



ORGR BUSH TELEGRAPH

THE MARCH 2021 EDITION

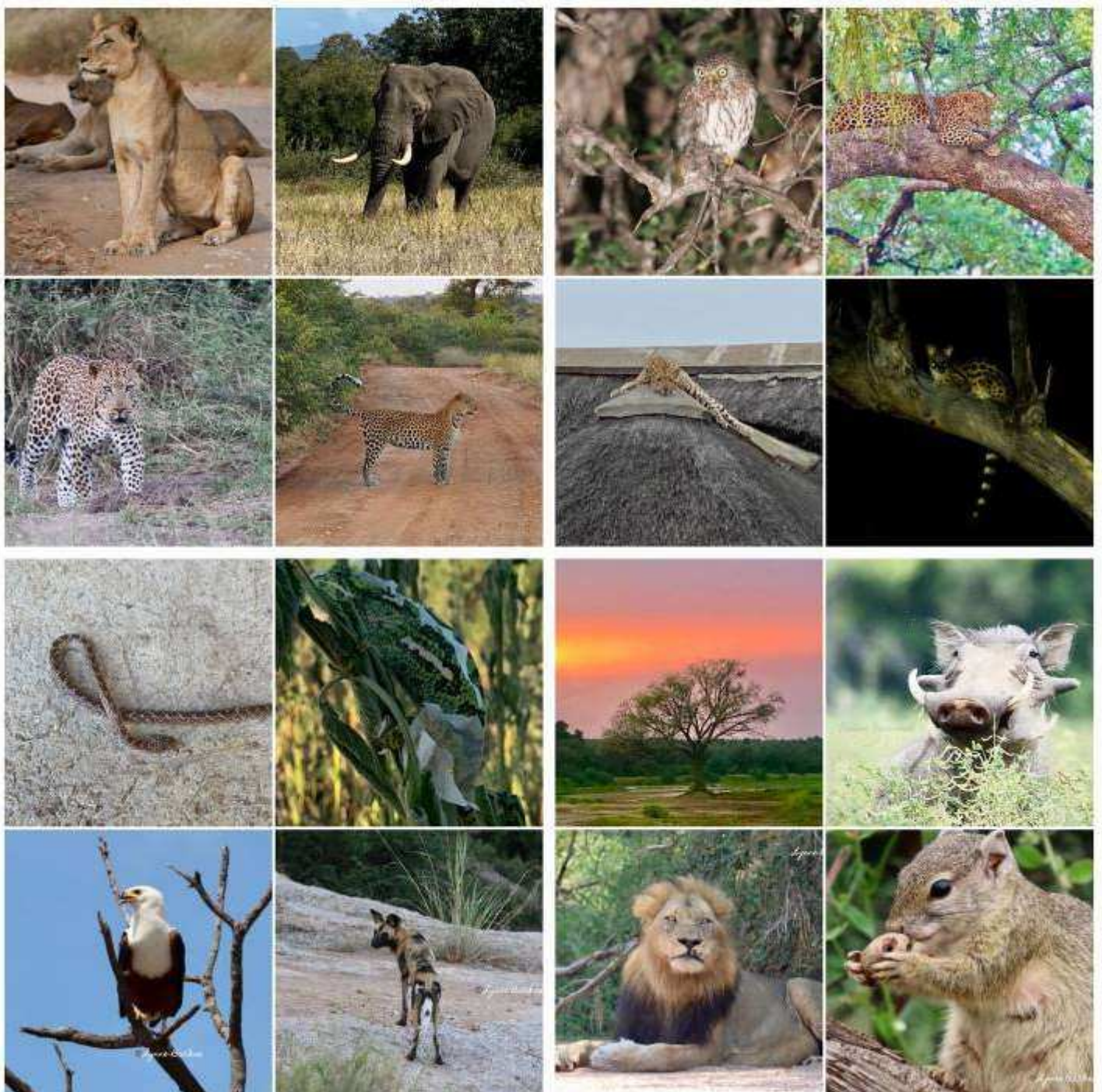


Hello Olifants Community!

We hope you all had a peaceful Easter with family and friends. A quarter of the year has already passed by at a rate of knots! The reserve has had very little rain in March after a bumper wet season and the transformation into a pre-dry season landscape is taking place rapidly. The hot, sweltering days are being replaced with warm temperate conditions and cool nights. The vegetation is slowly drying out, creating an appealing backdrop of Autumnal hues.

THE GAME DRIVE *"There is something about safari life that makes you forget all your sorrows and feel as if you had drunk half a bottle of champagne — bubbling over with heartfelt gratitude for being alive." - Karen Blixen (Danish author best known for "Out of Africa")*

Game viewing conditions in March were challenging due to the sheer density of the vegetation this year. Our ecologists have indicated the Balule Nature Reserve has not been this lush for at least 21 years! This is due to the early and consistent rain we have received this season. That being said, there have been some excellent sightings on the reserve, particularly in terms of leopards. Multiple individuals have been spotted this month including another one perched on Unit 35's roof. Elephant, buffalo, and rhino have been few in numbers due to the abundance of available water but this is changing quickly as watering points become more concentrated. Lion sightings have been good with both resident prides seen regularly and the small pack of wild dogs has been on the reserve on a few occasions. Migratory birds have started leaving the reserve and a large congregation of swallows was seen gathering along the powerlines for their en masse exodus to Europe.



Creature Feature: African Wild Cat (*Felis libyca*)

Africa Geographic

In ancient times, cats were worshipped as gods. They have not forgotten this..." - Terry Pratchett

A cat stretched out on the best seat in the house, lazing in the sun, is the very picture of domestication. They purr contentedly and rub up against their human servants' ankles, demanding to be timeously fed, or regard the excitable family dogs with a kind of contemptuous smugness from a place of safety. Yet as every cat owner knows, there are times when these cats stalk their surrounds, pupils wide and teeth and claws at the ready, embroiled in their own hunts, scuffles, and romances. In these moments, domestic cats don't appear particularly domestic.



Their instincts are a throwback to a time when their ancestors stalked Africa and Asia, surviving by their wits and reflexes, and preying on any number of small mammals, birds, amphibians, and arthropods. Some of these cat ancestors were drawn to human settlements and abandoned their wild existence to enslave their human owners. Yet others remained wild and, to this day, African wildcats continue to live as they have for thousands of years. Rangy and hard-bitten, they slink through the continent's savannas, forests, and wetlands – seldom seen and often overlooked but every bit as wild as the other members of the feline family.

THE TRUE ANCESTORS OF DOMESTIC CATS

In many ways, African wildcats are to cats what wolves are to dogs, with some important differences. While a history of domestic cats may seem out of place in an article on a wild creature, it goes to the heart of understanding the challenges faced by conservationists in classifying and protecting African wildcats.

The process of cat domestication was a complex one, and fossil evidence is in short supply, making piecing the events together somewhat tricky. Historians and scientists now believe that domestic cats went through two different periods of domestication – first in south-west Asia around 10,000 years ago and then, once again, in Egypt about 3500 years ago. Genetic analysis indicates that domestic cats may have two different source populations that can be traced to different periods but confirms African wildcats are the true ancestors of domestic cats.

As with dogs, scientists believe that cats were domesticated along a commensal pathway. Essentially, the wildcats (initially in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East) would have been attracted to human settlements for a variety of reasons, including warmth and increased food availability. Over time, people realized the benefits of keeping cats for pest control and gradually a shift took place from a purely pragmatic mutualistic relationship to one that extended to companionship (and selective breeding). A skeleton of one wildcat uncovered in Egypt and dated to somewhere between 3,600 and 3,800 years ago shows evidence of healed fractures that suggest the injured cat was cared for by a human.

Unlike dogs, modern cats have retained more genetic and behavioural similarities with their wild relatives, most likely because, while domestic dogs have been largely isolated from their ancestral wolf populations for thousands of years, domestic cats have continued to breed with their wild cousins. This, in turn, has ultimately led to one of the greatest threats facing wildcat populations not only in Africa but across the globe.

THE CONSERVATION (CAT)ASTROPHE?

In a 2010 study by the Ecology Global Network, scientists estimated that there were some 600 million domestic cats in the world. By contrast, while there are no estimates of African wildcat populations (the logistics and their widespread distribution make counting them an almost impossible task), there is no doubt that they are massively outnumbered.

As available wild spaces have vanished one by one, human populations have expanded, bringing domestic and feral cats with them. Given their genetic similarities, sexual encounters between domestic cats and wildcats are inevitable, and hybridization is common on the fringes of wildcat distribution ranges.

In a 2014 study, researchers concluded that in South Africa at least, levels of hybridization are still relatively low, especially in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier National Park which is a population stronghold for the African wildcat. The DNA samples collected from wildcats that indicated the highest levels of interbreeding came from individuals in the Kruger National Park. Given the high human population density on the Park's border, this is hardly surprising.

A project such as Alley Cat Rescue aims to mitigate this impact through domestic and feral cat sterilization programmes, focussing their attentions on specific border areas. These programmes also implement vaccination schemes to reduce the risk of disease transmission between domestic and wildcats.

IS IT A WILDCAT OR AN ESCAPED MOGGIE?

To the uninitiated, an African wildcat could look for all the world like a slim domestic cat. There are, however, subtle differences between the two. African wildcats are slightly taller than the average domestic cat, and their legs are proportionately longer, which gives them a more upright posture, particularly when sitting. Their walking gait is more like that of a serval or cheetah than the average domestic cat.

The variety seen in domestic cat coat colours is a product of selective breeding, and this variety is not reflected in the coat colours of the African wildcat. Instead, their almost uniform colour ranges from red to sandy and brown to grey, with very faint stripes known as the mackerel-tabby pattern. The end of their tails is ringed with black, the backs of their ears are characteristically russet, and the underside of their paws are pitch-black.

BEHAVIOUR

Like their domestic congeners, African wildcats have proved to be extremely adaptable and, as a result, occupy a wide number of different habitats from deserts and grasslands to savannas (though their range does not extend to rainforests). Their diets are varied and unselective – anything, including small mammals, birds, reptiles, and arthropods are all targeted. Some individuals have even been known to prey on young livestock animals such as lambs or kids, putting them at risk of conflict with farmers. African wildcats are reliant on keen senses, particularly their hearing, to identify prey. Their ambush approach is well-honed, and they demonstrate extraordinary patience in stalking – often biding their time for hours at a time.

One of the common effects of domestication (seen in domestic dogs, cats and other animals) is an increased breeding frequency. Female domestic cats reach sexual maturity as early as four months old and are capable of producing three litters of kittens every year. In contrast, the African wildcat generally only produces one litter during the wet season.

Being one of the smallest members of the cat family, their natural predators are numerous and include the larger cat species and birds of prey.

CONCLUSION

For the most part, African wildcats are somewhat underappreciated – they look so similar to feral cats that they are often dismissed as such, despite their status as one of the "Secret 7" (serval, wildcat, large-spotted genet, civet, porcupine, armadillo and pangolin). Yet these gangly, tough little cats are just as interesting, untamed, and fierce as their iconic big cat cousins.



CONSERVATION

Dehorning Rhino

(Text by Pierre Human, ONGR)

Rhino poaching is arguably one of the most depressing and demanding issues to manage as a conservationist.

Landowners in the Associated Private Nature Reserves (APNR), which form part of the Greater Kruger National Park (GKNP), are faced with astronomical security costs, which are now above and beyond what any of their expectations may have been when many of them embarked on a programme of reintroducing rhino to their protected areas.

After pouring a huge amount of funds and collaborative effort into region-wide anti-poaching methods and operations, there was still an unacceptable loss of rhino from reserves in the GKNP.

An unattractive choice had to be made; either continue to lose more rhino to poachers or alternatively, remove the horns from the rhino themselves by means of rhino dehorning.



It is a sad reality that in order to help save rhino species from the threat of poaching, the pre-emptive removal of their horns in a safe, controlled manner, has become one of the necessary but highly-effective management tools for conservationists to deter poachers.

It is no secret that Balule Nature Reserve regularly dehornes all of their rhino, and has seen a significant decrease in poaching incursions as a result of this ongoing programme.

The rhino dehorning process is carried out by an experienced veterinarian and is a painless experience for the animal under sedation. Every precaution is taken to ensure that rhino dehorning is as stress-free as possible. It all begins with sedation by a dart administered from a helicopter, containing a powerful opioid drug. Once the dart is in the animal, the pilot guides the rhino to an open location, one that is easily accessible to the ground team and as close to a road as possible. Once the animal is under sedation, the sedative is partially reversed. This is so that the animal can continue to breathe unassisted.

As soon as the rhino is immobilised, the helicopter crew notifies the ground team, who move with flair and speed carrying water and all the necessary equipment for a fast and safe dehorning. The immobilisation drugs have no lasting effects on the animal. Its eyes are covered with a large blindfold, its ears are plugged to drown out sound, and if necessary, its body is kept cool by the ground crew continuously spraying water on the animal.

Measurements of the horn are taken and hair, blood and tissue samples are collected. All data is meticulously recorded. The veterinarian then proceeds to remove the horn with a chainsaw and then an angle grinder to ensure a smooth finish. The ground team may need to support the rhino or readjust the rhino's legs during the procedure.



The horn which has been removed is then marked and immediately moved to an undisclosed secure location, usually a bank vault. The site where the horn was removed is sprayed with a blue/purple antiseptic for good measure. Once the operation is completed, the veterinarian administers the reversal antidote to wake the animal, and the ground crew moves off to a safe distance. The veterinarian positions himself strategically to observe the animal coming around and ensures that the individual makes a full recovery before leaving the scene

The whole rhino dehorning procedure, from when the dart is fired from the helicopter to administering the reversal drug, takes about thirty minutes. The dehorning of rhino on Balule Nature Reserve for 2021 has already commenced with the dehorning team headed up by the General Manager and Head Warden of Balule Nature Reserve, Ian Nowak.

The dehorning team recently managed to dehorn seven rhino, including three black rhino, in a single operation whilst running against the clock so as to avoid unnecessary heat stress. This single feat simply bears testimony to the commitment and dedication of each member of the dehorning team on the day in question.

As members and users we can actively participate in this vitally important programme in the coming weeks and months by assisting the dehorning team with intelligence gathering by reporting the date, time, location, species, number of rhino and size of their horn following a sighting on the reserve management.

Rhino Poaching

The Balule Nature Reserve is currently leading the pack in the APNR with the least amount of rhinos recently lost. However, the risk of losing rhino remains very high as neighbouring reserves and KNP continue to face the terrible reality of finding carcasses on their landscape. We cannot become complacent and need to remain at the forefront of technology to develop new, innovative ways to combat this scourge. The sad reality is that this problem is not going away anytime soon. Balule has had a 27% increase in white rhino population and a 17% increase in black rhino in the last year which is encouraging when our neighbourhood is still regrettably reporting losses. As landowners of open system property, we are dutybound to continue investing time, money and substantial effort in protecting these endangered pachyderms and preventing them from becoming a mere memory.

How can you Help on the Reserve?

Members can assist by effectively reporting information to us. Herewith guidelines and report formats to speed up the process. Any gunshots heard, dubious activity observed, suspicious tracks found or rhino carcasses found must be treated as URGENT and reported to management via direct telephone or radio call. Some tips and step to follow:

Shot Report

- Stop Listen
- Mark direction on the ground
- Compass bearing
- Date and Time
- Location (GPS/ Map Grid)
- Estimate distance (Sharp Crack / Loud bang / Dull Thud)
- Number of shots/intervals
- Wind (Direction/Speed)

Spoor Report

- *Date and Time*
- *Location / GPS / Map Grid*
- *Direction of movement (compass bearing)*
- *Spoor description (Photo)*
- *Other info*

Take a Photo

- *Choose clear track*
- *Place measure / scale*
- *Photo directly above track*
- *Whole Track in frame*
- *Uniform Light*



Incident Report (Person seen / carcass / suspicious vehicle)

- *Date and time*
- *Location (GPS/Map Grid)*
- *Photo*
- *Description of incident*
- *Do NOT walk around / disturb area*



To ensure the teams can effectively react to an incident please, note the following:

DON'Ts

- Do not contaminate the area by walking around
- Do not try follow up on an incident
- Do not report to non-relevant persons
- Do not report non-relevant information

DOs

- Do report only on what you have observed
- Do standby at position or clearly mark position of incident
- Do note exact time of the incident



DOs



DON'Ts

Actual Sightings of rhino can be reported via the WhatsApp Hotline. Please use 060 638 5080 to report all your rhino sightings, including location, sex, number, horn status and any identifiable ear notches.

Watering Points at Units

As members of the open system, we need to comply with various minimum standards as set out by NEMPAA (National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act), one of which is the management of artificial watering points for game. With this in mind, we have had to develop a policy to manage the birdbaths that contains available water to wildlife. These watering points cannot be permanent features and need to comply with certain size requirements.

1. They cannot be a permanent or substantial one that attracts significant and frequent quantities of game.
2. They should be limited in size to a maximum width of 1 meter, length of 1,5 meters, and a depth of 150mm.
3. At least one side of the water point should be sloped gently to allow small creatures to escape.
4. They should only contain water when Members are occupying the unit and not be continuously filled by anyone in their absence.

We have conducted a waterpoint audit and will be contacting those members whose units feature a waterpoint that needs to be modified to comply with regulations before the end of 2021.



REACHING OUT

A very big thank you to everyone who contributed to the Easter spirit with edible gifts for our staff. As always, anything that brightens their day or provides an element of surprise is truly appreciated!

The call for library books for the ORGR staff village (for staff and when their children visit) has been very successful with several members donating reading matter for all ages including pre-school literature, colouring books & crayons, puzzles and games. Thank you so much to all those who also donated rainproof clothing for learners and Bata school shoes, some of which went to Sigagule and some will go to Maseke.

We are still collecting winter clothing and blankets and recently received bags upon bags of these items which have been delivered to Sigagule and will also be taken to the Maseke Drop In Centre on Friday 23rd April.

As per a recent mail to all members, wherein John Anderson of the Balule Trust thanked the many generous donors to the Covid-19 Food Relief Fund Raising Campaign in April and May last year, it has been an outstanding success. Through careful selection of the most needy families, on a month by month basis, the Child Care Centre in Sigagule, the Maseke Drop-in-Centre and the Phalaborwa Apostolic Church have between them distributed nutritious basic food (and clothing, blankets and toys) to feed at least 600, and in some months up to 1000, persons daily and which has remarkably continued non-stop for 9 months from April until December. This was all made possible through the R675000.00 raised through our Covid Fund Raising Drive in April and May last year together and with some additional supplementation from the Trust's reserve funds.



Sadly, our Covid-19 funds are now drying up while the pandemic shows no signs of abating in the foreseeable future. The reality is that unemployment continues, particularly amongst those formerly employed in the tourism industry, and hunger continues to be a stark reality for so many in our community at large. The impact that we have made on the wellbeing of these communities is immense and once again we ask you to consider a donation to the Balule Outreach Trust so that we can continue to support, and importantly to be seen to support, this most meaningful and supportive lifesaving rescue operation. All donations are subject to tax relief in terms of SARS Section18A. Please visit baluleoutreach.org for all the information you may require.

Should you have any questions regarding our charity drives or wish to join the ORGR WhatsApp group, please contact Susan Harwood on 0832282546.

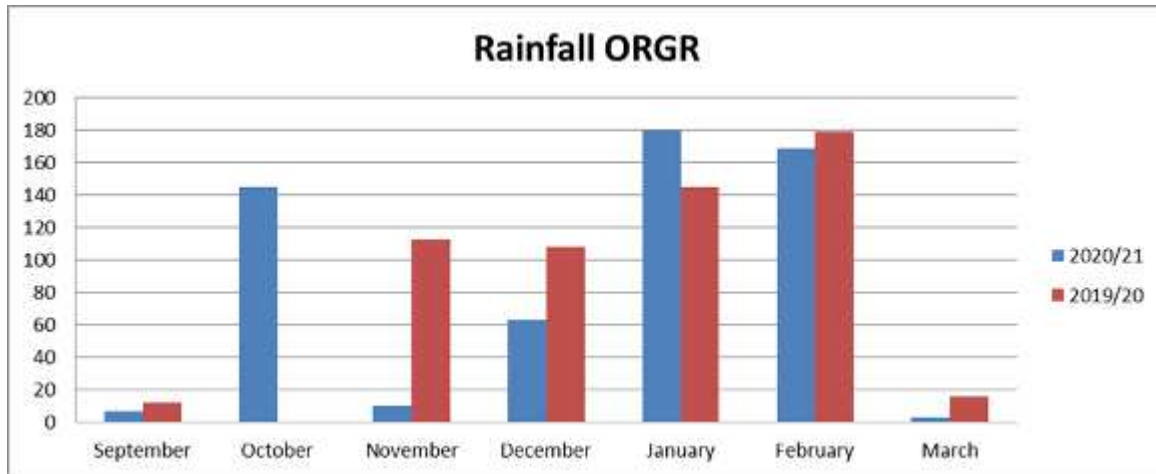


MEMBERS UPDATE

THE WEATHER REPORT

The rains came to a grinding halt in March, with only 3mm recorded on the reserve. Our current season total is at 577.5mm compared to 557.5mm at the same time last year. Temperatures have been quite moderate with highs averaging in the late '20s and the lows hovering around the 17-20 degree mark. The evenings are becoming cooler, which is a clear indication that we are fully entrenched in Autumn.

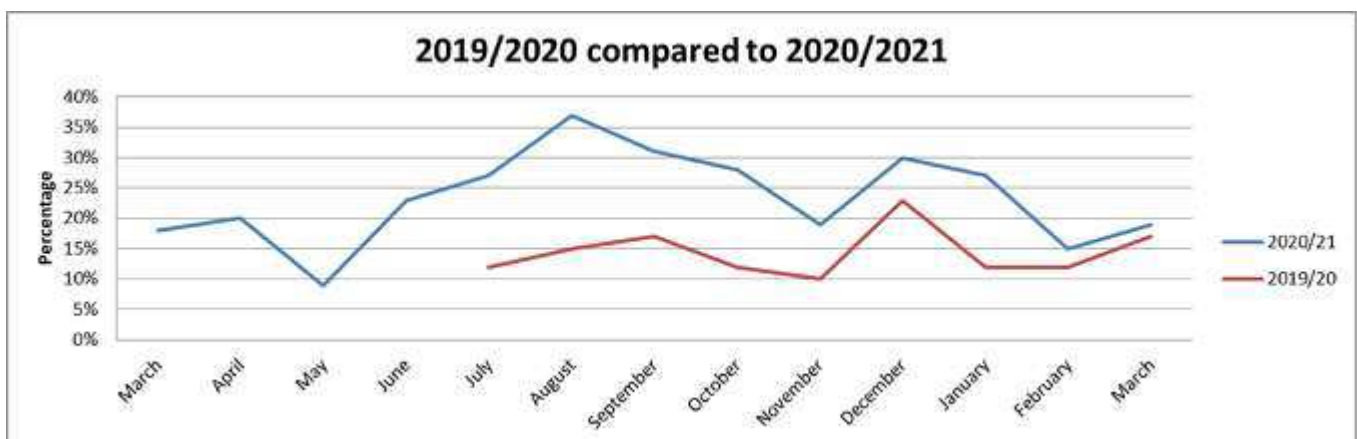
Rainfall 2020/2021 compared to the previous season



The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is currently in a La Niña state and the forecast indicates that it will most likely weaken and possibly return to a neutral state by the winter season. The influence on South Africa from ENSO however is expected to dissipate as we move towards the autumn and winter months. The multi-model rainfall forecast indicates mostly above-normal rainfall with drier than normal patches scattered in parts of the north-east and south-west in late autumn (Apr-May-Jun) and early winter (May-Jun-Jul). Mostly below normal minimum and maximum temperatures are expected over the country with the exception of the interior, especially during the late autumn. By contrast, early winter will see a modest signal for above-normal minimums and maximums over the interior, but cooler than normal elsewhere.

OCCUPANCY

March ended off with an occupancy of 19% compared to 18% the previous year. The reserve hit a peak of 28 units at 33% and our quietest day saw only eight units on the reserve for a day. The annual average occupancy remains at 23% for the past year. The Easter weekend brought 46 units in residence and these numbers will reflect in next month's newsletter.



OUR APRIL NIGHT SKY

In a nutshell...

Moon

Date	Time	Phase
04/04	12h02	Last Quarter
12/04	04h30	New Moon
20/04	08h58	First Quarter
27/04	05h31	Full Moon

Moon – Earth Relations

Perigee: 357 378 km on the 27/04 at 17h22
Apogee: 406 119 km on the 14/04 at 19h45

Planet Visibility

Mars is visible in the evening sky, near Taurus
Jupiter and Saturn are visible in the morning sky, near Capricornus

Meteor Showers

delta Pavonids: active from the 11th of March to the 16th of April (peaking on the 6th of April)
April Lyrids: active from the 16th of April to the 25th of April (peaking on the 23rd of April)
pi Puppids: active from the 15th of April to the 28th of April (peaking on the 23rd of April)
eta Aquarids: active from the 24th of April to the 12th of May (peaking on the 5th of May)

Some easy to identify bright stars

Rigel: blue supergiant in Orion

Betelgeuse: red supergiant in Orion

Procyon: yellowish white star in Canis Minor

Sirius: brightest star in the night sky, located in Canis Major

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

Olifants Campfire Stories

As yet, we haven't received any submissions for the Olifants Campfire Stories project. We encourage members to share any exciting moments with us so we can slowly build a Diary of Memories about our incredible reserve. The aim is to share uplifting/exciting/fun/educational/ interesting experiences here which you feel will entertain or inspire others in the ORGR family and others – and over time, we may select some of these to be featured on our website to highlight and showcase how privileged we are to be custodians of this incredibly special place. Positivity is the key here! Pictures which may



enhance the story are welcome too. Please note that all submissions will be subject to editing. Send your entries via email to Susan Harwood (<mailto:harwoods@netactive.co.za>). We look forward to hearing from you and to building a memorable collection of accounts about this unique part of wild Africa.

Unit Guards

We would like to encourage members not to use the unit guards for lengthy projects at the units during their daily checks. There are a few instances where they have been kept busy for hours at one unit which in turn makes it difficult for the guards to complete their intended rounds. They play an important role in checking all dwellings on a daily basis to ensure there are no issues. Should Members require assistance with labour, this can be booked via the Office.

Tree ID Course

Olifants North Game Reserve is hosting a Tree Identification course. ORGR Members are welcome to sign up for this activity between the 07 and 09 of May 2021. Space is limited to 24 people and costs R1 350 which includes course material, tea / coffee / water and Saturday evening braai.

A fascinating two-day workshop presented by ecologist Joe Grosel of Tembele Ecological Services. Trees dominate the bushveld, forming an integral part of the landscape. Some are huge and stately while others are small and straggly. Remarkably, more than 500 bushveld species provide a unique and vital service to countless other life forms and each species has a very interesting story to tell. This course is not just about learning to identify trees, but aims to evoke a deep sense of appreciation for these marvels of nature. The fine range of habitats and interesting diversity of Lowveld trees and shrubs make the Olifants North Game Reserve the ideal location for such a course. Attractive presentations including "The importance of Trees", "Remarkable Trees of the Word" and "A Practical Tree Identifying System" will complement the very informative practical excursions on the reserve.

You can contact Dalene: reservations@ongr.co.za or Reinette – finance@ongr.co.za to book your spot.



Staff Member of the Month

This month we would like to feature Errol Parkin, an integral part of our management team.

Errol was born in Port Elizabeth as third in line to the Parkin throne amongst four brothers. Shortly after his birth, the Parkin family moved to Johannesburg where Errol spend his childhood. He attended Northcliff High school, and after matriculating he studied Airconditioning and Refrigeration. He decided to pursue his passion for Wildlife and enrolled in a Field Guide and Lodge Management course at the Southern African Wildlife College.

Errol joined Gomo Gomo in the Timbavati as a Field Guide conducting game drives and walks for lodge guests – and it is here that he met Lourenza. He later became a national tour guide, taking groups of guests throughout southern Africa. He won 'Tour Guide of the Year' twice in a row during this time.

He then moved back to Gomo Gomo to assist the owners with moving the lodge to Klaserie and to be with Lourenza. Georgia, their firstborn arrived at this point. The Parkins later moved back to Johannesburg for four years where Errol worked as an Airconditioning contractor. Once their son Dylan was born, the bushveld was calling so the family returned to the Lowveld where Errol spent some time as a Gas technician in Hoedspruit. In 2016, he



joined ORGR with his family, where he is combining his passion for the bush and maintenance in the role of Technical Services Manager.

FINAL WORD

Well, that's all for this month, we hope to see you all on the reserve soon and in the meantime, stay safe and healthy! Catch you on Sunset Plains for a sundowner...

Best Regards

Nick, the management team & staff

