

THE BARKING GECKO

Newsletter of the NamibRand Nature Reserve

February 2004

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A happy, healthy and prosperous New Year to all of us

For a number of unknown reasons – probably the move from Antje’s home, where she and later we have lived most of our lives – the custom of wishing everybody connected and/or in love with our “pet” NamibRand a Happy Christmas and New Year slipped my mind completely. Please accept my humble apologies for this blunder.

2003 saw a number of memorable events, the most significant being the reconstruction of the Wolwedans Dunes Lodge in record time and an even more impressive phoenix, which rose from the ashes after the devastating fire on Christmas Day 2002. Congratulations to all of you that were involved in this task. Then there was the incorporation – at last – of the Aandstêr Trust into the Reserve, the introduction of three giraffe on Draaihoek/Toskaan and another seven hartebeest to increase the resident herd on Keerweder/Vêrweg. Welcome to all these newcomers and may your stay on NamibRand be a happy one.

We are still waiting for names for the three giraffe, remember??! – or shall we name them Tate, Nandi and Onduri as suggested in the October Issue of the Barking Gecko.

Lastly, there was the annual workshop and general meeting of the Vulture Study Group of Southern Africa that took place during April on Aandstêr and was attended by visitors from many parts of the world. Another first for NamibRand Nature Reserve, thanks to the Bridgefords.

With the NamibRand Nature Reserve and its concessionaires now firmly established and financially viable – at last – we all look forward to the New Year 2004 with confidence and expectations of what this next year has in store for us. Hopefully, it will be another year of success and prosperity for all of us.

J.A. Brückner



NamibRand supports vulture conservation

Once again, NamibRand Nature Reserve (NRNR) has supported the conservation of vultures in Namibia. During September 2003, an aerial survey was conducted in the Namib-Naukluft Park (NNP) to find breeding Lappet-faced Vultures. As these large birds, the largest vultures in Africa, build their nests on the tops of trees, and the nests are up to two metres in

diameter, they are visible from a slow flying aircraft. Even eggs can be seen from the air. The project, now managed by the Vulture Study Group, in cooperation with the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, has been using an aircraft to find breeding vultures for the past three years. Warden Rod Braby of Swakopmund piloted the plane and I was the observer. The position of each occupied nest was plotted on a GPS and additional information recorded on a tape recorder.

During October, the next phase of the project was tackled. This was the ringing of the vulture chicks. Here Ann and Mike Scott and my wife Marilyn assisted me. From 7-11 October, we ringed in the Ganab area of the NNP. Warden W. Kotze and Ranger E. Kalundingo helped with the ringing. We ringed 25 chicks, two less than last year.

The Saagberg/Kamberg and Tsondab area were the next on the list. The same team spent 16-18 October ringing, but it was disappointing and we only found eight chicks. In the past, this was the prime breeding area, but there has been a steady decline over the last few years. The final ringing in the Sukses/Sossus area took place on 25-26 Oct. Here Marc Dürr joined us to assist in manhandling the heavy 10-metre extension ladder. As expected, in the Sossusvlei area, we only ringed one chick. Since 1997, there has been a drastic decline in breeding vultures and this is most probably due to the large number of tourist vehicles going to Sossusvlei every day. Another factor is the increasing number of light aircraft flying over the main breeding area, taking tourists on pleasure flights. In total, we ringed 44 Lappet-faced Vulture chicks.

This report gives the results of the aerial survey and the ringing, but it is an expensive and time-consuming exercise. The flying

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took 18 hours over five days, as we could only fly early mornings and late afternoons. To pick up the fuel in Walvis Bay, transport it to Ganab and Weltevrede, our two airfields, and home again, took 15 hours and 968 kms. The ringing took place over 11 working days. The Scott's traveling in their private vehicle from Swakopmund every time, met us at the ringing vehicle. Together we covered 3 995 kms.

Without the financial support of the following, this project would not have been possible: NamibRand Nature Reserve and the Commercial Bank of Namibia. A special word of thanks to Mr Albi Brückner, CEO of NRNR and Chief Warden Achim Lenssen for giving me the time to do the vulture work. Thanks to all those people who helped with the ringing and Mr and Mrs Willie Swart of Weltevrede Rest Camp, for accommodation and meals during the aerial survey.

Peter Bridgeford Warden NRNR
Vulture Study Group Coordinator



Photo: P. Bridgeford.

Two

News @ NaDEET

It has been a year since Viktoria and I arrived on NamibRand. We moved into the house at Toekoms that was donated for NaDEET's use by the Reserve. Subsequently it has become a real home to us. Often the beauty of the Nubib Mountains and the Losberg at dusk and dawn fascinates us.

Despite the difference between experiencing an area for a week and actually living there, we are adjusting to the desert life. Moving here, people (especially from Otjiwarongo) shook their heads not understanding that we would want to live with the wind, sand, heat, dryness and aggressive sun.

I think for us, the most difficult trait of the desert to live with is definitely the wind. It has made a good attempt to blow our house down. We are very thankful for the fence around our house as it contains our freshly washed clothes (supposedly) hanging to dry outside on the washing line. So far, we haven't had any complaints from Wolwedans to say that our washing had blown over the Losberg and ended up at their newly reconstructed Lodge.

Nevertheless, it has been an interesting and good year. We are happy to have reached our goal at NaDEET, having built an environmental education centre and established a programme for children to come and study the various facets of the environment.

For me, the focus was obviously building. Although developing in a different way to that planned, everything turned out better than expected. The help of Raleigh International came at a good time and I learnt to cope with (and understand the language of) 15 or so young eager Britons, which has made my life richer in all aspects and will not be forgotten.

Experiencing four school groups at NaDEET Centre was a climax for me. It amazed me how happy we could make children by sharing our knowledge with them and learning

together how to solar cook and many other things. For many children the trip to us has been the highlight of their school career. After about four months, the first learners that came still talk about this experience.

In general, it was a great pleasure for me to help with the establishment of NaDEET Centre and the opportunity to learn more about building (especially in sand).

Andreas Keding



Warden's Notebook

Several sightings of leopard have been recorded/reported in the last four months in the Schafsberg/Horseshoe area. Marc Dürr's guide reported seeing the tracks in August and then observed this animal for almost half an hour on 14 October. Wolwedans guides have seen this leopard on at least two occasions and one report has been received, the second is being awaited. A reserve worker saw another leopard on 5 December when it crossed the main road on the farm Toekoms. This individual appears to be a territorial resident, as he has been seen before at this spot and again on 10 Jan this year.

The African wild cats are having a very tough time on the Reserve. Their food source has become so reduced that several specimens have died because of starvation. Four reports have been received from Mountain Lodge in the north to Aandstêr in the south.

Redundant telephone lines are being removed on the Reserve after permission was granted by Telecom. The line to Wolwedans has been removed and work is in progress on the lines to Draaihoek and Toskaan.

A large porcupine paid us a visit at Keerweder while we were sleeping outside the house because of the heat.

Spotted hyaena have been calling near Keerweder house for three consecutive days (10 to 12.01) and this prompted an investigation.

The remains of a big red hartebeest bull were found less than a kilometre away. Whether it was caught by the hyaena or died of another cause was too late to tell, as the remains are scant after three days feasting.

J. Lenssen



Behaviour Adaptation of Namaqua Sandgrouse

The most northern farm of the NamibRand Nature Reserve (NRNR) (S25°, E16°) is Vreemdelingspoort and it has no boreholes in the western and central parts. Only one borehole exists in the north eastern corner of the farm and it is not possible to serve the entire 12 700 ha from this one borehole. To promote a better distribution of wildlife, an artificial water point was created in the west of this farm. Water is taken there on a weekly basis with a light truck and water trailer. To conserve water, the potential evaporation rate here is close to 3 m per year, a narrow cement trough with a small surface area was erected. Water is stored in two plastic tanks hidden on the side of a rock outcrop and regulated by a float valve in the trough. Mainly oryx and springbok, but also birds including Namaqua Sandgrouse *Pterocles namaqua* drink at this artificial oasis. The small raised stock trough was adapted for small wildlife by building a sloping ramp on the outside and inside at

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the one end.

On 4 November 2002, I was on site when flocks of Namaqua Sandgrouse came flying in for their normal early morning drink. It has been well documented how they will land some distance from the water's edge, walk swiftly to the water, drink fast and then some males will wade into the water to do belly wetting by bobbing up and down. This is done to carry water to their chicks in the specially adapted and absorbent belly feathers. What I observed that morning was very different. In small groups the sandgrouse would walk to the ramp at the end of the trough. Being narrow, only four or five can drink at a time. The others would jump onto the edge of the raised cement trough, about 30 cm above ground level. From the edge, they would drink water from about 4 cm below the edge. However, they could not get their belly feathers wet on the edge of the trough. I observed how about one in three would jump into the water and splash around for a few seconds and then jump out again. The water is only about 12 cm deep in the centre of the trough so their feet would probably touch the bottom when they are in. Unfortunately, I was too far away to see whether it was only males that jumped into the water. From the edge of the trough they would jump back to the ground, pause and then fly away.

Sandgrouse are very vulnerable to attacks by falcons and goshawks when at the water's edge, and they are understandably nervous. I have never observed sandgrouse bathing and have not come across this observation in literature. The birds at the trough were faced with the dilemma of waiting their turn on the narrow ramp, flying to other water many kilometres away or adapting another method of getting a drink and their belly feathers wet. They adapted their normal behaviour by jumping onto the edge of the raised trough and went one step further by even jumping into the shallow water. Thus, a greater number could finish what they came for, along the length of the trough.

J. Lenssen



Porcupine at Keerweder

Photo: Korinna Lenssen

A Porcupine in my room!

During the hot summer months, when the house turns into an oven, we mostly sleep outside on the concrete slab between the kitchen, cooler and the outer-room.

One Saturday morning I was on my way to the outer-room when Tiger our cat who walked in front of me, suddenly came to a stand-still and intently gazed into the room in such a way that I knew either he had once again "lost" a mouse with which he had played or there was something else bothering him. Carefully I took a step forwards and peered into the room. Behind the washing machine, I saw something that first appeared to be a bushel of grass, but another step showed me something I would never, ever have expected to see hiding there. It was a porcupine! (*Hystrix africaeaustralis*) No wonder Tiger was apprehensive, as he had known long before me that

there was something very unusual and to him frightening, hiding in that room.

I called Korinna and Achim to come and have a look and to capture the animal so that we could relocate him where he belonged – in nature, but definitely a number of kilometres away from our house. We all know that they love anything that grows in a garden, as it always tastes a lot fresher than food from the veld. Achim asked us to fetch a big box, and then we somehow had to get him into that box. As the porcupine was very nervous by now, he urinated and that horrific smell nearly made us run for fresh air, but then the porcupine would still be in the room.

After a couple of minutes and more urinating and more smell that made us feel like suffocating we finally had him in the box. Achim and Korinna then took him about 14 km away, where there is no homestead and especially where there are no water pipes, as porcupines have a special liking for black plastic water pipes as these seem to have just that "special" taste.

It is difficult to imagine that none of us woke up when porcupine walked past us during the night into the outer-room. Only Tiger had noticed, as his sleep is never as deep as ours.

Ursi Lenssen.



Keep our Environment clean

Whenever I go on walks on Keerweder, I usually end up collecting historic refuse. It seems that the farmers of old had their rubbish dumps all around the homestead and when one was full, it was partly covered by sand. Over the years however the sand is being blown away or the game, especially oryx, begin to dig up the dumps, as they are always looking for old bones to chew on.

On one such walk, I decided I needed help, as it would take at least another 20 years to pick up all the rubbish. Because the Nama children were still on school holiday, I asked them whether they would like to earn some pocket money and help me get our environment clean.

Early the next morning, eight eager children, ages 7 to 17, plus myself gathered. Armed with a big carry bag each and one wheelbarrow for the bulky stuff, we started roaming around the homestead in a southerly direction, as most of the dumps are concentrated in that area.

Within two hours, having nine overflowing bags and a full wheelbarrow we returned home. Each child received some sweets, peanuts and money. We all decided that on the next day we would continue. Whilst walking and picking up pieces of glass, wire, tin, old batteries, rubber, porcelain pieces etc., I gave them a lesson on nature, all the little creatures that appeared after the rain as well as pointing out the minute green plants appearing all over.

Ursi Lenssen

***** This is a parody and not to be taken seriously!! *****

Mr Brückner

CEO

NamibRand Nature Reserve

RE: WHY MY CONCESSION FEES ARE 2 MONTHS LATE

While working in my office from the beginning of December, a Familiar Chat kept flying into my office with stones, which he would put down on top of the NamibRand File. I kept chasing him away and throwing the stones away, but he continued to bring stones. Eventually I moved the NamibRand File, but he relentlessly put the stones down on top of it, wherever it was. After a long weekend out of the office, I found a complete nest all ready for his wife's perusal. What could I do? I am on a Nature Reserve. I couldn't just break it up. It would break the chat's heart. So, I left it. Obviously, the nest found approval from the wife, as 6 days later there were three eggs.

Eleven days later, out hatched two chicks. The third egg was obviously a dud. These chicks stayed on the nest for a further two weeks before they started to fly. Wow, did they make a noise. Morning, noon and night, crying for their mummy and daddy to come and feed them. Not once did they seem appreciative of Mum and Dad's continuous efforts.

Well, once they flew, I could then pick up my file again and get back to work once more.

I therefore trust that you will excuse the late concession fees.

Best regards

Elinor

***** This parody is not to be taken seriously!! *****

According to a guide to the Nests and Eggs of Southern African Birds (Struik) by Warwick Tarboton Familiar Chats (*Cercomela familiaris*) often use "abandoned buildings and farmsteads" for nesting sites. (Makes one wonder what Tok Tokkie Trails does all year if the chats think my office is **abandoned**. They also use the same nesting site repeatedly and this has been proved, as our Familiar Chat mummy and daddy have bred three times in one year in the same nest upstairs in my office. The Familiar Chats have become quite part of the furniture and now 6 "babies" have also made themselves at home at Tok Tokkie.

Elinor Dürr



Photo: Andreas Keding

Dr Harvey unveiling plaque at NaDEET Centre

Doors officially opened by Dr. Harvey -UNESCO

Friday 24 October 2003 brought smiles to supporters, colleagues, friends, family and all of us at NaDEET, as we were able to share and celebrate the hard work throughout this past year that has made NaDEET Centre a reality.

The two-hour long ceremony included welcoming words from Elinor Dürr, NaDEET's managing trustee, a blessing from Bishop Reinhard Keding of the German Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Namibia. Christiane Berker, NaDEET Trustee, gave a history of NaDEET and much-deserved recognition to all of our supporters.

We are very honoured to have had Dr. Claudia Harvey, UNESCO Director of Windhoek Office and Representative of



Photo: Andreas Keding

Daweb Cultural Group at opening

UNESCO to Angola, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland, officially open NaDEET Centre. Her opening address

highlighted the role of NaDEET in achieving the Millennium Development Goals determined by all member countries of the United Nations of which environmental sustainability is one. Dr. Harvey said, "Environmental education is one of the essential instruments for empowering individuals and communities to take meaningful action and positively shape their future".

At the end of her opening address, Dr. Harvey also looked towards NaDEET's future now that the 'first hurdle' was overcome. "NaDEET faces at least two challenges, of course. One is its own question of sustainability. One dream of making the Centre live has been realized. How to keep it alive and true to its goal of harmony between humans and the environment is the first challenge. How to ensure that its services reach, not only those who have, but those who need, is another. ... For many Namibians, the Namib is just within the reach of the TV screen, for others, it is still beyond the imagination. NaDEET has the challenge to ensure that such young Namibians get the opportunity to see, feel and respect the awe of the place after which their country was named."

NaDEET looks forward to tackling these challenges and hopes to receive the support from all who have made NaDEET Centre a reality.

Viktoria Keding



Interesting Sights and Sounds

Hyaenas roam the plains, oryx gallop in the distance and springbok "pronk" along the roadside. I have the opportunity to experience all this almost on a daily basis. Guests ask me whether I don't get bored doing this everyday, and my answer is always a big NO. It is simple, I love this place so much and every day is so different with its sights and sounds.

I started in Wolwedans in February 2002 attending the now well-known Desert field-guiding course and I fell in love with it at first sight. Being there (or being on NamibRand Nature Reserve) is so different from any other setting. As one of my colleagues put it, the best of both worlds! Wolwedans in the rainy season is spectacular, if only to experience the aftermath of a thunderstorm and a beautiful sunset. Come October, you undergo something different, strong sandstorms that can change a peaceful day.

Deserts all over the world are characterized by small animal, plant and bird life. The Namib Desert doesn't fall short of that. You encounter some fascinating plants, birds and animals. Recently I was on a drive and came across an interesting finding. Being part of the milkweed family, the *Cynanchum orangeanum* is conspicuous standing next to the rocky road near the Schafsberg water point. We used to eat them in the Kalahari

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where it is known as “bokhorings”, meaning goat’s horns.

Very interested in birds, I encounter many; a Black-Breasted Snake Eagles flying away with a snake, as well as Lanner and Peregrine Falcons. The most interesting sight was two “Black Crows” sitting together. This I spotted near the Dunes Camp and turned out to be a Black Eagle!

In October this year, I had a day drive with six guests to the now famous Hard Rock Café. We had an enjoyable picnic and thereafter the guests could relax. One of them took a stroll of



Cynachum orangeanum from Flowering 4.86 plants of the Kalahari Dunes by Noel van Rooyen

almost 1 km in a southerly direction from the picnic area where he encountered two brown hyaenas. Spotting him, they ran off. The other day we caught sight of an African wild cat next to the road, lying in a hollow tree trunk peacefully curled up, taking a nap.

You will always get those special moments, which will be with you forever, including the Pale Chanting Goshawk that wakes me up every morning, calling from near the waterhole, making it sad for me to leave.

Nico Visser
Wolwedans Field Guide

(Thank you Nico for a wonderful and interesting article! It was worth all the cajoling, begging and pleading from my side! I hope that all the other tour guides will follow suit, as I know that each one of you will have anecdotes, sightings and tales to relate. Please let all the Barking Gecko readers share your interesting life on NamibRand! – Ursi).

especially limiting or in central South Africa, where resources are more abundant.

The Damara ground squirrel (*Xerus princeps*) is the second species of ground squirrel that occurs in southern Africa. This species is restricted to the South West Arid region along the narrow band of the Western escarpment that runs from southern Namibia north into southern Angola. Unlike the Cape ground squirrel, which lives only in open areas, Damara ground squirrels inhabit rocky, hilly ground. Although they also may occur on the open plains, they prefer to burrow in gravel and rocks in areas with single trees or sparse bush cover, and burrow entrances are usually found under piles of rocks or boulders. The poor visibility of this habitat suggests that solitary members of this species would have an advantage in concealment against predators; likewise, the scant resources of this region also suggest that competition for food would rule out a social existence. However, almost nothing is known about the social system, reproductive biology and demographic characteristics of this species. Anecdotal accounts suggest that the Damara ground squirrel is either solitary or lives in small family groups (mothers and young) of 2 – 4 individuals (Haim et al. 1987, Herzig-Straschil and Herzig 1989). Adult males do not appear to form independent groups, but may temporarily associate with small family groups (Herzig-Straschil and Herzig 1989).

Thus, these two closely related species exhibit dramatically differential social systems; one is extremely social and one is essentially solitary. The objectives of this research include: 1) investigate the molecular relationship between *X.inauris* and *X.princeps* and 2) examine the biology of Cape and Damara ground squirrels to assess the hypotheses that resources or predation are the main influence on grouping (or not grouping) in these species.

(to be continued)

J.M. Waterman, Department of Biology, University of Central Florida



The Ecology of the Cape ground squirrel (*Xerus inauris*) and the Damara ground squirrel (*Xerus princeps*)

Two closely related species of diurnal ground squirrels inhabit southern Africa. Although the morphological similarity of these species makes them difficult to distinguish in the field, evidence suggests that their social systems are extremely different. The Cape ground squirrel is a highly social species inhabiting open areas in arid regions across southern Africa (Waterman 1995). This high degree of sociality appears to be the result of predation pressure (Waterman 1995, 1997). Although predation appears to be the primary selective force leading to sociality in this species, differential resource abundance may influence the type of sociality and life history exhibited. In areas with low resources, competition for food resources may limit the sizes of groups (Waterman 2002). In areas of high resources, Cape ground9 squirrels may live in large groups composed of several female social groups (Herzig-Straschil 1978). These observations suggest that the social system in this species may be fairly plastic; varying with abundance of available resources, yet this hypothesis has not been examined. Specifically, very little is known about the biology of Cape ground squirrels in the South West Arid region of Namibia, where resources are



An unexpected yet very welcome treat

On 12 January after a very hot spell, promising clouds appeared behind the Nubib Mountains. At about 14.30, a very strong sandstorm was blowing and all the eye could see was a thick bank of dust all around. A short rain shower followed, with the rain spreading in a southerly direction. Another sandstorm followed at about 16.00 in the Jagkop and Kwessiegat area after which it rained “cats and dogs”, with a strong wind howling at the same time. Within a short time, we measured 17.5 mm at Keerweder, with the entrance track quickly turning into a river. The rain, measured between Toekoms and Draaihoek, was between 5 mm at Boscia to 27 mm at Jagkop.

Once again, we were amazed how quickly nature reacts to the first rain, as within less than 24 hours, thousands of termites had left their shelters where they had been for over a year, to start flying and breeding. A big fat millipede also emerged from the soil and slowly crawled around.

My favourites from childhood days, the velvet mite (family: *Trombiculidae*), were seen the next morning in the garden. The instinct of all these insects knowing when to appear, neither too early nor too late, will always remain a mystery to me.

Man and animal once again are full of hope that the year 2004 may still turn into a good rain season.

Ursi Lenssen

“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”



Das alte Farmhaus (Draaihoek)

Wo seid ihr wohl heute,
von hier diese Leute?

Die Mauern noch stehen
durch die Fenster

zu sehen
den einstigen Blick.
Wer hatte das Glück
hier zu Hause zu sein
zu nennen es “Mein”?

Von Natur hier umgeben
die Seele kann schweben
wie Wasser kann rinnen.
Doch ganz innen drinnen,
das Schicksal der Ruine?
wird sie bald eine Düne?
Oder kommen noch Leute
so wie ihr heute,
diese Mauern zu pflegen,
zu beginnen ein Leben,
wie einst es die Alten,
die Gemäuer zu gestalten,
der Natur sich anpassen,
denn Modernes können wir lassen.

Birman D’Nar

(The old farmhouse at Draaihoek, where people once lived now stands forlorn and empty. Will it be inhabited again one day, or will the dunes take over? People might come and live here as you do today, but in a way that the lifestyle blends in with nature that surrounds them, as here no modern amenities fit in.)

We assume that you like reading the “Barking Gecko” and would like to continue receiving it? To make the life of the editor easier and to save costs in envelopes and postage – as well as the danger of letters going astray, we wish to forward the “Barking Gecko” by e-mail in future. Please send your e-mail address as soon as you receive this issue of the “Barking Gecko”. You can forward your address to: nnr@iway.na when we will put you on our e-mail list for speedier, easier and less costly distribution of the “Barking Gecko”.

Another suggestion. You as a guest to Wolwedans, Sossusvlei Mountain Lodge or Tok Tokkie Trails might also want to contribute to our “Barking Gecko”. You are more than welcome to do so and could forward any letters, thoughts or anything of interest to our e-mail address.

Thank you for your cooperation.

From the Editor

“Two great people”

... How much can you know about people, how can one ever know everything about another...! This always is a question asked when you meet people, like them and start a relationship!

Two people that have become part of my life and in a great way have changed many ways of thinking and doing are Antje and Albi Brückner. It does not matter how little I know them and how little time we spend together! A great big thank you and tribute to you for what you are doing not only for yourself but also for this beautiful country, conservation and the people. I feel blessed to be part of the circle of family that know you and privileged to spend time with you!!

NamibRand and the generations to come will be your monument.

Hermann Cloete

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