



## Central Limpopo River Valley Elephant Research Project

### MARCH 2009 UPDATE



During the month so many interesting things happened that it is hard to summarise it all in one diary. We started the month with large herds of elephants and several musth bulls arriving in the reserve spending time within the various herds. Even though we observed several tussles between various sized bulls there were no aggressive fights observed during the month. Several females were mated including two matriarchs namely Agatha (a collared female) and Therese (a very dominant matriarch). Several females also gave birth during the month including Kinkle and another young female in Kolobje's herd, floppy in Veronica's herd, a young female in Hestelle's herd and several females in some of the Limpopo herds.

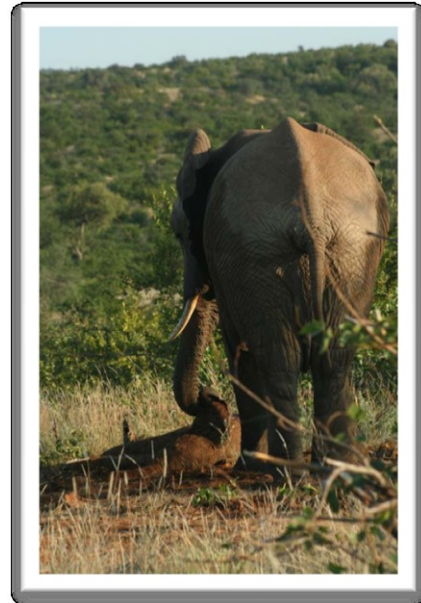
B200 was in musth this month and must have injured his one back leg in a tussle but this did not stop him from mating with a young female in Therese's herd. The bull spent several days in the vicinity of the Mashatu Main Camp mud wallowing in the

#### **Background to the CLRV Elephant Project**

The project was initiated in August 1999 to determine the status of the Central Limpopo Valley elephant population and the impact the elephant population had on their natural habitat within the Tuli.

The broad objective of this study is to determine how various factors influence movements, occupancy rates in different parts of the home range, social dynamics and conception and survival of elephant groups in the Central Limpopo River Valley. In order to meet the objectives, data will be gathered through field observations of the various herds within the study area, concentrating within the Northern Tuli Game Reserve. Satellite data on the movements of the various herds collared, weather data from various stations within the study area, vegetation data on the phenology of various plant species as well as long term vegetation change in the Northern Tuli Game Reserve will be measured.

vlei area just outside of camp every afternoon. These and herd group also spent about a week over the same period around the Main Camp drinking at the Main Camp waterhole in the late afternoons.



There were also sad events this month and several deaths were recorded. One of these was the stillbirth of Segole's baby. On an Ivory drive one morning Segole was seen guarding a dead baby. A Hyena was in the vicinity and every time it would come close she would charge and chase it away. Several of her family members were with her and the atmosphere was thick with emotion, ours and hers. We watched as she frequently touched the dead baby stroking it with her trunk, the entire herd secreting from their temporal glands. One of the young bulls also came to investigate the stillborn baby and stood for a long time running his trunk over every part of the baby's body. At long last the rest of the family arrived and after a long look back at the baby Segole turned away and followed the rest of her family down the hill. Not long after the hyena moved back in and by that afternoon all evidence of the baby was removed by the hyenas and vultures.

Another interesting mortality was recorded on Jwala during February by Angie. On inspection of an adult female that died near the Jwala Lodge it was discovered that the female was pregnant with twins (a female calf and a much larger bull calf)! Twin births in elephants are rare and seldom recorded. It is unknown whether the female died as a result of complications during the birthing process.



One of my favourite times to watch elephants must be when they are at water. Dispute Corner and Crocodile pool were two of the elephant's favourite drinking sites for the month and nearly on a daily basis elephants visited these two pools in large numbers. They would drink on one end of the river and then move across to a separate pool along the bank of the river where they mud wallowed. With all the water and food around during the month it felt like elephants "let their hair down". The groups would spend hours at the water playing and plashing mud all over their bodies and the youngsters often remained behind long after the females have moved into the shade of the nearby riverine trees.



### **Ivory drives**

An exciting month on the Ivory drives with large herds, several interesting behaviour observations and just great elephant viewing all-round. On several of the drives we encountered elephants at Dispute Corner or Crocodile pool drinking in one pool and then walking off to another where they would mud wallow – splashing water all over their bodies and submerging them deep into the mud. Even the young babies joined in and even though it looked quite chaotic with everyone in the pool, the babies were always well guarded and never left alone.

# Mashatu



# Research

Botswana

Early in the month we encountered Agatha and her family in Elephant Valley fast asleep on a cold and rainy morning. That is everyone but a young 2 year old. The youngster was obviously bored and walked from one sibling to the next harassing each one in turn until all the youngsters were wide awake.

On one of the Ivory drives we also witnessed a young female in the first phases of labour. Unfortunately the herd moved off and I have not seen them since. On yet another drive we watched with tearful eyes as Segole mourned her stillborn baby, chasing a persistent hyena from the carcass.

Several huge musth bulls also visited the area and on yet another drive watched as several big bulls were competing for Agatha's attention, milling around her with several displays of dominance towards each other and the odd charge when a younger bull dare get to close to her.



## SPECIAL REQUESTS

### ✚ Climate data

Climate data in any reserve is extremely important to establish trends. Within the NTGR rainfall is generally very patchy and this can have a huge effect on the distribution and movements of wildlife on the reserve. We are looking for reliable daily rainfall and temperature records from as many locations as possible. Anyone who would like to contribute can contact me at [mashatu.research@telkomsa.net](mailto:mashatu.research@telkomsa.net). Datasheets are also available.

### ✚ Mortalities

I am trying to keep track of all the mortalities (natural or otherwise) of elephants within the region. This data is extremely important in understanding the population dynamics of the Tuli elephants and to ultimately assist in the management of these amazing creatures. Would anyone who has any historical data or come across any dead animal (of the specific species) please contact me.

### ✚ Identification kits

Anyone who would like to participate in identifying or who has come to know a specific elephant well on their property assist me in sending identification photographs. For more information on how to go about this please contact me.

### ✚ Newsletter

We would like to hear from you in our newsletter. Any contributions towards sightings on the reserve or interesting stories on elephants are welcome and would be appreciated.

### ✚ Donations and Contributions

Research would not be a reality if we do not have the amazing support from so many organisations and individuals who obviously share our love for nature and the vision to conserve our magnificent heritage. Thank you to each and every person who has made a contribution, in whichever way, to the project! Anyone interested in donating towards the elephant research project can contact me at [Mashatu.research@telkomsa.net](mailto:Mashatu.research@telkomsa.net) for more information.

### Project Sponsors

