


The Barking Gecko



Newsletter of the NamibRand Nature Reserve

From the Guest book at Keerweder

The three of us, Carl Albrecht, Johan Joubert and Paul de Rycke (from Belgium) visited Wolwedans to further our studies of the amazing "Fairy Circles". We were here previously in 1993, 1996 and 1997. We, like most observers, wish to know what is causing the Fairy Circles to form and function the way they may have. We don't have all the answers yet, but some facts are beginning to emerge. For instance the Fairy Circles usually contain more water than the soil outside of them. It would thus be that the Fairy Circles act as "Water traps". Water traps for what? The answer seems to be termites. In other words, for termites to live on the edge of the Namib Desert the need, above all else, WATER. We made direct measurements and found 6 times more water inside viz. outside the Fairy Circles. During this visit a trench was dug through a 6.5 m Fairy Circle and we found termites, especially up to a depth of 50cm. These termites need to be identified but they are small – about 6–7 mm long. They are present in little tufts. I believe that they are making a chemical that affects plant growth in such a way that new plants within the circle eventually die. This keeps the water trap functional. We are taking back about 80 soil samples for chemical analysis. We have found a chemical and will now try to confirm this. All of this does not explain how the circle forms? I am beginning to think that the termites "draw" the circle. This would be amazing. This is like a human drawing a circle 2km in diameter. How could this be done? It remains a mystery.

Our stay was more than science. We made good friends with Achim and Ursi and deepened our friendship with Albi whose enthusiasm for the research is much appreciated. We are most grateful for the hospitality and help.

This is a MAGIC PLACE that brings a deep peace and sense of well-being.

Written by: Carl Albrecht
14 – 17 May 2002

The Great Red Thing in the West

As residents of NamibRand Nature Reserve, we are all aware of a red place in the west. The dune field is about 34000km² in extent. This makes it one of the largest dune fields in the world (the largest, almost double in size, is in the Sahara in North Africa.) But its size alone is not the only wonderful thing about it.

The dunes harbour life. Much life. Amazing creatures, many with special adaptations live in this area of sand. Mammals, birds, reptiles and invertebrates all have representatives who make a living in the dune field. The diversity of plants in the dune field is amazing.

The dunes are also stunningly beautiful. At times, the air is clear, and the lines and shadows are displayed in an unreal, artistic manner. When the air is dusty, the soft light brings out a new range of shapes and colours. Clouds and fog make the dunes look so amazing, at times, it is hard to believe it is real.

The life in the dunes and its incredible beauty attract visitors to the dunes, and are obvious features of this sand sea. But the dunes are interesting from other points of view as well.

As a whole, the dune field represents a wilderness area, which is hard to match in much of today's bustling world. Even in busy Sossusvlei, often crossing a couple

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of ridges away from the crowd puts you in touch with yourself as you really feel like a speck in the vastness. These experiences have an almost spiritual quality to them.

The dunes may well have implications well beyond the dune field. The sand is rich in iron, and with good east winds, this iron becomes important to plankton in the Atlantic, which is important to fish, which is important to Namibia and to an extent, to the world. In the longer terms, it may be an important sand depot, with particles broken down by the wind, adding to topsoil further inland. This interconnectedness may include many other things, and we should be proud to be a part of conserving it.

This vast area of sand is truly a special place. Treasure the moments you spend revealing its sheer splendour and intimate secrets with our guests. Enjoy some time exploring it on your own. And continue doing your part to conserve it!

Vernon Swanepoel
Sossusvlei Mountain Lodge

Visit on Keerweder

I am looking out of the window into my garden. Snow covers shrubs and lawn, birds are searching for food, and from 16h00, darkness fills the air.

It is then that I think back to Christmas a year ago, when I first visited my friend in Cape Town where then it was summer with sun, blue sky, warmth and a swim in the sea.

Days later I travel with the Lenssens to Keerweder, where they live and work. Having visited them a couple of times when they lived at Ganab, the desert no longer is strange to me. I see it as a fascinating landscape with a strong attraction: the vast plains, the supernatural silence, the sky without beginning or end, the solitude and the light that changes with the time of day.

I stay in the guesthouse. My view wanders to the mountains on the horizon and to the drinking trough close by, where animals and birds quench their thirst. The pale chanting goshawk, an early riser, waits on a telephone mast for his breakfast, as sand grouse coming to drink at the water trough very often fly against

the nearby telephone wires after take-off.

On a walk around Keerweder, I notice in the shrubs mountain chats, pale-winged starlings, whose singing resembles that of our blackbird, and other birds. Clouds of white butterflies are staggering over the shrubs and come to rest on the lawn.

At times Achim takes me along on his inspection drives to the various drinking troughs or to other parts of the Reserve. We don't encounter any vehicles, but are seeing Springbuck, Oryx and Ostrich on the plains. Huge nests of the weavers are hanging in the *Acacia erioloba* trees.

What amazes me are the sudden upcoming winds, that storm through the desert and are whirling up so much sand that even the mountains seem to disappear behind the clouds of dust. As quickly as the wind picked up, it again disappears and the quietness once again takes over.

On weekdays, teatime at 10 o'clock takes place on Ursi's stoop and all take a half an hour break from work.

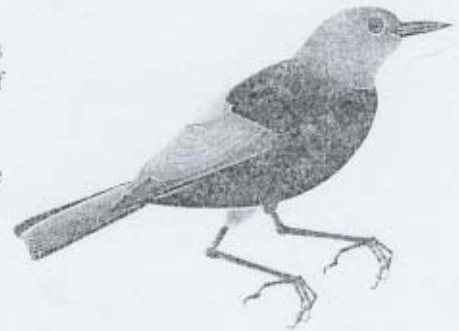
Sundowners take place on the stoop of the

guesthouse, which has the best view to offer. We talk about anything and everything, at the same time watching animals drink at the trough nearby. The sinking sun changes the colours into magnificent shades of reddish-blue.

The moon hangs like a lamp in the dark sky, the stars appear and soon multitudes are seen, too many to count. We become silent, the only sounds heard come from the drinking trough.

All these impressions I take back to cold Germany, happy to be able to have unforgettable memories in store when it is dark and cold at home. I am grateful for all this to my good friends Ursi and Achim.

*Ursula Jaspersen, Preetz, Germany
(Translated into English by Ursi Lenssen)*



Place Names on the NamibRand Nature Reserve - continued

Losberg: The big mountain in the centre of the reserve. Those who have not been on it will not know why it is called so. From the top one notices that all other mountains in the area are either mountain ranges or have appendices. This large mountain is loose and on its own, therefore Losberg.

Dino Hill: This little hill close to the Keerweder house has a water reservoir on it and feeds the Sand grouse-water and Jagkop troughs. The owner of Keerweder, his son and Albi once climbed this hill and when they got to the top the two elders were a bit out of breath. The young Christopher compared them to two puffing dinosaurs. The name Dino was derived from dinosaurs.

Porcupine water: Visitors to the Draaihoek or Toskaan houses drive past a reservoir or dam at the junction of the two entrance roads. This dam is on the boundary of the two farms but still on

Draaihoek. It was given the name because of the persistent problems experienced with porcupines that dug up and chewed the pipeline. The two porcupines were eventually caught and relocated. The newcomers of this species are not addicted.

Bushman Koppies: These small hills are on the boundary between Keerweder, Draaihoek and Kwessiegat west of the public road. The name is sometimes confused with Bushman Hill, which is a big mountain actually in the Namib-Naukluft Park west of the farm Wolwedans. The koppies (hills in English) were used by the ancient inhabitants of this area. Many artefacts (they may not be removed) have been found in these hills. The name Bushman Rocks would have been less confusing than Bushman Koppies.

*Achim Lenssen
(To be continued)*

Acknowledgement

We would herewith like to thank the initiator and editor of the Barking Gecko Mrs Mandy Brückner for the creative work and drive of the past two years. This newsletter has been so well received and is appreciated by people all over the world, although it only has a limited edition. Due to time constraints, she will no longer be fully occupied with the layout of the newsletter, but will continue as editor. We sincerely hope that others can continue her fine work to her satisfaction and hope that she will enjoy her role as final editor in the future.

Another point regarding the Barking Gecko is that at the last NamibRand Nature Reserve AGM, held in May, it was decided that good articles of the year would be combined in an upmarket edition for wider circulation.

In memory of Wilfried Achterfeld owner of the farms Keerweder and Verweg, who passed away a short while ago. He was a nature lover by heart. I had asked Christopher, his son, to write a short profile about his father. Unfortunately I only received this article after Wilfried Achterfeld had passed away. This however is now a tribute to a man with a vision, to protect and safeguard the land for future generations to come.

Ursi.



My father and Keerweder

When my father visited South Africa for the first time in the seventies, that country fascinated him right from the beginning. At that time he was still working for the

famous newsmagazine "Der Stern" and often en route conducted interviews with people in South Africa and Namibia. During this occupation he became convinced that the 300,000 German-speaking population living in Southern Africa experienced a deficit concerning information and with this in mind decided to publish a newspaper. Many for over two years, before it had to be closed down as the newspaper was called enjoyed "Die Südafrikanische Rundschau".

Wilfried Achterfeld, who already had dreamed since childhood of becoming a forester, wanted to keep some investments in southern Africa. It was then that he invested his money in a farm called Brunnenthal near Otjiwarongo. The previous owner of the farm remained as manager on the farm. As Independence for Namibia showed signs of becoming a reality and rumour had it that all

foreigners would be expropriated it was then my father decided to sell. Although he sold with a 100% profit, he still lost about 50% through inflation and decline of exchange rate. After that he then decided to just wait for another chance. By chance he met Albi Brückner who informed him about his ideas and NamibRand. Wilfried Achterfeld was totally convinced of Albi's ideas and bought the farm Keerweder. In 1993, the time had come for me, his son Christopher, to accompany my father to Africa. Right from the start I too was fascinated by this country and was happy to get to know Keerweder, the name that originates from both Afrikaans as well as Low German. In the mid-nineties my father acquired the farm Verweg too, as one must first leave a place in order to come back again.

*Christopher Braun-Achterfeld
(Translated into English by Ursi)*

Obituary

Professor Wilfried Achterfeld, owner of the farms Keerweder and Verweg, died in Hamburg on June 03, 2002, at the age of 70, after a long-lasting illness. During his very active life, he was a journalist and correspondent of the German magazine "Der Stern", was a publisher in his own right, was an associate professor of the Music Academy in Hamburg and composed a musical names "Himmel auf Erden" and – last but not least – was the

executive partner in the casinos of Hamburg and Wiesbaden.

He visited NamibRand Nature Reserve and Keerweder at regular intervals and had a deep-rooted affinity towards the NamibRand Nature Reserve project. When I enquired from him – after he bought the farm Keerweder in August 1994 – why he had decided to buy a farm in the desert, he replied: "Ich will

in Afrika eine Spur legen".

Wilfried Achterfeld will be remembered as an extraordinary person by me – and all those who knew him – for a long time.

Albi Brückner

Maltahöhe's Farmers Union tour of NamibRand Nature Reserve 10 to 11 May 2002

It 9 o'clock and 11 vehicles are waiting at the entrance gate of Sossusvlei Mountain Lodge to start an unforgettable drive through the reserve. The Reserve comprises a total of 13 farms with 7 owners of which Mr Brückner is the chief investor with 5 farms.

Achim Lenssen shows us a satellite map of the farms and explains the set-up. The owners of the Lodges can acquire a concession from the Reserve. The satellite map reminds one of a painting like those of Paul Vecrocy of Camp Mwisho on Kwessiegat. Cream-coloured are the grass plains, orange-coloured the dunes, black-brown the mountains with green in-between for the camelthorns and shrubs. But wait, I am running ahead of my story.

Our first destination was Sossusvlei Mountain Lodge that is breathtakingly luxurious. Built from stones of that area with a natural garden with indigenous plants and rocks helps blend the buildings into nature. The only non-indigenous plant is the lawn around the little swimming pool.

We continue to Camp Mwisho which is found on the farm Kwessiegat, where in the days when grazing licences were handed out, a few farmers grazed their sheep on this land. The farm got its name due to a controversy that began around the water. Here live Andree Boniver and her husband Paul Vecrocy who heartily welcome us by offering cool drinks, beer

and salt crackers. They live in the main house and a distance away the guests stay in tents on platforms. Paul showed us the hot-air balloons and who ever was under the impression that ballooning is a very expensive recreation no longer thought so after Paul explained that a balloon for 4 people costs in the region of NS 1,000,000, and that it is only allowed to fly 500 hours before having to be renewed. The balloon, which takes 8 people, costs double the amount. The condition of the balloon and other equipment need to be tested regularly and with the extreme weather conditions in the Namib the balloons cannot be used for more than 500 hours. The great amount of gas used, plus a pilot and the champagne

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breakfast after such a ride justify the cost. As the balloon is only able to rise up when the outside temperature is low they depart early mornings before the heat of the day begins. Paul Vecrocy, with his wife, is not only an outstanding host but also an artist who uses a combination of various colours of sand and paint for his paintings.

En route to our third destination (still travelling through the dunes on small tracks) two of the vehicles, to the amusement of the boys and the delight of the photographers who want to capture this, get stuck. Luckily the women have enough power and weight to push the first vehicle out of the soft sand and the men have enough rope and 4 x 4 vehicles to pull the second car out. The farm Wolwedans, so named by its first owner Andries Liebenberg, because as hyenas, in Afrikaans known as tierwolwe, caught a gemsbok their movements gave the impression of a dance. The Lodge is called Dunes Lodge and all the chalets are built on wooden poles. It not only looks impressive but also is practical as the surrounding area is the natural garden and the encroaching dunes are not able to cover the chalets.

The next stop is at the Dune Camp also on Wolwedans, where we are spoilt with coffee/tea and cake. This camp is similar to the Dunes Camp but this time luxury tents are on platforms, which gives you the impression of being on your own in the wild, untouched desert.

Pygmy Mice on NamibRand

In March 2002, five small mice were caught in the Aandstêr house. Being small and lightweight (5 to 7 g), we had to use a special trap supplied by Mike Griffin, the MET specialist on small mammals. They were kept in a glass case and supplied with a hamster wheel and a nesting box. We had our own TV show in the evenings watching the hilarious antics of the mice on the wheel.

At the end of March, when putting them in a smaller travelling box, we found six grub-like pink things with legs, in the nest. The small "young" mice had

Between the Dunes Camp and Die Duine where we will set up camp for the night, two vehicles again got stuck, and according to the boys and the photographers this happened only because they had held thumbs in order to have more excitement. Marc and Elinor Dürr from TokTokkie Trails, which is on Die Duine made us feel welcome right from the start with the fires that were already burning. The visit around the fires, the atmosphere of sleeping under the stars, (funnily I did not even hear the call of a jackal) can only be described by one who is able to juggle with words.

After breakfast, of re-heated "braaivleis", we continued to Aandstêr where we arrived without getting stuck. Although the youngsters were disappointed they were unprepared for what was to follow. Needless to say everywhere along the route game was seen and it was just as oryx were amazed at such a cavalcade of passing cars when the car behind the one I was travelling in starting hooting. First we thought they tried to draw our attention to the oryx, but when we turned our heads, we saw smoke behind our Combi. It was like lightning that the car was off-loaded in order to get at the engine. Grass seed got caught below the engine and the heat of the exhaust caused the grass seed to start burning. Fortunately the damage was slight.

On the way to Aandstêr we could still have driven to Stellarine where the Family Hideout, a renovated house that sleeps 10 people, is situated but as there

were people enjoying the solitude and we had limited time we headed straight for Aandstêr where Peter Bridgeford's wife was expecting us with tea/coffee and cake. Nico Grobler ended the tour with a short thanksgiving prayer.

It is unbelievable to think how often I have travelled the road D826 without realizing how much beauty is hidden in that area. This lets a person wonder how much food for our soul is lost as we are always on the search for money and glory.

The Maltahöhe Farmers Union cannot thank Mr Brückner, Achim, Peter and the Concessionaires enough for the privilege that was given us to be able to see such a jewel in the south-western part of the country.

*Talita Lofty-Eaton, Secretary
(Shortened and translated by Ursi)*

reproduced and were actually small mature mice. Mike tentatively identified them as pygmy mice, but told us that the genus was in disarray and needed revision. From the map it can be seen that there is a large gap in the distribution from the Orange to the Kuiseb Rivers and now they have popped up on NamibRand.

Just to confuse the issue they have been classified as follows:

Genus: *Mus*
Subgenus: *Leggada*
Species: *minutoides*
Reference: G. de Graaf, 1981,
Rodents of Southern Africa, page 233



If you suspect that you have pygmy mice (head/body length = 50 mm) in your area, please let me know.

Peter Bridgeford.

Interview with Johanna Simon

Johanna Simon has been working at Wolwedans since 1995. She first came to hear about Wolwedans from her mother's sister who then worked at Die Duine.

Ursi: How big was Wolwedans when you were employed in 1995?

Johanna: At Wolwedans there was the then old farmhouse, which housed the office, kitchen and bedrooms for the manager. The Dune Camp consisted of 7 tents.

Ursi: What were your duties?

Johanna: I worked in the kitchen, laundry, started the generator, helped at the Dune Camp with cleaning and preparing the tents for the guests and even graded roads at times.

Ursi: Where did you go to school and for how long?

Johanna: I went to school in Maltahöhe and when my stepfather died I left school in Grade 4 to help on the farm. I am sorry that I could not complete my schooling but I made sure that all my children completed Grade 10. Eric who works at the Dunes Lodge even completed Grade 12.

Ursi: Where did you work prior to starting at Wolwedans?

Johanna: I worked on the farm with my grandmother, a year on Aandster and also two years at the Maltahöhe Hotel. At some stage I also worked for a German lady where I learnt some German as well.

Ursi: Are you happy at Wolwedans?

Johanna: I am very happy and hope to be able to work here as long as my health allows me to continue working.

Ursi: What do you like about NamibRand?

Johanna: I love the dunes, mountains and animals and also enjoy working with the people at Wolwedans.

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P.O. Box 40704
Windhoek
Namibia



Editor: Mandy Brückner
Phone: +264 (0)61 226803
Fax: +264 (0)61 232890
Email: ambruck@nmweb.com.na

Editor: Ursi Lenssen,
Farm Kaerweder
Phone: 264-6638 ask for 5702

"The wildlife of
today is not ours to
dispose of as we
please. We have it
in trust and must
account for it to
those who come after
us."

Website
www.namibrand.com