



NEWSLETTER

February 2023 Issue

Quick Honey Badger Facts

Honey badgers, also known as ratels, are found throughout sub-Saharan Africa, as well as in parts of Southwest Asia and India.

They are known for their fierce and aggressive nature, and are considered one of the most fearless animals in the world.

They are primarily carnivorous, and will eat anything from insects and small mammals to snakes and even crocodiles.

Honey badgers have a thick, loose skin that makes them difficult to bite or grasp, and they are also able to turn their skin inside out to further protect themselves.

They are known to be able to withstand bee stings, snake venom, and even rifle bullets, giving them the reputation of being virtually invincible.

They are also able to climb trees and swim well, making them difficult to escape from.

Honey badgers have a symbiotic relationship with honeyguides, birds that lead them to bees' nests, and the badger will break open the nest for the birds to eat the wax and grubs.

DEAR OLIFANTS FAMILY

As we welcome in the new year, we at Olifants River Game Reserve would like to extend our warmest wishes to all our members. We are grateful for your continued support and are excited to share with you the latest news and updates from the reserve.

The past year has been challenging for many, but we are proud to have been able to provide a safe and enjoyable experience for our members and their visitors. We are looking forward to another year of conservation efforts, wildlife sightings and creating memories that will last a lifetime.

Thank you for your unwavering support throughout the years!

“Africa is the birthplace of humanity and the cradle of civilization.” - Barack Obama



ORGR GAME DRIVE

We have had an excellent two months of game viewing, with the highlight being the wild dogs. Our high impala population is keeping these active predators on the reserve for longer periods and we witnessed three separate packs on ORGR in a single day in December. Lion and leopard sightings have also been good and hyena have been ubiquitous! Buffalo have been using the reserve more frequently with a couple of decent-sized herds pulling into Olifants and the resident dagga boys are often found cooling off in our waterholes. Elephant numbers have subsided slightly but there are still good numbers present on the reserve. A wide variety of game have been spotted, with high numbers of giraffe and kudu being sighted. The Wildebeest herd has also produced five calves this season, which is exciting!

Thank you to those who submitted photos...please keep posting those sightings on the Telegram group!



CREATURE FEATURE: AARDVARK

There are signs if you know what to look for. Some are obvious, like a pile of dark, freshly excavated soil or a massive entrance hole. Others are more subtle: adjacent patches of bare ground or a place where a shadow doesn't fall quite right. These signs hint at the existence of a network of secret tunnels, a daytime lair where one of Africa's most fantastical animals slumber beneath the ground: the aardvark.



THE "EARTH PIG"

The aardvark (*Orycteropus afer*) is one of a kind, devoid of close living relatives and the only surviving member of an entire order of animals, the Tubulidentata. Their otherworldly forms look as though they sprang straight out of the crazed imagination of an overly caffeinated fantasy writer. Giant, rabbit-like ears perch atop a bizarrely elongated head ending in a pig snout and massive talons extend from each foot. Their stout, hunched bodies range from a dirty grey-pink to brown and thick skin is covered in a light smattering of hair. Finally, the "aardvark look" is completed by what could only be described as a giant, stumpy rat's tail. Such an eclectic collection of features might, on paper at least, sound positively monstrous, but on the aardvark, the overall effect is somehow oddly winsome.

Of course, as is usually the case in nature, form follows function and the aardvark's unusual attributes are all perfectly suited to nights spent terrorising ants and termites before sleeping off a full belly in the safety of a comfortable underground den. Even the name "aardvark" is inspired by their excavation skills and subterranean habits, coming from an old Afrikaans word meaning "earth/ground pig". The genus name "Orycteropus" translates as the "burrowing foot".

THE NOSEY ONES

Aardvarks subsist almost entirely on a diet of termites and ants (they are myrmecophagous), occasionally supplementing their water intake by snacking on the fruit of an aardvark cucumber. They emerge from their burrows as darkness descends (or slightly earlier during the colder, drier months) and set off searching for a meal, covering an average of around 2–5km every night. They move slowly, using their large ears and prodigious sense of smell to seek out termite and ant nests. Once located, aardvarks use their powerful claws to crack open termite mounds or dig beneath the soil, using a 30cm long tongue coated in sticky saliva to lap up the swarming insects. They will also make short work of a line of termites on the move.

Their characteristic noses are well suited to their gastronomic preferences. The tip of the snout is extremely sensitive and controlled by specialised muscles that allow it a high degree of mobility. Aardvarks, with their humongous ears and piggy snouts, also have more turbinate bones inside the nasal cavity than any other mammal, which is thought to increase the surface area for olfactory epithelium and improve their capacity to analyse scent molecules. When digging and feeding, these vulnerable nasal structures must be protected from both dirt and biting insects, and this is accomplished by a dense filter of thick nose hair and the ability to seal both nostrils tightly.

Despite some morphological and dietary similarities with New World anteaters, aardvarks and anteaters are not related, and any superficial resemblance can be attributed to convergent evolution. What sets aardvarks truly apart from any other mammal is their dental structure. The molar teeth do not have a pulp cavity or any enamel coating and instead consist of parallel tubes (hence Tubulidentata) of modified dentine held together by cementum. The sticky tongue approach to feeding means that copious amounts of sand accompany an aardvark's meals, so the teeth wear down and are replaced continuously. However, the aardvark chews little while scoffing down tens of thousands of ants, so the muscular stomach takes over as a gizzard to further grind their food.

DIG IT

Though aardvarks may have some of the keenest senses of hearing and smell on the continent, their eyesight is particularly poor. While foraging, they keep their ears pricked for approaching predators. Still, they become highly focussed when feeding, and it is surprisingly easy to creep close to a hunting aardvark unnoticed, provided one stays silent. As a result (and perhaps somewhat sensibly), they seldom stray far from a known bolt hole while feeding. When faced with a predator, their first defence is always to flee below ground. If necessary, they can dig out a tunnel up to a metre in length in less than five minutes.

However, this is not always possible, and, despite its rather bulky and cumbersome appearance, an armadillo is astonishingly fleet of foot and agile. Their long claws on shovel-like feet are formidable weapons if all else fails, and they will roll onto their backs to face a would-be attacker pointy side up.

Armadillos dig different types of burrows: short tunnels for brief, overnight stays (“camping holes”), and dens with a straight tunnel ending in a round room and an extensive branching network with multiple entrances. Research shows that the temperatures in these tunnels fluctuate very little, acting as a warm refuge on cold days and sheltering their residents from the worst of the midsummer heat. Armadillos move frequently, digging new dens every few days or weeks, and abandoned networks are often commandeered by warthogs, porcupines, hyenas, bats, mongooses, and even denning wild dogs (painted wolves).

THE SECRET LIVES OF ARMADILLOS

The nocturnal activities of armadillos leave behind very distinctive tracks to be discovered the following morning. Many a guide on a quiet drive or walk has pointed out a spot where an armadillo has stopped to feed, complete with claw marks and an indentation left by the tail. The guide will then invariably describe how one can tell it was a male armadillo due to two round indentations made by the scrotum. But alas! Contrary to prevalent belief, armadillos have internal testes, and those impressions were likely left by the sizable scent glands found on both males and females.

The secretions produced by these scent glands have a profoundly pungent odour and are deliberately deposited when defecating and feeding. However, their exact function is still not fully understood. Given armadillos’ low densities and extraordinary sense of smell, it is highly likely that these deposits offer a suitable means of indirect and long-lasting communication. Armadillos are almost entirely solitary, but their territorial habits remain unclear. Home ranges often overlap, especially when food is plentiful, but whether or not they mark or defend territorial boundaries is unknown.

Armadillos also likely use these scent marks as a coquettish communiqué between the sexes. Little is known about romances of armadillos, though the male generally stays with his companion for the duration of her oestrus. Seven months later, the female gives birth to one baby belowground. Adult armadillos may be fantastical and appealing, but it is somewhat challenging to extend such a description to their newborns. Without mincing words, newborn armadillos are adorably ugly – pink, bald and wrinkly, with absurdly oversized feet. They are (unimaginatively) called cubs or calves. (If you have a better suggestion, they are all ears.)

EARTH SHAPERS

As far as we know, armadillo populations are still considered stable across much of the continent, and the IUCN currently classifies them as “Least Concern”. However, there are no definitive population estimates as armadillos are somewhat challenging to count. Due to their low densities and cryptic natures, they may be declining in some areas due to habitat loss. Like all specialist feeders, armadillos are also particularly vulnerable to sudden population declines.

While termites and ants may seem ubiquitous, survival in extreme environments can be tremendously challenging. In the desert, for example, armadillos undergo dramatic internal temperature changes. They have to compensate for the biting cold winter nights by emerging earlier in the afternoon, limiting their available feeding windows and struggling to meet metabolic requirements. During these dry months, food is scarce. After a severe drought, the authors of one particular study recorded the deaths of five of their initial six armadillo subjects. Droughts are part of typical climate patterns, but weather extremes are becoming more common, and animals like armadillos are likely to be severely affected by climate change. These curious creatures are a keystone species. As biological engineers, they shape the landscape around them, and their tunnels are a vital resource to a multitude of mammal, reptile, and bird species.



CONSERVATION

2023 Balule Nature Reserve Internal Elephant Impact study

All regions in Balule will be conducting tree studies to determine the impact on trees so we can formulate an Elephant Management Plan. This study is based on a linear transect model that has been simplified to require minimum materials and maximise ease of use. To get an accurate picture there need to be enough transects to yield information from which reasonably robust results can be drawn. The 50 000ha of Balule requires 100 transects (1 per 500ha) covering a total assessed area of 10ha (0.2%). We will be doing between 14 and 16 transects on ORGR.



Veld Conditions and Dams



The Olifants veld condition is currently very dry with the lack of rain. The photo to the left was the condition of the grass during mid-January this year. Grasses throughout the reserve are dry with watering points also taking strain. High temperatures have caused accelerated evaporation on our shallower dams and the pumps have been struggling to keep up. We rely heavily on the summer rains to fill up the larger dams. Double Dam has dried up completely and Big Dam water levels are fairly low. Ecologically this is not a bad thing as lower dam levels create wallowing opportunities for elephants, rhinos and buffalo. We have an abundance of watering points on the reserve so it is an aesthetic concern vs an ecological one.

Leopard with an ear condition

The old leopardess who had issues with her ears has been found dead. On New Year's eve, we discovered that she was completely deaf and 24 days later her carcass was found around Hide Dam - more than likely taken out by another predator. Nature had taken its course. We intended to intervene once we discovered she was deaf as her condition posed a risk to humans. We did not have a sighting of her until her carcass was discovered.



Office on Solar Power



The Olfants River Game Reserve office complex has received a renewable energy solar plant to ensure the office remains operational during the rolling blackouts we are experiencing.

This system now powers lights, plug and the office internet during load-shedding so we can continue being productive. The laundry and workshop currently do not have any backup power - something we are looking into.

Rehab Projects

With our previous rehab projects at Two Trees and Sable Plains showing excellent results, we are going to be working on the Big Dam area with the same technique to rehabilitate those exposed areas.

The photos to the right show excellent grass regrowth once we managed to slow down the water flow on these exposed soils. The method we have used has been complimented by the BNR ecologist, as it is one he has not seen before and has had an incredible effect. It pays off to experiment with new ideas!



REACHING OUT

We were fortunate to receive brand new measuring jugs, thermal mugs and lunchboxes (30 of each) for our staff in ORGR. Many thanks to Ayni Marketing in Johannesburg who donated them to Bags of Love. Thanks too, to various members who dropped off general donations of clothing, toys, etc. We are always appreciative!



Trustees

Allan Appel has announced his retirement as a Trustee of the Balule Outreach Trust while undertaking to complete the February 2023 accounts as his last official fiduciary duty. Chairman John Anderson, on behalf of the Trustees, would like to thank Allan for the time that he has devoted to the Trust, for his sage advice and for his valuable work on behalf of the Trust since its inception 12 years ago. At the same time, the Trustees are delighted to announce that Alistair Pearce has volunteered to take over Allan's fiduciary duties and we welcome him as a Trustee! Alistair is both a director of ORGR and an active committee member of the Balule Nature Reserve. We look forward to making good use of his expertise!

Banking details of the BALULE OUTREACH TRUST

First National Bank (FNB), Bryanston, South Africa

Account number: 6233 678 7877 Clearing Code: 250-017

Swift number: FIRNZAJJXXX

Please reference EFT payments with your name.

MEMBERS UPDATES

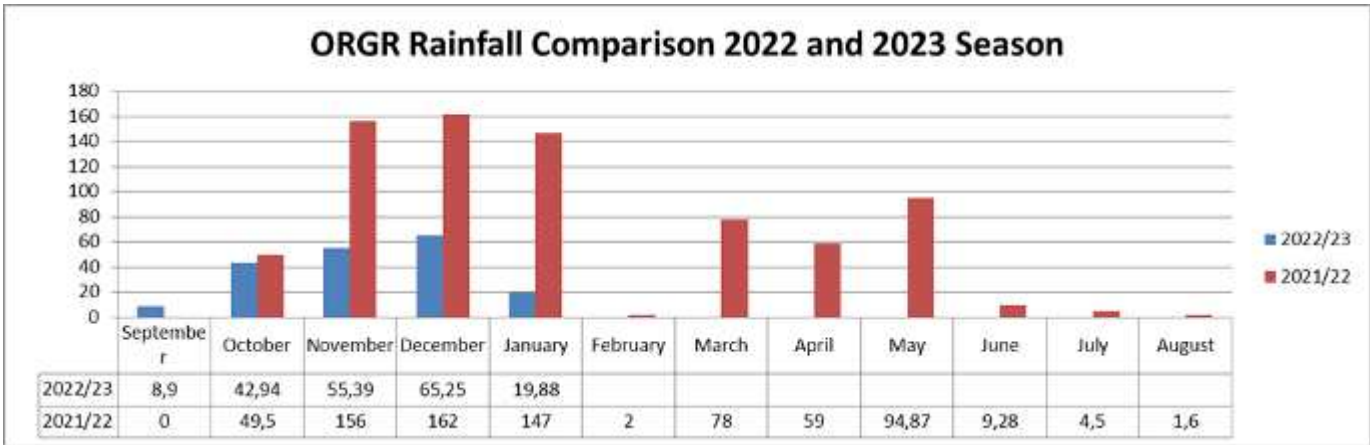
THE WEATHER REPORT

The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is currently in a La Niña state, and forecasts indicate that it will likely remain in this state during the remainder of the 2022/23 summer season and return to a neutral state during Autumn. The presence of a La Niña event usually has its strongest impact on rainfall during the mid-summer months. With the continued persistence of the La Niña event, there is a high chance that it will have its usual effect on South Africa, which is generally for above-normal rainfall and below-normal temperatures over the summer rainfall areas.



There has been some very good rainfall recorded around the country and also in the Lowveld, but in our area, rainfall this summer has been extremely low. We are currently at a season total of 192mm as of the end of January. At the same time last year, we already received 514mm of rain with the 30-year average being 313mm. With the Low rainfall, we have also experienced some uncomfortably high temperatures, well into the 40s. This has resulted in the grasses drying out to resemble mid-winter conditions and the dam levels dropping due to a high evaporation rate. Double Dam has subsequently dried out.

We are hoping that we receive some good rain in February and March, but the forecasts are unclear and there is speculation we are heading into a dryer cycle.

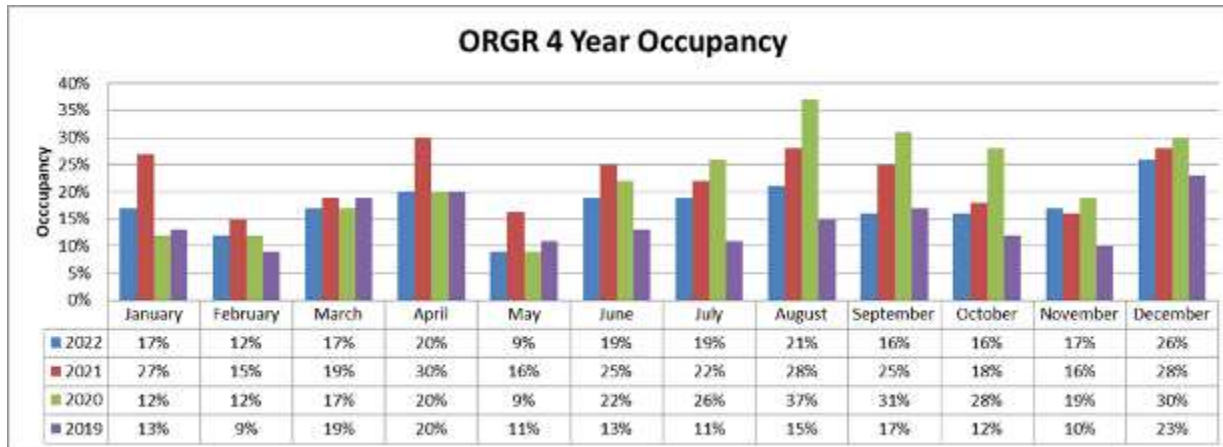


December 2022 Summary				January 2023 Summary			
	High	Low	Average		High	Low	Average
Temperature	43.0 °C	14.6 °C	26.4 °C	Temperature	41.0 °C	16.6 °C	27.0 °C
Dew Point	23.9 °C	7.9 °C	18.3 °C	Dew Point	23.7 °C	10.8 °C	18.0 °C
Humidity	97 %	15 %	64 %	Humidity	97 %	24 %	61 %
Precipitation	65,25mm			Precipitation	19,88mm		
Wind Speed	26.4 km/h	0.0 km/h	5.9 km/h	Wind Speed	26.6 km/h	0.0 km/h	6.8 km/h
Wind Gust	38.0 km/h	--	9.2 km/h	Wind Gust	36.0 km/h	--	10.4 km/h
Wind Direction	--	--	SSE	Wind Direction	--	--	SE
Pressure	1,014.66 hPa	992.14 hPa	--	Pressure	1,011.92 hPa	994.28 hPa	--

OCCUPANCIES

We had a fairly busy festive season with an average occupancy of 26% for December and 17% for January. Over Christmas, we have on average around 22 units in residence and we got very busy over New Year's with a peak of 42 units being occupied. We have closed 2022 on an annual average of 17%, lower than the previous two years. It looks like we are settling back into pre-Covid occupancies.

Average Occupancies	
2022	17%
2021	22%
2020	22%
2019	14%



OUR NIGHT SKY IN FEBRUARY

In a nutshell...

Moon

Date	Time	Phase
05/02	20h28	Full Moon
13/02	18h00	Last Quarter
20/02	09h05	New Moon
27/02	10h05	First Quarter

Sun and Moon

The Full Moon occurs on the 5th of February at 20h28 and the Last Quarter Moon falls on the 13th of February at 18h00. The New Moon occurs on the 20th of February at 09h05 and the First Quarter Moon falls on the 27th at 10h05.

On the 4th of February at 10h54 the moon will be at apogee (furthest from Earth) at a distance of 406 476 km. The Moon will be at perigee (closest approach to Earth) at a distance of 358 267 km on the 19th of February at 11h05.

Planet Visibility

Mercury is located near the stars of the constellation Sagittarius in the morning sky

Venus is visible near the stars of the constellation Aquarius in the evening sky

Mars is visible near the stars of the constellation Taurus in the evening sky

Jupiter is visible near the stars of the constellation Pisces in the evening sky

Saturn is visible near the stars of the constellation Pisces in the evening sky but is at solar conjunction on the 16th of February

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

ORGR BIG BIRDING DAY RESULTS

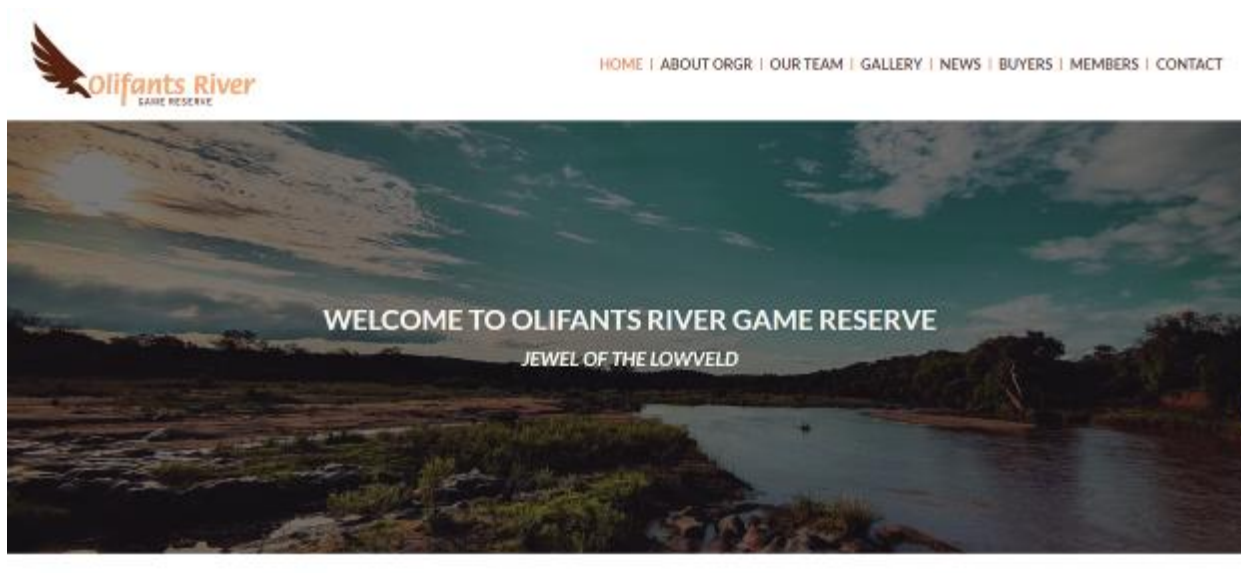


We hosted our first ORGR “Big Birding Day” in December and it turned out to be filled with fun and excellent birding. Six teams entered the contest to see who could identify the most birds in 24 hours, which included sightings as well as calls. The teams worked hard to log all their sightings into Birdlasser and all six managed to identify 186 Species of birds on the reserve! The 186 birds counted included a hidden “Easter Egg” (a Gentoo Penguin) laid by the Flocking Forsdykes! Well done to those who spotted it in the final “Big Birding Day” list.

It was a great contest and something that we aim to do every year going forward. Below is the ranking per team with their counts.

ORGR BBD 22 December 2022			
Rank	Team	Unit	Bird Count
1.	On the Money	Unit 26	138
2.	Clucking Clearys	Unit 85	117
3.	Stork Raven Mad	ORGR	109
4.	Flocking Forsdykes	Unit 79	103
5.	Lynne Wright Appreciation Society	Unit 16	80
6.	Confusion of Munro's	Unit 6	77
ORGR BBD Total Species Seen			186

ORGR WEBSITE



We have done a little upgrade on the Olifants website, with a cleaner and fresher look. The Member's section is now password protected, so please contact the office for the password in order to gain access to the documents under this section.

ACCESS CONTROL

Access control through the Southern gate is going well. All parties are getting the hang of the system and we are experiencing fewer issues. Below is a quick summary so to how it all works.



Shareholder and User Access

Shareholders and users will need to present their Member/Landowner QR Code when entering the Southern gate (Railway Line/Hoedspruit) or the Grietjie gate. Please liaise with the office should you still need your code. For shareholders and users, the code remains the same and you will not need to renew it for every visit.

Inviting Personal Visitors

Shareholders and users can generate access codes for their personal visitors via the Southern gate themselves through the ATG App.

Contractor Access

Access for all contractors, service providers or deliveries to ORGR units will need to be arranged via the office to ensure security protocols are followed and are in place.

Grietjie Gate Access

Shareholders and users of Olifants River Game Reserve have the right to access ORGR via the Grietjie gate and through ONGR. There is no longer a need to pre-book these entries as we are now all linked on the same Access Control system. No access for visitors and guests is permitted via Grietjie and ONGR unless they are travelling with the ORGR shareholder or user. All visitors and guests need to enter from the Southern gate.

THE FINAL WORD

In closing, just a reminder to shareholders and users that we have an “open door” policy and are here for you, to serve and protect our precious land, its inhabitants and all those who visit us to share the beauty and tranquility of this piece of paradise. Please remember that we are approachable, whether you wish to discuss suggestions or concerns about our reserve and welcome feedback for our endeavours to keep this precious jewel shining even brighter into the future.

~HOPE~

Author Unknown

The sun rises over the savanna,
Bringing light to a new day,
Hope shines bright, like the morning sun,
Warming hearts in its rays.

Like the strong and steadfast acacia,
We stand tall through the storm,
With roots deep in the rich red earth,
Our spirits unbreakable, warm.

We carry within us the rhythm of life,
The beat of our motherland,



Dancing to the music of hope,
With every step, we take a stand.

In the stillness of the night,
The stars twinkle above,
Reminding us of our heritage,
Of the enduring power of love.

So let us lift our voices in song,
And carry the hope of our land,
For a brighter tomorrow awaits us,
With love, peace and understanding at hand.



We trust you enjoyed the read and look forward to seeing you on the reserve soon!

Warm regards

Nick and the Olifants Team!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Night Sky – SAAO

Aardvark – Africa Geographic