eagle owl. Rare cats have also been spotted on occasion; we have had wild cats, caracal, and a collation of young cheetah in Mahoed clearing. Some lucky volunteers got a quick glimpse of a hyena, before it ran off into the bushes. Once again LEO encountered the genetic rarity of the white water-buck!



**Above:** Cheetah in Mahoed clearing; and a white water-buck.

## Additional news

The LEO pond also received a further upgrade this month, when it was reinforced with sand and mud, which also aids in the ease with which animals can access the water. Our pond is still proving a hit with the local wildlife, and we now have several frequent visitors; these include five male impala, 20-30 helmeted guinea fowl, a family of four warthogs, a common duiker, and a pair of martial eagles. LEO is glad to be helping out our local animal community, and our volunteers are happy that they are benefiting through some fantastic sightings from the comfort of their beds.

**Below:** Scenes from the LEO pond in the past month.



Sadly that's us fished for the month. We really enjoy sharing our story's and new with everyone. LEO would like to thank all past and present volunteers for their hard work and support, and we look forward to meeting all our future volunteers very soon. Until next month, take care, and goodbye.

Kind regards

The LEO team

St Clair, Sheldon, Kevin and Jenny

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