

Mashatu Game Sightings 30 November - 31 December 2008



Sunday 30th November

A scorching sun blazed over the landscape on Sunday, reminding us all how desperately we need the rain. Morning game drives were fortunate enough to spot a juvenile male leopard going about his business of finding a shady concealed spot to wait out the heat of the day in the Mashatu tree grove of Baboon's Bedroom. To the south, in much the more open territory surrounding Pole Hill a trio of hyenas was flopped in the shade of a shepherd's bush, obviously not about to move in a hurry. A family group of elephants was spotted walking past in single file, perhaps on their way to water and shade. The Well-shaped Mashatu area proved to be a good place to watch elephants as there were around a hundred of them mud bathing, drinking and socializing in this area. The wildebeest have given birth across the reserve, and a special treat is watching them frolic with their herds, apparently unaware of the dryness of the landscape around them.

Monday 01st December

The first day of the new month was mercifully cool compared to the previous day, although no sign of rain could be seen. In the afternoon new arrivals were greeted by the New Pride lion trio resting at Dispute Corner, perhaps hoping to repeat their previous feat of killing an eland near this natural riverbed waterhole. At Nel's Windmill a female leopard was seen, and a sub-adult male was spotted north of Graham's Tree. This young cat was apparently hoping to ambush a warthog because it was watching the entrance of a burrow intently for 20 minutes or more. Gently tiptoeing around the entrance this leopard scouted the area, and eventually stuck his head down the hole to see if anyone was at home – probably a sign of his inexperience as a spooked warthog leaving a den could cause a lot of damage! The leopard eventually lost interest, abruptly hopped off the termite mound above the den and disappeared effortlessly into the gathering darkness.



Tuesday 02nd December

A similar day to Monday in terms of weather, but the animal dynamics had changed. An amazing moon was up last night with two stars on either side of a slither of the moon. On the morning drive two hyenas were spotted on the move early on near Cheetah's Koppie. Guests saw the quiet interaction of a lioness and her two cubs as they rested, played and suckled below Jackal's Koppie during the day. An adult male leopard was seen briefly near Lucenda Crossing and a herd of nearly fifty elephants was encountered in the Moddergat area. And yet another 100 browsing below Braai Koppie along the Majale River.

Wednesday, 3rd December

This morning we set out with Jeanetta, the elephant researcher to track down some of the herds she study within the reserve. We were not disappointed as we came across several herds moving into the central section of the reserve, Amongst these were the families of Diane, 1-Tusk and Agatha. The temperatures increased rapidly today after the two days of cloudy, cool weather. As a result the elephants headed straight for the waterholes near Wallow and we sat watching herd after herd coming through for a drink and a mudbath. We watched the babies swim and submerge themselves completely in the muddy water. Even the adult females joined in the fun. Once again the lioness and her cubs were seen near Jackals Koppie. The cubs are growing up fast and becoming more and more adventurous by the day.

Thursday, 4th December

Another hot day with little relief in the form of rain. During the game drives two lionesses were spotted feeding on a zebra they caught earlier. Elephants were out in large numbers as typical for this time of the year with over a 100 elephants walking down the Matabole River. On the evening drive a magnificent female leopard was seen hunting near Dispute Corner. General game was plentiful and we watched several herds of wildebeests with their newborn calves. Another splendid sighting was that of a bush pig scurrying away.



Friday, 5th December

Another exciting day with good sightings of the lionesses and the three cubs, a magnificent male leopard, hyenas and elephant. During our morning drive we encountered the lionesses with the three cubs. The two males have joined up with the pride and in an altercation one of the young cubs were badly injured by the male lion. The young male leopard often spotted along the Matabole River was resting comfortably on a large branch of a Mashatu tree, while a lone hyena was seen walking into the thick undergrowth along the Pitsane River. The elephants of course was spread all along the Majale River, with babies playing while mothers were searching for the fresh green grass.

Saturday, 6th December

As the day progressed dark clouds started to build up and at last by 18h00 thunder could be heard and at last it started raining. One of the great sightings of the day was a sighting of baby Bat eared foxes near their den. General game was as normal amazing with great sightings of eland, wildebeest, kudu and large herds of impalas. The elephants were all along the Majale River with babies playing, young bulls play fighting and adult cows plucking trunks filled with grass. As we drove along our ranger pointed to several of the magnificently coloured birds that arrived back on the reserve with the rains. We listened and watched the Woodland Kingfisher, and at Wallow saw large numbers of Egyptian geese, Dabchicks, Knobbilled ducks and many more.



Monday, 8 December

A sunny morning as we set out on our drive. Not far from the Main Camp we encountered a small family of elephants walking towards the west. Near Kanda Rock Camp, we watched a troop of baboons in the Majale River drinking from a pool, while several of the youngsters were playing along the steep bank of the river. As we drove along, our tracker pointed out several of the colourful birds and remarked on some of their calls. He pointed to a Woodland Kingfisher and we listened to its “chip chrrrrr” while sitting on an overhanging Mashatu branch. Just after sunset our tracker spotted a magnificent leopard near Dispute corner. It was a young male and very comfortable with the game viewer, allowing us to watch and follow him for some time as he weaved through the riverine bush.

Tuesday, 9 December

Early morning we came across a herd of approximately 30 elephants walking while browsing on the green mopane leaves as they made their way towards the Matabole River from Agate’s Koppie. Along the Matabole River we came across a large herd of zebras with several foals. Not far from the zebra, a lone wildebeest was running in circles for no apparent reason, or so we thought..... The predators eluded us today, but there were more than enough of the smaller creatures to entertain us on our drive. One of the highlights was a family of bat-eared foxes with two little pups. They were so cute!

Wednesday, 10 December

We went out on a beautiful but extremely hot afternoon. As we were driving along, we saw a few giraffe, some zebra and many impala. After stopping to watch a couple of birds (such as a purple roller and Kori Bustard), we turned the corner and almost drove straight into a young lioness (4-5 years old) which was lying in the middle of the road. She was tired and did not feel like moving, but she seemed frustrated by the flies, and when we looked a little closer there was a bite mark on the top of her right hip. After leaving her, we then bumped into a young bull elephant that was left at the back of the herd. After driving for a while we stopped on the side of a river. Another vehicle was on the

other side taking pictures of a big lioness. We watched for a while and then all of a sudden two cubs came running out of the bushes. This was a wonderful sighting, and they looked beautiful in the setting sun. They walked across the riverbed towards us and settled next to a few bushes where the cubs played among dead trees which had fallen down. The cubs were also very interested in a couple of franklins that were walking in their direction, but they only watched as the franklins realized where they were heading and scurried off. By this time it was getting dark, so we headed back towards the camp. On the way home we saw a small spotted genet, an African Wild cat and a couple of eland. It turned out to be an excellent drive.

Thursday, 11 December

This morning we had an early start to the day as we were heading to a camp called Nitani - north-west of Main Camp. It was quite a cloudy morning to begin with, so it was not that hot on the way there. Not so long after we left we spotted a jackal and two puppies running around. They were very sweet and fluffy, but we only got a glimpse as they run off very quickly. We also saw a couple of giraffes wildebeest – many with babies. After seeing quite a few of the regular impala, we came across a huge herd of elephants that were browsing among the Mopane trees. These also had little babies, so we did not look at them for long. We then got to the camp and had a cup of coffee and looked around. When we had all finished, it had already started to get very hot so the trip back was a very uncomfortable one. We came across a hyena, and another large herd of elephants on our way back to the camp. The matriarch of this herd was a very nervous elephant as there were tiny babies everywhere. She started flapping her ears – a warning to us. The guests grew very nervous, so we passed the elephants quickly. We then drove onto a tall Koppie where stopped to watch the elephants walk in the riverbed in search of some water. There was a beautiful view from where we were standing and we could see for miles and miles with the tops of the baobabs showing every so often. We had finished the last of our water, so we hurried back to camp for a delicious brunch.

Friday, 12 December

We left the camp on a very hot afternoon with a specific animal in mind: a cheetah. We turned left out of the gates instead of the usual right, and we drove up the road that follows the power lines. While driving along, we saw a herd of zebra and a lone wildebeest. We also spotted an eagle on the hunt. We turned off the power line road and came across a couple of ostriches. The black and white feathers of the male ostrich were very distinct amongst the browns and greens of the grass and trees. On the way down the hill we also spotted a few elephants looking for something to eat and some shade in the riverbed. As we drove over a little hill we came across a pair of ostriches with about 11 chicks. We only got a glimpse of the fluffy birds before they ran into the bush. After we had finished trying to see the ostriches properly we drove for quite a while in search of a cheetah. During our search, we came across a jackal, but unfortunately no cheetah.....

We finally got tired of looking and went to find the lions that the guests had seen during the morning drive. This pride consisted of four young lions: 2 females and 2 males. One of the males was a grumpy one with a collar. He was mating with one of the females (not his sister), so we got quite a show. We then headed to our sundowners spot where we watched a beautiful sunset and the rising of big, orange full moon. During our drive home, we came across a journey of giraffe, and a small-spotted genet - and of course the regular impalas were seen throughout the drive.

Saturday, 13 December

This morning we woke up to a chilly breeze and a cloudy sky, so it was a nice change to set off for a drive a bit cooler than normal. Just outside the camp we saw a pair of warthog on their knees eating some grass, and a few impala that were running around amongst the bushes. We drove for a while and saw quite a few giraffe with babies. We then found the lions that we had seen the previous day. The male with the collar still looked very grumpy, and he and the female were not seen to interact again - so we left them and headed for a spot for tea. We parked in the shade of a beautiful tree and listened to the trumpeting and grumbles of a nearby herd of elephants. After tea we decided to go and look for them. There were too many to count as they were all behind trees, eating and playing. There were lots of babies in the herd and one in particular was very cheeky. We watched them for a while and then we moved off as we felt we were getting in their way.

Just after seeing the elephants we came across a couple of ostriches, male and female, running through the bush. The male was chasing the female, but he could not keep up and just gave up in the

end. This caused for quite a lot of amusement for us. On the way back to the camp we saw a lot of birds and quite a few eland.

The evening was a hot one. A couple of the guests decided to go on a cycle so there were fewer people on the vehicle. We went the same route as the previous afternoon's drive, along the power line road, in search for the cheetah that the guests wanted to see. We did not find it, but we did see lots of giraffe, impala, ostriches, elephants and eland. By that time we had been radioed to meet the cyclists at a point so they could have a drink. On the way to meeting them at Baboon's Bedroom we spotted a couple of jackals with their puppies. We got up really close to one of the adults, but we did not see the puppies much as they ran into the bushes with their other parent.

We found the cyclists and then had sundowners under a beautiful pink sky and watched the sun set. On the way home we saw many herds of impala, a herd of wildebeest and a genet. We also saw a giant eagle owl which was very exciting. This was a wonderful ending to a lovely day but there was still no rain so we will keep on hoping.



Sunday, 14 December

During the game drives today we came across two different prides of lions. On Majale Island we tracked down one of the Majale Island lionesses with her two cubs. The two male lions were visiting the New Pride with their two cubs near McKenzie Koppie. We sat for some time watching the two little cubs play, and it was hard to eventually say goodbye. Several herds of elephants were spotted throughout the property and we waded our way through them in search of the elusive leopard.

During the afternoon drive we came across three hyenas near McNiels Pool resting in the late afternoon sun.

Monday, 15 December

At long last we tracked down one of the elusive leopards of Mashatu. We encountered a female near Well-shaped Mashatu, resting on a thick overhanging branch of a Mashatu tree. The leopard could not be less interested in us if it tried. The New Pride with the two big males made a kill during the day, and on the afternoon drive we watched them as they devoured the remains of a zebra. A lone male hyena was seen on the move near the Main Camp, while close to 50 elephants were seen feeding near Dead Croton. Another great sighting during the morning drive was that of two bush pigs scurrying away into the undergrowth near Nel's Windmill.

Tuesday, 16 December

What an amazing morning with over a hundred elephants along the Majale River. We stopped overlooking Dispute Corner and watched herd after herd as they walked down the riverbank to drink at a pool in the Majale River. Some of the elephants were drinking from the pool, while most of the adults were digging for fresh water near the stagnant pool. Young babies tired of waiting fell asleep in the cool sand close to their mothers or baby sitters. On the periphery a herd of impalas was patiently waiting for the elephants to finish before they would get a turn. During the morning a herd of wildebeests came down to drink at the Main Camp waterhole. In the group were several young calves. The New Pride was still near Jackal's Koppie, with the two cubs fast asleep as we came across them on the drives.

Wednesday, 17 December

Quite a change in the weather as we set out on an overcast morning with the promise of rain. On the drive we encountered several herds of wildebeest and zebras. A group of giraffes were browsing on the Acacia trees near the golf course. As we drove by, a newborn calf watched us curiously - following our every move. A troop of baboons was playing near Fig Tree crossing, climbing up and down the steep embankment of the Majale River. Nearby a herd of elephants was resting under several Mashatu trees. We spotted a lone hyena resting near the Main Camp under a shady Shepherd's tree.

Setting out in the afternoon, we firstly visited the pride of lions with the young cubs once again. While driving, our ranger spotted fresh leopard tracks and we set out tracking the cat. Just before sunset, we came across a magnificent male feeding on an unfortunate impala.

Thursday, 18 December

An exciting day with the wild dogs back on the property after a long absence. During the morning we came across them already resting but in the afternoon we were in time to see them hunt down several impalas. During the morning drive we watched close to a hundred elephants as they walked into Wallow for a drink and a mudwallow. Watching elephants at water provides some of the most amusing viewing. The young babies were splashing about in the mud, finally covered from head to toe.

During dinner, a small group of elephants entertained us at the Main Camp waterhole.

During the afternoon drive, we came across yet another male leopard near Dispute Corner. He was on the hunt, and after following him for some time, we let him be. The lions had moved a few kilometres, and we tracked them down near Scrapper - fast asleep among the Croton trees,

Friday, 19 December

Shortly after the game drives left the Main Camp, a herd of approximately 20 elephants arrived at the waterhole. The group stopped at the one side of the waterhole where they drank - jostling for position while others having had their fill moved to a sandy patch nearby where they dusted themselves and ate trunk-fulls of soil. The lions were spotted during the drive. The two males were with the lioness and her two cubs – all were fast asleep. At Dispute Corner a magnificent male leopard was seen feeding on a big impala. Nearby a herd of close to 50 elephants was spotted browsing on the numerous Acacia trees along the river's edge. The wild dogs were also still in the area, and we had a great sighting of the 23 dogs near the Matabole River.

Saturday, 20 December

A wonderful sunny morning with the promise of a very warm midday. Once again we encountered the New Pride with the two males and the lioness with the cubs. All the adults were fast asleep in the morning sun, but the cubs were nowhere to be seen – they were probably already hidden deep in the undergrowth, and were most likely also fast asleep.

A large herd of elephants with tiny babies entertained us for sometime as they played in a mud pool near Dispute Corner in the Majale River. The leopard we spotted the night before was still in the vicinity, and encountering this amazing creature during the day was fantastic. By 09h00 the temperature was reaching the high 30's and we headed back to camp. En-route back, we came across four hyenas already fast asleep in the shade of a big Shepherd's tree.

Sunday, 21st December

This morning we were lucky enough to find the pride of lions again and this time the cubs were out and about. What a great sighting with the cubs growing up, way to quickly, and getting more and more inquisitive. A male leopard was setting high up in a Mashatu tree. The sun was shining on the coat of the leopard turning the yellow into sparkles of gold. Four hyenas were still in the vicinity of White Cliffs and we came across them early on our morning drive. Once more the elephants were out and about in large numbers and we saw in total more than a 100 elephants on the drive. The afternoon drive was as eventful as the morning drive with another visit to the lions and a leopard feeding on an impala near Hammerkop Crossing. Near Cheetahs Koppie we spotted a lone hyena on the move just after sunset.



Monday, 22nd December

During the evening the clouds started moving in and by the morning a thick cloud blanket formed over the reserve. The temperatures dropped and we had a great morning out with cooler temperatures and a few drops of rain. The lions were also more active with this morning and we came across a lone lioness closely guarded by the two dominant males. As we watched one of the males started mating with the lioness, quite a sight to see. At Gabions a magnificent female leopard was fast asleep as we approached. The approaching got little more than a stir from the female only slightly lifting her head in our direction. This morning we came across no less than four different herds of elephants at different locations within the reserve. By the end of the morning drive we counted nearly a hundred elephants!

Tuesday, 23rd December

An exciting afternoon with a little bit of rain towards the Limpopo River but no rain to the north of the reserve. It was an afternoon for the predators and we visited the lioness and her two cubs again near McKenzie Kopie, all resting in the cool cloudy weather. Our ranger tracked down a female leopard just before sunset near Moddergat and yet another leopard was spotted after sunset on route to camp. A group of hyenas were also starting their nightly activities near the M1 crossing.



Wednesday, 24th December

An overcast morning with the promise of rain as we set out with Jeanetta, the elephant researchers in search of her study animals. Not far from the main camp along Elephant Valley we came across our first herd for the morning. The herd was spread out along the ridge feeding on the bright green Mopani leaves as they ambled along towards the Majale River. Several herds were making their way towards the Majale River. Amongst these were Therese and her family - a group of approximately 40 elephants. We followed the herds to the Majale River where most continued feeding this time from the thorny Acacia trees. Amongst the breeding herds were several bulls including a big musth bull. A younger bull was browsing on what must have been a delicious tree when the bigger bull arrived. Quickly the younger bull moved off but not without a huge branch of the tree, which he hooked in his tusks carrying it high of the ground. As we approached the end of our drive thunder started rumbling

and the sky darkened. Rain was here and just as we arrived back at camp the heavens opened and it started raining. Another unusual sighting was that of a honey badger feeding on a baby impala.

The afternoon drive was as eventful as the morning. The skies cleared just enough for us to enjoy our afternoon drive with a great sighting of the four lions on a wildebeest kill, a magnificent leopard fast asleep high up on a tree and some more elephants. Christmas dinner was amazing with great food, children opening their Christmas presents and to end the evening an amazing staff choir singing and dancing in the boma. Some of the children even joined the festivities.



Thursday, 25th December

During the night the heavens opened once more and by 07h00 in the morning we received 70 mm of rain. The best Christmas present we could have asked for. A few of the guests ventured out in the rain but most opted for a sleep in. On the morning drive a large herd of elephants were seen within Elephant Valley browsing on the plentiful Mopani trees. Several of the general game species were encountered including off course impala, a large herd of wildebeest and a big group of giraffes. Not too long ago the impalas started lamming and within most herds several little babies can be spotted. The afternoon drive was far more eventful with the rain stopping just long enough for us to enjoy the evening out. We once more encountered the lions. This time they were feeding on a wildebeest carcass and there were little left by the time we met up with them near Mckenzie Koppie. At Moddergat we encountered a leopard on the hunt and on route back to the Main Camp an African wildcat.

Friday, 26th December

Another great morning with the lions! By now the wildebeest carcass was all but gone and the lazy lions were all fast asleep. That was until a few minutes before we left. One of the lioness got up and walked over to the dominant male and soon after the mating ritual started all over again. The elephants preferred the much rockier sections of the reserve this morning and were seen mainly spending their time to the west of the main road. After the good rains of the 24th and 25th most of the rivers came down and the Majale and Limpopo Rivers were flowing in full force.

This evening we were lucky enough to see the pack of wild dogs. We came across the dogs near Lucenda crossing along the Majale River. The dogs were playing in the river when we spotted them. After the great rains the Majale River flooded and has been flowing steady for a day or two. While watching the wild dogs two hyenas stumbled on them and soon the wild dogs were chasing the hyenas. What an amazing thing to see! We also once again visited the pride of lions near McKenzie Koppie.

Saturday, 27th December

The pride of lions have moved up the Pitsane River and this morning we tracked them down just below Pitsane Koppie, they were on the move and we followed them for some time. Near Old man's grave along the Nyaswe River we spotted a female leopard feeding on a baby impala. With the impalas now giving birth in large numbers most of the predators have been focusing on these little ones. In Elephant Valley we sat amongst a 100 elephants browsing on the Mopani leaves in the area. During the afternoon drive we visited the New pride still spending time near McKenzie Koppie. The dominant male was once more mating with one of the lionesses. This morning the cubs were out and about as well and watching them stalk each other and anything else that moves were very funny. Near Quelea Colony two hyenas were on the move as well most likely in search of food.



Sunday, 28th December

It has been raining on and off since the 24th of December. On several occasions the game drives had to come back early or not gone out at all, but no one is complaining. With the rains staying away for so long and the probability of another dry summer the rain was the best Christmas present we could have asked for.

On Sunday morning it was raining but some ventured out on the reserve and was rewarded with a herd of nearly 75 elephants along MMBA ridge. The pride of seven lions was also encountered both on the morning and afternoon drives in the same location near McKenzie Koppie. The dominant male has been seen mating with one of the lionesses on several occasions during the previous week.

Monday, 29th December

During the evening drive and again on Monday morning the pack of 23 wild dogs were spotted near the Tented Camp. On Monday morning the dogs were enjoying the cool water in the Nyaswe River and we watched them play for some time running in and out of the river. It is still overcast, but the rains stayed away until we reached camp after our morning drive. During the day we received close to 60 mm of rain. A herd of elephants were also enjoying the water, drinking and playing at Croc pool in the Majale River. On the evening drive we came across a group of three lions but this time they were on the move. We watched as they spotted a warthog and started their flanking maneuver stalking the warthog from both sides. Unfortunately for the lions the warthog had no intention of becoming dinner and made a run for it. The lions abandoned the chase and made themselves comfortable on a small hill. On route back to camp we encountered three hyenas out scavenging.

Tuesday, 30th December

At last the sun is out and the reserve looks like a whole new place. The birds were out and about chirping away and one of the great sightings this Tuesday morning was a large flock of Abdim's stork. Another very memorable sighting was watching an impala give birth, something rarely seen. During the morning and afternoon drives we encountered a magnificent leopard near Moddergat, two hyenas on the prowl and three lions fast asleep near Well-shaped Mashatu. A herd of close to a 100 elephants was seen at the Confluence of the Nyaswe and Matabole rivers walking towards the riverine along the Majale River.

Wednesday, 31st December

A cloudy morning but no rain as we set out to explore the reserve. With the sunshine of the previous day green grass shoots are already visible and in places the yellow flowers of the Devil's thorn can already be seen. East of the Tented Camp a female leopard and her juvenile offspring were feeding on a young impala. Neither paid us any attention as we sat watching them for sometime. On our afternoon drive we returned to the leopard and watched and followed her for over an hour. What a magnificent creature! During the morning drive our ranger spotted fresh wild dog tracks and we tried our best to locate them but alas no luck. On the afternoon drive we had better luck and found the wild dogs along the Matabole River resting under thick Mopane trees, no wonder we did not spot them on the morning drive! The elephants seem to prefer the rocky areas at present, possibly because of all the mud along the rivers. We spotted a small family near the water tanks on MMBA ridge on our afternoon drive.