

Mashatu's Year End Game Report for 2002



Introduction

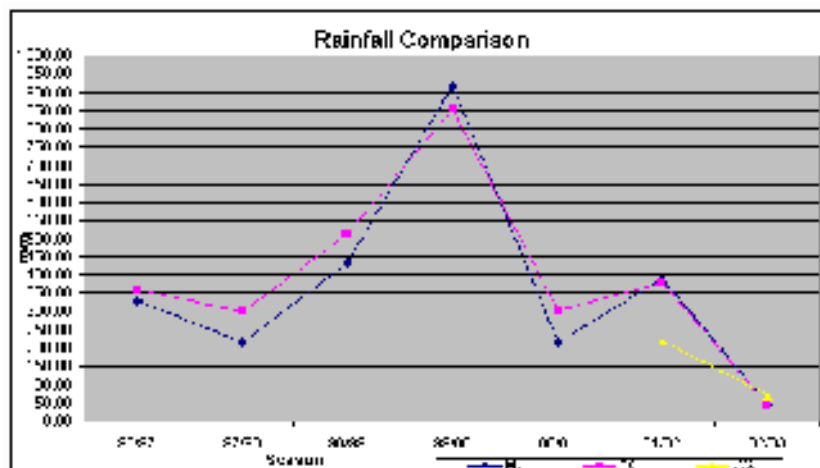
We have come to the end of yet another year at Mashatu. Here is a summary of the events that happened during the year on the reserve. We hope you enjoyed following the game sightings and keeping up to date with the activities of the animals we all love. My thanks to all the rangers, trackers and all the management staff that assisted with the game sightings.

Weather and vegetation report

The average rainfall for the season 2001/2002 was 383 mm. Unfortunately the bulk of the rainfall came in December 2001 (230 mm) with very little rain for the rest of the season. For the rainfall season from July 2002 to June 2003 very little rain has so far been received. Due to the early rains and no follow up rain later in the 2001/2002 season we have seen a drop in the available grazing and browsing vegetation in the reserve. With little rains early in this "rainy" season the seasonal grass layer has not established and very little forage is currently available on the reserve.

Rainfall Comparison

The rainfall for the 2001/2002 season was higher than the previous season and above the average of 350 mm. So far less than 50 mm of rain has been received at both the Main Camp and Tent Camp. The Limpopo valley airfield, close to the Limpopo River, has received more rain than both the camps - a total of 71.5 mm of rain. The highest rainfall this year was received during April (30 mm), with more than 10 mm of rain received during September, November and December respectively.



Game Viewing for 2002

Cheetah

A total of 132 Cheetah sightings were recorded at Mashatu for the year. Cheetahs were seen feeding at 15% of the sightings with impala being the preferred prey species.

During February there was a rapid increase in the number of Cheetah sightings. From March to September the sightings gradually decreased with the lowest number of sightings in September. From October to December the number of sightings increased and were fairly consistent for the last three months.

January and February were noted for the high number of cheetah hunts observed by guests at Mashatu. The high number of baby impalas born over this time period created a cheetah paradise. As the baby impalas grew bigger sightings of cheetahs seem to decrease a little. Cheetah sightings however have been exceptional this year. Three separate groups were spotted on different occasions on the property. This includes the group of 5, the group of 8 and another group of 4.

On one occasion we were enjoying coffee on the top of Disappointment Koppie when we noticed a female cheetah stalking a herd of impalas. For a while we lost sight of her in the long grass but suddenly we saw her sprinting at full speed towards the impala. The cheetah caught up with the impala and in a flash it was all over. From our vantage point we watched as she summoned her cubs in that very distinctive high-pitched call. Her four cubs joined her eagerly and started feeding immediately.

During January it was noticed that one of the youngsters of the group of 8 cheetahs was limping badly. After close observation it was discovered that the youngster had a serious injury to one of its back feet. It is believed that the back foot had been completely amputated. Unfortunately due to several Wildlife regulations the youngster could not be captured. The situation was monitored and by March the youngster was still with the group and in a good condition. Unfortunately when the group was spotted again in April the youngster was no longer with the group and we can only assume the worst.

During October we saw the return of Cheetahs to Mashatu. One female and her three sub adults were regularly spotted during October and November. On one occasion we watched how the female stalked and caught an impala ewe. Calling her cubs she allowed them to kill the impala. During November the female was seen more and more on her own. During December this female was seen on two occasions with a big male cheetah. An increase in the cheetah sightings is expected as more and more of the impalas give birth.

Elephants

Elephant viewing was exceptional during 2002. The herd sizes this year, due to the little rain, were smaller than the previous year. A definite drop in the herd sizes could be seen as the year progressed and forage became more and more scarce. Most of the resident herds were seen and followed during the year and an increase in the birth of babies occurred during June, July and again November through to December.

Several interactions between elephant and other animals have been observed during the year. The funniest was the sighting of the Elephant Valley Pride of lions and a young bull.

Early in December we watched the four youngsters of the Elephant Valley Pride stalking a lone elephant bull. The bull, also still a teenager (15 years old), took to the game and mock charged the cubs when they got too close. Even the mother lioness joined in but soon lost interest. Later on the cubs found the remains of a leopard kill and started feeding on the carcass. Our bull, on

the other hand, was not yet tired of the game and kept mocking charging the lions as soon as they settled down to feed. This game continued for most of the morning.

My favourite however was (and is still) watching the little babies as they played in the many waterholes on the reserve. On one occasion during early December we watched more than a hundred elephants playing and feeding around the Main Camp waterhole. Another fantastic spot to watch elephants is of course Pete's Pond close to the Limpopo River.

Hyenas

Hyena sightings increased during the year and reached a peak in August. For several months there was a den close to Mashatu Tent Camp on the Nyaswe River. Later the den was moved to the Matabole River. Unfortunately this was an area often used for both walking and cycling safaris and the den was moved again. The den close to Fika Futi is still active and hyena activity is more frequently observed along the boundaries of Mashatu to the north and west. A big clan of hyenas also seem to use the Motloutse area and have been responsible for killing several donkeys in the area. On a morning drive in July guests watched as the Elephant Valley lioness attacked a juvenile hyena that ventured too close to the pride. During December a group of nearly 20 hyenas was spotted at the Main Camp waterhole during the early morning hours and returning from a visit to the Archaeological site guests spotted a hyena stalking a baby wildebeest.

Leopard

A total of 421 leopard sightings were recorded on Mashatu for 2002. Leopards were seen feeding at 18.5% of the sightings. The major food source for leopard seems to be impala. Other species included kudu and eland calves and warthog. Leopard sightings steadily increased during the year.

Several females with various aged cubs were observed during 2002. In October the Dead Croton female gave birth to 3 cubs, two male and one female. Her daughter from her previous litter is now completely independent and has taken over part of her mother's territory. The Bryce's Store female's cubs are also now independent and are seen more and more frequently away from the mother.

Several interesting interactions between leopards and hyenas, cheetahs and lions occurred. A young male leopard was seen hurriedly taking his freshly killed impala up a tree with a group of three hyenas under the tree desperately trying to get a hold of the impala. On another drive we watched a leopard killing an eland calf. Before the leopard could think of feeding on his meal one of the Tuli Male lions arrived on the scene followed by the Elephant Valley pride. The eland cow, desperately trying to defend her calf, was killed by the pride while the dominant male enjoyed the calf. Our leopard ended up in a nearby tree watching the lions feed on his hard work.

Lions

A total of 688 lion sightings were recorded during 2002. Lions were seen feeding at 13% of the sightings. Preferred prey species seemed to be kudu and eland. Of all the animals zebra seemed to be selected the least by lions as a meal alternative. Other species preyed upon were impala, ostrich, wildebeest and warthog.

The two Tuli Brothers, who now appear to be in charge of most of the central area around the Majale River, came in close contact with the Elephant Valley pride. The adult female has recently had four cubs. It is assumed that either the Majale male or the Tuli male fathered these cubs. Whoever the father it was not one of the Tuli Brothers which puts the cubs into extreme danger if discovered by one of these males. In order to protect the cubs the eldest daughter was seen attacking one of the males whilst the mother and cubs disappeared from view. The young

daughter was no match for the much older and stronger male and had to retreat. The cubs, however, by then were far away and safe for the meantime.

A couple of days later a young cub was spotted alone nearby where the incident took place a few days earlier. It was assumed to be one of the Elephant Valley female's cubs. Fortunately the mother managed to find the cub and the whole family was spotted together a week later.

During April one of the dominant males was seen feeding on an ostrich. The old Majale male was also seen in the northern sections of the reserve and is still around, only his territory is now much smaller than it used to be.

During mid May and the beginning of June the two dominant males were once again seen in close proximity of the Elephant Valley Pride. The more dominant of the two males was seen mating with the daughter of the Mogatsha, while mother and the cubs were not too far from the scene. A couple of days later, to our surprise, the male was seen on a kill with the whole Elephant Valley Pride. The youngsters took advantage of the situation and continued to bully the male.

Both females of the Majale Island pride were pregnant during the year. Mosetsana gave birth in mid May and during the last week of June she introduced her three cubs to us. Still remaining close to the long grass at Majale Island, the cubs are seen on a more regular basis. Nkoko took a long time to conceive and gave birth to one cub. Unfortunately the cub did not survive.

In October three unknown lionesses arrived on Mashatu and immediately attracted the attention of the two Tuli Brothers. While up to now the two brothers were content to share the lionesses in the area, several fights between the two brothers broke out over the new arrivals. The lionesses remained in the area and were seen mating with the Tuli Brothers on several occasions.

During November the daughter of the Elephant Valley lioness gave birth to three little cubs close to Clive's Road on the Matabole River. The litter consists of two males and one female. The older cubs of pride are now over a year old and the young males manes are just visible.

Unusual sightings

During March a Black breasted Snake Eagle was seen catching a banded mongoose. As we were watching the eagle high up in the sky it suddenly swooped down and grabbed hold of a baby Banded mongoose flying high up with it and landing on a branch in a nearby Leadwood tree. On another occasion during April an African Hawk Eagle was seen catching an unfortunate guinea fowl.

A Selous mongoose has been spotted on several occasions at the Mmamagwe Ruins on the Motloutse River.

Several interesting sightings and interactions between leopards, lions and cheetahs were observed during June this year. We had the Elephant Valley lioness stealing a warthog kill from a young leopard, while another leopard stole an impala kill from a group of four cheetahs. On another occasion, while watching an African Wild cat, a young male leopard came walking past and climbed up the tree under which we were sitting. The leopard had an impala kill in the tree. Not long after a group of three hyenas arrived on the scene. They were trying to get hold of the kill by jumping up and trying to grab hold of the impala.

On one of the evening drives during June two Black-backed jackals were seen chasing a honey badger, nipping at it whenever they got close. This was very unusual, as honey badgers are known to be very tough and aggressive creatures.

During May the Black Eagle pair was seen on several occasions at Mmamagwe. On one of these occasions the Black Eagles was seen chasing a Fish Eagle out of their territory. During the same month a pair of Fish Eagles was seen doing a mating dance on route back from a ruins trip.

A Reed Comorant was seen at the Main Camp waterhole during breakfast on the 31st May. This is the first sighting of this specific bird and the total now stands on 143 species for Mashatu Main Camp. A Little egret was also seen at the Main Camp waterhole.

At Fraser Jones weir two Marabou storks and a Fish Eagle were observed on the 27th of June. One of the Marabou storks was feeding on a fish it apparently stole from the Fish Eagle. The Marabou storks continued to fish in the small waterhole that remained. Something spooked the one Marabou and as it flew off the Fish Eagle flew past and grabbed the fish left by the Marabou Stork. It flew high up on a tree where it started feeding on it.

On a morning game drive during July we watched the Elephant Valley lioness attack and nearly kill a young hyena. The hyena ventured to close to the pride and was told in no uncertain terms to keep its distance.

PANGOLIN!!!!!!!!!! Guests at Rock camp, with their ranger Mafala, spotted a pangolin close to the Limpopo River on a quick afternoon drive in broad daylight in August. This is a very endangered mammal and a very rare sighting at Mashatu.

Early one morning a Civet was spotted in the Tent Camp foraging between the mopane trees.

September was a reptile month. On several occasions pythons were spotted and mating tree monitors. On one morning drive the rangers spotted a python stalking and killing a full-grown Steenbok ewe. The python then continued to swallow the whole Steenbok. A process that took some time!

During October we were surprised with the birth of a bushbuck baby in Main Camp. The mom obviously felt Main Camp was a safe place to leave her youngster whilst she was out and about.

A safari the morning of the 10th of November witnessed a most bazaar incident: A warthog chasing a leopard! The warthog decided it was not going take 'life' lying down and defended itself against the leopards attack. The result being. . .a leopard hiding behind a tree trunk at its prey's mercy.

Another very unusual sighting took place the morning of the 18th of November as one safari found an impala carcass surrounded by vultures and an African Wild Cat feeding on the rump. Suddenly, elephants appeared out the bush, chasing the wild cat off the impala carcass.

Birding

Birding over the past few months has undergone some drastic changes. Below are some the highlights of the past few months:

Fish Eagle? To visit Africa and not hear this call is like visiting the ocean and not hearing the crash of the waves! Visitors to Mashatu Main Camp can now here 'the cry of Africa' whilst having breakfast on the terrace or lounging around the pool. A pair of these beautiful Eagles has taken residence along the Majale River not far from the Main Camp. The lack of rain should not effect the Fish Eagles whose catholic diet consists, not only of fish, but includes dassies, monkeys and other birds. . . to name but a few!

During April most of the migrants left us (as was expected), flying North to their 'Summer Homes'. During the winter months the drying river pools offered spectacular bird viewing. Mother Nature

herded the fish in the rivers into isolated pools creating an "avian sushi bar". A diverse array of species could be found at these pools including Saddle Billed Stork, Greenbacked Heron, Yellowbilled stork, Giant Kingfisher and Hammerkop. At one such pool, a record nineteen Saddlebilled Storks were seen!

The onomatopoeic 'Kelkiewyn' call of the Namaqua Sandgrouse is a familiar sound at these pools during winter. These remarkable birds are specially adapted to survive in arid climates and prefer to breed in the cooler winter months. The male sandgrouse flies to these drying pools and bathes himself in the water. With especially adapted belly feathers, he is able to absorb abnormally large amounts of water in his feathers before flying, up to thirty kilometres, back to his family. The chicks then drink from his belly feathers!

Speaking of remarkable birds, the Ostrich are 'alive and kicking' in Mashatu. To see a herd of ostriches running through the African wilderness is the closest one will get to experiencing 'Jurassic Park'. These life size "feather dusters" can run at speeds exceeding 55km per hour. One would do well to remember this if being chased and do not forget to lie down flat on the ground. . . to avoid injury.

Earlier this year, Mashatu had a couple remarkable visitors. A pair of Crowned Crane! These endangered birds frequent high rainfall wetland areas. So what were they doing in a low rainfall arid area you ask? Mashatu does have a wetland area known as "The Vlei". This isolated wetland could possibly become a safe haven for cranes in the future whose grassland habitat has been severely reduced by agriculture.

Another flock of remarkable visitors was seen flying over camp on the 27th of July. These Lesser Flamingos were heading South and a first for Mashatu. Lesser Flamingos are filter feeders with a fine mesh filter in the bill used to filter out algae. These "flame" birds favour alkaline water bodies where algae abound, such as Lake Natron and Manyara in East Africa. In fact. . . the total East African population of Lesser Flamingos are said to consume an estimated 548 tonnes of blue green algae every day!

Yet another remarkable sighting at The Vlei this year, included a flock of over one hundred Egyptian Geese! The Vlei adds tremendous value to the species diversity that one can find here at Mashatu. For all those twitchers in search of crakes, rails, and bitterns... The Vlei is the place to be!

Two pairs of Black Eagle have been seen at Mashatu this year. No other eagle is more prey specific than the Black Eagle and with Mashatu's high Rock Hyrax population the Eagles are permanent residents here in the Land of the Giants. These majestic eagles can be seen on a trip to the Motloutse Ruins where one pair has a nest. The second pair is located along the Motloutse River close to the Kgotla.

Another Mashatu gem is located in Tent Camp. . . at the moment. This is possibly the most striking bird Southern Africa has to offer, with its blood red, jet black and snow white plumes. The Cinnamonbreasted Boubou is the only Gonolek to be found in Southern Africa! While at Tent Camp, one can feed wild Crested Francoline out of your hand and lunch is shared with Arrowmarked Babblers. While on the subject of babblers. . . keep an eye out for the striking Pied Babbler whilst on drive.

Main Camp has a new birding feature. . . the "Bird Bench"! One can grab some seed from the Discovery Room and enjoy feeding mixed bird parties consisting of waxbills, finches, crows, puffbacks and many more. The Meyers Parrots are enjoying the Bushwillow seeds in camp and a Pied Barbet was seen last month enjoying 'Wag n' Bietjie' berries.

A pair of Lesser Honeyguides has taken up residence in the Bird Bench area! Nesting logs have also been erected and are awaiting residents. The logs, however, first need to be excavated by

barbets. Once a 'door' is in place. . . we are hoping to witness one of nature's grimmest forms of parasitism:

The Honeyguides will wait for the barbets to nest before "sneaking" an egg of their own into the chamber. Once hatching, the honeyguide chick will use the needle sharp spine on the tip of its bill to "butcher" the barbet chicks to death. The barbet parents will then remove their own lifeless chicks. Mother nature will then defy all human logic. . . as the barbet parents will continue to feed the young honeyguide. Maybe. . .the barbets will be able to keep the honeyguides from laying their "foster" egg and will step up their pace in the arms race! We will keep you all posted. . .

A single Lesser Stripped Swallow was spotted at the end of July at Main Camp and two pairs have begun nest building under the hanging lounge. These swallows can be seen collecting mud at the water hole in front of camp. . . which is used to build those famous mud nests. . . referred to here at Mashatu as "African Igloos"!

The Kgotla, which is used as a cycling safari over nightspot, has proven to be a great birding area. Two months ago, Redbilled Helmetshrike chicks were seen in the Mashatu tree above the camp. "Where o where is that Thick-billed Cuckoo who parasites these helmetshrikes"? Freckled nightjar and Bathawk are still to be found this year, as is the Barred Owl, which has evidently been heard calling in the area.

During October the African hawk eagles were seen high in an Apple Leaf tree rearing a single chick. In early December the rufus coloured fledgling took first flight and the parents and juvenile can be seen hunting prey along the Majale River.

In early December a Little bittern took up residence at the Main camp waterhole. This small bird is a rarely sighted shy species of aquatic bittern, standing motionless at the reed fringes for hours thus making for excellent photographic opportunities.

As the heat of summer approached isolated thunder showers were experienced at Mashatu bringing only temporary relief to birds and beasts. Unfortunately only enough water to settle the dust. After one of these down pours, within hours, waders such as Painted snipes and Greenshank arrived seemingly out of nowhere. Plenty of Knobbilled ducks were also seen using the small puddles that remained. The migrants are all back in force but with the lack of large water bodies the usual huge numbers and variety of storks has still to arrive. We pray the rain arrives soon, possible late rains in January as has happened in the past.

All in all, the bird viewing has been wonderful this year. Mashatu is a great bird destination as it possesses riverine forest along the Limpopo and other rivers while thornveld and Mopane scrub cover the interior. These habitats, combined with The Vlei and rocky sandstone outcrops, provide a mosaic of habitats and a bird list over the last six months. . . too long to remember.

Wishing you all a merry Christmas and best wishes for 2003.

Jeanetta