

# Getting to know *leopards*

a look into the lives of the elusive **big cats**.

By Leon Marais

In the bushveld of the **Sabi Sand Game Reserve**, next-door to the Kruger Park, both **predator and prey densities are high**. It is a **woodland-savannah biome**, characterised by a predominance of trees and shrubs rather than **open grassland**, and this relatively dense bush makes it more suited to smaller herds of **browsing herbivores**. So, if one is looking for **large herds of grazing animals**, spread across the open plains, then perhaps East Africa is a better bet, but **if it's cats you're after**, then there is perhaps no finer place in the world to see them.

**W**ith incomparable feline grace and an uncanny, ghost-like ability to blend in with the dry grass and bush that make up its surroundings, the leopard (*Panthera pardus*) is by far the most sought after animal in the reserve. It exudes coolness, beauty and latent power, and in terms of these qualities, has no equal. The black spots and rosettes on the white and golden yellow background break up the shape of the animal to such an extent that, even when it is out in the open, it is somehow hard to see. You can see it of course – it is right there in front of you – but the body seems to be not quite solid, shimmering, almost projection or hologram-like. It can disappear in the smallest patch of grass or make itself invisible in the top of a well-foliaged tree. Considering its perfect camouflage pattern, solitary nature and natural shyness, it is usually an animal that is seldom well-observed by tourists. Yet the opportunities for seeing and observing wild

leopards are no better than in the Sabi Sand Game Reserve. Leopard densities are naturally high, with plenty of prey about in the form of impala, warthog, duiker, bushbuck, nyala, and young kudu, which make up the bulk of an adult leopard's diet. The habitat is also perfect, with good cover afforded by well-vegetated water courses and riverbeds, as well as the lofty sanctuary provided by the line of granite outcrops in the west of the reserve. These cats can, however, be found in any terrain and trackers and guides are ever on the lookout for a glimpse of a black and gold form stealing through the bush. The reserve also has a lengthy history of conservation, which has spared many leopards from the hunter's and farmer's gun. The majority of leopards here are well used to vehicles and don't take flight at the first sound of diesel engines and human voices, and this is the key to the fantastic cat viewing. Indeed, in this reserve, generations of leopards have grown up in close contact with dark green Land-Rovers, clicking cameras and awed tourists. Guides observe these animals on an

Tender moments caught on camera: somewhere in the thickets of the bush of the Sabi Sand Game Reserve, one of Shangeva's cubs reveals the outline of an impala. As the cub grows and approaches the yearling stage, adult male leopards will become more and interested with more frequent visits to the rubber begins to think of the next litter.



Mambiri, one of Kwela's progeny, just after scent-marking on the base of a large Marula tree. This indicates that she is comfortable in establishing herself in the area and is well on the way to being a fully-fledged adult leopard. The high tail posture indicates that she wants to be seen, and perhaps then this scent-marking is also aimed at attracting the attentions of the resident male leopard.





**Khwela 'hanging out'** - leopards use trees for a number of reasons, such as for resting out of harm's way, keeping kills away from other predators, and using elevation to gain a better view (just like your house cat likes to spend time up on the roof or atop a wall), but generally spend less time aloft than most people think. In this case the low branch was probably just used because that's what's comfortable for a leopard.



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Wally enjoys the early sunshine in a recently burned clearing, always on the alert for potential prey. In this case a herd of zebra on the other side of the clearing are what's caught his interest. The adult zebra are far too large for him, but a young foal would suit him just fine.

almost daily basis and see them struggle through all manner of hardships, from being attacked by lions and having hard-won kills stolen by hyena to procreating and bringing new generations into the world. With our inherent human qualities it is hard not to become emotionally involved in the well-being of these animals, and each new day in the bush brings its share of beauty and savagery, triumph and tragedy. The core of the population in the 10 000 hectare Western Sector of the reserve is made up of around six adult leopards – five of them females (although not all of the females are regularly encountered) and a dominant male.

Perhaps the favourite and most well-known is a female called 'Khwela Pezulu' or 'Khwela' for short, which essentially means to 'climb up' in Zulu. She is around ten to eleven years old and is the most regularly encountered individual in the sector.

Some say that she moved into the area from the rocky outcrop that is now the site of Leopard Hills Game Lodge. Regardless, she has established herself firmly in the centre of the Western Sector and, according to our knowledge, has never left this section of the reserve. As she has spent most of her life here we have a good idea of her reproductive history, and have been witness to her attempts at rearing no less than eight litters of cubs. She has been the most reproductively successful female in the area, and one reason for this is the series of granite outcrops running through the centre of her territory. All her cubs have been born and secluded for the first few months high up among the rocks, where there are plenty of hiding places and lions

**Creature of darkness:** Khwela at night. On this occasion she and her male cub had been feeding on an impala carcass on the ground when a single hyena appeared on the scene and sent both cats scurrying for safety. On most occasions the spotted hyenas seem to easily dominate over leopards, but only seem interested in the kill and not in doing the cats any harm (though smaller cubs are always at risk).

seldom venture. Nevertheless, her first few litters were all lost, most likely as a result of infanticide by male leopards or eventual predation by lion and hyena. Of her fourth litter she managed to rear one male cub to independence, who evidently disappeared into the north-east of the reserve to set up territory elsewhere. Khwela then achieved a hundred percent success rate with the next litter, rearing three female cubs to independence and maturity. These are now close to four years old and one, known as 'Mambimi' (a name which refers to the number '2' in Shangaan, as in 'two spots on the upper left lip'), still frequents an area on the edge of Khwela's territory and had her first litter of cubs in October 2006. Khwela gave birth to her sixth litter in December 2003. Two males were born but, unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your place in the food-chain), one cub never saw a full season come to pass. The surviving cub is quite a character. At one stage he found a large Hamerkop nest situated high up in Weeping Boer-Bean tree and decided that it was a fine place to spend the hot days, spread out on top of the huge nest as if on a double bed – while his mother was out doing all the hard work! He was also observed taking a swim in a rock pool in the seasonal Mabrak River – behaviour that seems to be very rare for leopards. At around two years of age this boisterous youngster moved away into the north of the reserve and is perhaps showing-off his beauty to visitors at some other lodge. Khwela lost all of her seventh litter and is now focusing her attention on the single female cub of her eighth. Whether it was a conscious 'decision' or not no one can know, but she went

as far as to avoid all threats (except the human one) by giving birth to her cub on the rocky outcrop that lies just outside the reserve to the west. She has since brought the cub back into the reserve, and seems well on her way to rearing yet another cub to independence in this cat-haven.

The second female, a transient in the Western Sector, is known as 'Shangwa', so named after the Shangaan name of a particular tree (Scented Thorn) common in her territory along the Sand River. Although one leopard looks essentially the same as the next, after repeated encounters with individuals certain features serve to distinguish them. Spot patterns – the specific number and arrangement of spots above the whisker line or on the corner of the eye – are the most reliable method of identification. Yet each animal has a distinct face, and Shangwa's is somehow more reminiscent of the Pink Panther's than the others – well, to me anyway. Her third litter was born during December 2003. She lost one of the litter to infanticide by a male leopard, but the remaining cubs, one male and one female, both survived to independence. In early summer, usually during the first week of November, the impala ewes give birth to their lambs, and for the next few months these make perfect first-kills for young leopards. Watching Shangwa's female cub trying to manhandle what we believed to be her first impala kill up into the boughs of a large tree revealed to us the sheer determination needed to overcome the inertia of dependence and become self-sufficient. No sooner had she hauled the lamb up into the tree when she dislodged it and had to repeat the whole tiresome process. Kills left on the ground are easily appropriated by spotted hyena, which actively follow hunting leopards for just this reason. On one occasion Shangwa and cubs were feeding on a large impala carcass in a tree, with the usual two or three attendant hyena waiting expectantly below. The male cub was getting a trifle over-zealous in his feeding and dislodged the entire carcass – only to have the situation saved by Shangwa catching it in mid-air – super-mom, and she gives good hidings for such foolishness! Shangwa has since had another litter – two female cubs this time – who both made it to independence, and she now seems to be carrying her 5<sup>th</sup> litter.

The father of many of the cubs born here is a magnificent specimen known as 'Wally', which is a shortened version of the title 'The Wallingford Male'. The Wallingford Portion was one of the original farms that became the western sector of the Sabi Sand Reserve, and this formed roughly the centre of the geographical area used by this male.



This is what we believed to be Shangwa's female cub's first major kill – an impala lamb. Watching her trying to get it up into the tree brought home the difficulties of survival in this harsh and unforgiving place, where danger and difficulties are the norm rather than the exception.

Khwela Pezulu, the Western Sector's favourite cat, at home in a tall jackalberry tree with a fresh ulcer kill secured high above ground and out of reach of scavenging hyenas. A lot of this she would keep her for several days, although, like any other predator, should the opportunity arise she will not hesitate to make another kill before finishing this one.

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What is immediately apparent is his size. He probably weighs in at around 90 kilograms, which is thirty to thirty-five kilograms heavier than the average female and about the maximum weight for the species. He has the characteristic dewlap and loose belly skin of a mature male, as well as the arrogant and aloof demeanour to go with his status as the dominant leopard in the Western Sector. Wally is extremely relaxed in the presence of game drive vehicles, and doesn't even bother to look up at a Land-Rover crashing through the bush mere meters away. This male can be found almost anywhere in the traversing area and indeed he is a real rover, sometimes covering a linear distance of up to fifteen kilometres or more in one night. Mobility is a key factor in a male leopard's reproductive success, giving him regular access to the females within his territory. At the moment Wally's tenure of this territory is secure, and he has kept many other big males on the fringes, ensuring himself exclusive access to the resident females. He is a voracious predator and some of the more unusual prey items he's known to have partaken of include wild dog pups, lion cubs and a full grown female cheetah. He is getting on in age however, and must be well over ten years old now, which is close to the end of a male leopard's prime years.

These leopards and their offspring make up the bulk of the sightings in the Western Sector, although there are other individuals that are seen from time to time, such as the Ottawa Male (seen in the area where the Sand River leaves the Western Sector), Thombela ("He who hides"), the Tai Dam Female and the shy female Hippo Dam female.

And while the Sabi Sand Reserve is home to all manner of incredible creatures, from the lowly and much maligned Raucous toad to the mighty African elephant, it is these few individual leopards that are the unchallenged stars of the reserve, and for those fortunate enough to see them on a regular basis, they have become more than just wild animals. Guides and trackers alike are very fond of these leopards, and seeing them persevere through droughts, floods, injuries, close escapes from lions and hyena, killing, courting, reproducing and growing old instils in us a special sort of attachment that is just not there with other species. Indeed, after even one or two good leopard sightings visitors to the reserve seem to quickly come to appreciate and at least partly understand this unique connection between men (or people, should I say) and cats. ☺



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