

IMPALA

The Impala is probably the most beautiful of all African antelope, but sadly it is practically ignored by game viewers after the first sighting. A closer examination of the Impala's lifestyle reveals a truly fascinating animal.

When one observes them throughout the year, a very interesting behaviour pattern emerges. Impala notice the days becoming shorter after the summer solstice on the 21st December (longest day and shortest night, when the sun is directly over the Tropic of Capricorn). At the end of the rainy season, when the nights become longer and cooler (during May), the males enter a period of rut. This is when their testosterone levels start rising in response to the shortening day. The older males of 4 years and more, chase out the younger males into bachelor herds and the females group into breeding herds. The older males start fighting and the strongest ones establish territories of 5 to 8 hectares and advertise their status by making barking-like noises (not unlike the roar of a lion) with their necks stretched forward and the head tipped upwards.

They urinate and defecate in large middens that are clearly visible on the roads around the farm at the moment. Intruders are chased out by threat with their horns. Persistent intruders are attacked, which can lead to injury and even death. Territory advertising, defense and mating occupy so much of the males' time, that they have no time to feed and very soon lose body condition. These males last a maximum of 7 days and are then replaced by fitter, fresher and stronger males.

As female breeding herds move through male territories, the resident males check the females' reproductive status by smelling their urine and prevent the oestrous females from leaving, by herding them with horns and running in front of them with heads outstretched. Once a female has been mated she is no longer herded. Mating peaks at the first dark phase of the moon (new moon) after the winter solstice on 21 June (shortest day and longest night, when the sun is directly over the Tropic of Cancer).

Lambs are born in a synchronous fashion – all females in an area dropping within 2 weeks in the rainy season when food and cover is most plentiful. Mothers hide the lambs for the first couple of days after birth, after which the lambs join others of similar age in 'crèches' within the herd.

In the next few months, when the lambs have grown bigger the males will be chased out of the herd to join bachelor herds. Female lambs always stay in the herd they are born in.

By now the days are starting to shorten and the cycle starts again.

References:

Smither's 1986, Mammals of Southern Africa A Field Guide. Cape Town: Struik Publishers
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