

A Leopards' Tale

This is the story of a group of leopards living in South Africa. Their home is in the northern part of the Sabi Sand Game Reserve, which lies to the west of the great Kruger National Park and offers an extended area in which wild animals are free to roam. The leopards have made their territories in a block of land lying roughly to the south west of Gowrie gate.

There are many leopards in Sabi Sand, so what makes these so special? First must be their visibility. A combination of a healthy population - thriving in the absence of a single dominant lion pride in the area - and a high level of habituation to vehicles filled with camera-wielding tourists means that leopards are seen regularly, and often in significant numbers. Typically, a visitor to one of the lodges in this area will see a leopard on two out of three game drives, and may see as many as six on one drive!

The quality of the sightings is also excellent. We have seen leopards killing, eating, playing, fighting, courting, sleeping. These leopards do not disappear into the bush when a vehicle arrives; they continue about their business while -



occasionally - making the visitors understand they will be tolerated as long as they keep their distance. Sometimes, a leopard will make use of humans for his own purpose - for example, using a vehicle as cover to stalk prey. At other times, this very familiarity can prove the leopard's undoing, as we shall see.

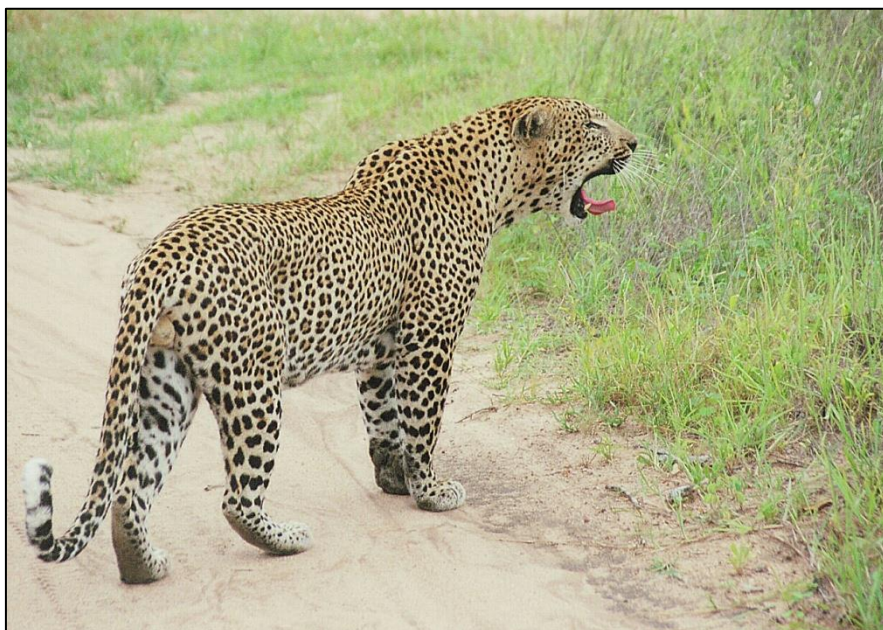
The other special factor is the character of the dominant male leopard, Mafufunyane. Leopards are notoriously solitary animals, but in this area one of the pleasures is to see interactions between leopards. Much of this is due to Mafufunyane's disdain for the rulebooks on leopard behaviour, as he does the rounds of his extended "family".

The story told here is based on personal observations (eight visits over eight years) as well as the reports of sightings by rangers in the area. It tells of a point in time, the prime of life for this male leopard. There will come a point when a different male becomes dominant, probably with different females. This story is just a snapshot of a dynamic situation, with the aim of recording for posterity the lives of these special leopards.

Mafufunyane

Young male leopards generally have to move away from the territory of their birth, to carve out their own territory, usurping any existing dominant male. Mafufunyane was about five and a half years old when he moved north from Londolozi. Over a period of about a year, between April 2002 and April 2003, he pushed out the older dominant male Xhivati, who was aged about 13 by the end of this process. His name means "one who gets angry".

Mafufunyane has a territory of about 3,000 hectares, of undulating lowveld bush crossed by two rivers, the Manyeleti and the Marakheni. There is plentiful game - impala (the staple diet), bushbuck, wildebeest, duiker. The leopard must defend his territory to preserve his food supply. Mafufunyane is frequently seen patrolling his boundaries, pausing to leave his scent as a deterrent to intruders or to check the scent left by others.





Within Mafufunyane's territory are the territories of the two females with which he has most regularly mated - Safari and Seseka. The territory of a female is smaller than that of a male, but still provides ample supplies of game, particularly for two such proficient hunters as these females.

Also overlapping to some extent with Mafufunyane's territory are the territories of some of his young adult daughters, who have carved out areas for themselves when they became independent from their mothers. Like the male leopard, females spend time scent marking and checking for intruders.

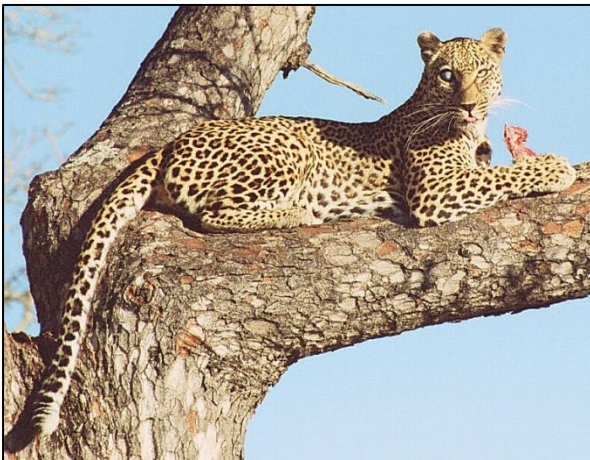


Safari and Seseka

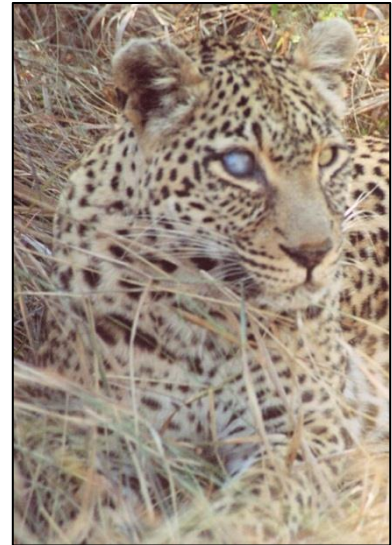
These two females are said to be half-sisters. Safari was probably born around 1993, and Seseka a few years later. Both had borne cubs to other males before Mafufunyane arrived. Since then, each has had several litters which he has fathered.



The name Seseka means "beautiful one".



Safari is so named after the lodge on her territory. Safari is an easy leopard to recognise because she is blind in her right eye,



which appears a cloudy blue. There are

differing versions of how she came to lose her sight. Some say it was the result of a fight with Xhivati over a kill; others, that the fight was with Mafufunyane as she defended her cubs. The loss of an eye does not however seem to have diminished her ability to hunt.

Baby leopard cubs are highly vulnerable to predators, from lions and baboons to hyaenas and snakes. The female leopard keeps her cubs well hidden, and moves them to a different hiding place if she thinks they are in danger. Safari and Seseka often hide their cubs in the thick vegetation along the banks of rivers or streams. The rangers take care to respect their privacy during the early months.

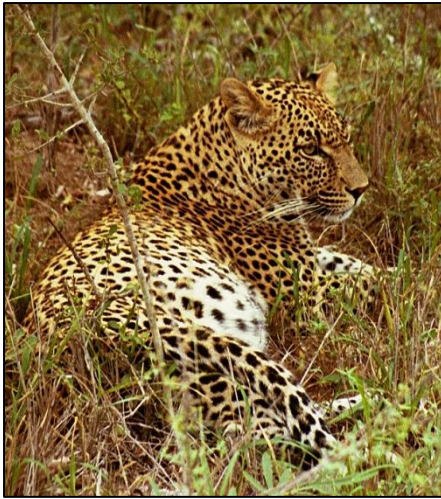
Safari's cubs



At the time Mafufunyane arrived, Safari already had two male cubs, born around January 2001. When we saw them at the age of a year to 16 months, they were left by themselves while Safari went off to hunt. They were still dependent on their mother for food, and spent hours amusing themselves in her absence. On one occasion, it seemed like fun to threaten a group of old male buffaloes, but the cubs soon had to beat a hasty retreat up a nearby tree!

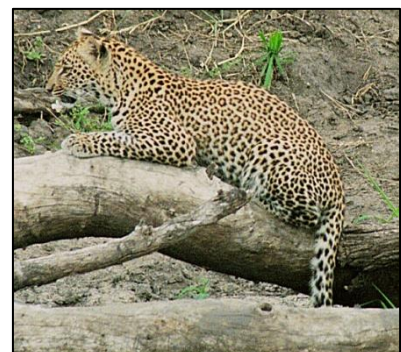
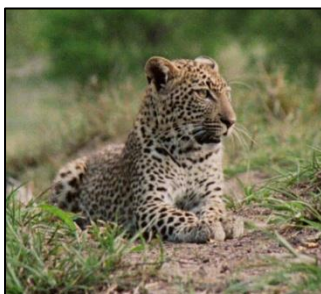


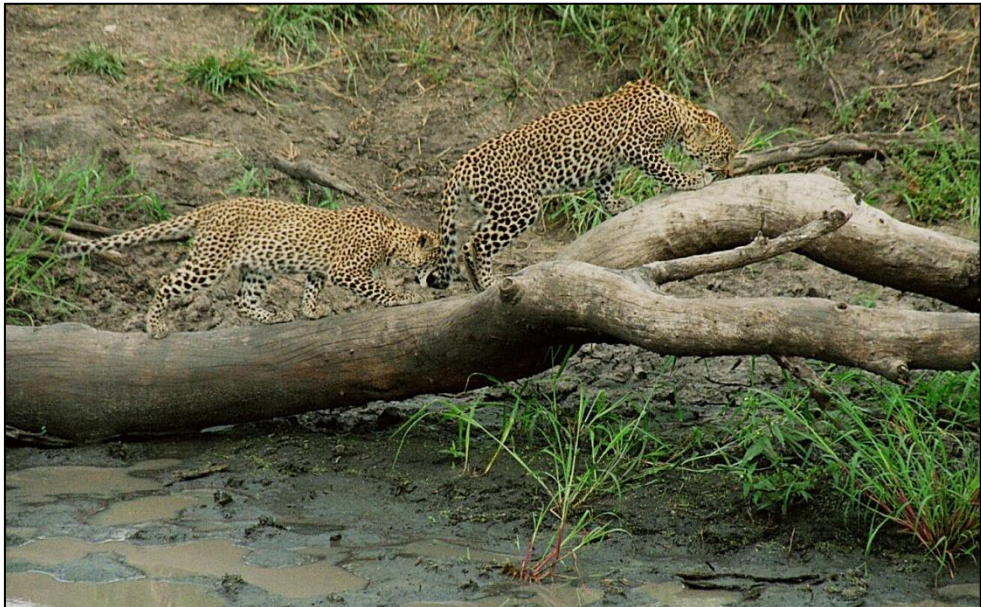
By May 2003, the two brothers had separated from their mother but were still keeping together. This was fortunate as one of them quickly ran into trouble. First his nose was pierced by a porcupine quill; then he was gored in the stomach by a warthog. While he lay injured, his brother hunted for both of them.



Eventually the brothers moved further away from their mother's home range and separated. Sadly, both died around November 2003. One was shot after catching a landowner's dog on a neighbouring property. The other - the injured one - died while being tranquilised for removal; some say, he too had caught a landowner's dog, others that he died of his injuries. At about the same time, Xhivati - the previous dominant male - was shot dead having walked into a tented camp. Before he was pushed out of his territory, he had regularly walked through the lodge where we stay, with impunity; he even hunted and mated in the grounds. The expectations of these leopards that they would be safe around humans turned out to be misplaced.

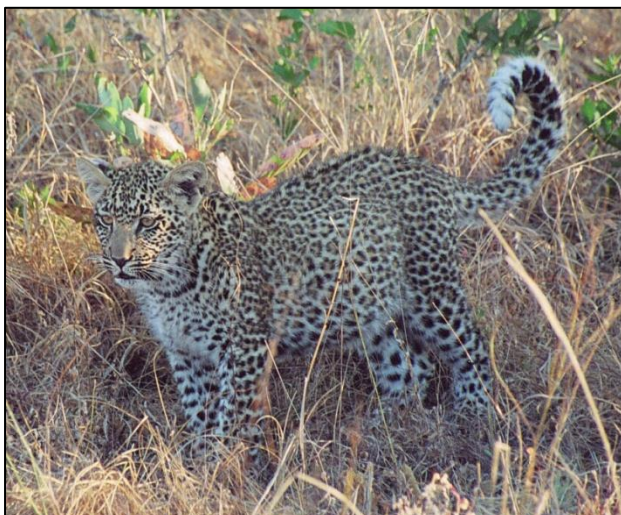
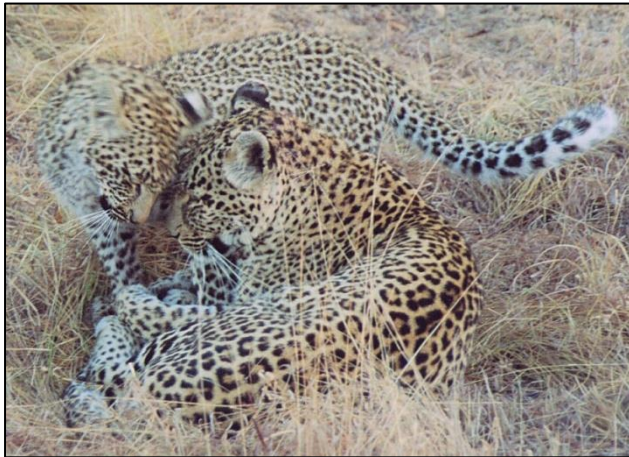
Meanwhile, Safari had mated with Mafufunyane, and in April 2004 two female cubs were born. At the end of that year, when they were eight months old, we watched them playing together as, again, their mother left them for long periods while she went hunting. They practised their skills in stalking and chasing each other, and when they grew bored, they climbed a tree and played with the gourds hanging from a vine wrapped round its branches.





These cubs, named Ku-rhula and Tsemba, became independent from their mother late in 2005, and moved away to carve out their own territories. Tsemba was found dead in the first half of 2006 - killed perhaps by lions or in a fight with another leopard. Ku-rhula stayed close to the north east corner of Safari's territory, and was thriving when we saw her in the summer of 2006. Not yet fully mature, she was still playful, and would spend time chasing small creatures like mice.

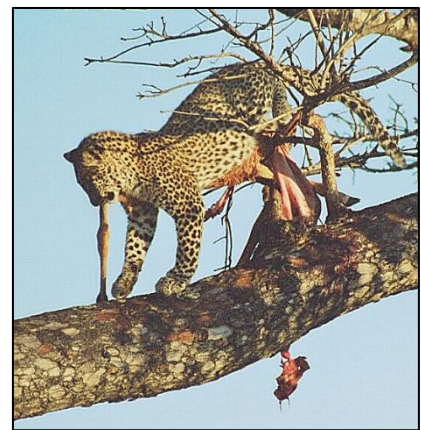
Around the beginning of December 2005, Safari gave birth to her most recent litter - two cubs, one male, one female. In July 2006, the cubs were still a little timid, keeping close to their mother.



We watched one of the cubs feeding on an impala kill on a high branch, while its sibling remained below with Safari.



After a while, the cub decided to try and move the carcass to a better position. This proved more difficult than it thought....



When the cub had eaten its fill, it dropped to the ground, and the two cubs and their mother greeted each other affectionately before Safari leaped up the tree to feed.

The female cub disappeared towards the end of 2006. The male cub, Matimba, was still with his mother in June 2007, but nearing the point when he would become independent.

Seseka's cubs

It is believed that Seseka had her first litter - two males - in June/July 2000, when she would have been about 4 years old. By the time Mafufunyane had taken over the territory, Seseka's cubs had moved away and she was ready to mate again. Their first cub was born mid January 2003. Called Nyaleti, meaning "little star", by May 2003 she was a feisty bundle of energy.

In the absence of a sibling, she took every opportunity to play with her mother. A favourite game involved pouncing onto Seseka from a height or a distance, Seseka pretending to be surprised.



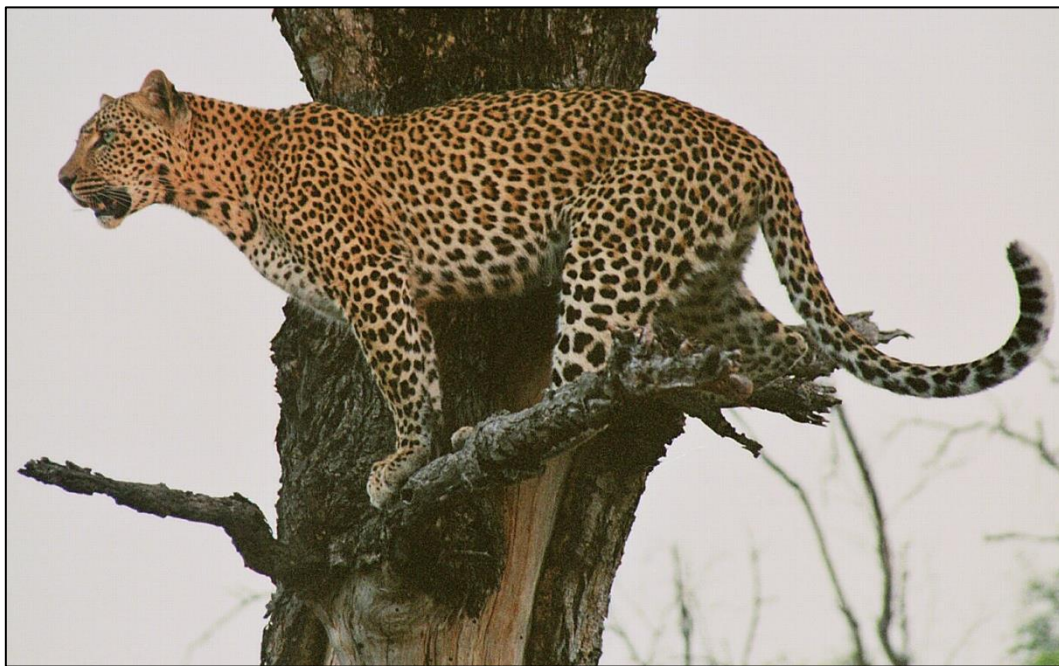
Sometimes Seseka lost patience with her cub. One evening, the leopard had caught a duiker (a small antelope) and was eating it at the base of a tree. After suckling, Nyaleti was more interested in amusing herself. Having played with the grass and her mother's tail, climbed a small tree and growled at our vehicle, the cub started to play with the carcass.



Irritated, Seseka finally took her kill up the tree - which was too high for the cub to climb - so that she could finish her meal in peace. The cub remained below, plaintively looking upwards.

The following morning, Seseka was up the tree finishing off the last of the duiker, watched intently from the ground below by a large female hyaena, which made a grab for the final bones as they fell. The cub was safely up another tree a short way off, watching the hyaena with a serious expression, as the hyaena would not have hesitated to kill the cub if she could. When the hyaena had finished eating and left, Nyaleti immediately began calling to her mother, anxious to rejoin her as soon as possible. Soon they were both on the ground and walked off into the bush to find water to drink.

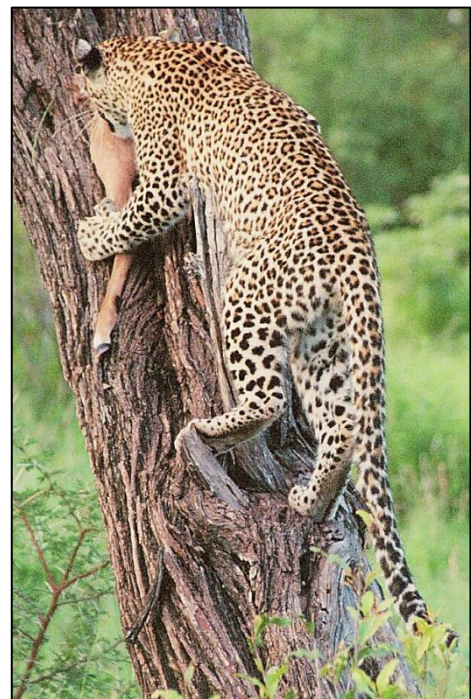
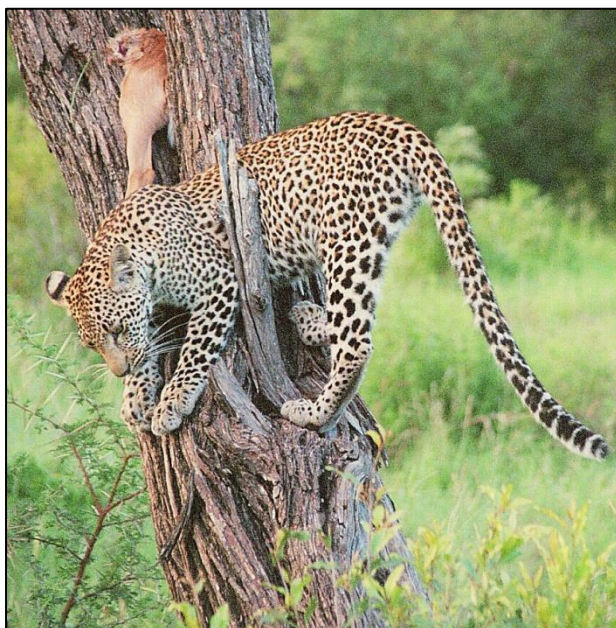
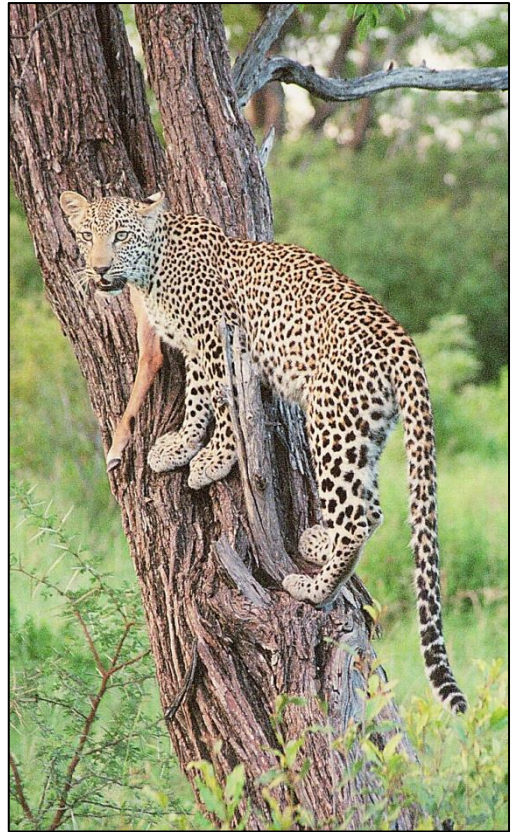
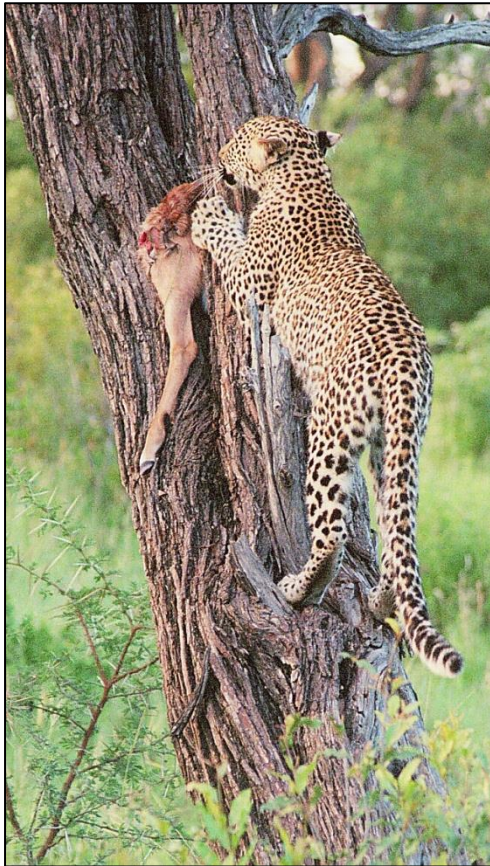
In January 2004, Nyaleti was almost as big as her mother, but still very playful - hide and seek round a tree, stalking and pouncing on Seseka at every opportunity, running up termite mounds and investigating twigs and branches. At other times she would act in a more grown up way, for example spraying a tree to leave her scent mark.



Nyaleti was independent of her mother by December 2004. Life can be tough for a young adult, and we witnessed one particularly bad day for her. She had caught an impala, but an adult male leopard turned up, chased her up a tree and stole her kill. No sooner had she descended than Seseka arrived, and mother and daughter then had a fight. Their noise attracted a pride of lions which came to investigate; Seseka fled, and Nyaleti escaped up a tree again, where she was obliged to stay until the lions lost interest. Nyaleti is now established to the south of her mother's territory, based mainly in Londolozi; she was still thriving in June 2007.

It is believed that Seseka's next litter of cubs died. A further litter of two cubs was born around late March or early April 2005. Only one of the cubs survived past the first few months, and she was given the name Salayexi, "the one left by itself".

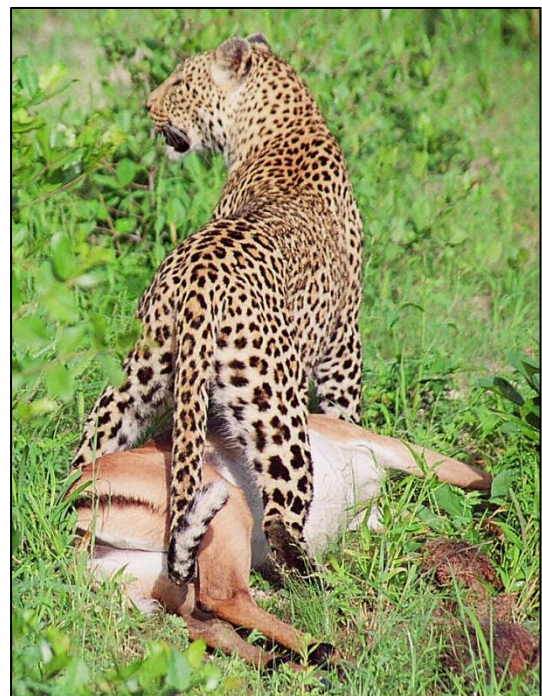
We first saw Salayexi when she was 9 or 10 months old. Like her half-sister Nyaleti, she was full of character and quite unfazed by vehicles. We watched her climb a small tree where her mother had stowed a kill, and attempt to move it to a more comfortable feeding position, nearly dropping it in the process.



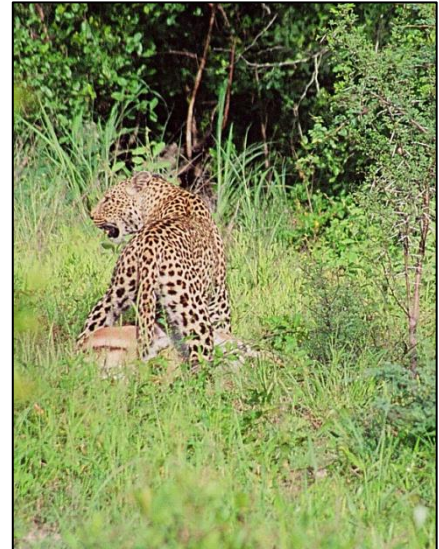
On another occasion, both mother and daughter made a kill at the same time! Seseka caught and killed an adult impala,



then dragged
it into the
bush,



stopping every few yards to rest.



Having hidden the kill, Seseka went to find her daughter.



Meanwhile Salayexi had caught a young impala, but she lacked the strength to finish it off, and ended up hanging on underneath it! Eventually her prey escaped.

By July 2006, Salayexi had grown in strength and size, but was still relying mainly on her parents for food. Almost every day, we saw her feeding on a kill, including a reedbuck which is relatively rare in this area.

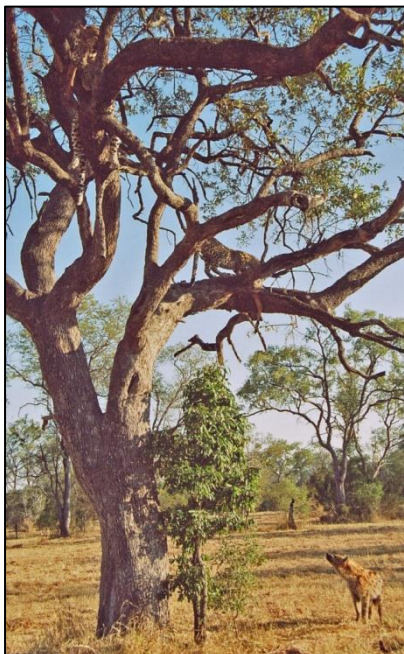
Seseka was becoming increasingly intolerant of her daughter, growling at her. Perhaps this was to encourage respect, or simply because it would soon be time for the cub to go her own way.

Salayexi became independent a few months later, moving off to the north west of her mother's territory. Seseka's next litter of two cubs was born in early December 2006.

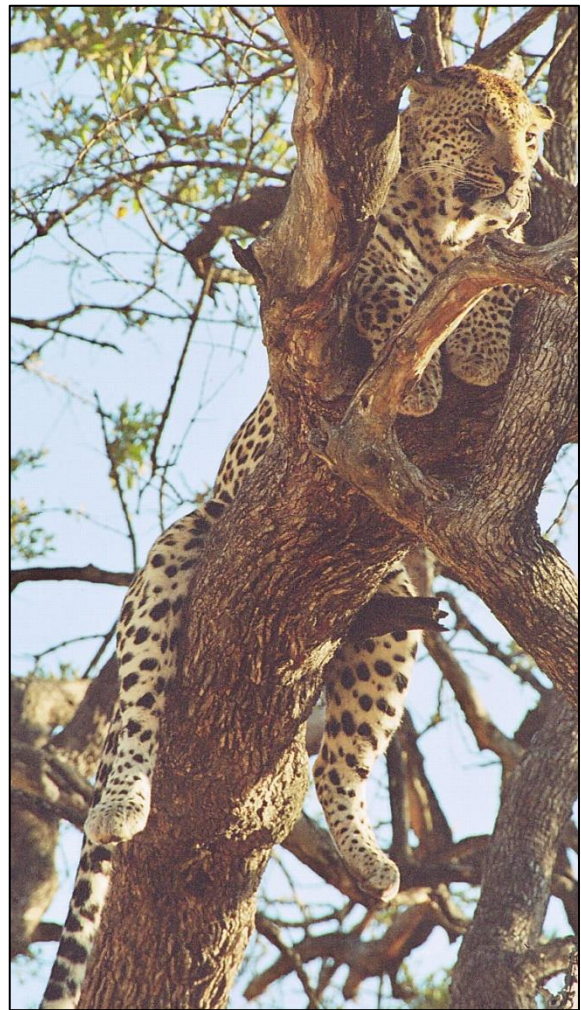
Mafufunyane and his family

The received wisdom about male leopards is that they associate with other leopards only to mate. Mafufunyane constantly breaks this rule.

As he makes his ceaseless way around his territory, he frequently visits Safari, Seseka, and his cubs. For example, on one day in April 2005, he was seen with Safari's two female cubs, then about a year old. The next day he was seen with Nyaleti, two years' old and independent. A few weeks later he was with Nyaleti again, and the following day with Safari and the cubs. He has been observed playing with his cubs, and he becomes familiar with their scent while they are small so that he does not attack them when they are older. He is not



averse to sharing his kills with his offspring, but equally he will steal kills from their mothers.

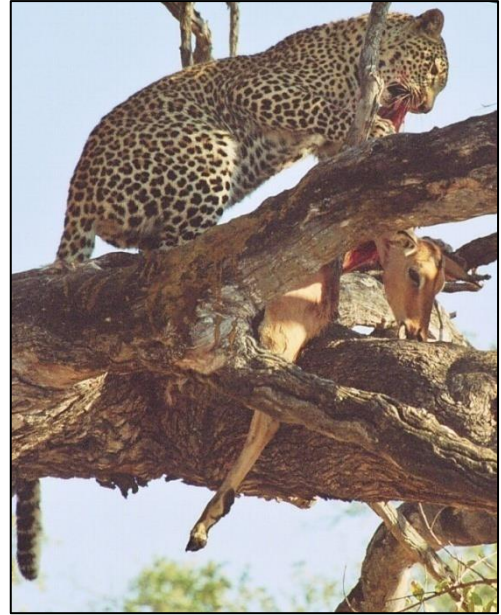


We witnessed his tolerant paternal behaviour in July 2006, when we twice saw Mafufunyane with Salayexi.

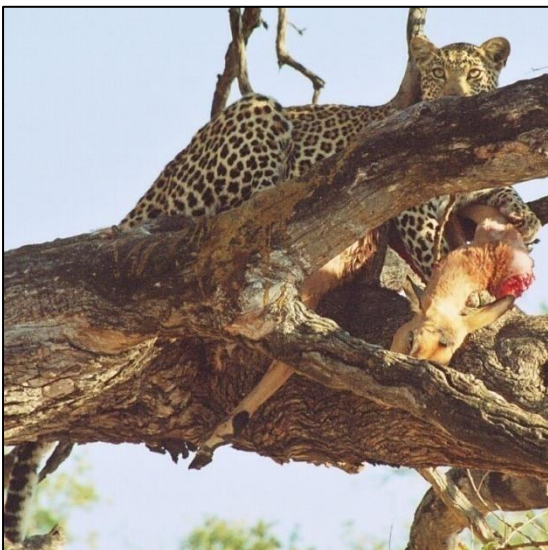
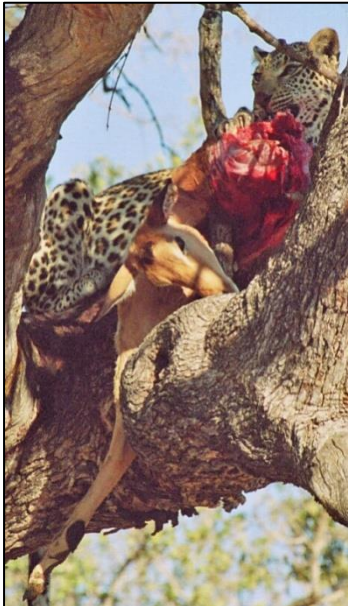
The picture above shows Mafufunyane resting in a tree. To the left is the same tree, with Mafufunyane in the top left, and his daughter Salayexi on the branch on the right, feeding on an impala kill.



Her father had made the kill and taken it up the tree, to keep it safe from other predators such as the hyaena



waiting keenly underneath for any scraps that might fall.



Once he has eaten his fill, he allows his daughter to take her turn. Salayexi moves the kill around on the branch as she feeds, and from time to time Mafufunyane casts an anxious glance towards her as it seems the carcass might drop. Otherwise, his rest is undisturbed.



V Silvester November 2007