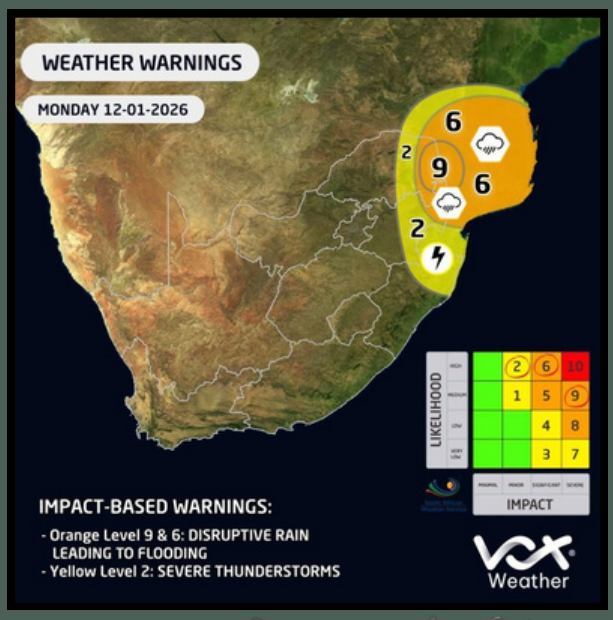
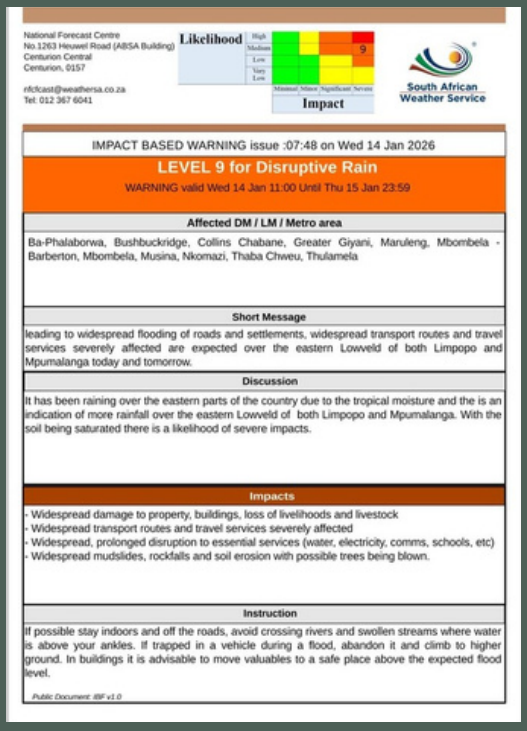
Olifants North Newsletter





Challenges are what make life interesting; overcoming them is what makes life meaningful.

Joshua J. Marine



A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.

Christopher Reeve

A WARDEN'S PERSPECTIVE OF THE JANUARY 2026 FLOODS
MURRAY REID

At the start of January, we noticed some strange predictions coming through on the various weather apps about heavy rain. They varied from day to day, and I recall laughing at one suggesting 300mm in one day. Little did I know what was coming. We made plans, stocked up on groceries, we even came back from leave early, just in case.



And then it started raining. The first 3 days were interesting, yet not dramatic, we had over 150mm for 3 days in a row, but things were under control. The roads were holding, the rivers were flowing strongly, and we were cut off from the outside world as the Swartspruit was up on Grietjie (image on the right), but all was fine.

Then, on Wednesday, 14 January, at around 19h00, it started to pelt down. After about 10 min, I knew we were in trouble. I even sent a video of the rain to some board members to say it needed to stop soon or there would be serious impacts on the landscape, but it didn't relent. After 45 minutes, we knew to eat dinner quickly and get ready, as we were about to have a long night. Whilst waiting for the rain to ease a bit before heading out for an inspection, reality hit us with a radio call from B2. Graham was in trouble, the Sedumoni River was literally flowing through his house!

In short, that 45 minutes of rain (dumping 120mm on ONGR and the surrounding area) will reverberate for years in the lowveld. Whilst the 3-4 days' build-up prior to it created the ideal conditions for the flood, it all came down to that 1 hour. It can be added that 9 days of solid rain is a lot for this area to absorb, but that 45 min made all the difference.

Juan and Graham's amazing story will be told in their own words, but it really sunk home to me what had happened when trying to get home later that Wednesday night. I had managed to make it to B2 in around 25 of the longest minutes, after Graham's call, but took 2 hours to get home, once the ground had time to soften, getting stuck repeatedly.



This was to become a way of life for a while. For the next few weeks, we never knew how long it would take to go anywhere or even if it was possible.

The flip side of this for me was that because of the great team the ONGR staff are and the character of our membership, we ended up having a pretty fun and amazing time through it all. Every day we received encouraging messages, had fun visits at the office and never lacked volunteers for a recce to go see something. These trips, always resulting in multiple vehicle mires in the mud, and accompanied with much heckling and laughter made the days pass so quickly.





After 2 weeks we got some of the roads open, fresh supplies could be sourced and it was time to take stock.

The ONGR board met on the property, and we took a good look around, by then we had reports from the surrounding areas, and it has been incredible to see the extent of the damage.

Being closed in meant we knew what the impacts were on Balule, but when starting to drive around outside the reserve, I found myself struggling to believe what I was seeing. The roads and bridges lost inside and outside the reserve, the extent of the damage in KNP, surrounding municipalities, etc. One must realise that when we look at the damage after it has been cleaned up, it somehow sanitises the damage a bit. When it is all still rough and broken, you realise the power of nature.

We had to realise how lucky we had been to escape any loss of life on the APNR, when we heard that outside the protected areas more than 200 people were not as lucky.



Image (L) - Letaba Rest Camp
Image (below) - Neighbouring Mozambique
Image (R) - R40 wash away





However, an account had to be made as to what the costs of the damages would be.

This has proven far more difficult to reconcile then was initially anticipated. The extent of the road damage, the length of time before we could work on roads, the repairs that have since been washed away by the follow up rainfall. It all makes life very interesting and difficult to quantify in rands and cents.

From a “where do we go now” perspective we know the following:

We are deep into the insurance process, having priced all the repairs to the flood-damaged structures, gone through the assessor, then the QS, then the engineers and then back to the QS and back to the assessors, we are getting close to settling the damaged units’ claims. The causeway has been a slower process but fortunately the assessor we have has allowed me to go to an outside engineering company to expedite the repair reports. This will be the start of establishing if we will simply repair the causeway to “as before”, or if we attempt some hard landscaping repairs to try and prevent/mitigate this damage in the future. In the meantime, we need to exercise patience before moving too far ahead. Sitting and waiting has never been something I am good at!

As for the rest of ONGR, we will keep opening the Sedumoni crossings as we can.

Still, deep into the month of May, roads have water flowing over them; Dead Lead has only recently become driveable, and Potholes is still soaking wet (the elephants aren’t helping there, they keep digging mud baths in the road). But we have recovered at least 70% of our roads now and once again patience will be required before we can attend to the rest (that word again).

From a management perspective, the amazing rain volumes this year will lead to our next concern, with the bush now so thick and vital, we run a potentially serious fire risk later this year. Something we are keeping in mind with our work schedules, fire break clearing this year will be crucial.

This is an opportunity to thank the ONGR membership for the support we constantly receive as well as the acceptance of the flood levy this year. Without this funding we would be nowhere near where we currently sit, and we intend to stretch these funds as far as possible to restore the roads to their former status.

Thank you all for everything you do to keep ONGR the amazing place it is.

THE NIGHT THE RAIN CAME
JUAN DE BEER - ONGR RESERVE MANAGER

The rain started like nothing we had ever seen.

It was the evening of 14 January 2026, 18h52, when the first drops hit the dust of ONGR. Within minutes, the sky opened. Not a steady rain, not a storm rolling through—but a wall of water. Over 150mm in just 30 minutes. The kind of rain that doesn't fall—it attacks.

Then came the silence.

Radios, usually alive with chatter, went dead. No updates. No calls. Just the sound of rain hammering roofs and turning roads into rivers.

At 19h20, the radio cracked to life.

"Murray or Juan, please come in for Graham..."

Something in his voice made my stomach drop.

"The water is coming over my deck... my house is flooding."

That sentence still sends shivers down my spine.

I didn't think—I moved. Jumped into the cruiser while the rain still lashed down, visibility near zero. The roads were already gone, swallowed by flowing water. They looked more like rivers than anything you could drive on.

I didn't know if I would make it through.

But I put my foot down and went.

Every crossing was a gamble. The current pushed against the vehicle, mud pulling at the tyres. But turning back wasn't an option. Not with Graham calling like that.

When I finally reached B2, the situation had already turned.

The Sedumoni River had risen fast—too fast. It was no longer a river; it was everywhere. Water was already wrapping around the house, cutting off escape.

I had to make the call.

A bakkie... or a life.

There was no hesitation.

I pushed the cruiser as close as I could, water forcing its way through the doors, soaking everything. The engine strained, but it held.

I jumped out—and that's when it hit me.

The strength of the water.

It wasn't just high—it was powerful. Waist-deep, ice cold, and moving with force that could take you off your feet in seconds. For a moment, I paused.

Then you commit.

I pushed forward, fighting the current, step by step, until I reached Graham. No time for panic. No time for second-guessing. Just action.

We moved together, slowly, carefully, leaning into the force of the water. One wrong step and it could have been over.

Somewhere in that chaos, I felt it—a sharp sting.

A scorpion.

Even that didn't stop us.

Cold, soaked, in pain—but focused—we made it out in time.

Richard from B11 arrived and took Graham in, getting him to safety. That moment, at least, was a win. But the night was far from over.

That's when the real work began.

We moved from one Sedumoni house to the next, checking who needed help, what could be saved. Vehicles were relocated where possible, roads assessed, crossings tested. Everywhere you looked—water, mud, debris.

The rain eased, but the damage didn't.

Cold. Wet. Exhausted. Sore.

But no one stood alone.

The ONGR team came together like a family. No hesitation, no complaints—just people stepping up for each other. Through the night and into the early hours, we kept going.

By morning, the full picture started to show.
Roads torn apart. Houses damaged. Access cut off in places. It wasn't just a storm—it had reshaped the land.

The days that followed were just as tough. Walking long distances where vehicles couldn't pass. Driving where we could, getting stuck more times than we could count. Assessing, fixing, helping.
Side by side—with the team, and with the members of the reserve—we pushed through it.
And that's what stands out the most.
Not the rain. Not the danger.
The people.
We are more than a team—we are a family on this reserve.
To the board and the members—thank you for standing by us, for the support, and for the equipment that helped us get through a night like that.
And to my colleagues—my family in the field—you showed what it means to stand together.
All the best to everyone.

JANUARY 2026 FLOODS
ELSEBÉ VAN DER MERWE - ONGR MEMBER LIAISON MANAGER



What began as an ordinary day on the 14th of January 2026 ended in heartbreak. The floods that followed changed everything.
The morning after the heavy rains, our roads were nearly impassable. Without 4x4 vehicles and driving in convoys to assist one another when stuck, reaching work would have been impossible.

That was only the first of many challenges we faced.
Our immediate priority was to save as much as we could from the units. At B2 and B5, staff worked tirelessly – maintenance men with shovels and garden brooms clearing mud that lay a foot deep, housekeepers gathering personal belongings filled with years of memories. Watching those sentimental items being carried out was the hardest part for me. In the blink of an eye, everything changed. Precious memories were lost.
For days we struggled to clean up, collecting personal items carried far downstream – even finding a mattress lodged high in a tree near B29. Other units required carpets, furniture and floors to be dried, while leaking roofs added to the damage.
Some units were inaccessible, and we relied on APU not only to guide us safely through wildlife but also to help move furniture and assist with cleaning wherever possible.
Every day brought new challenges, but as a team we stood together, determined to make the most of each day. We kept members informed with pictures and updates, understanding their concerns and striving to provide the most reliable information possible. Communication became our strength.
Through it all, our team gave everything we had to protect and preserve what mattered most to our members. We are deeply grateful for the support and understanding shown during this difficult time.
To our staff – a heartfelt thank you for your dedication, resilience and hard work. Together, we proved that even in the toughest times, unity carries us through.

2026 FLOODS
CURTIS PROCTER - ONGR SECURITY MANAGER

The floods of January 2026 was a time to experience the true power of mother nature, and what a truly humbling experience it was!
It was fascinating to witness how the wildlife on the Reserve adapted to the extreme weather conditions with what seemed like relative ease - a vast contrast to the devastating impact seen on infrastructure and human settlements.
From escorting staff on foot through a waterlogged bush, seeing the causeway literally disappear, to floating down a usually dry river bed after a three-hour vehicle recovery was something that won't be forgotten.



HYDRO-DRAMA ON THE SEDUMONI
GRAHAM BENFIELD - ONGR B2



Sedumoni at B2 showing 2012 flood line. Taken 31 Jan 2012



Sedumoni at B2 showing the January 14 2026 flood line (2012 flood line superimposed). Taken 15 Jan 2026

When Robyn, the ONGR Admin and Conservation Officer, asked me to contribute to the story of the January 2026 floods, I was rather reluctant as I did not wish to revisit the incident nor personalise what was an Olifants disaster. However, because she wanted an historical record of the events, I decided to recount these as they unfolded.

BEFORE

On the night of Sunday 21st of December 2025, we measured 100mm at B2 and that morning it was still raining. At 10h15 the Sedumoni started to flow and soon became quite strong, but nothing abnormal. My in-laws were staying with me and as this was the first time that they had seen the Sedumoni flow there was a lot of excitement. Little did we know that in about 3 weeks' time everything would change for the worse. As far as I can recall the Sedumoni had not flowed for 2 to 3 years so this was a grand occasion. It continued to flow for 2 days.

A week later, after another 50mm of rainfall, the Sedumoni flowed again. After this, in the early hours of Friday 2nd of January 2026, following a huge regional storm, the Sedumoni came down very strongly and was about twice the height of the first flood. On Saturday 10th of January and into Sunday, a total of 59mm was measured at B2. Naturally, the Sedumoni flowed again.

From then on, it basically rained all the time, with 70mm measured on the Monday and 90mm on the Tuesday. The Sedumoni continued to flow strongly, but not alarmingly, but certainly above the normal high levels.

DURING

Throughout Wednesday 14th of January, the Sedumoni maintained its strong flow but did not really rise. In the afternoon, with the rain continuing I started to watch the river carefully because I was concerned that it might start to push back seeing as the flow to the Olifants was not decreasing. It, however, appeared to stabilise and at this stage the house was under no threat. By late afternoon, the rain had increased and later it was reported that over 100mmm had been recorded in one hour.

This was the straw that broke the camel's back. By early evening the water had continued to rise and now the Sedumoni was flowing very fast but still away from the boma which is the closest point to the river. After supper, I cleared away and returned to the deck. It was now dark but I could see the water had reached the boma. All of a sudden, it went into the boma and the picnic table and gas braai were swept downstream. I reacted by grabbing my camera bag and putting it into the game vehicle. On my return the water in that short space of time had risen alarmingly and was at deck height which is close to 3 meters above the river. I radioed Murray to advise him of the situation and then all hell broke loose. A wave of water smashed through the sliding doors and suddenly I was waist deep and everything in the house was floating around, including the large fridges. It was amazing how quickly the inundation happened. The power went off and I made it to the bedroom where I grabbed the computer bag. Unfortunately, the water had closed the door and I could not pull it open. I made it past the floating double bed into the bathroom and then through a window into the waters rushing past outside.

Luckily, Juan arrived and helped me to his vehicle which had become stuck in a mud-hole. Juan went to rescue the game vehicle where the waters were at floorboard height. Richard, B11, arrived and took me to B3 so that I could move my other vehicle from their carport where there was no water. Murray had also arrived and we then all met at the office to plan the next move. We were a wet and sorry sight and poor Juan had been stung by a scorpion on his leg which was burning like hell. Richard gave me shelter at B11 while Murray and Juan carried on removing the bush vehicles from B3 and B4. B5 was inaccessible.



Damage to Sedumoni Crossing at B4. Taken 15 Jan 2026



View of Sedumoni showing the levels reached during the height of the flood. Taken 15 Jan 2026

AFTER

On inspection the next day, the waters had subsided to the new normal high with the Sedumoni still flowing bank to bank, but the trail of destruction was beyond belief. At the B4 crossing one could see how wide the water had been and that huge quantity of water had then been funnelled and concentrated into the much narrower section of the river downstream from B4. This undoubtedly contributed to the rapid rise at B2. One thing to learn from this unfortunate incident is that when the waters get angry, and I mean really angry, it is time to get out of harm's way as the situation can turn nasty in the blink of an eye. If I had been on the deck and not in the house, I would have been in serious trouble.

Also, of interest, is to note how fickle such a flood can be. B2 and B5 were severely damaged while the two houses in between, B3 and B4 only had minor flooding. The same applied to B1 despite it being much closer to the Olifants river. Nothing is predictable!

The extensive damage done on the farm in general has been well recorded. All in all, an unfortunate event which we all hope won't be repeated.



Debris on the causeway. Taken 29 Jan 2026



Changed Sedumoni landscape with rocks exposed. Taken 4 Feb 2026



Swartspruit looking upstream. Taken 24 Jan 2026



Swartspruit looking upstream. Taken 24 Jan 2026

THE JANUARY FLOODS
STEN AND BENJAMINE BRONEE – ONGR B15

A month to remember. One often watches on the news, floods occurring in the world with spectacular desolation of washed-out dwellings and landscapes. Little did we think we would, one day, live it. Luckily, the aftermath was not as dramatic as it could have been though most impressive and a time to be talked about and referred to forever.

For us, on the hill, we watched the events unfold but were not directly affected by it. The days that followed were reminiscent of the Covid lockdown, when homeowners were stuck and could not go anywhere. Rain came down incessantly and the roads were succumbing to it. We had been warned of the oncoming weather and had stocked up the weekend before with food and wine (lesson learned from Covid days when the shutdown happened with immediate effect and we were all caught with shortage of the most vital liquid).

So, while the tireless ONGR team was working endless hours making the main roads passable, we were stuck at home doing chores which we otherwise would never do. We read and we played board games around a cozy dinner with friends in the same fix. Food and medicine were dropped by helicopter and it was all very well organised thanks to some entrepreneurial members. We were very grateful to be so well cared for by all concerned. After a week, the warden, Murray, arranged for a reconnaissance convoy to exit ONGR to the Grietjie Gate and on to Hoedspruit the long way via Gravelotte, as the usual roads were washed away. And that marked the end of our confinement.

Considering how mighty and angry the Olifants River and the Sedumoni drainage became, I guess the damage could have been worse. The 2 houses that suffered most and the beautiful trees that were swept away will remain a lasting testimony of the power of nature when unleashed.

A JANUARY TO REMEMBER
ROGER RAATGEVER - ONGR B16

Our intended 5 week stay at B16 in January turned into something none of us could have predicted. As the heavy rain started to fall on the weekend of the 10th January, other owners started heading home. We decided to stay as we had planned to be at ONGR for a few weeks and we had no other plans and home is in the U.K.

At first, we could still drive to the office and the clubhouse. We were also lucky enough to watch a pride of lions feasting on a giraffe near the office (albeit in our ponchos getting soaked). But the rain kept falling and before long the roads deteriorated so badly that even short trips became impossible.

With nowhere to go, our days took on a slower, more creative rhythm. We filled the time with endless card games, reading, gym sessions and finding ways to entertain ourselves. One of the highlights was our “dress as another family member of the opposite sex” dinner. Seeing Gran transformed into her son-in-law, dressed in his clothes, complete with drawn-on facial hair, was easily one of the funniest moments of the trip.

There was a definite sense of déjà vu—it felt a lot like the 2020 COVID lockdown, only this time we were surrounded by bush instead of back gardens. Supplies became a growing concern as fresh food slowly dwindled, made all the more noticeable by the presence of two young men with seemingly bottomless appetites.

Just when things were starting to feel particularly remote, and the rain showed no sign of relenting, help quite literally arrived from the sky. Callan (ex-ORGR anti-poaching head), doing his medical drop-offs to Balule by helicopter, dropped off Gran’s medication. A true illustration of how communities pull together in times of an emergency. We eventually managed to get out. It was a sad day leaving ONGR but we needed to feed hungry mouths and join family friends who had flown into SA from the UK. We felt like we were deserting the team at ONGR, who had been working day and night on roads and houses, but had no choice but to say goodbye.

How the ONGR team kept the reserve ticking over at all was unbelievable. They were constantly checking in on us and making sure that we were fed and sane - even if it involved including the boys in road repairs.

What an extraordinary visit January 2026 turned out to be at ONGR.
Extraordinary doesn't really explain what we experienced.

Although we had had some on/off rain some days before, the rain from Cyclone Grant that we had been pre-warned about, started on 10 January in the form of gentle saturating rain over the next few days. Fortunately, we had re-stocked largely in preparation for the predicted weather.
Our last drive over the causeway was on the 12th, where the beautiful row of Sycamore figs was still visible in our photos and the Sedumoni on Ebony was flowing.

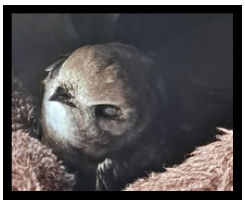


The Olifants River view from A2. Taken Dec 2025



Stand of Sycamores as taken from the Causeway 12 Jan 2026

On the 12th we had a drenched White Rumped Swift land on the patio. (Image on the right). It looked exhausted and we covered it with a towel to keep it safe. It stayed with us for 2 days and we asked Roy Sarkin what to do. He advised that it could not take off on its own and he released it into the air on the 14th and it seemed strong.





Olifants River from A2. Taken 14 Jan 2026

By the 14th the Olifants had risen substantially, and eerie black clouds started developing in the afternoon, signalling the start of what nature was about to produce. We pretty much "battened down the hatches" as the rain started pelting down in a sheet of water and it became evident that things were about to get rough. The sound of the river raged over the sound of the heavy rain.
That night, the 14th January 2026, we experienced what sounded like gun shots or loud firecrackers going off, the ten-fold sound of elephants pushing trees over which turned out once light the next day, to be the sound of trees snapping under the power and pressure of the vast amount of water and the raging river.
How we wish that this had played out in the day when we would have seen it happen.
Nothing could have prepared us for the sight in front of us on the morning of the 15th.
The whole river landscape that we had got to know and love over the years, had changed immensely.



Olifants River from A2. Taken end Jan 2026

The banks on the south were covered in uprooted trees, bushes & shrubs that the river had deposited on the doorsteps of units on the south – best described as one big timber yard.





Stumps and debris on the south bank. Taken 15 Jan 2026



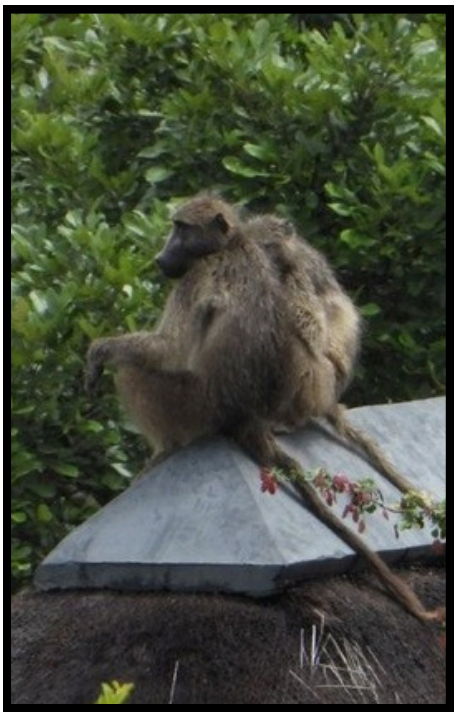


The north bank had lost some very big trees, some which continued snapping and breaking that day. The erosion of the riverbank was evident (above images).

Large, big and small logs floated from around the corner by the fallen Ana tree for days after. An area on the North bank had completely disappeared, an area that Barry and I used to refer to as the baboon's golden hour sunset lounge was now gone.
With many of some of the bigger trees fallen, north bank areas that weren't visible before became our new view.

It seemed as if all the birds and animals that we usually experience in the view from A2, had disappeared. There were more helicopters than birds in the sky.
The old landscape that we had mapped in our minds was altered, and now we could not identify any change immediately as we had in the past. Any change, which pointed out any unusual game or river level movements was now a new canvas which we would have to shape our minds around to ensure regular spotting. The north bank had been washed way just upstream of the Sedumoni mouth, and we estimate that at lease 30m of riverbank had disappeared and we were left with steep eroded sheer faces that resembled a new quarry.
The corner of the river upstream in front of 35 South, where the Ana trees once stood, had widened enormously. New game trails were emerging once it had dried up. This was no longer a stream on the south side with a larger body of water to the right of an island, but now a sea of water from bank to bank.

It took a few days before the first elephant eventually came down to the North bank. Watching it was a treat, as it navigated every step through mud up to its knees at times, scouring the new landscape, cautiously smelling and eventually stripping some of the timber lying around and what a choice it had. The sight of elephants crossing the river almost daily before the floods was no longer a regular sighting. Many attempts to cross were abandoned and often resulted in a few sweeps down the river moments. The first successful crossing only happened on the 27th.



The baboons that often made the big Sycamore tree below us their home for the night had taken to sitting on B29's roof.

The Southern Ground Hornbills (all 3) we had photographed on the 14th, had disappeared, not to be seen or heard until the 27th, albeit briefly. As the river subsided, newly formed ponds of water became the fishing grounds for a pair of saddlebills. A drying out pool of water became the resting spot for a leopard between south unit 32/33.
We watched as the family in Unit 32 South were airlifted to safety and it was eerie to not see a single vehicle traversing day or night.



For us, the entire trip was about 3 main events:
First of the memorable events was the desperate dash to try and find a route off the reserve via Parson's Gate. What a wonderful memory that will always be. I will always be grateful to the team that accompanied us on the muddy push through the "last frontier"
Murray & sons, Juan, Des, Elsebé, Curtis and Richard of B11.

The second outing to navigate Moolman's was an afternoon filled with fun and adventure and we have some amazing memories of this. Some of the washaways were so deep that Murray was able to hide in them.







Graham, the ultra-keen scout, really tested his biscuit tyres in that hectic mud. Again, a wonderful team and treasured memories.
Thanks to Des, Murray, Juan, Curtis, Luigi, Graham, Richard, Brandon & Cousin.

The third and most memorable, was the Sedumoni walk after the floods. It was an absolute eye-opener to see how the Sedumoni had changed.
The cleanup walk past B4 and B1 really showed the force of the water as the once tidy little stream was a wide debris filled channel to the Olifants.
The devastation to the trees and riverbank was astounding.
Getting closer to the Olifants showed how the mouth had forever changed and there were so many huge trees that had fallen.



Sedumoni walk 13 Feb 2026



Signs of a Sycamore sapling - Olifants Riverbank 13 Feb 2026

The shopping trips via Grietjie were turned into a shared adventure as we had to go in convoy to ensure everyone returned safely.
This trip was different to all the trips we have done in the past.
We would normally average one game drive a day, but in the 2 months we were there, we probably did 15 drives for the entire visit. Bush was also so thick that game viewing was extremely sparce.
All in all, different, but a great time to have been at ONGR. Thank you to all involved for making this trip so memorable, especially our amazing management team.



The intrepid explorers



River clean-up walk along the Olifants.
Taken 13 Feb 2026



A visit to the Causeway

RESILIENCE THROUGH THE FLOODS
DES AND LYNNE WENTZEL - ONGR B9

During the recent floods, what was meant to be a routine visit to our game farm quickly turned into an experience we will never forget. Rising waters caused significant damage to roads and several houses, making access difficult and, at times, impossible.

Despite these challenging conditions, the dedication and resilience of our staff shone through. From the earliest moments, they worked tirelessly to ensure the safety and wellbeing of members and guests. Roads were repaired under tough conditions, and constant efforts were made to restore access and normality as quickly as possible.

With supply routes cut off, essential food and medicine had to be flown in by helicopter — a clear reminder of the severity of the situation. Yet even in isolation, the team remained committed, resourceful, and focused.

We would like to extend our heartfelt appreciation to every staff member for their ongoing hard work, determination, and unwavering support. Their efforts not only helped us navigate a difficult time but also demonstrated true teamwork and care.

It is in moments like these that the strength of a community is revealed — and we are incredibly grateful to have such a dedicated team.



Ndlovu Dam overflowing since early Jan 2026



Giraffe kill on Ebony in the dip before B5. Taken 13 Jan 2026

FLOOD SUPPORT
MALCOLM AND JANINE ROYAL - ONGR B24

We were in residence at Olifants North when torrential rain fell from 10th January to 19th January 2026.

When the rain started, we had a few roof leaks in the living area and in one of the bedrooms. We weren't troubled by these leaks as they were easily reparable. Because we are situated high up on a ridge, we had few other problems, especially with regard to access to the house. Camp Road and our access road off Camp Road remained open and driveable.

However, we were cut off from Phalaborwa due to road washaways on the national road. This meant no grocery shopping or visits to the Pharmacy for replenishment of chronic medication in Phalaborwa.

Relief food parcels were airlifted in and Des Wentzel delivered a box of supplies to the house. Dr. Richard Alexander was in residence at B11 and he kindly wrote prescriptions for our chronic medication. This was also airlifted to ONGR and Curtis kindly delivered it to the unit. Luigi paid for the medication on our behalf.

Thank-you to Des, Luigi, Richard and Robyn for the support and facilitation of food and medicines. When it came time for us to leave Olifants North and fly to Johannesburg via Hoedspruit, access to the national road was only possible with a 4-wheel drive vehicle. Des once again came to our assistance and Robyn kindly drove us, in Des's game viewer, to an arranged pick-up point with the airport shuttle service.

Having retired last year, my bucket list suddenly moved to the forefront of the experiences I hoped to enjoy before I pass on. One of these was to be at ONGR around the beginning of February to witness the heavy rains and the swelling of the Olifants River — a truly spectacular sight, especially when the water rises over the causeway and its roar can be heard from far afield. I had experienced this before, but never after the record-breaking rainfall we received in January this year.

We are all familiar with the extreme dryness of the bushveld towards the end of October, when the landscape can appear burnt and lifeless, as though it will never recover. Then come the summer rains and the remarkable sense of relief, so tangibly felt by both humans and animals alike, as the natural cycle is kick-started once again. Almost overnight, the ashen dryness disappears, replaced by the vibrant greens of fresh leaves and grasses.

Barbara and I were certainly in the right place at the right time this year. Weather reports began predicting massive rainfall from Sunday, 11 January 2026, although steady moderate rain had already set in on the Saturday, as well as earlier in January. Our good friend Kevin, together with his two children, Catherine and Alan, were visiting at the time. Their weekend was spent mostly indoors, interrupted only by a few short game drives to the local dams whenever the rain briefly abated.
With the impending closure of the exit roads — particularly at Grietjie and the Swartspruit, which is usually a dry riverbed crossing on the Grietjie road — they wisely decided to make a hasty departure back to Pretoria on Monday, 12 January, so as not to become marooned at Olifants North. Barbara and I escorted them across the fairly strong flow of the Swartspruit, which they managed to navigate with ease in their little Suzuki Jimny. We then retreated to B11 to sit out the increasingly inclement weather.

The rain did not relent, and forecasts showed that, over the following days, we would receive the full brunt of the storm system hanging over Limpopo beneath thick rain clouds that simply refused to disperse.

The Sedumoni had been flowing since around 2 January, and the coffee-coloured muddy water was already breaching the wall of Ndlovu Dam soon after we arrived at Olifants. The other crossings along the Sedumoni were also covered by substantial flows of water, although they still remained passable at that stage in January.
One of the most memorable sightings of the month occurred on 2 January on Parsons Plains, when the massive tusker Ezulwini emerged from the bush along the Sedumoni riverbed and walked past us with awe-inspiring grace.



The rains continued unabated, and by this time the ground had become completely saturated. Every dip and drainage line became a channel for runoff water, forming small rivulets not normally seen that drained towards the major dry riverbeds. Dips in the roads began collecting water and, in places where I had never seen it before, strong currents started to form.

On the evening of Wednesday, 14 January, at around 18:00, the heavens opened. What had already been a heavy downpour became an absolute torrent. The rain was so intense that the beautiful westward view we normally enjoyed over the bushveld east towards Kruger vanished entirely, obliterated by the sheets of water cascading from the sky.
I went up to our carport, where my game viewer was parked, and found that both it and the laundry were already under about 10 cm of water. I grabbed a spade and began digging a furrow to channel the water away, getting drenched in the process.

I had never seen flooding like this before.
At about 19:00, as the light faded rapidly, I returned to the main house to change into dry clothes.

Around 19:30, Graham Benfield from B2 made a brief announcement that the water in the Sedumoni — now a fast flowing river — had breached the level of his deck. About thirty seconds later, he announced that he was evacuating his unit as the water had burst through the plate-glass sliding doors which open onto his deck. That was the last we heard from him despite trying to contact him and ask if he needed assistance.

I turned to Barbara, grabbed the keys to my Prado, a hand held radio and told her I was going down to Graham's place to see if I could help, as he had sounded genuinely desperate. By now it was dark, and the heavy rain made visibility extremely poor. The car's headlights seemed so dim as nothing reflected off the wet road or foliage. I felt blind.

As I drove down Camp Road, past the turn-off to units 30–38, I realised the road had suffered serious damage since I had driven it only a few hours earlier while returning from a giraffe kill at the intersection of Instant Alley and Camp Road. Massive furrows — some nearly half a metre deep — had been gouged into the surface. My vehicle responded like a railway coach, dragged helplessly along whichever channel the wheels fell into.
The pride of lions responsible for the kill was still in the vicinity, and I was acutely aware of their presence. This heightened the adrenaline already coursing through my system, and I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. Added to this was the dreadful fear that something terrible might have happened to Graham, especially as repeated attempts to contact him on the radio went unanswered, with only Murray and Juan responding.

Eventually, I reached the turn-off to B2 and drove up to the lodge. I saw the lights of Graham's game viewer and realised Juan had arrived shortly before me. I shouted to Juan, asking where Graham was. To my immense relief, he told me Graham was safe inside Juan's game viewer, which Juan had driven right up to the house — inadvertently sinking it into the septic tank outside. So his land cruiser was now of little help.

I got out and waded through the water to the vehicle, where I found Graham sitting in the passenger seat, understandably dazed by what he had just endured. We retrieved his camera equipment and a hastily packed bag of clothes before transferring him to my vehicle.
Graham later explained that he had run into his bedroom to grab his camera gear and a few clothes, only to look around and see his bed floating in the water. The bedroom door had closed behind him — probably fortunately — because had he tried to return to the main living area, he could easily have been swept away into the raging Sedumoni.

Displaying remarkable presence of mind and agility, Graham escaped through the bathroom window. The water on that side of the lodge had already risen to sill height. As he jumped into the torrent, Juan grabbed him by the collar and guided him to his Land Cruiser. Unfortunately, the vehicle itself was immobilised, its front wheels having sunk into the septic tank.
Only later did Juan mention that, throughout this rescue, he had been repeatedly stung by a scorpion that had somehow found its way into his Wellington boots. I can only imagine how painful that must have been but stoically he just soldiered on.

With Graham now safe, we still had to move both his game viewer and his private vehicle, which was parked under the carport at B3, to higher ground. Amid the chaos, adrenaline, darkness, and relentless rain, I became completely disorientated and actually had to ask Graham which direction to drive to reach the camp parking area. The whole experience felt surreal.

Fortunately, Graham had all his car keys with him and was able to move his vehicle to higher ground near the office parking area.

After a brief debriefing from Murray, who had arrived by then, we took Graham back to B11 and made up a bed for him in one of our guest rooms. He had a warm shower, changed into dry clothes, and we all recounted the extraordinary events of the evening over a bite to eat before eventually retiring for the night. I do not think any of us slept particularly well, our minds still racing from the ordeal.
During the early hours of the following morning there was a short period when the electricity went out. My thoughts at this stage were that now it was going to get really desperate but thank heavens the power returned and we never suffered another outage.

The following morning, after breakfast and coffee, I drove Graham back to his lodge to inspect the damage. My theory regarding the sudden rise of the Sedumoni was that a standing wave may have surged upstream from the Olifants, which by then was raging several metres above the causeway. This may have caused the abrupt rise in water level that imploded Graham's patio sliding doors and flooded the lounge, kitchen, and bedroom.

We found the bent and shattered remains of the sliding doors, and although the Sedumoni had subsided somewhat by then, it was still roaring past the deck.
To our relief — and, admittedly, delight — we discovered that Graham's freezer and fridge remained intact and still frozen, stocked with Woolworths food his daughter-in-law had brought during their December visit. By this stage we had effectively been cut off from civilisation and supplies, so the discovery felt like a treasure trove. I felt slightly like a looter rummaging through the bounty, but with Graham present and generously donating the supplies, it did not feel too awkward.

In addition to the frozen food, Graham shared beer and several bottles of excellent wine, all of which proved very comforting during the week we remained stranded. I do not mean to boast, but we ate like kings on those second-hand offerings. Many thanks to Graham!

We also greatly enjoyed Graham's company over the following week and shared many enlightening conversations over dinners, beers, and glasses of wine. Fresh fruit and vegetables eventually became scarce, however, and luckily and thanks to the extremely kind and generous donations we had a helicopter drop off fresh provisions which helped immensely.

You could see from Graham's demeanour that he was initially deeply shaken by what had happened but gradually his resilience began to shine through and he started to recover. I think it helped that we were all able to talk openly and reflect on the events of those days, which, I hope, assisted each of us in coming to terms with the dire situation in which we had found ourselves.

Barbara and I had originally been scheduled to fly back to Cape Town from Hoedspruit the following Saturday. Safair first changed our flights and rescheduled them for the next Saturday, but news soon arrived that the runway at Hoedspruit had partially collapsed due to the heavy rains and increased traffic from larger aircraft such as Boeing 737s, which were no longer permitted to land there.
Our tickets were subsequently cancelled, forcing us to make alternative arrangements. Eventually, we managed to secure flights with Airlink on 24 January. By then, the Grietjie road was passable only by 4x4 vehicles, and we still had to travel a long, circuitous route via Phalaborwa and Mica before re-joining the R40 to Hoedspruit — roughly 250 kilometres, if memory serves me correctly. We saw the beginnings of the destruction of the R40 road from Mica to the R40 which was being caused by those big tipper trucks which should have been refused access to the road as I understand the further destruction has been massive.
My utmost gratitude goes to Murray and Juan as well as Robyn, Elsebé andl the other staff who, with their youth and vitality as well as extreme hard work and doggedness helped guide us through this time. One cannot thank them enough.

OUR WONDERFUL HOUSEKEEPING TEAM REFLECTS ON THE 2026 FLOODS

In a sit-down with the ladies, they were encouraged to share their thoughts and experiences of this period on ONGR and beyond.

Maria mentioned how they were scared to see the heavy rain like that after such a long time.

Joyce was at B8 at the time when she heard a big sound like it was raining, but instead it was a wall of water coming down the Sedumoni. She saw a herd of Impala running – they seem to have come down to the banks of the river to drink but suddenly there was so much water and it was very loud with lots of waves which made them surprised, shocked and frightened.

Mernah mentioned that they were all amazed at how the Olifants River expanded, which they saw from the area around A10 – A12. There was a big Mogo (Sepedi for Sycamore Fig) standing up against the current in the middle of the river and Dudu and Mernah debated about whether it would be washed away or not. Dudu reckoned its days were numbered, and, true to her thinking, the next day, it was gone.

Tryphina's first emotions on approaching B5 were surprised and shock as it looked as if the house was inside 2 rivers! Everything was washed away and a fridge was on top of the roof! The car had been drowned by the water, and the storeroom door couldn't open, partly because the water had shifted the car up against the door from the outside, and partly because the water had wedged a storeroom fridge up against the door from the inside.







As many access roads had become undriveable, such as the route to B5 as well as the road to B6-B8, ladies were escorted by the field rangers to get to these units to assess them and to start the clean-up process. They had to take their shoes off to wade through water. They could also not access B16, B26 and B27 for at least 2 weeks subsequent to the worst flooding.

Strange sights included seeing Nivea body lotion from B1 floating away in the current.



At B29, Tryphina was surprised to see a single bed mattress perched up high in a Modukguhlu (Sepedi for Jackalberry) in front of the lodge. She also noted clothes and cushions on the opposite river bank – all anticipated to have come from B5.

Cleaning the mud away from affected units along the Sedumoni (B1, B2, B3, B4, B5 and B8) involved multiple trips to and from the river to collect water in buckets as water and electricity supply to these units had been washed away, which reminded the ladies of when they were children and their parents used to do this to have water for use at home. All the ladies were concerned about crocodiles as the water was very murky and they couldn't really see if there was something lurking in the depths or not.

B18, like all those perched high on the ridge, was anticipated to have no problems, but the storeroom under the main building had water coming up through the floor which caused mould to develop on stored linen.

Amusing anecdotes include Joyce seeing a branch floating by in the river which she mistook to be a body part!

Aches and pains came to the fore with all the stooping to scrape mud and taking on unusual cleaning challenges.

One of the units in camp had an unusual reaction to the floods as it was not flooded itself but developed a massive outbreak of mould which was attended to by a contractor once access was once again possible. The ladies had ceiling fans going and tried their best to try and air the unit, but the only solution was to bring in contractors to manage it as a permanent solution.

The ladies explained how their personal homes back in the community were affected. Mernah mentioned that the walls and floors of her home were still suppurating in May.
Roads in the community were also very badly damaged, with access roads from main arterial routes to houses still undriveable in May.

Amukelani (Leina) was not yet working at Olifants North during the floods, so she gave us some insight into her experiences at home. It was like Covid all over again. Learners could not go to school for about 2 weeks and everyone was stuck at home. People were sad as they could not get to work and everyone had to make do with what they had in the house with no food provisions provided from emergency services. Those with worst affected homes were sheltered in community halls.

Joyce had been so proud of her morogo crop which she had been growing at home, upstream on the Olifants River, but it was lost in the floods and washed away altogether.
Sad events within local communities include the loss of 2 teenagers in Mashishimale (Namakgale region of Ba-Phalaborwa Municipality) who were swept away when a local river breached its banks.
In Giyani, more specifically Mbaula Village, a 5-year-old also drowned.

The national roads such as the R40 were also a talking point. The washaway on the R40 has caused 3 fatal accidents with cars overshooting the detour and ending in the hole. Sadly, with the trucks now diverted onto the R71 (to Gravelotte) and then the R526 (Gravelotte towards Hoedspruit to rejoin R40), this has caused damage to the road surface such that accidents are now also occurring more frequently such as the instance when a group of 5 high school children were killed in a head-on collision with a truck in early May.

In an inexplicable twist of life events, the baby born in a tree in Mozambique on the 1st of March 2000 during the floods of that year (Rosita Mabuiango) passed away during the 2026 floods. On the 12th of January, contrary to stories doing the rounds that she had drowned, she died at Chibuto Rural Hospital in Gaza Province as a result of complications related to anaemia.

For the staff on ONGR, they were stuck on the property and were concerned about running out of provisions. Fortunately, the access roads became passable in time for them to go on their off days, although the routes to get home were longer due to road closures and washaways. When the staff returned home, their families were elated to see them all again and to hear that everyone was safe. Sadly, Joyce learned that her cousin, who had been living in Namakgale, had been washed away in the floods whilst trying to walk to work.

The ladies recall Murray taking them to the Causeway to see the damage that the floods had created. They also noted how members cancelled their plans because of the floods and how they wanted to know whether their houses had suffered any damage.





The laundry was also overloaded with all the items that had been damaged/muddied by the Sedumoni, with even the drainage under the washing lines not being able to keep up with the water. The area had to be swept clear every so often so that the cushions and other items could start trying to dry.
This period will forever be remembered by all who were on the landscape, working tirelessly to restore a sense of normality to what had been and to make sense of the new reality.



FLOODING ON OLIFANTS NORTH - JANUARY 2026
TRISTAN REID - Warden's son

Following the absolutely scorching summer of 2024/25, it felt like a welcome change to brace for heat exceeding 48°C, only to be met with regular rain and temperatures staying in the mid-to-high 20s. For my brother and I, it was a blessing to have gained some respite from the norm, having been in the dry heat of the Stellenbosch summer before returning home to the bush.

The regular precipitation soon soaked the soil to the point where the ground was completely saturated, meaning that any new rainfall would immediately start to flow as surface runoff. The small streams and brooks that cropped up intermittently were interesting to watch as they found their way along, creating riverbeds in areas that hadn't seen flowing water in years.

We noticed a stream that had started itself up and had risen to become a full-fledged river, with Mopane trees standing right in the middle of it. It was clear that the land had received too much water too quickly; one might say everything in moderation, but at this point there was nowhere left to put the water, besides the already swelling rivers, becoming torrents, and the dry drainage lines, themselves becoming too dangerous to cross.



Then, just when everything was being pushed to its limit, the deluge came. On the evening of the 14th of January, the heavens opened yet another time, only this time they didn't show a hint of slowing down.

We watched, first with an air of excitement, the newly created river flowing past our house



swell, and then with worry, as the rain continued to pound, the water continuing to rise, and our thoughts turned towards the much bigger waters in the surrounding area, and to those who were far more vulnerable to inclement weather than ourselves.

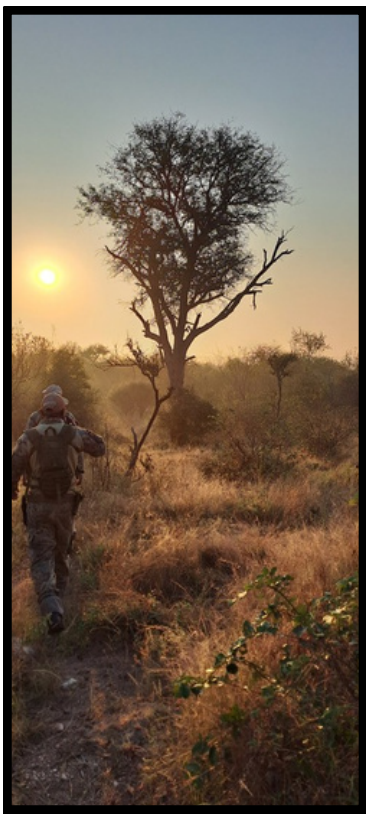
Our worry turned to fear later in the evening, when we heard chatter on the radio. People were asking about the situation with the Olifants, asking how high it had risen and if they were safe. Still the rain came down, and we were called to help fellow ONGR residents as the waters had reached the homes closest to the riverbank.

What followed was a whirlwind of pouring rain, stuck vehicles, soaked raincoats, shouted instructions and avoiding hippos in the dark. Whilst the damage done to select properties on the reserve was extensive, we are grateful that there were no casualties.

The extensive damage done all over Limpopo will take years to remedy, and I can only imagine the pain felt by those in the nearby communities who lost their homes and loved ones, everything taken away from them by something so utterly out of their control.

If we continue along with our current trajectory of mistreating the planet, events like this will become more common, less predictable and more intense.





During previous flooding, most of the roads were still driveable and houses were not severely damaged. In the 2026 floods, this was not to be the case.
It was a new experience for us to have to retrieve items
from members' houses which had been washed down the Sedumoni.
Also, it was unusual to have to escort the housekeeping ladies safely on foot to units which were not accessible via the roads.
The various departments had to work closely together, drawing on each one's strengths to help one another.
It becamse necessary to implement more permanent solutions like the bridge that was built at the access to B6-B8 to enable access and to prevent future problems of this kind.
Even now, some roads remain challenging to drive. Some members have become stuck and have needed assistance to get out of the mud.
In the community, some of the houses have been damaged and ONGR is assisting where they can to fix those staff members' homes which have had significant flood damage.





WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHIC CONTENT ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank-you to all who contributed directly to this special newsletter edition - authors named with each article.
Thanks, too, for the photographs supplied by: Barry and Olga Ryan, Graham Benfield, Des and Lynne Wentzel, Richard and Barbara Alexander, and Robyn Reid.

Thank-you to our wonderful ONGR team for rising to each challenge and finding the strength to keep on going.
The work continues, but so too does our spirit.



End of Jan 2026



Sedumoni debris with B5 in the background



Lions - Pools 23 Dec 2025



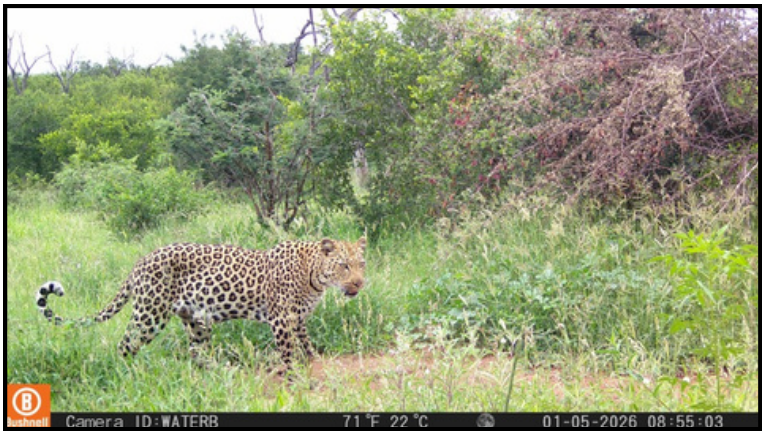
Leopard - Pools 26 Dec 2025



Leopard - Sedumoni 30 Dec 2025



Spotted Hyena - Pebble 5 Jan 2026



Leopard - Waterbuck Rd 5 Jan 2026



Leopard - Wildebeest Dam 25 Feb 2026



Absence of water - Pools 20 Dec 2025



Abundance of water - Pools 31 Dec 2025



Kudu with flowing Sedumoni - 2 Jan 2026



Ellies in the rain - Waterbuck Rd 11 Jan 2026



Pic 1 of 4 - water level at Pebble - 12 Jan 2026



Pic 2 of 4 - water level at Pebble - 13 Jan 2026



Pic 3 of 4 - water level at Pebble - 14 Jan 2026



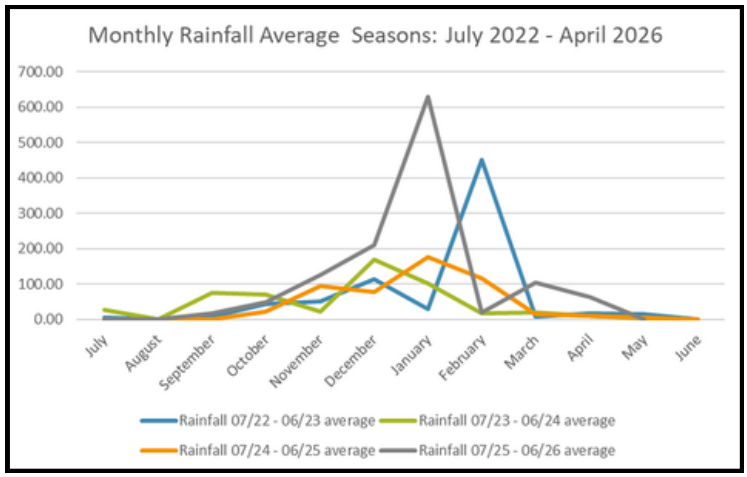
Pic 4 of 4 - water level at Pebble - 15 Jan 2026

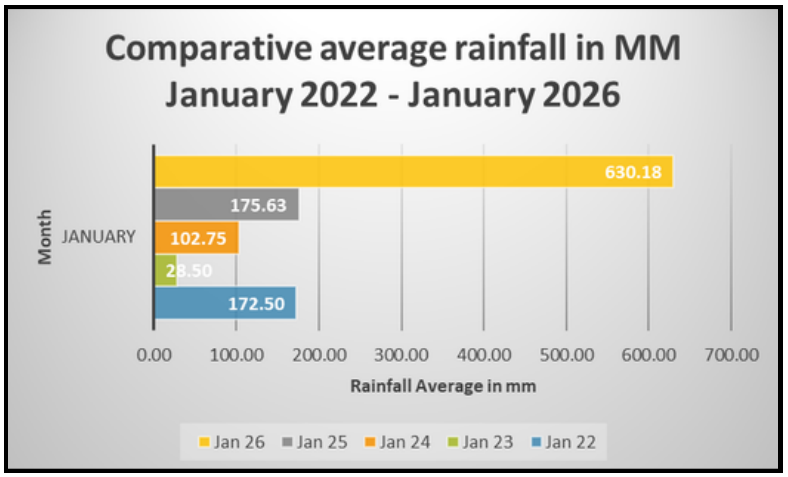


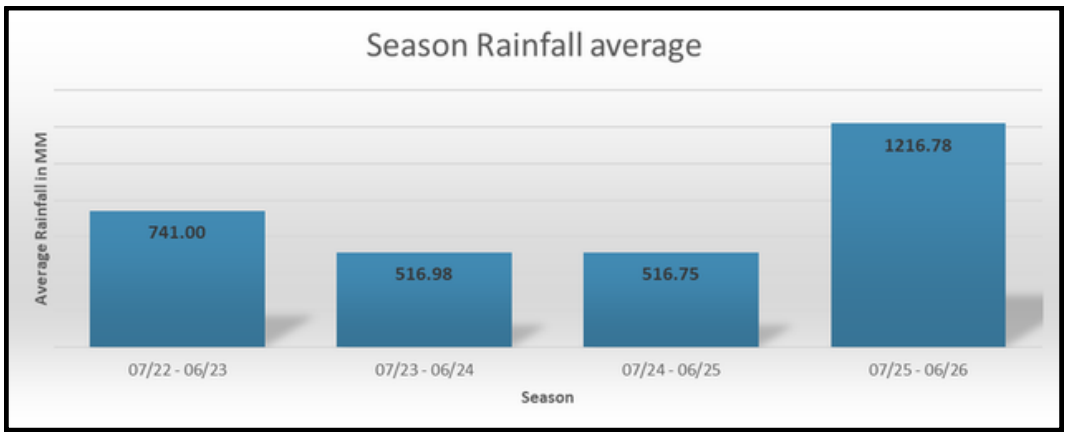
Bedraggled Impala - Wildebeest Dam 14 Feb 2026

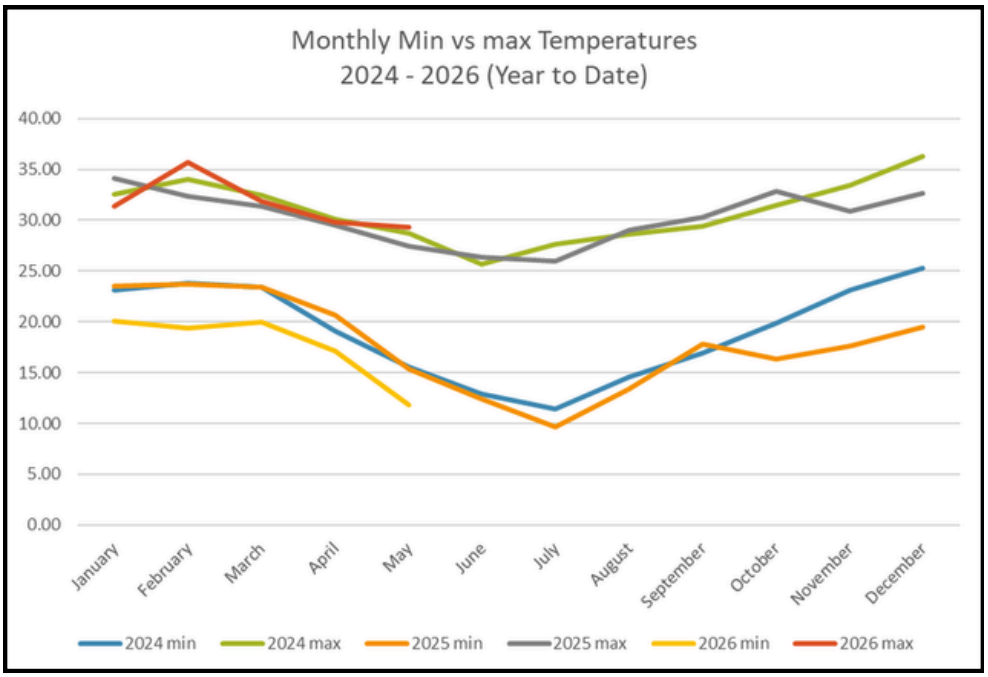


Cape Clawless Otter - Borehole 4 drainage 19 May 2026


Monthly Rainfall Average Seasons: July 2022 - April 2026
700.00
600.00
500.00
400.00
300.00
200.00
100.00
0.00
July
August
September
October
November
December
January
February
March
April
May
June
Rainfall 07/22 - 06/23 average
Rainfall 07/23 - 06/24 average
Rainfall 07/24 - 06/25 average
Rainfall 07/25 - 06/26 average


Comparative average rainfall in MM
January 2022 - January 2026
Month
JANUARY
630.18
175.63
102.75
28.50
172.50
0.00
100.00
200.00
300.00
400.00
500.00
600.00
700.00
Rainfall Average in mm
Jan 26
Jan 25
Jan 24
Jan 23
Jan 22


Season Rainfall average
Average Rainfall in MM
741.00
516.98
516.75
1216.78
07/22 - 06/23
07/23 - 06/24
07/24 - 06/25
07/25 - 06/26
Season


Monthly Min vs max Temperatures
2024 - 2026 (Year to Date)
40.00
35.00
30.00
25.00
20.00
15.00
10.00
5.00
0.00
January
February
March
April
May
June
July
August
September
October
November
December
2024 min
2024 max
2025 min
2025 max
2026 min
2026 max