



**NEWSLETTER FOR  
October 2011**



Summer is well and truly here, with the insect friends making sure that everyone here knows it. We have had some heavy and persistent rains towards the end of the month, with one evening getting pelted by hail the size of small golf balls. But with all this extra water all the small signs of life are making drives even more entertaining, except for whoever is driving, trying to avoid being a mass killer of all the insects abundant on the roads!

## LION NEWS

The pride has been exceptionally busy themselves and keeping us on our toes this month, with lots happening. The month began with a walk in on the lionesses which had been illusive as ever, and as the group walked in, a leopard which had been chased up a tree used us a chance to escape. All the group could see was the young leopard jumping down and the back of Mica's head bouncing off in the bush after it. The girls were on a nyala kill and had attracted the unwanted attention of the leopard. This beginning of the month started off a nice little run of finding the lions on some kills.



Mbhurri, Skinny and Shaka were located near Mahoed clearing on Mabottle link and the two young males were trying to dig up an aardvark or something whilst Shaka watched with wisdom, realising that it was a waste of energy. Later that same day the males were pretty much in the same position and were located a few meters in front of the vehicle, whilst Shaka took shade under a bush just across the other side of the road. In the distance the clouds were getting darker about to bring in more heavy rains and with this the two young males sat up and got a little more restless. Mbhurri then fully stood up and gave himself a nice long stretch before walking towards the vehicle and turning himself right into the driver's window and gave a nice long stare, before strolling along the vehicle and staring at all the volunteers with the same unimpressed expression. Then it was Skinny's turn and he ignored the driver to concentrate more on the rear of the vehicle and licking and rubbing himself on the back of the vehicle where Mbhurri had plotted himself behind. As the two males got up, Shaka joined them and we followed them along to a muddy water hole where they drunk for a while, and then began strolling along again, occasionally bumping into each other giving friendly growls.

On the same drive, we headed home and got caught in a hail storm on Rhino Ridge, where everyone in the back got a painful massage from the large hail stones. But once back and dried off, think everyone thought it was worth it. The next day, the males must have made the most of it, as we found them on an adult giraffe kill. They had already tucked into about a third of it without having puncher the guts and stomach. This was the first time everyone was in place to try and dart Shaka and collar him, and as he was on a kill it was unlikely he would go anywhere.

Waiting for another team to come out and carry out the operation, we watched as the male lions took turns in filling any emptiness in their stomachs and Shaka after sticking his head in the unfortunate giraffe, filled up and sat about four meters in front of our vehicle. The reserve vehicle with the darting gun, took a road too close and the smart lion on hearing the vehicles engine, just got up and ran towards the other two males not far off and they got up as well and ran off into a block. Getting everyone together at rock lodge, we tried to find him again, but to no avail and disrupted the fifty or more vultures, now scavenging on the large carcass. It wasn't until almost two weeks later, the male lions were located in Lillie 2 at the bottom of the reserve, we tried a lot harder to get him again.

This time, they were hidden near the open area near a dam and we had to call in the helicopter in order to be able to get the clever feller. The helicopter circled around for half an hour and unfortunately the vet missed twice, but even more unfortunate than that, was when they did dart the lion wrongly identified, it was Mbhurri! Any other lion than Mbhurri would have been okay, but Mbhurri, not a good start. Luckily though, they ended up finding Shaka and darting him from the helicopter closer to the large koppies that dominate the area. Having darted Mbhurri, it gave the volunteers and others the opportunity to touch him, check out his huge sized paws and claws on the end of them. Seeing them separately, and not having seen Shaka for a while, it was clear the old lion was not in a good state. The vet having found loads of gross cysts on him and seeing his much skinnier condition from Mbhurri since having last seen him, they decided to take him to the boma on Elephant Boma Road. We checked on Mbhurri who after a hour or so got up again all drowsy, but back on his feet and later that night, he was back with Skinny, pretty much in the same place.



Shaka at the moment still remains in the Boma, and is being fed about two impala a week, to get him back to a better state of health. The lionesses have not been seen with the males there yet and have pretty much kept to themselves, killing for themselves and probably unaware what has been the case with the dominant male. The next stage is to hopefully collar Skinny when all the right pieces are in place to be able to dart him. Hopefully he shouldn't be as difficult as Shaka, having never been collared before and generally with his sibling most of the time.

## ELEPHANT NEWS

Elephants this month have mostly been south of the Selati river and given us a few sightings quite close to home. We had some nice sightings of them around Burren Koppie Road in Huja with Elza and Lillie's herds roaming around close together. George's collar appears to be working again, but we have yet to sight him or any of the other bulls. Along drainage lines we have mainly seen young elephants along with the dominant matriarchs ensuring their safety.



On a drive in the clearing near Galon Dam we had an excellent sighting of Elza's herd, where they were in the open and could be seen clearly and could also see us very clearly as well. Two of the adult females, one being Elza, mock charged the vehicle and came within fifteen feet of us. With them standing tall, ears out they began to check us out with their trunks, making sure we smelt okay. This sighting was close to dusk and as they were pretty much around the vehicle, when the opportunity was available, we made an exit, as elephants in general are not too keen on having a spotlight shone on them at night.

Four of the elephants on the reserve were also collared this month. Two of the elephants were re-collared, whilst we have two new elephants now with collars. One has been named Sahara and the other was named after the vet carrying out the darting and is named Bossie. We have since picked them up on the telemetry, but as of yet to see them up close and see how their reactions are towards us. Hopefully though, this should make it a little easier to pin-point them and intercept them, to gain better and more frequent sightings of these large creatures.

## **RHINO NEWS**

Most of the white rhinos in Selati have had a hectic month, having being chased and darted from a helicopter or vehicles that could access them. The whole process went exceptionally efficiently, and they managed to dart and tag almost all! It was so fast in fact, that we almost missed the darting and process on any of them! Luckily though we managed to join them of the darting of the largest bull rhino they had darted so far. Just across the river, we drove up to where the rhino had been darted from the helicopter and saw a doped up rhino struggling to stand on his feet. The vehicles were trying to herd him close to the road and in the open, so that was easier for everyone to get close and do their work.

About twenty meters from the road, he became still and was still sitting up, with his large nostrils snorting out thundering puffs of air. We were able to get up closer and watch as the team which had been doing this for the last few days got to work, measuring his horn length, everything you could think of to identify him. They drilled into his horn, and placed some tagging device, to be able to track him and then filled it up with resin. The strong large rhino bull was sitting up during the whole process, snorting loudly away, with his eyes covered, so he was less distressed. It was done in the name of his and all the other rhinos conservation from poachers. We were able to touch him and feel how rough his skin and smooth his horn is, and basically feels as it looks to touch. Having been running away from the humans, he felt very hot through his thick skin and this was most likely the other reason for him puffing loudly. All the rhinos that were darted and tagged, were marked on there back with white painting marks, so they could be seen from the air not to re-dart them again!



Around this time, we had an amazing sighting of a mother and calf rhino next to Galon Dam, who had obviously been darted that day. At night we spotted them to our side and we watched as they walked right in front of our vehicle and stood there, with the small calf staring right up at us. They were so close, their breath touched the front grill, but they were obviously still affected by the drugs, as the next morning we saw them again, shaking of its effects in the long grassed area by the dam. A few days before the rhino dartings began, we manage to see a large male rhino, with a mother and calf drinking from Galon Dam, most likely the same mother and calf. Each rhino that was tagged, also had a new set of notches in their ears, if they didn't already have them, to help identify them, so now every rhino in Selati is accounted for. Hopefully all the commotion will play a huge part in making sure it's more and more difficult for poachers to get close to these large fantastic creatures.

## LEOPARD NEWS

Sightings of leopards this month have not been as high as August, but we did manage to see a young male leopard on one of the lionesses sightings. As mentioned in the lion news, we carried out a walk in on the lionesses and manage to find that they were on a nyala kill, having discovered its tail on the way in on the walk. As we did this, our presence, must have distracted the lions from the young leopard up a tree. Having noticed the distraction in the lions attention, we manage to see him briefly, jump down and run off, getting chased by Mica. Unfortunately, we haven't managed to have anymore sightings of these beautiful cats this month. Yet we have found the odd track along Borehole Road in Hoed, but as the rains are more frequent, leopard tracks are becoming less common, as they are washed away. But with all the new life on the way for summer, hopefully some keen eyes will spot one in a tree.

## SPECIAL SIGHTINGS

Nocturnal sightings this month have ruled the special sightings this month, having been lucky finding fairly relaxed animals that haven't run off into the darkness of the bush. We had a great sighting of a porcupine on Mopane road in Transport, where we followed them for a good ten minutes as they rummaged around in front of our vehicle. We also saw another large porcupine later in the month, fairly near to LEO base, but this time, they were not so keen to hang around. Though it was still really cool to see Africa's largest rodent and all its quills running around in the bush. On another drive we had an excellent sighting of a serval on Rhino Ridge, where it ran along the road in front of the vehicle and stopped to pose in front of a termite mound for a few seconds before darting off from our spotlights again. Then continuing a good bunch of night time sightings, on a drive one night we spotted a civet, routing around the road, which instead of running off, sat and watched us for a good five minutes, before hiding behind thicker bushes.



Due to the recent bush burning of one of the blocks siding on Rhino Ridge, it attracted a lot of species which are loving the new growth. It also means that we have been able to have nice clear sightings of them at the same time. This has given many sightings of steenbok, who run a little and then, due to openness of the area, stand still and stare at us for a while. With the lions having been in the Lillie, we manage to catch a sighting of a klipspringer running across the road in front of us, and then posing for a moment on the large boulders which made it felt safer than its previous position. But again, night drives have been great with two separate sightings of side striped jackals, also giving us a clear view of how slightly larger they are than their black-backed counter parts. Hopefully the abundance of nocturnal insects, will bring out more of these shy hunters for us to view and record on drives.

## OTHER NEWS

We have been a great deal more active this month in tackling reserve maintenance and preservation. The LEO volunteers have taken part in starting to remove a humongous queen of the night cactus, which is situated in a clearing outside one of the land owners property. This plant is as high as a two storey house and as wide as one as well. With the aide of pangas and the hilux, we have made a dent in its dominance of the area, finding out very quickly to avoid its sharp spikes. The volunteers did an excellent job in chopping up the stems which sound as though they're full of water, into either little pieces to be run over or stacking them high up to be dealt with at a later date. This will all go towards helping to prevent it from spreading to other parts of the reserve, as this is South Africa, not South America!



We have also dealt with some of the bolster and mitre drains which have disintegrated over time. The bolsters, are the humps that we drive over and the mitre drains are the dead end looking patches of road. They play a crucial tool in preventing soil erosion, which will favour certain species over others and increase bush encroachment of these species. It also prevents the road from being washed away by the heavy rains we experience here, which as you know can make a huge difference in how comfortable a road is to travel on. So we got our shovels and rebuilt some of the bolsters along Thankerton Cutline, by getting the soil from the sides and building a sufficient hump or bolster, to force the rain to drain of into the mitre drain. There is hundreds of these within Selati that need repairing, possibly thousands, so this important work will take a while, but over time will help conserve the plant life protected by the existence of Selati reserve.

Until next time, best regards,

The LEO team

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