



The Rooikat

A newsletter produced by the Friends
of Vrolijkheid

No 43 ~ April 2010

 Please consider the environment and print only if strictly necessary

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Feedback from our Readers

Do snakes inject a specific amount of venom depending upon the size of prey?

– John

Answer from Dr Ernst HW Baard, Senior Manager: Scientific Services, CapeNature: *A bite from a venomous snake does not mean envenomation has occurred. That is, snakes can choose if and when they 'want' to inject venom during a bite. Therefore the outcome of a snake bite depends on how much venom is injected, its potency and the susceptibility of the victim. Earlier research has shown that snakes are likely to economise when it comes to envenomation (this is because venom is a highly specialised polypeptide and protein which needs to be produced) and therefore indications are that snakes do not always empty their venom glands and seldom inject more than 15% of the available venom. On the basis of body weight, small animals such as rats and mice are rather resistant to snake venom, and larger animals, including man, are more susceptible to venom. If one therefore assumes that humans are somewhat on par with large animals regarding susceptibility to snake venom, and concedes that the amount injected is around 15% of that obtained from milking snakes, one could conclude that few if any of the lesser adders (horned adders, mountain adders) and few if any of the smaller elapids (coral snakes, shield-nosed snakes) would be fatal to humans (this is indeed so). Alternatively, the risk of fatalities would be higher in bites from mambas, puff adders and other large cobras, purely on the amount of highly potent venom that gets injected during a full bite. However, remember that only about 24–34 people get bitten in KwaZulu-Natal every year, and more than 98% of the victims survive! You are more likely to get run over by a car.*

To conclude, it is difficult to answer the question of whether or not a snake injects more or less venom based on the size of the prey. However, remember the larger the prey item, the stronger the grip needed by the snake on the victim.

The harder the grip, the stronger the 'squeeze' on the jaws ('look Ma, I have no hands!') and venom glands, and perhaps more venom will be injected in 'larger' or more-difficult-to-hold-down victims. If one assumes that snakes can decide if and when to inject venom, one could perhaps assume that they are able to decide to inject more venom into a larger prey item. However, if you 'know' you have some of the most potent venom of all species, why bother to inject a whole lot of valuable venom? Who knows?

I hope these thoughts are useful and that I have managed to confuse you thoroughly now, but there seems to be no straight answer to this. (Broadley: 1990, Marais: 2004.)

Answer from Johan Marais, renowned herpetologist and author: *Some snakes, like the boomslang, have fairly primitive venom glands (Duvernoy's glands) and their fangs are not hollow but have a groove down the front. They have little control over their venom glands, and the amount of venom injected during a bite depends largely on the amount of pressure applied to the venom gland region. Snakes with more advanced venom systems, like the cobras, mambas and adders, have a great deal of control over how much venom they inject during a bite and may inject nothing, enough to do serious damage or kill their victim, or a large amount of venom. The larger the snake the more venom it may have but, generally speaking, a large venomous snake may have 10 drops of venom and only needs two drops to kill a human. The snake can inject nothing, a drop or two or ten drops during a bite, depending on its mood, level of threat, etc. For instance, if you accidentally stood on a puff adder and hurt it, it would probably inject most of its venom in a single bite.*

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.

Fun with the Friends – text by Alison M Downie, photographs by Andre Doering

When the weather's tough, the tough get going. Friends found the answer to a sweltering summer's day in the cool kloofs of the Krom River.

Friday, 5 March saw a contingent of Friends and Mountain Club members from McGregor, Robertson and Franschoek heading to the Huguenot Tunnel and the Krom River Hike.

It turned out to be the perfect place to spend a 40-degree day. While others were working hard in stuffy offices we spent the day alternately boulder-hopping and swimming (oh well, someone had to do it; it might as well have been us!).

The Limietberg Nature Reserve hike meanders alongside the Molenaars-, and later the Krom River, providing ample opportunity for dips in the champagne, ochre-coloured water. Now and then leaving the river and following the contour of the hills through indigenous riverine forest, the route takes one deeper and deeper into the river valleys and eventually up to a series of majestic waterfalls. These provide the ideal location for a bite to eat and, for the thrill-seekers, rocky ledges from which to fling oneself off and into the depths below.

The hike is an out-and-back route and after a final glorious swim in a large pool near the end, goodbyes were said all round and we returned to our respective homes: tired, content and satiated with the beauty of nature. ♡



Did You Know – by Dr Ernst Baard



Did you know ... ?

- Snakes are merely unusual lizards, and that one should say 'snakes and other lizards' and not 'snakes and lizards'
- They stem from an ancestor which probably was a leguaan-like, burrowing lizard
- African rock pythons have rudimentary hind limbs present as small spurs and located next to the cloaca
- There are 151 described snake species in South Africa
- Snakes occur on all continents, except Antarctica
- No snakes occur naturally in New Zealand and Ireland
- Many snake species are adapted for living in a marine environment
- All snakes are carnivorous, and their highly 'mobile' and non-rigid skull and lower jaw structure enables them to consume proportionately very large meals
- Snakes are unable to take bite-sized pieces of their victims or to chew their prey – prey must be swallowed whole
- More than half of South African snakes have fangs and are technically venomous, but only 16 species carry venom that is considered potent enough to be considered life-threatening
- There are less than 10 snake bite deaths per year in South Africa – you are more likely to die in a vehicle accident or be hit by a motorist
- Snakes are able to endure long periods of fasting
- Snakes have no external ears (you knew that – imagine a snake with ears!) and 'hear' by picking up low-frequency vibrations with the inner ear
- Snakes have only one lung
- Snakes 'smell' with their tongue by picking up scent particles in the air with their forked tongue and sticking it into the Organ of Jacobson in the roof of the mouth
- Most snakes lay eggs, but some give birth to live young, such as puff adders
- The African rock python females look after and brood their eggs, and stay with their young for up to two weeks after they hatch
- Snake 1 to Snake 2: 'I hope I'm not venomous!' Snake 2: 'Why?' Snake 1: 'Cause I bit my lip!!'
- What is the most popular snake dialect? Boomslang! ♦

Animal Encounters

Anne Binos and her husband James witness a most unusual incident in their very own backyard in McGregor ...

Last week our female ridgeback, Vula, woke me at 2 am wanting to go outside. She's usually very good – no barking – so I let her out. Next thing she is barking and I hear a loud screeching/rasping noise which sounded like the screech of a Barn Owl and our male ridgeback, Bwana, rushed to join her. All the neighbourhood dogs started to bark and howl!

Hoping they hadn't caught an owl, we rushed outside with torches to find the dogs had cornered a striped polecat! The cornered creature (also known as the African polecat) was very fierce and brave and the dogs didn't go too close! Its tail was up behind it and its eyes were glowing in the torch light – quite frightening!

I managed to get the dogs inside while James guarded the polecat and it got away safely. There was a distinctly unpleasant smell which lingered around Bwana for a day or two ...

Our gardener, Isak Bailey, has seen these animals before but always far from the village in the veld and he was surprised to hear that it had ventured so close to humans.



Photograph: White Wolf

A chance encounter on a day like any other caught Ann Snaddon by surprise. What they witnessed is a prime example of the phrase 'being in the right place at the right time'.

This is an account of a rare occurrence which Brian and I were lucky to witness, which took place in the late morning of 27 January near McGregor.

While out on a walk, we heard a tearing, crashing noise and observed two eagles flying at a tremendous speed from a mountain ravine towards and above a gum plantation. The eagles gripped one another's feet, locking talons, and fell, spiralling towards the earth, wings open and heads down, crashing noisily through the canopy and into branches, scattering leaves. Before hitting the ground, however, they managed to separate and swoop between the tree trunks out of the forest.

One disappeared over the hill; the other flew to a rocky outcrop and landed in full view. The bird of prey, a Verreaux's Eagle, stood steady on its powerful black-feathered legs and yellow feet, with its wings folded and huge black shoulders hunched. Surely the eagle must have been dazed and giddy after such a spinning fall! After a few minutes the eagle spread its magnificent wings, revealing the stark white 'V' on its upper back and the long, broad rump; then it hopped, half-flying a little higher up the hill and folded itself up again.

Fortunately by this time we were watching through binoculars and could see every detail. As it opened its wings again we marvelled at the crescent-shaped, barred white 'windows' near the pitch-black wing tips, yellow cere, great hooked lead-coloured beak and yellow-hooded, rimmed eyes. With no other sound apart from a few high-pitched cries, 'yeee-u, yeee-u', it rose into the air to fly in slow, small circles upwards, gliding mostly on a thermal until it was too high to remain visible.

In his book, *Birds of Prey of Southern Africa*, author Peter Steyn writes, '[...] Tumbling flights with interlocked claws are probably not a part of courtship and may be instances of occasional aggressive interactions with intruders; one encounter where both birds fell into the sea was almost certainly the result of a fight.'

We imagined that whatever the reason for the 'tumbling flight', our two eagles must have unlocked fast, with an almighty shove to get free and fly out of the trees without harm.

Dr Rob Simmons, Honorary Professor at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute at UCT, concurs: 'Peter's book is spot on ... these are aggressive interactions between a territorial bird and an intruder, who comes too close to the territory core.'

'We assessed the behaviour in 39 species of raptor worldwide (107 observations) and found that 82% were aggressive, 7% were play and 11% were interpreted as courtship. The Friends of Vrolijkheid members almost certainly saw aggression between eagles.' ♦



Neurotoxic Envenomation: Button Spiders – by Norman Larsen, Associate Arachnologist, Iziko, South African Natural History Museum

Spider fundi and author Norman Larsen untangles the web of button spiders: how to differentiate between them, and what to do when someone is bitten.

Neurotoxic envenomation results from bites by button spiders of the genus *Latrodectus* and is known as Latrodectism. This includes the five species of the black button spider and the two brown species, the Geometric- and Rhodesian button spider.

Most of the research in South Africa was done using *Latrodectus indistinctus*, the Western black button spider; and *L. geometricus*, the Geometric or Brown button spider.

Bites by black button spiders are painful, or occasionally trivial, and as with scorpions and snakes, the culprit noticed. They are completely black, hence the name, and lack the orange to red hour glass marking ventrally on the abdomen – unlike the American black widow. Juvenile spiders have red stripes, bands or patterns dorsally which may be replaced with white speckles in the sub adult stage. Red ventral markings may be visible in juvenile spiders. With the final moult, the adult *L. indistinctus* is totally black.

The brown button spiders, *L. geometricus* and *L. rhodesiensis*, are often mistaken for Black widows as they have the ventral reddish hour glass but can easily be identified as they have geometric circular patterns, often red, orange, yellow or white, which radiate down the sides of the abdomen. Although these spiders are known as ‘Brown’ button spiders, the colouring can range from cream, dirty light green or olive green to brown and almost black. The legs are noticeably darker at the joints and lighter in colour in the mid sections of the femur and tibia. All button spiders produce spherical egg cases. Those of the Black button spider are smooth; *L. geometricus* egg cases are decorated with tiny spikes while *L. rhodesiensis* has a fluffy egg case about 2.5 times larger, otherwise the two ‘brown’ species are difficult to morphologically tell apart.

Neurotoxic venom affects the neuromuscular junctions. The venom is alkaline (pH 8) and becomes acidic and less toxic at lower temperatures.

Signs and Symptoms:

- A sharp, burning pain at the bite site, or trivial and not noticed on rare occasions
- Pain spreading to lymph nodes within 15 minutes, which become tender and palpable
- Initial hyperactivity followed by severe muscle pain and cramps, especially of large muscle groups, within an hour, resulting in tightness in the chest and difficulty walking
- Severe pain in the chest and abdomen
- Excessive sweating, excessive salivation and watery eyes
- Facial swelling (oedema), droopy eyelids (ptosis) and a painful grimace
- Anxiety, slight fever, slurred speech, nausea, vomiting and headaches
- Raised or reduced body temperature and a blood pressure (above 140/90 mm Hg) that may rise with an increased pulse rate (tachycardia, above 100 beats per minute)
- Heart palpitations
- A body rash
- Extreme restlessness
- Pins and needles (paraesthesia) in hands and feet, and breathing difficulties due to tightness in chest
- Partial erection (priapism) in young male children.

Whilst the above sounds somewhat dramatic, life-threatening bites are rare. It is reported that globally, prior to 1965, 1–6% of untreated cases resulted in death, usually due to respiratory failure. In fact, there have been no deaths from button spider bites in South Africa in the last 60 years. Those more severely affected are children (smaller blood volume) and the elderly who suffer from respiratory or heart problems. Symptoms are less severe with *L. geometricus* and *L. rhodesiensis*, which are only 25–30% as toxic as the venom of *L. indistinctus*. All *Latrodectus* bites should be treated and monitored with equal urgency as necessary according to the signs and symptoms.

When someone is bitten:

- Keep the culprit, if possible. An identification of the spider would be necessary to determine the species but treatment must be to counter any signs or symptoms that may develop

- Keep the patient or the affected part as motionless as possible. However, this might not be practical if one is out in the wild. It is then preferable to get to help as soon as possible, even if the patient has to walk
- Eating, drinking and smoking should be avoided
- Loosen tight clothing and remove all jewellery
- Reassure patient
- Call for medical assistance (a cellphone is an indispensable part of an emergency kit)
- Keep the patient on his/her back with feet raised above the rest of the body. Cover with a blanket and keep the head to one side in case of vomiting
- Apply artificial respiration should breathing stop
- Apply crushed ice to the affected area. The cold helps to retard the venom action and reduces pain. This must be done within minutes of being bitten
- Do not cool for an extended period – remove periodically for the feeling to return otherwise tissue damage might result.

Do Not:

- Use alcoholic drinks as this could mask certain symptoms or exacerbate them
- Use potassium permanganate on the wound or any traditional remedies
- Cut the wound
- Use a tourniquet as this could aggravate local effects of the venom
- Use snake bite or scorpion venom on spider bite patients
- Waste time with pressure bandaging
- Give electric shock.

It is unfortunate to see the use of pressure bandaging advocated as a first aid measure on the internet and in books for the treatment of snake bite. This has been shown to be ineffective when used for neurotoxic snake bite; and counterproductive and disastrous, restricting the blood flow, when used for cytotoxic bites, most adders and spitting cobras.

Antivenom:

Latrodectus antivenom must be administered in severe proven or properly diagnosed cases of button spider envenomation. This should be done by a qualified doctor, who should anticipate anaphylaxis, an allergic life-threatening reaction to antivenom. An intravenous antihistamine can be administered prior to the antivenom. Anaphylaxis is fortunately rare. Adrenaline must be administered immediately on presentation of anaphylaxis. Ten ml of antivenom must be administered intravenously, slowly over a few minutes. The patient normally has a dramatic response to antivenom, showing signs of recovery within 10–30 minutes. If not, a further 5 ml should be given. The patient must be monitored for 24 hours. ◊



Black button spider

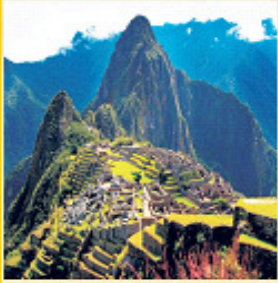


Brown button spider

Text and photographs used with permission from Norman Larsen (whom we hope to invite to McGregor to give a talk on arachnids later in the year)

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In Memoriam

The retired residents of McGregor and surrounds form the backbone of the Friends of Vrolijkheid, many of whom are involved in the day to day operations of the group and all of whom contribute to our ongoing projects. Sadly, this month we remember two of our members: **Mike Vials**, Esquire (88) (pictured right), and **Gordon Campbell** (72) (pictured left). They are remembered fondly and our thoughts are with their families at this sad time. ♦



PETA Strikes Again – by Alison M Downie

For seven months a PETA investigator, a veterinary technician, worked at US Global Exotics (USGE) in order to expose the company, a major player in the exotic pet trade. The company imports and exports animals which are destined for pet stores throughout the world. Based in Texas, USGE trades in hundreds of thousands of reptiles, amphibians, arachnids and mammals annually. The investigator uncovered cruelty and neglect of staggering proportions, documenting an extensive report of abuse inside one of the company’s warehouses.

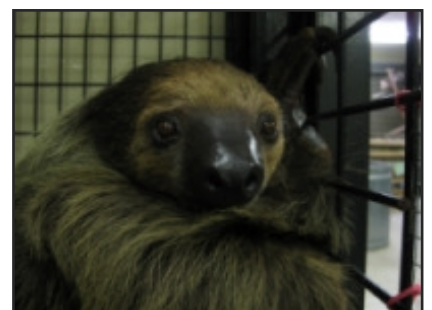
According to PETA, tens of thousands of animals, including wallabies, sloths, ring-tailed lemurs, hamsters, guinea pigs, hedgehogs, prairie dogs, ferrets, squirrels, turtles, tortoises, frogs and snakes were kept in severely crowded and dirty boxes and even glass bottles and pillowcases. They were left without food or water, adequate housing or veterinary care.

Green tree frogs were kept inside plastic cooldrink bottles, remaining confined for weeks until they either died or were sold. Thousands of hamsters were crammed into litter pans. Unable to move, the overcrowding resulted in injury and cannibalism. Malfunctioning water nozzles regularly flooded hamster containers, drowning animals. In excess of 12,000 baby turtles were kept in cardboard boxes for weeks at a time, deprived of their basic needs. In just one day 657 died. A young hedgehog, one of hundreds kept at the warehouse, was not given medical treatment after his front leg was almost completely severed. Almost 300 iguanas, barely alive, were found inside shipping bags and crates. Exotic animals (including endangered animals) were trapped and removed from their natural habitat and some spent months and even years in the warehouse. Many animals, considered ‘unsellable’, were dumped in a freezer to die a slow death.

Local authorities and animal protection organisations seized the warehouse in late December 2009, confiscating approximately 26,000 animals. Officials found hundreds of dead and dying animals lying amid the decaying, even liquefied remains of others. In a statement, PETA said this was ‘the largest cruelty-related seizure of animals ever conducted. It has already affected the global pet trade, and with more hard work, it could change the industry forever’.

The above article illustrates why the world would clearly be a better place without pet shops. Educate Please encourage your friends and family to only consider adopting pets from reputable animal welfare organisations. ♦

(Pictures, from top) Victims of the pet trade: A hedgehog with a severe leg injury; hamsters in overcrowded living conditions; a lizard, one of the many hundreds of animals who died at the hands of usGE; two coatimondis and a sloth, some of the lucky few who escaped alive and are being cared for at the Detroit Zoo



Nasionale Voëldag, November 2009 – deur Maurits Perold, Robertson Voëlklub

Ons sit hier in die hartjie van 'n voëlkykers-paradys: Minstens 180 voëlspesies kan in een dag aangeteken word! Dit was dan ook hierdie area wat twee gesoute voëlkykers die Nasionale Voëldag se wenners help maak het.

Die horison begin lig raak vir die nuwe dag. Dit sal 'n lang dag wees. Adrius Rabie en Gawie Malan kry my om 03.55 by my huis. Ons vat eers koers na De Hoop. Die sterk soekligte word onmiddellik ingespan. Ons moet die nag voëls kry voor dit lig is. Bo in De Hoop moet ons egter nog meer as 'n uur wag voor ons die Paradys Vlieëvanger (foto regs onder) hoor roep uit die populierbos. Daarna volg meer soorte. Toe eindelijk sien ons die Gevlekte Ooruil en hoor ons die Tjagra. Toe dit lig is begin die lysie groei. Die verrassing in De Hoop is die Breëkoparend. Toe is ons vliegveld toe met die hoop om die Bergpatrys te kry. Dit gebeur nie, maar ons sien wel 'n paar ander soorte soos die Geelbekbosduif, Gryskopmossie, Suidelike Swie, Kaapse Pietjiekanarie en Dikbekkanarie. Ons ry toe bo op die koppe by Droëkloof se lande. Daar is 'n paar skaars soorte soos die Dubbelbanddrawwertjie, Vaalstreepkoppie, Grysruglewerik en Swartkraaie.

Dit begin warm raak. Ons besluit dat ons eers Nuy damme sal opsoek en Vrolijkheid los vir later die namiddag. Eers gaan ons deur die dorp ry en as ons gelukkig is kry ons dalk 'n paar soorte soos die Swartsuikerbekkie en die Reusevisvanger. Daar kry ons toe twee soorte wat jy selde aanteken in Robertson, die Kleinheuningwyser en die Europese Vlieëvanger. Nou vat ons pad na die Nuy damme. Ons ry egter die grondpad agter Rooiberg Kelder en die kalkfabriek, met die hoop om die Bloukraanvoëls te sien. Dit gebeur dan wel ook. Maar langs die pad kom die grootste verrassing vir die dag. Eers sien ons die Geelbekwou. Die roofvoël is onmiskenbaar met sy halfmaan stertvere. Naby Nuy Wynkelder kry ons byekorwe naby die pad. Ek speel die Grootheuningwyser se roep op band, om te kyk of hy reageer. Adrius het die voertuig afgeskakel en laat dit vry loop, toe hoor ons die Heuningwyser. Toe die bakkie tot stilstand kom, sien ons 'n plaashuis met 'n gronddam so skuins regs. Dit is toe dat Adrius die 'eend' gewaar net voor hy in die water in loop. Ek en Gawie gryp toe ook ons 'lang' oë en daar swem die eerste Fluiteend wat nog aangeteken is in ons area. Die eend het ligte bruin sye en kop, bont rug met die wit gekartelde vere op sy flanke. Enig in sy soort, sy geroep het hom sy naam gegee – hy fluit.



Nou kom Nuy damme aan die beurt. Daar sien ons weer die groot broeikolonie reiers en baie eende. Ons stap om die groot dam, en net toe ons in die voertuig wil klim, vlieg 'n Geelbekwou met 'n klein reier in sy pote laag oor ons. Die volgende stop is die dammetjies by Worcester weikampe waar die beste loop. Ook hier word ons nie teleurgestel nie. Die Oranjekeelkalkoentjie en Nonnetjie-eend is daar. Adrius swaai die voertuig se neus om Draaivlei dam toe. Ongelukkig het die wind opgekom en die Sterretjies wat normaalweg daar voorkom, is nie daar nie. Gelukkig het ons hulle by Nuy damme en omgewing gekry. Maar ook hier word ons nie teleurgestel nie. Die Grootkoningriethaan is weer daar en 'n Swartrugmeeu verras ons.



Ons draai terug. Dit is 16.30 en ons kort nog 'n paar soorte. Om egter die uitstaande voëls te kry raak al hoe moeiliker. Ons soek nog steeds die Swartsuikerbekkie, Swartsperwer, Bontvisvanger, Kuifkopvisvanger, Waterdikkop en Nonnetjie-uil. Op pad na Vrolijkheid stop ons by Johannes van Zyl se druiewedoppe kamp langs die rivier. Daar is ons weer gelukkig want die Namakwalangstertjie is op sy pos. By Vrolijkheid in die ou kelder kry ons toe die Nonnetjie-uil. In die veld om die rantjie word ons hoop nie beskaam: daar vlieg die Karoospekvreter met sy wit buite stertvere. By die voël-uitkyk op die boonste dam roep ons die Swartriethaan uit. Ons draai hier met die hoop dat ons die Waterdikkop by die uitvalwerke sal kry. Dit is egter nie so nie. In plaas daarvan kry ons die Teeleend wat ons nog kort. Dit begin sterk skemer raak en ons druk aan na Jan se kloof waar die Swartsperwer vir 'n paar jaar al broei. Vandag is hulle nêrens te sien nie.

Ons sien wel die nes en stap rond sonder enige teken. Dit raak donker; ons gaan onder na die paglande – kan ons die lys langer maak?

Dit gebeur nie en Adrius laai my om 20:05 by die huis af. Dit is 16 uur later en ons is moeg. Die troos is egter ons het 180 soorte voëls aangeteken. Dit was 'n uitstaande ervaring. En om dit alles te kroon word ons span aangewys as die wenners vir die voorgee-afdeling (handicap) vir ons land se Nasionale Voëldag.

Die groot geheim van ons sukses is dat ons die area baie goed ken. Jy weet waar jy watter soort behoort te kry. Dan help dit baie as jy die voëls se geluide ook ken. Dit bly egter een van die goedkoopste stokperdjies. Net 'n verkyker, 'n goeie boek (verkieslik *Sasol vir Beginners*) en later 'n band met die voëls se geluide op is al wat jy nodig het. Geniet ons wonderlike natuurskoon en bewaar dit. ♦

Boardwalk and Bird Hide Opening

The Friends of Vrolijkheid committee are pleased to announce that, after three years' discussion, planning, fundraising, designing, organising, and building, the new bird watching facility at the reserve has been completed. The brainchild of member Bruce Milne, the initiative was discussed for a good few years before being approved in 2007. Two years were spent raising funds for the project and construction by Bruce Milne and Gerhard Botha began in early 2009, first with the boardwalk and later the bird hide. The facility is wheelchair friendly, and will be one of the few reserves in South Africa where disabled persons can enjoy bird watching as well as the tranquil surrounds.

We hope to have a number of CapeNature representatives and we are trusting that **every member** will set aside the time to attend the ceremony and show their support for this very worthwhile project. Saturday, 22 May is the date we have tentatively identified and we will communicate with members to confirm the arrangements. We thank all those who have supported our fundraising events, either by attending them, contributing financially or donating prizes.

We look forward to seeing you all there, at this much-anticipated celebration. ♦

Earth Hour 2010: Earth Hour is a World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) global initiative which aims to raise awareness about global warming and to convince world leaders to take more action against climate change. Fourteen African countries joined in this year, up from five in 2009. SA was one of 125 countries that took part worldwide, with about a million South Africans participating. Eskom reported a 420 MW electricity saving. Imagine what could be achieved if we all took part in 2011!



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Gilly's Chronicles – by Gilly Schutte

Do you believe in sangomas? Gilly recalls an incident that made him think twice ...

It was during 1971 when six head of buffalo arrived in Ndumo Game Reserve, having come across the Msutu River from Mozambique. The nearest herd, as far as we knew, was located in the Kruger National Park – a long way away.

We were very excited to have buffalo in the reserve but the government veterinary official was not, as he was worried that the herd may have foot and mouth disease and wanted the beasts destroyed. We made sure that we were never able to 'find' them. Eventually it was agreed that we would shoot one animal and take samples.

Ranger Druminand Deusham had planned to leave early in the morning with two game guards. The evening prior, he took his .375 rifle from the walk-in safe at the field office and took it home in order to get an early start. When he and his wife Gloria retired to bed, he placed the rifle under the bed. Of course in those days we never locked our homes.

The following morning before dawn, Druminand rose but discovered to his amazement that the rifle was missing. Gloria was accused of removing it but denied any involvement. Druminand drove across to my home 1 km away and recounted the strange tale. We agreed that the rifle must have been stolen in the house that night. We then reported the matter to the police and together with two constables and our game guards started to follow footprints which had been discovered. These led from the house to the reserve's boundary fence. On the other side the tracks were crisscrossed by cattle spoor and ultimately lost. Even a bloodhound which was brought in could not help.

Four days later the police still had no breakthrough. It was at this point that the game guards suggested we ask the local sangoma. Thinking we had nothing to lose, we drove the 38 km to Sihanguane, on the way to Kosi Bay, taking a chance that the sangoma would be there when we arrived – remember we had no telephones in those days.

The well-known sangoma, Ufeesch, was indeed in residence. I parked the vehicle near a kraal and before long a young girl came along to ask for whom we were looking. I told her that we wished to have the bones thrown. She returned a short while later to call us and led us to the hut where Ufeesch was kneeling on a grass mat, dressed in traditional clothing.

We sat on the floor and she asked how she could help us. We repeated that we would like to have the bones thrown. She took a small round basket and shook it, chanting all the while, and then threw the bones onto the grass mat in front of her. I noticed the 'bones' consisted of sea shells, coins, broken false teeth and goat knuckles.

She pointed at the position of certain items and stated that she could see we had lost something. We then replied, as was customary, saying '*siyavuna*' (we agree). She then said that the object for which we were looking had been stolen. '*Siyavuma*,' we replied. It was made of metal. '*Siyavuma*,' we said again. The object is dangerous. '*Siyavuma*.' By this time she had gathered the bones back into the basket; she now shook them and poured them out onto the mat again.

She looked at them for some time before saying that this dangerous object is an '*isibamu*' (rifle). '*Siyavuma*.' Yes. The person who has the rifle does not want to keep it but intends selling it in the northern country (Mozambique). We should not delay in retrieving the dangerous object, she said. Do we have any suspects? We had three possibilities and gave her the names of three cooks who worked in the houses. She shook and threw the bones once more. This time the goats' knuckles stopped 30 cm ahead of the other articles and she straight away claimed that the bones tell her 'Grumede' is the guilty one. We must go to his kraal, she said, to find the rifle. We must not waste time looking in his home, for she can see the rifle hidden in bushes nearby.

We thanked her and paid her standard fee. As we were leaving she said to let her know sometime if indeed the rifle was found. I promised her that we would and enquired if there was anything else we could bring her. She replied that an empty drum in which to store water would be a fine gift indeed.

We arrived back at Ndumo late that afternoon after stopping at the police station to ask them to join us early the next morning for a raid at Grumede's kraal. We arrived at daybreak and found that he was not there. We began a search and found a hat and carving knife, belonging to Paul, a fellow game ranger who was with us. Ten minutes later Grumede arrived on his bicycle, looking genuinely surprised at his unexpected visitors. We told him we would like the rifle back. When shown the hat and knife he said he had been given them. He denied any wrongdoing but after some friendly persuasion by the police he took us to the rifle, hidden, as the sangoma had said, in thick shrubbery near the hut. Grumede was later found guilty and sentenced to two years in jail. How did the sangoma know? The answer you get is that they communicate with their ancestors. Yes, we did visit her again and took her the drum she so wished for, plus an impala. After this case we consulted her on several more occasions. No buffalo were ever shot at Ndumo and over the years they increased to such an extent that surplus animals were translocated to other conservation areas. ♦

Global Synopsis – by Alison M Downie

March 2010, Washington – A NASA team of scientists are surprised to find the existence of sea creatures six hundred feet below the ice in the Antarctic where no light reaches. When they lowered a video camera, footage later revealed a shrimp-like creature and a tentacle which they believe to come from a large jellyfish.

October 2009, Montagu – After more than a year of fundraising, the Montagu Eco Club opens a bird watching facility at the 'leidam', a heronry within the village that attracts local and international interest. The hide is accessible from the road near the information office and is certainly worth a visit to the picturesque and historical town. (*As the facility lies east-west, the best time of day to visit is in the morning – Ed.*)

January 2010, Bangkok – WWF reports that the tiger population of Southeast Asia's Greater Mekong has declined 70 percent in the last 12 years. The number of wild tigers is estimated to be just 350 and the possibility of extinction in Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand very real. The growing demand for body parts used by the Chinese in traditional medicine was cited as a major contributing factor. Ironically, tigers bred for the exotic pet trade outnumber tiger populations living in the wild. Tiger bones are used in traditional Chinese medicine to produce 'tiger bone wine', which fetches £100 a pint. In China, there is a domestic ban but tigers are bred in captivity; many of these 'parks' are a front for the illegal trade. Tiger bones are now being supplemented by lion bones and Africa's lion population faces a new threat. It is legal to trade in lion parts, particularly in East Africa, and it is alleged that lions in South Africa are being bred for slaughter for this trade. Unfortunately, lion farms do nothing to relieve pressure on free-ranging lions and it is likely that lions in the wild will soon be targeted as organised crime moves into its new 'market'.

March 2010, California – A restaurant owner and a sushi chef are criminally charged after undercover marine activists are served meat from a sei whale, an endangered species, at The Hump restaurant in Santa Monica. The whale meat is allegedly from Japan's scientific whaling program and was illegally exported into the USA. Violent protests have been triggered in recent years as a result of the killing of hundreds of whales by the Japanese in Antarctic waters.

February 2010, Nature's Valley, Tsitsikamma – The Nature's Valley Trust reports in its newsletter the sighting of a leopard at the De Vasselot Rest Camp. Two staff members spotted the leopard in a tree after investigating some unusual nocturnal noises, observing that the predator had just killed a vervet monkey. The Nature's Valley Trust regularly receives news of leopard sightings and spoor throughout the area.

December 2009, Agulhas – Only weeks after *Wild* magazine features the Agulhas National Park in its summer issue, a fire sweeps through the park, destroying newly renovated cottages and more than 50 percent of the reserve. Vast stretches of fynbos were destroyed, causing concern that alien plants will germinate in the weeks following the fire. The Honorary Rangers of the Overberg are appealing for funds for fire-fighting equipment, repairs to housing and the purchase of lost equipment. For more information contact Koos Swart in Struisbaai: 082 859 7824 or koosswart@mtnloaded.co.za.

March 2010, London – A panel of 41 scientists, after reviewing 20 years' research, conclude that the extinction of the dinosaurs came as a result of an asteroid smashing into Earth 65 million years ago. The new report, published in the journal *Science*, claims to have found evidence in Mexico of the impact site. For a graphic representation of the impact go to <http://impact.ese.ic.ac.uk/ImpactEffects/Chicxulub.html>.

November 2008, Faroe Islands – A petition is started and is circulated globally for almost two years, after evidence comes to light of the slaughter of hundreds of pilot whales and other cetaceans in a killing frenzy in the Faroe Islands, a protectorate of Denmark. Islanders drive schools of whales into bays before killing them with metal gaffs and long knives, an apparent traditional practice abandoned by other countries decades earlier. Circulated photographs show bays filled with blood and the corpses of dead and dying whales, most of which are discarded due to high toxin levels.

April 2010, Brisbane, Australia – A Chinese vessel, straying 15 km outside of the shipping line, runs aground in protected waters off the Great Barrier Reef where shipping is restricted. The coal-carrying ship hit the reef at full speed and there are fears of a major oil spill if the vessel breaks apart. A salvage team has been assigned but it could take as long as a week to assess the damage. Spilt oil would reach the mainland coast in two days and is a serious cause for concern for the World Heritage Site.

February 2010, Mexico – Amateur photographer Sandra Critelli captures unforgettable photographs of thousands of golden rays while looking for whale sharks. The stingrays turned the sea to gold, giving the appearance of masses of autumn leaves gliding beneath the waves. The scene came about during the sea creatures' biannual mass migration to warmer waters.

Sources: *Mercury News* online (www.mercurynews.com), *Wild* magazine (www.wildcard.co.za), *Yahoo News* online (www.news.yahoo.com/), Care2 Petition Site (www.care2.com), News24 (www.news24.com), *Carte Blanche* (www.mnet.co.za/carteblanche)

Weather Statistics for March

Rainfall				Temperatures	
Year to date	19 mm	Min	0 mm (1999)	March min temp	7,7 °C
2009	279 mm	Max	119 mm (2003)	March max temp	43,8 °C
2008	417 mm	Total	9 mm		
2007	315 mm			2009/2010 days > 35 °C	30
2006	335 mm			2009/2010 days > 40 °C	6

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

Beer was the reason the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. It is clear from the Mayflower's log that the crew didn't want to waste beer looking for a better site. The log goes on to state that the passengers 'were hasted ashore and made to drink water that the seamen might have the more beer'. After consuming a bucket or two of vibrant brew they called aul, or ale, the Vikings would head fearlessly into battle, often without armour or even shirts. In fact, the term 'berserk' means 'bare shirt' in Norse, and eventually took on the meaning of their wild battles.

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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 plant 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 May 2010 and informed in writing or by telephone. The competition is open to FoV members only.

Congratulations to Rose Kent who correctly stated that the term that refers to an animal which is active at dawn and at dusk is *crepuscular*. She wins a R150 voucher to spend at Frangipani.



Outings & Events

APRIL

- Thurs 8:** Movie evening at Tanagra from 6.30 pm. Bring along your picnic supper, camp chair and blanket. There is no charge for the film (*The Beckoning Silence*) but donations to FoV will be welcome.
- Sun–Wed 18–21:** Three-night camping trip to the Cederberg. The base will be at Krom River and day walks will set out from there. Participants to bring tents and provisions. We will share transport where possible. Campsites are R120 per night for four persons. Phone or email Frances to book and in order to co-ordinate transport arrangements.
- Sat 24:** Robertson Bird Club outing to Cogmanskloof. Meet at Robertson Post Office at 7.30 am. For more info call Maurits on 023 626 1160 (w).

MAY

- Sat 8:** Boesmanskloof walk (to the pool and back). Meet at the old post office at 8.00 am. Phone or email Frances on or before Wednesday, 5 May as a permit is required (no charge for Friends of Vrolijkheid members).
- Sun 9:** Family braai at Vrolijkheid. Fires will be ready from midday. Should it be raining the braai will be postponed to the following Sunday, 16 May.
- Sat 15:** All or part of the Rooikat Trail at Vrolijkheid Nature Reserve. Meet at the parking area at 9.00 am.
- Sat 22:** Opening ceremony of the boardwalk and bird hide at Vrolijkheid (Steenboksvlakte entrance). To be confirmed.

JUNE

- Wed 9:** Outing and walk at Groot Toren. Details to be confirmed.
- Sat 26:** Day walk in Cogmanskloof. Details to be confirmed.

JULY

- Thurs 22:** AGM (brief, as ever) at the hall at Vrolijkheid, followed by a talk on owl and bat boxes by guest speaker Jerry Cassidy. Time: 6.45 for 7.00 pm.

Travelling the trails of the !Xam – by Don Pinnock

In hundreds of caves and overhangs in the Drakensberg are paintings by the !Xam – the mysterious southern San. But as Don Pinnock discovered, it takes a 4x4 and a good deal of shoe rubber to find them.

It was a matter which could have been cleared up by a single conversation. But few settlers realise they owe it to history not to shoot first and ask questions afterwards

I sat gnawing at the problems caused by the short-sightedness of my ancestors, staring rather sadly at an extraordinary scene. A charging lion, about half a metre long, its whiskers bristling and its teeth bared, was painted on the cave wall with the definite strokes of a master artist.

Ahead of the beast, seeming to flee with great leaping steps, was a row of San hunters. Above them floated little red boxes which resolved, Esher style, into flying figures with antelope heads. These spiralled up the domed roof and into a circular indentation at its highest point.

The small cave I'd ducked into was an almost perfect dome, some two metres at its highest point and maybe five in diameter at its base. We'd found it atop a boulder-strewn hill behind a gracious stone farmhouse in a valley named Balloch, part of an area in the Southern Drakensberg known, rather oddly, as Wartrail.

The tableaux before us was dream-like, vivid, teasing cognition but inexplicable. The cave itself had a strange, alien presence and I found myself glancing out the opening expecting someone else to arrive. But no one did – the !Xam had long gone: hunted down, shot, starved or frozen to death in their mountain hideaways.

At the turn of the century the historian George McCall Theal, with typical Victorian arrogance, had put the matter quite plainly. Bushmen, he said – using a name which was to be much contested later – 'were of no benefit to any other section of the human family. They were incapable of improvement, and as it was impossible for civilised men to live on the same soil with them, it was for the world's good that they should make room for a higher race' ... (presumably his own).

More recent historians would call the events which Theal supported by a more uncomfortable name: genocide. The San were forced to make way, and sitting there I realised there was nobody on Earth who could now tell me with certainty what the painting on the cave wall meant. There are theories – books full of them – but San rock art still awaits its Rosetta Stone.

Some months earlier I'd phoned Susan Tonkin of Wild Cape Ventures in Ugie to ask if she could suggest a route that would take in San art sites of the Southern Drakensberg.

'It's possible,' she chuckled. 'But you'll need a 4x4 and some good hiking boots. They can be wild mountains.'

So September found me thrumming my way through Queenstown and Dordrecht to Ugie in a beefy Colt Rodeo double cab, wondering if I was in for baking heat or ice: these bergs can lay down ski-depth snow on Christmas day and fry you in July.

Ugie was balmy, with little white clouds giving no hint of snowstorms. I picked up Susan (we'd soon rename her Su San) and her forester friend Gordon McKenzie and headed up to Woodcliffe where Phill Sephton owns a farm so outrageously beautiful it hardly seemed real. Beyond the lawns of her self-catering cottage massive, muscular sandstone cliffs rose almost vertically out of the river and continued doing so up the valley until they lost themselves in the purple basalt stickleback of Drakensberg towering basalt.

Next morning we followed the river upstream, past fields where rare Crowned Cranes gathered, then skirted valleys of indigenous riverine forest boasting Outeniqua and real yellowwoods (*Podocarpus spp*), white stinkwoods (*Celtis spp*), cheesewoods (*Pittosporum viridiflorum*), horsewoods (*Clausena anisata*) and Cape quince trees (*Cryptocarya woodii*) among many others.

The first cave offered a beautifully drawn cheetah, the second a single baboon. Then we trekked out of the river bed and onto a ridge overlooking Wide Valley with a splendid view of the high Berg. In a most unexpected place Phyll pointed out a rain-animal painting that looked to me like a nasty-tempered moray eel. Near it was the first of many 'therianthropic' figures we were to see – humans in the process of transforming themselves into animals. Around it were masses of dots and lines known as entoptics: patterns seen in a trance state.

It doesn't take much stamping round San caves to realise their paintings weren't 'art in the park'. Frankly, they're weird. In the absence of a San shaman to explain them, the next best interpreter is Professor David Lewis-Williams of Wits University's Rock Art Unit.

In 1990 he published a useful little book entitled *Discovering Southern African Rock Art*, which was followed by the much more weighty *Images of Power*, then *Fragile Heritage*. Most of the images, he suggests, were painted by shamans recreating their own spiritual experiences, and he has collected a mountain of evidence to support this view.

For the San, it appears, there were two worlds, that of the camp and surrounding wild creatures, and that of the world associated with the supernatural and with strange creatures – a place of the gods from which power could be drawn. Between

them were what could best be described as portals: certain shimmering water holes and cracks, or special surfaces in quartzitic rock – doorways between the two worlds.

The intermediaries between these worlds were shamans who, through trance-inducing dance rituals, could ‘die’ in this world and travel through portals into the spirit realm, seeking the power to heal, make predictions or bring rain.

From dances witnessed among living Bushmen, and from the perilously few records available, it seems that entering a trance could be painful, causing the shaman to double over and bleed from the nose. Often they would take on a therianthrope form, ‘becoming’ an animal, generally an eland. Often these creatures would be bleeding from their noses. What they experienced they painted: trail maps to other worlds.

All that’s an educated guess, of course. We can’t know for sure.

By the time we returned to Woodcliffe cottage we’d covered some 13 steep kilometres – a tough start to a week in the mountains.

Next morning we pointed the Colt’s nose towards the picturesque village of Rhodes. First, though, we dropped in on !Kaggen’s Cave and its fading herd of eland, then round the contour to Outlook Cave. Sitting there, doing what the name implied, a deep, healing stillness seemed to enfold us as we stared across at the emerald foothills of the ever-present Drakensberg. The next site, Storybook Cave, had two metre-high therianthropes – one pointing authoritatively at a crack in the rock from which an eland emerged – and a two-tailed cat.

It was about that time I realised San rock art was not so much about pictures but about place. The caves and overhangs were rather like theatre proscenium arches marked ‘entry’, surrounded by elaborate scripts on how to enter and about what to do beyond the portals.

This trip was becoming a tour of the doorways to San heaven. But where on earth were the keys?

The drive which followed up Naude’s Nek Pass was one of those which people buy 4x4s to experience, though we got up with only the back wheels churning. One false move and we’d have become a panelbeater’s nightmare. Once over the top the vehicle was invaded by the delicious aroma of blossoming thickets of *ouhoud* (*Leucosidia sericia*) which seemed to grow everywhere.

Rhodes is one of those villages which time forgot, before newness became a fashion. Nestled in a valley of the Drakensberg foothills, its houses have deep verandas, steep corrugated-iron roofs and sagging wire fences.

We zigzagged down the wide dirt streets, bemused by the almost overabundance of rustic charm, then pulled into Walkerbouts Inn. It’s owned by Dave Walker – self-proclaimed mayor and Mr Trout – and isn’t short of rustic or charm.

The bar counter was made of solid cedar and the fish tank had recently been vacated by some trout because it had sprung a leak. They languished with a platanna in the rather cramped quarters of a cooler bag with a bubble machine attached.

Dave’s a large, easy going host who came to Rhodes because of trout. He organises fly fishing trips, runs the inn and fires up a mean pizza. Up the road is the ski lodge Tiffindell, but he’s quite glad the favoured road to it bypasses the village.

‘The yuppies go up there in their fancy 4x4s. Here we get interesting travellers and sheep farmers. Good people.’

Just outside Rhodes the next day Vasie Murray – farm owner and some-time film-set animal handler – took us up a valley which loomed in on the road and made each corner seem sinister. Desolate beauty might be a bit of a cliché but it’s the only phrase which seemed to fit.

Martin’s Dell Cave, high up one of the valley sides, had eland paintings so highly coloured they looked as if their long-gone painters touched them up annually. Above one was a white bird doing a high-speed dive into the back of a staggering grey eland.

In another cave, once filled with art, a farmer who had used it as a shearing shed painted the walls with whitewash to improve the light. In cultural terms it simply extended the gloom.

Nearby Willem Naude of Buttermead Farm – a man with a passion for rock art – showed us a cave with a painting of what has come to be called the lightning bird. It was connected to the bleeding nose of an eland by a zigzag line, possibly representing supernatural potency. If these little artists were primitive they certainly used sophisticated metaphors.

A mountain buttress and many kilometres later we followed the directions of Alan Isted to Bidstone Guest Farm which is run by his parents. His mum, Di, cooked up a fine meal and we sat clutching beers and discussing the idiot weather.

Alan’s a snowboarding man and was chafing at the bit. It was hot when it ought to be snowing: global warming, undoubtedly, we agreed. In a few months time he’d be off to the Himalayas for the real stuff.

Alan’s knowledge of rock art sites is considerable – he’s been hunting them down much of his life. The first place he took us to was Warwick’s Cave at Balloch – the domed cave of the lion chase. The second required some serious walking through high-mountain canyons to Brummer Cave.

By this stage it might have been the daily hiking, the bizarre paintings or continuously hunkering down in places of power, but the trip was getting increasingly surreal. Brummer’s Cave would blow me away completely.

The place was as large as a big concert hall, with a view over the Kraai River Valley, and was simply full of polychrome eland.

They were drawn with such clarity and understanding of tone they seemed three-dimensional. Between them were busy human forms, curled snakes and other, odder creatures. The paintings were perfectly preserved, possibly because they're so deep inside and far from weather and water erosion, but also because they were on two levels, both protected from cattle and sheep which obviously use the cave. And they're certainly way off the tourist map.

The looming buttresses beyond the vast cave mouth and the valley far below offered no hint of human life, but behind me the walls vibrated with evidence that this was once a San equivalent of France's Lascaux, and possibly far older. The presence of the little hunters was so strong, the silence which enveloped us seemed a gossamer portal away from their clicking chatter.

These Drakensberg foothills had been home to the San for countless centuries, some moving with the seasons and others settling permanently in great caves such as this one.

When the Nguni cattle herders appeared a thousand or so years ago the San simply moved to higher ground and – because they were so few, had no cattle and posed no threat – they were left in peace. But from 1837 Dutch farmers, moving away from the British rule, trekked into Natal and before long were in conflict with black pastoralists.

After the defeat of the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River, settlement in the region increased. Wild game was quickly depleted and the San, deprived of their food source, raided livestock. Farmers retaliated with vengeance, shooting San 'pests' on sight. (When Britain took over Natal, English settlers simply kept up the tradition.)

While the Natal Volksraad hadn't exactly specified extermination, the instructions were so broadly worded that discretion in that matter was left to the local *kommandant*. Thousands of San died. With a total estimated population of around 20,000 for the whole of South Africa, the effect of the virtual open hunting season in San was devastating.

The final demise of the southern San is chillingly depicted by historian Nigel Penn: 'In the desolate obscurity of the 19th century *agterveld*, the San were overcome by a piece-meal process of betrayal and defeat. By the 1870s the last remnants of the Cape San were being hunted to extinction. Those who were not shot were starved to death in the dusty margins of South Africa's most marginal land ...'.

That sad history seemed oddly out of step with the elegant images behind me and the breathless beauty rolling in from the yawning cave mouth. I guess a conscience is what hurts when everything else feels so good

We left the cave reluctantly, and as we crested the valley a howling gale stopped us in our tracks. Driving wind saps the spirit, which may have explained why we arrived back at our vehicle feeling rather flat and disgruntled. Or had we disturbed something ancient?

From Wartrail we drove through the historic but unattractive town of Aliwal North and decided to push on to overnight at its aesthetic opposite: Burgersdorp.

After a fine meal and a comfortable night's rest at The Nook B&B in the care of Anita Joubert, I took a dawn stroll to investigate the Anglo-Boer War blockhouse. Along the way I had the unusual pleasure of being simultaneously crowed at by a rooster and barked at by a crow in someone's garden. When a tough-looking staffy came up, yapping to get in on the act, the obviously tame crow beat him up and sent him packing.

The rock art trail would end some days later at Greenvale Cave in Dordrecht, a thousand kilometres from where it began.

The cave has a strangely lyrical 'flute player' and some freakish nightmare creatures. But, in a sense, my personal quest for the spirit of the San ended in a canyon near Burgersdorp so remote even the Colt seemed nervous – and so full of exquisite paintings it should immediately be declared a national monument and a World Heritage Site.

Known locally as the Valley of Art, it spans the farms of AC de Klerk and Ouboet Coetzee. They're well aware of its importance and are dedicated to its preservation. But sheep farming has fallen on hard times and there's no guarantee their properties will remain in sympathetic hands. Many farms in the area have been abandoned to weather – and probably the Land Bank – and are sliding into ruin.

Even at the dry end of a particularly dry season, golden-hued streams ran through reed beds and slid into deep pools cradled between towering cliffs of orange and black sandstone.

Almost every overhang seemed to be an art gallery teeming with images of profound sophistication. In one a group of hippos clustered in near-photographic perfection. In the Cave of Birth, amid a welter of polychrome antelope, therianthropes and unintelligible symbols and dots, was the drawing of a woman which was so graphic it must rate as one of humankind's earliest pornographic works. In Rainmaker's Cave strange, bloated creatures loomed while busy little figures towed them magically to bring an end to the dry months of winter.

But it was in the Cave of Dogs that I stared, dumbstruck, into the joyous soul of a departed people. Possibly because it's south facing and on less-friable rock, the images have been preserved down to the feather-strokes in the head-dress of a dancing shaman. The wall was alive with hundreds of figures – here a hunting group with dogs, there a family group on the move, the men with bows and spears, the women cloaked with karosses, supply sacks thrown across their shoulders and digging sticks in their hands. Tall figures with antelope heads strode beside bent, old people leaning heavily on sticks. Marching with the throng were

sheep (the San kept sheep?), prancing eland and packs of loping hounds. Three of the dogs were no longer than a centimetre each, but so perfectly drawn that you could feel the joy of their gambolling.

This is how almost all the caves we'd seen must once have looked. What were they telling us? The figures were all walking, running, striding across the huge tableaux: all moving. But to where? Whatever destination they had in mind, the real answer was terrible: to oblivion.

As I stood, staring in wonder, my eyes filled with tears of shame at what had been done to their culture. When some *kommandant* pumped a bullet into the breast of the last San artist, he would not have known that he'd murdered Africa's equivalent of Leonardo da Vinci or Renoir. Would he have cared?

How much richer the world would have been if, instead, they had stood side by side before one of the great panels while the artist interpreted his images

But they didn't, and the meaning of San art remains tantalisingly just out of reach. That makes it so intriguing, but also ineffably sad, like a dream you knew would change your life but which you forgot on waking.

History documents so many misunderstandings, but so few meaningful conversations. ♦

Don Pinnock is the author of a number of books, including Love Letters to Africa, Natural Selections, African Journeys, Blue Ice, and The Woman That Lived in a Tree, from which the above story was chosen. Pinnock has been an associate editor and photojournalist at Getaway for a number of years, having joined the magazine in 1996. He has just retired from his three-year tenure as magazine editor and now works as a freelance photojournalist. Twenty years on, Getaway magazine ('going places, doing things in Africa') is still as popular as ever, with a readership of 60,000.

**'Until one has loved an animal,
a part of one's soul remains unawakened'**

– Anatole France



Thank you to the following for their assistance with this issue:
Anneen Steyn-Durant, Graeme Morgan, Frik Linde

Next issue: July 2010