THE BARKING GECKO

Newsletter of the NamibRand Nature Reserve

September 2011 ***Volume 12 Nº 3***

Photo: Ann Scott

Photo: Quintin Hartung

Snow on the Nubib Mountains east of Keerweder on 22 August 2011 transforms the desert; this last happened in 1997!

In this issue:

Snow at NamibRand!

After a huge build-up of clouds and a drop in temperature followed by a steady 10 mm of rain in the night, we woke up on 22 August 2010 to SNOW on the Nubib Mountains! The Losberg also received a sprinkling. Albi Brückner recalls that the last snow was recorded in 1997 (see page 2). This exciting event follows an exceptionally high rainfall last summer, averaging 330 mm for the Reserve (see the May 2011 issue of this newsletter). Can we expect further extremes this summer?

Our CEO, Nils Odendaal, touches on the recent Board meeting and AGM, a new addition to the Brückner clan, visits by the Grassland Foundation, and the University of Humboldt and the HNE Eberswalde from Germany, and infrastructure updates.

Our annual game count shows an increase of +11% in oryx and springbok numbers, linked to the high rainfall this summer. Further news includes that of an internship to develop opportunities for University of Nebraska students; filming of the fairy circle mystery by National Geographic; refurbishing of Sossusvlei Desert Lodge; and news from NaDEET including on Environmental Literacy and Climate Change Adaptation.

On the ecological side, we take a look at another survey of inselberg vegetation, a search for the elusive fairy shrimps, a new gecko species, International Vulture Awareness Day, thought-provoking aspects of the conservation of the Arabian oryx, an update on our large predators and a jam-packed section on sightings and photographs.

Ann Scott

The last snow at NamibRand – in 1997

To complete the records:- The last time we observed snow on the Losberg and Nubib Mountains was in August 1997, when I happened to be at NRNR to host a certain Günther Mack from the GEO-Spezial magazine, similar to the National Geographic Magazine, which everybody knows. Mr Mack wrote a ten-page article, illustrated with some fantastic photos, on NamibRand in the December 1997 of GEO-Spezial, which is most informative and complimentary on the NamibRand Nature Reserve. The article finished with a quote of a comment by Kay Hillen, then NRNR's Control Warden, when encountering a somewhat aggressive Péringuey's Adder: "Just leave her alone, this is her home. We are the 'guests' here". When Mack questioned whether that really was snow on the mountains around Keerweder, Kay sent our then ranger Loutjie to Toekoms, to load and return with a load of snow to show Herr Mack. I still have a photo of that truckload of snow on the pinboard in my home office. I hope you will find this "memory" story of interest.

Albi Brückner

Photo: Kay Hillen

Above: Helge Denker holding a snowman at NamibRand in August 1997. Below: Albi's plane, a Piper Cub – Family Cruiser, at Rietoog.

Photo: NamibRand Safaris

Heavy frost was also recorded at Wolwedans on 24 June 2011.

News from the CEO

Photo: Barbara Wayrauch

The Wolwedans Dune Lodge provided a spectacular setting for the NamibRand AGM on 4 June 2011.

The members of the NamibRand Nature Reserve Association held a regular board meeting at Kwessiegat on 3 June 2011. At this meeting the directors reviewed management progress, provided guidance and directives for the upcoming year and prepared decisions such as the approval of the annual audited finances and budget for the new financial year, to be tabled at the Annual General Meeting. In line with the mandate from our Visioning Meeting earlier this year (see May 2011 issue of *The Barking Gecko*, p4), the directors were also able to agree on changes to our Articles of Association which go towards devolving more rights to the landowners, while staying true to the overall mission and objectives of the Reserve as a conservation organisation. A well-attended and successful Annual General Meeting was then held at the Wolwedans Dune Lodge on 4 June 2011.

Our annual game count was held on the morning of 4 June. The abundant rainfall received this year produced the expected results – a noteworthy increase in wildlife numbers. Dr Ann Scott expands on the results later in this newsletter. It is important to remember that we use the numbers obtained from actual sightings, rather than extrapolated population estimates, to monitor wildlife distribution and trends (i.e. whether the numbers are going up or down) and it is these latter two variables which are important for management decisions.

We are delighted to inform you that the human NamibRand family has also grown! Little Hannah-Louisa Savannah joined the Brückner family on 24 June 2011 (see p3 for photographs). Congratulations to the proud parents and family.

Networking and the promotion of the NamibRand Nature Reserve is one of our most important functions and during the past few months we have hosted several important groups of visitors.

(Continued on p3)

Photos: Brückner family

Little Hannah-Louisa Savannah joined the Brückner family on 24 June 2011. Above (FLTR): Stephan, Sophie, Hannah, Jana and Theo Brückner. Below: the gorgeous Brückner girls.

(Continued from p2)

A high profile delegation including the Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme to Namibia and the Deputy Project Coordinator of the Strengthening the Protected Area Network (SPAN) Project, Mr Samson Mulonga, visited NamibRand on 7 June2011. The purpose of their visit was to meet and interact with field-based stakeholders and key institutions, as well as to familiarise themselves with the NamibRand Nature Reserve.

Tyler Sutton, president of the Grasslands Foundation in the United States of America visited NamibRand with two delegations. The first group, from 12-15 June 2011, included graduates from the University of Nebraska – Lincoln (UNL) who came to Namibia as part of a study visit to learn about Namibia's biodiversity conservation and sustainable utilization programmes. Eric Schacht, who was a part of this programme then spent six weeks on NamibRand (see p6). He gained first hand experience on resource management aspects of the Reserve and also had the opportunity to visit some of our partners including Wolwedans, NaDEET and Tok Tokkie Trails. Based on this pilot visit, the Grasslands Foundation and the NamibRand Nature Reserve will partner up in the future to host an intern from UNL on an annual basis.

From 2-4 August, 2011 Mr Sutton again brought a group to NamibRand. This time, staff and board members from the Grasslands Foundation as well the regional head of the Audubon Society came to Namibia to visit and learn from environmental conservation projects. The Audubon Society is a national conservation organisation in the USA focussing on birds (see www.audubon.org for more information).

We are particularly proud of the fact that Namibia and NamibRand are chosen by top conservation organisations from the USA as a model for conservation! Several members of the Grasslands Foundation group told us that NamibRand was their favourite destination in Namibia.

From 20-23 August 2011, a group of academics led by Prof. Dr Ulrich Zeller from the Humboldt-University in Berlin and Prof. Dr Ulrich Schulz from the University of Applied Sciences (HNE) Eberswalde visited NamibRand. They were here as part of a fact-finding mission to investigate the possibility of placing students at our NamibRand Desert and Awareness Centre (NRAC). They were very positive about the prospect of working with NamibRand and engaging with us on long term research projects. Biology students from these universities would visit us as part of their Bachelor or Masters thesis requirements

(Continued on p4)

Photo: Ann Scott

NamibRand hosted representatives of the Grassland Foundation in July 2011.

Photo: Thomas Göttert

A study visit by the Humboldt University and HNE Eberswalde of Germany in August 2011—photographed on a snowy day at Keerweder.

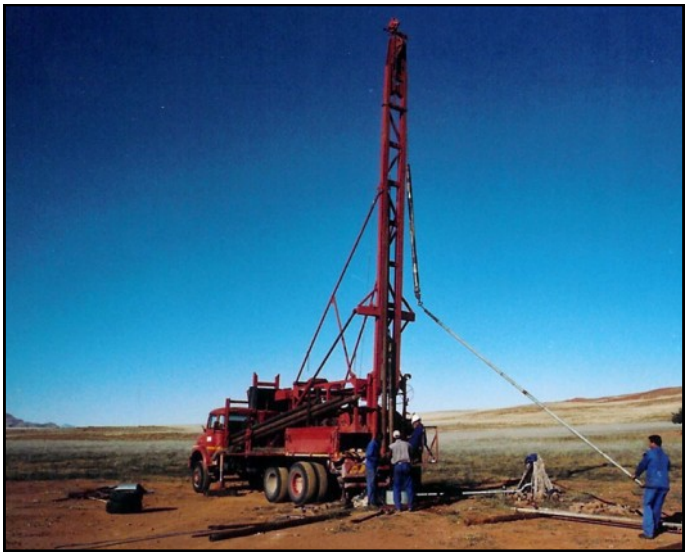

Photo: Nils Odendaal

Drill rig operators pulling pipes at Kwessiegat. A new one-piece boreline hose now allows us to do this job ourselves!

(Continued from p3)

and contribute toward research that would ultimately benefit the knowledge base and management of NamibRand .

A new generation of solar pumps that allows for deeper installations has enabled us to switch more of our water pumps to this renewable energy type. One of these Grundfos SQFlex 1.2-3 pumps has been installed at Kwessiegat at the depth of 220m in combination with a one-piece hose, enabling us to service this pump ourselves. In the past a borehole drilling machine had to be specially contracted to extract the 73 x 3m steel pipes needed to hold the big submersible water pump!

Toekoms, where our Research Centre (the NRAC: see p3) is housed, has been renovated. The old bathroom has been renovated and a new shower and toilet have been added. A new VSAT telephone and internet system have been installed the solar system has been upgraded. This work has been done to accommodate our ranger, Quintin Hartung, who will now be based here to keep an eye on the Centre. Feel free to visit Quintin at Toekoms, or give him a call on 063-683571.

Nils Odendaal

Scientific papers now available

Two more scientific papers have been added to our online library, http://www.namibrand.org/Library. htm:

1. A new species of the Pachydactylus Weberi Complex (Reptilia: Squamata: Gekkonidae) from the NamibRand Reserve, Southern Namibia (347KB/PDF) Scientific paper, published in BREVORIA Museum of Comparative Zoology, June 2011 *By: W. R. Branch, A. M. Bauer, T. R. Jackman, and M. Heinicke.*

2. Preliminary report on the late Holocene archaeology of the Awasib-Gorrasis basin complex in the southern Namib Desert (590KB/PDF) Scientific paper, published in Studies in the African Past 5, September 2006 *By: J. Kinahan & J. Kinahan*.

May 2011 Kgotla at Geluk

Photo: NamikSky Balloon Safaris

Participants at the May 2011 Gotla enjoy the beautiful setting at Geluk.

On 27 May 2011 we attended the latest Kgotla meeting, hosted by NamibSky on the farm, Geluk. The event was well attended, with every concession being represented by at least one staff member. The meeting commenced with a warm welcome from Mike to all in attendance, after which, management and tourism matters were discussed and further actions were mutually agreed upon including planning for the annual game count. Dr George Tucker, a visiting astronomer to Sossusvlei Desert Lodge, made a fascinating presentation on the International Dark Sky Programme. A special thanks to NamibSky for hosting the hugely successful event in such a well organized manner, and for the delicious snacks and refreshments.

Quintin Hartung

Photo: George Tucker

The Omega Centauri, photographed by visiting astronomer, Dr George Tucker at Sossusvlei Desert Lodge in June 2011. Although it appears as a mere smudge in the sky to the naked eye, this magnificent formation is believed to consist of a few million stars!

Annual game count: 4 June 2011

Photo: Ann Scott

An enthusiastic team from Wolwedans tackles Route 4.

Data collected by participants of the June 2011 game count were collated and analyzed, bearing our three core objectives in mind:

Objective 1: Population estimates

Total numbers of game as estimated by the June 2011 game count are summarized below:

Species	Route 1-8	Route 1-9
Oryx	4 873	5 162
Springbok	8 878	9 405
Kudu	39	39
Burchell's zebra*	370	370
Ostrich	302	349
Hartebeest*	125	125
Blesbok*	-	18
Total	**14 586**	**15 467**
% change	**+13.2**	**+11.4**
*Giraffe**	*6*	*6*
Ludwig's Bustard	*136*	*143*

**Numbers are known*

The overall population estimate for all species combined on NamibRand Nature Reserve in June 2011 is 14 586 (Route 1-8). With the inclusion of the Pro-Namib Conservancy, this number rises to 15 467 (Route 1-9). These totals represent an increase of 11-13% from those in June 2010, which corresponds with the higher rainfall in 2011. Details of estimated annual numbers are provided in the three figures alongside.

The total estimates for numbers of oryx in June 2011 are 4 873 (Route 1-8) and 5 162 (Route 1-9). Numbers of springbok are estimated at 8 878 (Route 1-8) and 9 405 (Route 1-9). Ostrich numbers showed a sharp decline to 302 (Route 1-8) and 349 (Route 1-9). The Reserve continues to be an important haven to a relatively large population of Ludwig's Bustard, recently uplisted to *Endangered*.

The total biomass of the Reserve has increased in June 2011 to 10.1 kg/ha (Route 1-8) and 9.7 kg/ha (Route 1-9).

Just a reminder that these population numbers are *estimates*.

Objective 2: Wildlife distribution/density

Wildlife distribution/density (animals counted per 100 km, ***based on actual numbers***) increased by 9% compared to June 2010. The highest relative densities were recorded in the northern and central parts of the Reserve as well as in the south, at Aandstêr.

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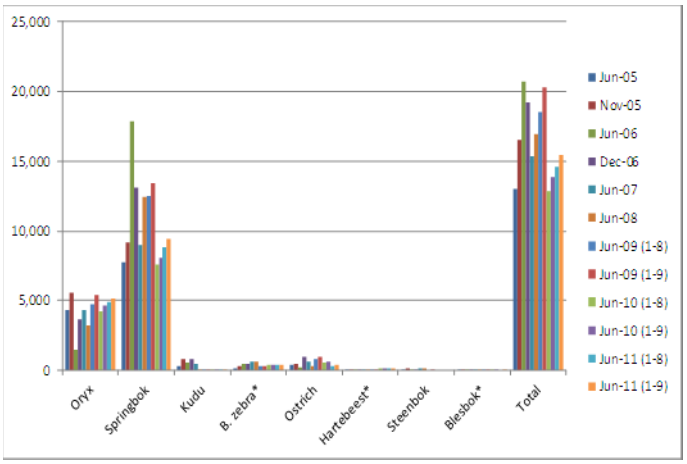
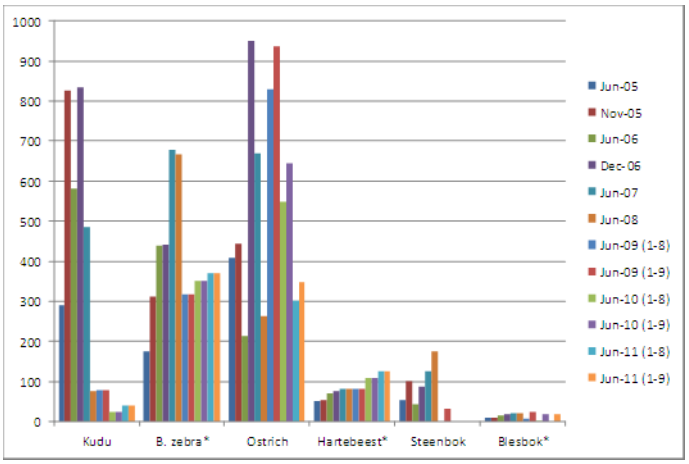
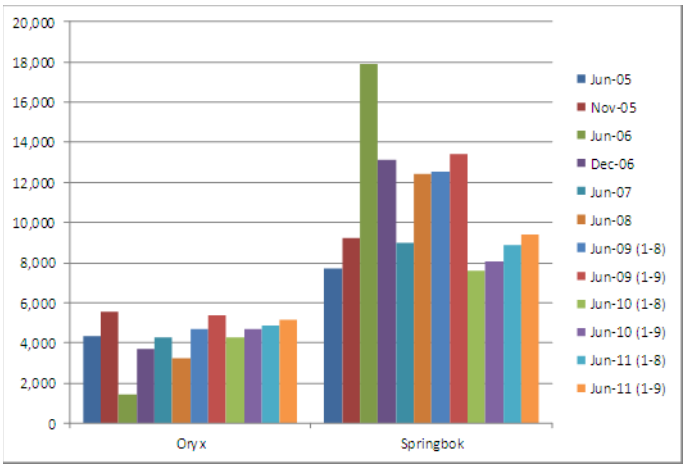
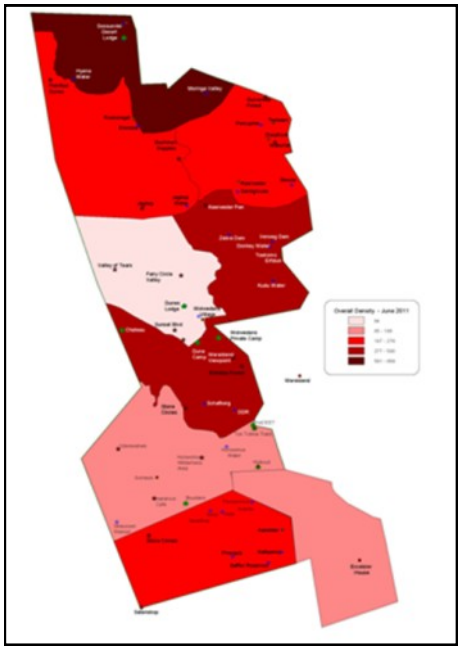






Details of annual game numbers at NamibRand, 2005-2011.



Wildlife densities at NamibRand, June 2011 game count.

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Objective 3: Population change over seven years

Overall, animal sightings increased by 9% to 693 animals/100 km in June 2011. Compared to June 2010, the extreme northern and central parts of the Reserve showed the highest increase in wildlife (106% for Zone 1 and 89% for Zone 5), followed by 45% in Zone 6 and 43% in Zone 8. Only Zone 2 showed a decrease (-36%).

Correlations with rainfall

Correlations between the above results and average annual rainfall figures continue to indicate that springbok respond very quickly to changing rainfall patterns, whereas the response of oryx and Ostrich is more apparent during the following year.

Once again a big thank you to all our enthusiastic and dedicated participants for their support! The full game count report will be posted on our website in due course.

Ann Scott

Photo: Ann Scott

Lively springbok at Kwessiegat, in the northern part of the Reserve.

Developing relationships and research projects

for University of Nebraska students

It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for me to work and learn at NamibRand Nature Reserve (NRNR) for the month of June. The Grassland Foundation (GF), who funded my trip, has recognized NRNR as a model in private lands conservation. My time at NRNR was to learn and explore the commercial conservation model and to identify learning opportunities for UNL students. I would like to thank everyone for the friendliness and hospitality shown to me during my month-long stay. It felt like I never left my home in the U.S.

I'm from the state of Nebraska, which is part of the Northern Great Plains ecosystem and is one of the least "protected" ecosystems on earth, with less than 2 percent of the region's 180 million acres (almost 73 million hectares) in reserves. Over 200 hundred years ago, explorers traveling through the Northern Great Plains found an abundance of wildlife rivalling the grasslands/savannas of Africa. Millions of bison, prong-horn, deer and elk grazed an endless sea of grass as coyotes, prairie wolves, mountain lions, and grizzly bears watched their prey in the distance, while immense flocks of birds blanketed the big open sky. Today, large sections of mixed grass prairie in the region remain but the sights and sounds of many native species are largely gone.

In many instances, Great Plains landowners have replaced the large native grazing ungulate species with domestic livestock and have eliminated or removed competitive wildlife species to make a safe, productive and a currently sustainable environment for their livelihood. While un-natural, Nebraska ranchers have had success in developing a beef cattle production system that fits well with the grassland environment. The system has included management strategies that allow them to tolerate the many disturbances or wild swings in environmental conditions (e.g. wildfires, violent storms, severe winters and drought) that are characteristic of semi-arid grasslands. Managing for this temporal and spatial variability in grassland systems and minimizing the effect of disturbances on livestock production have been strengths of the ranching industry.

Recently, many ecological, economical and social trends are making it increasingly difficult for single-enterprise, beef cattle ranches in Nebraska to survive. Ranchers, other land managers and advisors have recognized that production costs and market demands have changed. Grassland management must adjust to current and future market-driven production environments while conserving natural resources. A diversity of enterprises including ecotourism, outfitting and guest ranching must be considered to ensure grassland health and sustained production from grasslands.

The Grassland Foundation is leading a major conservation effort to restore and conserve this remarkable landscape

(Continued on p7)

Photo: Ann Scott

Eric Schact visited NamibRand in June 2011 to explore the development of relationships and research projects for students of the University of Nebraska.

(Continued from p6)

through the education of students and outreach to landowners. It may seem that the Northern Great Plains has little in common with this part of Namibia, but in fact, our areas share an intrinsic bond. Both ecosystems contain some of the last unsettled, wide open landscapes on the earth.

While Nebraska's students are in NRNR, we propose that the students work on projects that are of benefit to NRNR. With the enthusiastic assistance of Reserve and tourism concession staff, I identified several projects for potential University of Nebraska interns including the following:

1. Much of the focus of NRNR is on tourists who come to Africa for the stunning vistas and the beautiful, unique wildlife. Vegetation and the condition of the land can get overlooked. A series of surveys could be conducted to assess the range/ veld condition and carrying capacity of the various habitat types on the reserve.

2. There are simple high-quality maps focussing on different features of NRNR. Nils Odendaal, CEO, has produced excellent existing maps but has expressed interest in GIS mapping projects and developing maps that could link wildlife populations, habitat types and rainfall, for example.

3. A majority of tourists that visit NRNR are conscious of their impact on the environment. Therefore, visiting places that conserve natural resources and use renewable energies are very important to them. A project for a student could involve measuring the amount of energy and water used by each concession on the reserve. This could help the Reserve and its concessions manage their energy and water more efficiently, appealing more to the "Green" tourist.

The Grassland Foundation will continue to build on the partnership with NRNR to ensure proper management of natural eco-systems on private lands. My experience at NamibRand is evidence that we're off to a great start.

Eric Schacht

Photo: Ann Scott

Tourists come to Africa for the stunning vistas and the beautiful, unique wildlife, with which NamibRand abounds.

National Geographic films

the mystery of the fairy circles

Photo: Quintin Hartung

Yvette Naudé of the University of Pretoria explains her theories on the origin of the fairy circles to the National Geographic team.

From 22-25 August 2011, we were visited by a film crew from Tigress Production in the UK, filming a National Geographic film. The film is based on the theories behind the mysterious fairy circles of the Namib Desert. Scientists were brought in and interviewed to give their expert opinions on the reasons for the existence of the fairy circles. The first day consisted mostly of aerial filming, with the use of a multi-million dollar remote controlled "Spy" camera attached to the aircraft. Also, Prof. Mike Picker from the University of Cape Town was interviewed as he explained his theory based on the relationship between pugnacious ants and the fairy circles. The second day consisted of ground footage, where further interviews were conducted on the dunes in the Fairy Circle Valley, and they also filmed our *Euphorbia* species as a possible cause of the fairy circles. The film crew was very pleased with the amount of footage they were able to get within the short time span, and given that on the day they arrived, they were greeted by rain and the next morning were woken up by snow on the mountains.

Quintin Hartung

Photo: Quintin Hartung

A multi-million dollar remote controlled "Spy" camera was attached to the aircraft for aerial filming.

New waterhole at Kwessiegat

Photo: Quintin Hartung

A brand new waterhole is under constructon at Kwessiegat, incorporating a design that is user-friendly for the animals.

We started building a new waterhole at Kwessiegat on 22 August 2011, to replace the old water trough which the animals have been using all these years. The idea is to create a waterhole that is more user-friendly to all animal species and to try and blend the waterhole in with the surrounding environment. The landowner also requested that the new waterhole be situated where it is possible for guests at the Kwessiegat house to photograph the animals at the waterhole from the front veranda, without disturbing the animals. So with that in mind, we chose a spot south-west of the existing water trough, with Bushman Koppies as a backdrop. This spot also allows the animals easy excess to the waterhole without getting too close to the buildings.

Quintin Hartung

&Beyond relaunches

Sossusvlei Desert Lodge

&Beyond Sossusvlei Desert Lodge in the NamibRand Nature Reserve, Namibia has been completely refurbished with an updated, sophisticated desert-chic look. A cool oasis that contrasts with its rugged surroundings, the lodge offers a luxurious base from which to experience a range of exhilarating desert adventures.

Designed to capture the solitude of the desert, each of the 10 stone and glass desert villas now boasts completely new interiors. Featuring split-level bedrooms and living rooms, elements of bone, slate and stone were used throughout to create a dramatic, yet entirely natural look, while rough timberwork, twiggy chandeliers and wooden sculptures mimic the craggy mountains in the distance. The dusky pink colours of the natural rose quartz found in Namibia provide a fresh contrast to the creams and greys of the interiors. Hemp rugs are strewn over pebble floors, while rustic vintage furniture and whitewashed wooden pieces fill the guest areas.

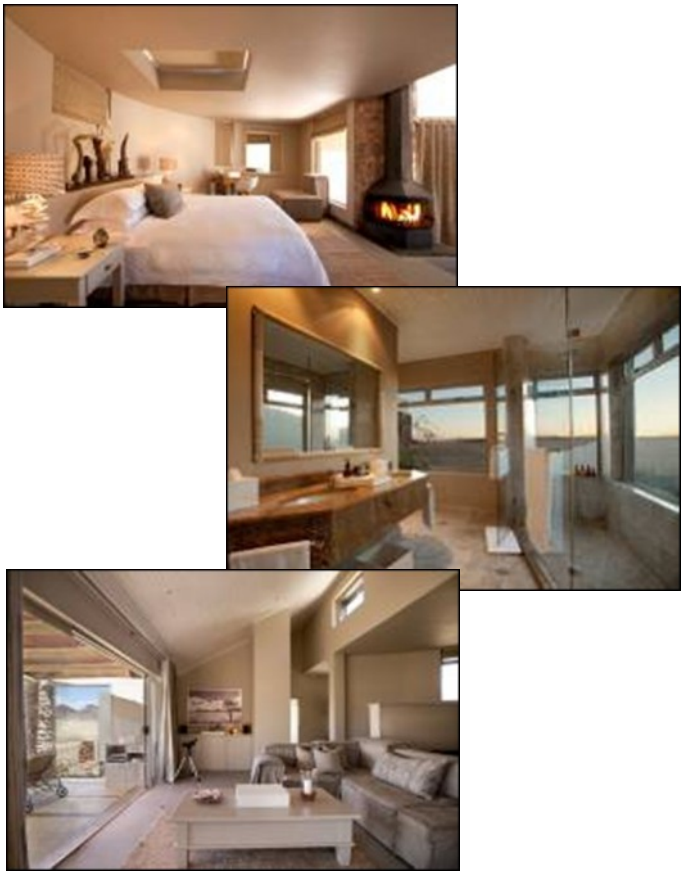
"All the interiors were chosen to complement the dramatic Sossusvlei desertscape and we are delighted with the finished product which has totally rejuvenated the villas and guest areas. In addition to the lodge's makeover, we are also introducing a new 7-day package to demonstrate that Sossusvlei Desert Lodge is a great long-stay destination", says Regional Director, Jason King.

With an exciting selection of unique desert adventures, stays of up to a week are guaranteed to offer a new thrill every day. From guided quadbiking and nature drives where desert-adapted wildlife such as zebra, giraffe, oryx and other smaller species can be spotted, to hikes in the nearby mountains to view Bushman paintings, guests are spoilt for choice. The lodge also has a state-of-the-art observatory where guests can explore the starry desert skies under the guidance of a resident astronomer.

Adventures available at an additional cost include guided tours from the lodge to nearby Sossusvlei where guests can scale some of the world's tallest dunes, scenic flights and hot-air ballooning over the desert.

Mealtimes are also part of the Sossusvlei experience and decadent dinners are served in a dozen different locations, from the lodge's open veranda or cosy wine cellar, to the middle of the majestic dunes beneath the stars. The combination of adventure with luxury desert-chic offers a unique, romantic destination that is hard to beat.

Valeri Mouton



Photos: &Beyond

New look for the 10 desert villas at Sossusvlei Desert Lodge; bathrooms with spectacular views; refurbished en suite *living room.*

NEWS @ NaDEET

Centre

During May and June 2011 NaDEET Centre was visited by nine groups including two adult groups, four primary schools and three secondary school classes. We had the opportunity to implement our exciting new secondary school programme with teenage learners from various socio-economic backgrounds. The programme aims to challenge learners more directly about their personal impact on the environment, especially due to consumerism. This is highlighted through activities such as “Shop Til you Drop” and “Building your own sustainable town”. We are also using a new approach to solar cooking by having meals cooked in smaller groups and served “family style”.

NaDEET Centre is even more accessible to rural and underprivileged schools and communities thanks to the generous support of several of our donors. More than half of our May and June visitors were sponsored by our European Union grant and Nedbank’s Go Green Fund. These sponsorships allowed us to provide needy schools with a transport assistance grant. Lack of public transportation and the high price of private buses remains a tremendous barrier for schools in the region.

Environmental Literacy

Our main environmental literacy project, the *Bush Telegraph*, has just celebrated 10 years. With a total of 22 issues produced, the latest issue was in support of the International Year of Forests. In recognition of forests the issue was printed on recycled paper for the first time. This is unfortunately much more expensive in Namibia still than normal paper, but we hope through demand that this can change. With a readership of more than 15,000 Namibians, the *Bush Telegraph*’s impact on informing these people about their environment is growing. All issues of the *Bush Telegraph* are available on our website at www.nadeet.org/educationalMaterial.html.

Photo: NaDEET Photo Library

NaDEET’s intern, Vilho, explains fire bricks (made of recycled paper and used as fuel) to youth at the CCA Youth Climate Change Fair.

Climate Change Adaptation

NaDEET has been actively involved in the Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) programme of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism. NaDEET’s Director was one of 81 Climate Change Ambassadors that were recognised during a gala dinner in June. The ambassador programme aims to identify experts in various fields that can advise about developing policies and implementing programmes to adapt and mitigate climate change. At the end of July, NaDEET participated in the CCA Youth Climate Change Fair in Windhoek that was attended by approximately 250 young people from around the country. NaDEET’s information stand was well visited and everyone was enthusiastic about learning more about sustainable living.

Viktoria Keding

Photo: NaDEET Photo Library

Secondary school learner shows her solar baked pizza.

Where has the desert gone?

Many visitors to the NamibRand Nature Reserve have likely asked this question, and we could hardly help ourselves asking the same. Yet, if you are collecting plants, then this is certainly your year!

After my research trip to inselbergs in the NamibRand Reserve in 2010, I returned with colleagues from the National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI) in March 2011 to continue studying the fascinating flora of this part of Namibia. Our focus this time was, however, the mountains and plains to the west of the Reserve (Chowagas and Awasib). Nevertheless, we could not just pass through without not at least having a brief look at some "unchartered" terrain. During our preparation work we had realized that the Aandstêr "square", the grid covering the Aandstêr farmhouse and its surroundings, had very few records in the NBRI database. We usually work with quarter-degree references, that is, the map divided into a 15 minute-

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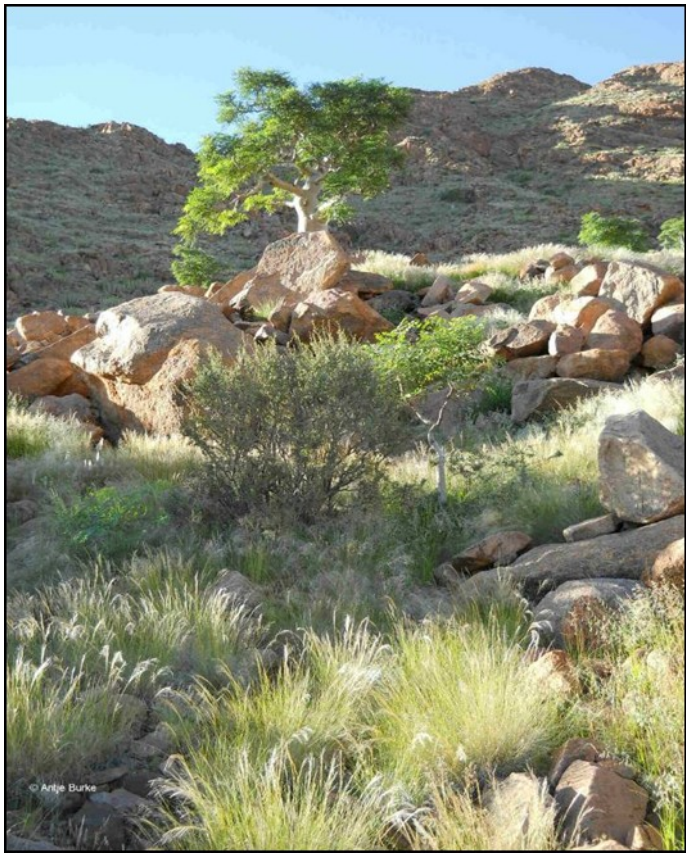


Photo: Antje Burke

A remarkable grass cover awaited us near the top of the "Aandstêr koppies".

(Continued from p9)

interval grid system, for those not familiar with tree or bird "atlassing", and the previous collections in such a grid or square guide the on-going collecting effort to ensure that we do not collect the same plants over and over again.

Apart from general collecting *en route* through the Aandstêr area, this year with sweeping grass cover and carpets of colourful herbs where the grass had left some gaps, we expected to find some interesting plants on the inselberg just north-west of the Aandstêr farmhouse. It has no known name, and for the lack of a better word, we have christened it the "Aandstêr koppie". It is in fact a group of several outcrops composed of rounded granite boulders – Spes Bona syenite to be correct, following the geologist Ken Hart's description – and of the kind that has always turned up some interesting plants, no matter where I have looked in the Namib so far. We were not disappointed. Although no plant has so far appeared that has not yet been recorded on the Reserve's plant species list, plant identifications are still under way and some new records may still be added. Yet with over 200 species on the present plant list for the Reserve, it will be hard to add something new, even after an exceptional season. But there were plenty of new records for the Aandstêr "square".

Apart from two different species of cork wood (*Commiphora saxicola* and *Commiphora tenuipetiolota*), we were surprised to find an enormous fig (*Ficus cordata*) wedged in between boulders higher up, as well as bushman candles (*Sarcocaulon marlothii*) and plentiful resurrection bush (*Myrothamnus flabellifolius*) plants already around the base of the koppies.

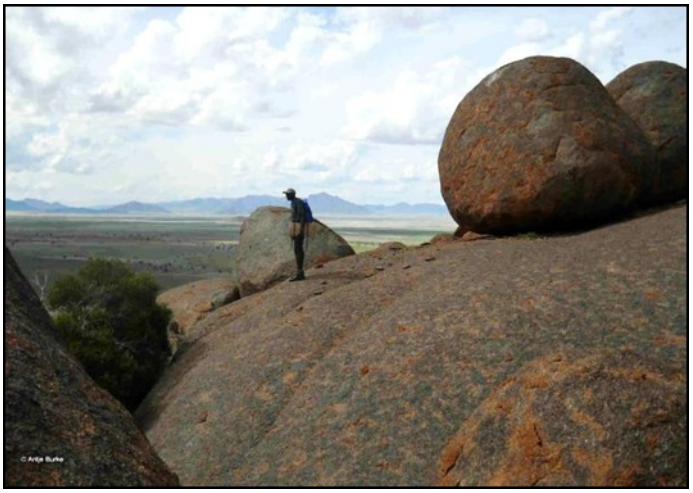


Photo: Antje Burke

No mountain is too high or slope too steep for Leevi Nanyeni of the National Botanical Research Institute, who ensured that new plants were collected and added to the Herbarium's specimens collection.

Also striking was the diversity of shrubs and herbs, some of which grow only on mountain slopes in this area, such as the pretty, red-flowered shrub *Hibiscus elliottiae*. Tall moringas (*Moringa ovalifolia*) and the majestic Namib resin-tree (*Ozoroa crassinervia*), as well as gnarled shepherds' trees (*Boscia albitrunca*) add other interesting plant features to this koppie. Grass cover on the Aandstêr koppie was also remarkable this year, as plant growth on these granite koppies is normally restricted to the areas along the base of boulders, overhangs and channels running off the mountain. So the rather hostile looking granite slabs usually do not support much growth, but this year some areas between the boulders, where some soil accumulated, did.

How does Aandstêr koppie compare to the other very distinct inselberg, Jagkop, on Wolwedans in the northern part of the Reserve? Many of the same plants can be found on both, such as both cork wood species, moringa, Namib resin-tree and resurrection bush, but Jagkop also supports a population of quiver trees (*Aloe dichotoma*), while bushman candles (*Sarcocaulon marlothii*) were found only on the Aandstêr koppies. So there are certainly some differences.

Curious were some man-made, low stone walls running across a saddle between two of the peaks. Too low to stop even goats from clambering over, we thought at first, perhaps a farm boundary, but were assured by Aandstêr residents that there is certainly no boundary running across the koppie. However, the wardens put us on the right track and it seems that we may have come across a new archaeological site – a series of hunting hides or blinds – built by late Holocene hunter-gatherers and likely used sporadically during the last 700 years. We may have to come back to have another look at this…

Antje Burke

Photo: Antje Burke

*Hard to miss when in flower, this indigenous hibiscus (*Hibiscus elliottiae*) is found in rocky habit on the NamibRand Nature Reserve.*

The search for fairy shrimps on NamibRand

NamibRand is famous for its Fairy Circles; but in late December 2010 we visited some pans and pools near Keerweder on the Reserve, searching for "fairy shrimps" and their eggs. Fairy shrimps are small, beautiful crustaceans (a large class of arthropod animals with hard shells, mostly aquatic, including crabs and shrimps) that live in temporary pools and pans when these have water, along with other aquatic crustacea such as clam shrimps and tadpole shrimps. Amazingly, they can all last in the form of eggs or cysts for many years between rainfall events and then have to grow quickly to mature, mate and lay eggs before the pools dry up again.

As it is difficult to time visits to wet pools in Namibia, we collect dry mud opportunistically and later try to hatch out the invertebrates in the laboratory. Very few eggs were spotted at NamibRand but some mud samples were taken back to Windhoek. Later the mud samples were made part of a rehydration study of mud samples from the Southern Namib by Martin Herman, a Polytechnic of Namibia student who did his in-service training and research project with the Aquatic Ecology Section of the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry.

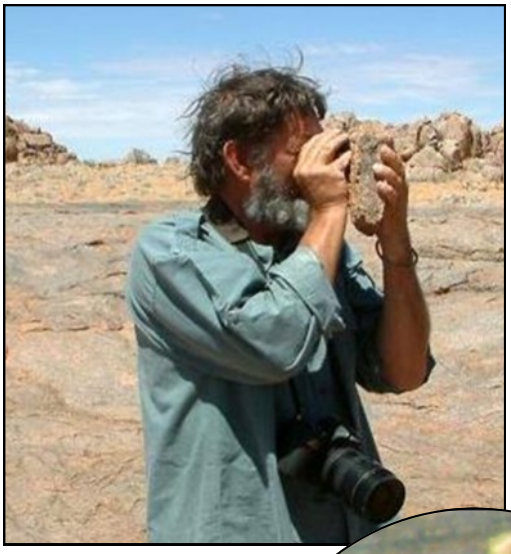
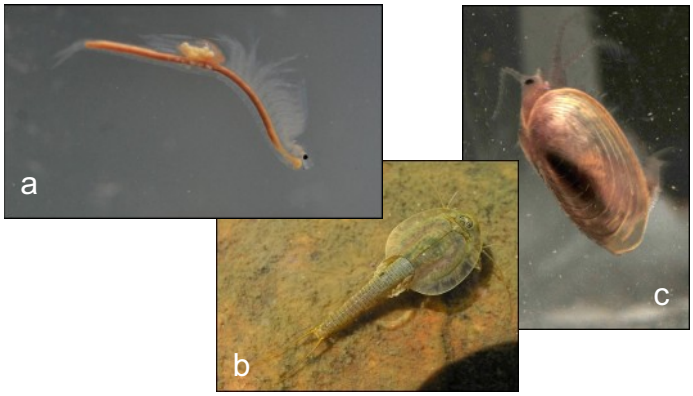


Photo: Ann Scott

Photo: supplied by Kevin Roberts

Above: Kevin Roberts hunting for fairy shrimp eggs at NamibRand; the inset shows fairy shrimp eggs of two species, under magnification: each egg is about the size of a pin-head!



Photos supplied by Kevin Roberts

(a) Fairy shrimp or Anostraca with long orange egg sacks of the genus Streptocephalus*.*
(b) Tadpole shrimp or Triops *have been around since the Triassic Period; this is the commonest of two species in Namibia,* Triops granaries*.*
(c) Clam shrimp or Chonchostraca *grows up to 18mm long, this one is of the family Leptestheriidae.*

Martin put mud samples into small glass tanks and added distilled water to see what might grow out. This was part of an ongoing project where mud is collected and eggs hatched from all over Namibia. Usually after 48 hours, small "beasties" can be seen swimming with little jerking movements. After a few days one can easily see which is a fairy shrimp and which is a clam shrimp by their different ways of moving; fairy shrimps glide along on their backs. After two to three weeks the females have eggs and the males are mature enough to be identified down to species using keys developed in South Africa (see below*).

The following aquatic invertebrate species hatched from mud collected at Keerweeder Pan were grown to maturity, identified and added to the National distribution records:

- Fairy shrimp (*Branchipodopsis tridens*)
- Clam shrimp (*Leptestheria inermis*)
- Cladoceran (daphnia; *Moina belli*)

Unfortunately the mud samples collected from two other pools on NamibRand were not included in Martin's project, but will be hydrated soon.

Anyone who would like to grow or collect fairy shrimps can send samples (preserved in alcohol and with details, a GPS reading and description of the location) to Kevin Roberts at Department of Water Affairs in Windhoek, email robertsk@mawf.gov.na.

* JA Day, BA Stewart, IJ de Moor and AE Louw *Eds.* (1999). Freshwater Invertebrates of Southern Africa. Crustacea 1 *Notostraca, Anostraca, Conchostraca and Cladocera*.

This and other freshwater invertebrate keys can be obtained from the Water Research Commission, PO Box 824, Pretoria.

Kevin Roberts

Polytechnic student, Martin Herman.

Discovery of a new gecko
at Sossusvlei Desert Lodge

Photos: W.R. (Bill) BRanch

Above: Pachydactylus etultra*: adult female holotype.*
Below: Pachydactylus etultra*: hatchling paratype, showing the characteristic boldly contrasting pattern.*

At Sossusvlei Desert Lodge (SDL), one aspect that greatly enhances the experience of guests is our astronomy programme. Since 2003 a number of people have visited SDL as the guest astronomer. All the astronomers entertain the guests at night with a chat about the fantastic night sky we see from the lodge.

But these astronomers contribute so much more than simply those wonderfully entertaining evenings by the telescope. They each come with their own interests and skills and many pass on a great deal more to the guests, to the staff at the lodge and even to the greater NamibRand Nature Reserve (NRNR; such as spending time at NaDEET). Probably the best known example is of a guest astronomer (Robin Catchpole) who discovered the Bushman paintings under an overhang just 40 minutes' walk from the lodge.

Miles Paul has been one of the regular astronomers since 2003, and his background as a biologist has been wonderful for us, especially for the guides.

Miles, who is sometimes joined at the lodge with his wife, Dorothy, is a great naturalist and spends a great deal of time exploring the hills, dunes and plains on the northern part of NRNR.

No year had richer rewards for his efforts than 2006. With then the best rain we had on record – and by a huge margin – 2006 was a great year to be in the desert. The previous year had been dry, with some of our rain meters measuring less than 30 mm for the whole year; in 2006 some rain meters had more than 230 before the summer rains were done. A massive change happened in the Namib that I certainly had never seen before.

Miles first found some tadpoles in a pond that we later realized holds water for a few months after each rain. I discovered Bushman paintings by this same waterhole later on. It turned out that the tadpoles were Marbled Rubber Frogs – already known to be on NRNR. But it was a treat for us, none the less. For anyone who knows NRNR from the dry times, seeing tadpoles is just incredible.

Then one night Miles was on his way back to his "desert villa" and saw a small reptile on the pathway. It turned out to be the brightly colored nymph of an unusual little gecko. After studying the books we discovered that we couldn't get an identification on this creature – and Peter Dunning, then lodge manager at SDL, got hold of Dr Bill Branch, a well known reptile taxonomist and curator of Herpetology at the Bayworld in Port Elizabeth. Bill was interested. We knew there was something special about this creature!

In September 2006, Bill visited the lodge (along with Johan Marais). Johan wrote about the trip here (www.johanmarais.co.za/tripnamibianamaqualand.htm - see the September 21st report for his discussion of *Pachydactylus sp. 3 cf serval*).

After checking it out, Bill confirmed that he suspected that it was a new species. He would come out and collect again in 2007.

In about April 2007 Bill Branch and his wife visited the lodge for several days. We spent many evenings up on the hill looking for the little gecko. We found both male and female adults, a juvenile and a nymph. We were lucky, as finding these tiny creatures is hard.

We heard from Bill a short while ago that, after years of waiting, his paper had finally been published – and our gecko had a name. Bill has been involved with our company for many years, sometimes hosting people on special trips, but most often helping to train our guides. We were delighted when we heard what the creature had been called – ***Pachydactylus etultra***! *Pachydactylus* is the genus but *etultra*, the specific name, is named after our company, &Beyond - '*et*' meaning 'and' and '*ultra*' meaning 'beyond', in Latin.

Pachydactylus etultra is a tiny creature. It is a rock-dwelling gecko, much like the well known *Pachydactylus turneri* (now renamed *Chondrodactylus turneri).* But it is much smaller, and would most likely be eaten by these larger geckos, were they to share too much of their niche. So it tends to live in the rock piles or on the face of much smaller boulders than the larger geckos. From about end April till mid September one simply

(Continued on p13)

(Continued from p12)

doesn't see these smaller geckos, and even when they are out and about, they're hard to find. When you approach they often dive into a rock pile long before your flashlight has provided a glimpse of them.

To the best of my knowledge, these geckos are still known only from the region just around the lodge – we have no idea how much further up or down the eastern Namib these creatures extend.

Having guided in the desert for many years (and grown up in a very different desert in northern Kenya), I've come to appreciate that one of the most special aspects of deserts is that there are many hidden gems – you need time to take in what's special about the desert – not just these amazing little creatures – but to take in the desert itself. The more time you spend there, the more the proverbial Namib sands trickle in – revealing the layers of depth and character of these amazing dry regions.

Vernon Swanepoel

Vultures are tops –

International Vulture Awareness Day

Vultures are a charismatic, ecologically vital group of birds that face a range of threats in many areas. Populations of many species are under pressure and some are facing extinction.

Well-known conservationist, Richard Leakey comments that ***the decline of vultures across Africa is one of the saddest and most serious biodiversity crises facing the continent***. In recent years, the problem of deliberate poisoning (in particular through the misuse of pesticides) is escalating to unsustainable proportions. This practice takes place because vultures may indicate the presence of poachers to law enforcers by quickly locating carcasses; they are thus seen as a threat to these illegal activities. Vultures are also poisoned for the muthi (muti) trade; or they may feed on carcasses poisoned to control other scavengers, or predators.

International Vulture Awareness Day has grown from Vulture Awareness Days initiated by the Birds of Prey Programme in South Africa and the Hawk Conservancy Trust in England, who then decided to work together and expand it into an international event. The purpose of this day is to create awareness of the continued plight of all vulture species, and to highlight the work done by conservationists to monitor populations and implement effective measures to conserve these birds and their habitats.

This year, International Vulture Awareness Day took place on 3 September 2011 and was dedicated to the splendour of vultures across the globe and the critically important services they provide in our environment. The aim was for each participating organisation to carry out its own activities that highlight vulture conservation and awareness. But one doesn't have to be a zoo, bird park or conservation organisation to become involved. Have a look at the following websites to see how you can become involved—at any time of the year: www.vultureday.org; www.ewt.org.za; www.nnf.org.na/RAPTORS/INDEX.htm; www.restafrica.org.

Photo: Peter Woolfe

On 22 January 2011, around 100 Lappet-faced Vultures were seen in the south of NamibRand during a 4 mm precipitation of fog.

Despite repeated poisoning incidents in the Namib Desert, vulture numbers appear to be on the increase on NamibRand (see the May 2010 edition of this newsletter). This phenomenon is possibly associated with the increase in predator activity and the associated restoration of the natural balance. Up to 100 Lappet-faced Vultures have been recorded in one day, and up to 64 White-backed Vultures at a time; but bear in mind that the birds move around for great distances, depending on the availability of food and other factors.

Although the numbers of vultures observed on NamibRand are relatively high, the number of nests recorded on the Reserve itself remains low, with a maximum of three nests in 2006 and 2007, and only one each for the last three years (the latter producing two chicks in total).

Both Lappet-faced Vulture and White-backed Vulture are listed as *Vulnerable* on the (draft) Namibian Red Data List; the former species is also *Globally Threatened*. Due to their threatened conservation status, vulture numbers and movements are being monitored all over the world, including by ringing/tagging; any re-sighting records are always much appreciated.

Please look out for any signs of vulture breeding activity on the Reserve (from about May to October), bearing in mind that the birds are especially sensitive to disturbance at such times; report vultures that are weak or appear to have been poisoned; and vultures marked with colour rings or yellow shoulder tags, as the details are important for scientific research. If possible try to record the color ring combination (vulture's left or right leg, colours from top-bottom) and/or the tag number, and the number on the metal ring if a carcass is found.

Hopefully these magnificent giants of the sky will continue to increase as they find a safe haven on NamibRand! Please help us to raise awareness about the problem so that we can save our vultures.

Ann Scott

The return of the Arabian oryx

Photo: David Mallon

A grain of hope in the Arabian Desert: the Arabian or white oryx has been brought back from the brink of extinction.

Photo: Ann Scott

There are marked similarities—and differences—between our own oryx or gemsbok (above) and the Arabian or white oryx (photo on left).

The regal Arabian or white oryx (*Oryx leucoryx*), which was hunted to near extinction in the Arabian Desert, is now facing a more secure future according to the latest update of the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™. Its wild population now stands at 1,000 individuals.

"To have brought the Arabian Oryx back from the brink of extinction is a major feat and a true conservation success story, one which we hope will be repeated many times over for other threatened species," says Ms Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, Director General of the Environment Agency-Abu Dhabi. "It is a classic example of how data from the IUCN Red List can feed into on-the-ground conservation action to deliver tangible and successful results."

The Arabian oryx is a large species of antelope endemic to the Arabian Peninsula. Locally known as Al Maha, it features heavily in Arabic poetry and paintings.

It is believed the last wild individual was shot in 1972. As the extent of the decline became apparent, some of the last animals were captured to form a "World Herd" which, along with individuals from royal collections in Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, provided stock for re-introductions into the wild.

This year, thanks to successful captive breeding and re-introduction efforts, the oryx has finally qualified for a move from the *Endangered* category to *Vulnerable* on the IUCN Red List—the first time that a species that was once *Extinct in the Wild* has improved by three categories.

The Arabian oryx is uniquely adapted to living in extremely arid environments.

- Its wide hooves enable it to walk easily across shifting sand;
- It can smell water from miles away;
- It lives in small herds of eight to 10 animals, which is believed to reduce stress in individuals in the harsh desert ecosystem;
- It tends to seek the shade and often feeds at dusk, detecting and rooting up succulent tubers buried up to half a metre underground.

Four species of oryx occur worldwide, the other three being native to arid parts of Africa. All prefer near-desert conditions and are able to survive without water for many days. The impressive long horns (present on both males and females) of oryx render them a prized game trophy.

NamibRand Nature Reserve boasts a population of some 5,000 oryx or gemsbok (*Oryx gazella*). Fortunately, timeous conservation action has secured its future in the Reserve and elsewhere before such drastic measures as captive breeding and re-introduction became necessary.

Ann Scott

Based on a news story (16/6/11): http://www.iucn.org/knowledge/news/?7671/A-grain-of-hope-in-the-desert&utm_campaign=1108177124&utm_content=1006514660018&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Emailvision

Update from N/a'an ku sê

and other news of our large cats

N/a'an ku sê news

My name is Stuart Munro and I hail from Aberdeen in the north-east of Scotland. I received an honours degree in Zoology from the University of Glasgow. Until now, most of my research experience has been conducted in entomological studies (including beetles, butterflies and bees, ants and wasps), however I am excited to be among you now in NamibRand Nature Reserve and look forward to working closely with you all.

My growing experience and learning of the large carnivores of this unique habitat I am becoming to call home never fails to inspire me to expand my knowledge and I am eager to benefit from all your combined years of knowledge and experience.

Since I took over the reins at NamibRand as Assistant Researcher for N/a'an ku sê Wildlife Sanctuary, I have been

(Continued on p15)

(Continued from p14)

monitoring several remote IR (infra-red) camera traps at various waterholes around the reserve, and hope to add more in the near future. Some of the images captured have been truly breathtaking and there have been some exciting results.

A large male leopard has been photographed at Prosopis waterhole on three separate occasions on the nights of 23 March 2011 and 9 April 2011, then again in the early morning of 11 April 2011. I will attempt to confirm that this is indeed the same individual by using spot pattern recognition for identification. An even more exciting discovery was when a group of three cheetahs, with no visible VHF radio collars, were photographed at Straussenwasser waterhole in the early morning of 10 May 2011. Judging from the images it appears this may well be the same three cheetahs (two adult, one sub-adult) photographed from one of the NamibSky Balloon Safaris' hot-air balloons on 24 March 2011 (see May edition of this newsletter).

On 23 July 2011, I was honoured to see a brand new cheetah cub in the dunes west of Kwessiegat. I had picked up the signal of one of the female cheetahs [N029 “Lilly”], released by N/a’an ku sê in conjunction with NamibRand Nature Reserve, and duly followed it across the dunes. Out of nowhere suddenly sprang a very young cheetah cub followed quickly by its mother leaping up, growling at us, and running off (thankfully) in the opposite direction. This is the fourth cat released by N/a’an ku sê that has bred, proving that all the work put in to reintroduce cheetahs to NamibRand is being successful. We will follow the progress of this mother and her offspring with great interest and report back in the future with any interesting or exciting developments – watch this space.

Spotted hyenas continue to be photographed at Prosopis waterhole; we are attempting to use spot pattern recognition to determine the number of different individuals observed.

At Kalkpomp waterhole several images were captured of an African wildcat. In one series we even retrieved images of the capture of a sand grouse by the cat.

Among the many birds that have been photographed are raptors such as Tawny Eagle, Lappet-faced Vulture, Greater Kestrel, Lanner Falcon, Spotted Eagle-Owl, Barn Owl, Secretarybird, and Southern Pale Chanting Goshawk. Mammalian species captured include aardwolf, bat-eared fox, hare, jackal, striped polecat and small-spotted genet.

Photo: N/a'an ku sê stealth cameras

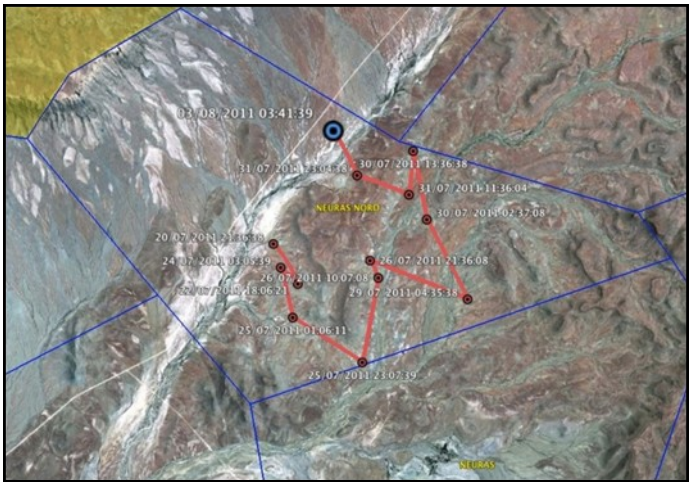
An African wildcat captures a sandgrouse.

I look forward to reporting back in the near future with more exciting images and interesting sightings.

Stuart Munro

Photos: N/a'an ku sê stealth cameras

Top to bottom: Leopard, three cheetahs, two cheetahs and three hyaenas "captured" at NamibRand by a remote Iinfra-red camera.



Map: Rob Thomson

Photo: Ann Scott

Photos: NRNR camera traps

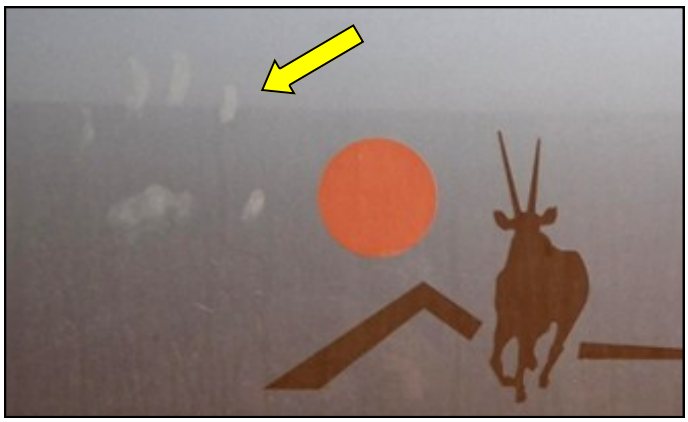


Photo: Ann Scott

Top left: Satellite tracking of female cheetah; Bottom left: Cheetah at Toskaan; Right (top to bottom): cheetah at Porcupine; one leopard and two leopards at Porcupine; leopard spoor on NRNR vehicle.

Other cheetah sightings/records

Satellite-tracked female cheetah (August 2011)

Our "lady" has spent all of the past fortnight on the northern portion of Neuras. She executed a rough loop and ended up in a river valley and almost as far north as she's ever been. As of 03:40 AM on Wednesday morning she was 600m SW of the border between Neuras and Onis, 4.8 km SE of the edge of the Namib-Nauklauft National Park (yellow area on map), and 51 km NE of the NRNR boundary (Vreemdelingspoort).

Rob Thomson

- Three cheetahs at Bushmankoppies (7/6/11), Chateau (20/7/11) and Toskaan (25/8/11)
- Single (uncollared) cheetah at Porcupine (18/7/11)

NRNR staff

Other leopard sightings

- Three leopards at Toskaan (7/6/11)
- Single leopard (5/8/11) and two leopards (28/8/11) at Porcupine
- An apparently young leopard left its track in the Keerweder grounds during July-September, and a footprint on our vehicle door on 23/8/11

NRNR staff

Interesting sightings and photo gallery I



Left: Aptosimum spinescens*—plentiful on the gravel plains at present. Centre: The fruits of the tsamma melon attract many kinds of invertebrates; Right: What is it—is it a spider web? In May 2011 these strange items were abundant on the Keerweder Plains (Ann Scott).*


Left: Orb spider at Keerweder (Ann Scott). Centre: A toktokkie doing battle with a ladybird; surprisingly the seemingly superior toktokkie gave way in the end (Barbara Wayrauch).

Above: A gorgeous pair of clubtail dragonflies mating in the dunes south of Hyena Water, 19 May 2009: fam. Gomphidae – possibly species Ceratogomphus pictus *(Dorothy Paul).*


Left: Solifuge caught in the dining area at Sossusvlei Desert Lodge, 2 November 2007 (Dorothy Paul). Centre: Large water scavenger beetles (Hydrophilidae) approx. same length (~3.4 cm) as the tadpole of a marbled rubber frog (Dorothy Paul).



Left: Namaqua chameleon observed crossing the sand track near Petrified Dunes (Miles Paul); Centre: Puff adder curled up in the vicinity of Sossusvlei Desert Lodge (Miles Paul). Right: This large rock monitor (1+ m long) may have been laying eggs at the side of the track? (Ann Scott).

Interesting sightings and photo gallery II


Left: Dusky Sunbird; Centre: Bokmakierie (Miles Paul). Right: Red-faced Mousebirds were added to our checklist this year (Ann Scott).


Left: Double-banded Sandgrouse; Centre: Red-headed Finch; Right: Scaly-feathered Finch, all photographed at NamibRand (Miles Paul).



Left: Two giraffe bulls "necking" to establish dominance; Centre: a group of young oryx in July 2011 (Ann Scott). Right: a kudu bull and a klipspringer at the Porcupine waterhole (NRNR camera trap).



Left: Black-backed jackals trot through the grass (Ann Scott). Centre: An aardwolf and group of bat-eared foxes , and Right: A porcupine—all at Porcupine water hole (NRNR camera trap).

More photographs

Photo: George Tucker

Photo: George Tucker

A spectacular lunar eclipse, photographed at Sossusvlei Desert Lodge on 15 June 2011. The moon passed through the middle of the earth's shadow and became red at the mid-point of the eclipse.

Photo: Ann Scott

A dusky pink landscape at "Sunset Boulevard", Wolwedans.

Photo: Ann Scott

The Keerweder Plains, viewed from Erfstuk, south of Toekoms.

Thank you

Many thanks to those of you who have contributed to this issue of *The Barking Gecko* by providing articles: Antje Burke, Albi Brückner, Quintin Hartung, Viktoria Keding, Valeri Mouton, Stuart Munro, Nils Odendaal, Kevin Roberts, Eric Schacht and Vernon Swanepoel. We would also like to thank all those who so generously share their photographs and interesting sightings—we just wish there were more space to include them! Also thank you to Nils Odendaal for his editorial inputs and assistance. *The Barking Gecko* is your newsletter and, as always, we invite you to keep on sending us your contributions in terms of news and views, short reports, sightings, artwork and photographs!

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