

Wildlife Circular 18 – September / October 2021

Our hiking group did a walk at Farleigh Forest Station earlier this week. The ranger informed us that the sole surviving Knysna elephant was currently present in the section that we intended walking, but this was not a concern as it would become aware of our presence long before we got anywhere near it and move off. Well we certainly did see plenty of evidence of the elephant's presence in the form of heaps of dung on the route we traversed. So although I'm not able to show you a picture that I took of the elephant herself I can show you evidence of her presence.

Below photo of elephant dung taken at Farleigh Forest Station



A SANParks report published in 2019 revealed that there is now only one Knysna elephant left, a 45 year old female who has been named "Oupoot" after the legendary bull elephant mentioned in Dalene Mathee's novel "Circles in a Forest". This book has been translated into no less than 14 languages. In it, Mathee focuses on conservation and speaks out about the extermination of elephants and destruction of the Knysna Forests. She died in 2005 and her ashes were scattered at **Krisjan's se Nek** en route to Millwood. A memorial was erected to her in 2008 next to an 800 year old Yellowwood tree. The aptly named **Circles in the Forest Trail** starts here. It is estimated that some 1000 elephants once roamed the Garden Route area, sadly now reduced to a single 45 year old cow. This is the sole surviving unfenced free-ranging elephant left in South Africa. Elephants are known to be highly sociable animals so she is probably stressed because of the lack of companions. She ranges widely through SANParks Garden Route National Park areas and into a few adjacent private properties. It will be too stressful to move her and a management policy is

yet to be finalised. I recall joining a group of volunteers clearing a section of alien infested Council property on Whites Road of aliens some years ago. The owner of an adjoining property told us that his late father remembered elephants visiting the area. They had created a wallow here (still visible) where they indulged in mud baths. How sad that we have destroyed this last population of free roaming elephants.

We also noted that Australian invaders such as Blackwood and Eucalyptus are rapidly outgrowing the fynbos regenerating after the devastating fire a few years ago. If SANParks had adopted a proactive approach these seedlings could have been hand pulled, but they are now far too big for that to happen.

Below a photo of “Oupoot”: courtesy of SANParks.



Crows

We have just returned from a visit to 4 National Parks namely Karoo, Augrabies, Kgalagadi and Mokala. I have developed a keen interest in bird photography and Kgalagadi is indeed an ornithologist’s “Mecca”. One morning we watched a crow catch no less than 3 finches within the space of 30 minutes at Kaspersdraai Waterhole south of Nossob. There seems to be an endless supply of these small birds that swarm from the adjacent trees and bushes to the water and back again whenever a raptor appears on the scene. Raptors such as Lanner falcons and Black shouldered kites made regular swoops to catch prey. We even observed a Drongo which is not that much larger than a Finch spear one before carrying it off to the safety of the nearest bush. Crows which are omnivorous have a reputation of being one of the smartest birds and one particular Cape Crow we observed showed this to be true. He worked out that by sitting on the concrete slab located directly above the point where the water enters the trough he could pick off the finches that went below the slab to access the freshest water at the entry point as they left. Did you know that the collective name for a group of these birds is a murder of crows? Crows are generally not liked but they are in fact very useful birds. By way of example, a family of crows can

consume 40 000 grubs, caterpillars and other insects in a single nesting season. They also transport and store seeds thereby assisting forest renewal.

Below photo: Cape Crow with a Finch in his beak



Death's Head Hawk Moths

There are 3 species of Death's head moths *namely Acherontia atropos, lachensis and styx*. All 3 species names derive from Greek mythology and are related to death. The genus name Acheron derives from the River Acheron in Greek mythology which is a branch of the River Styx (river of the dead). The African death's-head hawk moth *Acherontia atropos* found from Great Britain to South Africa is a very large moth with a wingspan of 5 inches (13 cm). It is a powerful and very fast flier (it can reach speeds of 50 kilometres an hour) and is sometimes seen on ships far out to sea. The forewings are a mottled dark and pale brown, and the hind wings are orangey-buff with two narrow dark bands parallel with the hind margin. The abdomen is a similar orangey-brown, with a dark dorsal stripe. The most notable feature is a patch of short yellowish hairs on the thorax that bears a resemblance to a human skull. It is a striking insect, but is seldom seen because it flies late in the night. All three species have the ability to chirp or squeak like a mouse. They do this by inhaling and then exhaling air over their epipharynx which vibrates to produce the chirping sound. The Hawks Head moth has a predilection for potato & tomato plants, but will also attack other species. We have found that they also love Arum Lilies. These moths also commonly raid beehives. For a long time it was a mystery as to how they managed to do this without being attacked by the bees, but it has recently been discovered that they mimic the scent of the bees and are thus not recognised as intruders. Single eggs are laid under host plant leaves. The larvae are stout, can reach a length of 120 -130mm and have a prominent tail horn. They are capable of biting if threatened. When mature they burrow underground where they pupate.

Death's head moths have long been considered to be a bad omen and not unsurprisingly they have often consequently featured in literature e.g. in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native* and more recently Thomas Harris' *Silence of the Lambs*. In the latter the killer places the pupae of *Acherontia styx* in the throat of victims.

You are much more likely to have seen the caterpillars of this moth in your garden especially on Arum lilies.

The two pictures below show firstly the moth and secondly the larvae (note the mock eyes on the larvae too which help to frighten off predators).



Photo above courtesy of Google. Take note of what looks like a human skull on the back of the thorax from which the common name is derived.



Photo above: Larvae of Deaths Head moth feeding on Streptocarpus leaves. Note the horn at the tail and the large false eyes.

The photos below feature caterpillars of another moth found locally namely, *Bombycomorpha bifascia* spp. *Bifascia*. I haven't managed to get a picture of the moth itself, but every year my *Searsia lucida* trees are infested with their caterpillars. Take care when handling them as the hairs can irritate one's skin causing severe itching. Notice in the top photo the large numbers that literally engulf small branches eating all the leaves in sight.

Photo below: Caterpillars massed on a *Searsia lucida* twig



The photo below shows a single caterpillar taken from below. One can clearly see that all the leaves on the twig have been polished off.



Flower of the Month

The Arum Lily *Zantedeschia aethiopica* (Afr. Varkoor) is actually not a lily. It does very well locally but is high on the menu for Bushpigs and Porcupines, so unless you have a protected area you will be frustrated by constantly having the plants dug up to get at the rhizome. We have found that even when planted in terraforce blocks porcupines will destroy the foliage in a fruitless attempt to get at the rhizome. It is an excellent cut flower and lasts well in water. There are a number of varieties of the species such as the “Green Goddess” featured in the photo below. The genus *Zantedeschia* occurs only in Africa and seven species are recognised. The common arum is found from the Western Cape up into the Eastern Cape, KZN and the north east of the country. In our area it is dormant in summer unless growing in a wet marshy conditions.

This lovely plant was introduced to Europe before Van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape and is named after Professor Giovanni Zantedeschi, an Italian physician and botanist.

The arum is very easily cultivated by seed or division. The grey seeds can be sown in clean seedling mix and covered lightly during spring. Take care not to sow them too thickly as they will need space to form the fleshy roots. The rhizome can also be divided when the plant is dormant, it should be re-planted about 5 cm deep. The arum can be used along streams, or on the fringe of a pond. They prefer shade in drier conditions. It will tolerate deep shade, but will not flower well in this position. It is fast growing and likes very rich, well-drained conditions.

Photo below: *Zantedeschia aethiopica* Arum Lily “Green Goddess”



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