

THE GLOBAL LEOPARD PROJECT ERINDI NEWSLETTER 6

Natasha de Woronin
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THE PHOTOGENIC PHANTOM OF ERINDI!



Phantom Tree Female is slowly but surely becoming the star viewing leopard of Erindi. She does not always allow us viewing and she does spend a great deal of time on inaccessible mountain ranges but when she is willing we have the most spectacular sightings of this female leopard. During July and August we started working with her in the day time as she is very shy during the light hours. After a great deal of hard work and time spent with Phantom Tree Female (Tash) in the field she did allow us the opportunity of a day time photograph. She began hunting before sunset and because the grass was so long she leapt elegantly onto a termite mound to scan the area. Before heading off she turned to face the camera and the result was quite spectacular!! For the first time ever we were also able to get a few game drives into sightings of her and there were a few very lucky guests that managed to see her. The habituation work with this female continues and we hope that the recent progress keeps going forward.

"Internationalize the plight of the Leopard"

LEOPARDS OF THE ERINDI LEOPARD PROJECT

MICROLIGHT FEMALE (TSKAPAE)

For the very first time since the Microlight Female was fitted with a radio collar in September 2007 she allowed us to get close enough with the research vehicle to have a viewing! Although the sighting was not spectacular, this viewing gives us great hope that one day in the future she will accept a vehicle into her secret world.

Tracking and viewing of this female on foot is still the primary objective for her as she allows people walking to get quite close to her and often sightings are excellent. During July Dave Salmoni of Triosphere (Filming the lions of Erindi) became part of the leopard walking venture. He shared incredibly valuable knowledge with us and even had some brilliant sightings of the leopards on foot.



GLOBAL LEOPARD PROJECT

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We spent a great deal of time walking with Microlight Female. On our first day out with her she was moving during daylight hours and just ahead of us she ascended up a termite mound to scan the area. Dave recommended that we talk to get her accustomed to our presence but that was a little too much for the leopard and she moved away. This is the next step for us to work on.

On another of the walks we were perhaps 30-40m from her when I fell into an aardvark hole in the ground! Microlight Female was sleeping behind a termite mound nearby and her response was rather amazing. She did not move at first and after I had stood up and brushed myself off she popped her head out from behind the Termitarium! She watched us carefully for a moment or two and then she headed off to the nearest koppie where her den site and cub were hidden.

We spent many hours close to her den and there were times that we were sure that she could see us (although we could not see her!) and she chose not to move away. The progress of viewing her on foot looks very positive and time spent with her seems to be the most important key to success of this venture.

Sightings of Microlight Female from the microlight continue and she was spotted by Ruan early one morning as she killed an impressively sized kudu bull. She had captured the kudu close to a ditch and her success appeared to come from the fact that the antelope eventually fell into the ditch. Although we spent time during dark hours at the kill with the vehicle, we did not manage to get a sighting of her from the ground and every day she headed back to the cub at the den site.

PHANTOM TREE FEMALE (TASH) & THE CUBS



The female cub

The male cub

Phantom Tree Female's cubs showed their different personalities on the first day that they were spotted and it is very interesting to note how opposite they truly are. The female cub is still larger than the male cub (making us think that she still perhaps has something to hide!) and she appears dominant. She is completely at ease with the research vehicle and at kills she is always first to feed.

We had some very leopard enthusiastic guests at Erindi during July and after trying very hard to get the game drive vehicle in to view the cubs, without success, we decided that the only way was to be with them 24 hours until Phantom Tree Female allowed the game drive vehicle in. The cubs are not with her when she does not have a kill and at the start of this great plan there was no food and there were no cubs. I sat with the female during daylight while she slept and at midday I headed back to Old Traders Camp for an hour or two. Upon returning to where the mother leopard was earlier it was strange to see that the cubs were suddenly with her. She had managed to capture a rather large Red hartebeest bull during the heat of the day and the female cub was already gorging herself!

The sighting was beyond spectacular to say the least and the game drive vehicle with our guests arrived and waited very patiently 20m from the carcass. Both cubs and eventually the mother leopard fed on the kill and played around the vehicles providing the best ever Erindi leopard sighting yet!

GUINEA FEMALE

As always, Guinea Female resides on the mountains but she did change a few of her moves during the month, the reason for this is not yet understood. She crossed a lowland area moving in a thick drainage line one night and headed towards the southern boundary fence of Erindi. The fence is situated on a koppie and the signal from the leopard's collar indicated that she was outside the reserve. I sat patiently for hours trying to get confirmation of her position but she did not show herself. What she did do, however (very obliging!) was she gave an incredible leopard call! This was the first time that I had heard a Namibian leopard giving a territorial call and interestingly it was very different to the calls of the South African Lowveld leopards. It was a low deep rasping sound that penetrated every part of me and left me in absolute awe!

GERH MALE

Gerh Male spends more and more of his time outside of Erindi on Gert Schwarting's farm and this has meant that the only way for us to follow his movements is with the microlight. To begin with he was very shy of the noisy flying machine but he got used to this quite quickly. Ruan has found a new passion, he searches for this male from the air and when he finally got his first viewing from the sky he was so excited that he was bouncing! He spotted the male leopard on our neighbour's farm while he was stalking a warthog. The leopard did not react to the microlight at all, he continued in the pursuit of his quarry! We did get a little worried when Gert called to say that his calves had been attacked by something and that one had been killed. We headed onto the farm immediately and fortunately there was no sign on leopard activity and the young male was nowhere in the area. We do however want to come up with a plan to help with what ever it is that harassed Gert's cattle.

While Dave was spending time walking with the leopards of the project, Gerh Male was on Erindi. We decided to head into the area on foot to see his reaction to people walking. Up until that point I had walked into him only once and he had chosen to hide under a bush and he did not move away. I felt that I was within 20m but there was no visual of the hiding cat. Before we started our walk into Gerh Male, I wondered if he would react the same way.

The young leopard was in a drainage line that was scattered with low bushes and intermingled with trees. As we approached closer, the signal from his collar indicated that he was not moving at all.

We suddenly felt that we were very close and as we circled 270° around a bush we realised that he was underneath it...incredibly close and he had not moved. Dave stared into the thicket to try and spot him and it felt like ages before the young leopard reacted. It was almost as if he was sure that he had not been seen and when he felt that his camouflage had let him down, he had to get away. The only way out of the thicket was to come towards us and he gave his best non-aggressive growl as he made 2 steps towards us before he turned and bolted away! It was a heart stopping second but it was a wonderful moment, to realise that such a powerful creature would not do anything aggressive if not threatened.

JAKKALS DRAAI MALE (WOGS)

Although he was not spotted during the past months, it has been exciting to note that Jakkals Draai Male has slowly begun to extend his territory even further. He has included two new mountains into his range and he finally has a defended area larger than Guinea Female. Location of this male has become more difficult but we try our best to find him regularly especially when he is away from his former ranging area.

CAPTURE BEGINS

Unfortunately Dairen Simson (Foot snare trapping) did not manage to get to Erindi and in late July we began to set the original traps again. Specific areas were targeted for leopards to be collared early in the year and soon after starting capture again it was noted that most of the leopards had changed their movement patterns! Signs of a male and a female were noted but their tracks were only found once during the month. A trap was set for a female close to camp but again signs or lack of signs indicate that she is focusing her time in a different area. A female with cubs has been identified and a trap for her will be set in the months to come but as yet there has been no success.

SUPPORTERS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

- ➔ **Erindi Game Reserve:** Home of the Project: Erindi
- ➔ **Pulse Africa:** A contribution from every booking made with Pulse Africa is put towards the GLP.
- ➔ **Catchco Africa Dr Douw Grobler:** Capture, equipment and constant support
- ➔ **Londoloz Private Game Reserve Rangers:** Ongoing data capture
- ➔ **Florissa Keisel:** £5 000-00 (data capture equipment)
- ➔ **Rick and Lindy Dekker:** Photographic equipment, binoculars, literature & support
- ➔ **Vlasta and Keith Ross-Jones:** Ongoing funds and support
- ➔ **Warren Pearson and Juanita:** Inspiration & GLP logo
- ➔ **Heidi-Lee Stockenström:** GLP logo

Robyn Tobias of Pulse Africa finally had the opportunity to visit Erindi, to see the reserve and spend a little time out with the leopards. Phantom Tree Female was hunting on the night that Robyn was out with us and although the sightings were brief it was very exciting to have Robyn be a part of the leopard work! We hope you will visit again soon to see the progress!

The Global Leopard Project is now offering guest activities, a chance for every one to get involved in the research project. If you are interested, please do not hesitate to ask us for the information.

THANK YOU TO EVERY ONE THAT MAKES THIS PROJECT POSSIBLE!

GLOBAL LEOPARD PROJECT

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