



Waterberg Nature Conservancy Newsletter

Occasionally issued news of interest to WNC members and others in the Waterberg

Number 10, April 2010

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Newsletter items by John Miller unless otherwise attributed.

Next WNC Meeting

Date: Thursday, 27 May 2010

Venue: Farmers Hall, Vaalwater

Time: 2:30 pm

Guest Speaker: Peter Oberem Parasites: a Game Rancher's Perspective

A relatively new member of the Conservancy, Peter is a veterinarian and Managing Director of Afrivet, the largest South African-owned animal health company.

He is also the Director of Limpopo Agribusiness Development Corporation (as appointed by the MEC for Agriculture).

Also on the agenda, briefings from:

Ant Baber on Rhino Poaching in the Waterberg
and

Willie Stone on Fire Protection Association
and

Adam Gunn on the Limpopo Environmental Action Forum

Cash Bar and Light Supper at Very Reasonable Prices

RSVP to Heidi Carlton by Tuesday 25 May 2010
(contact details at left)

Support for a Bursary and a Charitable Organisation

During the last year, the Executive Committee has been discussing ways in which the Conservancy might support worthy social projects in the Waterberg. We have agreed to proceed on two such projects.

First, we have established a process to support a Matriculant from any Waterberg secondary school who chooses to pursue his or her education at the tertiary level in a field related to nature conservation, environmental protection, or tourism management. We are pleased to announce the first recipient of this bursary – **Salome Seaba**. Since Salome left Meetsetshehla Secondary School with her Matric in 2006, she has been studying for a National Diploma in Water Care at Tshwane University of Technology. Having earned high marks, including several distinctions, Salome is now in her fourth and final year. She intends to work to ensure clean and safe water in rural areas, thus combating cholera, malaria, and typhoid. The Conservancy will contribute an amount of R5000 to her tuition in 2010.

Second, we will soon be soliciting applications from local charitable organisations, one of which we will select for some financial support from the Conservancy.

Night Skies

Many of us enjoy clear views of the night skies. Here's a website for those of you who wonder what you are looking at – www.heavens-above.com. Enter your GPS co-ordinates to see what you can expect to see above you, including satellites.

Resource Person in Vaalwater

The Limpopo parliamentary constituency office is located in Village Square across the road from the Post Office in Vaalwater. Luther Mokjoto manages that office and he may be able to help you navigate to and through municipal and provincial offices. He can be reached at 082 905 6224.

Rhino Poaching

by Ant Baber

I thank you for the opportunity to share a matter of great concern to not only myself, but to all the rhino and game reserve owners in the Waterberg. Some of us are aware of the huge looming threat of rhino poaching in our area, and some still have not realised how extremely vulnerable we are to what seems to be military-styled and efficient poaching syndicates. There is enough evidence to suggest that the ever increasing Eastern influence across Africa has brought a very hungry market for rhino horn to our doorsteps. So far, 33 have been poached in South Africa since the beginning of the year, with last year's tally being nearly 140 animals. The Waterberg alone has tragically had rhino killed at the Rhino Museum, Welgevonden and Kamonande, just outside of Vaalwater. Five rhinos in the Vaalwater vicinity!

We, as the custodians of the rhino, have to rely on our own resources now to protect this valuable resource, as the Government seems to have neither the will nor ability to help us. It is thus vital that we are coordinated and linked to other concerned members as there are structures emerging where information is shared, and security coordinated. There can be no tolerance of any individuals in our area who are found to be associated with this illegal, inhumane activity.

Unfortunately, what often occurs when a carcass is found is that people contaminate what is really a crime scene, making the job of the forensic teams extremely difficult as many a vital clue or bit of evidence is destroyed by the curious. Communication is vital between rhino owners and both the formal and informal security sectors, who can assist in either apprehending poachers or making the area uncomfortable for them to operate in. There are structures available here in the Waterberg that one can belong to, at no expense, that can make all the difference. There are often many signs to look out for if one is informed, and measures can be taken to make your rhino less of a target. General farm security can go hand in hand with protecting one's rhino. It is thus vital that we get together and discuss how we are to protect both ourselves and our rhino in this area. We look forward to discussing this at the next Conservancy meeting.

Invasive Plant Species and Our Community

by Wendy Adams

Pompom weed (*Campuloclinium macrocephalum*) is an ornamental South American herb belonging to the daisy family, Asteraceae. It is rapidly becoming the most serious threat to the conservation of grasslands in South Africa.

Pompom is alive and thriving in the Waterberg.

I drive down our roads radiating out from Vaalwater, and indeed the town roads as well, and am filled with a sense of despair at our community's obvious ignorance and apathy in the face of the invasive plants problem.

I am lucky enough to own and enjoy 1000 hectares of the most magnificent land in our mountains, but am fully cognisant of the fact that I am only a custodian of this land for future generations. What will we be leaving to them? A land with perhaps some indigenous wildlife species (which we are so proud to "own") living in a biome unrecognisable from what it was. Our water courses will be depleted and our grass species outcompeted. Foreign flowers will bloom across the landscape – how will you explain their presence to those tourists you work so hard to encourage to visit? How will you explain to your grandchildren (who will surely face food shortages and water crises) that it is no longer possible to run wildlife or domestic animals on your land because there is no longer any decent grazing?

We need to take our custodianship of the land more seriously. Whether you are a South African or a foreigner fortunate enough to own a piece of the Waterberg, you have no right to ignore the laws of our land. And you especially have no right to affect the integrity of the neighbouring lands around you. I know many of us work long and hard at eradicating invasive species, costing much time and funds, only for our land to be re-contaminated each year by the wind- and bird-dispersed seeds from neighbouring properties. I drive past one of our celebrity-status, privately-owned reserves which boasts the big five and am aghast that they are allowing Lantana to grow uncontrolled on their land. I know of landowners who are growing Lantana in their front yard "because it looks pretty" and others propagating exotic Syringa species "because they are such nice shade trees"!

Many landowners pour money into acquiring the glamorous big game species and building fancy lodges and

homes, but ignore the fact that if you do not look after the base of the pyramid that supports all life, i.e., the land, your future is no longer secure.

Business owners in Vaalwater, who rely for their livelihood on the surrounding land and landowners, should play their part as well, by controlling invasives, especially Pompom, which is growing unchecked in our town.

Don't rely on provincial departments to control invasives on the verges of the roads. It won't happen, so take responsibility for the verges outside your fences to prevent re-contamination.

Ah, you say ... but it costs too much money to control these species. Rubbish! Take a walk every evening with a plastic bag and, at the very least, pick any flower head of Pompom that you see, put it in the bag and burn it. If you can control the dispersal of Pompom seed, you are halfway to getting the job done. If you can't afford to look after the land you are lucky enough to own, then you shouldn't own it.

We live in an area with thousands of unemployed people. In mid-summer, hire a small team or the wives of your workers for as long as you can afford. With only spades and supervision, you will be amazed at what an impact they can have on the spread of Lantana, Bankrupt bush, Prickly pear etc.

One of the fully-functioning government departments is the Agricultural Research Council (ARC). Their Plant Protection Institute monitors the emergence of invasive species in South Africa and works towards efficient ways to eradicate them. The Conservation of Agricultural Resources Act (CARA), Act 43 of 1983 (amended in 2001 and currently under revision) is aimed at the long term management and prevention of invasives. Alien plants fall into one of three categories according to their threat and impact. Category 1 invaders are prohibited plants, which must be controlled or eradicated. These plants serve no economic purpose and possess characteristics that are harmful to humans, animals or the environment. Both Pompom weed and Lantana are classified as Category 1 invaders and it is therefore illegal to harbour, plant, propagate or sell these plants. Landowners are therefore compelled to control them or face prosecution.

Look at ARC's website www.arc.agric.za to familiarise yourself with the declared invaders. The list is too long to reproduce here, but you'll find detailed and useful information and the correct control measures for specific alien plants. The website of the Working for Water Programme also has useful information – www.dwaf.gov.za/wfw.

South Africa has sound environmental laws which have been passed for good reasons, not least of which is to protect this beautiful land of ours. Respect these laws, respect your neighbours and do your part in controlling and eradicating invasive and exotic plant species.

Mystery Wild Dog Pack at Lapalala

by Jessica Babich

As the *in situ* film crew at Lapalala Wilderness, my husband Patrick and I are on constant standby for any exciting wildlife action. After moving to the Reserve permanently in November last year, we have been able to film and document some incredible and unique wildlife action!

The challenge with filming wildlife is, of course, not only finding the animal, but actually getting worthy footage – even when the terrain and conditions are less than accommodating.

On top of this, the animals need to be willing to be caught on film. Animals and birds seem to have an uncanny knack of 'feeling' when the lens is upon them, typically running or flying away or hiding behind a bush just as you are beginning to get footage!!!

In November last year, we were radioed urgently, as a large pack of wild dogs was found near Kolobe camp! Although there are resident packs in the Reserve which are occasionally sighted, only some photographs had ever been taken of a few individuals.

Wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*) are high on the endangered species list. Their efficacy as predators combined with their need to traverse large territories through unprotected areas means that they are constantly at risk.

Researchers on the Reserve had spotted wild dog at various intervals throughout last year but, of course, they always disappeared whenever Pat and I went looking for them!

We had received a call earlier in the day – a pack had been seen close to the Kolobe Bridge. Evidence of the pack in nearby areas on the Reserve had been found in the form of a kudu and warthog carcass, but as yet the elusive dogs had remained unseen.

As it was drawing closer to late afternoon/evening, we received another call from a staff member on his way out of the Reserve – he had just seen the wild dogs crossing Kolobe Bridge!!

Pat and I threw (not literally, but close!) our film gear into the car and off we barreled. We had already gone

scouting for the dogs earlier in the day, but to no avail. And then ... our luck turned.

On this particular evening, the dogs had made a kill in some thick riverine bush and soft twittering sounds emanated from the reeds – the only clue that dogs were there.

At last, the dogs decided to show themselves and we were ready, with our cameras rolling! This pack was a large one, totaling roughly 24 members and they emerged from the bush once they had had their fill, staring curiously at the film vehicle and sticking together.

Feeding amongst wild dogs is co-operative. Although the kill itself was not visible, the dogs were clearly taking turns at the carcass, one group moving away whilst another moved in, depending on status and hierarchy in the pack.

Packs are led by an alpha female and male and they are highly social animals, each with individual and distinctive markings. There were clearly youngsters in the group, who were periodically whipped into shape by the dominant male and female.

We had so many questions: Was this a new pack in the territory, or had one of the resident packs bred very successfully? Where did they come from and where do they go if they are not on Lapalala?

We took our questions to Anton Walker and he advised us to get in touch with Dion Cilliers from the Endangered Wildlife Trust. Dion and Anton were very excited. Apparently, this pack may very well be the one that has been moving between Botswana and South Africa for many years, periodically sighted by people over time.

But as yet, to our knowledge, no footage or photos had been taken of them to assist with identification or database compilation. Lapalala's footage was the first!

But the challenge has only just begun. More information about these dogs is required – not only to save them from the hunter's gun, but also to find out if this indeed is the legendary pack from Botswana.

According to recent information from Dion, this pack is more than likely the Super Pack that traverses thousands of kilometers of African bush and farmlands – perhaps the last of their kind to do so in Africa.

The hunt is now on to find out more about this pack and to gather as much information as possible about them. Permits have been granted to place collars on some of the dogs, so scientists can study them further, as well as provide some form of protection where possible.

Information about this pack would be very welcome. Anyone who thinks they have seen them, or finds them on their farm is encouraged to contact Dion from EWT with the details on 082 853-1068.

And in the meantime, Pat and I are on standby, ready to leap into action and capture whatever footage we can of what might be Africa's last true free-roaming wild dog pack!

**Wait, there's more in this Newsletter.
Learn a little about some of our members.**

Scroll on to Member Profiles