



Mashatu Game Sightings April 2007



Sunday 8

It has been a week now and we still have a black cloud over us. The temperatures have dropped and it has been much cooler.

This morning we found the Elephant Valley Pride hunting. The lions were headed in a westerly direction - the sub adult males mane was up and his ears were flat. We looked around to see what animals were in the area and we saw zebras running away in the distance.

There was a male leopard spotted at Quealea colony in a Mashatu tree while a herd of impalas were grazing near the tree. This leopard was not asleep and the impalas did not see him, but we did not see any action. A lone elephant bull was also seen on the drive walking towards Old Rock Camp.

On the afternoon drive the Elephant Valley Pried was seen once again at Beacon Hill. The lions had travelled a long distance from where they were seen in the morning. They were resting but it looked like they had not made any. The leopard that was seen at Quelaea colony had not moved an inch and guests enjoyed a good view of him. An active spotted hyena was found at Erics Donga. Along the M1, near Erics Donga, there is a burrow that has been used by an Aardwolf and we manage to see one resting outside the burrow. About two hundred elephants were spotted grazing and browsing at Jackals Koppie.

Monday 9

On the afternoon drive Mpho took the Walker family to the Mmamakwa ruins and they were to spend a night at the Kgotla. Driving to Motloutse we found a journey of about twenty giraffes browsing in the vlei. Thirty elephant were also seen drinking water in the river in the company of baboons and impalas at Solomon's wall. The elephants have been frequenting the area around the Mmamakwa ruins and they even walked up to the springs where we saw lots of footprints and droppings. While enjoying sundowners we heard hyena calls from the bottom of the hill. We had brought a flashlight and thanks to Martin we also had a powerful touch. We spotted a hyena lying close by. Driving to the Kgotla we saw a pack of six hyenas very close to the road. It was truly an Easter week as we had more than twelve sightings of African springhare and six scrub hare sightings. The night was spent under the African sky in the open Kgotla with stars shining down and calls from baboons, jackals

and hyenas.

Tuesday 10

It was a beautiful morning with birds singing from the Mashatu trees. The guests who spent a night at the Kgotla had a leisurely morning and woke up around seven o'clock. Main camp and Tent camp guests had an early morning drive. At Nels Windmill hyenas were seen resting just by the windmill. There were two adult females and a juvenile that walked towards the car and watched us attentively. Driving from the Kgotla the Walker Family was to go to Main camp for two more nights. Elephants sightings were great with a herd of twenty elephants found foraging on the acacia trees at Loensa junction. Another herd was seen at the Vets gate while at Elephant Valley about fifteen grays made us stop on the road as they crossed the road in front of us.

The afternoon was planned for cats. During high tea the guests seemed to talk more of the cats and so they gave the rangers an idea of what to look for in the drive. As ranger Fish passed Agates Koppie a huge roar from a lion was heard. The roar was heard from Main camp and this overwhelmed the guests. A lion's roar can cover up to eight kilometers but this roar was very close. The Elephant Valley Pride was spotted at the Nyaswe/Matobole confluence. A female leopard was spotted at Qualea colony where it was having a nap. A herd of six elephants was seen wandering near Disappointment Koppie heading towards the Majale River.

Wednesday 11

This morning the Elephant Valley Pride had moved to Gabions. The lions were relaxed. Near Tent Camp a male leopard was spotted with a kill of a young kudu in a tree. A pack of seven hyenas were seen headed to where the leopard had made a kill. We followed the hyenas and when they arrived at the Shepard tree they surrounded it and stared calling. The leopard was annoyed with the hyenas that were drooling and disturbing him with his meal. He looked down and started charging the hyenas. Hyenas are cowards and they ran, all seven of them!! The hyenas then came back and the leopard was more annoyed and he climbed down the tree and walked away. The hyenas were still there but none of them could climb the tree to get the kill. No doubt the leopard would return later when the hyenas had moved off.

A second leopard was seen at Moddergat walking along the riverbed

On the afternoon drive we all decide to go check if the hyenas were able to get the leopard kill that we saw in the morning. The leopard was nowhere to be found and only two hyenas were still hoping to get the kudu that was half eaten. The Elephant Valley Pride had moved to Disappointment Koppie but were once again sleeping. At Matobole a male leopard was found snoozing in a Shepard tree.

Thursday 12

Yet another day for great game sightings at Mashatu! Three of the big five can be found at Mashatu and today we spotted all of three. It was at Gibeons when the most elusive of the cats was spotted. A beautiful female leopard was seen strolling into the crotons but not before giving us a beautiful pose for photos. As we watched the leopard Morgan the tracker directed us to a sighting on the other side of the vehicle and pointed out two creatures - honey badgers!! The leopard moved off but we were amazed to see how relaxed the two badgers were. Honey badgers are a rare species found in Mashatu. As we watched the honey badgers walk away about five elephants came sauntering along while eating the croton leaves. Another leopard sighting was had at Nyaswe but we only had a peek of the leopard as it moved off. The Elephant Valley Pride was found sleeping once again at the base of Beacon Hill. A big herd of fifty elephants was seen wandering at Cheetahs koppie.

The afternoon drive was unbelievable with a fantastic sighting at Beacon Hill. The Elephant Valley Pride and a leopard were both feasting on an impala!! It was confusing to see five lions feeding on a warthog while a leopard had his share of a warthog leg on the other side of the tree. The leopard was not in the tree and whilst he fed he was relaxed. HOW?????????????. Ranger Eric could not believe what he was seeing and radioed other rangers on the drive to come witness the scene. We watched the cats for more than thirty minutes and when we left they were still there. The question of the day was who had made the kill and why did they share the meal?

At Old Rock Camp another leopard was found feeding on an impala. A herd of fifteen elephant was seen wandering at Mc Nels pool where they were enjoying the greens.

Friday 13

Today the weather was perfect, it was neither hot nor cold. Paul took two guests on bike rides while other guests went on the safari vehicle. On the bike ride they followed elephant trails and saw impalas, kudus, elands, wildebeests, zebras and the Elephant Valley Pride of lions at Beacon Hill. As they approached the lions they paused to take pictures and then Paul informed other rangers about the lions sighting. The lions were fairly awake when they cycled away. At Crocodile Pool there was a leopard that we only saw for a second before it disappeared in the bushes. About six hyenas were spotted at Nyaswe resting in their den. A herd of twenty elephants was found marching along near Scrapper while picking leaves from the trees.

Saturday 14

The Elephant Valley pride had moved from Qualea colony to the south of Pole hill. While tracking the lions spoor at Qualea colony we were heard a lion roar to the south of where we were. It was at Pole hill where we saw the pride feasting on an eland kill. Two hyenas and four jackals were waiting by the side drooling.

At Cheetahs koppie a male leopard with a young wildebeest kill was found in a Shepard tree. Below the tree were three hyenas hoping that some pieces would drop down. Another leopard and hyena were seen at Old Rock Camp with an impala kill.

During the afternoon drive the Elephant Valley pride was still at Pole hill around the eland kill. The three hyenas were also still hanging around the site as they hoped for the lions to make a move so they could come and feast. A herd of fifteen elephant was seen walking towards the Majale River from Disappointment Koppie. Game sighting also included zebras, wildebeests, warthogs, steenbok, monkeys, kudus, jackals, impalas, giraffes, elands, bushbucks, bat eared fox, and baboons.



Sunday 15 April

Our morning started off very productively with sightings of kudu, impala, warthog and ostrich before we reached the Majale River crossing. Not far from the river, at Old Rock Camp, we found three hyenas still active and on patrol. They were on their way towards Croc Pool where later in the morning we found a male and female leopard. The Elephant Valley lion pride was resting at Wildebeest Koppie and to the west a herd of approximately 15 elephants foraged in the aptly named Elephant Valley. Other sightings included martial eagle, banded mongoose, bat-eared fox and black-backed jackal.

In the afternoon we found the lion pride at the neighbouring koppie – Braai Koppie – where they were still resting. We couldn't find the two leopards again, however. The afternoon was highlighted by playing baboons on the Majale riverbank and zebras and wildebeest kicking up dust in the open pans of the Central Area. After dark we spotted African wild cat, as well as small-spotted genet.

Monday 16 April

This morning was exceptionally quiet. Maybe the animals took a day off!? It seemed like hard work finding even general game species like impalas and kudus, but eventually we found both, together with eland, giraffe and a small troop of baboons. We concentrated on birds instead and enjoyed sightings of crimson breasted shrike, green wood-hoopoe, secretary bird and black-chested snake-eagle. The wonderful thing about the bush is that things can change so quickly!...and in the afternoon the tables had turned 180 degrees!

A drive towards the Majale Cocktail Spot took us into and along the Majale River in a very scenic area. Suddenly two spotted hyaenas ran across the river to the northern bank. We followed and found four hyaenas lying in a circle around a relatively large and dense shepherd's tree. We immediately smelled a rotten carcass and realised that there could be a leopard in the tree above them! There was! It was a young male which jumped out of the tree when we approached. He was very relaxed and didn't seem to be bothered by us or the hyaenas for that matter. My first thought was that it was one of the White Cliffs Female's sons, Ouboet or Boetie, but he was too quick for me to confirm. About fifty yards from the tree we found another leopard – it was Shashi! She probably made the kill and had it stolen by the younger, but larger male. Her cub, Bundu, was nowhere to be seen. It was an unforgettable evening spent with hyaenas and leopards!

Tuesday 17 April

The morning game drive departed just after six and we decided to check up on the carcass we had found the previous evening in the shepherd's tree. There was no sign of the leopards, but the four hyaenas were still present under the tree. Two black-backed jackals had joined them in the search for scraps. We decided to continue west along the Majale River and were rewarded for the decision. At Kudugat we found a massive herd of more than 20 giraffes! It was like a scene out of Jurassic Park with the giants spread all over the valley below us. They looked like moving skyscrapers in a magical city... Wildebeest and zebras were abundant in the west, and other sightings included eland, steenbok and impala. Despite our morning luck, we opted to go back east in the afternoon. The Elephant Valley Pride was found at Dispute Corner and gave us endless photographic opportunities when they started to play right next to the vehicle. The highlight of the drive was a sighting of a honey badger at Graham's Tree. We also found vervet monkeys, warhogs, porcupine, black-backed jackal and springhare.

Wednesday 18 April

It was a stunning morning – blue skies and beautiful weather! April must be the nicest month of the year in Mashatu! Our drive complimented the fantastic weather and not even 15 minutes from camp we found a spotted hyaena at its den site next to the Nyaswe River. She was resting and possibly baby sitting. A slow drive north took us past the Kgwedi Airstrip, which currently resembles a perfectly good par 4 on a golf course, and through herds of zebra, eland and wildebeest. Suddenly we saw three small yellow figures in the distant open plain. Cheetahs!! Then there was a fourth – their mother! It was a family of cheetahs, walking very relaxed and in no hurry towards the Matabole River. The cubs seemed young – probably not older than 8 months old. We spent the best part of the morning with them. A large herd of 100-odd elephants was the cherry on our cake and a fitting end to a wonderful morning drive!

The Elephant Valley Pride had moved to Disappointment Koppie in the afternoon and we spent about 30 minutes watching them resting near the foot of the hill. At the new hyaena den a single female was baby sitting at the den entrance, but she didn't seem interested in calling any of the pups out into the open. Elephants were hard to find this afternoon, but baboons and their antics before bedtime kept us entertained before we headed for the hills...and sundowners. After a beautiful sunset we spotted genet and porcupine on the way to Main Camp.

Thursday 19 April

To our surprise the Elephant Valley lion pride had moved all the way down to Bryce's Store next to the Pitsani River. This is a great distance from where they were the previous afternoon and an area which they had not been seen in for a long long time! They were resting under a large leadwood tree and seemed thin and hungry. Even the cubs seemed lethargic. The two leopards spotted this morning were much more active! First, one of the White Cliffs Female's sons near Frazer Jones Weir, and second, a young male near the Matabole Nyaswe confluence. Both males were strolling along the riverbed, probably not aware of each other or the fact that they may very well be future competitors for territories and females... At McKenzie's Koppie we watched a massive herd of over 200 elephants graze in amongst the yellow carpet of devil's thorns – a sight so impressive, I will never forget it in a lifetime!! The elephants moved north in the afternoon and were not seen in such great numbers in the afternoon. The leopards also managed to elude us. We decided to spend some quality time with giraffes and other general game species and even took the time to admire the gracious impalas. Birdlife astounded us as well and at one spot along the river our guide identified 15 bird calls from that single location...

Friday 20 April

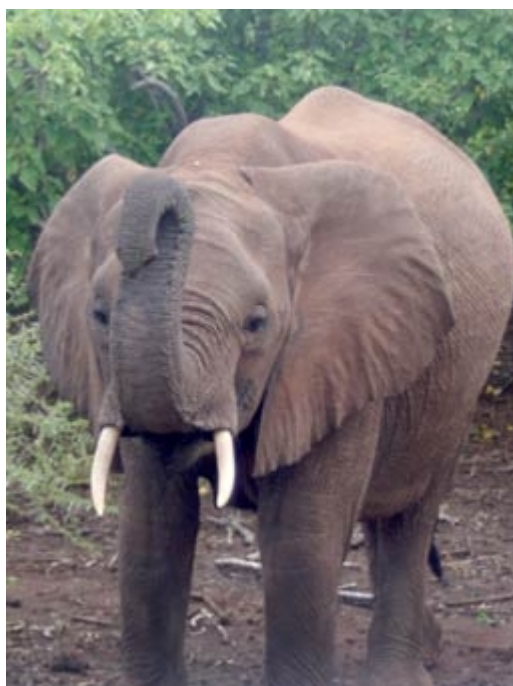
After a delightful early breakfast we headed north towards the Matabole River. Our guide spotted a leopard!!...tortoise. Yes, he tricked us with that one! The reptile was extremely well camouflaged and we had to be directed and redirected a few times before we spotted it under a low Combretum bush. Not far from there we found the real deal – a young leopard male stalking guinea fowl along the Matabole River's edge. He was so

relaxed and didn't even look at us when we approached to no more than 10 meters from him. He never managed to kill one of the "Mashatu chickens", but the entertainment he provided was priceless! This would be the first of two amazing predator sightings for the day. The second was in the afternoon when we found five spotted hyaenas hunting near pole hill. Few people realise just how effective spotted hyaenas are as hunters! This group was going after some impalas and we just couldn't keep up with them. In the end it seemed as if the predators gave up because we found them all heads down under a shepherd's tree. They must have picked up another scent. A herd of elephants was seen at Cheetah's Kopie in both the morning and afternoon and contained quite a few young calves. A herd of 20-odd giraffe was also seen on both drives and didn't move far during the heat of the day. After dark we spotted an aardwolf at the den near Main Camp!

Saturday 21 April

After having seen the Elephant Valley Pride regularly we decided to go and search for the Majale Island Pride in the south east of the reserve. They could have been anywhere so we were prepared for a long search, but the anticipation was fantastic! Our guide first took us east to the Pitsani River and from there we made our way south to where some reports of lion roars came from. After a good 90 minutes of searching we picked up fresh lion tracks leading towards the airfield. Luckily the new grass cover was not enough to prevent tracking and within 15 minutes we had located the young Majale female, her grandmother and the four small cubs! They were so beautiful and the long search was more than worth while!! The lions must have had a kill a few days before because they all looked well fed. No carcass could be found or smelt, however. Our drive back to camp included sightings of giraffe, kudu, impala, baboons, black-backed jackals and elephants.

The afternoon drive was very quiet, but after some searching we did find some bat-eared foxes. They are such active jackals – never disappointing to amuse onlookers when they dig for bugs. We had more sightings of giraffes and kudus before sunset which was enjoyed from Pole Hill. The view was magnificent!! Our tracker, Ben, then miraculously spotted a leopard male on the way back to camp! The little guy was hiding behind a mopane tree initially, but as soon as we switched off the car's engine, he popped his little head out and eventually relaxed enough for us to get a full view of the sub-adult.



Sunday 22 April

An unforgettable morning drive in the Central Area produced two magnificent herds of elephants – one on Majale Island and the other at Graham's Tree. All together we must have seen nearly 250 elephants on the single drive! There are few places in Africa where so many elephants can be seen in so little time and probably none where they are so extremely relaxed! The rocky outcrops along the river produced special sightings of dassies and klipspringers, together with more common species such as kudu and baboons. My personal highlight was what started out as a glimpse of a leopard at Graham's Tree. It was a juvenile male on the move and soon we caught up with him and were able to get a very decent view of the youngster. His mother was nowhere to be found in the immediate vicinity...

Our spotted friend eluded us in the afternoon, but more elephants were on the cards. We were able to count a

herd which we found at Moddergat, since they were walking in single file. Seventy eight animals in total!! That forms one very long line of elephant!! The nocturnal creatures were plentiful and we enjoyed sightings of bushbabies, genets, a black-backed jackal, bat-eared foxes and many mice! We also found a huge Verreaux's eagle-owl before we arrived back at camp at 19:00.

Monday 23 April

The late March rains brought with it the difficulty of following leopard tracks in the generally dusty plains of the Central Area. After a considerable search for the spotted ghosts along the Majale River we decided to head for the Pitsani River in search of another spotted creature – the spotted hyaena. Lady luck was on our side as we passed Bryce's Store and found four "spotties" walking in the road in front of us! All four were adults and on a mission it seemed. After following them for a short while, we decided to turn back west, only to find more elephants...170-odd of them!! Moddergat and Well-shaped Mashatu were the elephant hotspots for the morning and also produced sightings of impala, kudu and zebra.

I believe one should "work for your sightings". Mashatu is not a zoo and therefore one cannot expect to find lions, leopards and cheetahs resting around every corner. Our hope was to find lions, but they proved to be very elusive! So we worked for our visual... Our ranger picked up a set of fresh tracks, probably from early the previous evening, near the airfield and followed them all the way to the Limpopo River. The dense vegetation made it very difficult to follow the tracks, but after about 30 minutes we heard the call of lion cubs. We had located the Majale Island female and her four small cubs. They were still resting in the shade of the crotons, but soon became active and disappeared into the undergrowth... Back on the road to camp we located bat-eared fox, porcupine, jackal and springhare!

Tuesday 24 April

What a wonderful predator morning!! Lions at Cheetah's Koppie; a leopard at Beacon Hill; and three hyaenas at Three Mashatu Dam. The lion pride was the Elephant Valley Pride and the cats were feeding on an impala carcass which they probably stole from a leopard. The hyaenas were resting at the dam and the leopard was a sub adult male resting in the comfort and relative safety of a large Mashatu Tree. To top it all off, we found over a hundred elephants throughout the morning!!

The Elephant Valley Pride had moved to Baboon's Bedroom in the afternoon and we could only assume that they had finished the impala during the morning. We were fortunate to find another leopard before sunset – this time a large, nervous male. He only provided us with a very brief glimpse of his massive head. On the way back from the vlei we passed a lone spotted hyaena and a small family of bat-eared foxes. Ostriches and giraffes were also found in great numbers in the open areas near the vlei!

Wednesday 25 April

Today started out very quietly, but sightings picked up slowly as the day heated up. Kudu, eland, impala, baboon and vervet monkeys were all seen along the banks of the Majale River. Elephants were found in small scattered herds throughout the central area and so were zebras and wildebeest. No lions or other cats were found, but we did see an elusive bush pig family – an amazing sighting in any reserve! Bird sightings included marabou storks, crimson-breasted shrike, African spoonbill and pale-chanting goshawk!

The tables did not really turn in the afternoon, which also started out relatively quiet. More baboons kept us entertained near Church Mashatu and a rock python was a great sighting near Lucinda Crossing. Only after dark did the action really start with sightings of honey badger and eventually a leopard youngster in Elephant Valley. This young male was a real poser and provided fantastic photographic opportunities!

Thursday 26 April

After having seen the Elephant Valley Pride and the young Majale Island Female this past week, it was high time we found the old Majale Island granny...and we did! This very old lion was resting alone at Graham's Tree and looked in relatively good shape for a lioness which should be near 15 years old. Her face tells a thousand stories. Her mouth hardly closes anymore and it is anyone's guess whether she can actually catch even small prey on her own anymore. A trip past Jackals Koppie produced a sighting of more than 50 elephants grazing in the open plains. The same area was filled with herds of impalas, wildebeest and eland. In the afternoon we found elephants at Frazer Jones Weir and three hyaenas in the Dead Croton area. The highlight certainly must have been four cheetahs found near the vlei where they had just killed an impala ram! We spent the best part of the afternoon with them until the setting sun called us for drinks at the cocktail spot. From there we headed back to camp for another delicious meal.

Friday 27 April

The Majale Island lion pride was again found near the Limpopo River and this time the young mother of four had killed a warthog female, much to the delight of the cubs. They were in a really dense area which made it difficult to get close to them. The four cheetahs which had been spotted the previous evening, however, were in the open and allowed us to pull up right next to them! They were also well fed and content to just relax in the cool morning air. Elephants were seen regularly as they seemed to be scattered all over the reserve. We could not find a leopard, however, and no hyaenas showed themselves this morning. Beautiful birds included white-fronted bee-eaters and saddle-billed storks! One of my favorite sightings of the morning was that of a group of banded mongooses.

We decided to go past the lions again in the afternoon and found them in more or less the same spot, but a bit closer to the riverbed. The warthog had not been eaten completely and two of the cubs were munching away, whilst the other two played with their massive mother's tail. The four cheetahs were still resting north of the vlei. A lone hyaena patrolled its range near Pole Hill and a family of six bat-eared foxes were scavenging near Quelea Colony. Ben, our tracker, also spotted a bushbaby, genet and Africa wild cat on the way back to camp.

Saturday 28 April

We were met by a family of six warthogs just outside the camp gates at 06:05 and waved the resident bushbuck goodbye as we set out on our morning drive. A slow drive along the Majale produced sightings of baboons, impala, a water monitor, two honey badgers and a herd of giraffe. We enjoyed coffee with a herd of elephants feeding not far from us in the wild sage below wildebeest coffee. From there we watched an African hawk-eagle hunt a guinea fowl successfully! The guineas seem to be all over the place! More giraffe waited for us at Grahams Tree, and then a small group of foraging hyaenas at the edge of the Matabole River. We drove back west along it with the hope of finding the young male leopard that often hangs around Beacon Hill, but no luck. We did, however, see a puff adder and three kori bustards along that stretch of road!

In the afternoon we went out with resident leopard researcher, Villiers Steyn, in search of one of his study females, Shashi. A scenic drive up the Majale River took us past herds of zebra and wildebeest up to an open area where Villiers explained to us how researchers catch leopards. A tricky business if you ask me! From there we drove to a high hill and watched Villiers run to the top from where he tried to locate Shashi. There was no signal. He explained that she was in a very rocky area of her range, so we continued in search of other leopards in the Main Camp area. Fortunately a young male was spotted near the island next to the White Cliffs! He was relaxed and only slightly concerned about a big troop of baboons which were making ready for a good night's sleep further upstream. We headed back to the camp knowing much more about Africa's most beautiful cat and the current conservation efforts concerning leopards in Africa.

Sunday 29 April

The day was filled with sightings of impalas, kudus, warthogs, wildebeests, zebras, jackals, steenbok, and baboons as well as two leopard!!

It was at the Majale crossing when ranger Fish spotted the first leopard. It was a juvenile leopard walking in the Majale Riverbed but as the vehicle got closer the timid leopard ran into the mopane trees for cover. Driving up the river we saw our second leopard hidden behind a termite mound.

A herd of forty elephants was seen wandering at Hammerkop Crossing. There were a few young ones that were drinking water and splashing each other. It was wonderful to see these calves being so playful. The bigger elephants were browsing nearby in the mopane trees and paid little attention to their young elephants or to us.

Sundowners were enjoyed with great sighting of bushbabies. Driving back to camp we also saw a small spotted genet and an African wild cat.

Monday 30 April

The early morning started off a bit chilly but as soon as the sun had risen it got very warm very quickly! The highlight of today was seeing a brown hyena and it was also our first sighting of the day. Brown hyenas are rare to see at Mashatu but amazingly this one was found walking straight towards Main camp. The hyena had an old carcass in its mouth that looked like the backbone of a giraffe. After spotting the hyena all the guests were excited and on a mission to spot lots of game.

At Crocodile Pool we spotted a herd of twenty elephants. The huge grays were having an early morning browse

and the leaves were fresh and moist. At Braai Kopppie there was another herd of twenty elephants seen wandering through the bush. A third herd of thirty elephants was found drinking water at Dispute Corner. To our disbelief another brown hyena was spotted at Pole Hill to end off a wonderful mornings drive.

The afternoon drive was for big cats. The rangers tried their best and at the Limpopo Airfield a leopard was seen stalking duiker. The duiker had seen the leopard and it ran away and finally hid in an abandoned burrow. We were all worried about the duiker's choice of refuge, but the leopard moved on and the duiker finally came out of the burrow quite safe. Another glimpse of a female leopard was had near the horse safari operation where the rangers were tracking lion spoor. It was here they eventually also spotted the Majale Island Pride of lions walking toward the Limpopo River.

