

The Leopard Quest and Biyamiti Stand-off

By [Peter Sumner](#)

Ever since my parents took me to the Kruger National Park for the first time in the 1950's, it has had a magnetic effect on me and now beckons me every two to three years. My family has been very lucky over the years, witnessing lion, cheetah and wild dog kills, but the graceful leopard has eluded us for all these years, except for a glimpse and a set of limbs dangling from a distant tree.

We decided that in our quest for leopard this year during the October school holidays, we would stay in semi-private bush camps, which are a bit more up-market than the average accommodation and more exclusive, as the camps only house about 70 visitors. We booked for a group of friends at Biyamiti in the "deep" south and Talamati in the west, south of the Satara to Orpen road. These camps turned out to be excellent in all respects, lovely settings, abundant bird life, full electrical facilities in the cottages – the info flyers give conflicting information – and above all, staff who went the extra mile to see that our party had a memorable stay. It did help communicating with the staff beforehand, so when we arrived we felt we knew each other.

One thing I cannot credit to the staff was the giraffe that died on a game path just off the road 1km from camp the night before we arrived. Some leopards found it and were chased off by hyenas that were in turn dispossessed by a large pride. Some in my party said they wanted to see lions if nothing else. We have a 100% hit rate on lion since 1956, so I was confident of us all seeing them, but this was a bonus, as everybody now put down lion first on their daily scorecard!

We found out the night before we arrived that large tracts of the southern park had been burned and not only the Pretoriuskop area, where the loss of life had occurred. The animals appeared to be starting to return to the Biyamiti area, and our party collectively saw the big five in the area, as well as kudu, giraffe, sable and impala. The game down south seemed to be sparse until one reached the H4-2 and H4-1, the tar road that joins Crocodile Bridge with Skukuza via Lower Sabie. This road is always a favourite among game seekers and very seldom disappoints. We saw many lions in different sightings, two lazy lionesses ensured single-lane traffic by lying in the road, and others sat just off it. We saw wild dogs, and the big five on consecutive mornings. Our first "real" sighting of leopard was worth the wait. We had just left the Sunset Dam for Skukuza and as we rounded a corner, a group of cars was reversing towards us. As the first drew level, I asked what we should look for. The answer was "Lion running!", but as we watched, this leopard appeared in a tree, snarling and looking downward. We could see and hear movement in the lion-coloured, rain-starved bush as the commotion passed. After about a minute of silence, the leopard jumped down from the tree into the thicket and was gone. We assumed that he had killed an impala, and the lions got wind of it and gave chase. Unable to outrun them, the leopard ditched his kill and scrambled up the tree. The lions grabbed the kill and each made off with some as he "swore" at them from safety, and when the coast was clear he was off to find some more breakfast.

Some of our group went out for the day and found that we were struggling a bit to make it back to camp in time. That is usually when you see the most interesting things, like a black-maned lion lying next to the road, a huge hyena and a herd of elephant with tiny babies. There is only time for a quick look and maybe a photo, if the light holds, and then back to beating the clock. We were on the point of losing the battle when we approached the afore-mentioned giraffe feast and found the road blocked by a herd of buffalo. Great, they wouldn't budge. I invited the party lawyer to proceed first as he had a hired car. They still wouldn't budge. We were now officially late. I scrambled around the interior of my car and found the folder containing all you need to know about Kruger and rang the camp. Cell phones are mercifully useless in most of the Park, but I contacted Biyamiti and reported our plight. Within a few minutes headlights filtered through the herd from the other side. Good, the cavalry has arrived. Suddenly there was a commotion in the herd and they ran off the road, only to be replaced by the well-fed lion pride. Almost immediately they retreated like frightened kittens as the buffalo charged head-down. They won back the road. The hyena chose the height of the confusion to sneak in for a snack, but the alert cub-minders chased them off. The lions started to fan out and almost succeeded in isolating a large bull, but at the crucial moment, they retreated in the face (horns?) of

another charge. This went on for nearly an hour, until the buffalo finally retreated and our convoy was allowed through. The camp manager was in the front vehicle on the other side of the standoff and it was comforting to see that he was enjoying a show of nature, rather than making plans to rescue us. Realistically, there was little he could have done anyway except to tell us not to get involved in the rumpus.

Night rides around Biyamiti yielded fewer nocturnal species than I had expected. The occasional genet and bush baby was seen, and a pearl-spotted owl made for a lovely photo, but some or other of the big five were also seen. The biggest cheer one night was when we found a hubcap just off the road. The spotter had lost it “somewhere between Johannesburg and here”!

Having been thoroughly spoilt, we set off for Talamati. The lions were getting closer. We had to drive between a couple of well-fed females and the traffic jam before long. My navigator ensured that I did not drive over a royal head. North of the Sand River, the thick bush gives way to more open country and grasslands, and so the expectations change accordingly. The area around Talamati had not been burned but was yellow and tinder-dry. Some in our party startled a honey badger standing in the road, and I spotted a giraffe with a snare around its neck. The giraffe was uninjured but I feared that would not last. The Satara ranger was grateful that the animal was seen at an intersection and would be easy to track down.

Talamati proved to be the perfect foil for Biyamiti. A cheetah brought down an impala close to the camp and while our friends watched, her three small cubs joined in the meal. One was so curious it inspected their car. Sable antelope were seen by most and a leopard and her larger cubs had taken up residence in the trees at a waterhole on the Satara-Orpen road. White rhino groups were sighted in many occasions and our cheerful night ride driver cleared up a mystery for us. Elephant are seen fertilizing the country as they walk, but occasionally one comes across a large area of dung – called diarrhoea corner by a lady in the party. This is in fact a rhino midden – there is a “his” and “hers”. He visits it once a week (whether he needs to or not) and lets rip.

Night rides were productive. On the way out, we saw elephant, rhino, and a lovely bateleur. On the return, the rare reedbuck, two lions as well as the nocturnal civet. The highlight of all the night rides was the sighting, by one of the children, of a serval. We spent ten fascinating minutes watching this seldom-seen cat drinking from a skip. The serval and his reflection made for lovely viewing, although it was not ideal to photograph.

Other lasting memories will include the bateleur that swooped down on the road to pick up a morsel, causing me to brake, the fish eagle chicks in the nest at Silolweni, lilac breasted rollers mating, the tiny scops owl in the tree directly opposite reception at Satara, the cheetah with the leg injury, stunning sunsets and the impressive blood red full moon rise, the scramble for left-overs by birds on the breakfast tables at Lower Sabie – the bulbuls really like apricot jam!, the tender, tasty impala steak special at Satara, inspecting the great bodies of another two male lions asleep on the tar road, the bravado of the men whose families were charged by elephant, and the large-spotted genet that sat patiently waiting for food at Biyamiti.

As rank amateur birders, we identified sixty-nine species of bird, including seven eagles. It was gratifying to see a number of the rare and endangered saddle-billed stork, as well as a large variety of water birds.

The Kruger Park is alive and well and still capable of putting on a show of nature to compare with any other.