



## ORGR BUSH TELEGRAPH

*THE September 2020 EDITION*

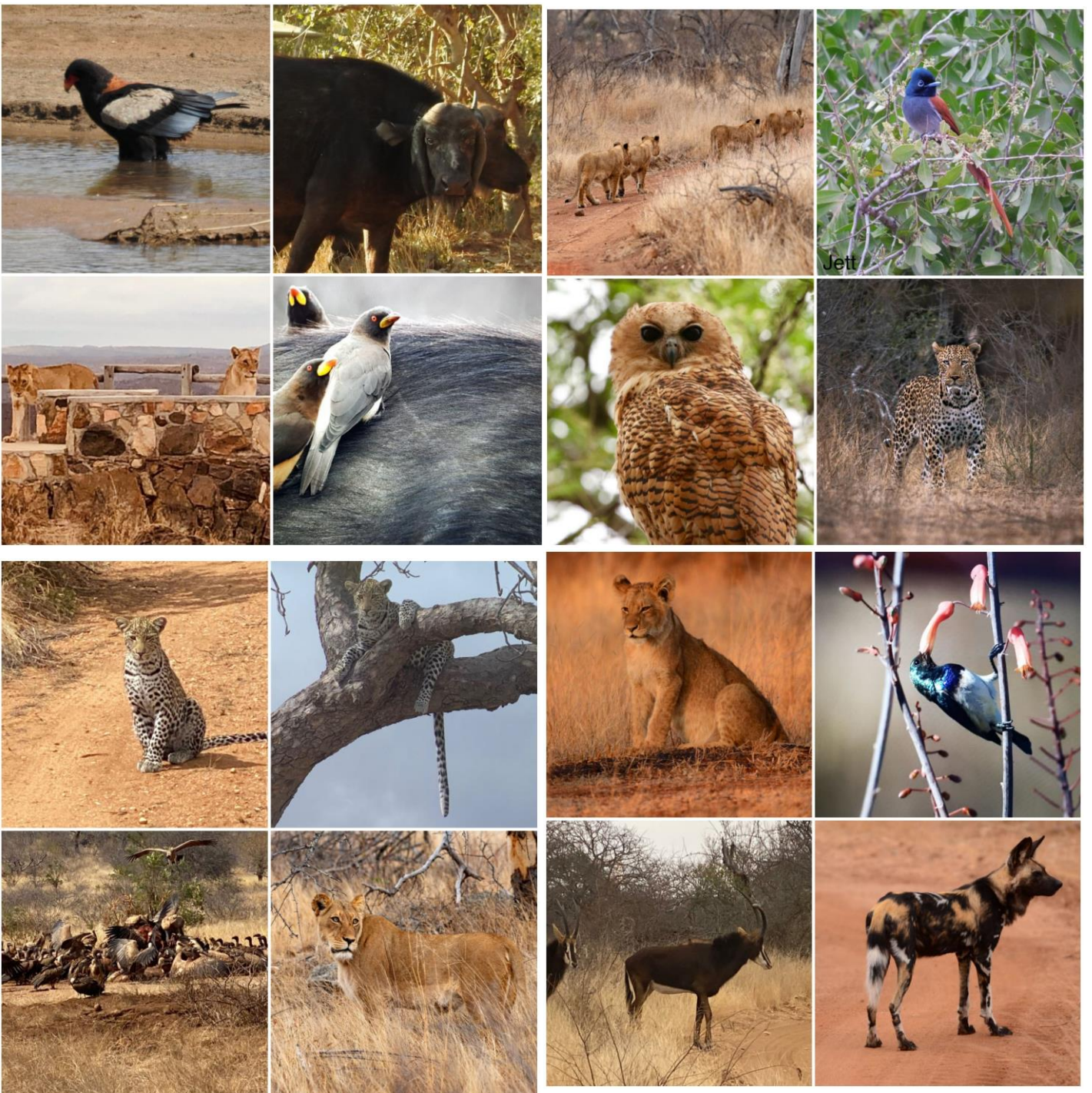


Hello Olifants Community!

We hope you are all well and are staying safe. September is officially springtime and there is a tangible aura of regrowth in the air. The Sjambok Pod trees and Knobthorns are in full flower with multiple other species of plants pushing new buds and starting to bloom. August has proven to be the busiest month in Olifant's history from an occupancy perspective, proving how important wild places and spaces are to people during this unprecedented pandemic. The bush has an incredible ability to rejuvenate and refresh the soul.

## THE GAME DRIVE

As always Olifants has produced some phenomenal animal and bird viewing this last month. The highlight of the month is most certainly the Pels Fishing Owl, sighted along Pels Loop - such exciting news to have these almost-mythical creatures on the reserve again. Lion and leopard sightings have been incredible with cheetah and wild dog also seen on the reserve. The good news on the ostrich front is that our male and female have finally found each other and we hope to have chicks soon. Keep an eye out for them between Sunset Plains and Sable Dam. Sable have also been sighted on Grootdraai, and another dozen have been released on Dinidza. They are stunning creatures! We are expecting our summer migratory birds to start arriving back soon, so the race is on to spot the first Yellow Billed Kite or hear the first Cuckoo and Woodlands Kingfisher. Thank you to all who contributed photos on the sightings group...keep them coming!



## CONSERVATION MATTERS

### GENERAL GAME COUNT AND PREDATOR CENSUS

We have concluded both the annual predator and general game counts. The Balule team is currently compiling the report and I will share the numbers with you all next month. It will be very interesting to see what the populations are doing this year.

### ARBOR WEEK 2020



Between the 1st and 7<sup>th</sup> of September, the ORGR team planted well over 160 trees around members' units. Congratulations to Errol and the team on this incredible feat!

We planted both Forest Mahogany and Marula trees during this period and surrounded each with a fence to keep the browsers out. We used an Earth Augur to assist the team in rapidly digging the holes, which enabled us to get through all the required planting in a short period. Thank you to all who participated with this project. Now, all we can do is hope Mother Nature is kind to the newcomers. If this pilot project is successful we will certainly repeat it next year.

## PELS FISHING OWLS

As mentioned above, the very exciting news is that we have Pels on the reserve again. Reports of vocalization have been coming in from the Grootdraai area which culminated in a confirmed sighting by the Tenderinis of Unit 72 on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August. The owls have been spotted a couple more times thereafter. These sightings are very significant to the local Pels population and we suspect that there is a nesting site along Pels Loop, between the causeway and the end of loop.



## TRAIN CASUALTIES

Sadly we have had 3 incidents recently of elephants being hit by the trains along the railway line. Two of these were just on the boundary of ORGR and Dinidza and the other close to the sliding gate. We have not had an elephant incident on the railway line for around 18 months and now three in very short succession. We certainly hope this is not a new trend. In all three instances, we have ruled out speeding by the trains.

We respond as fast as possible to remove the carcass to ensure there are no secondary kills of predators which are attracted to the carcass. It is not an easy task to remove elephant carcasses from this location and many thanks must go to the ORGR team members who selflessly respond in the middle of the night to assist in clearing the site.

## ELEPHANT INCIDENT

Another very unfortunate elephant incident occurred with an unprovoked attack by a female on two members of our APU. This elephant cow charged the field rangers from a distance of some 80 metres and when she was within 20 metres, they shouted and fired a warning shot without any effect. At five metres, shots were fired directly at the animal who then veered off. She was seriously wounded and had to be euthanised shortly thereafter. An autopsy revealed a festering wound on her back which may have accounted for her abnormal behaviour.

The matter was reported to the relevant authorities and investigated and it was confirmed that our rangers had acted according to the protocols for such incidents.

We are extremely thankful that no-one was injured – but this is a reminder of just how dangerous it is out there..

## CREATURE FEATURE:

### TURNING THE TIDE FOR PEL'S FISHING OWLS

With the recent sightings of Pels Fishing Owls on Olifants River Game Reserve, I thought it appropriate to share an interesting article by John Davies, Project Co-ordinator: Raptor Conservation and Research, EWT Birds of Prey Programme

Endangered, mythical to many, threatened by deterioration in water quality, and rapidly being pushed aside as a result of riparian forest loss, to some the Pel's Fishing Owl would seem to be on a road to localized extinction in South Africa. Yet despite the many threats this species has to constantly face, these incredible birds still manage to survive on well-vegetated stretches of sub-tropical river systems in eastern South Africa, where hidden under the cloak of darkness and only given away by their occasional loud hooting calls, they spend their nights along moonlit pools, waiting for fish to rise to the surface which they duly grab before disappearing once more.

For such an unobtrusive and shy species, it faces a multitude of threats and being particularly sensitive to changes in both the aquatic and terrestrial components of riparian systems, means that a single large infrequent disturbance (LID) such as a severe flood can result in a large part of the population in South Africa being affected in a very short period.

Besides this, river systems in this part of the country such as the Olifants and Levuvhu rivers, as is the case with so many across the continent, are affected by significant declines in water quality raising serious concerns over the viability of healthy fish stocks. The effects of this on so many species that depend on these rivers is poorly documented. Another threat which is seldom talked about but is as relevant now as ever before, is the continued increase in the human population, leading to a strangling of water resources, and each year leaving less and less for nature to survive on.



*Photo by Monique Tenderini*

Also, one of the historical strongholds for this species in eastern South Africa, the Olifants River, has shown drastic declines in recent years. While surveys in the Kruger National Park in the early 1990s found a minimum of 19 individuals, these days only five seem to consistently still occur here, a worrying decline and one without any obvious solution to turning things around.

However, despite all of these challenges the species has to face, they manage to cling on in some pockets of suitable habitat, with the most significant populations being found along the Limpopo and Levuvhu rivers, whilst the Olifants River further west from the Kruger still holds viable numbers of these birds.

One particularly refreshing aspect is that, since the EWT expanded its Pel's Fishing Owl research to include a more comprehensive area within the Lowveld, previously unknown pairs have been found with the most surprising being a relatively healthy population along the Blyde River. The remarkable thing is that in an area that is almost completely surrounded by people, commercial agriculture, and low-density housing, and which is virtually completely unprotected and right under the noses of many nature enthusiasts and bird watchers, these birds seem to thrive. This remarkable river holds some of the most significant tracts of Lowveld Riverine Forest in the country, which in some areas reaches nearly 280m from bank to bank, with multiple channels flowing through it all.

Although the work we are doing represents the tip of the iceberg, the EWT's Birds of Prey Programme is working hard to bring landowners together, monitor populations, and protect the integrity of this habitat, so that we can be confident of knowing that this population will not only be stable but will expand and be viable for many years to come.



## THE SECURITY REPORT

We are happy to report a quiet month from a security front on ORGR and Balule as a whole. Sadly our colleagues and neighbours in Klaserie and Timbavati have both experienced losses of rhino, which indicates that syndicates are becoming active again and we cannot afford to let our guard down. We are more prepared than ever to combat the scourge of Rhino poaching on our landscape.

The ORGR Anti-Poaching Unit and management team joined another collaborated snare sweep between Balule, Klaserie and PMC mine on the SANDF owned Savong area on the unfenced boundary of Balule.

This operation was a follow-up to the original snare sweep we did in this area in June, during which a total of 95 snares were removed. It was originally agreed between the parties to do these sweeps every four to six weeks to monitor if the improved security features such as access control are making a difference.



A total of 57 snares were removed from the operational area. The majority of these were operational cable snares. These are identical to the ones removed from several elephants, lions, hyena and buffalo in the last three months by Balule, Klaserie and the PNHF.

This month we welcome two new members to our APU unit. Firstly Vusi Sibuyi joins us a Junior Field Ranger. He was previously based at the Railway gate entrance with Protrack. Vusi is a passionate young man and will be mentored into a future wildlife warrior by some of our more experienced rangers.

The gentleman pictured to the right is our new Corporal, Collet Maswanganye. We have been looking for an experienced and mature individual to fulfill this leadership role amongst the Field Rangers for a while now. Collet "ticks all the boxes" with a lengthy career in Anti-Poaching, spanning 18 years in the field with his most recent post being seven years with Klaserie Nature Reserve as one of their top Field Rangers. We are very lucky to have a man of Collet's caliber on our team, Welcome Brother!



***Corporal Collet Maswanganye***

## REACHING OUT

Since our last visit to Maseke and Sigagule in early August, we have received a lot of “nice-to-have” donations from various sources in Johannesburg, which will be distributed to both centres at the beginning of November. These include large numbers of beanies, scarves and jersies, water bottles, coffee mugs, utility bags, brand new wool, knitting needles & crochet hooks, as well as sewing kits & fabric to get the ladies in both communities busy making their own masks, blankets, and clothing!



Great interest has been shown by heads of each community for initiating these projects.

We have also received a nebulizer with a stock of nebules, a stethoscope & blood pressure monitor, a child's leg brace, a stock of ballpoint pens and masks (all brand new) for Sigagule Childcare Centre.

By uplifting surrounding communities, whether it be for crisis relief or sustainable initiatives, we not only alleviate poverty (which directly affects crime levels) but is also an important humanitarian responsibility that ultimately creates more goodwill and harmony throughout the area.

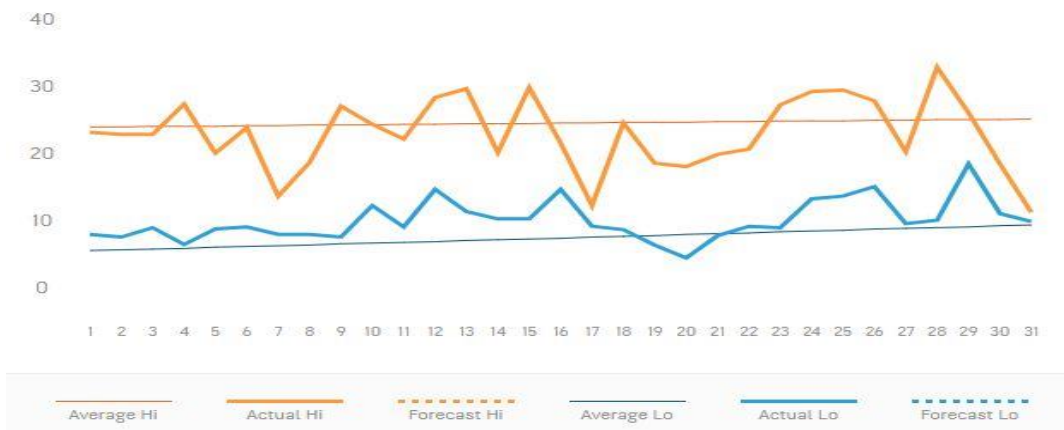
**If you would like to join the ORGR Outreach Group on WhatsApp, please contact Susan Harwood on [0832282546](tel:0832282546) and join the like-minded individuals who wish to be informed about - and contribute where possible to - the needs of our neighbouring communities.**

# MEMBERS UPDATE

## THE WEATHER REPORT

August temperatures have been quite varied with a few days breaking the mercury just above 30 degrees, interspersed by a couple of cold, wet, and windy days. We received a total of 7.5mm of light rain so far - just enough to kickstart some springtime regrowth in some plant species.. The winter of 2020 brought one of the most intense spells of low temperatures in at least the past two decades.

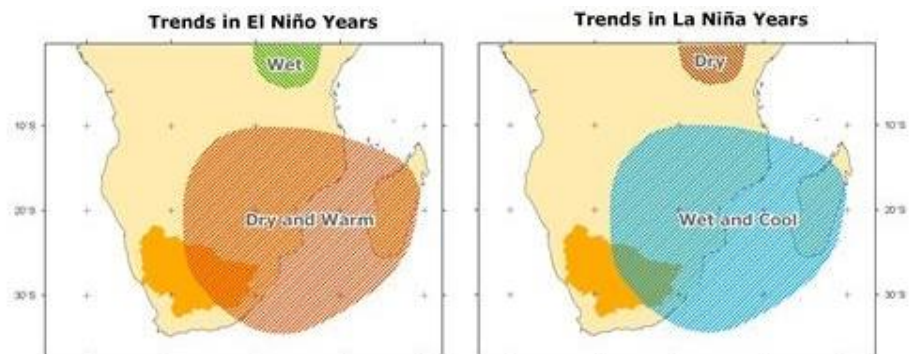
August Temperatures



## LONG TERM FORECAST

The presence of a La Nina phenomenon at the end of winter is a positive indication of favourable summer rainfall conditions for the summer to follow. La Nina usually indicates a normal to somewhat later than normal start of the rainy season. The current scenario is that rainfall conditions will start to improve over the eastern parts of the country from about the end of September, to reach a peak in November and December over these parts. There is a more than average risk of flooding of the Summer Rainfall Area, especially for the central to western parts in the second part of the season.

What is La Nina? It is the name given to a natural event characterized by abnormally cold ocean temperatures in the Equatorial Pacific. It is actually the opposite of El Niño which occurs when the Equatorial Pacific



experiences unusually warm ocean temperatures. La Niña is thus defined as the intense cooling of the eastern and central tropical Pacific Ocean, frequently experienced together with warmer than normal sea surface temperatures in the west side of the Pacific.

Just like an El Niño event, La Niña is tied to increased chances of extensive changes in global weather.

## OUR NIGHT SKIES FORECAST

### September In a nutshell...

#### Moon

Date	Time	Phase
02/09	07h22	Full Moon
10/09	11h26	Last Quarter
17/09	13h00	New Moon
24/09	03h35	First Quarter

#### Moon – Earth Relations

Perigee: 359 100 km on the 18/09 at 15h44  
Apogee: 405 600 km on the 06/09 at 08h31



#### Sun – Earth Relations

The equinox occurs on the 22nd of September at 15h31.

#### Planet Visibility

Jupiter and Saturn in Sagittarius visible in the evening sky and at dawn

Mars near Pisces visible at dawn

Venus near Gemini, Cancer and later near Leo at dawn

Mercury near Virgo visible in the evening in the west

#### Some easy to identify bright stars

Antares: red supergiant in Scorpius

Arcturus: red giant in Boötes

Spica: brightest bluish-white star in Virgo

Canopus: yellowish-white star in Carina

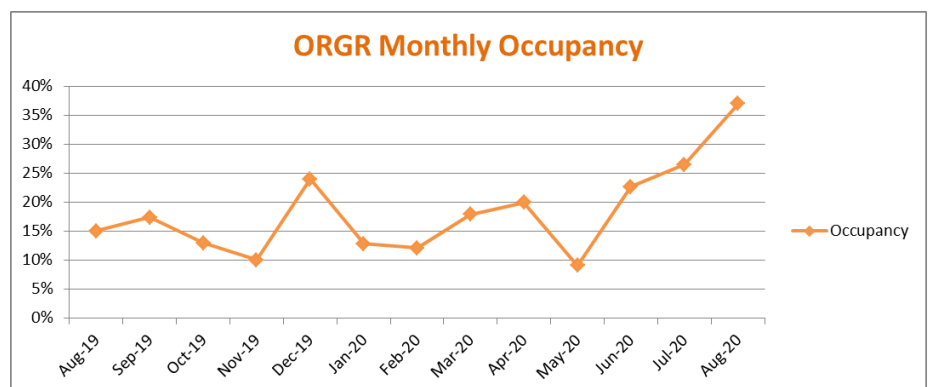
Altair: a white star, brightest in Aquila

Regulus: blue-white star and the brightest star in Leo

The Pointers: Alpha and Beta Centauri

## OCCUPANCY

August has gone down in the history books as the busiest month we have on record for Olifants River Game Reserve! We clocked a 37% Occupancy rate for the month, compared to a 15% occupancy for the same time last year. We peaked at 52% of units occupied with lowest point being 25%.



Previously we have had high occupancy peaks over shorter periods, but the COVID-19 effect is seeing dramatically greater occupancies for much longer periods.

## TRAVERSING STUDY

We have compiled the data collected from the camera trap at the causeway for August. These numbers exclude the visits to the causeway where vehicles popped onto the bridge for a look and turned around again. It only reflects the number of vehicles that traversed for a longer period. The figures are very interesting as they demonstrate an average of less than one vehicle net per day difference crossing between the two reserves during the month. This is very reassuring as it confirms our on going assumption that there is no undue pressure on densities from North to South and vice versa. Special sightings will always cause an influx of vehicles but this is not the norm – and special sightings deserve to be shared as widely as possible in any event on both sides.

## DRONE POLICY

We have had a few queries about the usage of drones on the reserve recently. Any form of remotely operated aircraft is strictly prohibited on the reserve and on Balule. Special permission will only be granted for research and conservation use and will be closely monitored. Recreational flying of drones and photographic flying equipment is strictly prohibited and not allowed UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES..



The rationale behind Drone Policies in our (and other protected areas) follows:

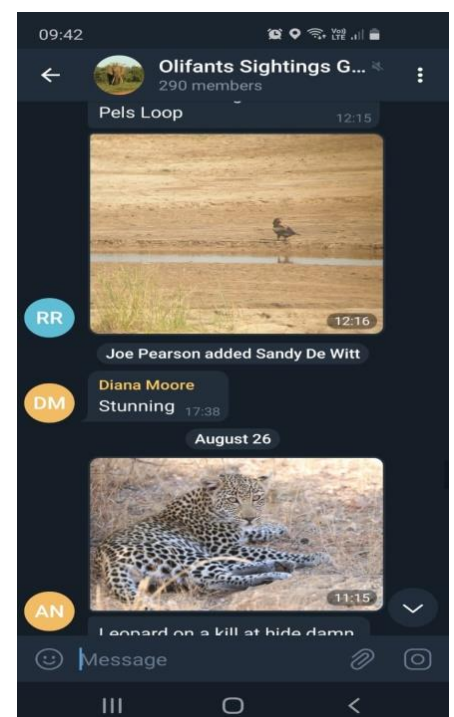
- We fall under Military and GKEPF controlled airspace
- We have a high volume of light aircraft and helicopter traffic in the area, and drones can easily bring an aircraft down
- Wildlife is significantly disturbed by drones.
- The privacy of members can be infringed upon by such a device flying over or in front of residential units

## NEW TELEGRAM SIGHTINGS GROUP

We have now officially migrated to the Telegram App to host our sightings group as there are fewer restrictions on group numbers. Our group participant numbers on the Whats App channel were at capacity with no more additional users allowed.

If you are not on Telegram yet, please download the App and get hold of the office to add you to the Group.

Keep those pictures and sightings coming in on the group. They are fantastic!



## ROAD CLOSURES

We would like to ask all members and users to please respect road closures on the reserve. We close a road for various reasons including security, conservation and maintenance work. If there is danger tape, a chain, or a large log across the road, please do not use that particular road. We will do our best to communicate road closures in advance..

## LEOPARDS AROUND UNITS

Another reminder to be cognisant of the leopards that are being seen on unit decks and around the units. These animals are habituated and very relaxed around the houses, so we need to exercise great caution, particularly when there are children in residence. As chilled as they appear, leopards are extremely quick, dangerous and opportunistic.



*Photo by Maurice Egan*

## RAILWAY LINE ROAD SLIDING GATE

The sliding gate along the railway line was severely damaged by a vehicle driving into the gate itself.

We took the opportunity to make some changes and removed the sliding gate and installed a new electrified cattle grid instead. It's a simpler, safer, and cleaner set up. No more getting out to open the gate on your way in and out of the reserve. Happy Days!



## NAMBU VONA

A beautiful new picnic and viewing sight has been developed at the Nambu Vona lookout site. It is a spectacular space and I am sure will be one of the most popular spots on the reserve. There is a path that leads to a covered structure nestled amongst the rocks with unrivaled views of the river. An eight-seater table and bench will complete the setup this coming week.

Enjoy - it's magical!



## NOISE LEVELS AT SIGHTINGS

With such high occupancies there is increased pressure on sightings and there have been reports of accompanying increased sound levels. Please remember to be sensitive to both the animals as well as fellow members at game sightings, and keep noise levels to a minimum..

## WALKS ON THE WILD SIDE

We have launched our Wildwalks on Olifants this month with our inaugural walk having taken place on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September.

Members from Unit 10 and 28 joined the first adventure with some incredible big game encounters, including lion and buffalo (see pic below)!. Subject to demand, we aim to offer three walks a week, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings.

We have had an incredible response from members and will be releasing our October walking dates very soon. In terms of a "walking season", we will continue until we deem it unsafe to walk due to the thickness of vegetation and heat.

Until such time, strap on your boots and book your amazing adventure with us.



**SPOT THE  
BUFFALO!**

**YOU SEE THE AFRICAN BUSH FROM A VEHICLE ...**

**BUT YOU FEEL THE AFRICAN BUSH ON FOOT!**

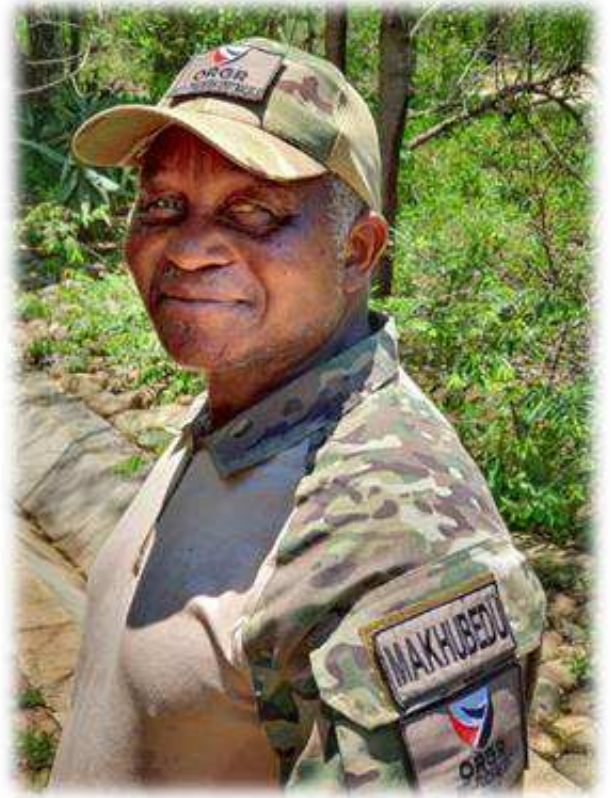
## THE LAST WORD

### STAFF FAREWELL

This month we sadly say goodbye to one of the Olifants Legends, Mr. Jabulani Makhubedu who retired from our APU for the second time at the beginning of September. Despite his years, he has spent every night out on the reserve doing night patrols, keeping a keen eye and ear on the happenings after dark.

Jabulani gave our community 30 years of loyal service with a perfectly clean record and a smile on his face.

He has reached an age where he deserves to put his feet up and enjoy life. Famba Kahle Jabu, we will never forget you!



That's all from us for this month! We hope to see you all on the reserve very soon. Stay safe and all the best. Catch you on Sunset Plains for a sundowner...

Best Regards

**Nick and the management team and staff.**

