



FROM THE WALLOW

Happy New Year to you all! Hope you all had a lovely and restful Festive Season.

On the last night of 2006 we saw a newly born, still wet, baby waterbuck with its Mum at Steenbok Dam, what a way to see out the old year with a new beginning.

We have been blessed by frequent visits by mainly harmless mole snakes this rainy season. They are interesting as when they are young they look completely different from the adults. Unfortunately, our neighbours' dog was bitten by a puff adder, but was saved by the vet – at quite a cost, but at least he is still with us! We have put a 60cm high additional fence of chicken wire around the base of our existing fence. This may help to keep snakes out – although we had to rescue a mole snake that was trying to get out and got its head stuck in the fence! A pair of wire cutters soon had him free and on the outside of the fence.

Talking of potentially dangerous unwanted guests, I strongly recommend using FrontLine on your dogs to keep the ticks at bay (only available from vets). Also, for human use, I can recommend Baytickol to spray on your body and clothes before going for a walk. It's also a good idea to look for and remove any ticks after a walk (on both you and your dog).

We also tried to raise a clutch of fiscal shrike babies whose nest was separated from its tree. Two of the chicks had broken legs from the fall and the vet was unable to save them. One little bird we managed to raise to flying stage, but still dependent on us for food – mainly meal worms and grasshoppers – and he was doing very well until he flew into an ornament, caught his leg and broke it. Talk about tears – we had him for nearly seven weeks – and although he was a demanding little character – he would screech for food, flapping his little wings and fly behind me at my shoulder, we all miss him dearly! Thanks to Marie who babysat the brood for me when I had to go out.

Stay well,

Jill

Juvenile mole snake at No 8



BIRDING ABOUT LETAMO AND SURROUNDS:



Fiscal Shrike chicks – Marie McCrae



Hi Jill,
I saw a Quail Finch on the farm yesterday(27.11.06) which doesn't appear to be on our bird list. Here is a pic of both male and female, not very good but a positive ID.
Hope your feathered children are doing well.
Marie McCrae

Hi Jill,
If you read my e-mail, I've pasted it below, we beat Marie to it by a day or two but she got PICS!!! Shot Marie!
Claire and I also saw Streaky-headed

Seedeater (was "canary") and Red-backed Shrike on Sunday the 26th November (which aren't on our list).

I'll do a proper update to what we (on this side) have seen and will e-mail you.

The Purple Heron that I reported was only seen by Vaughn Poole but Claire (my wife) and I positively ID'd one today at the Hippo Dam. BETTER... we saw African Quailfinch at (what I call) the Marsh Owl Dam!! A Lifer for Claire and my second sighting ever!! A GREAT spot! I ALMOST got pics.... camera up and I'm pushing the button but the battery had JUST died.... they didn't wait for me to change batteries ☺.

Who decided that what we have ARE Cape Vulture? How did they make that decision? It has never been an easy call between Cape and Whitebacked..... There ARE easy ways to tell... Cape nests in cliffs while Whitebacked in trees, Whitebacked apparently have white backs although I've always battled to see this in the field... their irises are different colours but I don't remember being that close to one.

Regards
Ian Grant

I agree that it is difficult to ID the vultures – I think it was Manie van Aswegen who told me about them – maybe he can shed some light on the matter? Congratulations to you and Marie on the quailfinches – but where the heck is Marsh Owl Dam? Marie is going to be doing a map of the farm for us – with all the relevant places of interest and roads and dams named – can't wait for this – Melinda still has to give us any official names of roads and/or other landmarks before it can be completed – I think it will be wonderful!

I have seen both juvenile and adult Purple Heron at Hippo Dam over the past few weeks as well as Spotted Flycatcher at my house and Cape Robin. I also saw a yellowbilled kite up near

the ostrich camp. Unfortunately I have had only one sighting of African Fish Eagle over the past three months.

Another interesting birding event that happened during December was the intrusion down a chimney into Shauna and Andre van Niekerk's home of a pair of Rock Pigeons. They got down and could not get out the bottom as the grid was too small for them to pass through. Andre contacted me and I had some wild ideas of building ladders of rope for them to climb out – this did not work! Anyway, they managed to keep the pigeons fed and watered for a few days until FreeMe was called out and managed to noose the birds' legs and haul them out unceremoniously and take them back to FreeMe to recuperate. The pigeons survived their ordeal! (Shauna and Andre – only just!).

**Please take Emerald Cuckoo off your bird list –I not confirmed – Jill*

WATERBUCK *Kobus ellipsiprymnus*

Height at shoulder

Males: 100 - 130cm

Females: Slightly smaller

Weight: 150 to 250 kg

Sexual dimorphism: Males carry ringed horns. Females have no horns.

Gestation: 9 months – twins very rare.

Life span: Up to 18 years.

Defassa Waterbuck – sub-species – see below:



The symbol of Letamo (“Place of Water” in the local language),

the Waterbuck historically occurred naturally in the Cradle of Humankind area, so is ideally suited to our game farm. These large ungulates live near natural water sources such as perennial rivers and dams because they have high water requirements and are also dependent on the good quality grasses that are associated with these areas. Because they are so selective of habitat, they are

usually fewer in number than other antelope in an area.

Although they mainly eat grass, Waterbuck will also take selected browse when the grass loses its nutrition in winter. Even then, they will only eat leaves and avoid eating any twigs and stems.

Waterbuck are known to breed all year round, but most calves are born in the rainy season and hide away in long grass or cover for several weeks before joining the herd. Calves and dams will bleat and snort to make contact. All Waterbuck snort in alarm.

While generally gregarious, these animals congregate in small herds of about ten animals and the males defend territories of about 1.25 square kilometres by threat displays or serious fighting. They do not mark territory as they already carry a strong musky/turpentine-like smell. This smell has given rise to the myth that predators and man will avoid eating them – this really is a myth.

It has been found that 60 to 80 per cent of waterbuck deaths are caused by lion predation. They are also eaten by leopard, cheetah, spotted hyaena, crocodile and feral dogs (you know - those sweet little house pets that have "gone wild" due to not being neutered and over-breeding). Meat poachers also favour their meat – and in KZN, Waterbuck are mostly illegally hunted by locals using hunting dogs and spears.



Another myth is that Waterbuck, as their name suggests, like being in water. Not true – they like the vegetation surrounding water – but will flee into water only if pursued by a predator (or a game capture helicopter – as we witnessed in 2005 when a Waterbuck bull crossed the hippo dam three times to avoid capture – successfully!).

The Defassa Waterbuck from East Africa and Zambia is a sub-species that does not have a ring of white on its rump, the whole area being light-coloured. The Defassa and Common Waterbuck can and will interbreed, producing fertile offspring where their ranges overlap.

PS – Otto and I saw Defassa Waterbuck on an island on the Zambian side of Lake Kariba (Sinazongwe) last June – magic!

ALIEN PLANTS FLOWERING ON LETAMO

Marie McCrae has joined the LGF Board and has plenty of good ideas on assisting the Environmental Task Team with improving the health of the ecology and for making the farm more interesting for all of us!

This month highlights two alien plants flowering on Letamo at present.

This is an extract from an article written by **Eden Wildy of the Alien Invader Plant Project** who will also be sending Marie information on how to eradicate this problem plant, which Marie will send to shareholders under separate cover.

POMPOM WEED : NOT A LOT TO CHEER ABOUT



Pompoms are the distinctive hand-held ornamental tufts that have been made famous by American cheerleaders. They bring connotations of applause, goodwill, possibly even excitement. Unfortunately, their namesake in the world of alien weeds and invasive plants provides starkly contrasting emotions for weed scientists, nature lovers and landowners. Pompom weed *Campuloclinium macrocephalum* is an invasive weed of grasslands that threatens conservation and agriculture in South Africa. A member of the daisy family (Asteraceae), this South American overstay is rapidly displacing native species, reducing both the biological diversity and carrying capacity of vleis and veld. Infestations become conspicuous when the plants are in flower, usually between December and March, transforming the landscape from green to pink. The plant initially

establishes itself in disturbed sites, such as roadsides, but then invades grasslands, open savannah and wetlands.

Is this species worth our concern?

Modelling exercises indicate that the potential distribution for pompom weed includes the majority of KZN Province. Anecdotal evidence from farmers, conservation officers, ecologists and WESSA members strongly suggest that this weed has already begun to fulfil its full potential.

Pompom weed is a perennial erect herb that grows up to 1.3m high. Stems and leaves are covered with rough bristly hairs. Leaves are scattered along the stem but are clustered at the base to form a rosette. The showy pink flower-heads are produced in dense clusters at the end of aerial stems. Each flower-head consists of hundreds of tiny, star-shaped florets surrounded by purple bracts.



“Wild verbena” is also flowering on Letamo right now.

This weed also comes from South America and we are trying to find out more about its status which Marie will send out under separate cover.

There are a lot of these flowers on the farm, particularly in disturbed areas. They are not, as I said, indigenous and therefore ought to be removed, so if you have them on your stand, perhaps we should remove them. I have a few which will be going tomorrow! Even though they are quite pretty – they do compete with grass and can take away grazing from our animals.

THE GRAZER GRAZED

“Few mammals allow plants to grow on them. The lethargic sloth is one. The hippopotamus is another. Its skin is hairless without sweat glands, for in the water the hippo has no problem with temperature regulation. Instead its skin has glands that produce a pinkish lacquer which prevents the hippo getting sunburn as it floats lazily with its head and back above the surface. But this lacquer does not deter the growth of algae, and shoals of carp-like fish follow the hippo, grazing over its body. The fish are also awaiting an additional bonanza. Every few hours, the hippo ejects a load of dung into the water. This is a valuable addition to the river’s food supplies, for the vegetation of which the still-edible remains was gathered by the hippo during the night when it left the water and grazed on the river bank.”



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Extract from: The Trials of Life – David Attenborough

Introducing the XYZ Club - something for the kids!

What is the XYZ Club? The eXceptional Young Zoologists Club was started during the Christmas Holidays by four children aged 5 to 11. I used to be a member of London Zoo’s XYZ Club in the 1950’s (was it really that long ago?) and children from all over Britain used to get a quarterly newsletter telling them interesting facts about animals at the zoo and would also be invited to outings of special interest, and to meet exciting animals at the zoo. The London Zoo XYZ Club is no more – but now we have started one on Letamo – and all the youngsters on the farm are welcome to join in the fun.

We already had a field day on Letamo in January – learning how to identify the more common and easier species of birds and animals. The children also collected and identified antelope dung as well as various grasses and wild flowers.



The XYZ Club kids also went on an outing to the De Wildt Breeding Station and took this photograph of a King Cheetah *Acynonix jubatus rex*.



They also reported back to me with all the facts that they had learned about at De Wildt. We hope to get together about once a month to learn about animals and the environment and we will have a special place in this newsletter to report on our activities and any plans for outings. If you want to join, please contact me. Jill (082 441 5892)

What sort of terrapin is this?
Gary, can you please identify for us.

This chap was photographed as it crossed road over the Hippo Dam.



Andre van Niekerk

FROM THE CHAPEL

The new year of 2007 brings new challenges and with the number "7" being the spiritually perfect number, I trust that God will meet all your social, material and spiritual needs. It is a year of hope, and a time for new beginnings, so even if you can't keep your new year resolutions, do them for as long as you can – at least then part of the year would be spent doing the good things you intended for yourselves.

The prayer meetings continue in the chapel every Saturday morning at 7.30 am to 8.30 am. All are most welcome and if there are any spiritual needs or prayer requests that I can assist with, please do not hesitate to call me on 083 280 6649.

May God bless you richly during 2007.
Ingrihid Povey (Stand 59)

SUNSET BRAAI AREA -

The XYZ Club visited this braai spot during early January. There were cigarette stompies all over the place which the young members picked up and deposited into the bin. There were also meat wrappers and other rubbish lying around which were dealt with similarly. The bin is located not two metres away from all the trash we found! Please folks, do not chuck your cigarette butts and rubbish all over our farm. Not only is it unsightly, but it is dangerous for the game to ingest your rubbish. And cigarette butts are a fire risk. (We also witnessed one

angler chucking a cigarette butt into the Hippo Dam, he was a guest of one of the shareholders.)

The Sunset Braai Area must be booked. This can be done by contacting the LE office.

RECYCLING BINS 😊 😊 😊 😊

The Board has arranged for recycling bins to be placed at the gate. The first one will be for our unwanted glass. Please support this initiative by new board member Marie McCrae. Remember that recycling is good for our fragile environment. 😊

STEENBOK DAM BRAAI AREA

Letamo Homeowners Association would like to thank all those who have already donated building materials towards constructing the new braai area – please anyone who hasn't heard about this project yet, they are requesting that people donate any unused building materials, braai grids, tables, chairs, etc towards this project.

LETAMO WEBSITE & MAILING LIST

Theo Kramer has donated a website to Letamo and he and Tjaart Riekert have been working very hard to set it up – go take a look at www.letamo.com

The mailing list is open to all Residents who wish to communicate with the board or any other resident who is registered. Tjaart moderate the list for the moment, but if any one would like volunteer to moderate the list 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 – and now for the final contribution – from Andre van Niekerk – a water monitor lizard – not as big as the one I saw – but pretty enormous!

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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