



The Rooikat

A newsletter produced by the Friends
of Vrolijkheid

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 Please consider the environment and print only if strictly necessary

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Feedback from our Readers

Q: I noticed the committee members have been asking for email addresses of members. I prefer to have a hard copy of the newsletter to read at bedtime. Are you intending to distribute the newsletter via the Internet only in the future?

A: *No, we will continue to deliver the newsletter to those members who do not have access to the Internet, do not have an ADSL connection for fast downloads, or prefer to have a paper version. We are, however, wanting to save some trees and print fewer copies as time goes by. Additionally, periodic notices are useful in reminding members of upcoming events such as evening talks and family braais.*

Q: I'm a new member and would like to join in some events. What is planned for the next month or two?

A: *Check out the "Outings & Events" section in this newsletter (page eight). If you are an outdoor enthusiast, keep in touch with mountaineer Frances Doering of the Friends (tel: 023 625 1449) and Gilly Schutte of the Robertson Bird Club (tel: 023 626 6899).*

Q: The fundraising concert held at the Donkey Sanctuary was great fun. Will there be one this year?

A: *If Debbie and Jimmy will have us back, and if the magnificent band is available, then yes. We definitely want to do it again so watch this space!*

We would love to hear from you, our members and readers. Your comments, feedback or article in English or Afrikaans is most welcome. Please write to us at alisonmdownie@yahoo.com or send a letter to PO Box 436, McGregor, 6708.

A number of membership fees are outstanding for 2008. Please contact Frances to pay yours. Subs for 2009 are due in June.

Earth Hour 2009

The concept of what is known as “Earth Hour” started in Sydney on 31 March 2007, when more than two million people turned off their lights for one hour. One year later, 35 countries, totalling more than 370 cities, got involved, crossing no less than 18 time zones. Fifty to 100 million people cut their lights for Earth Hour as the idea took flight globally. Even well-known venues such as Times Square in New York, the Jumeirah Hotel in Dubai and the Coliseum in Rome joined in the movement in 2008. This year Earth Hour hopes to reach one billion people in 1 000 cities, including families, businesses and governments. The date for 2009 is Saturday, 28 March. For South Africa, the set time is 8.30 pm. Let’s spread the word in McGregor, Robertson, Montagu, Worcester and Bonnievale, and join in! For more information and to sign up and be counted – literally – visit earthhour.org.

Did You Know – by Dr Ernst Baard

Did you know that ...

- many frogs secrete toxic substances from their glandular skin to deter predators?
- toads have large parotid glands on their necks which release a white, distasteful fluid when the animal is molested or attacked?
- dogs froth at the mouth and get very sick after mouthing a toad? Cases are known where dogs have actually died as a result
- mongooses, in order to avoid these effects, will eat a toad from the underside, leaving the upper, glandular skin untouched (why can’t dogs learn that too, you ask)?
- these secretions are cardiotoxic and cause hallucinations and heart failure in humans if absorbed in sufficient quantities (so don’t go licking or kissing that toad now!)?
- these secretions and/or frog and toad urine DO NOT cause warts?
- despite their toxic secretions, frogs and toads are commonly used in traditional food and medicine?
- in Zulu traditional medicine, burnt frogs are mixed with herbs in the treatment of asthma and chronic oedema?
- medieval English medical practice had widespread uses for frogs:
 - a live frog in the mouth cured an inflamed throat
 - a frog, if swallowed, would cure incontinence
 - frog soup made from nine frogs was just the thing for whooping cough
 - eye diseases were cured by someone first licking the eye of a frog and then licking the eye of the patient!
 - tonsillitis was cured by wearing a string from which a toad had been hanged until dead!
- it is important to remember that, as with all our lizards, no South African frog or toad can administer venom themselves – they are not venomous – but when you handle them, keep your hands away from your eyes, nose, mouth or open wounds. ♦

Why Anti-venom is Not the Answer! – by Alison M Downie

Originally published in *Popular Mechanics* magazine/letter of the month, March 2009

... I would like to add to the letter by Frans Oosthuizen featured in the PM [*Popular Mechanics* magazine] December issue regarding the 59th skill a “man’s man” should have [an article listing certain virtues every man should have, which included keeping anti-venom in the home], namely managing snakebite. I was rather surprised by the segment, as the other sections on surviving in the outdoors [hyperthermia, heat exhaustion, etc] were generally accurate.

As a former field guide, the question, “Do you keep anti-venom here?” used to drive me nuts. My standard response was to point out that it is expensive, has a limited shelf life, needs to be kept below 10 °C, should be administered by a doctor, can cause allergic reactions, and that a victim may need several doses as well as other medical treatment.

I took the liberty of contacting renowned herpetologist and author Johan Marais, who had the following to say: “I have never owned anti-venom and never carried it with me, even when doing reptile surveys in remote parts of Namibia and Mozambique ... it has a limited shelf life ... and should be kept cool but not frozen. Personally I have never recommended the use of anti-venom for a variety of reasons. A fair number of people have histories of allergies and may be allergic to anti-venom. If administered they may require cortisone, antihistamine and adrenaline. In serious snake bites, like mamba, Cape cobra and other large cobra bites, anti-venom may well be required and could be life saving. But it must be injected intravenously and in large quantities (usually 100–160 ml or more) – this is five to 10 snakebite kits! If you are going to keep anti-venom with the intention of using it, make sure you know how to use it. Very few victims of snakebite die within an hour or two and something like 95-plus per cent of all snakebite victims that are hospitalised survive the ordeal.”

So, yes, it is available to the public and can be ordered from a chemist or venom producer. Adrenaline, however, is a schedule 4 product so a prescription is required to obtain it. According to Mike Perry of African Reptiles and Venom in Randburg, a 10 ml ampoule of anti-venom will cost you in the region of R600. In the event of a serious bite, you would start with 50–80 ml and then repeat this if the symptoms continue. The serum would need to be administered intravenously. And let’s not forget the adrenaline, antihistamine and cortisone. Says Mike: “You have a 10 times greater chance of being killed by lightning, and a 400 times greater chance of dying in a motor car accident than being bitten by a snake”. (In fact more people die of human bites in SA every year.) “People also kill many more snakes than there is snakebite inflicted on the human population every year, so who is the most dangerous “animal”? Contrary to popular belief, most of the snakebites are not inflicted on snake handlers but inflicted accidentally when rural people ... walk around at night, in the dark and step on snakes they didn’t see. Most often they are also not wearing adequate footwear.”

Based on the above, it would seem more pertinent, as suggested by Frans in his letter, that PM run an article on snakes, so that we may be better educated. Advising people on how to avoid snakebite, for example, might be a more “manly” thing to do. How about a DIY on building snake-proof firewood storage cabinets?

Yours sincerely
Alison M Downie

Additionally, here are a few tips on how to avoid being bitten:

When in a wilderness area, wear thick boots and trousers.
When hiking, watch where you walk and place your feet.
Do not step over objects – rather onto them.
When lifting an object, lift it away from yourself.
Ensure adequate lighting at night.

As Mike Perry says, **“please be kind to snakes; they fulfil a very important ecological role in nature and they are rather cool animals!!”** ♦

Every Drop Counts – by Alistair Upton

It is estimated that the water needs in our country will exceed what is available within 15 to 20 years. All South Africans need to develop a lifestyle of conserving water NOW. Providing water is environmentally damaging (for example, draining underground water) and uses valuable resources in construction and associated activities. Saving water has associated benefits such as saving on your electricity bill – and building a closer relationship with your spouse (see below!). It is estimated that if all the energy that is put into developing new supply systems was redirected into encouraging efficient use of water, the aforementioned would not be necessary. Here are some useful hints that each of us can implement with ease:

- ❖ When using your dishwasher or washing machine, wait until you have a full load
- ❖ Add a brick or plastic bottle to your cistern to reduce the amount of water required for flushing. This could save you over 7 000 litres of water each year. Older toilets use 11 litres for one flush, which is twice what is necessary
- ❖ Have a shower rather than a bath. This can save as much as much as 100 litres. Save water – shower with your spouse! If bathing, share the water and/or use the grey water in your garden
- ❖ Don't flush your toilet when it is not necessary – the more you flush, the more water goes **down the drain**
- ❖ When washing your car, park it on the grass so as not to waste water. Turn the hose off while you are busy. Alternatively, wash your car using two buckets of water – this can save up to 300 litres each time!
- ❖ It goes without saying that indigenous, hardy plants are more water-wise than gardenias and roses. Grass uses four times what other plants require – consider turning some of your lawn areas into garden beds
- ❖ Don't let the water run when you are brushing your teeth or shaving
- ❖ When washing fruit or rinsing dishes, use a tub in your sink to reuse the water
- ❖ Don't overwater your plants. Very few need to be watered every day and many plants die because of over-watering. Nutrients are leached from the soil in this way, therefore a good, organic compost is needed for lawn and other plants, together with the adequate amount of irrigation
- ❖ Repair dripping taps and toilets – every drop adds up. A dripping tap and leaking toilet can waste up to 10 000- and 30 000 litres a year respectively. For toilets, using a food dye can reveal the location of leaks
- ❖ When defrosting, take out the foods the night before instead of running water over frozen goods
- ❖ Consider changing your plumbing to allow grey water to run into your garden – vast amounts of water can be saved in this way
- ❖ Water your garden before 10.00 am and after 4.00 pm. Irrigating your garden less frequently but for longer will result in stronger plants with a deeper root system
- ❖ At businesses, factories and schools, turn the urinal system off after hours and at weekends.
- ❖ Install a low-flow or aerating shower head in your shower. Replacing all taps with an aerating fitting can drastically reduce your water consumption. This method mixes water and air in order to maintain a high pressure.

Applying simple living methods can reduce your monthly water consumption by 30 per cent – and up to 60 per cent if grey water is reused. Don't waste any more time (or water) on implementing these ideas in your home. ♦



Global Synopsis – by Alison M Downie

October 2008, Switzerland – The Living Planet Index report released by the World Wide Fund for Nature issues a sombre warning: By 2030 humans will need two planets to continue to survive if there is no change to our current consumption patterns. WWF International Director-General James Leape says the following: “The world is currently struggling with the consequences of over-valuing its financial assets, but a more fundamental crisis looms ahead – an ecological credit crunch caused by under-valuing the environmental assets that are the basis of all life and prosperity.”

February 2009, Columbia – Experts have possibly discovered not one but seven amphibian species new to the scientific world. Found in the Tacarcuna area, the species include three transparent (glass) frogs, a salamander, two rain frogs and a harlequin frog. The Conservation International-led expedition included herpetologists and ornithologists of the Ecotropico Foundation of Columbia. The country is home to an astounding 754 species of amphibians, the most varied and diverse on the planet.

December 2008, Kimberly – The only site in South Africa where the endangered Lesser Flamingo breeds, the Kamfers Dam near Kimberly, is under threat as a new housing development is proposed for the artificially-built dam. Constructed by Ekapa Mining in 2006, the first summer resulted in the birth of approximately 9 000 chicks. In February of this year, the Pan African Ornithological Congress, held in the City of Cape Town and attended by 250 delegates, were united against yet another proposal, this time for a soda ash plant to be erected on the shores of Lake Natron in Kenya, another breeding site of great importance for the Lesser Flamingo. An EIA indicates that the proposed plant would destroy the lake and all whose survival depend on it. These two sites are two of only four locations in Africa where the birds are able to breed successfully.

August 2008, Malaysia – A warehouse of a suspected illegal wildlife smuggler in Palembang in South Sumatra is raided. Fourteen tonnes of the Malayan (Sunda) Pangolin are found, leading to the arrest of 14 suspects. Although trade is illegal, pangolins are highly sought after. The frozen bodies were destined for China, where the meat is consumed and the scales and skin used for traditional medicine. The Indonesian authorities are linking the case to two arrests made earlier in 2008 when 23 tonnes of frozen pangolin were discovered in Vietnam, thought to have come from Indonesia.

February 2009, Columbia – Fossils unearthed in the north-east of the country in 2007 have been revealed to be a 12–13 metre-long, 1 100 kg snake, the biggest ever discovered. It would have been able to consume prey the size of a cow (or a human). The creature lived in rainforest habitat 58 to 60 million years ago, spending most of its life in water. The fossil bones from about 24 snakes were first discovered in a mining pit and experts now hope to return to Columbia for further exploration.

December 2008, Sydney – The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society sets sail from Brisbane on their campaign to locate, monitor and impede whaling ships near to Japan. A loophole in a 1986 global moratorium that permits "lethal research" has been used by Japan to cull hundreds of whales every year. Due to the interference of activists, last season the country was only able to fill about half its quota.

September 2008, Harare – Rhino populations are once more threatened as law enforcement in Zimbabwe breaks down. Four poachers were recently released, even after they admitted to killing 18 rhinos and were found guilty and sentenced. The slaughter included several black rhinos, killed in their enclosure at the Imire Safari Ranch. About 70 rhinos have been shot and killed since 2000, with approximately 20 killed in the Lowveld region in 2008. Rhino conservation projects in the country involve WWF, the Parks and Wildlife Management Authority of Zimbabwe and the International Rhino Foundation, as well as several other conservation groups. “In terms of the CITES treaty on wildlife trade, Zimbabwe is now in the spotlight and an international task force will be visiting shortly to investigate its performance in rhino conservation,” said Tom Milliken, the Regional Director of TRAFFIC’s programme in East and Southern Africa.

December 2008, Kenya – A geothermal power plant is proposed for the Great Rift Valley after new technology showed great potential for the area. Powerful veins of steam were found while engineers were searching for hot spots near Nairobi. A number of “wells” have been pinpointed, with most producing four to five megawatts of power. The discovery could be instrumental in providing power to many countries in East Africa.

February 2009, Maldives – The UN predicts that seas may rise by as much as 59 cm within the next several decades. The majority of the Maldives is 1,5 m above sea level so even a minimal rise could be catastrophic. The most densely populated city, Male, is home to 100 000 people in an area of only two square kilometres. The archipelago consists of 1 200 islands, of which 80 per cent are at a height of less than one metre above sea level. ♦

Sources: *Simply Green* e-zine (simplygreen.org.za), *Nature* Magazine (www.nature.com/), WWF (panda.org.za or wwf.org/), TRAFFIC (traffic.com/), Yahoo daily news (news.yahoo.com/)

Ramblers' Round-up – by Frances Doering

Cederberg Trail, 19–22 October:

Four tents, five sleeping bags, five mattresses, kettle, pot, potjie, gas stove, clothing, vegetables, hiking boots, provisions, cool boxes and bags ... all in one vehicle, together with five people in order to reduce our carbon footprint, not to mention our travelling costs. Then we took a slow journey via Ceres, Op die Berg and Matjiesrivier (at the south-eastern end of the Cederberg range) to the attractive Driehoek campsite which we were fortunate enough to have to ourselves.

Our first day's hike was to the Wolfberg Arch. We climbed slowly up through the fascinating rock formations in Die Rif (disturbing a small puff adder on the way), then up the steep Gabriel's Pass (another, much bigger, puff adder there) and up again through a rocky section until at last we reached the plateau where the arch is situated. We took our lunch break with magnificent views across the northern Cederberg towards Calvinia and Sutherland.

Back at camp we lit the fire for the potjie and braai, and enjoyed a pleasant evening until the thought of our warm sleeping bags enticed us to our tents.

The next day we walked through a pretty kloof, then along a jeep track with a gentle gradient, past the Sneeu Berg Hut, to the top of a rocky section from which we could see the Maltese Cross in the valley below. Clouds were swirling around the peak of Sneeu Berg, which loomed over us as we ate our sandwiches in a sheltered spot on the path. On our return we looked north towards Tafelberg and the Wolfberg Arch on the distant plateau. We were sad to leave our campsite the next morning and we look forward to another visit to this beautiful wilderness area.

Elandspad, 14 November:

Six adults (and Mike's endearing grandson) met at the parking area on the Worcester side of the Huguenot Tunnel on a rather warm day to walk along the Elandspad valley in the Limietberg Nature Reserve.

The start of the hike is noisy with the continuous sound of cars and trucks rumbling across the bridge, and the boom of the air conditioners in the tunnel. However, after a short while these sounds are no longer heard and the path continues along the river and through a valley to a cave next to a delightful pool. We stopped here for a swim and lunch. Another swim on the way back to the cars refreshed us for our journey home.

There are some lovely walks and hikes proposed for the next few months (see "Outings & Events"). Bookings for these trips can be made with Frances and usually a small fee is applicable (a Wild Card makes these more affordable). Permits for many of the outings need to be obtained so please plan in advance. For all overnight excursions, a sleeping bag, clothing, provisions, raincoat, torch, hat, sunblock and so forth needs to be brought along. Further detail can be obtained from Frances regarding the terrain, duration of hike, transport arrangements and so on. ♦

500 YEARS AGO IN ENGLAND - a contribution from Dave Harding

Before thermometers were invented, brewers would dip a thumb or finger into the mix to find the right temperature for adding yeast. Too cold, and the yeast wouldn't grow; too hot, and the yeast would die. This thumb in the beer is where we get the phrase "rule of thumb".

Your committee:

Outings, Events & Robertson Bird Club	Gilly Schutte	023 626 6899
Guest Speakers & Outings	Piet van Zyl	023 625 1621
Secretary & Garden	Ann van der Riet	023 626 3888
Treasurer, Walks & Rambles, Garden	Frances Doering	023 625 1449
Newsletter	Alison Downie	023 625 1469
Events & IT	Alain Roux	023 626 6074

The committee welcomes new member Alain Roux from Robertson. Anyone interested in assisting the committee in furthering the aims of the Friends (and being a useful product of society) is welcome to get in touch with Alison or Frances.

Boardwalk Bird Hide Project

The project has gotten off the ground (figuratively and literally), thanks to the support of the Friends of Vrolijkheid, the Vrolijkheid staff and a great deal of hard work and effort on the part of Bruce Milne and his assistant, Gerhard Botha. Bruce began construction in October of last year and completed the first phase (the boardwalk) in January, after 38 mornings of work. The boardwalk is located near the reserve entrance along the Steenbokvlakte road.

Bruce's skill and passion can be clearly seen by the unmistakeable workmanship and the effort he has made to ensure the boardwalk is user friendly to all. The next step is to level out the ground in order to make it accessible for able-bodied and disabled persons. A small area at the end of the boardwalk will be cleared, from which the birdlife at the dam can be viewed (see pictures below) while we continue fundraising for the construction of the bird hide. Says Bruce, "A total of 239 man hours were required as well as 120 mugs of home-brewed coffee! Forty-six poles were planted and 500 planks secured with 2 000 screws. Eighty metres of chain provide security, supplemented by 320 metres of Deltex plastic wire generously donated by Mike Vorster of Cape Agricultural Products."

It certainly is wonderful to see the funds that have been raised over the years being put to good use; and it must be very satisfying for Bruce to see his project come to fruition in such a wonderful way. ♦



Weather Statistics

Rainfall (statistics since 1968)				Temperatures (statistics since 1995)	
Totals		Recordings for Feb			
				Feb min temp	12,6 ° C
Year to date	20,6 mm	Min	0 mm (1971, '73, '75, '98)	Feb max temp	39,1 ° C
2008	414 mm	Max	53 mm (1974)	Average Feb min	16,2 ° C
2007	315 mm	Feb 2009	19,3 mm	Average Feb max	31,6 ° C
2006	335 mm			>35 ° C summer 2007/08	18 days
2005	239 mm			>40 ° C summer 2007/08	3 days

Other interesting rainfall statistics:

The 161 mm we received in November 2008 is the highest rainfall for any month since Vrolijkheid started measuring rainfall in April 1968, 40 years ago! The previous highest was 157 mm, recorded in August 1974.

Vrolijkheid measured 414 mm of rain for the year 2008 which is the highest for any year since April 1968. The previous highest was 404 mm in 1982. Interestingly, 447 mm was recorded for the village. Our mean annual rainfall for McGregor is 275 mm, meaning that 2008 recorded a higher than usual total, although a portion of this did occur during floods.

Outings & Events

MARCH

- Sat 28:** Bird Club outing to Draaivlei Dam (Worcester district)
- Wed 25:** Happy Valley Hike. Beginning at Eerste Tol in Bainskloof, this easy, 9 km hike is a there-and-back-again walk which follows part of the Limietberg Trail to Junction Pool. A delightful and picturesque outing for the whole family with plenty of opportunities for swimming

APRIL

- Sun 5:** Family braai at Vrolijkheid Nature Reserve from 11.00 am. Fires will be provided so bring along your friends and come and enjoy the day out in nature with the Friends
- Tues–Thurs 14–15:** Du Toits Kloof. An overnight excursion to Krom River Hut. The group will walk in on Tuesday, explore the area and swim (weather permitting) and climb Krom River Dome on Wednesday and return on Thursday morning. Numbers are limited so early booking is essential
- Thurs 23:** Evening talk “Mapping the Night Sky” by Angus Rose, to be followed by savoury snacks. Angus’s reputation is well known in the district as anyone who has been to one of his recitals will tell you. Don’t miss this one! The cost is R20 for members and R30 for non-members. Time: 6.00 for 6.30 pm

- Sat 25:** Bird Club outing to Droëkloof/Roodehoogte (Robertson district)

MAY

- Sun–Tues 3–4:** Hike to Thomas Hut in the Hex River Mountains near Worcester. On the first day the group will climb up to the hut, exploring the area further on Monday and returning home on Tuesday morning. Warm clothing is essential at this time of year

JUNE

- Thurs 4:** FoV AGM at Vrolijkheid and talk by Quentin Martins of the Cape Leopard Trust. The time is 6.00 for 6.30 pm and the talk will be followed by our famous home-made soup and rolls
- Wed 10:** Rooikat Trail at Vrolijkheid Nature Reserve (18 km)
- Future Outings:** The Cederberg, Groot Winterhoek and Anysberg Nature Reserve (winter or spring)

Land of Great Thirst – text by Alison M Downie, photographs by Julia McAllister and Alison M Downie

Sixty-five million years ago the Kalahari began its auspicious beginnings as a basin, vast in area, during what is known as the Cenozoic Era. Relatively young, geologically speaking, this basin was to be filled with windblown sand during the millennia that followed. Below these deposits lies the Karoo Supergroup – sediments of up to 12 km thick. Consisting primarily of sandstones and shales, it is the stratigraphic unit covering much of Southern Africa and records a near continuous period of deposition that lasted in the region of 100 million years ... a blink of an eye (or maybe two) as far as geological time is concerned.

Today the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park (KTP), spanning two countries and almost twice the size of the Kruger, is a wildlife extravaganza: a tapestry of ochre sands and windswept grasslands laced with an amazing variety and form of creatures adapted to semi-desert living. It is a land of stark contrast: from moonscapes to bushveld-type valleys; from blistering midday heat to soft sunsets as another day breathes a gentle sigh.

Hunters and gatherers, and pastoralists lived and migrated through the Kalahari for hundreds of years before the first Europeans settled in the area in the latter part of the 1800s. In 1914, soon after World War I began, the Union of South Africa drilled a number of boreholes along the Auob River, the purpose of which was to provide troops with water should the government embark on an operation to invade South West Africa. People from the local community were employed to secure and maintain the boreholes, and remnants of their dwellings and animal shelters can still be seen today. The invasion never occurred but the borehole keepers stayed on with their families.

Minister of Lands Piet Grobler was instrumental in establishing the area as a national park, which he did in 1931. The British government did the same a few years later in 1938, declaring a reserve in what was known as Bechuanaland (now Botswana). After World War II, the southern and western boundaries of the park were fenced, leaving the eastern side open in order for animals to migrate freely. The neglected boreholes were reopened by the first warden in order to discourage animals from roaming outside the park boundaries, where they were shot for sport and for food. The boreholes still play a big role in providing life-giving water, where there otherwise would be none.

The KTP comprises the former Gemsbok National Park of Botswana (73 per cent) and the former Kalahari Gemsbok National Park of South Africa (27 per cent). In 2000 President Festus Mogae and President Thabo Mbeki attended the park's official reopening and the proclamation of Southern Africa's first peace park. A joint management plan was signed, with the premise that each country would maintain and develop infrastructure, and that local communities would be involved and benefit from these processes.

Get Up and Go

As a group of fellow nature lovers and outdoor enthusiasts, we concluded it was high time to discover what all the Kgalagadi fuss was about. We were five in our group, with a Toyota Hilux 4x4 and Toyota Hilux 4x2 between us (what can I say: *"everything keeps going right ..."*). This was to be a recce trip for future vacations and we therefore set out to do and see as much as possible in our allotted seven days. Ideally, though, one would spend two or more days at each camp, the modus operandi being to head out at dawn and dusk, and relaxing in camp during the heat of the day. March/April and September/October are, according to park staff, the best times of year to make the trip.



After barely making it out of McGregor due to heavy rain and localized flooding, our second port of call, after overnighing at Augrabies, was Twee Rivieren in the extreme south of the park. Several months ago SANParks appointed a new contractor and, as a result, the legendary bone-jarring stretch of road outside the park is a thing of the past. En route we had only to endure a few kilometres of good gravel road; by the time we left a week later, the final tarred stretch had been completed.

If you're visiting the park in summertime, enjoy Twee Rivieren's cool chalets while the air conditioners last ... you won't see another until you return. With the bleating of goats and machinations of road crews, one does not feel as if one is in the park proper and therefore probably only worth a one-night stay. Twee Rivieren and Nossob are, however, the only camps offering night drives: Guiding is pretty much a non-event but R130 will buy you the opportunity to stay out a little later and see nocturnal creatures such as honey badger, springhare, owls and bat-eared fox. (Yes, do expect to be the only South Africans on the truck.)

"I love not man the less, but nature more ..."

The beauty of the Kgalagadi is in the sheer unpretentious non-commercial-ness of the park: Vehicular traffic is minimal and we enjoyed several days without seeing another car; on the downside there are fewer pairs of eyes for game spotting. With a rainfall of just 200 mm annually, the plant life in the KTP is extremely water-wise, but more prolific than we had anticipated. Camelthorn, false umbrella thorn and shepherd's tree dominate the landscape whilst in other areas grey camel thorn and grasses such as dune bushman grass are more prevalent. Under many lie the would-be black-maned Kalahari lion or cheetah, waiting to be discovered. The change in scenery from barren, Valley of Desolation-type terrain to densely vegetated grasslands covered in tsamma melons is quite remarkable.

The immense size of the KTP allows for the nomadic movement of ungulates and predators, providing scope for large-scale ecological processes in a sizeable ecosystem. We enjoyed several magnificent sightings, including lion, cheetah, brown- and spotted hyaena, black-backed jackal, Cape fox and African wild cat. Leopard, caracal, wild dog and bat-eared fox eluded us but are sighted regularly. We encountered large herds of springbok, gemsbok, blue wildebeest as well as smaller groups of red hartebeest, giraffe and eland, and of course many delightful steenbok resting under bushes along the roadside. A whopping 307 birds have been recorded, and the park has a reputation for exceptional bird life, which includes 52 of South Africa's 80 raptor species. Whilst game concentrations are certainly not what one finds in Kruger, visitors will not be disappointed.

It was sheer pleasure to sit by the fireside at night without the omnipotent and omnipresent mosquito; instead, the aural space from dusk was filled with the sound of the Kalahari's barking gecko. He is a shy fellow who calls from the entrance of his keyhole-shaped burrow, using the space to amplify the sound.

Spending the majority of the week sans footwear may have been *slightly* reckless on my part, what with *Parabuthus* scorpions and other critters about, but it was irresistible being able to enjoy the red sand between the toes – minus the salt, crowds and screaming kids.

Rest Camps and Roads

There are fewer lodge facilities in the Botswanan section of the Park but it does incorporate several camping sites as well as 4x4 trails comprising 100 km-plus routes with one to two overnight stops. On the South African side there are eight camps; namely Twee Rivieren, Nossob, Mata Mata (fenced); and Grootkolk, Gharagab, Bitterpan, Kalahari Tented Camp and Urikaruus (unfenced). !Xaus Lodge is a community camp located in the south-west. According to SANParks, a new upmarket lodge is planned for Twee Rivieren in the not-too-distant future. Only fenced camps offer camping facilities on the South African side. Each site is provided with shade, and the ablution facilities are roomy and well-serviced. The smaller, off-the-beaten-track camps consist mostly of four to eight bungalows, located in remote wilderness areas where it's just you and Mother Nature. Waterholes enable one to view a variety of nocturnal animals, such as leopard, lion, hyaena and antelope. The chance of seeing predators in camp after dark are good, especially if one does not 'gad about' too much. Each camp has its resident stand-up comedians, and visitors are treated to the antics of entertainers such as the yellow mongoose and ground squirrel.

Essential Equipment

Five litres of fresh water per person per day
Two-way radios
Binoculars (ideally one pair per person)
Natural history reference books
Hand-held spotlight (preferably five million candlepower or more) for (responsible) spotting at camp waterholes at night
Separate freezer and fridge
Spade and tyre gauge
An appointed look-out to keep watch while changing a tyre

All the camps have their own unique features: Nossob, a hide at the waterhole, complete with webcam and certainly worth a few hours in the early morning and a final visit before bedtime; Bitterpan, an elevated platform, providing 360 views of the immense Kalahari heavens; Gharagab, a sundowner deck; and Mata Mata, a waterhole situated only metres from the camping site. Unbelievably, several camps also provide a swimming pool where one can cool off from the day's heat.

With few exceptions, the camps make use of gas fridges and geysers, with solar panels and small inverters providing electricity for lighting (and on occasion, ceiling fans). Anyone with experience of gas fridges will know how inefficient they can be: If you are visiting during the warm summer months, you seriously need to consider investing in good refrigeration.

There are no tar roads in the park (long may this last) and the main gravel roads are graded monthly. Whilst sedan vehicles are permitted, the roads become progressively more difficult to traverse as one travels north.

Onwards and Upwards

The smaller camps are where the fun-factor is turned full throttle. Off-road driving is required to reach a number of these remote areas, most of them for the exclusive use of those who are booked in for that day. After reducing tyre pressure down to 1,2 bar, we were in for an axel-twisting roller coaster ride. The experience was akin to being at sea and the apparently harmless jeep tracks have a deceptive sting in the tail. The bucking-bronco dune hills tested both vehicles and drivers. All, however (cars and pilots), managed with relative ease, though differential was deployed from time to time. The trails certainly added a huge splash of camaraderie and enjoyment to the already magnificent landscape in the remote wilderness. Whilst only once were we required to tackle a dune a second time, attempting the trails with backup is sensible. Off-road junkies can choose from a total of ten 4x4 trails, with differing grades of duration and difficulty.

Tariffs and Booking Information

Camp sites: R130 per site

Chalets: R690-R760 (on average) per two-bed cottage

Conservation fees: R35 per person per day (South African citizens)

Tel: 012 428 9111

Fax: 012 426 5511

Email: reservations@sanparks.org

Website: www.sanparks.org.za

We were impressed by the security measures in ensuring all visitors reach their destinations safely. Each vehicle is issued with a 'passport'; throughout our trip we were required to check- in and -out at every camp, indicating not only where we were headed but the precise route we had chosen to get there. Many of the trails are one directional only and we therefore planned our route accordingly, in an anti-clockwise direction, covering much of the south- and north-western parts of the park. Grootkolk, Bitterpan, Kalahari Tented Camp and Urikaruus were particular favourites, with Gharagab and Mata Mata close behind.

While the park does require a little more in the way of planning and time away from work, it is without doubt worth the effort to get there, and from our experiences and those of SA burgers we came across, Kgalagadi seems set to become Kruger's main rival. ♦



“It was but yesterday I escaped the tumult of the city
And went forth to walk in the silent fields;
And I came unto a lofty hill
Where nature had bestowed the gifts
of her bountiful hand.
I ascended the hill and looked back upon the city.

... And heartily I turned my mind away from all that
the sons of Adam have wrought,
And looked upon the fields, the seat
of God’s great glory.”

~ Kahlil Gibran



Photograph: Van Heerden Heunis
