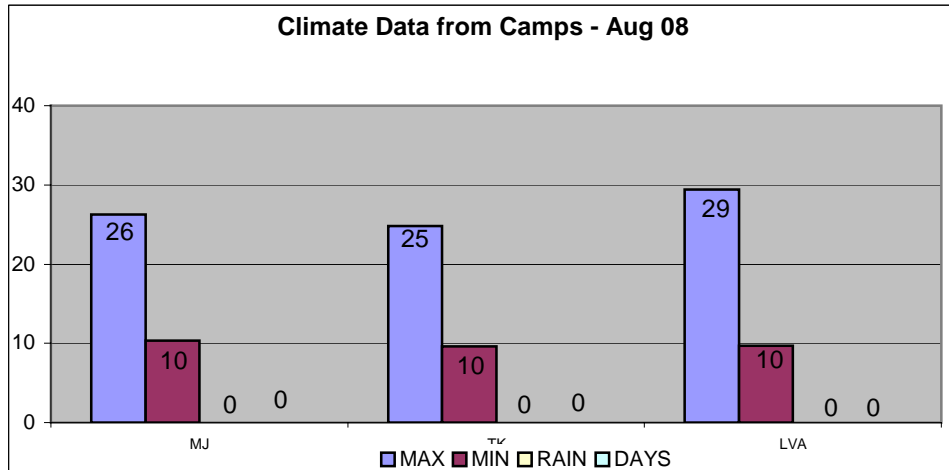




Game Sightings Update

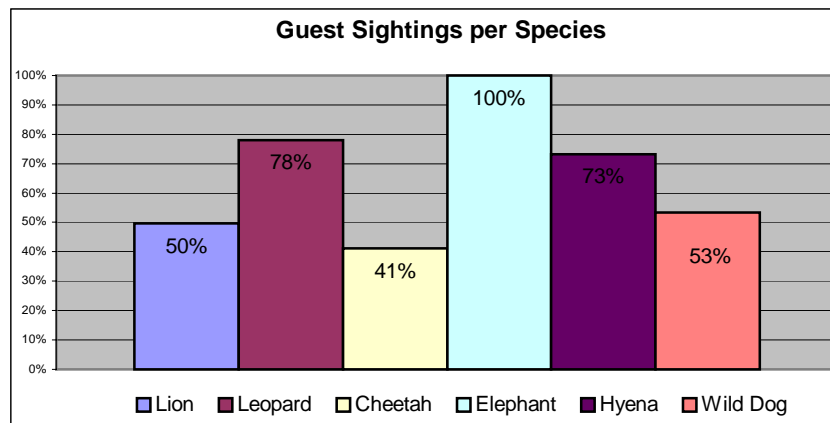
August 2008

Weather and vegetation report



The August winds arrived as usual and some days a wind velocity of up to 36 knots was measured. Temperatures bounced up and down as the one cold front after the other swept through the reserve. With everything in shades of brown and dust devils circling all over the reserve it was a welcome change when the various Acacia trees started flowering. The most beautiful of them is the Water Acacia with its bright yellow flowers. The sweet scents of the Stink shepherds tree and the Molalatau could also be smelled when driving through the reserve.

Game sightings during August



The majority of days seen per species were lower this August compared to the previous year, but apart from the lion and cheetah sightings there was an increase in all species when compared to July 2008. During the month the rangers had amazing sightings of the wild dogs hunting and off course of the very fast growing pups at the den.



Predator Sightings

Leopards

There have been stunning sightings of these ghostly animals. Leopards are truly known to be very elusive and smart cats and apart from their secretive nature leopards were seen very frequently around Mashatu. A young male, who likes to live around Happerkop Crossing was seen most often. On some occasions he was seen hunting roosting guinea fowl from trees, but the most beautiful sighting was when he killed a large male impala at Croc-Pool. He did not drag the carcass into dense bush or even tried to hoist it up a tree, but instead he lay in the riverbed happily feeding away at his freshly killed dinner. The young male should have taken his highly valued prize into a tree, because not long after a spotted hyena, an avid hunter itself took claim to the still learning young leopard's kill.

Lions

The New Pride has been seen very often and they are doing well. They are making substantial kills on a regular basis and eland are the preferred species being selected for. They have been spending most of their time around Longgras and reports from Horse Safari indicate that they are roaring and living the typical lion life in the South of Mashatu. It is very comforting to know that the two male lions are staying in the southern part suppose to areas like the Tuli Circle which is a high risk area due to safari hunting.



Spotted Hyena

These magnificent creatures were seen almost every day of the month. If they were not seen then they were certainly heard whooping at night. On one particular evening three spotted hyenas were waiting below a Sheppard's tree where a leopard had an impala kills. They were hoping for some scraps to fall, but after nothing came tumbling down from above, they moved off and to all of our amazement, still looking at the feeding leopard, the hyenas made their own impala kill not far from where we were sitting! As we drove up to the feeding hyenas we heard some more calling and came running in from almost every direction. It was an awesome sight!





Cheetahs

During August there have yet again been numerous sightings of cheetah all across Mashatu. The majority of the sightings were around Pole hill and LVA. One successful hunt has been witnessed this month, and there have been several sightings of cheetahs chasing scrub hares and steenbok. During the month volunteers on the Research Shadow Program were lucky enough to spot a female cheetah on the hunt. Not long after encountering the cheetah on a small hill, she crouched down and in a blink of an eye had caught an unsuspected impala.



The Tuli Elephants

As we approach the end of the dry season the elephants started moving more and more and as we approached the end of the month were harder to find, but non the less elephants were seen at least once a day. The average herd size this month were slightly lower than recorded by the rangers in July and it is expected that as the dry season continues the herds will get smaller and smaller. An interesting sighting this month was that of a lioness feeding on a stillborn baby elephant. In less than a day there was nothing left of the baby elephant!



Birding

During the month 93 bird species were identified on the reserve by rangers and volunteers on Mashatu. The highlight this month was a sighting towards the end of the month of two Tawny eagles hunting and killing a guinea fowl. It was amazing to watch these two birds working together in herding and chasing the guinea fowl. Every time the guinea fowl ran into a thick bush, one of the Tawny eagles will land in a nearby bush, while the other will walk into the bush chasing the guinea fowl out into the open. This happened a few times before the tawny eagle successfully swept down and took hold of the guinea fowl. We watched how the two birds plucked the unfortunate guinea fowl and started feeding.



NEWSSTORIES

Insect Insights

Guy Williams

Walking through the Tuli Mopane veldt during July and early August is a wonderful experience filled with a multitude of wild encounters ranging from elephants to jumping plant lice (family Psyllidae, genus *Retroacizzia*). It is the latter which caught my attention, as their abundance appears to be restricted to this time of year. As one passes Mopane bushes, the faint rustling of thousands of these tiny creatures hopping or dropping off senescing leaves can be heard. On closer inspection these bugs resemble minute orange and green cicadas with clear wings. The adults arrange themselves in queues along leaf veins (Fig. 1) from which they suck sap through their straw-like mouthparts. The nymphs (as in all true bugs - Order



Hemiptera – psyllids have an incomplete metamorphosis, i.e. the babies resemble adults without wings) also suck sap from the leaves but do so under the protection of whitish translucent caps (Fig. 2) of excreted gum, which grow as the nymphs, do. These scale caps resemble tiny limpets and provide protection from both insect predators and desiccation, since a sticky wet secretion is retained beneath it. These caps taste fairly sweet and provide a tasty treat on the go for both humans and our primate relatives, the vervet monkeys and baboons. The inclusion of the tiny nymphs in this snack may add a protein bonus to the meal! It appears that the Mopane psyllids experience a massive population explosion just at the time when the leaves are beginning to senesce *en masse*. This may be due to the fact that plants often slowly reabsorb much of the cellular contents (proteins, sugars etc.) from leaves before dropping them. Included in this evacuation of the leaf are chemical defences such as tannins and alkaloids. Such defences are probably a limiting factor for many insects, which specialize on Mopane - as they are for many vertebrate herbivores - and so a free-for-all breaks out when the leaves are at their lowest ebb. Although nutritional content is bound to be low at this point, the advantages of a poison-free meal clearly outweigh the costs in the case of these insects. It will be interesting to see which predators have adapted to take advantage of this temporary resource glut, and how this tiny (but simultaneously vast) system changes as we move into the spring months.



Figure 1. Adult Mopane psyllids feeding on leaf veins.



Figure 2. Mopane leaf showing insect feeding damage and psyllid nymph scale cap (top).