



## Mashatu Game Sightings 28th December – 29th January 2009



### **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.

## **Thursday, 1st January**

The first day of the New Year and we set out early morning to see what the New Year will hold. The elephants were out and about and we sat watching a herd of close to 50 elephants quietly enjoying the lush green mopane trees near the water tanks on MMBA ridge. Our ranger also pointed out some amazing birds to us and we listened to the various calls trying to identify the different bird species. On our afternoon drive we met up with the two lionesses again close to Cheetah's Koppie, they must have had a late night, because they hardly lifted their heads as we approached and the cameras started snapping away. We also spotted some of the smaller critters in the reserve on our evening drive including a civet and an African Wild cat.

## **Friday, 2nd January**

On Friday morning we managed to track down one of the male lions near Nel's Windmill. The big male was fast asleep and barely looked up as we approached. The elephants were also out in large numbers today. During the morning drive we watched a herd of over 50 elephants mud wallowing and playing near Well-shaped Mashatu, while during the evening drive we watched another group walking and feeding as the sun set in the west. Close to the Limpopo River a large group of giraffes were browsing on several Acacia trees in the area while a large herd of wildebeest was walking towards Pete's Pond for a drink. Impala babies by now are everywhere and most of the herds have several little babies running around.

## **Saturday, 3rd January**

On Saturday morning we set out with Jeanetta, the elephant researcher on the reserve to learn more about the elephants of the Tuli. Jeanetta has been studying the elephants here for the last 9 years. Below Braai Koppie we came across two different herds on their way to the Majale River. Jeanetta introduced us to the big group. The matriarch here was Hestelle, one of the oldest matriarchs in the central section of the reserve and definitely one of the favorites. In the other group was a very young female with no tail. The youngster has been seen on several occasions but Jeanetta was happy to see that the youngster was again with her herd and the wound around the tail looks a whole lot better. We watched and learn so much about the elephants and while watching them feed

on the Acacia trees a hyena quietly snuck past, trying to avoid being spotted by the elephants. Not far from where we were was a very young baby impala. We had our morning coffee stop at Fig tree Crossing and from our vantage point we could drink our coffee and watch the herd of elephants having their drink for the morning. During the evening drive we spotted both the lioness on her own as well as a young male leopard feeding on an unfortunate impala.



#### **Sunday, 4 January**

It was a warm summer's morning as we set out on our early drive. Below Jackals' Koppie we stopped to watch a group of close to 50 elephants walking towards the river. They were in quite a hurry to get to water and shade, knowing that today was going to be a very warm day. The two male lions with the Dingle lioness have moved onto Majale Island, and it is here that we came across them fast asleep in the morning sun. Even the leopard we tracked down near Lucenda was high up in a Mashatu tree, and already fast asleep. It was only the general game that seemed to be on the move, and we watched a herd of impalas with several youngsters as they fed along the open plains. A group of giraffes were seen feeding in the Acacia veld, using their long tongues to pick off the small leaves from among the big white thorns.

A highlight on the afternoon drive was enjoying our sundowners on top of the Boer War hill overlooking the vlei. In the vlei there were close to a 150 elephants all spread out. The vlei by now has got plenty of water, and the elephants were making the most of it - playing and throwing mud all over themselves.

#### **Monday, 5 January**

Cheetahs! What an exciting morning, spotting seven cheetahs near Old Rock Camp along the Majale River. The group consisted of 6 adult and sub-adult females, and one adult male. Cheetahs have not been seen for several weeks, and spotting seven on one morning is quite a treat. The lioness and her two cubs were back at Nel's Windmill and fast asleep when we arrived. It felt like there were elephants everywhere today, with large groups seen in the vlei, at Crocodile Pool in the Majale River and at Scrapper.

On the afternoon drive we came across 3 hyenas on the move. The evening drive back to camp was eventful, with a great sighting of a large spotted genet, and a magnificent Giant Eagle Owl.

#### **Tuesday, 6 January**

After tracking for some time, we found the lioness with her two cubs along the Matabole River. Lower down along the Matabole River near Baboons Bedroom, we sat among a group of close to a 100 elephants as they walked past us towards the river. We really hoped to find a leopard this morning, and our ranger set out tracking. We came across some fresh tracks, and Fish started his search. It took some time going backwards and forwards, but eventually we found our guy – fast asleep high up in a tree.

On our afternoon drive we visited the leopard near Well-shaped Mashatu again. This time it was a lot easier finding him, as he was still fast asleep in the tree in which we found him during the morning drive.



### **Wednesday, 7 January**

This morning we set out with the elephant researcher, Jeanetta, in search of her subjects. We did not have far to travel before we spotted the first of many herds of the morning. Jeanetta introduced us to Charge and her family close to Disappointment Koppie where they were feeding on the devil's thorn. We followed them as they slowly moved towards the Majale River. Here we watched them digging for water, even though there is plenty available in the river. Jeanetta explained that the elephants prefer fresh clean water rather than the muddy water currently in the pools. Hestelle's herd was the next to arrive in the river, and gently rumbled a greeting to Charge. Along the Majale River we encountered several different herds for the morning. Amongst the groups was a big breeding bull moving from herd to herd, inspecting the different females. As we watched, he walked up to a big Mashatu tree, reached up as far as he could to pick one of the highest branches on the tree, and broke it off with a loud crack. Soon a group of youngsters joined him in feeding on the tree, but the females kept a respectful distance.

During the evening drive we came across a magnificent female leopard near Beacon Hill. We all were in awe with the beauty of this creature, and stayed with her for some time - unwilling to leave.

## Thursday, 8 January

A great morning for predators! It was a wonderful sunny morning as we set out on our drive with our first stop at McKenzie Koppie where we visited the two lionesses of the Majale Island resting in the early morning sun. Near Fig Tree Crossing, Fish tracked down a female leopard on the hunt. She gave us a quick snarl as we approached, and we respected her wishes - keeping our distance as we followed. Not long after we located the leopard we encountered a large herd of elephants. The leopard gave the elephants one look before climbing into a big Mashatu tree. Near Old Rock Camp, two hyenas were on the move towards the Majale River, possibly for their morning drink. Near Quelea Colony we spotted a bush pig, but as soon as it spotted us, it disappeared into the thick undergrowth.

Just after we drove out on our afternoon game drive the weather suddenly turned, and it started raining. It is the most amazing thing to listen to thunder and smell the wet soil as you drive through the reserve. The storm did not last long, and soon we were searching for leopards again.



## Friday, 9 January

This morning we were once again joined by our elephant researcher. Shortly before we found the elephants, we came across a group of three hyenas feeding on a newborn baby kudu in the Matabole River. Not long after, we heard hyenas laughing. Our ranger tracked the hyenas, and we spotted a group of six hyenas "arguing" over territory. At last it was the elephants' turn - the first group we encountered was Broken Tusk and two of her calves. The rest of the herd had already moved deep into the Croton thicket. Agatha and her family was also slowly making their way into the Croton thickets, where the grass has grown a lot quicker - this together with the wonderful shade is an elephant's haven. Near Fig tree Crossing, ranger Fish pointed out a young male leopard in a gully. The leopard, as if on cue, walked out of the gully and up the riverbank. The last stop on the morning drive was watching Ilze and her family mud bathing in a pool in the Majale River. They were diving head first into the pool, submerging themselves completely and then popping up again. They all seemed to be very reluctant to leave the cool of the mud pool.

During our evening drive, we were once again lucky to locate the wild dog pack, as well as a pride of lions. After sunset our ranger tracked down an elusive leopard, and before we reached camp we also spotted an African wild cat.



### **Saturday, 10 January**

What an exciting morning. We set out early on our morning drive, and located the herd with the young female elephant which has a snare around her back foot. Our ranger was notified the previous day that a veterinarian of the Wildlife Department would be assisting with the removal of the snare. Bashi called in the sighting, and later in the morning we were able to assist in the darting of the huge animal, and the subsequent removal of the snare. What an experience! We helped measuring the young female's shoulder height and several other dimensions that Jeanetta showed us while she and John (the vet) were cutting away the snare and cleaning the wound. In no time it was all done, and John injected the female with an antidote. Five minutes later she stood up, rumbled and her family rushed over to rejoin her, rumbling and touching her continuously.



### **Sunday 11 January**

On our morning drive we were amazed to see how lusciously green the vegetation was. Apart from the wide variety of bird species (some of which are migrant species such as the Carmine bee-eaters) we also saw plenty of game species. Zebra, blue wildebeest and impala herds were plentiful. What made the morning drive even more special was the lioness we found at Cheetah's Koppie. She was merely resting in the shade. Very relaxed. Large herds of elephants were seen at Jackal Koppie, Moddergat and Cheetah's Koppie. The biggest herd was easily around 80 elephants.

On our afternoon drive we were very lucky to see 16 wild dogs at Kanda Waterhole! They were resting and later got up and trotted off into the bush - probably hunting, as they are known to hunt in the late afternoon. We also saw a male spotted hyena resting in the Majale River.

### **Monday 12 January**

Early on our morning drive we found an adult lioness at Scrapper, but as soon as we found her, she chose a soft resting spot under a Sheppard's tree. More large cats were to follow as we found a beautiful mother leopard with her sub adult male cub at Pitsane Koppie. They were not as relaxed as the lioness and we had to weave through the bush in order to follow them. After some tracking they did what leopards do so well – vanish! From Mckenzie Koppie we saw a herd of elephant which looked like nearly 200 strong. It was the largest herd of elephant we have ever seen! Truly amazing.

On our evening drive, we were fortunate enough to see the two leopards of the morning's drive again. This time they were much more relaxed since it was getting dark, which is their 'time'. We also found 3 spotted hyenas moving in the riverbed. Birds were as always plentiful as was giraffe, zebra and many more species of animals.

### **Tuesday 13 January**

On a wet morning drive we did not see as many bird species, as they are not as active during rainy conditions. Most animals were standing under the shade of trees in the drizzle of rain. Another large herd of elephants was seen close to Jackal Koppie and not far from there, at Scrapper, we found a single lioness resting in the open. We also found a stunning pair of bat-eared foxes. Warthog was plentiful and watching them wallow in the numerous mud wallows in the soil gave us plenty of great photographs.

### **Wednesday 14 January**

Another wet game drive! Even though it was drizzling as we were driving, it was still very special to see the much needed rain fall over the landscape like a blanket. Not only cleaning everything from a season of wind and dust, but also renewing life in all forms. To see all the baby animals in their hundreds was truly amazing. We found a herd of elephants feeding close to Cheetah's Koppie. We spend some time with them and then decided to head back to camp. Large herds of eland were seen running over the open landscape with kudu standing like statues amongst the lush green mopane shrubs. At McNeil's Pool a female spotted hyena was found. We stopped right next to the female and we were amazed to see how large an adult female hyena can be. We followed her down the riverbed as she was walking - as if she had to go and meet-up with someone somewhere.



### **Thursday 15 January**

On our beautiful sunny morning drive, we saw plenty of animal species – pretty much every herbivore there is to see at Mashatu. Zebra, impala, giraffe, eland and many more was seen feeding all across the landscape. Birds and their amazing calls filled the air and we even saw a pair of black backed jackal and bat eared foxes. On our way back to camp, we found 5 spotted hyenas! They were resting in a shady area along the Majale River. The most spectacular sighting, however, was not of the animals, but the yellow Devil's Thorn flowers growing all over. When we stopped for coffee and tea on a hill, as far as the eye can see it was as if the ground was covered in a field of gold. Stunning!

On our afternoon drive we found a lone female spotted hyena close to Old Rock camp. She was just resting and we could get very close to her. Duiker, kudu, zebra, impala and warthog was also seen during the drive.

### **Saturday 17 January**

On our morning drive we found a herd of almost 100 elephants. They were feeding along the Matebole River. The light was perfect for photography, and we took some beautiful pictures of baby elephants playing in the mud. We also spend some time with birds, such as the Kori bustard and the Three Banded Courser. Our guide told us some amazing stories and facts about birds. On our afternoon drive we heard guinea fowl making a typical alarm call as if there could be a leopard. As we drove closer, we got a glimpse of a large male leopard moving through the undergrowth. They are very elusive and cunning animals. We finally found the male leopard again, but this time he was on the opposite bank of the riverbed – looking straight at us. Truly an amazing creature.



### **Sunday 18 Jan**

On our afternoon game drive we stopped at a beautiful lookout point called Majale Cocktail . As we enjoyed some ice-cold G&T's, we heard guinea fowl making an alarm call. Our ranger said that we should go and have a look, since it might be a leopard down in the valley. After the drinks, we headed down to the riverbed and sure enough, we found not one but two leopards! They were still resting along the riverbank. It was a mother with her male cub. They were fairly relaxed and we got some stunning pictures of them together. We also saw plenty of elephants, giraffe, zebra and herds of impala.

### **Monday 19 Jan**

Early morning, we found a pride of lions. There were two adult males, three adult females and 4 stunning cubs! We followed them as they weaved through the bush and finally found a shady spot

under a big Mashatu tree. They adults were tired and were just resting, but the cubs made for some cute and funny entertainment – as they were playing all over the show with each other. After spending some time with the big cats, we drove around and found herds of elephants, zebra, wildebeest and giraffe. At Agates Koppie did we see a female spotted hyena as we made our way back to camp for brunch.

During our afternoon drive we encountered another large herd of elephants. At Frazer Jones' Weir we found a male leopard walking along the riverbed. The male was a bit shy and quickly disappeared into the night, but we at least got to see it perfectly. Zebra and wildebeest herds were also seen on our way back to camp, as well as impala, steenbok and giraffe.

### **Tuesday 20 Jan**

Our morning drive was filled with birds and general game species such as impala, warthog, zebra, wildebeest and eland. At Nel's Dam we found two leopards (a mother and her cub) resting in a large Mashatu tree. Both cats were very relaxed in our presence, and were draped over a large branch – fast asleep. We also saw black-backed jackal, duiker, steenbok, klipspringer and waterbuck. A herd of around 100 elephants concluded our morning drive. A female spotted hyena was seen at M1 crossing, and was walking briskly into the night. At Disappointment Koppie we found another large herd of elephants, and not too far from them were giraffe.

### **Wednesday 21 Jan**

Early morning we found a stunning female leopard sleeping in a Mashatu tree. This gave us the opportunity to take some beautiful pictures of this "Princess-of-Darkness and Stealth". Over the course of the rest of the drive we found herd after herd of elephants. Some were feeding on the millions of yellow flowers growing all over the area, while others, especially youngsters, were playing. Our highlight of the morning was a pack of African wild dogs at Hammerkop Crossing. All 16 of them had just caught two impalas! Watching them was truly one of the best experiences ever.

During our evening drive we were lucky to see the wild dogs once again, but they soon disappeared. Later we found a male leopard - also at Hammerkop Crossing. We followed this beautiful animal as it was walking along the riverbed and up onto a hill.



### **Thursday 22 Jan**

This morning we did not see any carnivores, but herds of elephants entertained us as they were feeding and playing in the morning sun. Bird calls filled the morning sky, and herds of giraffe, zebra

and wildebeest also made for some stunning photographic opportunities. Eland were seen running over the plains - leaving a trail of dust as they went.

During our evening drive we found three lions, two brothers and their sister, resting in the open. They are very relaxed and we could stop fairly close to these amazing cats. When they do look at you, they look right through you with those stunning, big yellow eyes. Later we also found a shy female leopard walking along a small drainage line, which runs into the large Majale River. We even saw some cute bat-eared foxes! These animals have large ears and they use them like satellite dishes to listen for arthropods underground.

### **Friday 23 Jan**

During our morning drive we had some beautiful sightings of birds - African-Hawk eagles, European rollers, bee-eaters and plenty more. We also spent some time with elephants as they were having a mud bath. The youngsters were playing in the mud, and gave us the opportunity to take some amazing pictures. Later we passed by herds of impala, zebra and giraffe. A spotted hyena was also seen resting in the shade along the Matebole River.



### **Sunday 25 Jan**

During our afternoon drive we were amazed to see how much rain has fallen during the impressive thunderstorm earlier that day. Bat eared foxes, baboons and jackal were just some of the animals we found. We also saw plenty of small aggregations of zebra and wildebeest. Due to an abundance of vegetation and water availability, these species break up in smaller herd sizes. Large herds are normally only found during the drier times of the year.

### **Monday 26 Jan**

Early morning at Scaper, we found the two adult male lions resting under a Sheppard's tree. They looked very tired – maybe because they were walking long distances patrolling their territory. We also found a lone female spotted hyena which was seen walking in the Majale River. A herd of almost 150 elephants was seen at Jackal's Koppie, they were grazing in the open plains. We sat with them for a while and then continued on our drive. Herds of eland, zebra, wildebeest and giraffe were also found on numerous occasions.

During our afternoon drive, we went back to the lions and found the two males' sister also with them. She must have been lying in a thicket in the morning, hiding from our view. We also sat for

quite a while with a family of bat-eared foxes. The youngsters were playing around while the adults were more serious, searching for food.

### **Tuesday 27 Jan**

While it was raining we decided to take a drive and see what we can find. Almost all of the animals were standing under trees, hiding from the precipitation. Zebra, giraffe and wildebeest were seen along with lots of impala. The rain did not help much, and we eventually headed back to camp. Our afternoon drive was short lived since it started pouring down with rain again. Seeing and hearing the Majale River flow, bank-to-bank, was priceless. But a warm shower and drink in the bar were awaiting us back at camp.



### **Wednesday 28 Jan**

A sunny morning at last! We found the two territorial male lions walking along thickets close to Baboon's Bedroom. Later we also found their sister not far from their resting spot out in the open. With the bright sunlight and crystal clear skies, photography was a pleasure. Birds were seen all over - their song filled the air. While raining, birds tend to keep quiet, but after the rain they are out calling marking their territories again. Three different herds of around 40 elephants were seen at McKenzie's Koppie, Three-Mashatu and the Nasjwe River respectively. After some slippery, but excellent 4x4 driving, we headed back to camp.

During our afternoon drive, we found a large herd of elephants along with giraffe, zebra and plenty of impala close to M1 Crossing. We later found the two male lions again and tried to follow them as they were walking in a southerly direction. Hearing these beasts roar at close range was truly unforgettable. The power in their voices is unmatched. Amazing!

### **Thursday 29 Jan**

Our morning drive was filled with animal sightings. Eland and impala seemed to be the most abundant, but then kudu and wildebeest were also seen more often. Most of the animals have new-borns with them and although they look small and fragile, they are lightning fast! Those little impalas are not as vulnerable as they were a month ago, but prove very difficult for any predator to catch. But even with that speed it is still impossible to outrun the quickest animal on land... the cheetah! Three male cheetahs were found close to Tented Camp. We just missed them hunting since they were feeding on a juvenile impala. We sat there until they were done feeding, and then followed them to where they found a shady tree under which to rest. This was the highlight of the morning.

During our afternoon drive we went back to the cheetah and found them still resting. We sat with them for a while, and then continued on our drive. More predators were seen - this time spotted hyenas. They were moving fast over the plains, and looked like they were not hunting, but rather responding to calls of other hyenas in the distance. Maybe they were responding to their own clan members, or even rival spotted hyenas on the border of their territory? It was exciting following them. Elephants, zebra, giraffe, warthog, impala, kudu, eland and wildebeest were also seen during our drive.

