



## ORGR BUSH TELEGRAPH

### *THE May 2020 LOCKDOWN EDITION*



### Dear Olifants Community

We hope you are well during this exhaustive lockdown period. The lockdown has affected us all in numerous different ways, but nature is flourishing. The reserve is looking fantastic as we had some very good late rains of 55mm falling which has topped up all the watering points and has given the vegetation a last little push before the long dry season starts. Winter crept upon us very quickly, as if someone turned on a switch, and morning and evening temperatures have become refreshingly chilly. We have had a very busy time on the reserve during lockdown without staff to keep things running, but we have had a good time and all is well at Olifants River Game Reserve. We are lucky to have an incredible team of highly dedicated people who have pulled through thick and thin to ensure our jewel of the Lowveld remains just that! Thanks ORGR Team, you are the best!

## ORGR on Lockdown

We have since moved from the initial five weeks of Level 5 Lockdown to Level 4. Level 4 has not allowed us much more freedom of movement but there are certain areas in which we have been able to reignite on the reserve. Please see below an updated list of our Lockdown Level 4 protocols.

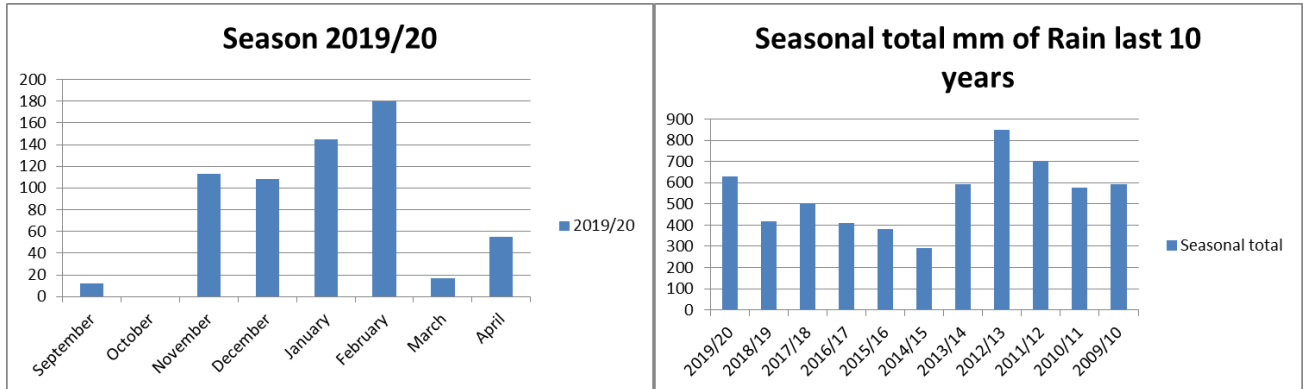
- The Reserve is still locked down for new Member arrivals and any Members departing, until lockdown restrictions allow otherwise. 8 Units made the journey back home during the one week lifting of the interprovincial travel ban.
- Certain labour and maintenance staff have been able to return to perform the Essential Service of maintaining Conservation Management of a Protected Area.
- Two reusable triple-layered face masks will be provided for all ORGR staff members.
- Symptoms and temperature checks are done on all staff weekly and staff returning from leave.
- Social Distancing measures and staff education sessions are still in place for all staff currently on the reserve.
- Housekeeping, Reception and certain non-essential staff are still at home,
- Only contractors holding permits for “Critical Maintenance that can not be delayed” are allowed access to the reserve to perform emergency work. Regular building and non-critical work is not allowed.
- Anti Poaching have remained on the reserve to perform the essential services of Security. They are now able to take their days off and travel with the appropriate permits.
- All member services are still halted for the Lockdown except for emergencies, refueling, and critical maintenance services.
- All public places including Office, Clubhouse, and Hides are still closed.
- The sightings Whats App group has been put on hold during the Lockdown and members have been encouraged to avoid activity on social media platforms.
- We have asked that sightings are not called in on the Radio.
- No traversing is allowed between North and South for the duration of the Lockdown.
- The southern gate has been closed down and only authorized grocery shopping trips are permitted through that entry point for members and staff to purchase essential goods

We all hope that these restrictions will be lifted as soon as possible so we can return to a certain level of normality. We miss seeing all of you on the reserve and hope to catch up soon.



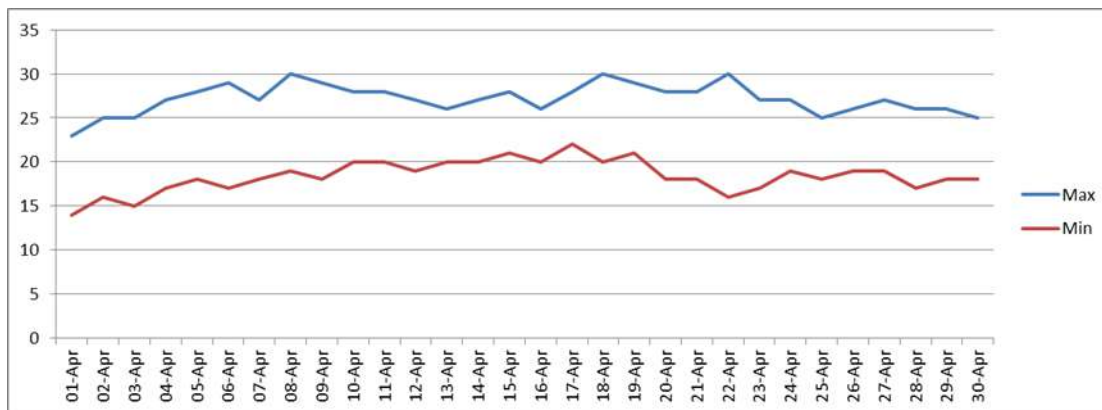
# THE WEATHER REPORT

April has brought us more rain than March with a total of 55 mm falling on Olifants. 45mm of the 55mm fell in one event and provided the area with a good soaking and topped up all the watering holes and pans. This brings our seasonal total up to 630,5 mm. This is the most amount of rain in a season since the 2012/2013 period, where we received 848mm.

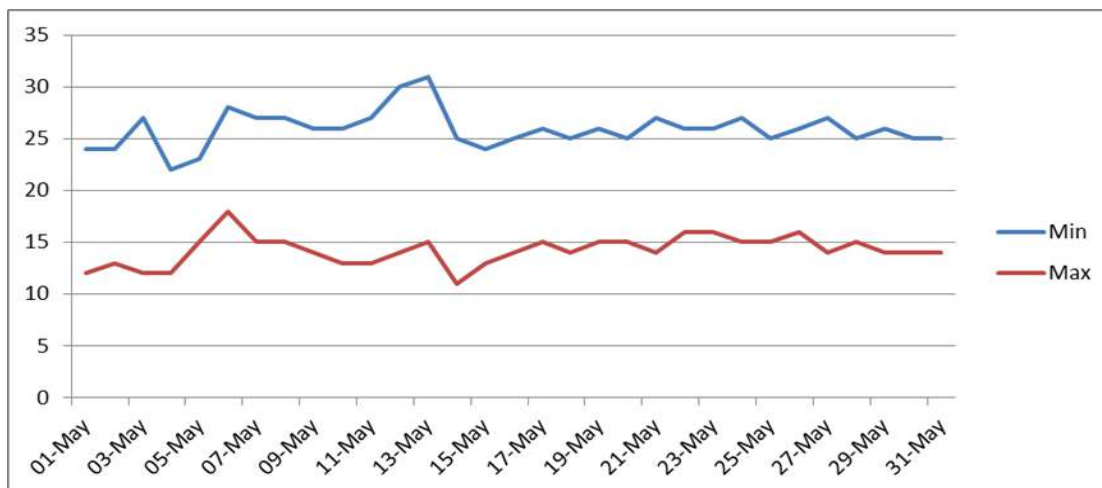


Temperatures in April have still been quite warm but there is certainly a chill in the air in the evenings and early mornings. Average Highs of 27 degrees and lows of 18 degrees were experienced on the reserve during April

## April Temperature Graph



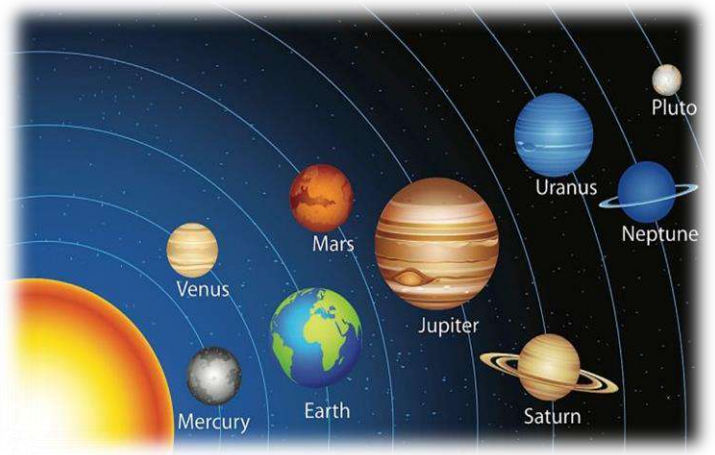
## May Forecasted Temperatures



## OUR NIGHT SKIES FORECAST – The 5 Planets of May

You can see all 5 bright planets in May 2020. Venus is your ticket to finding Mercury in the evening sky. Brilliant Jupiter can help you find Saturn and Mars in the morning sky.

Venus – the brightest planet – blazes mightily in the western sky after sunset. Given clear skies, it'll be hard to miss Venus, the third brightest celestial body to light up the heavens, after the sun and moon, respectively. Some sharp-sighted people can even see Venus in a daytime sky.



May 2020 presents the last month for Venus' reign in the evening sky. Day by day, Venus sinks closer to the glare of sunset, to swing behind the sun on June 3, 2020. After that, Venus transitions over to the morning sky.

This month Mercury will be climbing out of the sunset glare and in the direction of Venus. These two worlds will meet up for a conjunction on May 21, 2020. Once you see Venus, aim binoculars at Venus to spot nearby Mercury and Venus in the same binocular field together. As the evening twilight deepens, chances are that you'll be able to spot Mercury next to Venus with the eye alone.

Mercury enters the evening sky on May 4th. However, this world probably won't be far enough from the sun's glare to be visible until a week or so later. Fortunately, Venus and Mercury will stage a conjunction on May 21, with Mercury passing one degree to the south of Venus. After their conjunction, Mercury will climb upward day by day while Venus will descend downward. As long as you can catch Venus after sunset, seek for Mercury above Venus with the eye alone or binoculars.

Mars is the last of the three bright morning planets to rise in May 2020. Jupiter rises first, closely followed by Saturn, and then a few hours later by Mars. Whereas Jupiter and Saturn almost rise in tandem, Mars is off by itself.

Jupiter and Saturn are closely joined on the sky's dome, remaining rather close together in the morning sky all month long. Look first for brilliant Jupiter and you'll find Saturn a short hop to the east of Jupiter. Although Saturn is easily as bright as a 1st-magnitude star, the ringed planet pales next to the king planet Jupiter, which outshines Saturn by some 15 times.

At temperate latitudes in the Southern Hemisphere, Jupiter and Saturn rise at late evening in early May, and around mid-evening by the month's end.

## Creature Feature – Termites (Macrotermes)



A lot of people consider Termites to be a pest in an urban environment, but out here in their natural environment, they are a keystone species. A keystone species is vital for the ecology of the environment and termites play a vital role.

Termites are the oldest known organized community on the planet – they have been traced back 300 million years. These tiny little

creatures are no longer viewed by scientists as millions of individuals making up a colony but instead are seen as a superorganism. They work together to form one of the most spectacular communities on the planet.

Termites can be split into 2 distinct groups, those that eat wood, the macrotermes, and those that eat grass, the microtermes. In this Creature Feature, we will focus on the Macrotermes, as they are very prominent on our landscape and are responsible for the large termite mounds we find on Olifants.

Members of a macrotermes termite community are split into several roles such as workers, soldiers, and a king and queen. Each termite has its job which is carried out 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The workers collect wood and tend to gardens, the soldiers are constantly on guard waiting for any danger so that they can protect the colony, and the king and queen have the job of fertilizing and laying eggs respectively.

### Termite Mounds



Like other termites, Macrotermitinae are soil engineers, mixing their salivary secretions with soil particles to make their strong, hard mounds and galleries. Their mounds are some of the largest built by any species of termite, with volumes of thousands of liters and lasting for many decades. They are probably the most complex mound colonies of any insect group.

The macrotermitine termites build some of the most spectacular animal-built structures on the planet. Some, like the mound of *Macrotermes*

*michaelseni* are dominant landscape features over much of southern Africa. These termites control a significant portion of the flows of carbon and water through arid savanna ecosystems.

These remarkable structures are not the residence for the colony - very few termites are found in them. Rather, they are accessory organs of gas exchange, which serve the respiratory needs of the subterranean colony, located about a meter or two below the mound. The colony's respiratory needs are prodigious - one colony contains as many as a million worker termites and symbionts that collectively consume oxygen at about the same rate as a cow.

Functionally, these mounds are devices for capturing wind energy to power active ventilation of the nest. They are adaptive structures, continually molded by the termites to maintain the nest atmosphere.

This ability confers on the colony emergent homeostasis, the regulation of the nest environment by the collective activities of the inhabitants.

### Subterranean Farming



Macrotermes are very efficient farmers, practicing agriculture underground and growing their food source. Macrotermes colonies host a remarkable symbiotic relationship with a basidiomycete fungus, Termitomyces. The termites cultivate the fungi in a fungus garden, comprising a few hundred fungus combs, structures built from chewed up grass and wood and inoculated with fungal spores. Each year, these fungi produce a crop of large mushrooms (pictured above).

Unlike the fungi cultivated by leaf-cutter ants, which the ant colony uses as food, the Termitomyces culture in a Macrotermes nest aids in the breakdown of cellulose and lignin into a more nutritious compost which serves as the termites actual food. The fungus garden is, therefore, a kind of extracorporeal digestive system, to which termites have 'outsourced' cellulose digestion.

The fungi also play a significant role in the social homeostasis in Macrotermes colonies, in particular aiding in water balance for the colony. This has made Macrotermes colonies much more tolerant of

dry conditions than other termites, which enables them to exist in dryer environments than termites are commonly found.

For the fungus to grow it needs constant humidity and a temperature of around 30 degrees Celsius. The termites maintain the temperature by opening and closing chimneys in the mound, using their metabolic heat during cold times, and having porous walls to allow the wind to clear out excess heat. Humidity is maintained by tunneling down to the water table to release water vapor into the colony. The deepest tunnel found was 30 meters deep and the tallest mound was a staggering 14 meters high.

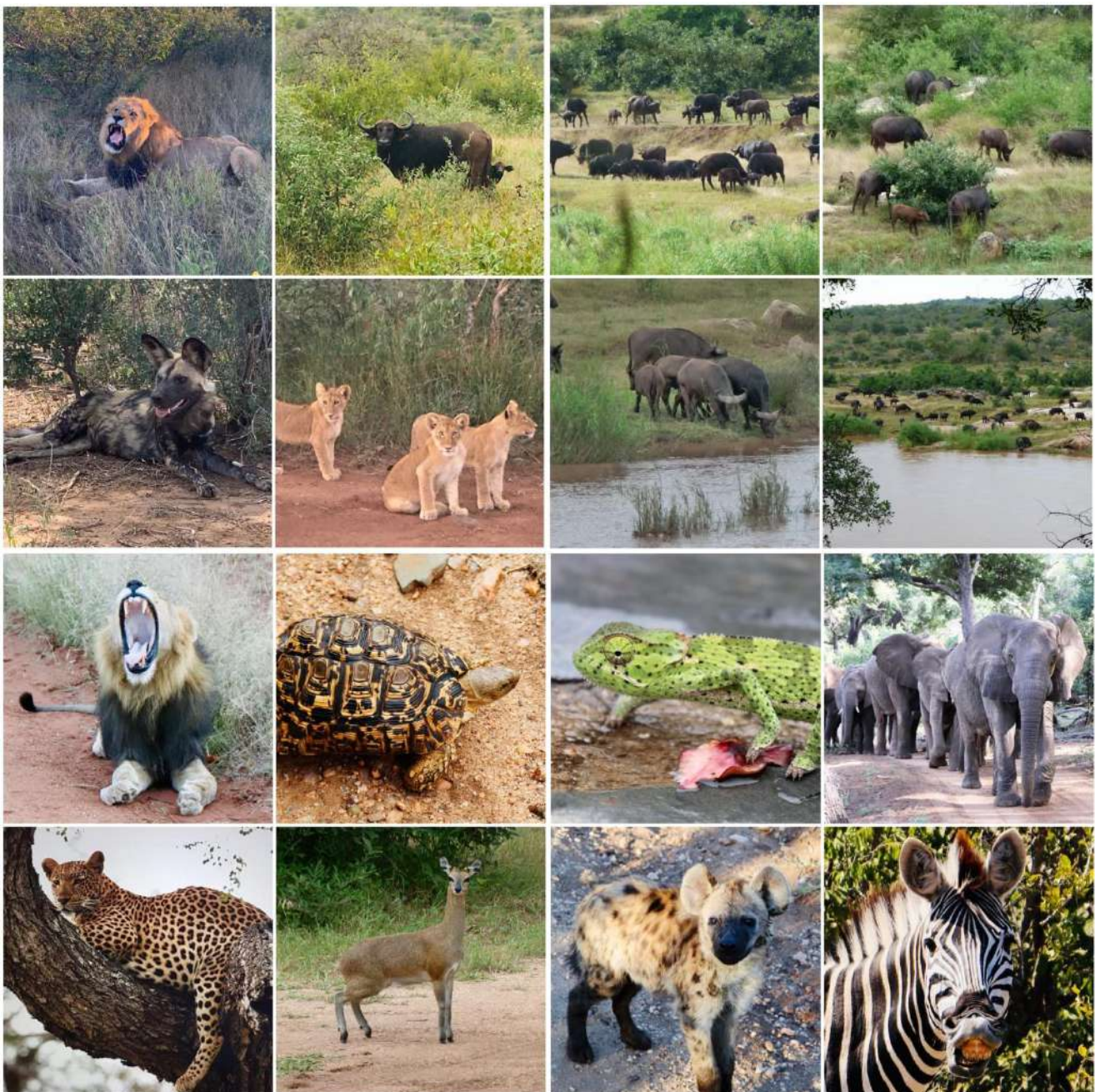
These fascinating colonies will live for around 80 to 100 years before dying out. The mounds are then used by birds for nesting, snakes for hibernating, wild dogs and hyenas den in old mounds, warthogs sleep in them at night and nocturnal creatures like porcupines and honey badgers will use them during the day. Even while colonies are active they still have a multitude of uses as termites are eaten by many different animals, monitor lizards lay their eggs inside the mounds as the temperatures are perfect for incubation and the mounds are responsible for the germination of many seeds of trees. Termites are Champions of our environment and very important ecosystem engineers.

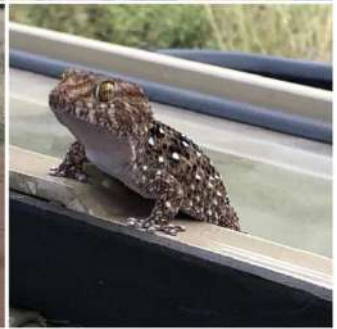
## Lockdown Game Drive Gallery

Lockdown has certainly not affected Game Viewing on Olifants. Sightings have been phenomenal with some good quality predator viewing. Buffalo have also made a return to the reserve with a herd of 75 individuals moving into Olifants for a few days. Most of the migrant birds have left us to spend our winter in central Africa or further abroad in Europe and Asia.

Below is a Galley of photos submitted by our members who were on the reserve with us during the lockdown. Thank you all for sharing your special moments with us.

Photos submitted by Dan Stevens, Steve and Lynne Beesly, Ally Hewitt, Maurice Egan, Darryl Furman, Nick Ryan, Irene and Sean Joubert, Charles Reynolds, Heather Aitkin, and Tim Dunker.





# CONSERVATION MATTERS

## #1 Rhino News

There seems to be an increase in White Rhinos on the reserve in the last 10 days. The below heat map indicates the hot spots on Olifants. Most sightings have been recorded around Big Dam, Wild Dog Pan, along Palm Loop drive to Warthog with a few other sightings distributed on the reserve.

The White Rhino cow with the long horn we have been looking for since January was finally dehorned in MRNR recently. This is a major relief as she is a high-risk candidate to be poached. MRNR in conjunction with Balule and Joel Alves (Vet) did a great job in getting her dehorned.



Maurice Egan captured this incredibly lucky photo of a White Rhino being photobombed by a Leopard. Very special sighting and thank you for sharing Maurice.

We recently captured a horned Black Rhino at Big Dam on our camera traps. This is quite exciting news and more than likely an individual named Niyiko who was seen last in 2018. He missed the dehorning last year. Unfortunately, we are unable to get a positive ID for the photo so we can not confirm it is Niyiko. Either way, it's quite exciting to have a dehorned black rhino around the Big Dam area. Hoping we see can dehorn him at some stage.



## #2 Train Mortalities – The Lion Cub Saga

We have had two train kills in April. One being a big male Kudu, and the other, a more tragic case where a lioness was killed. The lioness was the mother of three cubs who survived the incident. Bizarrely the train hit the Lioness at 1300 during broad daylight on a straight stretch of railway on flat ground. The odds are in favour of the lioness being able to get off the line before being hit, but unfortunately, she was killed. We were notified by Transnet and responded to find her body severely mutilated. A quick necropsy was conducted and we found her to still be lactating. She was seen a few hundred meters from the impact spot a 4 hours earlier with her three 4-month-old cubs in tow. We immediately set out to try to locate the surviving cubs and reported the incident to Balule and LEDET.

The directive from Balule and LEDET was to euthanize the cubs to prevent any further suffering. This proved to be quite a challenge. We located cub tracks in the Palm loop between Mikes Link and Q's corner and started to search again. Rehabilitation of the cubs was unfortunately not an option,. A couple of days later, they were seen by Sean Joubert with full bellies which was amazing. They were certainly managing to find some food somewhere. A call was made to keep an eye on them and see how they would fair. After another couple of days, they were seen again still in good condition. Interestingly they had survived for 12 days at this point without their mother.

Another couple of days past without a sighting and then unit 76 found them along Malope drive. They looked to be a little skinnier and we launched another operation to euthanize without success. It's more difficult to catch 3 lions cubs than one thinks. Another 5 days past and they were seen again by Unit 5, still in fair condition and playful. At this stage, we are not seeing them as often as we used to but they are still alive and not suffering after 3 weeks without their mother. Quite remarkable. We continue to monitor the situation and if the need arises, we will medically euthanize them with assistance from the vet. I will keep you updated as we go, but they have not been seen for about 10 days now, so we assume nature has taken its course. This picture was taken 14 days after losing their mother.



### #3 Project Forest

We managed to wrap a further 14 trees in the Lisbon area of ORGR during April with a roll of wire we had left from before lockdown. Ally (Unit44), Tom (Unit 3), Maurice (Unit 47), and Willem (Unit 48) all assisted with this project. We were a very well-oiled tree wrapping machine towards the end of the day. Looking forward to the next round of trees when we get more wire. Thank you very much for the assistance gentleman and to Maurice for providing his homemade Cheese and Chive muffins!



### #4 Security Report

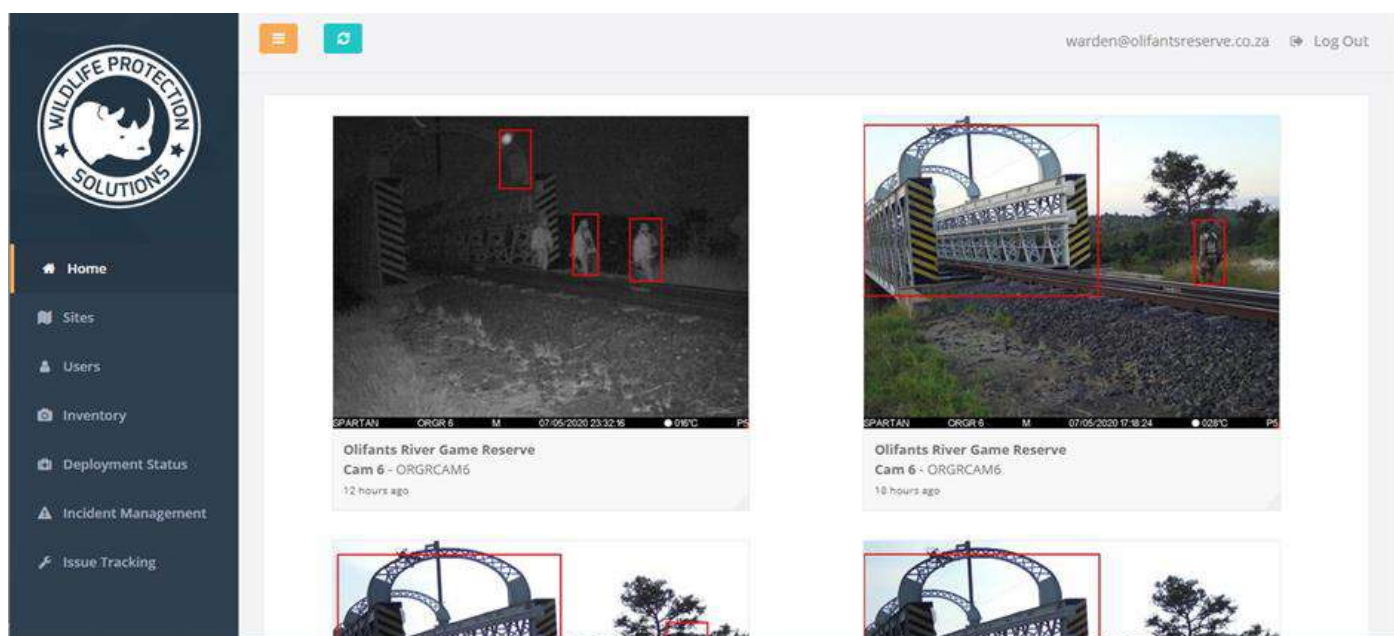
We are happy to report that there have been no security incidents, incursions, or animals poached since the beginning of the lockdown. We had some intel via Balule that there was a poacher team in the area from cell phone tower pings. This led us to increase our already jacked up APU strategy and with the assistance of the ORGR members during the lockdown, we presented a very busy reserve with vehicles out and about late at night. This managed to deter any poacher teams in the area to look elsewhere. During this intense time, we did deploy a Helicopter to perform a disruptive flight which further advertised that we had knowledge of a poacher team in the area and this acted as an additional deterrent.

We also closed off the northern boundary which acts as our most prominent access point from the north. This allowed us to monitor the road closely without being disturbed by vehicle tracks. The boundary was dragged with tyres daily to ensure we have a clean canvas to detect fresh entry tracks daily. This worked very well and we would like this practice to remain as a standard operating procedure during our full moon periods. The closure does not prevent any access to dams and game viewing sites and gives our APU an advantage in early detection of entry tracks

We have not let our guard down in April and continue to operate a very high level of alertness using our new technologies in the form of our thermal devices and AI camera trap monitoring.

We are now fully operational on both WPS Watch and Earth Ranger. The WPS camera trap monitoring system has revolutionized our lives using Artificial Intelligence to assist us in monitoring the images captured. We will be receiving three additional camera traps from WPS in June which we will be installing in the MRNR area to create a camera trap corridor from Doreen, through OREC, ORGR, and into MRNR.

I have also approached our neighbours on OREC to purchase 5 cameras of their own to join our network. With this system in place, our future goal would be to get at least 50 Cameras set up in the hot zone to detect any incursions. Below is a snapshot of the WPS Watch dashboard showing how the AI identifies a human threat. In this case, it's our APU on patrol.

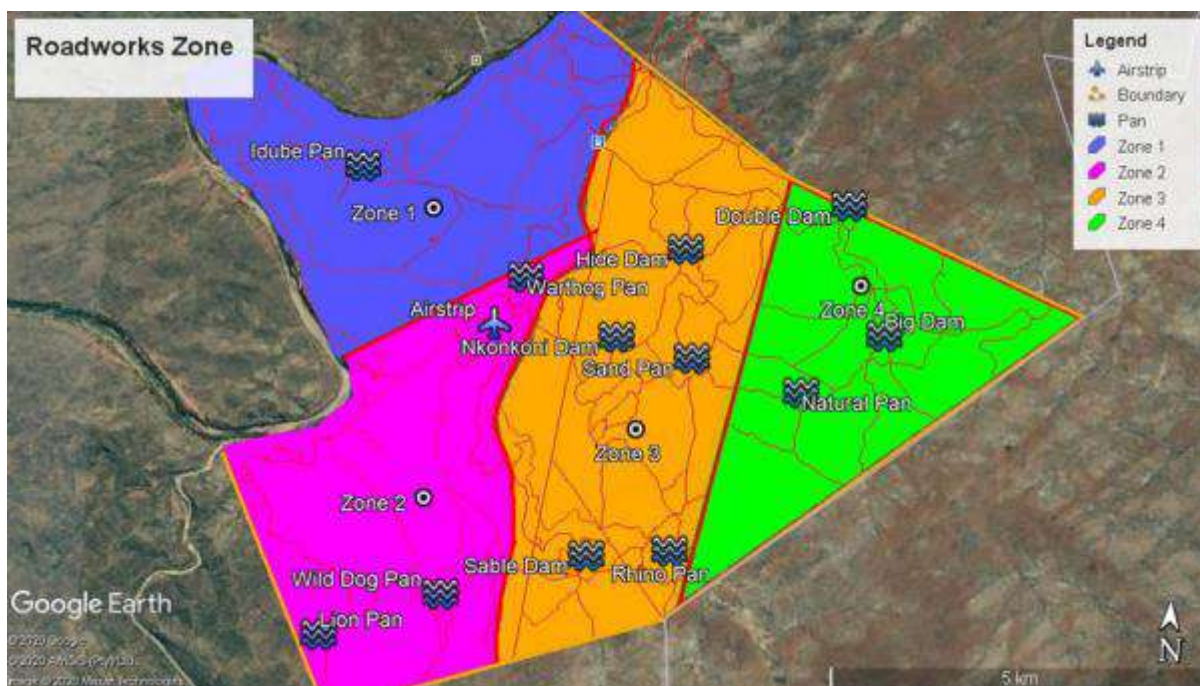


# THE MEMBERS UPDATE

## Roads

We have done our best to drag tyres on the road networks to maintain a smoother road surface. In the last three weeks, we have spent substantial amounts of time dragging tyres on the roads. We are unable to repair the major ruts until our workforce is back. We have also dragged tyres along Elephant Walk, Red Duiker, Entry-Exit Road, Palm Loop Drive, Mamba road, Wild dog, and Warthog Pans. Most of these roads have been dragged twice.

3 road maintenance staff return to the reserve on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May. Friday on the FEL, Mateo on the Grader, and Nkosinathi on the Tractor. We will be doing 1 day on the railway road to repair the bad spots and from there continue to work in Zone 2 followed by Zone 1. By the end of May, Zones 1 and 2 will be fully graded and ruts repaired.



## OCCUPANCY

Occupancies have been stable through April due to the Lockdown. No new arrivals or departures have been possible. We have had 16 units on the reserve for April. With the temporary lifting of interprovincial movement for 7 days, 8 Units left the reserve, leaving 8 units occupied for the rest of the lockdown period.

April 2020					
	Occupancy	No of Units		Occupancy	No of Units
Week 1	21%	16	Week 3	21%	16
Week 2	21%	16	Week 4	21%	16

## Workshop Upgrades

Maurice Egan, Willem Bosman, and Ally Hewitt have done an incredible job upgrading the ORGR workshop in their own time. We appreciate the assistance greatly and they have done an incredible job! Ronald's workshop has been completely cleaned up and repainted and it's looking very sharp. They also repainted one of the Firefighting trailers, and have started painting the floor at the old tyre changing area. The next steps are to screed and paint the floor in the new tyre changing area. Our grateful thanks to our member workforce!



## Water and Electrical

We have had some issues with the water reticulation on Madrid. The first problem came about when the tanks at 84 were not refilling. We managed to get the back-up tanks at 56 up and running which ensured that all units in Madrid had enough water. We initially suspected a major leak on the line from the Pump to the tanks but after days of searching, we could not find any leak. Eventually, Errol managed to identify the problem; it was a small stone blocking the Kalifi Vale at the borehole which was, in turn, jammed shut not allowing any water up to the tanks! Our second water problem appeared on the hill at the 80's tanks. No water was reaching the tanks and we spent two days looking for the fault and eventually found a major leak up on the line. This leak was repaired and water was restored.

We also experienced a cable break between transformers 6 and 7 on Madrid very close to the last incident. The fault was reported at 0700 am and by 1400 we had repaired the break and power was restored to the Madrid Units.

Thanks very much to Errol for keeping us wet and electrified!

## **Idube Pan**

Some exciting developments. We will be starting the naturalization of Idube Pan this month by removing the concrete trough from the pan and concealing the water delivery pipe in the ground with a concrete terminal point. This will dramatically improve the aesthetic of the pan. We will also be rehabilitating some of the access road to the dam so that its less unsightly.

## **Classifieds**

The half share in Unit 25 has been sold recently. The transfer of the share will go through once the deeds office is operational again. This leaves a full share in Units 83 and 76 available, as well a third share in units 54 and 22. Please contact the office for any further information.

## **ORGR Gin**

Its Official, the ORGR Gin has been completely sold out. This incredible initiative managed to raise more than R150 000 in donations to our Anti-Poaching Fund. Thank you all who purchased and enjoyed our Gin. Hopefully we will get to enjoy this popular and unique Gin again in the future. Not quite sure if Gordons will cut it anymore ☺!

## **Food Parcel Donations**

Our amazing members have managed to donate R116 300 to the Balule Outreach fund to date towards food parcels for the Sigagule community. This amount includes funds form two units on the North but does not include donations from other entities. It shows what an incredible member base we have who are willing to support the Balule Outreach Trusts initiatives in assisting the surrounding communities who are now starting to feel the pinch as a result of the economic impact COVID 19 has brought to our country.

## **Unit 82 Guest Donation**

Before Lockdown, Friends of Gina Rueff from Unit 82 Kindly Donated R7000,00 to our Anti-Poaching fund. They had a great stay on the reserve and we ended up having some interesting conversations on dehorning and how we manage the poaching problem. John and Anita Brown made this donation before leaving the reserve. Very kind of them.

## **Some sad news**

It is with great regret that we advise of the passing of one of our long standing members, Andy Ochse of unit 70, earlier this month. Andy invested in Olifants in the the early 90's and served as a highly valued board member from 2003-2008. As a tribute to his service the viewpoint on the entrance/exit road bears his name – “Andy’s Lookout”. Andy is survived by his daughter Kerry, his two sons Garth and Bruce, and their families. On behalf of all at Olifants we send our condolences and wish them strength at this very difficult time.

That's it from us all at Olifants River Game Reserve. Stay Safe, Stay Safe, and keep in touch. This Pandemic shall pass and we will be seeing you all on the reserve soonest.

Catch you on Sunset plains for a Sundowner!

All the best, Nick and the ORGR team

