

Olifants North

Newsletter

Graham B2



TRACKING SCORPIONS p. 4

MAPOGO LIONS p. 6

WHITE-BACKED VULTURE p. 7

ENDANGERED WILDLIFE TRUST
Protecting forever, together.



TEMPERATURES, RAINFALL AND MOON PHASES p. 10

BIRD MNEMONICS

A mnemonic is a memory device

My instructor in Sabi Sabi got very frustrated when I could not hear a Sombre Greenbul calling “Willie come out and play” but ... all of a sudden I did! Now I will never forget that elusive bird and its call



Monotonous lark - For syrup is sweet



Klaas’s cuckoo - Nicci Nicci

Fiery-necked nightjar - Good Lord deliver us





Shelly’s spurfowl - Drink your beer



Crested francolin - Beer and cognac, beer and cognac



White-browed robin-chat - Don’t you do it

Orange-breasted bush-shrike - Coffee, tea or me



Emerald spotted dove - My mother is dead, my father is dead and I’m sad, sad, sad



African emerald cuckoo - Pretty Georgie



Black cuckoo shrike - I’m so sad



Cape turtle dove - Work, harder, work harder or Drink lager, drink lager



Chinspot batis - Three blind mice



NATURE'S ENDURANCE



Driving to work I noticed a marula tree, that had been destroyed by elephants, coming back into leaf

The perseverance of this tree continuing to grow after being coppiced is a remarkable testament to nature's resilience

Despite the drastic pruning, the tree hadn't merely survived; it was thriving

New shoots reaching towards the sky spoke of an indomitable spirit

I thought this was a beautiful metaphor for resilience and growth in the face of adversity (like elephants!!)

POTATO BUSH

Phyllanthus reticulatus



As the sun begins to dip below the horizon, a distinct aroma wafts through the evening air

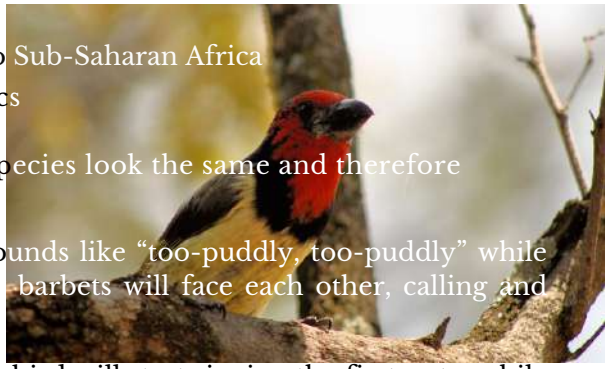
It is the scent of the potato bush - a signal and gentle reminder to the children that it is time to abandon their games and return home for dinner

The potato bush, with its timely fragrance, is more than just a plant

It becomes a symbol of home, of routine, and of the beautiful interplay between nature and human life

BLACK-COLLARED BARBET

Lybius torquatus



The Black-collared barbet was first described in 1816 and is endemic to Sub-Saharan Africa

Both the male and the female share the same physical characteristics

In sexual monomorphism, the males and the females of the same species look the same and therefore cannot be sexually distinguished

A pair of Black-collared barbets sing a unique, powerful duet that sounds like "too-puddly, too-puddly" while flicking their wings. A dance accompanies this loud song - the two barbets will face each other, calling and bowing ceremoniously

The "too-puddly song is actually a antiphonal duet, meaning that one bird will start singing the first note, while the other bird will sing the second note

Another example of a species that shares a antiphonal duet is the bokmakierie *Telophorus zeylonus*

During the breeding season, both sexes will excavate the nest, which is usually a hole in a dead branch or stump, or trunks of softwood trees. The couple use the nesting site for several breeding seasons

Egg-laying takes place between September and February and the female will lay 2 - 5 eggs but the couple share responsibility in incubating the eggs for 18 days

TRACKING SCORPIONS



Transvaalicus thick-tailed scorpion, South African thick tail, or giant deathstalker
Parabuthus transvaalicus

It occupies bushveld habitat and can be found under rocks, logs and other debris. It often ventures into houses and can also be found under outside lights at night, hunting insects and other prey

A large scorpion reaching a length of around 15cm with the tail extended, usually dark brown to black in colour often with lighter pincers





Their burrows are oval-shaped

Track shows four footprints on either side; however it is common to see only three as the tiny feet register so close to each other



All scorpions will fluoresce under a ultraviolet (UV) light, also known as a "blacklight". The glow is caused by an unidentified substance in a thin layer in their skin.

GOLDEN ORB SPIDER

Nephila senegalensis



The genus name roughly translated from Ancient Greek, means "fond of spinning", a testament to the enormous webs the golden orbs weave. The golden orb's web has been seen to start at the top of a 6 metre tree and stretch as much as 2 metres across. Whereas most other spider webs are short-lived, these impressive structures can last for years

The golden orb spider is so named because of the colour of its silk. It is thought that this colour may serve two purposes; in the sunlight it will attract bees drawn to the bright yellow, whereas in shadow it becomes camouflaged into the foliage, thus ensnaring other insects

The spider is able to adjust the amount of pigment in the silk, thus changing the intensity of the colour of the thread

Its size and formidable looks make this one of the most recognisable and easy to identify spider species. Although it is frightening to look at, this spider is non-aggressive and relatively harmless. It can deliver a painful bite if severely provoked, but the venom is not lethal, generally only causing redness and blistering

A female golden orb spider can have an abdomen of up to 30mm long. She dwarfs the tiny 5mm male in both size and weight

In almost all nephila species the male is in danger of being devoured by the female after mating



To avoid being cannibalised, the male will approach the female when she is already feeding, or present her with a parcel of food to eat

Whilst the female is distracted, the male will fertilize her and then retreat to a safe distance

The silk of this species is incredibly strong. It can even trap small birds

There is a theory that if were possible to weave a line of the silk to a thickness of a small pencil, it would be able to withstand and repel a 747 jumbo jet at maximum speed

There has been some promising research on the silk in the field of tissue engineering for medical use

WEEPING BRIDE'S BUSH/CHRISTMAS BUSH

Pavetta gardeniifolia



This month's featured plant seems like the obvious choice, especially as ONGR is on the verge of being graced with the enchanting scent and sight of white. When these trees or shrubs are in full bloom, they truly evoke the image of a radiant bride, resplendent in a stunning white gown!

Masses of flowers are borne at the ends of the branches from as early as September to January, but the peak flowering time is during November and December when one can detect the sweet scent in the air so the other common name of Christmas bush is very apt

Pavetta lanceolata is an evergreen tree or shrub, up to 5-7 m high, regularly decussately branched (opposite pair at right angles to next pair)

The main stem has a diameter of 150-250 mm, the bark is light greyish-brown, smooth on younger specimens, maturing to a finely grooved and longitudinally cracked texture

They mostly grow on rocky hillsides, mixed woodland, granite koppies and on termite mounds

The corolla is tubular below, 4-lobed above and pure white, but the very tips of the lobes are green when freshly opened

The stamens are exserted (protruding), greenish, turning yellow and finally black with age



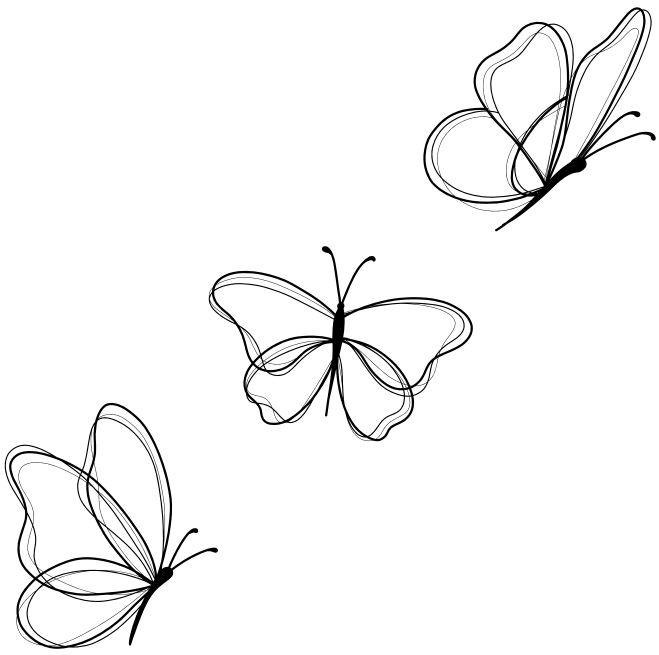


Numerous small pea-like drupes, initially green, turning black with maturity, develop from about February and stay on the plants till about July /August

The fruits are crowned by the persistent calyx lobes and contain one or rarely two, small, hard, spherical seeds

The tree is evergreen and the leaves have noticeable little dark spots – these are bacterial nodules and the leaves produce a characteristic spicy potato smell when crushed

The nectar rich flowers attract sunbirds and a host of insects including butterflies and, in turn, their predators (such as other insects, spiders and insectivorous birds)





THE MAPOGO LION COALTION

SABI SANDS GAME RESERVE

Five male lions from the Sparta pride — Makulu (also spelled as Makhulu), Rasta, Scar (also known as Dreadlocks), Pretty Boy, Kinky Tail and Mr. T. formed the Mapogo coalition in the early 2000s. Due to their exceptional physical strength and ferocious hunting abilities, these lions were well-known as a dominant force in the Sabi Sands region. They swiftly took control of a sizable area that contained multiple lion prides

The intense brotherhood of the Mapogo coalition is one of its most captivating features. The Mapogos functioned as a cohesive unit, which greatly improved their hunting success and territorial authority, in contrast to many other male lions who frequently act alone or in small groups. Because of their close relationship, they were able to defeat larger prey and protect their territory from other alliances, demonstrating the significance of social dynamics in the animal kingdom

Throughout their reign, the Mapogo lions faced numerous fierce conflicts with opposing coalitions, which they resolved with ruthless efficiency. The Birmingham coalition posed a threat to their domain, which led to their greatest significant conflict. The Mapogos were renowned for their violent strategies, which included ambushing rival men and fighting ferociously to establish their superiority

With time, the Mapogo coalition's sphere of influence grew significantly, giving them authority over a sizable region that was abundant in resources. They gained a reputation for being fierce hunters in the area since they were known for frequently bringing down huge animals like buffalo and wildebeest



The Mapogos had difficulties during their rule even if they prospered at first. Lion coalitions can have unstable dynamics, and as time went on, the coalition started to fall apart. Internal disputes eventually resulted in some members leaving and the formation of new coalitions in the area. As the fight for mates and territory intensified, the ageing Mapogo lions found it harder and harder to survive

Furthermore, their numbers started to decline because to pressure from other coalitions, environmental changes, and human encroachment. The harsh reality of living in the wild proved to be difficult despite their powerful reputation, serving as a reminder that even the most capable leaders had to deal with the unpredictability of their surroundings

The tragic reminder of the intricacies of wildlife dynamics and the precarious balance of ecosystems provided by the tale of the Mapogo lions. Their ascent and descent serve as a reminder of how crucial conservation efforts are to maintaining the natural environments that support these amazing animals

The untainted beauty and ferocity of nature are best embodied by the Mapogo lions. Their reputation as a formidable alliance of brothers serves as a reminder of the complex social relationships seen in the animal kingdom. Even though their story may have come to an end, the effect they had on their surroundings and the awareness they generated regarding the protection of lions still has resonance today

ENDANGERED WILDLIFE TRUST RECOVERY OPERATION

ROBYN REID



https://www.africanbirdclub.org/afbid/search/birddetails/species/247/19694

We are fortunate to encounter White-backed Vultures (Gyps africanus) on Olifants North fairly regularly, with groups of them sunbathing, wings spread wide, on the sand banks in the Olifants River. The status of these significant members of the food chain changed from vulnerable (regional status in 2000) to critically endangered in 2015 (both regionally and globally) as a result of a projected and suspected 80% population size reduction, caused by an increase in large-scale poisoning of the species. Due to concerns of this nature, when a dead vulture is reported on the reserve, we call in the expertise of the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) to investigate the cause of death. On the 22nd of September this year, a dead vulture, in a knob-thorn tree, was reported on the Upper River Road close to White Rocks (thank-you, Monique Tenderini, for the report and photo – image below left).



John Davies, the EWT project coordinator for raptor conservation, together with Dr Lindy Thompson, visited the site with Robyn Reid on the 24th of September. It was imperative to ascertain the cause of death as other vultures had been discovered poisoned in the Kruger National Park (KNP) just prior to this discovery. They confirmed it was a young White-backed Vulture.

John immediately ruled out the possibility of a broken wing as the bird would unlikely be in a tree if this were the case.

The knob-thorn made extraction of the carcass challenging, but John came equipped with an extension pole for just this purpose.

Dislodgement took a matter of minutes and then the investigation could continue.



Another cause of death of these majestic birds in this region is due to electrocution on power lines. We checked for burn marks but none were found. As we are a considerable distance away from these structures, it is unlikely to discover a bird on our reserve with this as the reason behind their demise.

We needed to check for damage, decomposition and presence of living decomposers (beetle and fly larvae as well as other insects which aid in the breakdown of organic matter). What was of interest to both researchers was the lack of soft decomposition as well as the way the skin was peeling away from the bones, as noted on the neck region. Usually the carcass would fall apart, but this one was intact. As this time frame coincided with the time of the very cold weather period, it was speculated that this drop in temperatures may have played a role in somewhat preserving the specimen.





Photo credit: Dr Lindy Thompson

We searched for puncture wounds, usually to be found on the back under the wings, caused by predators attacking these birds at kill sites, which might result in a punctured lung such that the bird might be able to fly away and then die elsewhere. An alternative cause of death could be disease.

Our search revealed a full crop, so we dissected this to see what the bird had fed on as well as to find signs of healthy decomposers.



Bones and flesh were discovered in the crop together with very healthy, active fly and beetle larvae, thereby ruling out the possibility of poisoning being the cause.

It was ultimately decided that the bird had died of natural causes (either a puncture wound as described above, or illness/disease) and thus it was left in the veld to decompose further.

Thanks to John Davies and Lindy Thompson for their response to our call for assistance and for their ongoing support.

ENDANGERED WILDLIFE TRUST
Protecting forever, together.

SMALL LITTLE THINGS
SOUTHERN TREE AGAMA

Acanthocercus atricollis

In the past, agamas lived in the forests of Africa. When forests began to disappear, they managed to adapt to a life in open spaces, like the wilderness and bushveld of the Greater Kruger

What's amazing is that the males will enhance and brighten their blue colour while breeding to attract females

With agamas, their dominance in the group is determined through fights

A dominant male is brightly colored and this male enjoys the privileges of mating with females and also gets the best place to rest

During courting, they bob their head up and down in a display

A female tree agama's markings are strikingly different and superbly suited to their tree-dwelling habitat

Being perfectly camouflaged against the bark of the branch, she too, will bob her head up and down towards a male

The female will lay 5 – 14 soft shelled eggs in mid-summer soft, moist soil. The eggs will hatch after a period of about 90 days

The agama usually eats ants, crickets, caterpillars, worms, and spiders, however, they have also been known to eat seeds, berries, fruits and eggs of other lizards and birds

An agama can survive for a long period of time in the wild with an amazing average lifespan of between 25 and 28 years

The blue-throated agama is not poisonous but beware, as they will still deliver a painful bite. Your warning will be the bright orange mouth lining while they gape their mouth open





HOW ANIMALS HAVE SEX - CHAMELEONS



Chameleons are fascinating creatures, and their mating rituals are no exception

Male chameleons will often display bright and vibrant colors to attract a mate, with some species even changing their colors rapidly in a display known as "rippling." This display is thought to signal to females that the male is healthy and strong, and capable of producing healthy offspring

Chameleons use vocalizations to attract mates - male chameleons will make a variety of sounds, from hissing and grunting to chirping and whistling

Males will often inflate their bodies and extend their limbs to appear larger and more impressive to females

They may bob their heads, sway their bodies, and perform other displays to catch the attention of potential mates

Females, on the other hand, will often display submissive behavior, such as lowering their heads and bodies, to signal their willingness to mate

Chameleon mating rituals are also marked by intense competition between males and they will fight for access to females, with the winner earning the right to mate

These fights can be brutal, with males using their tails, jaws, and claws to battle for dominance

Chameleons produce pheromones through specialized glands located in their skin. These glands secrete a variety of chemicals that can be detected by other chameleons through their sense of smell

Female chameleons release pheromones to signal their readiness to breed, while males use pheromones to locate potential mates

These pheromones can also help chameleons find partners that are genetically compatible, as research has shown that chameleons are more attracted to the scent of individuals with different genetic backgrounds than their own

Once a male and female have agreed to mate, copulation can take place

Chameleons mate through a process called cloacal kissing, which involves the male and female pressing their cloacas (the opening used for elimination and reproduction) together. This process can last anywhere from a few seconds to several minutes

After copulation, the female will begin to develop eggs. Chameleons are oviparous, which means that they lay eggs rather than giving birth to live young. The female will look for a suitable nesting site, such as a hole in a tree or a burrow in the ground, and lay her eggs there

In the case of chameleons, fathers are important in raising offspring. The chameleon dad will keep the eggs and young hatchlings safe from predators, regulate their body temperature, and even lick them clean



CREDO MUTWA

21 July 1921 – 25 March 2020

Credo Mutwa is one of Southern Africa's most celebrated Sangomas or witchdoctors

The content therefore is not scientific but rather represent the feelings, beliefs and experiences of this exceptional man.

These stories are written in precisely the same way that Credo Mutwa tells them, with all their original colloquialisms and styles

"There is the baobab tree for example, a tree that our people believe is the tree of truth. The baobab tree produces large pods that have a substance inside them, which you can grind into a powder. This substance has got a rather pleasant taste, and it was used to find out the truth from people accused of crime. How? You took the substance, you ground it into a fine powder, and then if a man was accused of stealing the property of a chief, you gave the substance to the man to swallow. If the man was guilty, he would not be able to swallow the powder, and he would choke on it because there would be no saliva in his mouth. But if he were innocent, he would swallow it quite easily. So they call the baobab umsenge, 'the one who milks out the truth'

There are trees that our people believe promote good luck. And there are those that our people believe promote bad luck. There are trees that we believe create beautiful dreams and join you to your ancestors. These trees we chew the roots of, and one of these is the beautiful mpera tree (Combretum schumannii – sand bush willow), a tree with a very, very black bark, which when you cut into it, is bright red, like uncooked meat inside. The Zulu people call this tree 'umpendulo,' which means 'the one who turns things around' or 'the one who gives you an answer.' And if your ancestors no longer speak to you, you are advised to chew the red umpendulo root and spit it in four directions, slowly. Then you are to take the remaining root, roll it inside your pillow and sleep on it. And the umpendulo will answer every one of your questions

Marula trees have got beautiful love songs that are sung to them by men in the tribal communities and also by women. These marula trees yield beautiful fruits, which are used by the tribe's people to make wine, as well as valuable cosmetic oil

Trees are used in a special way by sangomas. When a sangoma mixes muti, they must first talk to the bulbs that they are about to cut and boil. In fact, when a sangoma makes a muti from the bark of a particular tree, they first name that tree after their patients. If I have a patient called Samuel, I will name the tree with which I am going to heal Samuel, as "Samuel." And for as long as I'm treating Samuel, so shall I refer to the tree whose bark I am taking as "Samuel". And I must under no circumstances destroy the green Samuel, because by so doing, I will be killing the flesh and blood Samuel

The word marula means the 'pick me up and stretch my body gently' tree. It comes from the verb roola - to pick up an injured person, to rub him and gently pull his or her joints back into shape. Why is the marula called 'the marriage tree'? Because out of marulas we make a powerful tonic that is also a potent aphrodisiac. Our people used to grind marulas on a wood grindstone - pips, skin and all - and then they used to pour this mash into a clay pot. They would then add several honeycombs into the mess and then boil it. This created a powerful tonic, which was given to people who had been weakened by sickness. It was also given to little babies and grown children who were sickly by nature

The fruit of the marula is shaped roughly like the scrotum of a young man. And old men whose sexual power was seen to be flagging were not only given marula wine to drink but they were given rich and fatty chicken broth in which umwele had been mixed like a powerful spice. This is why they say in Zulu: "The old goat whose walking stick is becoming flaccid should eat a lot of chicken soup with bitter herbs." It sounds long stated in English but in the African language it is shorter, to the point and very funny

Now, let me tell you, Africans believed for hundreds of years that you could talk to trees and that if you showed love to a tree, the tree would yield more fruit. Now, in Africa, we are taught to gently talk to marula trees, to flatter them and to even sing love songs to them. Marula trees have got beautiful love songs that are sung to them by men in the tribal communities and also by women. These marula trees yield beautiful fruits, which are used to make wine, as well as valuable cosmetic oil, by the tribe's people

These are special trees - of a type known as the musu, (Umbrella Thorn) which means 'dead-man-tree' and it is only used when a chief has died. This acacia-type tree grows very large and has bean-like pods as fruit. A branch of such a tree is used to form the ritual fire, or the watch-fire, which is lit next to the hut of the dead chief, to light him on the way to the next world

The cancer bush Lessertia frutescens is so named because it used to save many Voortrekkers who had cancer. But what I love about this plant, is that when you plant it in a big pot and you bring it into the house, it makes peace all around. I don't know why. What we used to do if we were going to negotiate the bride price, you know the labola, where everybody looses his temper and starts punching each other, you put the thing there by the door and then you'll see it brings all the people to start negotiating. There will be no fighting, a lot of angry words yes but no real fighting. The whole plant appeals to you. It asks you: "Come and look at me"

Now we come to another tree: a very sacred tree indeed. It is the wild fig tree, known as umKhiwane by the Zulu people. Like the marula, the wild fig tree produces fruits that are shaped like the scrotum of a man. And because of this our people attached great sanctity to this tree and its fruits. It was the type of tree whose leaves young people wore around their waists on special occasions as they danced under the full moon during the first fruits festivals, which was the African equivalent of Christmas. Girls and boys wore garlands of leaves of this tree on their heads and they wore waist strings to which were tied leaves of the umKhiwane tree

By this dance they showed their determination to serve the tribe truthfully and even to sacrifice their lives in the process. Because the wild fig tree was a tree of self-sacrifice

In olden days in Africa no person was ever forcibly sacrificed to the ancestral spirits during difficult times. A person had to volunteer to be sacrificed. Incredible as it may seem, a forced sacrificed was unacceptable to the gods. The person had to volunteer. It was in fact a form of ritual suicide

Now, one of the forms of self sacrifice that was performed was the following: A young man who had proven himself to be a brave and fearless hunter or warrior would volunteer to be sacrificed in the event of a severe drought overtaking the tribe. Especially, if the drought was accompanied by an epidemic of cattle disease or by an epidemic of disease that was killing many people. The young man to be sacrificed was taken to the river and bathed thoroughly from head to toe. Then his body was smeared from head to toe in fragrant herbs and then dressed in a crown of umKhiwane leaves and in the soft loinskin made out of several dassie or rabbit skins. He would be led up the hill to where he was to be sacrificed and there he was hung from the branch of a wild fig tree and then he was pierced in the chest or in the side with a spear made not of iron but of bronze. Sometimes even a spear of gold was used. But this was only for a very highborn person, child of an emperor. The young man was supposed to sing and not to scream as his blood flowed down his legs to the ground. When he was dead, he was buried ceremoniously facing not the east but the west. Then his grave was totally obliterated so that no one afterwards would be able to know that a holy person was buried here

The following year, when wild figs appeared upon the branches of the sacrificial tree, the family of the dead young man was notified and dressed in their finest skins and bangles. They would walk up the hillside and would appear before the sacrificial tree and ask its permission to eat of the fruits that were believed to contain the soul of the sacrificed young man. No one else was allowed to eat the figs that grew on the tree. Every one of them would be eaten by the members of the victim's family. Only on the following year the year following the eating of the fruits would other people be allowed to eat the fruits of the tree of sacrifice

Zulu people use the wild fig as the subject of many wise sayings and proverbs. One of these proverbs is: "The best-looking wild fig is the one which, on being torn open, is found to be fullest of worms." In other words, beautiful people are often the most corrupt

Our forefathers say that in olden days human beings could talk to trees, and trees could tell them whether they were edible or poisonous. Man could talk to plants and be told by them whether they were good to eat or not

It is incredible, but if you look very, very closely at what goes on amongst many native communities throughout the world, you will find that something was talking to people in ancient times. Were these the gods? Maybe. Were these creatures from the stars? Maybe. But there is another "person" about whom we don't talk when we talk about things like this - the earth itself

The earth is an intelligent, living, pain-feeling and love acknowledging entity. The earth is not just a dirty ball of matter tumbling through space like a mad projectile. No, the earth is more than that! And I feel that people who believe that the earth is alive are not superstitious savages, but rather they are people more advanced, mentally and spiritually, than we are"

THE CHANGING OF SEASONS



Over a year I took photographs of the magnificent baobab north of Mopani camp in the Kruger National Park

I know this is not Olifants but I thought I would share the remarkable seasonal changes that we see in the bush

March 2019



May 2019

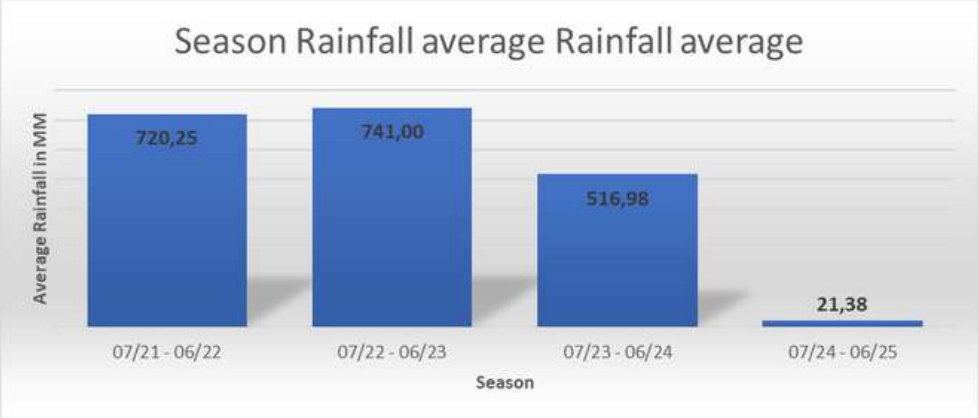


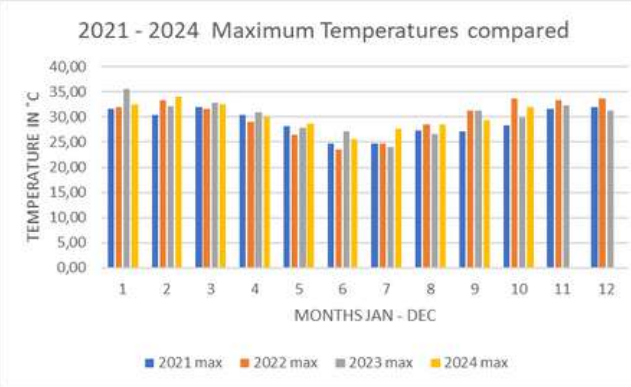
July 2019

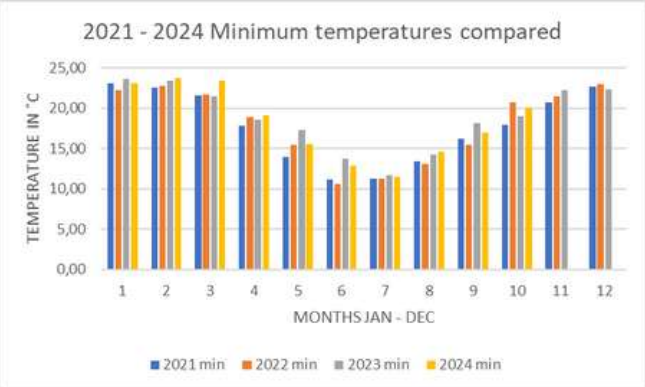


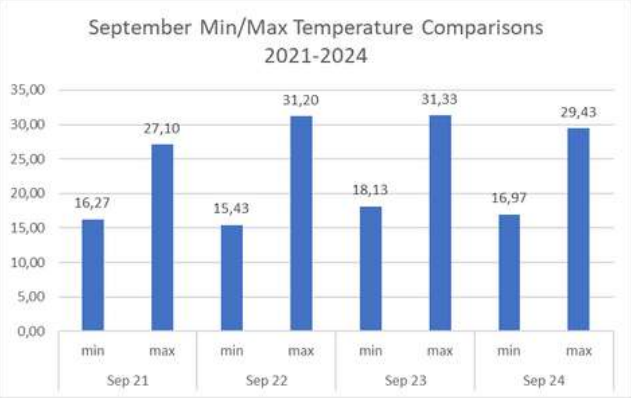
December 2019

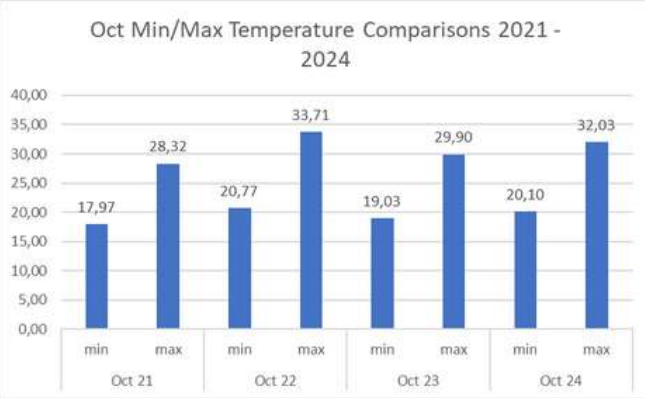
RAINFALL AND TEMPERATURES











MOON PHASES

NOVEMBER MOON PHASES

New Moon	1st	@	8.47am EST
First quarter	9th	@	12.55am EST
Full Moon	15th	@	4.29pm EST
Last quarter	22nd	@	8.28pm EST

DECEMBER MOON PHASES

New Moon	1st	@	1.21am EST
First quarter	8th	@	10.27am EST
Full Moon	15th	@	4.02pm EST
Last quarter	22nd	@	5.18pm EST
New Moon	30th	@	5.27pm EST



TRAIL CAMERA PROJECT

































Why is it you can never hope to describe the emotion Africa creates? You are lifted. Out of whatever pit, unbound from whatever tie, released from whatever fear. You are lifted and you see it all from above - Francesca Marciano

Bibliography
Tracker Manual
Snake Bite Institute
Credo Mutwa
Sabi Sands Lodges blog

View from B19