



THE
**LAPALALA
RESERVE
REPORT**

NEWS SNIPPETS FROM
AROUND THE RESERVE

VOLUME 1 2026
JANUARY - MARCH 2026

IN THIS ISSUE

Two bulls added to Lapalala elephant population

Front row seats to a hyena denning season

Prosecutors gain insights into the reality of wildlife crime

Transformation at Touchstone to benefit safety and longevity

Routine search and check conducted by security personnel

EarthRanger strengthens conservation operation

AVERAGE TEMPERATURES & RAINFALL

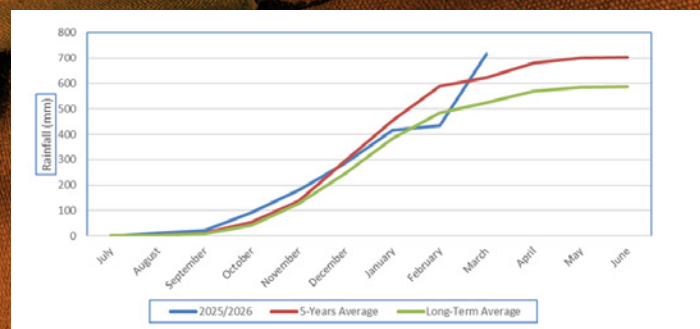
FEBRUARY

Rainfall = 18 mm
Min temp = 17.4 °C
Max temp = 29.6 °C

MARCH

Rainfall = 280 mm
Min temp = 16.7 °C
Max temp = 26.4 °C

CUMULATIVE RAINFALL AT LAPALALA WILDERNESS FOR THE 2025/2026 RAINFALL SEASON.



Total rainfall of 713.95 mm has been recorded at Lapalala headquarters from July 2025 to March 2026, which is above the most recent 5-year average and the long-term average.

TWO BULLS ADDED TO LAPALALA ELEPHANT POPULATION

By Charli Pretorius

Each elephant was fitted with a tracking collar, giving us valuable insights into their behaviour and movements following the translocation.

Lapalala Wilderness recently marked a conservation milestone with the translocation of two elephant bulls from Marataba Contractual Park.

The operation was carefully planned for 5 March but had its share of the challenges and triumphs that usually come with wildlife management. The team assembled at Marataba hoping for an early start but had to contend with heavy rain that bogged down a loading truck and delayed the capture for a few hours. A break in the weather at 09h00 allowed for access via alternative routes and the operation could proceed. Two hours later both bulls had been successfully prepared for their journey to Lapalala. By late afternoon they were safely offloaded near Mohlatse Plains. Each elephant was fitted with a tracking collar, allowing us to monitor their movements and help ensure that they adapt well to their new environment.

What followed was an insightful glimpse into elephant behaviour post translocation. During the first 48 hours, the bulls traversed an impressive distance from the northern reaches of the reserve down to the south and then returning north again. Since then, they have remained in the northern section of the reserve, with localised movement near the internal fence between Mohlatse and Leah, as well as Gianni's Pool area. This pattern is often observed in newly introduced elephant bulls. During the initial weeks after translocation, they tend to seek out secluded areas, keeping their distance from human activity, vehicles, and even other elephants. Their behaviour is also consistent with the observation that fence-line interaction initially increases after elephant bull introductions, peaking around the first 70 days post translocation before decreasing dramatically.

Looking ahead, it is anticipated that the bulls' movement patterns and habitat preference will stabilise within about three months. Their introduction is expected to play an important role in enhancing the genetic diversity of the Lapalala elephant population. Additionally, their presence will contribute positively to the reserve's ecological balance and offer exciting opportunities for tourism. The successful translocation of the two elephant bulls is a testament to careful planning, teamwork and an ongoing commitment to conservation excellence. Lapalala Wilderness is grateful to Conservation Solutions, Marataba Contractual Park and the Wildlife Emergency Fund for making this translocation possible.



Each elephant was fitted with a tracking collar, giving us valuable insights into their behaviour and movements following the translocation.



FRONT ROW SEATS TO A HYENA DENNING SEASON

By Wihan Pretorius

As is common in hyena mothers, hyena female 2 is highly attentive, returning regularly to nurse. She will move the cubs to a new den if she senses a threat.

Over the past few weeks, we have been privileged to share the comings and goings of a denning season for our spotted hyena female 2.

We were aware that she was heavily pregnant, so a cluster of GPS points from her collar alerted us to the possibility that she had chosen to den right next to headquarters. This was confirmed when we discovered a network of tunnels at the suspected den. Camera traps revealed that she had given birth to two cubs.

Spotted hyenas are often maligned, but their antics at a den site quickly dispel any misunderstanding. Hyena cubs are born fully furred, with open eyes and a full set of small, sharp teeth. From the very beginning they are active, alert and surprisingly assertive.

Competition between siblings can start almost immediately after birth, especially in litters of two where dominance is established early on. At the den, cubs spend much of their time playing, wrestling and interacting. What looks like simple play is critical for development: building the strength, coordination and social bonds that will shape their place within the clan. Hyena society is female dominated. Cubs inherit their social rank from their mothers meaning that, even at a young age, some individuals hold higher status than others. This hierarchy influences how cubs interact, who they defer to, and how confident they are around other clan members. While the den offers protection, cubs are still at risk from predators like lions or even unfamiliar hyenas.

It has been a rare treat to share this intimate glimpse of a hyena den so close to headquarters.



Spotted hyenas are often misunderstood, but their antics at a den site are a source of great amusement and wonder.

PROSECUTORS GAIN INSIGHTS INTO THE REALITY OF WILDLIFE CRIME

By Glenn Phillips

From 23 to 27 March, Lapalala Wilderness was pleased to host a workshop for wildlife crime prosecutors on behalf of the Waterberg integrated wildlife zone (IWZ).

The initiative was spearheaded by Kassie Knoetze of Welgevonden Game Reserve, who serves as the Waterberg IWZ coordinator and national co-chair. Organising partners included the Limpopo endangered species unit (ESU) of the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the deputy director of public prosecutions in Limpopo, Adv Rene Roux.

The workshop aimed to expose lawyers who prosecute wildlife crime to the realities of poaching. Delegates heard presentations from Francis Craigie, Chief Director Enforcement, Carmen van Tichelen from the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, Lt Col. Piet Meyer and Jurg van Heerden of the SAPS ESU, and Sampie van Heerden from the Financial Intelligence Centre.

Retired advocate, Ansie Venter, shared some inspiring stories from her career as a state prosecutor, particularly her experience of prosecuting poachers in the Kruger National Park.



The highlight of the workshop took place in the field, where a rhino was darted for a foot collar placement and ear notching. Guests also experienced a simulation which demonstrated the various capabilities that our wilderness protection unit uses to track and apprehend poachers.

Elise Serfontein of Stop Rhino Poaching, Dr Kelsey Skinner of the African Pangolin Working Group, and our very own JP Viljoen, discussed the various efforts to protect endangered species, such as rhino and pangolin.

The event culminated in a visit to the Lapalala Wilderness School where guests were inspired by the incredible work of the school and its educators, as well as a tour of the world-class Giovanni Ravazzotti Biodiversity Centre. The prosecutors described the visit as a life-changing experience and agreed that they had not experienced such professionalism and teamwork.

The workshop opened their eyes to the challenges of protecting vulnerable species, with a view to improving support and collaboration in the prosecution of wildlife crimes.

TRANSFORMATION AT TOUCHSTONE TO BENEFIT SAFETY AND LONGEVITY

By Dalene Pitout and Michael Gardiner

Over the past few months, the parking area at Touchstone Lodge has undergone a quiet but meaningful transformation as we prepared to replace the thatch with Chromadek IBR steel roofing.

The decision had to balance both strategy and nostalgia: the thatch was a familiar feature of the parking area, standing steadfast against the elements and providing a playground for our resident baboon troop. However, thatch also comes with the ever-present risk of fire, escalating cost of insurance, and constant maintenance. The result is a thoughtful upgrade to infrastructure that strengthens safety, reduces long-term costs and safeguards the visitor experience at Lapalala Wilderness.

The project was officially launched on 23 February, following a comprehensive plan that prioritised the assessment of risk and meticulous safety protocols. The site was used by both staff and guests, so access was controlled and the walkways and traffic routes were clearly demarcated. The height of the installation (six metres) required that the scaffolding was professionally inspected, and workers were equipped with certified fall-protection gear. Fire-prevention



The team retained the original wooden framework where possible, choosing to replace or make repairs to any age-related wear or areas affected by termite activity.

measures were heightened, supported by daily supervision and toolbox talks. This structured planning ensured that the project progressed responsibly and without disruption to the daily rhythm of the reserve.

The next phase will see the installation of the Chromadek IBR sheeting in dark dolphin grey. The upgrade to the parking area roof is only the beginning. Over the next few years, all thatched roofs at Touchstone Lodge will be gradually replaced in a project that has the wellbeing of people, wildlife and the environment at heart.

ROUTINE SEARCH AND CHECK CONDUCTED BY SECURITY PERSONNEL

By Winston Pretorius

Regular searches by gate access officials play an important role in maintaining strong area integrity. They prevent the illegal removal of fauna and flora from our protected area. They also control the entry of unwanted items into Lapalala Wilderness.

For the most part, security personnel seldom find anything of concern during these routine searches. However, this was not the case during a recent search and check at East Gate when a substantial amount of marijuana was confiscated from five members of a contractor's team.

Due to the large amount of marijuana (locally known as dagga), and the way in which it was pre-packaged, our security suspected that the dagga was intended for



sale and not private consumption. Our security team contacted the South African Police Service, who issued fines to all the individuals and confiscated the dagga. We appreciate the dedicated efforts of our security personnel as they work to preserve the area integrity of Lapalala Wilderness.

BIOSECURITY INFRASTRUCTURE HELPS TO CONTROL THE SPREAD OF FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE

Lapalala Wilderness has introduced vehicle disinfection and foot baths at all access points to address the risk of foot and mouth disease.

Foot and mouth disease (FMD) is a highly contagious disease that affects cloven-hooved domestic animals (cattle, pigs, sheep, goats) and wild animals (African buffalo, kudu, and other antelope species). The Waterberg district has not been spared from the widespread outbreak of FMD in South Africa. Multiple outbreaks of FMD have been confirmed in Limpopo, with Vaalwater recording its first case in February this year (this was later found to be a false positive). The area was declared a 'red zone', prohibiting movement of cloven-hooved animals and their products out of the district in order to prevent the spread of the virus to FMD-free 'green zones'.

Lapalala Wilderness explored various measures to protect the reserve against any transmission of FMD. All access points were fitted with automated BioSpray systems : high-pressure vehicle disinfection to decrease the risk of contamination from vehicles that enter the reserve. Foot baths were also deployed at all access points, including the airstrip, to prevent the spread of pathogens from the shoes of staff and visitors. These aspects of biosecurity infrastructure are our first line of defence in the prevention and control of FMD.

We often focus on the more visible threats to biodiversity – like poaching, fence damage or alien vegetation – but the unseen risks demand equal attention. Pathogens can spread in many forms, leading to massive losses that can threaten ecological integrity if left unchecked. Healthy ecosystems play a vital role in biodiversity conservation as the more diverse the ecosystem is, the more resilient it is to any disturbance.



All our access points have been fitted with an automated BioSpray system to disinfect vehicles as they enter the reserve.

EARTHRANGER STRENGTHENS CONSERVATION OPERATIONS

By Jacques Viljoen

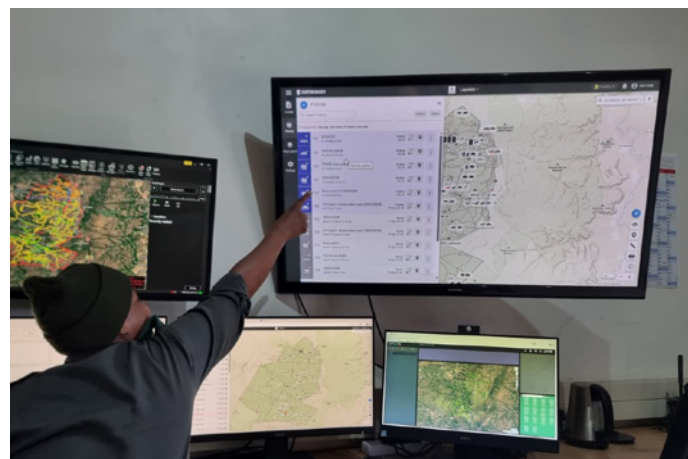
With a live operational picture of the situation on the ground, teams can respond quickly and effectively to emerging situations.

Effective conservation relies on access to the right information at the right time. Lapalala Wilderness uses the EarthRanger platform to coordinate data from multiple sources so that we can respond quickly and effectively to the situation on the ground.

EarthRanger integrates information from various networks, which allows us to monitor wildlife, track teams and review events (patrols, alerts and incidents) on one central platform in real time. The data is recorded and analysed, resulting in clear, consistent reporting and the ability to identify patterns and trends over time.

EarthRanger is equally valuable as a live operational picture of what is happening on the ground. This situational awareness allows teams to respond

quickly to emerging situations and coordinate actions more effectively. This unified system helps our teams work more efficiently and focus their efforts where they are needed most, ultimately contributing to stronger and more effective conservation operations.



EarthRanger integrates real-time information from various networks into one central platform.