



The Rooikat

A newsletter produced by the Friends
of Vrolijkheid

No 44 ~ July 2010

 Please consider the environment and print only if strictly necessary

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Feedback from our Readers

Where can I get my hands on a Friends of Vrolijkheid cap!?
– Clare

Clare, we initially brought out a limited edition FoV cap, in order to gauge the response of members. I believe these sold out immediately. We have purchased more caps and are looking at the possibility of purchasing a few other items, such as beanies and golf shirts. Contact Alison or Frances to get yours.

When are subs due?
– John

Annual subscriptions are due each year in June/July, and membership is valid for a further 12 months. It is suggested that members pay their subs at the AGM, which is to be held on Thursday, 22 July. See 'Events Diary' for further information.

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

Boardwalk and Bird Hide Opening – by Alistair Upton

After a great many fundraising events and lots of hard work from members Bruce Milne and Gerhard Botha, 22 May culminated in a wonderful celebration of a job well done.

The day dawned gloriously bright and sunny: a foretaste of the joyous day ahead. International Biodiversity Day was selected as the day on which the boardwalk and bird hide, the project the Friends have been committed to for the last three or so years, would be officially opened.

There was a great sense of anticipation and excitement as committee members turned out at the site early to set up tables, assemble shade cover and ensure the bubbly was put on ice.

Meanwhile at the Vrolijkheid offices, several other events were on the go under the supervision of a contingent of CapeNature officials, who spent the weekend at Vrolijkheid and had planned the day many weeks in advance. The celebrations were attended by many local school children who enjoyed talks on the importance of biodiversity and a variety of entertainment including drama and a performance by a brass band.

The day was broadcast live to four radio stations, estimated to have reached approximately 330,000 listeners in the province. Vrolijkheid was selected based on two issues: firstly, the location as a central point for the majority of CapeNature reserves, and secondly, the Friends' boardwalk and bird hide project.

Our big event took place just after midday, supported by members and sponsors, CapeNature officials, Director of Biodiversity Dr Kas Hamman, CEO Lucile Meyer, and Minister for Local Government Environmental Affairs and Development

Planning Anton Bredell. Once everyone was gathered, Chairperson Alison Downie gave a short address, thanking members, sponsors, and current and former committee members for their commitment to this worthwhile project.

Most importantly, though, it was a day to honour Bruce Milne and Gerhard Botha, who designed, sourced the materials and built the facility, attending to every detail and tirelessly spending hour upon hour at Vrolijkheid bringing Bruce's vision to reality. They enjoyed every one of the 108 mornings spent at Vrolijkheid and had memorable and fascinating interactions with the wildlife of the reserve. The facility cost R40,000, a figure which could easily have been doubled had Bruce and Gerhard not offered their services at no charge. This also meant that the facility was completed several years in advance than would otherwise have been the case. Bruce and Gerhard were thanked on behalf of the Friends and were also each given a first limited edition FoV peak cap.

Alison handed over to Minister Bredell, who said a few words and then insisted that Bruce and Gerhard be the ones to cut the ribbon and officially open the facility. No sooner was this done than the bottles popped, sparkling wine flowed and everyone was invited to celebrate the event with a glass of bubbly and a snack while having a closer look at the new wheelchair-friendly bird watching facility.

We have a great many people to thank; they are: FoV members for their continued support; Bruce and Gerhard for their selfless contribution and passion for this project; Richard and Naomi Schütte, Maurits Perold, and the Robertson Bird Club for their kind donation of sparkling wine for the opening; committee members and volunteers for help on the day; CapeNature officials for their organisation and cheerful assistance; and Minister Bredell and Dr Hamman for their input and attendance. Our thanks must also go individual donors and to our sponsors for their contributions to our fundraising events over the last two years: Amathunzi Game Reserve, Anysberg Nature Reserve, A Place in Thyme B&B, the Breede River Goose, Cape Cottages McGregor, Deli Girls, Fairy Glen Game Reserve, Green Gables at the Old Mill Lodge, the Jack & Grape Pub and Restaurant, Jan Harmsgat Country House, Sanbona Wildlife Reserve, Temenos Retreat, Trossachs Lodge, Van Loveren Wines, and Ruben's Restaurant at the Robertson Small Hotel.



It seemed fitting to close, as Alison did, with the words of the Psalms and Isaiah, our hope and prayer for Vrolijkheid in the years to come:

'I know every bird in the mountains,
and the creatures of the field are mine ...

Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself ...

The birds of the air nest by the waters;
they sing among the branches ...

The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth;
You founded the world and all that is in it ...

She will become a haunt for jackals,
a home for owls ...

Desert creatures will meet ...
there the night creatures will also repose
and find for themselves places of rest.' ♦



**The moment we've all been waiting for:
Bruce and Gerhard cut the ribbon, while
Minister Bredell and Kim Senogles look on**

Fun with the Friends – by Frances Doering

The Krom River was the destination of the enthusiastic group of Friends who spent a glorious three days camping and hiking in the Cederberg in April. Local walks were tackled and enjoyed during May, with more superb events in the offing.



Cederberg: 18–21 April

As always, the Cederberg proved to be a delightful setting. This time we were at Krom River, where there are some less challenging walks than in the other parts of the wilderness area. The farm at which we stayed, deep in the valley, has a pretty campsite shaded by oak trees and is bordered by a stream with a dam nearby. We enjoyed a relaxing few days, far from cellphones, traffic and vuvuzelas!

Our first walk took us into the SA Mountain Club property adjoining the farm – past the sheep and their delightful Anatolian sheepdog, up the jeep track and into the next valley to a disused farm where there is a small thatched hut which the Mountain Club uses to store equipment. The weather began deteriorating so we returned to the camping area and spent the afternoon wandering around the amazing rock formations at 'Die Stadsaal', now a heritage site under the management of CapeNature.

Despite the intermittent showers of rain which began in earnest, we managed to light a fire and enjoyed our supper sitting on the stoep of one of the unoccupied chalets.

The following day we walked along the valley next to the river until we reached Disa Pool. Before leaving the area we visited Truitjieskraal, another site on the farm with spectacular rock formations.

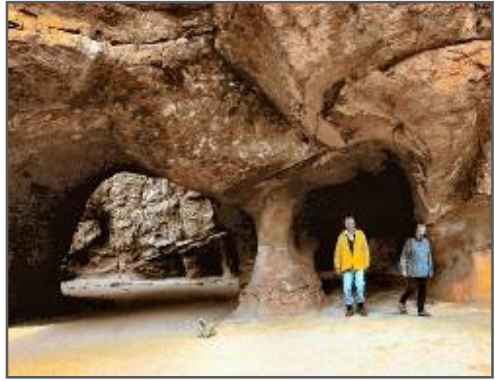




Boesmanskloof Hike: 8 May

Our beautiful valley was a completely different place on this hike – instead of an abundance of flowering fynbos all we could see were mountain slopes devoid of vegetation with the exception of an occasional pine tree. The summer fire had spared nothing.

But as we continued our walk we could see that life was returning to the burnt landscape, particularly next to the river. We are all looking forward to going there again in the spring after what we hope will be good winter rainfall. *(Shortly after this walk Frances was contacted by Weg magazine, which featured a photograph taken by the Friends in their June issue – well done, Frances!)*



Rooikat Hike: 15 May

A small group enjoyed a morning walk to Kanonkop, one of the lookout points on the Rooikat trail in Vrolijkheid. The weather was perfect, we took it easy and considered ourselves lucky to have this beautiful reserve on our doorstep. ♦

(From above) A selection of photographs from the memorable trip to the Cederberg

Witteberg Nature Reserve: 1–3 September

The Friends are planning a visit to this private reserve from Wednesday, 1 to Friday, 3 September (two nights). The reserve is located between Touwsrivier and Matjiesfontein, 28 km from the N1 on good gravel roads. The distance is approximately 195 km from McGregor. Special mid-week rates for the FoV are:

- R46 per person per night for camping
- R117 per person per night for a two-bedroomed historic cottage (own towels and linen; minimum charge R312).

It could be cold at night but the days should be perfect for walking. There are various jeep tracks which we will explore. A communal braai area will make for cosy evenings around the fire and hot water ablutions are provided. The camp site and cottage will be for the exclusive use of the Friends.

Please email Frances (andredoering@netactive.co.za) by mid-July if you would like to make a booking or require further information. Transport costs will be shared where possible.



The camp site and braai area at the Witteberg Private Nature Reserve



The reserve is mountainous and vistas like this are commonplace

That Which Slithers

M*yth, misinformation and mystery tend to proliferate around snakes. Even if you think you know a thing or two about these amazing creatures, you might not know it all – yet.*

Here are a few useful facts to store in the memory banks:

Pressure bandages

You probably know that as regards snakebite, the following are all wrong: tourniquets, cutting the bite, and trying to suck and spit out the venom like in the westerns.

The way to go is to calm everyone down, call emergency services as soon as possible, and apply a pressure bandage – but not for all snakes. It's the right approach for snakes like cobra and boomslang, where you want to firmly wrap the entire limb to prevent the venom spreading from the bite site, but it's not advised for cytotoxic snakes like puff adders.

Don't hold snakes behind the head

Even if you've seen people do this on TV, rather don't try it. 'People who milk snakes do hold them behind the head every day. But for anyone with less experience, this is a bad idea – you've got about a 50% chance of getting bitten,' says Tony Phelps, director of the Cape Reptile Institute.

Snakes are never poisonous

When people ask me if a snake is poisonous I say 'I don't know, I've never eaten one!' Don't make this uncool mistake in the presence of herpetologists: the correct term is *venomous*.

Non-venomous snakes can bite

One tends to forget this, but of course most of them can – if not fatally, then potentially still fairly seriously. In fact, if a big mole snake takes a nip, you'll probably need stitches.

Baby snakes can be highly venomous

A mature snake doesn't like to waste its venom, whereas the juveniles don't know better and are more inclined to squander theirs.

There is no anti-venom for some snakes

Some snakes, like the boomslang, require specific anti-venom which is not always easily available. Another reason not to get bitten in the first place.

Snakes love a nice warm engine

Cobras, particularly, like getting into engines and can be very difficult to remove. They also like a nice warm mammalian body in a sleeping bag, which is a good motivation to take the trouble to set up a tent. ♦

Originally published by EnviroHealth, Health24 (May 2010)

Avril, the bird whisperer ...



Bonnievale se Raaiselagtige Gemsbok – deur Corne Claassen, Bestuurder: Langeberg Bewaringsdienste

In sy werk as bewaringsdienste beampte, het Corne Claassen van Vrolijkheid al eienaardige oproepe van die publiek ontvang, en ook geleer om inligting maar op sigwaarde te hanteer. Die volgende voorval het hom egter verstom gelaat.

Op 'n Vrydag in Junie, so teen etenstyd, bel die Bonnievale SAPD my, met die nuus dat daar 'n gemsbok op 'n erf in die dorp vasgekeer is. My eerste reaksie was dat hulle die dier verkeerd geïdentifiseer het, maar volgens die beampte se beskrywing, kon dit nie iets anders gewees het nie. Ek sê hom toe ek sal oor 'n halfuur daar wees, en hulle moet net sorg dat die mense nie naby die dier kom nie.

'n Vasgekeerde verbouereerde gemsbok kan lelik amok maak. Ek neem toe maar die reservaat se .308 jaggeweër saam, net ingeval, en vertrek om te gaan ondersoek instel. By die dorp se hoofpad, word ek ontmoet deur 'n SAPD patrollievoertuig, wat my begelei na 'n adres in die informele behuising gedeelte van die dorp.

Toe ek stop by die adres, staan daar reeds vier polisievoertuie, en 'n skare mense, wat lyk of hulle na 'n sokkerwedstryd kom kyk het. Die polisiebeampte in beheer, vergesel my toe tussen die toeskouers deur tot in die erf agter die huis, en daar tussen twee sinkgeboue, staan jou werklik waar toe 'n volwasse gemsbok! Ek kon maar net my kop skud in ongeloof.

By nadere ondersoek blyk dit toe dat dit 'n ou gemsbokkoei in 'n redelike swak toestand is, met die heupbene en ribbes wat sigbaar is (hoe gereeld sien mens 'n maer gemsbok?). Wat nog meer eienaardig was, is dat die dier geen opsigtelike vrees vir mense getoon het nie, en dis toe dat ek sien dit blind in die een oog is. Die enigste logiese besluit, was om die dier maar so gou moontlik uit te sit.

Met die polisie se hulp, en 'n paar harde woorde, kon die nuuskieriges uiteindelik teruggedryf word, ten einde 'n veilige area te skep vir die afvuur van 'n vuurwapen. Op 'n afstand van vyf meter, het ek die dier toe uit haar lyding verlos. Van haar tande het ontbreek, en die een horing was ook los in die skedel. Met die hulp van die polisie, het ek toe die karkas op my bakkie gelaai (onder protes van die inwoners) en verwyder. Ek reken as dit nie vir daardie skerp horings was nie, het die plaaslike gemeenskap die arme dier self van kant gemaak!

Aangesien die dier nie wettig aan enigiemand behoort het nie, het ek die karkas maar in die veld gaan afsit, en oopgesny vir die natuur se aasvreters. Wat egter 'n groot raaisel bly, is wat die oorsprong van die dier was, en hoe sy in die middel van die dorp geland het. ♦

Nature, the Ultimate Mastermind – by Alison M Downie

Whale fins, photosynthesis, termite mounds: all the genius of nature. Now a new science seeks to actively tap into the well spring of knowledge that has taken millennia to perfect.

The art of biomimicry is the science of replicating solutions from nature in order to solve human problems. It is not about what we can learn **about** nature but what we can learn **from** it. Learning in this way requires a change in outlook and a new frame of mind. Nature is the ultimate engineer, biologist, chemist and physicist, and can provide us with the innovative answers and solutions we so desperately seek.

Biomimicry also means consciously seeking ideas in nature before the design stage. It can be applied to a wide variety of industries, including motoring, information technology and architecture. It is rapidly becoming something that organizations such as NASA, Mercedes-Benz, Hewlett-Packard and Nike incorporate into any new venture.

For example, the odd bumps on the flippers of the humpback whale are not as random as one might think. The whales swim in tight circles in order to trap krill by blowing rings of bubbles. Their dexterity is due to the bumps or 'tubercles' of the flippers: The even movement of water through the comb-like bumps enables the whales to maintain position or move at tight angles. This principle has been applied to wind turbines, providing a break-through solution in aerodynamics. It has increased the turbines' efficiency and is a concept that can also be applied to aeroplanes.

Other examples of biomimicry include the surface coating that imitates shark skin, to be used in medicine, and the flight of kingfishers and owls which was used in the reduction of noise on Japan's high-speed trains.

Biomimicry is the new buzz word in scientific circles throughout the world as we continue to discover more about the design, efficiency and capabilities of our incredible natural world. ♦

Thank you to Marilyn Poole for her assistance with this article

Animal Encounters – compiled by Alison M Downie

When a run-down farm was purchased with the purpose of establishing a nature reserve, the local wildlife soon discovered that they were once again welcome inhabitants.

Since the departure of our last dog, Lucy, at the grand old age of about 22, various visitors have breached the solid brick wall around the garden at the main residence in the Witteberg Private Nature Reserve. The conservation of nature is a top priority in the reserve but the main purpose of the garden wall is to have some privacy and to keep uninvited visitors out.

Well, most – if not all – of nature's creatures become friendly when they realise they are not threatened. Birds, rats and mice therefore quickly moved inside the enclosed garden, including a rare spectacled dormouse. Without a dog around, even Cape Spurfowl (Cape Francolin), scrub hares and dassies have entered uninvited.

The dassies discovered the apricot tree last season and cleaned out the apricots long before they were even ripe. Most recently a young dassie – seemingly more fearless and friendly than his parents – has been enjoying the apricot leaves. However, he still has a lot to learn about climbing trees, balancing on branches, weight distribution and the strength of thin apricot branches. We have, with great merriment, watched him fall out of the tree on several occasions, but it is all part of growing up!



Intrepid adventurer: one of a new and fearless generation of Witteberg dassies

During the past few weeks, several McGregor residents have encountered small antelope in and around the village, which have to a degree become accustomed to grazing in the village at night.

Robyn Downie was innocently driving slowly home one night in early June when all of a sudden her headlights picked out the eyes of a small antelope. Surprisingly, this occurred in the main road, Voortrekker Street, between Van Reenen and Plein Streets. The antelope – likely a grysbok or steenbok – made its way across the street and into the open plot in the vicinity of Rachel and Gerhard Botha's property. They too have encountered spoor in their garden. At 11 am on Monday, 7 June, the Botha's gardener, Ndodwa 'John' Godongwana, saw what he called a 'veld bok' running through their garden after being chased along their lane by children and dogs. From the description (lack of white patch, which is diagnostic of a steenbok), it seems probable that Robyn and the Bothas saw a Cape grysbok.

Roger and Pam Verrall, who live at the end of Van Reenen Street next to Die Krans municipal reserve, from time to time see grysbok or steenbok grazing in their garden and along the road. These sightings have always taken place after dark, often late at night. Usually Roger and Pam have observed a single animal but have on occasion seen two. During one recent sighting, a grysbok which was browsing near their garden gate returned to the reserve via the stile! On another occasion the antelope nimbly leapt over the fence to safety. While Roger commented that he had seen more antelope in years gone by, Gerhard and Rachel confirmed that they see evidence of small antelope in their garden at mid-year annually, when conditions are dry. ♦

A warm welcome to new members San-Mari Burger, Brian and Merle Brice, Jane Angus, Rolf and Linda Angst, Ian Clarke, Amanda Bourne, Erika Viljoen, Sylvia Buchanan, and Heather Cooper. We hope you enjoy your new group of 'friends' and we look forward to seeing you at our next event.

Member Yvonne Muller recently relocated to a retirement home in Swellendam. We wish her well and hope she will be happy in her new surroundings.

Birds on the Side – by a ‘Friend of Vrolijkheid’

Our favourite poet and long-time contributor takes time out to explore Vrolijkheid’s new facility and discovers, to his delight, a world of flight and fantasy.

‘It might turn into another of those lovely sunsets,’ said my old-lady-girlfriend, looking at the sun setting below the black, rose-tinted clouds. ‘Let’s take a bottle of wine and watch it from some high point.’ Watching sunsets with a bottle of wine is one of my favourite pastimes. ‘We’re always heading up country – let’s try the other direction for a change,’ she said. ‘How about Strykhoogte? Do you think we’ll get a good view from there?’

‘We can try’.

But as we approached Vrolijkheid it occurred to me that, in view of the hard cold wind that was blowing, it might be nice to watch the sun setting from the comfort of the new bird hide so recently built by Bruce Milne and Gerhard Botha. We parked the car and set off with the wine and glasses in our cooler bag.

The quality of the wheelchair-friendly wooden walkway leading to the hide is impressive: every detail carefully considered, beautifully constructed, and most certainly friendly to wheelchairs. The vertical poles are vertical, at equal distances, restful, rhythmical, each plank sawn to the right length, at the right angle. Where a plank meets a round pole the plank is not chopped off but a rounded saw-cut allows for an exact and snug fit. The edges of the path are set off with polythene tubing, neatly hiding the sawn edge and possibly preventing an aberrant wheel from running off the path. No time or expense has been spared to make this walkway a paragon of walkways: a true labour of love.

We took our seats in the new hide. We poured ourselves our first glass of wine and looked out over the dam at the sunset aglow on the mountains. At the far end of the dam a variety of birds were basking on the mud flats.

For a while we sat there sipping our wine, enjoying the tranquility of the scene before us.

‘What d’you say we move to the back of the hide, outside, into the sun, with possibly even some protection from the wind?’ I suggested. So, picking up our glasses of wine, we retreated to the back of the bird hide where, outside, against the back wall, to our surprise and joy, the builders had thoughtfully provided a bench.

There we sat, completely sheltered from the brisk south-easterly wind, soaking up the warmth of the setting sun, relaxing into that sort of moment when one unexpectedly steps out of a life-threatening situation into a soothing, all-embracing comfort zone.

We refilled our glasses and settled down to harmonize with our new environment. The setting sun bathed us in its warm yellow light. Such clouds as there were, were black and windswept, and with the setting sun penetrating the lower banks each cloud was set alight in its own golden halo. Below us the bushes were lost in dark shadows; each twig, each thorn projecting out of the gloom, darkly silhouetted against the golden sky. Here and there, a ray of sunlight penetrated through an open pocket into the black bush to create, for a few minutes, its own small golden world of gossamer and yellowing grass.

One saw things and promptly lost them. The light played tricks. I thought I saw Venus as an implausible radiant pinprick between the black clouds but lost it again. But by now the mood was such that it didn’t matter. The entrancing evening and the bewitching light were already creating a world of myths and fantasy which replaced the factual world.

Then, perhaps because of the softer light of the advancing evening, I noticed several swarms of tiny flying insects. They caught the sun in clouds of a thousand brilliant dazzling pinpricks of light against the dark shrubbery. As they danced up and down and around within their cloud, the whole cloud also moved up and down, up and down.

It seemed as if each swarm had chosen a focal point in the form of a stump or a bush around which they swirled and to which they returned again and again. Every now and then the swarm would sink into the shadows and become invisible but within a few moments there they rose again. An explosion of tiny lights – up and down, up and down.

How does a swarm of flying insects, insects so small that one is in danger of inhaling them, manage to keep their coherence and that on a windy day? By sound? Sight? Smell? Pheromones? Is there a swarm-orchestrated mind? I was reminded of Eugene Marais comparing a nest of termites with a single living body with the queen as its heart and brain. Was there a similar dynamic at work here? Or perhaps a nuptial flight?

Its very presence, its cohesion, remained a mystery. And, in fact, at that point of time the answer did not matter. This was a new world ... a different world.

The diorama playing itself out in the golden light appeared to radiate a profound air of happiness – of abandonment. Such tiny insects have a lifespan of one or two days, at least as an adult flying insect.

This vibrant joyous dance we were witnessing constituted the joy of a lifetime concentrated into a few hours!

And so we sat there, in silence, mesmerized. Is there a lesson here – a message? To extract every ounce of joy that we can from our own small span of time? From our own seventy or eighty revolutions of the earth around the sun? Sitting there I searched my memory for a word which could describe the hypnotic, vibrant up-and-down dance of the insects but I could find no such thing.

Later, back in McGregor, it occurred to me that John Hargreaves, our quiz master extraordinaire, might well know such a word. When I asked him it was not his secret book of quiz questions but his feeling for music which suggested the answer. ‘Try using musical terms,’ he said. Brilliant!

Allegro Agita’to: quickly with agitation. *Crescen’do al diminuen’do*: increase then diminish – eminently suitable. So many musical terms are apt, I discovered. *Rallentan’do*: gradually slower. *Glissando*: in a gliding manner. *Apassiona’to*. *Anima’to*.

One could say that watching these insect swarms dance in the setting sun had been watching music made visible. The archaeologists and palaeontologists say that the insects will inherit the earth ... so it’s not impossible that these very insects which had enchanted us by dancing in the sunset will inherit. I could believe it. In this context, with a pale moon rising, it is befitting to end with a few lines from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*:

Meanwhile the winged haralds by command
Of sovran power, with awful ceremony
And trumpets’ sound throughout the host proclaim

Thick swarm’d, both on the ground and in the air,
Brusht with the hiss of rustling wings.

Behold a wonder!

Now less than smallest dwarfs, in narrow room
Throng numberless, while overhead the moon
Sits arbitress, and nearer to the earth
Wheels her pale course. ♦



Disabled persons be afraid, be very afraid (location: De Vasselot, Tsitsikamma National Park)



In Memoriam – by Alison M Downie

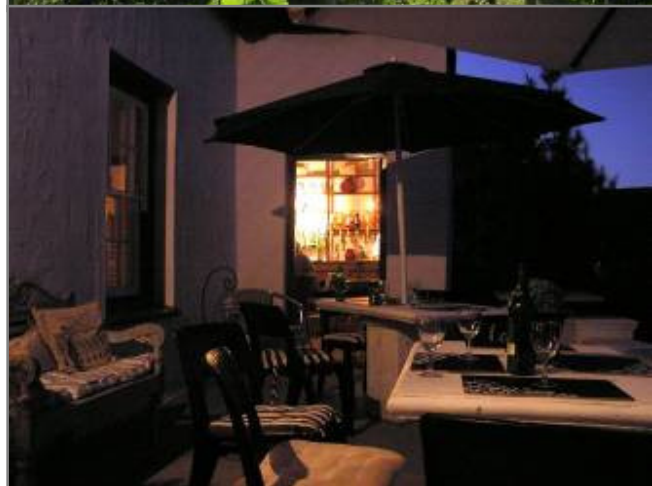
This month we remember Joan Robbins who passed to her rest just a few weeks ago after suffering for some time from illness.

Joan was someone who cherished McGregor and its surrounds: the fresh country air, the quiet country ambience, the kind and generous people. She loved her home in Church Street, under the beefwood trees. As her companions she had two cats, one of whom simply showed up one day and decided to stay.

While it was not possible to her to join in all of the Friends activities, she thoroughly enjoyed being involved in the group and always looked forward to her hand-delivered newsletter.

An informal memorial service was held at Temenos Lodge in McGregor; Joan had made plans in advance and insisted on a lovely tea, wine of the valley and no morose faces – just a gathering of friends, family and acquaintances who remembered and celebrated a life well lived.

We thank Joan for her contribution over the years to our group's efforts in conserving and promoting Vrolijkheid Nature Reserve. ♦



Green Gables Country Inn



Your hosts Tiger & Jill

023 625 1626 ~ grgables@telkomsa.net



Gilly's Chronicles – by Gilly Schütte

Back in the day, Ian Player insisted upon an eight-day walk for all new field rangers at the reserves in what was then Zululandi. In his own words, this was Gilly's introduction to Umfolozi and the wonderful world of conservation.

In 1964, when I wrote this report, doing an eight-day walk through northern Zululand formed part of a two-month training period that was compulsory for all trainee game rangers.

Game guard Zungu and I left the Umfolozi Game Reserve at 09.00 on 15 October. It was the first time I had ever set foot in a game reserve.

After an hour we saw our first game, some painfully thin warthog, and when we got to the Umfolozi River we saw the first white rhinos: a bull, a cow and a half-grown calf that were busy grazing. After a short stop for water, at the Masinda camp, we continued towards Msinyane which was to be our first overnight stop.

About a mile from Masinda we saw a group of zebra, and then branched off the main road, heading north-east. After a short distance we came across a large herd of wildebeest accompanied by a few buffalo. They grazed until hearing our approach and then took flight.

After taking respite from the fierce midday sun in a quiet, shady spot we set out for the [next] guard camp. We had gone no farther than 50 yards [45 metres] when Zungu suddenly shouted, '*Baleka Nkosane nangu Ube-jane!*' (Run, Nkosane, black rhino!). I took off back towards the trees and all I could hear was the snorting of a rhino just 40 yards away. Tired legs were forgotten and super strength (and adrenalin) took me straight up the nearest tree. The rhino bull made for our two pack donkeys, their bells clanging frantically as they ran. Having circled the donkeys, the rhino then returned and charged straight towards the tree I was up (and very high too, by now) ...

Suddenly a rhino cow and calf came out from the bush and with much snorting followed the bull into the dense bushes. A while later I climbed down and cautiously looked for Zungu, who came down from another tree. All he said was, '*Xisha safa!*' We nearly got killed!

We arrived at Msinyane at 14.45 without further mishap, and after a welcome cup of tea, there was much mirth from the guards as they listened to our experience with the rhino. The rest of the day was spent in relative quiet, watching some Marabou Storks circling the skies before descending out of sight behind the hill to feast on a dead impala. We also discovered the amazing jumping-seed tree. The seeds of this tree, *Sapium ellipticum* [amazingly, the name has remained unchanged], jump around on the ground – with a little help from small worms (the larvae of a butterfly) inside the pod.

The second day did not contain the same adventures as that epic first day, but that morning there were spectacular views of the plains we had to cross. Three white rhino and a small herd of impala ran off as soon as they noticed us. After travelling through the heat of the day we stopped to rest and lunch at the Tobothi guard camp, from where we could see five white rhino standing and resting under some trees.

The rest of the day was relatively uneventful – other than being hard work due to the thick bush and hot weather. Arriving at the guard camp, [we noticed that] there were some domestic chickens at the camp, and we watched as they were forced to take evasive action in the face of an attack from a hungry hawk, scattering [them] in all directions.

The third day was when we saw the most rhinos during the trip, on our way to the Madhlozi guard camp. We also saw impala, kudu and zebra, and watched as ten vultures circled overhead. That evening we heard a lion calling. According to the guards at the camp, it was a lone male.

On the fourth day, on our way to Mhlanganweni camp, we spotted a wide variety of bird life, including crows, hadedahs, guineafowl, francolins and an owl, all before 09.00. Earlier we had spotted a white rhino cow and calf, and seen (and avoided!) three black rhino while they were browsing. On the Mhlozwane hills we came upon the remains of a reed buck – all the vultures had left was the head, skin and a few bones, and I narrowly avoided stepping on a puff adder which was soaking up the morning sun on the trail.

Monday, 19 October, saw light rain falling, which made the going underfoot heavy as we made our way to Makhamisa camp. Along the way we came across a group of young white rhino bulls squaring up for a fight but after snorting and scraping the ground they parted company.

It was a quiet day, with the rain seemingly sending most of the wildlife in search of cover, for that afternoon we saw very little other than baboons and Marabou Storks on the banks of the Umfolozi River. In the evening we feasted on warthog which the guards from the camp had shot for rations the previous day.

The following morning we set out, following the rhino-proof fence on the way to Nqaqalempisi camp, which we reached just before noon. We saw many animals along the banks of the river once it became cooler in the early part of the afternoon.

On the Wednesday we crossed the Umfolozi twice, finding a dead reedbuck in the open veld after our first crossing. Shortly after that we saw three white rhinos which shied away from us, and then twelve zebra – mostly females who were pregnant, who appeared to want to communicate with our two pack donkeys.

The penultimate day took us to Steshi camp. From atop Ngega hill we spotted plenty of game, namely five white rhino, a large herd of wildebeest and then two kudu females who crossed the road just ahead of us. On our way down the hill we disturbed a grey duiker which took off at great speed.

When we reached the airstrip we saw more rhino and wildebeest grazing on the short grass. Having reached the camp, we noticed some vultures circling overhead, and the guards told us that there was a dead wildebeest about a mile [1,6 km] away.

Friday was our last day, and we walked back to the starting point at Mpila. It was very hot and we did not see many animals. We arrived back at 11.00, having thoroughly enjoyed the walk and finding it most informative, thanks to my guide Zungu and all the other game guards we met.

After this auspicious start, I looked forward with great eagerness to life as a game ranger. ♦

Originally published as 'Eight day walk round the Umfolozi Game Reserve' in *The Game Ranger*, official magazine of the Game Rangers' Association of Africa

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Global Synopsis – by Alison M Downie

April 2010, Gulf of Mexico – An undersea explosion at a BP drilling platform off the coast of Louisiana kills 11 workers and results in crude oil spilling into the Gulf at up to 19,000 barrels (800,000 gallons or 3 million litres) per day. Despite desperate measures, BP has been unable to contain the leak. Videos and photographs show oil pouring out of the damaged well; it has now reached many sensitive marine environments, clogging up marshlands and beaches, and covering sea birds and creatures in toxic black goo. Said Obama in a June statement, ‘We will make BP pay’, calling the company ‘reckless’. The company is to pay compensation to business owners and provide funds required in clean-up operations that will continue for many months, if not years. But we all know who will really pay the price of BP’s greed: the environment and marine creatures who rely upon it.

June 2010, Kruger National Park – Game numbers are up in the KNP and in a healthy state, attributed to good yearly rainfall for the last decade and a half. The favourable environmental conditions have resulted in a stable increase of many mammal populations, including black and white rhino, buffalo, elephant, giraffe, Burchell’s zebra and impala.

May 2010, Cederberg, Western Cape – Nature lovers of all ages gather to plant a record number of Clanwilliam cedar trees at an event held annually for the last few years. This year 182 trees were planted on the mountain slopes near the small village of Heuningsvlei.

March 2010, Switzerland – South Africa’s first and only electric car – ‘SA’s Joule’ – is showcased at the Geneva Motor Show. Built in Port Elizabeth, the Joule is an environmentally-friendly plug-in vehicle with zero emission. Due to be released in 2013, it is estimated to retail at about R235,000.

July 2009, Northern Siberia – A baby mammoth is discovered by a hunter on the banks of the Kroma River near the Arctic Ocean. The ‘young’ fossil, thought to be six or seven months of age when it died, is estimated to be more than 50,000 years old. Named ‘Khoma’, the mammoth was initially examined by Russian scientists and then transported to France in June of this year in order to be analysed and treated for germs before being placed on display.

May 2010, USA – Scientists capture on camera the beginning of a very large star, using a Herschel infrared telescope. Even as a young star, it is eight to ten times the size of our sun. Part of the Milky Way, it was discovered in a star-forming cloud known as RCW 120. The star is still feeding on nearby dust clouds and gas and researchers have indicated it is likely to become one of the biggest and brightest star in our galaxy within, oh, a couple of hundred thousand years.

April 2010, Maropeng, Gauteng – A newly discovered fossil, found in 2008, goes on display for public viewing for a limited period at the Maropeng Visitor Centre. The team of scientists, led by Professor Lee Berger of the University of Witwatersrand, unearthed the 2-million-year-old fossil in Maropeng, in the world heritage site, the Cradle of Humankind. The ‘Sediba fossil’, *Australopithecus sediba*, appears to be a new species of hominid and could be one of the most significant archaeological finds in years.

January 2010, USA – NASA announces that it plans to spend \$1,75 million (R13,2 million) of taxpayers’ money to perform radiation testing on 28 squirrel monkeys. The estimated radiation is said to be the equivalent of spending three years in space. After the exposure, the radiation damage will be assessed while the intelligent monkeys spend the remainder of their lives in cages. Comments one animal welfare organisation, ‘Like all animal experiments, physiological and anatomical differences between species make it impossible to generate data that can be reliably applied to humans.’

June 2010, Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape – Close to 500 African Penguin chicks die on Bird Island in 24 hours after extreme cold and winds buffets the islands offshore. The deaths comprise 50% of the island’s young penguins. St Croix Island has also been affected but wildlife authorities are yet to determine the number of deaths. Only recently was the status of this flagship species changed from Vulnerable to Endangered.

April 2010, Kuala Lumpur – A rare Borneo rhino is captured on camera in Malaysia, a female thought to be pregnant. Wildlife authorities can only monitor rhinos via camera traps and say that just 30 remain in the wild. A new calf would be a lifeline for the species which is on the brink of extinction.

May 2010, Florida – Archie, a 1,814 kg 41-year-old white rhino escapes from the Jacksonville Zoo. After his enclosure is found empty during the morning shift, 20 members of staff spend several hours looking for the escapee. When he is eventually found on the zoo grounds, tasty morsels cannot entice him back and he is sedated before being led back to his pen. (*Good thing it wasn’t a black rhino* – Ed.)

Sources: Wild magazine (www.wildcard.co.za), Associated Press (www.news.yahoo.com/), News24 (www.news24.com), The Cutting Edge (www.popularmechanics.co.za), PETA (www.peta.org), Simply Green (www.simplygreen.co.za), Christian Science Monitor (www.csmonitor.com)

Weather Statistics for June

Rainfall				Temperatures	
Year to date	77,8 mm	Min	2 mm (2003)	Min temp	-0,6 °C
2009	279 mm	Max	50 mm (1996)	Max temp	27,7 °C
2008	417 mm	Total	36 mm		
2007	315 mm			Average min temp	4,6 °C
2006	335 mm			Average max temp	29,6 °C

Five Hundred Years Ago in England – a contribution from Dave Harding

In the 1400s a law was set forth in England that a man was allowed to beat his wife with a stick no thicker than his thumb. Hence we have ‘the rule of thumb’ (!!).

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Readers' Competition

Answer the question and win a dinner for two at Green Gables Pub & Restaurant in McGregor!

What is the name of the animal in the photograph? Email your answer to alisonmdownie@yahoo.com or send a postcard to PO Box 436, McGregor 6708.

The winner will be drawn on 15 August 2010 and informed in writing or by telephone. The competition is open to FoV members only.

The correct answer to the question in the previous issue is *Aloe plicatilis*, the succulent plant featured in the photograph. ♦

Outings & Events

JULY

Thurs 22:

AGM at the hall at Vrolijkheid, followed by presentation by photographer Wicus Leeuwner. Wine and grape juice available and our traditional soup and rolls will be served afterward. Time: 18.45 for 19.00. Please RSVP Frances or Alison to indicate your attendance.

AUGUST

Wed 4:

Outing to Groot Toren. Meet at old post office in McGregor at 09.00.

Sun 15:

Family braai at Vrolijkheid. Fires will be ready from midday. Should it be raining the braai will be postponed to the following Sunday, 22 August.

Fri 20:

Day walk at Dassieshoek. Vehicles will be parked at the Robertson end and the walk will be to the half-way point, or a little farther. Meet at the old post office, McGregor, at 08.30 and at the Robertson post office at 09.00.

Sat 28:

Robertson Bird Club outing to Vrolijkheid. For further detail on RBC outings contact Maurits Perold on 023 626 1160 (w). Non-members welcome.

Sat 28:

Rooikat Trail Run at Vrolijkheid: 19 km (08.30) and 8 km (08.45) trail runs taking place at the reserve. The event is being organised by Target Events in conjunction with CapeNature. Please contact Alison if you are interested in assisting with registration or marshalling. Entries open on 16 July at www.trailrunning.co.za. Walkers welcome.

SEPTEMBER

Wed-Fri 1-3:

Visit to the Witteberg Nature Reserve near Matjiesfontein. See article on page 4 for more information.

Sat 25:

Robertson Bird Club outing to Buitenste Kloof, Vinkrivier.

OCTOBER

Dates TBC

Overnight trip to the Cederberg or Groot Winterhoek. Arrangements to be confirmed by Frances.

Sat 30:

Spider presentation by Norman Larsen at the Vrolijkheid hall, followed by a spider walk at the reserve.

Sat 30:

Robertson Bird Club outing to Nuy dams.

Small Species: Spare Parts that Matter – by Michael McCarthy, Environment Editor, *The Independent*

Michael McCarthy, environment journalist for a leading British newspaper, submitted this report just last month. With South Africa's bee populations also declining alarmingly due to existing and new viruses and diseases, we would do well to heed the warnings contained herein.

An American botanist once suggested to me that I should think of the living plant and animal species of the earth as the parts of a dismantled Boeing 747, laid out on the ground. If 10 percent of those parts were removed, he said, would you still be happy to fly in the Jumbo Jet, if the plane were put back together without them? Hardly, I said. So by analogy, he said, would you think you were safe on planet Earth with 10 percent of its parts missing?

I was taken aback; it was one of those moments when somebody offers you an insight, and you find an avenue of new understanding stretching away behind it. He was talking about extinctions, of course, living things disappearing, and how their disappearances might matter; how a single missing part might bring the plane down – or cause terrible trouble for the earth.

But it's not a widely shared view. Celebrity-obsessed as we are, we care about the big beasts vanishing, the icons – we don't want to lose our whales, our tigers and our polar bears – yet on the whole we are supremely indifferent to the disappearance of much of the rest of the world's wildlife, especially the small things, the amphibians, the smaller plants, the insects, even though many of them are now heading for the exit door so fast that biologists believe we are embarking upon the Sixth Great Extinction. (There appear to have been five great extinctions in the geological record, when much of the earth's life was wiped out, the last one being 65 million years ago when the asteroid did for the dinosaurs; this sixth one, likely to happen in the 21st century, is being caused by us.)

The indifference I have noticed most keenly has been to insect decline. Over the past few years it has become clear that there has been an immense reduction in insect numbers in Britain, probably because of the pesticides in which our farmland has been drenched, and not to put too fine a point on it, nobody gives a tinker's cuss. Well, why should they? We are mostly stuck in the cultural matrix we grew up with, and people are happier with fewer flies around. Insects are unsympathetic creepy-crawlies in the popular mind, creatures you get rid of with spray cans.

Yet it has long struck me that this decline is so great that it cannot be looked upon complacently, that it is signalling loudly that all's not right with the world. At first, the evidence for it was anecdotal; for example, people began to remark upon the absence of 'moth snowstorms', those great clouds of moths which until about 30 years ago you would encounter on a car drive on a warm summer's night, and which would blanket your windscreen by the end of it. They've gone. But then the anecdotal became statistical: in 2004 the agricultural research station at Rothamsted in Hertfordshire analysed 35 years of moth trap records and found that, out of the 337 species of larger moths they examined, more than 200 had declined over the period, nearly 70 of them by more than 50 percent.

In fact, decline seems to be evident wherever insect population trend data is available, in butterflies, in mayflies (the upwing flies of rivers), in beetles, in bumblebees.

I was so preoccupied with this that a few years ago, over a boozy dinner, I dreamed up with a chum from the RSPB [the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds] a device called the splatometer, which could be attached to the fronts of cars to register the countless moth and other insect collisions of a summer's night, so you might observe them change over time. (It was trialled, but never got off the ground.) Yet the fact that our insects seemed to be vanishing faster than snowflakes in the desert seemed to bother no one in officialdom, no one in the scientific community – or at least, no one in the policy community – the slightest bit. Until this week.

On Monday, a major set of research projects was launched in London: the insect pollinators' initiative. With a budget of £10m, this will explore the reasons for the declines and disappearances of insects with a particularly pivotal role: those which pollinate our plants, our crops, our fruit trees.

Honeybees, declining alarmingly, are the main concern, but the research will also seek to highlight the reasons behind the loss of bumblebees and other pollinators such as solitary bees and hoverflies.

Buzzing from flower to flower in search of nectar, and taking pollen, the plant's male sex cells, with them as they go, insects pollinate at least a third of the range of agricultural crops grown globally, and it has been estimated that the loss of insect pollinators could cost the UK alone £440m per year. Hey! Suddenly insects are not creepy-crawlies any more! They're a vital economic resource! Here are some of the parts of the Jumbo Jet which were left out when it was reassembled, even though most of us continue blithely unconcerned, and are perfectly happy to board the plane.

Could this be a mystery solved?

It is possible that insect decline is behind the loss of several of our bird species, including the two which have gone extinct in the past half-century, an enchanting mini-predator, the Red-backed Shrike (which fed on big beetles) and the small brown woodpecker, the Wryneck (which fed on ants).

It may also be at the root of the disappearance of the House Sparrow from our towns and cities (young sparrow chicks are fed on aphids) and of the cuckoo from the countryside (cuckoos feed on big moth caterpillars). Get rid of the small things, and the ramifications never end. ♦

For further reading

A World Without Bees, by Alison Benjamin and Brian McCallum (Guardian Books, 2008) (*For anyone interested, a copy is available from Alison*)



Only after the last tree has been cut down;
Only after the last river has been poisoned;
Only after the last fish has been caught,
Will you find that money cannot be eaten.

- Cree Indian Prophecy

Thank you to the following for their assistance with this issue:
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Next issue: November 2010