

Distribution of Some High Profile Game Species at Ngala over 2002

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Introduction

Monthly records of precise location of Leopard, Lion, White Rhino, Wild Dog and Cheetah were kept on a pin board by the rangers. The maps were updated daily after game drives such that an accurate record of animal movement was kept. It is these sightings that are represented on the maps below, the territories of both Lion and Leopard therefore representing minimum areas. It is hoped that a long term record of the distribution of easily recognisable and regularly viewed animals may one day challenge or confirm the status quo with regard to the behaviour of the various species.

Leopard

Leopard viewing at Ngala continues to be excellent with a number of interesting developments in the last year (see Figure 1).

The Clara female (age 10 years) continues to provide the bulk of Ngala's leopard viewing. She has successfully raised one male out of a litter of three cubs to 10 months. Her last cub, also a male, is now three years old but unusually continues to reside in his mother's territory to the extent that he has not once during the last year been seen away from this area.

The Oppy female (age 7 years) has not been observed regularly over the last year as her territory has shifted further south and west so that she covers an area with a very sparse road network and some of the neighbouring property. She has raised one female cub successfully to a year but as a result of her mother not occupying areas where she may be regularly viewed she is shy. The two male cubs from her previous litter are viewed sporadically. The smaller and less relaxed of the two is sometimes viewed in the north west of the reserve around Big Dam. His larger and more relaxed brother appears to have moved off perhaps to the southwest. They are now three years old.

The Mabotlel female (age 11 or 12 yrs) seems to have shifted further west and south again as she has done over the past few years (see: Brugman & van den Heever, 1999; Brugman, 2000; Bouwer, 2001; Roche & Letcher, 2001) and this may be due to similar movements by the Oppy female. Her tracks are seen often in the Tshwatsemotso River in front of the Walking Safari Camp. There have been tracks of cubs in the area also indicating another litter of cubs for this female. Over 2002 she has been viewed infrequently, mainly by game drives from the Walking Safaris Camp.

The Clara female's first successfully raised litter of two female cubs (Three-Times female and Gogga female, both now 4,5 years old) have set up territories adjacent to their mother's and this may go some way to explaining the south-westward shift of the Oppy female and the Mabotlel female. One of these (the Gogga female) produced her first litter in January (2003) although these cubs have yet to be seen.

The Fountains female (unknown age) and her one male and female cub (now 11 months old) provide very good viewing when they are found. Fannie Mathonsi (head tracker) spent a month on sabbatical tracking this female and her cubs in June 2002. This was done in an effort to habituate the cubs to vehicles. His hard work has paid off as, although they are not frequently seen, both siblings are not fearful of vehicles.

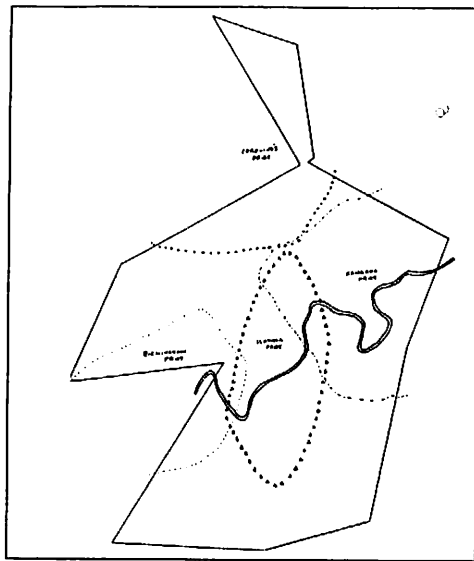


Figure 3: Lion pride territories

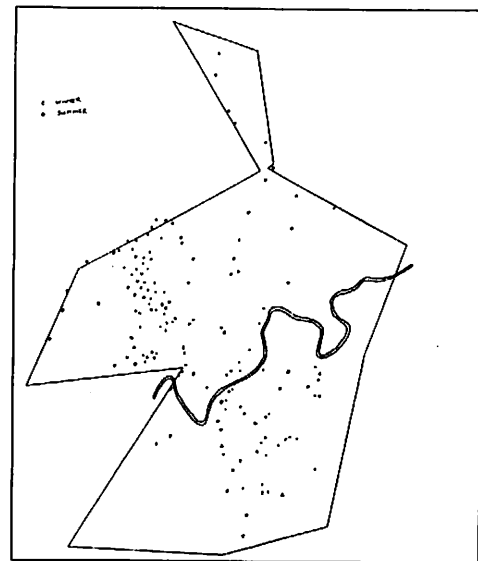


Figure 4: Seasonal White Rhino distribution
(● = winter, ○ = summer)

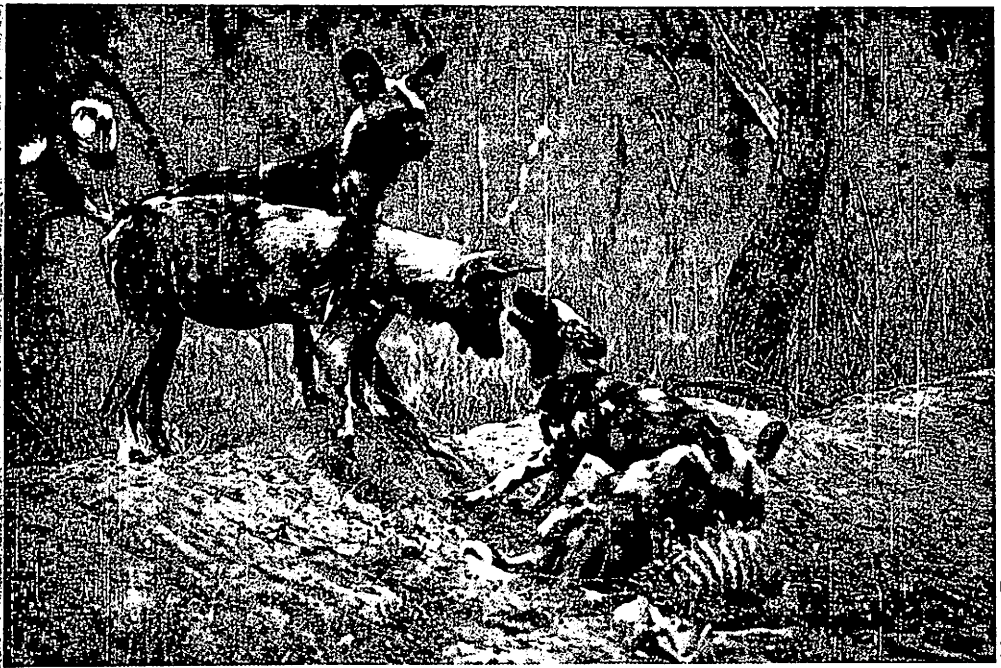
White Rhino

The distribution of White Rhino on Ngala is interesting. These animals are fairly uniformly distributed on the *Acacia nigrescens-Themeda triandra* savannah on gabbro south of the Timbavati river. On the *Combretum* woodland on granite however, Rhino are almost exclusively seen in the west of Ngala and north into Johnniesdale (see Figure 4). Why there should be such a dearth of these animals in the east of the reserve is not clear since there is water and a more extensive road network than in the west. Higher rainfall in this area may account for the difference and there are some subtle differences in vegetation that have yet to be satisfactorily determined. From the data available it is estimated that there are approximately 40 White Rhino that make use of the Ngala reserve particularly during the drier parts of the year. Aerial census data for the last three years has not been accessed however so this cannot be verified.

Wild Dog

Wild Dog sightings have been frequent throughout the last year. An active den on Ngala in May made for some spectacular viewing and interaction with other predators particularly Leopard and Spotted Hyena. Male Leopard have been seen stealing kills from a pack of four Wild Dogs on more than one occasion and there have also been a number of sightings where Leopard have been forced to take refuge in trees from the Wild Dogs. This happened on a number of occasions when it appeared the Leopard had actively sought out the den site.

Wild Dogs have been spotted throughout the property, from north of the main lodge all the way to the Manyelethi and Welverdiend (local community) boundaries in the south. There is some concern in this regard as there are many domestic dogs in the community that could transfer canine diseases to which the sensitive Wild Dogs may succumb. Contact is quite possible given the number of domestic dogs that forage within the Manyelethi and the ease with which Wild Dogs and their



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domestic counterparts pass through fences. Most of the viewing of the dogs has been north of the Timbavati River but more recently the pack of eleven has been spending a lot of time south of the Timbavati River, this change attributable to the lowered Lion density here.

Cheetah

Cheetah viewing over the last year has improved dramatically. There have been fifteen individuals seen over the last year on a number of occasions. They have become progressively relaxed and if approached carefully provide some excellent viewing. One of the females was spotted with four young cubs but they have not been seen again. They were very close to the reserve border and thus may have crossed into the Manyelethi. The increased number of cheetah and frequency of sightings of these animals can perhaps be attributed to the unstable lion population on Ngala (see: Roche, 2000). Although there have been many Lions seen over the last year, many of these have been nomadic and the dominant males that range along the Timbavati seldom stay in one area for any length of time as they patrol their vast territory.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the rangers and trackers for keeping the records of these animals.