



NEWSLETTER FOR OCTOBER 2009



Dear Volunteers and Friends,

Welcome to our monthly news for October. What a fantastic month October has been – we have had some great sightings this month and not just of our magnificent Selati lions! Thank you to all volunteers for a great month and please read on to find out what we have been up to....

LION NEWS

The month started on a grey and cloudy note which not only disgruntled our volunteers whilst shivering from the mist and rain on our search for the Selati pride, but also caused the lions to go into hiding. However on the 1st we had a great sighting of Shaka towards dusk as he was out on what seemed to be a mission along Mabottle Avenue. He passed within metres of the car giving a few volunteers a heart stopping moment as he eyed them up as he passed and continued on his way. The next day the mist and drizzle caused the females to go into hiding on a koppie down on Lillie. However in the afternoon the weather had cleared and they had come out of their hiding places and moved down towards a dam on Lillie. We had a great sighting of all 3 females and their young cubs as well as Mbhurri. The cubs were in a playful mood with one playing with a small warthog skull as the others looked on in interest.

The pride remained in the south for some time, and the three sub adults males once again looked like they were together. One afternoon we found them on Salejan Clearing drinking from the waterhole with Shaka, then not so long later Amarula and Mica appear with their cubs and they all drink and settle down to relax in the clearing, Selati was not with them. The sub adult males approach Mica several times sniffing at her testing if she is in estrous, and Stitches also tries to mount her several times, Shaka obviously unaware that he was potentially having one of his ladies being sneakily mated with as he is lay away from the pride off in the bushes.



The lions lazing together at Salejan Clearing

EARLY BIRD CATCHES THE WORM...UM LION...

On the morning of the 9th we located the pride very early on resting on a termite mound down near Mole Road. It is great when we find them so soon as it enables us to spend much longer with them and see what they do – which is why we like to get away early in the morning! All lions were present except for Selati once again. After a few moments of watching them watching us they decide that we are not interesting enough and they slowly raise from their spots on an old termite mound and begin moving East through the mopani trees. Amarula led the pride with Shaka bringing up the rear however the cubs began to lag behind and Shaka sent Mbhurri off to round them up which he does playfully. The lions then seem to stop amidst some guarri bushes with something attracting their attention....read on further down to see what they had found.... After their little distraction they continued on and lay in another clearing near to Lillie Airstrip and were still there in the afternoon.

Selati was away from the pride for some time and on the 12th we found her and Shaka quietly resting in a clearing on Mahoed Link Road. They remained there for the day and in the afternoon as the sun was beginning to set they came out of the bush to Mahoed Clearing to drink from the waterhole, and then stretched out and relaxed in all their glory for us to see. We sat observing them for over an hour as impala and giraffe past in the distance. Then we had two surprising guests pop out of the bush to quench their thirst....see later on for who it was....



Shaka and Selati resting up at one of ours – and their – favorite spots Mahoed

After continuing to watch Selati and Shaka, Selati all of a sudden rose and got into stalking position, she trotted off in search of something we could not see and then she disappeared in the bush. Shaka followed behind her making contact calls as he went, and we heard baboons alarm calling in the bushes. We thought we heard the sound of something being attacked but it was not that loud and could have perhaps been our vivid imaginations. It was dark so we left them both with their possible dinner and decided to return the next day to see if they had made a kill. On return and investigation we did not find any carcass so perhaps they were unlucky that night...

The rest of the pride meanwhile was down on Lillie, and a few days later Selati joined them once again. We had an interesting morning on the 15th of strange telemetry signal and decided it was hot and to stop for refreshments, the signal on 3.5 so lions far enough for us not to worry that they were going to steal our biscuits (heaven forbid anything happened to the biscuits!). After we had energised ourselves we carried on along the road at the base of the long line of the Lillie Koppies, about 600m down the road we turned a corner and oh my there's a lion! It was Skinny and Selati! Skinny was busy munching away on an impala whilst Selati rested in the shade, Selati then decided to get up and move towards a small koppie where she hide away in the undergrowth. Skinny then decided he had had his fill and with bulging belly walked off in the same direction and headed up the Koppie. Selati then decided she wanted some more and came down and crunched her way through what we identified as impala bones, there was not much left at all! She then returned to the Koppie and we drove a little closer and spotted a cub lying on the rock staring down at us. They all seemed very relaxed and we had a signal for Mica too but Stitches was not with them, although signal suggested that he was not far away. Later in the afternoon they had

come down from the koppie and were lying in the clearing giving us a wonderful sighting.



A very full Skinny past out under a rock



Selati enjoying the leftovers....

The lions then did a disappearing act up into the Lillie Koppies for several days and we were not able to get a visual of them. On the 16th however we had an amazing sighting of the pride on Lillie Airstrip, they lay down for sometime then got up and moved towards the house at the end of the airstrip. They then took great interest in the buffalo pen behind the house, and split up and took up hunting positions next to the fences. After a while they realised that they would not get lucky here because of the pen and moved off. The next day they were found lying on top of the knuckles. It took us a while to find them amongst the rocks but after some perseverance (and hour of changing angle, scanning with binoculars) Stitches could be seen peering over a rock as if he had been watching us the whole time. Then Selati and Mica's heads pop up as well as the cubs from time to time. They were resting looking over their home that is the great Selati.



"There you are!!"

After their long spell down south the pride took a change in direction and headed northwards. One evening they were found on a Zebra kill near the eastern fenceline on the BVB farm. It was dark but we could hear lots of growling and disputes over the kill particularly between Shaka and the sub-adult males. The next day we returned to find almost all the zebra gone, only one leg and skull could be found in the vicinity.

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE...

Towards the end of October the lions played hard to get, they eventually ended up in the koppies right down south on Lillie 2 and visuals were difficult. However we had one great sighting of Shaka near the dam on Lillie 2, whilst he was relaxing behind the dam wall. We spent a long time watching him in awe and as we were doing so a warthog family came trotting along behind the vehicle, a female and male with their 3 young. They were heading straight for where Shaka was lying!! We held our breath as we watched what was going to happen. You could see Shaka's body tighten as he sat up alert and his expression could only be interpreted as surprise and anticipation as here came a fast food delivery! Only about 6m away did the leader stop and sense something was amiss with the situation. They either spied Shaka or caught his scent but promptly changed direction and trotted off away from him – piggies saved for another day! Shaka then flopped down again and ignored the pigs trotting away from him, it was too good to be true that his dinner fell in his lap...

LEOPARD NEWS

What an exciting month for leopard sightings – the first very close to home! On the afternoon of the 7th when volunteers were out on drive one staff member was enjoying the quietness looking over the view of Selati as the sun set when an interesting shape appeared at the waterhole... it was cat like and after further investigation with binoculars as the light was beginning to fade it was identified as a young male leopard!!! He even went for a drink at the water! Then he began to move up towards the house seemingly unaware of being watched. He lay down in the grass about 30m from the house, and then as if sensing he was being watched he jumped up and trotted off away from the house, probably on a hunt as Kudu alarm calls were heard in the distance.

Two days later and we were having an amazing morning with the pride, finding them all lying on a termite mound down on Mole Road first thing. The lions slowly arose and began heading east and we followed them from block to block watching them cross the roads. We arrived at a clearing where we thought the lions would come out and something had attracted their attention in the magic guarri bushes, volunteers on the back suddenly gasp and tell the LEO staff member to reverse, they had seen something cross the road behind the vehicle and it was not a lion! The lions continued to play in the bushes and then came out one by one, with the youngest cubs Jane and Xena posing in front of the vehicle for pictures. The volunteers were so shock they could not quite believe what they had seen....at first they were unsure but after investigating and looking at tracks it was certain that they had seen a leopard, who had been silently feasting on a genet cat as we passed the bushes but then was flushed out by the lions and dashed for safety behind us. The lions were not too bothered with the leopard but had a bit of fun playing with it's kill before moving on.



The leopard was disturbed by the lions whilst eating a small spotted genet kill

Later in the month we were on our way home on the evening of the 26th after observing part of the pride on a koppie on Double Highway. We then tried to follow them as they moved off as the light faded hoping they would come out on the road, however it seemed something had their interest in the block of Double Highway and Red Sun Road or they were sheltering from the brewing windy so we were not lucky with a closer visual. We began to set off back towards base

when a keen eyed volunteer with the spotlight caught sight of something close to the road. “Go back, go back” they gasp and as we reverse we are graced with the amazing face of a young leopard about 5 metres away. It stared at us for a moment and then sunk low into the grass and crept along beside us into the bush. We inched forward and caught sight of it again, and then it moved out into a clearer spot giving us all an amazing view looking at us with as much interest as we were at it! It was very relaxed and we spent a good 20 minutes watching in awe.

ELEPHANT NEWS

We have had a quiet month for Elephants but this has been compensated for by our amazing sighting of George and Junior at Mahoed Clearing. During our great sighting on the 12th of Shaka and Selati at Mahoed Clearing we had two visitors... With everyone looking over to our right watching the pair laze as the sunset LEO staff member spotted two grey shapes appearing out of the bushes to our left. Whispers to the back of the vehicle elephants took a while before everyone realised they were there and just 30m from the lions. George and Junior did not seem troubled by their presence and drank and splashed themselves contently, with Selati and Shaka watching them. George and Junior then silently grazed the fallen leaves of our beautiful Nyala tree with the lions still watching. It was amazing to see 2 of the ‘Big 5’ so close in one sighting and we remained there for over an hour thinking how lucky we were!



George and Junior quenching their thirst at Mahoed

RHINO NEWS

A busy month for rhino with lots of sightings most of which were on the Hoed and Huja farms. One of the most amazing by far though was a sighting at Galon Dam on the 20th. As we were coming up to the dam from the south we spotted 3 rhino just over the dam wall, so we drove up slowly towards the dam view point and as we came around the corner 5 more rhino were at the water's edge on the far side of the dam. It turned out to be a mother and her calf and a large male rhino, and 5 sub adult males on the other side. They were very relaxed (yes relaxed!) and we watched them for about twenty minutes as the young males came up to drink, and the young calf suckled from its mother. The large male was covered in mud after what must have been a refreshing wallow in the dam.



OTHER NEWS

WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING...

Due to our earlier sighting of a leopard at the LEO waterhole, we decided to put up the camera trap to see if we could catch him in the act again. We left the camera out for a few nights and then inspected our findings...we did not get a picture of the leopard but however had a surprising visit from an Aardvark! A nocturnal animal our volunteers would love to see and here one is taking a drink just outside as you sleep....



SABLE AUCTION

This month was the annual Selati Sable Auction which LEO staff and volunteers attended. It gave us a good idea how a game auction took place, with pens with the Sable which were up for auctioning and viewing platforms to observe the animals but signs up to remain silent so as not to disturb them. Bigger game were also in the auction such as rhino and buffalo however these were not at the sale due to the difficulty of transporting them just for viewing purposes. It was very interesting to see how fast the auction for each animal went, all bids in afrikaans and very energetic and exciting!



One of the beautiful male sables up for auction