

MABULA

SPOTTED & REPORTED 2020 ISSUE 1



A WORD FROM THE EDITOR – Kobus Havemann

Dear Readers,

It is indeed an immense pleasure to launch this first edition of Spotted & Reported for 2020.

In this issue, we are trying to bring you a selection of inspirational stories that we are hoping will light up your day and bring you hope. Furthermore, Mabula is well known for the hard work, dedication and loyalty of its members and especially for its conservation efforts and we will share some recent success stories from this front

A huge thank you to Dr. Gayle Pedersen and all the other members who contributed writing the wonderful and inspiring stories, without which there wouldn't have been this newsletter issue.

Thank you, Kobus.

COVID CABIN FEVER – Dr Gayle Pedersen

You may have seen on social media and news headlines, stories of nature and wildlife doing weird and wonderful things while the world is on lockdown, to varying degrees from one country to the next. There have been stories about wildlife and livestock strolling down city high streets and through slumbering suburbia, the murky canals of Venice clearing up, and clear skies with 100% visibility in some of the most polluted cities in the world. All as a result of humans staying indoors and the subsequent reduced footprint on the planet.



Here on Mabula during the lockdown, we have seen mornings with roads covered in hippo tracks, afternoons with cheetahs lazing along the roadside, gigantic holes appearing in the middle of roads as the burrowers abuse the privacy while they dig. Who is to know for certain whether this is an indication of greater animal activity on and close to roads due to our reduced activity, or whether we are just seeing more spoor due to the decrease in vehicle tracks on the reserve? Either way there is a feeling of calm and tranquillity, but also of an eerie absence...like something out of a science fiction movie set 100 years in the future.



We thought we would change the tone slightly, for those of you bush lovers who are locked down in suburbia and suffering from withdrawals of your favourite refuge from the madness of the city life. With so many home-schooling websites and platforms for enjoying safaris from your couch via SANParks webcams, we just wanted to share some images of the last month on Mabula, to wet your appetites ahead of your return. And for those of you sharing lockdown with us, on the reserve, we wanted to say thank you for your community spirit, patience and cooperation.



A sneaky waterbuck takes the opportunity to cross a deserted Main Entrance Road in stealth mode, meanwhile around Mokaikai we witness Hide and Seek...the sable way! These empty roads are making it too easy for them to locate each other. They want their audience back.

Rhinos have become the designated social distance monitors of the reserve. Be mindful of this when you return...they're taking this responsibility very seriously (particularly since the latest myth stemming from the East is that their horns have COVID-19 curing components, which they don't).



Critical veterinary interventions have to happen as urgently as possible, and these creatures aren't holding back on their sparring just because there is a pandemic sweeping the globe. The full extent of the April lockdown Ecology Team is pictured here, working tirelessly to clear the plains, treat injured animals, monitor all our prized wildlife, clear fallen trees and overhanging branches, and cut firebreaks ahead of the dry season. It is more critical than ever to maintain monitoring and tracking devices on our valuable wildlife assets, now that there are fewer eyes and ears on the reserve to assist us in keeping track of them.



"Adopt the pace of nature: her secret is patience." – Ralph Waldo Emerson.



Despite what is going on in the world, take a lesson from the giraffe and slow down to smell the flowers.

Giraffes are such strange and wonderful creatures...here a gentle reminder that nature is carrying on, doing her thing as only she can, while the world faces solitude, cabin fever, self-reflection, mourning and the toughest tests of our resilience and ability to focus on silver linings. Take solace in the fact that, when some normality returns to the world, the familiarity of Mabula’s roads, plains, dams, and majestic wild roaming animals will all still be here...waiting for your return.



*The majority of the photos in this article were taken by the Wildlife team within the Ecology Department, as they self-teach on camera operations after a brief training introduction (there may be some budding Greg Du Toits and Frans Lantings in the department).

THE RAIN IN MABULA FALLS MAINLY ON THE PLAIN - Dr Gayle Pedersen

After a very wet November 2019, we saw a slightly lower monthly rainfall from December to March than we did the previous year. In March 2020 the rapidly advancing dry season was becoming evident all around us, with dam levels lower than this time last year, and grazers seeking satisfaction in the two remaining green areas from our ecological block burns last year. 2019 saw relief in the form of late rains in April, more than in February and March, and we were holding out high hopes that 2020 would follow a similar pattern. And guess what? It did.



We received a very welcome 70 mm of rain (averaged across the reserve utilising the rain gauges that are monitored at various locations) in April, the first time since November that the monthly average was higher than the previous wet season. These April rains refreshed some of the green flushes on the burnt areas as well as the plains that have been recently cut. And as always, all the game disappeared deep into the blocks of thick bush as they suddenly had abundant ephemeral water and wallows. This surface water has lingered for much longer than has been observed previously, which could also be a result of the lower volume of traffic on the roads as well as the dropping temperatures.

Another interesting side effect of the reduced human activity on the reserve, has been the observed increase in the water table. Fewer reserve users have resulted in a substantial decrease in water utilisation and a major replenishment of underground stocks as we start to crawl towards the dry season. While the world battles new ills, our most precious natural resource appears to be having a very good year.



Lingering surface water that was still evident one week after this rain fell, and wonderful wallows all over the reserve which serve as critical cooling and parasite control purposes for large game.

YOU'VE BEEN SPOTTED - Dr Gayle Pedersen

The value of camera traps in wildlife and ecological research has grown substantially in the last decade or two. They have been used for over a century, and currently their most popular uses are for monitoring bird nest sites, monitoring animal abundance and occupancy, public engagement and citizen science (a growing initiative whereby nature and conservation enthusiasts with no formal training can assist with research from their couches by, for example, helping to identify species from camera traps and satellite imagery) campaigns, and anti-poaching. Camera traps during the COVID lockdown are keeping many a nature lover occupied and entertained as they enjoy live imagery of parks waterholes and from scenic lookouts. Here on Mabula, camera traps have been the primary source of information as we attempt to learn more about one of our most elusive species, *Panthera pardus*, the leopard. They provide the ideal opportunity to gain insights into the movements and behaviour of the more solitary and elusive species, and those active mostly during the darkness of night. Another key purpose is enabling the individual identification of these rare, private creatures in order to better understand the number, sex and age ratios that exist on the reserve.



The Mabula Leopard Study Group has been making great strides since 2020 kicked off. With only seven camera traps spanning an 8500-hectare reserve, the well thought out, strategic placement of these cameras is critical to the likelihood of them catching our targeted feline subjects. Ideally, studies are conducted with an entire network of evenly spaced cameras as means of surveying an area, but when resources are limited, it's necessary to utilise known preferred areas from field observations and spoor. And in this case, the cameras are placed at one location for a 28-day cycle, so the placement can really make or break the success of the project. This project, a collaborative effort between the Reserve Management Division, and a number of committed Wholeowners and staff, aims to ensure the conservation and sustainability of leopard numbers on Mabula. Research is conducted into the movement, home ranges, and density on Mabula, with the ultimate goal of increasing the frequency of sightings on the reserve. The group is managed by a Research Committee that reports to the Mabula Board of Directors via the Reserve Manager. March saw an incredible turning point in the project, with five of the seven cameras successfully capturing leopard activity, and a total of 20 separate sightings being recorded. One camera captured five different individuals, including the adult female with two cubs. One day these daylight strolls will be enjoyed by guides and guests, not just by camera traps. Here we see on the left, territorial scent marking in progress, and some subsequent interest in that spot from another leopard.



April has seen further success, with news just in of 32 successful images captured across six of the seven camera traps in operation. It seems the only way is up for the Mabula Leopard Study Group. The fruits of everyone's labour are finally blooming after tireless effort from those dedicated to improving our knowledge of the cats we share the property with. Now the hope is that improving our understanding of who resides where will slowly but surely translate to sightings for all Mabula reserve users. A huge thanks to all those involved in this project and making it the success it is today (and to the other "trap-happy" species who grace us with their nocturnal and daylight selfies).



BUSINESS AS USUAL – Dr Gayle Pedersen

With everything that is going on in the world at the moment, not only is nature still doing her magical thing, but the Reserve Management Division has been holding the fort and soldiering on, in anticipation of normality resuming some day in the not too distant future. Maintenance and Ecology are out on the reserve every day, ensuring we maintain the structural integrity of water reticulation systems, repairing fences that the elephants have been testing the strength of, fixing buffalo and rhino bumps and dings, removing fallen trees from roads after heavy rains, slashing plains, and other season-dependent essential tasks that simply cannot wait until COVID is under control.



It has been a prime opportunity to burn the rubbish at the dumping site and patch up roads and speed humps. Firebreaks are being cut around the camps and wholeowner units, and plains slashing is well underway to ensure you can all enjoy unobstructed views of all the plains game when you return. The Modjadji firebreak and Mannekamp Plain can be seen here.



Ensuring the reserve perimeter fence is clear from obstructions and the roads are in great condition improves the ease of access for security patrols and maintenance teams needing to conduct daily checks.

In a nutshell, it is business as usual for the essential services providers, since plants and animals don't simply stop growing, reproducing, injuring themselves, pulling out water pipes (because they can), and other such unpredictable activities that keep us on our toes day and night, simply because there is a government instituted lockdown as we wade through the highest risk period of this pandemic. We wish all our Greater Mabula Private Game Reserve friends and family a safe and stress-free downtime until we can all meet again where all our hearts seek refuge.

