



# Singita

PAMUSHANA LODGE

Malilangwe • Zimbabwe

## WILDLIFE JOURNAL

From the first to the twenty-eighth of February  
Two Thousand and Eleven

### Temperature

Average Minimum: 20.1°C (68.0°F)  
Average Maximum: 31.6°C (87.8°F)  
Minimum recorded: 18.7°C (64.4°F)  
Maximum recorded: 35.7°C (96.8°F)

### Rainfall Recorded

For the period: 28.0mm  
For the year to date: 238.8 mm

There are no words to aptly describe the intensity and variety of greens that blanket the landscape this month. It does make the animals more difficult to find, but the rewards outweigh the effort when you see them in peak physical condition with newborn young frolicking afoot, and an added bonus is when you take a look at your vibrant and vivid photographic results.

In urban areas you tend to get used to three or four different grasses that people cultivate as lawns, but out here there are literally hundreds growing wild, and each has a story to tell...



## Green warfare

The two 'spears' you see stabbed into the mopane leaf are from spear grass (*Heteropogon contortus*). They're still young and haven't become dried out and contorted as they will later on in their lifecycle, and field guide Japhet Diza showed me how to use them as ammunition...

He and his young friends would be tending their fathers'

cattle out in the wilds all day. They would get bored and, boys being boys played a game of combat.

They'd divide into two groups and have a set time in which to collect their weapons. (The weapons being the heads, or inflorescence, of the spear grass.) Before long the allocated time would be up and the game would begin. Quickly they'd spit on the tips of the 'spears' and manipulate each to be as aerodynamic as possible and then, arsenal in hand, they would chase their opponents high and low until they had a clear shot. They'd throw the spear and a good shot would stab the enemy's skin!

Japhet tells me it was extremely painful and the little hairs on the end of the inflorescence would irritate the skin and make it fester to a small wound. I declined a demonstration and instead offered the hardy mopane leaf, and was amazed at the accuracy and sharpness of the spear!

## Whatever you do don't panic!

The tall grass you see silhouetted against this big bull elephant is known as guinea grass, and it has my favourite scientific name of all the grasses -*Panicum maximum*.

It grows tall and abundant and is a favoured grass of many grazing animals. Should you unwisely decide to walk through a field of this grass, that could easily be shoulder height or higher, and you suddenly hear a snort, grunt, growl or rustle that is very close by but hidden you will undoubtedly be prone to a bout of *panicum maximum*!





## Grasses that tickle

The grass on the left is soft and silky and its feathery top gives it its common name of feather-top chloris (*Chloris virgata*). Growing close by in the poor sandy soil upon a rock was another wonderfully tactile grass beckoning to be stroked, the cat's tail grass (*Perotis patens*).

These wispy gossamer growth forms are not by chance – grass is wind pollinated and the pollen is easily transported from these flimsy inflorescences when a breeze blows.

## Mating frogs

Another story from Japhet's youth that he entertained me with was this of the "mating frogs" grass...

We came across a beautiful field of giant crowfoot grass (*Dactyloctenium giganteum*) that looked to me like a cloud of dancing dragonflies. With a chuckle Japhet picked two stems of the grass, interlaced the one with the other, and by moving one stalk back and forth showed me the "mating frogs!"



He and his young friends would roar with laughter at their demonstrations of this to younger boys, and the wide-eyed newcomers would shriek with wicked delight and rush off to practice the trick for themselves.

It is so wonderful how folklore travels through the ages without a textbook – it's such a



treasure of our African culture!

## Black and white

We are incredibly fortunate to have a healthy, highly protected, multiplying population of both black and white rhinos on our reserve. Guests often ask the difference between the two types (it has nothing to do with their colour) and with a little luck it is possible to see both species during a stay. This of course makes the comparison between the white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) and the black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) so much easier.

We were treated to a sighting of this wary black rhino mother (top photograph) and her calf in the late afternoon after they had been wallowing in the mud of a nearby pan.

Earlier in the day we had come across this more docile white rhino bull grazing in a clearing. Comparing them you can easily see some of the major differences – the black rhino is smaller, has a pointy hooked-shaped mouth and tends to hold its head in a more upright position.





## Photographic delights

It's a good idea to get off the game drive vehicle (when your guide has declared the area safe) and photograph on foot in order to capture the most



flattering light and angles. I became aware of a distinctive aroma when I crushed some of the leaves from the herb on the left while photographing it in early morning light. It is from the genus *Hemizygia* and smells like a delicious combination of coconut milk and ripe pineapple. The purple-pod cluster-leaf (*Terminalia prunioides*) on the right is best photographed with backlight so that you can see the halo of tannin-tasting crimson that surrounds the seed.

Giraffe are notoriously difficult to photograph, as it is awkward to capture the perspective of their height from a vehicle. A way to overcome this is to very carefully and slowly climb down from the far side of the vehicle and crawl around to the front on all fours. From this angle you can then photograph the curious giraffe from the ground level up and experience them for the tall, imposing and graceful animals they are.



## All creatures great and small



This recently hatched leopard tortoise (*Stigmochelys pardalis*) was no bigger than the palm of my hand. It was crossing the road as fast as its legs could carry it to get out of the way of the vehicle and disappear into the safety of the undergrowth.

Further down the road this bull elephant in his breeding state of musth was exactly the opposite. Towering over the height of the vehicle he swaggered about in the road preventing us from passing and treated us to a magnificent display of boldness, bravado and bluster as he broke a mopane tree into splinters and stripped it of its bark.



## Mopane metamorphosis

I have mentioned my irrational apprehension of mopane worms (*Gonimbrasia belina*) in December 2009's journal. This season we witnessed a bumper crop of them and they clung to the branches of the mopane trees in their multi-coloured spiky glory, stripping the trees of their green leaves.

Nothing could have prepared me for my next sighting of them. An audience of 'eyes' peered at me from a coat of camouflaged wings that clad the giant baobab outside the lodge's entrance.

It was one of the most beautiful sights I have ever seen. As the saying advises not to judge a book by its cover I have since revised that to not judge a worm by its skin!

Mopane worms pupate underground and emerge in the adult form of their lifecycle as mopane emperor moths. At the base of the baobab is a spotlight and the emergence of moths were attracted to the shining beam. They only live for three or four days in this stage, during which time they mate and lay their eggs.



As we came and went we were treated to an ongoing spectacle – if the moths felt threatened in any way they would flutter their wings revealing the eyespots on both the fore and hind wings. This gave the effect of many pairs of eyes being turned on you and was rather startling. However it wasn't long before the moths had an audience of other admirers too – squirrels, birds and even lizards lined up to feast on the bounty.

Many of the moths survived and after they had died or been eaten we could see clutches of white eggs on the trunk of the baobab. It was such a fascinating spectacle that lodges manager Shelley Mitchley was inspired to pen the following

poem about the  
sighting...



Jenny Hishin



## Moth Poem

A glaring voice calls to them, coaxing them out of the ground, out of the trees.

They dance, they fly, they dance some more.

Their spineless hearts beat within their boneless backs.

Enchanted by the silence of a bright rhythm, they draw closer, ever closer.

They ride upon waves of air and piercing sheets of light.

They flutter, they fall, they flutter some more.

They are just shadows marking the darkness, stealing the night.

With eyes upon their wings through which they cannot see,

On wings that fly, that never flew before.

Their powdered wings of green and brown, rust and red - with great big painted eyes!

The light of day is cold, there is no rhythm, they hear no voice.

They rest. Their wings flat, their eyes open, they rest.

Breathing against the cold, hard surface of a baobab tree,

The sunshine stills their spineless hearts.

The magic of the dance has stopped, there is no fluttering.

Huddled together, in green and brown, rust and red, they sleep.

With great big painted eyes open upon their wings, eyes wide open, they sleep.

*Shelley Mitchley, Pamushana Lodge Manager*

## New arrivals

This was the sight that greeted us on the 8th February 2011, at our Captive Breeding Centre. The kudu calf (*Tragelaphagus strepsiceros*) in the second photograph had been born in the early morning and was still wet from the birthing process. A juvenile and adult red-billed oxpecker (*Buphagus erythrorhynchus*) welcomed the wide-eyed youngster to the world with a dawn chorus and a grooming session.





## Farewell my feathered friends

Perched in this sculptural dead tree was a flock of southern carmine bee-eaters (*Merops nubicoides*). They breed here in colonies, in the sandy riverbanks, during summer. It won't be long before they embark on the next stage of their three-phase migration that takes them to their northern wintering grounds in Angola, Congo and Tanzania.

The European roller (*Coracias garrulous*) is a long-distance migrant that breeds in northern parts of Africa, and beyond the continent in Europe and Asia Minor. It's good to see them well-fed, fit and in their bright plumage before they migrate, but like welcoming guests back to Pamushana, it is even better seeing them return.

"Being at Pamushana was great. For my first trip to Africa, the people here could not have been more accommodating and helpful, making this a trip to remember. Thanks!"

*Henry Michaels, USA*

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