

LETAMO WILDLIFE - FEBRUARY 2007

FROM THE WALLOW

So many people have asked me to do this newsletter on a monthly basis, I will try – sometimes I am away on business or snowed under with catering to the rich and famous!!

So, please contribute – or ask me to research a subject close to your heart and publish the findings – in other words – please give me some ideas to make this newsletter interesting to all of us. Thanks again for the brilliant contributions from Ian and Patricia – always appreciated!

With the above in mind, I was asked by several people on the farm to explain why cutting of grass is not beneficial to the environment, so please read all about grassland conservation – not as exciting as reading about the animals and their antics on the farm – but probably much more important – as the grazer is nothing without the grazing!

The comet was most illusive – we tried to view it from the sunset braai spot several times – only to be stymied by cloudy skies and not very good spotting eyes – but we eventually found it and watched it one night with some of the XYZ kids. See the photo sent to us from a shareholder whose sister filmed it over Cape Town – stunning!

With all the power outages we experienced in January, our computer did a spectacular crash and I lost many emails and ALL my email addresses. **If anybody sent any contributions between the 15th and 20th of January – please re-send.**

On the wildlife side from the wallow – the Piet-my-Vrou that nearly drove us mad with his incessant calling has left our area – sleep is a wonderful thing – Ha! Ha! I love birds – but that one nearly drove me even barmier than I already am...and that's saying something!

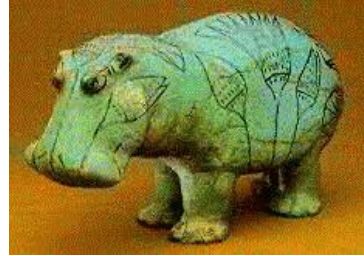
This summer we have had a passing parade of animals grazing on the re-growth after the big fire on the opposite side of the dam, the Goliath Heron has been more visible but no more sightings (or hearings) of Fish Eagles from us, although Ian Grant had a Fish Eagle fly overhead two weeks ago.

Talking of fishing, we at No 8 have actually managed to catch quite a few fish this summer. We do this from the dam wall and use green, wiggly, jelly-like "frogs" that we get from the angling shop at Rant-en-Dal as bait. We have no idea about fishes or fishing – so please will somebody write us an article about fishing? As it is bass bait – we think that's what we are catching???? It is a great stress-reliever at the end of the day. Tristan, the fisherman, caught and released another five today in one hour! (Is this good?)

How cool are these stamps from Malawi? Almost as cool as our South African Xmas stamps last year – did you see them?

Stay well,

Jill



BIRDING ABOUT LETAMO AND SURROUNDS:

Sharon Kramer found a small chick (probably a crowned lapwing (plover/kiewiet) in her garden. She thinks that she managed to reunite it with its parents, but is unsure of the outcome due to the long grass on the farm at present. Thanks, Sharon. Please note that it is always better to try and reunite bird babies with their parents than to try to 'rescue' and hand-rear them. I am always willing to give it a go if you can't find the parent birds, so please contact me if you have a bird or mammal that needs rehabilitation. If I can't do it, I will direct you to the relevant animal rehabilitators.

I got a phone call about an African Grey Parrot being seen a tree on the farm. Next day it had moved to another site on the farm and was rescued by Alex Basson, thanks, Alex! Notices were sent out to all the appropriate authorities as well as residents and nobody has claimed the bird, so now it is living with Gary Bennets until its owners can be traced. It is a ringed bird and if anybody can identify it by its ring number they can take it back home.

☺☺

Hi Jill,

Thank you for the newsletter, I LOVE reading it and thanks too for placing an advert for Everything Birding!!

I have removed the Emerald Cuckoo from our birding list.

While on a walk two Sunday's ago we had an African Fish-Eagle fly over us calling.

Marsh Owl Dam: Below the marshy area where we always see Marsh Owls (west of Sunset Braai area) :->

Last Saturday (13th January) I ID'd a Desert Cisticola near the Quarry Dam. On Sunday we saw (and I managed to photograph) both Bronze-winged and Temmink's Courser. Bronze-winged on the road in the bush on our way down to the Hippo Dam and the Temmink's in the large open fields between the Hotel Road and the Marsh Owl Dam (at S26* 01.282' E027* 47.107'). On Monday I heard the distinct call of the Black Cuckoo coming from the bush to the west of our house (Ptn 228).



Bronze-winged Courser:



Temmink's Courser:

Then I thought that we'd found a Dwarf Bittern many, many miles out of its range...



It is in fact an immature Green-backed Heron!

Regards, **Ian Grant**

Thanks Ian for being such a great contributor and supporting the newsletter – it would be nothing without **all** your contributions. ED

Grass owls – both Keith Schroder and I think we have seen a grass owl – mine near Steenbok Dam – Keith's near his house, within two weeks of each others' sighting. Anyone else seen one?

YELLOW MONGOOSE - *Cynictus penicillata*



Total length – 40 – 60cm
Weight: 450 – 900g.
Up to four young per litter
It has a sharp snout and pointed ears similar to a fox. Over most of its range it has a white tip to the tail, except in Northern Botswana, where its coat colour is greyish and the tail is the same colour. However, all yellow mongooses have paler chin, chest and throat areas – with the eyes being an amber colour. Because of its diurnal habits, this mongoose is probably one of the most frequently seen of all the

Southern African mongooses, barring the slender mongoose. It is often confused with the suricate/meerkat which is also diurnal and lives in communal burrows.

There is no size difference between male and female yellow mongoose and they have five toes on the front feet and four on the back feet. The front spoor, however, only shows four toes as the first digit is a dew claw.

Mating usually takes place in July with a gestation period that is said to vary between 42 and 57 days (this probably means that researchers don't really know how long it is!) The young are born in burrows and are weaned at about ten weeks of age.

Although this mongoose is mainly diurnal, it does forage on moonlit nights – but the really interesting thing about this mongoose is that it forages alone while living in a close-knit, but small community ranging from three to 12 yellow mongooses who share a 'warren system'.

The yellow mongoose is prodigious on Letamo Game Farm and is a major factor in the spread of rabies in South Africa, particularly Gauteng. **(One author has implicated it in 75% of all rabies epizootics in South Africa – The Complete Book of Southern African Mammals compiled by Gus Mills and Lex Hes)** There is a high correlation between the seasonal incidence of rabies and the breeding cycle of the yellow mongooses (Taylor and Meester 1993). Because of this, all dogs on Letamo should be inoculated against rabies on an annual basis.

I have been told that some residents on the farm are feeding these mongooses – this is not to be encouraged – they are mainly insectivorous (but will feed on rodents and reptiles) and a great asset to the farm in controlling harvester termites and other destructive insects/animals. ***If we feed them, they not only stop doing their job as insect controllers, but also get too tame and may spread rabies to our dogs, children and ourselves.....***

22 VULTURES KILLED BY ARSENIC IN NORTH WEST

The Citizen Monday 12 February 2007

By **KENNEDY MUDZULI**



A case of arsenic poisoning is being investigated after 22 vultures died at Klippan Farm near Delareyville ("Delarey, Delarey" {sorry!}) in the North West.

The African white-backed vultures were found lying dead alongside the carcass of a sheep.

It is suspected the sheep had died as a result of arsenic poisoning, and was not killed and then laced as is expected in the deliberate poisoning of vultures.

At least 11 birds were still alive when they were taken from the scene, albeit in a very weak state. Four of them subsequently died while being transported to specialists in Magaliesberg – some 350km away from the farm.

Arsenic, the notoriously poisonous metalloid used as a pesticide, herbicide and insecticide, is an illegal substance.

Marlene Muir of Rhino & Lion Wildlife Conservation, which runs a vulture programme in the area, said the incident was a

tremendous setback for their efforts.

"The African white-backed vultures are becoming extinct and conserving them is now more vital than ever," said Muir.

****These may be the same vultures that visit Letamo occasionally as we still have not definitely identified our visiting vulture population; Vultures travel extremely long distances daily to find their "daily bread". ED***

GRASSLANDS - WHO NEEDS THEM?

"Grasslands are boring, treeless wastelands that once maintained large forests until Man arrived on the scene and chopped out or burnt down all the trees right? Most of South Africa's coal deposits are found in the grasslands and this is proof positive that there were forests here right? We are doing everybody a huge favour by planting the largest manmade forests on earth in these grasslands right?"

"Wrong, on all counts!"

Thus starts the report on grasslands by SAWAC (Southern African Water Crisis) which is supported by the Wildlife and Environmental Society of SA.

For those who have to perform an EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) on an area before it is developed, they have to take cognisance of several factors – including these –

- What birds, plants, mammals, butterflies live in the grasslands and are any of these threatened?

- What will be the impact of the proposed activity on the grasslands and the species that live there?
- It is important to evaluate all housing for the greater environmental impacts.
- Once disturbed by housing estates, most of our grasslands cannot be rehabilitated.
- Has the appointed specialist the necessary qualifications to do a grassland plant and animal survey?
- Some grassland types have as little as 3% remaining intact.



Grassland is important because it is a significant collector of rainwater and acts as a natural sponge and sieve, ensuring that rivers run throughout the year. Grasslands provide free grazing for livestock and wildlife, thereby contributing significantly to the country's economy, and they support at least 12 endemic species of birds. 15 of the 34 mammal species endemic to South Africa are found in the grassland biome. Four of these are endemic (only occurring in an area) to this biome – the black wildebeest being one of them.

The major threats to grasslands include expansion of agriculture and timber plantations, urban and industrial expansion (Gauteng is in the grasslands), poor land use management practises that result in the degradation of the veld, mining, invasive alien plants (pompom weed and Kikuyu grass, for example) and pollution.

Our EMP has allowed for 1500 square metres of land to be fenced and developed as gardens. It recommends that no Kikuyu grass (an invasive alien grass from East Africa that takes over and escapes through the fences, reducing natural biodiversity) is planted and that lawns should preferably be planted with *Cynodon dactylon* – and even that seed rather be taken from the seed bank already on the farm.

Further to that, it recommends that no alien species be planted without permission. That is to ensure that no more invasive plants get established on Letamo.

By law, residents are supposed to cut a five metre wide firebreak between their properties. If a fire breaks out on your own property and destroys neighbouring properties, you can be held liable for damages if you don't have the prescribed firebreak. But apart from this, the grass should not be cut or burned.

Veld grasses are diverse – you will find that you can identify at least six or seven different grass species growing around your homes. Each one has different properties and feed values. All produce seeds that are high in protein and valuable to both animals and birds. These seeds need to be able to reproduce annually – both to feed the animal population and to re-seed the grasses. On a normal long grass, you will find if you pull them up, that they have a very shallow root system and no runners or stolons (unlike Kikuyu that runs along the ground). These roots are adapted to survive and even thrive on grazing and **natural** fires – which usually get started by lightning after the first rains.

By this time the grass plant has had time to produce its annual seed bank (and has taken most of its nutrients into its root system to bide it over the winter months) which has been eaten and distributed by mammals and birds, all nicely fertilised and lying in wait for the next rains to germinate. The mother plant will still come up after being cut, burnt or grazed, but it only has a limited lifespan and will die off after a few seasons. This is when the grasses with the runners or stolons will set in – they will happily take over the niche – and on Letamo this will only further encourage the runaway Kikuyu grass and also *Cynodon dactylon* which,

although indigenous, is only nutritious during summer, and only to those species that prefer shorter grass. All grasses need competition and biodiversity will be lost within three seasons and, although you may visibly have a nice short green “meadow” surrounding your house, the nutritional value of the grazing will have been severely compromised and the lack of diversity in the grazing will impact negatively on the birds and mammals. Considering the above, the bottom line is that year-round cutting of the grass is a poor land use management practise and is to be avoided at all costs.

References: *Considering Grasslands in the EIA Process – 2006 Endangered Wildlife Trust and Regenesis; SAWAC*



McNaught comet as photographed over Cape Town on 20th January 2007 taken by Patricia Riekert's (site 25) sister! What an amazing photo over Signal Hill. It is very Salvadore Dali – a true work of art! Thanks for sharing with us, Patricia!

XYZ Club - something for the kids!

The next meeting of the XYZ Club will be at 09h00 at No 65. Shauna van Niekerk will be teaching the children something about the importance of water and we will be looking at some of the water goggas and water birds. We also will be visiting a cat show in the near future - there is such a variety of domestic cats and they are genetically identical to the African Wild Cat from which they are descended... I think it will be fun.



Andre van Niekerk

Anyone know what type of scorpion I am?

Gary Bennetts says that this is a Cape Terrapin - they eat anything from snails, mice, frogs, snakes, tadpoles, fish, etc - they grip their prey in their mouths and then rip it apart with their powerful claws - which can be quite gruesome. They are very common around Johannesburg area. Thanks, Gary!



Andre van Niekerk

SUNSET BRAAI AREA -

The Sunset Braai Area must be booked. This can be done by contacting the LE office. This braai area is currently being given a facelift by the Homeowners Social Club – Huge thanks to Andre van Niekerk for all his efforts and doing up the bamboo walls! Don't worry ladies, the loo is getting a bit of pampering too!

HOMEOWNERS SOCIAL CLUB

Potjiekos Kompetisie at the Sunset Braai on 3rd March – more details later!

STEENBOK DAM - THANKS TO TONY AND ANNE JONES

Letamo Homeowners Social Club would like to take this opportunity to thank Tony and Anne Jones for the generous donation of a brand new fancy braai for the new picnic site. We really appreciate your generosity!

REGISTER ON LETAMO WEBSITE & MAILING LIST

Thanks to all those who have registered already! It is so easy – even I found it user-friendly – and at my age anything even remotely “computer-ish” is scary! Maybe that should read “computer-eish!”

Melinda has written a very interesting history of Letamo which will be posted to the site within the next 14 days.

Theo Kramer donated the website to Letamo and he and Tjaart Riekerk have worked very hard to set it up – go take a look at www.letamo.com Well done guys, it is really appreciated!

The mailing list is open to all Residents who wish to communicate with the board or any other resident who is registered. Tjaart moderates the list for the moment, but if anyone would like volunteer to do this function they are most welcome. It should be run by the residents for the residents independent of the Board or Letamo Estate.

Go to: <http://flame.co.za/mailman/listinfo/residents> to register now.

THANKS!

Thanks to all those people who took the time and effort to contribute to this newsletter – it is very much appreciated!

Advert:

Since I launched www.EverythingBirding.co.za I've sold quite a few PDAs with Robert's Multimedia software included. I own one myself. To have ALL that text, those pictures & photos, often video, and all the calls with you all in one little box is amazing!

Ian Grant: 011 662 2000

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