

# ASKARI WILDERNESS CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

The Askarian – March 2014

<http://www.askariwcp.com>

## The Month in view



## Coming up.....

- Annual floods
- Anti-poaching efforts
- Reserve projects
- Elephant/hippo combo!
- Sable darting
- Outrageous reptiles!
- Reserve sightings

Volunteers joining Askari this month formed “Safiya’s marchers”. Volunteers were from Australia, England, France, Israel, The Netherlands and Sweden.

It happens every year, it is just a matter of when.....the annual floods! This year it was very late on in the season, our big downpour came in March. The rain started late afternoon and kept coming throughout the night. It was torrential, at times deafening on the roof of the house! By the time it stopped our rain gauge had long over-flowed. Brian however managed to empty his at various stages throughout the night and recorded a huge 285mm of rain in 24 hours!



After such big rains we are always very limited in our movements. Many roads are impassable and all the drainage lines turn to mini rivers. The following day we made it (part way on foot) to the river crossing and then the weir to check out the Selati river. Overnight it had become a raging torrent, completely un-crossable by our vehicles (for weeks to come). In the following days, manoeuvring around the reserve was tricky with many roads being damaged, dams swelling to unimaginable size and plenty of incidents of getting stuck in the mud!



Remember to ‘Like’ the Askari Facebook page to receive daily sightings and project updates to your news feed <http://www.facebook.com/Askari.Wilderness.Conservation.Programme>



### Sable Darting



This month the decision was made to intervene for one of our breeding sable antelope. The female had been losing condition gradually and it was time to give her a bit of a helping hand. Dr Peter Rogers was called and the darting was relatively easy with the herd being relaxed around us. Once under anaesthetic the female was administered with supplements and vitamins as well as two different types of de-wormer treatment. A previous dung sample that we collected had shown her to have an extremely high count of intestinal worms. The whole procedure only took about 15 minutes before the drugs were reversed and she was back on her feet.

### Beautiful birds

Looking back on this months photos I seem to have a great collection of stunning bird shots; enough to warrant a mini feature! As we come to the end of summer, the migratory species are beginning to leave us. Golden backed bee-eaters gather in flocks ready to begin their journey and that familiar summer sound of the Woodland kingfisher starts to fade away. One very special sighting this month was a Giant eagle owl; very rare to see even with its formidable size and bright pink eyelids!



Brown snake eagle



Giant eagle owl

©Mike Oldridge



White faced ducks



Tawny eagle



Yellow throated longclaw



Swainsons spurfowl



Remember to 'follow' us on Twitter to receive daily sightings and project tweets. Follow #Askarivolunteer

## Reserve work & Projects

Work continued at the erosion site on Langa langa to **repair damaged soils**. This photo shows the amazing progress of the land already restored earlier on in the year. **Alien plants** are always high on our list of reserve projects with our main goal being to combat Lantana plants. The herbicide used is a foliar spray meaning it is absorbed into the system of the plants via the leaves. Work continued at the **boma** clearing the fence line and painting the posts. A new **tree** was chosen for **protection against elephant damage** this month as well. It is a large common cluster fig, along Main access, which has already lost one of its largest branches to the elephants. Rocks are collected from the old mica



mine in buffalo camp and arranged in a ring around the base of the tree. Large and sharp rocks are perfect for the job which then stop the elephants being able to get close enough to cause damage. Not only does it prevent the tree being pushed over but it also limits bark removal. Time was spent on anti-poaching efforts this month as signs of poachers entering the reserve were found. Camera traps are not just handy for spying on animals but can be used for humans too! Cameras were set and disguised at key points on the reserve that were being used to gain illegal access with the pure intent to kill our wildlife.

## Sleep out

This months sleep out took place over on Jackal plains, north of the river. After a game of cards we witnessed a spectacular sunset. Dinner was wors rolls and pap with chocolate banana boats for desert! We settled down in our sleeping bags for a night under the stars and listening to the lions. Sunrise



was equally as impressive with coffee & rusks around the fire.



## Wildlife monitoring, Conservation & Sightings



This month the team experienced their first **Leopard** sighting for 2014. It was during our route 3 herbivore drive when a few members of the team saw an animal cross the road far in the distance. Identification went from lion to hyaena to large jackal....but of course once we got there, it was gone! We checked a few of the nearby roads and finally got lucky with a brief sighting of the stunning cat. He walked down the road in front of us, allowing a few blurry photos, before turning off into the bush....always a special treat. Following our sighting of the **lion** cubs in January we spent plenty of time on Jackal plains hoping for another glimpse. It was hard work and we weren't getting very far so decided to set up a camera trap to get an idea of their movements. To our surprise, the first photo we got showed not just 2 but 3 cubs! (you can see a foot and tail between mums legs

here). We had suspected that young lioness 'Intombi' might also have cubs so it would seem possible that this 3<sup>rd</sup> one may be one of hers. Later in the month we

Saw 'Thula' & 'Intombi' but no cubs in tow. Another great lion sighting was of female 'Mumu' and her 3 youngsters. They had a kill just off the road but we could only hear the bone crunching and not see what it was. Our top **elephant** sighting was



2 bulls at the hippo pool! They were having a grand old time, wrestling and submerging, all under the watchful eye of the resident hippo pod (see middle photo below). We had further great sightings of the herds throughout the month.



## Outrageous Reptiles

This month can't pass by without mention of some of the outstanding reptile sightings we have had. On one particular drive we had only just seen a 'Black mamba' when we came across an unbelievable sighting of 2 snakes wrestling. To see one snake in the bush is relatively rare.....let alone 2! Contrary to the way in which 'National geographic' portrays them, snakes are not man seeking killers! For the most part, humans are too big for the snake to eat and it would be a waste of their precious venom to use it on something they can't consume. Most snakes will move away upon feeling the vibration of an approaching human (they cannot hear us coming) and even those that stay do anything to avoid having to bite.



### Purple glossed snake –

This is the black/dark one doing the attacking! They can take prey almost twice their size and 'fold' it up inside the stomach to fit it in. For the duration of the fight this one seemed to have the upper hand as you can see from its mouth clamp!



### Schlegels blind snake –

This was the one on the receiving end! It is one of the largest blind snakes and can reach up to 1 metre in length. They spend most of their lives underground but do come to the surface after heavy rains. They often use a spike on the end of their tail for defence.



Despite its appearance this reptile is not a snake at all but a type of lizard - a 'Giant legless skink'. It's funny 'nose' type appendage is a scale but it is different to those found on the rest of the body and therefore differs slightly in colour. It is known as a 'Rostral scale' and is hardened to assist with burrowing into mud.