

WILDLIFE CIRCULAR 28 Q1 2024

As mentioned in my previous circular we visited Etosha, Mokala and Kalaghad National Parks during August and September 2023. This circular features some of the highlights of our visit to the Kalaghad Park. The famous Irish poet & playwright Oscar Wilde (Full name Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde) is remembered among other things for his famous quote "*Comparisons are odious*". Be that as it may, we found the facilities and service in Kalaghad to be streets ahead of Etosha and for that matter some of the camps in the Kruger Park too. The shops in Etosha were also generally poorly stocked and the prices exorbitant. For example a 5 litre bottle of water cost close to double what we paid in Kalaghad.

On this visit we were struck by the paucity of raptors for which Kalaghad is renowned. In this context, we ourselves noticed and also heard a number of other visitors commenting on the absence of mice. These are normally seen in abundance at picnic spots and crossing the road. Their absence could possibly be explained by the extremely dry conditions in the park and huge veld fires that had swept the area in previous years. As small rodents constitute an important source of food, most of the raptors appeared to have looked for greener pastures. By way of example we have normally found Lanner Falcons to be widespread, but on this trip only encountered 3 over a period of 18 days. We did however have one memorable encounter on the Mata Mata road. I noticed a Lanner sitting on the ridge above the river bed and it then obliged by flying closer and perching in a tree alongside the road. After setting up my camera and waiting for about 30 minutes, in the hope of catching it in flight, my patience was eventually rewarded by the appearance of an approaching tractor towing old vehicle tyres used to grade the dirt road. This produced the desired effect as the bird started getting agitated by the loud noise and billowing cloud of dust kicked up. Fortunately it decided to leave before being enveloped in dust. The first picture shows the moment of take-off and the second the bird in flight.

Photo below: Lanner Falcon taking off



Photo below: Lanner Falcon in flight



Kalahadi is also famous for its felines and we were fortunate enough to see plenty of these.

Photo below: One of the females in a pride seen at the Kwang Waterhole north of Nossop Camp urinated after having a drink. A male then proceeded to sniff the spot, resulting in the dramatic reaction captured below.



We also saw a couple of lion kills. In the first picture below taken at Marie's se Draai close to Nossop the lions were just departing their Gemsbok kill when we arrived and the jackals had already moved in.

Photo below: Jackals scavenging the remains of the Gemsbok carcass.



Photo below: A Brown hyena also seen in the vicinity of the kill



We also observed a kill at Samevlooiing Waterhole just 5 kilometers from the Twee Rivieren Camp where 3 young lions had brought down an Eland.

Photo below: A young male licking his lips after feasting on the kill.

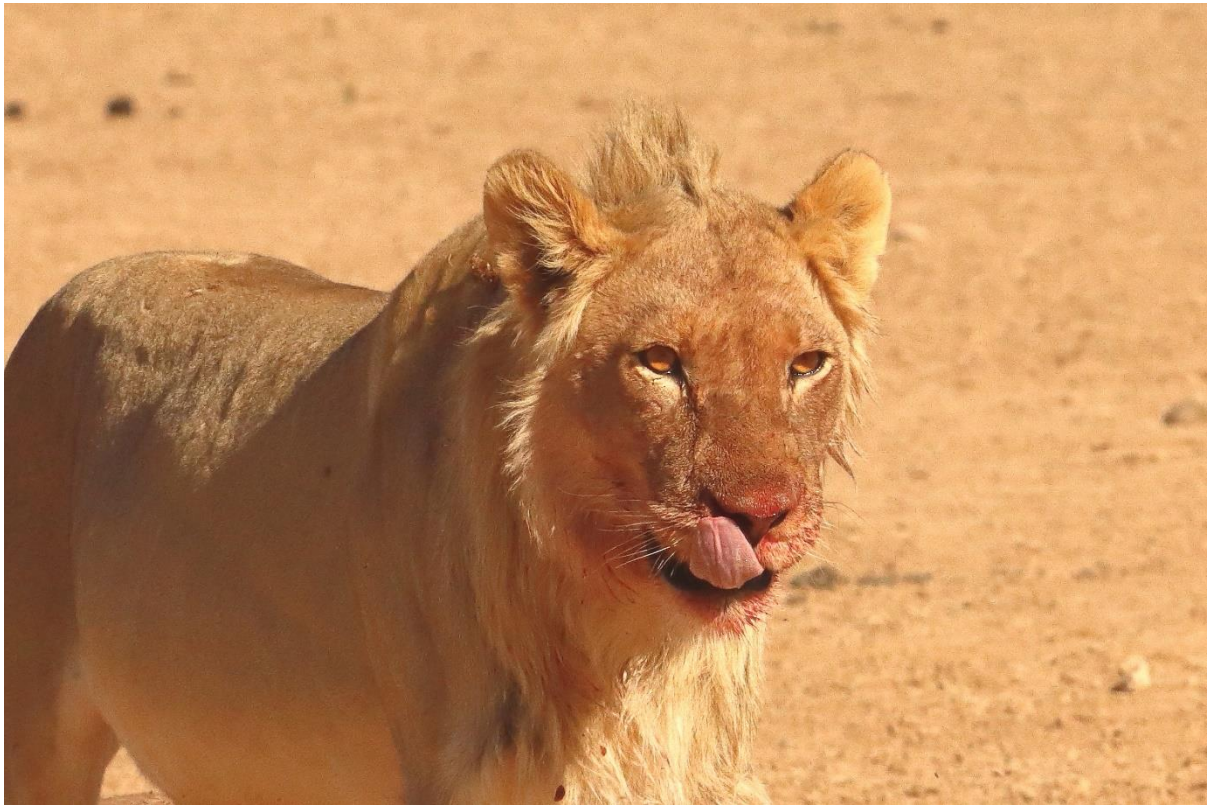


Photo below: A lion on the Eland carcass during the late afternoon, the ideal time for photography in the soft golden sunlight.



We were also fortunate enough to see cheetahs on a number of occasions including a mother with 3 grown cubs. We followed them down the Nossop River one day and they eventually crossed the road giving me the opportunity to take some close up photos

Photos 1 & 2 below: Cheetahs

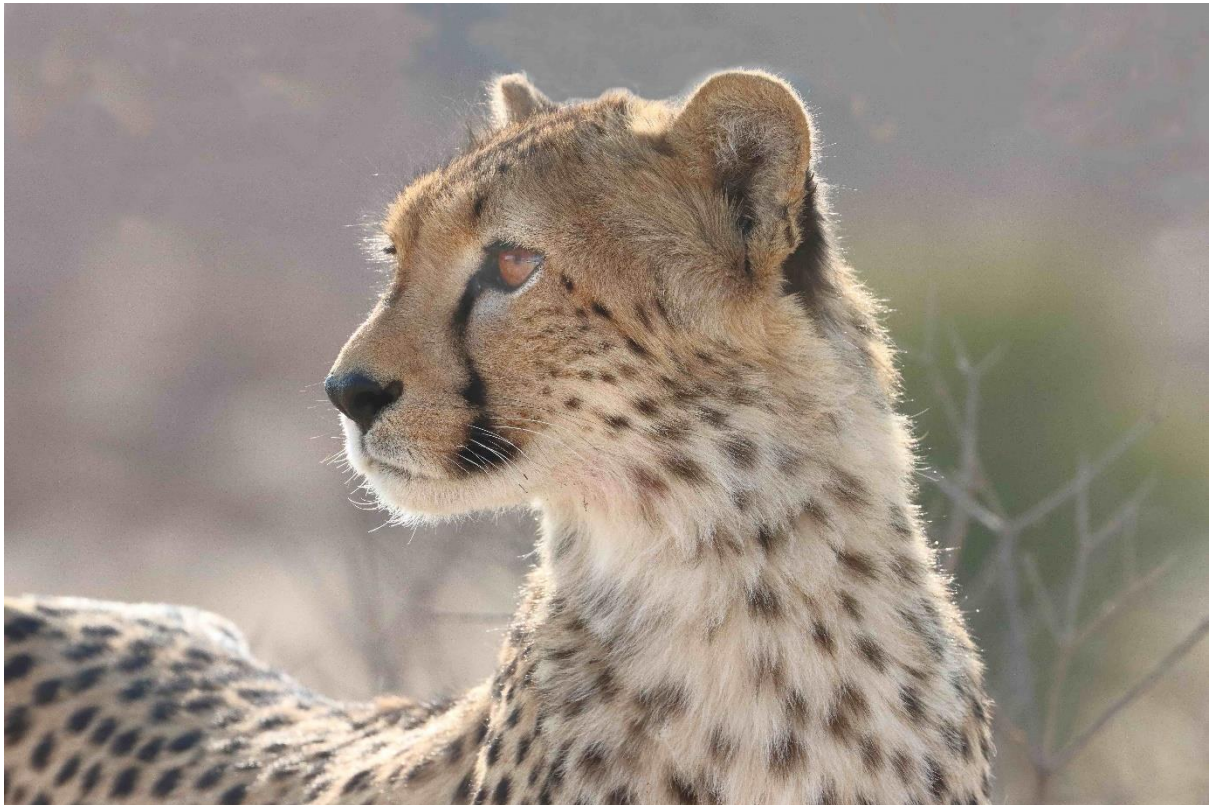


Photo below: A Tawny Eagle watches a Bateleur exit the Nossop Waterhole while a dove flies by.



Photo below: A Bateleur in flight at Cubitje Quap Waterhole north of Nossop Camp. We watched this individual at the waterhole for about an hour in the hope that it would take off. Eventually some Gemsbok arrived and I thought I would get my shot, but one stepped right in front of it as it took off. Fortunately I still managed to capture it in flight.



Photo below: Two Gemsbok involved in one of the frequent sparring contests seen around waterholes.



Photo below: A Honey badger foraging in the Auob River bed. They seem to be perpetually on the move and are therefore difficult to photograph.



Photo below: A most unusual sighting in Kalaghadi, a solo Warthog seen at Kousant waterhole north of Nossop Camp. They aren't usually found in the Kalaghadi.



The male lions in Kalaghadi are truly majestic creatures and are generally much bigger than their counterparts in Kruger. Many of them sport thick black manes and scarred faces, an occupational hazard when they engage in duels with rivals for mating rights.

Photo below: A typical example of a Kalaghadi male lion with facial scarring seen at Kwang waterhole.



Nesting African Hoopoes

Towards the end of December last year we had a pair of African Hoopoes nesting in our next door neighbour's roof. It was fascinating to watch them collecting worms and insects in the garden and delivering them to the chicks. As the chicks matured, a little head would momentarily poke out from under the tiles and snatch the food from the parent hovering next to the roof.

Photo below: Adult perched on the roof tiles with loaded beak.

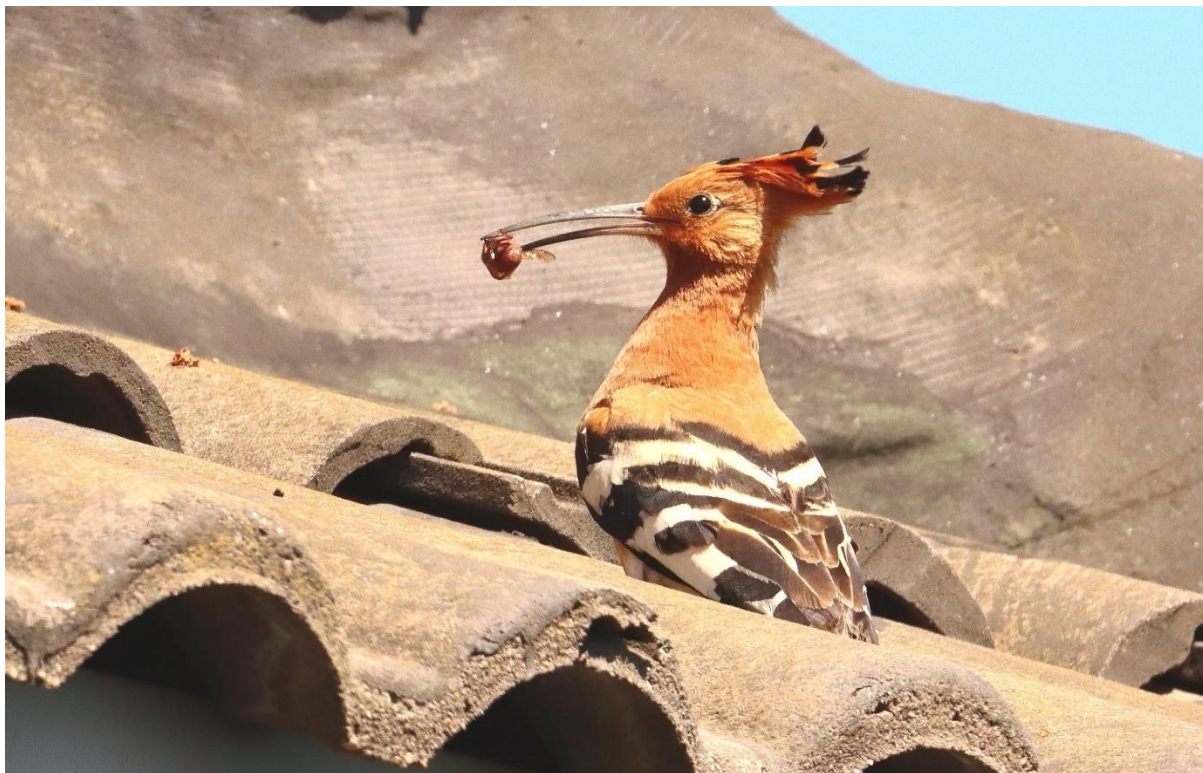
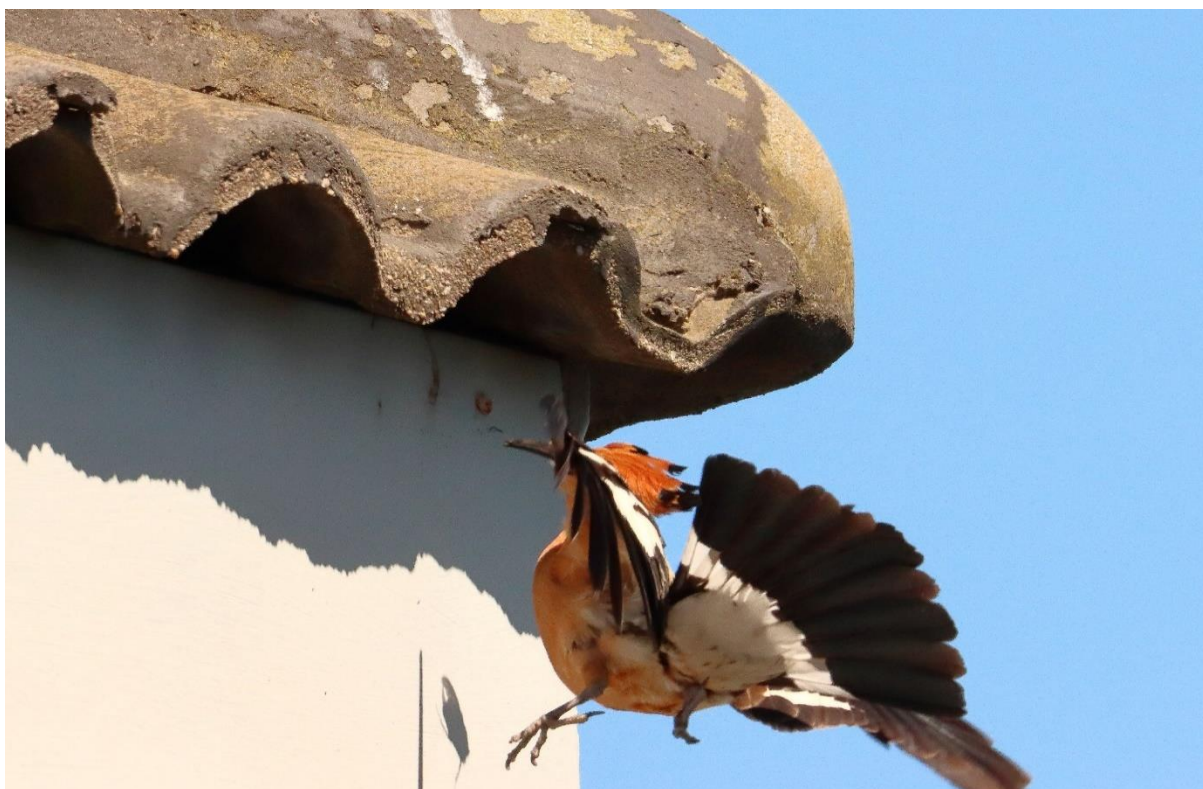


Photo below: Adult Hoopoe in the process of squeezing in under the roof tiles.



Spotted Eagle Owl

I received the two interesting photos featured below from Lesley Roberts, who lives in Freezia Lane, Wilderness. Firstly of a Spotted Eagle Owl that has roosted in her property and secondly of the pellets containing the regurgitated remains of food that it had eaten. Spotted Eagle Owls are the smallest of the eagle owls and they have yellow eyes, a distinguishing feature that helps to differentiate them from the slightly larger Cape Eagle Owl which has orange coloured eyes. They are the most common large “eared” owl in Southern Africa occurring throughout the region. Undigested substances such as feathers, hair and bones are regurgitated in the form of pellets within 24 hours of eating and dropped below the roosting site.



I was fascinated to see that this particular specimen had been eating snails as well as a scorpion, as neither Roberts Bird Guide, nor Wikipedia on Google mentioned these as food sources. Both of these reference sources indicate that prey consists of small mammals, birds, insects and reptiles. Scientists are able to use the pellets to identify the prey the owls are eating, so this appeared to be somewhat of an anomaly. However I then checked in my weighty 2 volume tome on SA birds namely “**The Ultimate Companion For Birding In Southern Africa**” by Peter Ginn & Geoff McIlleron.

There I found the answer to my query. These two well-known bird authorities and authors state that Spotted Eagle Owls eat a diverse range of prey including **arthropods**, rodents, birds, amphibia, small reptiles and **molluscs** (my emphasis).

So, well spotted and thanks for sharing Lesley!

Photo below: Owl pellets showing snail shells and some scorpion remnants



Quarterly flower / tree recommendation

I've chosen an unusual subject this quarter, namely the Bract Disa, *Disa bracteata*. We have a narrow pathway covered in wood chip between our south facing garden and the adjacent greenbelt. During early November 2023 I noticed this unusual small plant flowering on the pathway, so took a photo which I submitted to iNaturalist. I was amazed by the rapid response with 3 individuals confirming the identity (now considered a research grade observation) within days. We have lived in Wilderness for more than 15 years, but I have never previously seen this plant in our garden or for that matter elsewhere in Constantia Kloof, but there it was flourishing in the middle of the pathway.

It is a tuberous geophyte (Definition: a perennial plant that bears its perennating buds below the surface of the soil) found in the western and eastern Cape that grows to a height about 12cm, more commonly in disturbed habitats such as roadsides. The lanceolate leaves have a pointed tip and the flowers, present from September to November, grow in a multiple flowered inflorescence. The small rather insignificant flowers are bi-coloured with a greenish-yellow bottom half and helmet shaped maroon uppers. It's now disappeared completely and I'm waiting to see if it re-appears later this year.

These plants have become naturalised in Australia where they now constitute a serious invasive pest. I read one article on the internet advising people on how to eradicate them.

Photo below: *Disa bracteata*



I trust you will enjoy reading this issue.

Regards

John Callanan