

LETAMO WILDLIFE - October 2009

FROM THE WALLOW

Hi All!

Shew! Time goes so fast and I really wanted to get the newsletter out last month, but I never managed it – but this time I have some great new contributors. Mike Reed owns a site on Letamo, but the lucky man lives and works in Botswana for a safari company and he will be sending us Missives from Maun as well as some more pertinent articles about Letamo and its creatures, this issue he warns us to be aware of puff adders.

Jan Arkert is currently studying for his FGASA field guide exams, lives on Letamo and will be completing a Masters in Environmental Management from next year. He will be giving us some insight into the value of the grazing on this farm in this issue.

Both gentlemen thought I was going to get the newsletter out earlier, so they write about winter and sent in their articles during winter.

The rains have been so sparse so far – and we have had quite a few fire scares – fire season is still not over, so please be careful and make sure that you have fire beaters available outside your house. Let's hope that the rains will come soon. At least the trees are green which brings some relief from the drabness of winter.

With spring having sprung – Twinkle (AKA Blondie and Crystal by other people much more inventive than I) has joined up with a stallion, so her blesbok complex is hopefully over!

Til next time,

Jill



Springbok caught on camera trap – Gary Bennetts

BIRDING ABOUT LETAMO AND SURROUNDS:



Egyptian Geese with goslings – Lyneve Cook – site 29



The new ostrich chicks that were named “Spook and Diesel” by photographer, Lyneve Cook. Unfortunately Spook has passed on and is now a spook in the sky.



Red-knobbed coot chicks – not on Letamo but close by – they look like aliens, but their folks love them! Photograph – Lyneve Cook



Lappet-faced vulture photographed over Rhino and Lion Park by a Swiss visitor

MIKE'S MISSIVES FROM MAUN



Hi Jill,

Many thanks for, once again, an interesting news letter and I'm sorry that I am not able to contribute news about the wildlife on or around the farm but, as you are so interested in flora

and fauna, I thought that I would share with you a couple of pictures that we took on the weekend along the Thamalakane River.

The floods this year exceed that of the past 25 years and, on the Thamalakane fault line on the southern Delta, the water is still rising and has formed large lakes under the trees along the edge of the main rivers and channels. In some places a channel that, two months ago, was a few metres wide stretches 100 metres across chasing snakes and other small animals from their terrestrial burrows forcing them to look for homes on higher ground or face the harsh winter nights in the trees.

The dense, impenetrable thickets of the *Acacia tortilis* on these flood plains are home to a large variety of bird species including the blue, violet-eared and black-cheeked waxbills to name but a few of the birds that feed out of reach of the many raptors in the area. Along the edges of these woodlands/thickets the Crimson-breasted Shrikes (*Laiarius atrococcineus*) defend their territories whilst scraping the soft earth with their bills in search of ants and other small invertebrates.

On Sunday afternoon we took binos and camera and strolled along the banks of the river looking for the yellow form of the Crimson-breasted Shrike that a friend had found. Sure enough the bird was there and twice we guessed correctly its line of foraging and, standing still in its predicted feeding path, were able to get pictures as it hopped to within three metres of us.



As we were packing our cameras away and taking out the sundowners, my daughter in law spotted a Common Scimitarbill fly up against the damaged trunk of a *Phyllonoptera violase* tree about ten paces from us. It lay flat against the trunk and was settling down for the night (see attached photo). This behaviour of clinging to and lying flat against the trunk of a tree is, apparently, not

uncommon for this species. After taking a couple of shots we felt we had disturbed it enough and left it to sleep in peace.

(This was Mike's first letter to me and I thought it so well written and interesting that I decided to encourage him to sending me more – hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. – Ed)

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LETAMO GRASSES

Article and Photography by Jan Arkert
(No 117 Letamo Game Farm)

As the seasons begin to change on the farm, not only do we notice that spring is in the air, but soon the grasses on the veld will turn from drab brown and yellow to a succulent green.

We can hope that we will once again enjoy a summer with lots of rain and the farm will be lush with a splash of grasses of all shapes and sizes and shades of green, gold and red. This may appear to be a proverbial feast for the animals, but is it? Looks can be deceiving and

unfortunately not all grasses are good for the animals.

Letamo falls within the grassland biome in South Africa, which is one of seven recognised ecological units, and also the most threatened of all biomes. Only 2% of the grassland is formally protected and due to the fertile soils and favourable climate, this is the most intensely farmed area of our country.

What makes the grassland biome unique are the harsh frost laden winters and natural veld fires that prevent the proliferation of trees which would otherwise turn the area into a typical savannah landscape. However it is also these natural phenomena that also turn the grasses into unpalatable grazing during the winter period.

In the “sourveld” area of the country such as the Gauteng and Mpumalanga highveld, grasses have developed the unique ability to draw their nutrients below ground level and into the roots to protect the plant and to give them a head start in the new growing season. This means the leaves have a low nutrient level and become fibrous and unpalatable to grazers during the winter period.

Not only does this make it difficult for grazers to obtain sufficient nutrients during the winter months, but many of the grasses, are naturally unpalatable to grazers, even during the favourable summer growing period. Different species of grass respond to being grazed, and will increase or decrease depending on the amount of utilisation. Over grazing will result in increaser grasses predominating, and these are generally the less palatable grass types, while decreaser grasses, which are the more palatable and nutritious grasses dominate in healthy veld.



The decreaser grasses are more palatable and are grazed by the animals, while the less palatable grasses are ignored, resulting in the patchy distribution of species.



A healthy mix of grasses, with increaser species growing next to the road and the more palatable decreaser species occurring further away from the edge.

An initial survey of the grass species on Letamo has shown that approximately 50 dominant grass species exist on the farm. Largely due to the previous agricultural activities on the property, some areas are predominantly occupied by increaser grasses, while other parts of the farm that have not been affected by previous farming and mining activity show a healthy crop of decreaser species.

So when next you are out enjoying the farm, spare a thought for the animals that live off the grasses and look closely at the grass that you are walking through. Each species is different and serves a unique purpose in the ecology of Letamo.

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PUFF ADDERS (*Bitis arietans*)

Mike Reed, Botswana

During our 30 odd years living a little more than a kilometre from Letamo Estate we came across numerous Puff Adders both on our property and the adjoining hill.

What was strange was that for the first 10 years, despite our constant search for reptiles we found many species but never any Puff Adders; as time went by they became one of the more common snakes of the area.

Description:

- Well camouflaged with **brown** and **black** mottling across the back.
- Extremely thick...**short** and **squat** with a flat diamond shaped head.
- Two other snakes that look **similar** in the Letamo area are the **Night Adder** (*Causus rhombeatus*) (mildly venomous) and the **Egg Eater** (*Dasypeltis scabra*) which has no fangs and is completely harmless. Both of these snakes have similar colouration to the Puff Adder but are considerably more slender.
- If disturbed it usually hisses loudly
- Often found basking on pathways in the early morning. Slow to move out of the way of people on foot and one of the **fastest striking** snakes in Southern Africa.
- This snake is front fanged and the venom and, as with most of our Adders, is cytotoxic...it causes **tissue damage**.

Breeding:

It is **viviparous** (bears live young) and gives birth to as many as **40 young**. Note that from the moment these babies are born their venom is as toxic as the adult

Our sons, Brent and Grant, kept (unbeknown to their parents) numerous venomous snakes and one of these "pets" was a Puff Adder. We might never have known about this had the "pet" not bitten Grant on his 18th birthday. Fortunately his brother was there and rushed him to the hospital. By the time I arrived an hour later necrosis had set in and his thumb had turned black.

The doctors did a Fasciotomy ...they sliced the arm from the wrist to the elbow both above and below to relieve the pressure caused by the swelling. The pain was excruciating and when anyone touched him he broke out in a rash all over his body.

The doctors told us that they would have to amputate his thumb and possibly the whole hand. It was at that point that we contacted everyone we knew and eventually were referred to a plastic surgeon, Dr. Richard Stott at the Kenridge Hospital. He sent an ambulance for Grant

and by the time I had fetched Rose from home and raced to the hospital, Dr Stott had examined our son. He said that he would save the hand and possibly the thumb as well.

It took six general anaesthetics, removing all dead tissue (to the bone) and many skin grafts, before the thumb was back to normal.

I tell you all this to make other parents aware of the danger of children handling snakes...particularly Puff Adders. If you handle snakes, it is not if you get bitten, but when...More than 50% of serious snake bites in Southern Africa are from the Puff Adder

As with the Rinkhals, the Puff Adder fills an important niche in our environment and it is responsible in rural areas for controlling the rodent population. Having said that, whenever we came across these reptiles on our property, they were moved to farms many miles away...it is not a snake that should be allowed to stay around the home if you have young children. In Maun (Botswana), Puff Adders are responsible for a large number of dog fatalities each year.



Picture caption: Coiled and ready to strike (picture by Grant Reed)

RABIES

Rabies has been confirmed in a dog in Linden in August. Please be aware that mongooses carry the disease. The yellow mongoose (rooimeerkat) common in the residential areas on Letamo is a vector of this deadly disease.

Please do not feed wildlife – even the antelope can get it and pass it on to you via a bite. Get your pets inoculated and be wary of over-friendly animals.

NOTICE BOARD



(Contact me for inclusion herein.)

PICK UP YOUR LITTER - AND ANYONE ELSE'S YOU FIND ON LETAMO

SUNSET BRAAI AREA -

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

Malawian Maid looking for full/part-time work at Letamo – Edina Chirwa is an excellent person and hard worker – fully fluent in English, residence permit – loves animals – phone Edina on 071 400 6180 – The No 1 Ladies Employment Agency – Jill Masterton



Farmer's Market
Pamphlet.pdf

Farmer's Market at The Heritage School on the morning of Saturday, 14 November 2009. The cost for stall holders is R150 and booking is essential. Stall holders must supply their own equipment (tables, gazebo, etc). Shaded spots available at first come, first serve basis. All welcome! Contact info@heritageschool.co.za or Patricia 072 520 8942 for bookings and more information.

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