

View from the Top

It seems that midyear is as good a time as any to remember the "great ones", those people who actually had the vision to pioneer conservation of our wilderness areas. It is wrong to believe that credit goes to one man only. It is also illustrative that conservation began with forestry for largely commercial reasons. All the same, no-one to my mind had greater influence than the Prussian Alexander von Humboldt who encapsulated his thoughts in a monumental work "Kosmos" based on his famous lecture series. It was he whose work expounded the concept that we were morally bound to preserve the environment for future generations. He also first postulated human induced climate change in 1800. Indeed almost no natural scientist of the 19th century was not dependent on him for their thought processes, but in the RSA he has never received full credit for his work. Of direct interest to us is that he did plenty of work on birds, and discovered the oilbird, one of only two bird families using echolocation. 220 years ago this month his first journey of exploration began at the Orinoco River (the trip where he found the oilbird). We salute him, and those who followed. george@naturesheart.co.za.

Birding Plant of the Month

Tree Fuchsia (*Halleria lucida*)
Be careful! This magnificent specimen could become an absolute giant – so either plant it in a large garden, or restrict growth by planting in a suitable container. As long as you supply some water it will grow anywhere in South Africa, except perhaps the very coldest climes. It produces a brownish yellow flower in spring, and then a fleshy dark berry. Both are great for birds ito. nectar and fruit. Foliage is heavy, and great for shade. It may even attract nesting activity.



Tree Fuchsia

Nature's Heart

Specials of the Month

We hold the June specials for July! Available until 26th July or while stocks last.

1): Mega Pops (600g) Bulk (x5)
R200,00

2): Suet Pops (300g) Bulk (x5)
R120,00

3): Grub-in-a-Tub Feeder (incl 1 Tub) R140,00

4): Natalie's Hand Painted Terracotta Fruit Bowls
R240,00

Bon Mots

"If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need."
(Marcus Tullius Cicero c 50BC).

Note that if he lived today he would have written – "If you have a garden, and a bird feeder from Elaine's Birding..."

Environmental Chirps

And so, June 2019 sees the pointless death of 537 vultures and 2 tawny eagles in Botswana, a by-product of the slaughter of 3 elephants for their ivory. That included 468 critically endangered white-backed vultures. There may be as few as 20000 of these creatures left on earth (thus >2% of the entire population may have died in one incident). We are responsible because we seem to tolerate these crimes.

It does raise another flag. This incident highlights the level of interconnection between all organisms (and indeed cosmic entities including anorganic systems). This particular area of scientific interest is defined by the concepts of "environmental holism". An interesting point is that the term "holism" and the essential philosophy was first established by our great polymath Jan Smuts in his book "Holism and Evolution" (1926). Unfortunately, the level of complexity between these interactions is such that it is impossible to fully model them, resulting in inaccurate or incomplete knowledge. Thus it is that the effect of improper policing of borders, or of

failing to improve a poor cultural attitude through active enforcement measures can have a potentially terrible yet unforeseen consequence upon an endangered vulture population. This simple example is just a small drop in the ocean of problems that beset our environment. The existing culture of lawlessness in the RSA makes all efforts at environmental law enforcement inconsequential – after all, if you are not even willing to stop at a red traffic light (when it costs nothing), why would one stop hunting elephants that can make you a fistful of money?

Bird of the Month

Red-knobbed Coot (*Fulica cristata*)

Certainly, this water-bird is one of the most beautiful on our inland waterways (and definitely one of the most common). Yet "common" they are not! Firstly, on the point of feeding: cursory observation leads one to believe that these birds live off underwater vegetation. Then you note a wayward grasshopper disappearing ... Soon you realise that just about anything goes, and they are truly omnivorous. Secondly, on the issue of sheer aggression, this bird is a vicious defender of territory against any and all comers. Although they will chase other species (even larger birds), special attention is reserved for peers, and they seem to chase each other as much as feed. Thirdly, when it comes to breeding: they build haphazard, partly floating nests in the middle of ponds. Here 6 eggs are hatched. Yet we only typically see parents with two or three chicks. There are reports of parent aggression being the cause of mortality. Frankly we have never seen that (only fairly attentive parenting), and it is likely that predation by raptors seems more likely. Certainly, these birds are worthy of an hour of your time at the local water hide!

