

View from the Top

Christmas time! There is no better period of hope and love. Sadly, there is also no greater period of commercialisation and ingenious marketing, and that fact incites our natural cynicism. Perhaps this year is our chance to put aside that cynic, and return to the child-like wonder that has a restorative effect and feeds our souls. After all, is that not a basic reason for us immersing ourselves in our garden birds in the first place? Rather concentrate on giving (particularly love and attention). To quote St Francis "for it is in giving that we receive". If you consider gifts in support of charitable causes, we encourage you not only to consider the many humans in distress, but also the stresses faced by our animals. That includes pets and wild animals, and there are a good number of truly worthy causes. Give in the spirit of St Francis.

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Birding Plant of the Month

Ficus sycomorus (Sycamore)

Here we have a massive tree! For this very reason, we have been hesitant to list the plant as a great "birding" tree. Furthermore, it really is a KZN coastal tree with some also in the Lowveld of Mpumalanga and Limpopo. Yet it cannot be ignored because this is a superb tree for birds. If you have space, and if you are in a suitable area, get a cutting and plant one. The tree is most famous for fruit, devoured by a massive range of mammals (including bats) and birds (check out the green pigeons!), and naturally fallen fruit is favoured by the ground-based animals especially in our national parks. However, massive numbers of insects are attracted, and again draw in birdlife. If one then considers the larger trees as a nesting habitat, we have one of the most important plants in South Africa. Take a moment for your personal interest and read up about the relationship between the tree and fig wasps. That alone is a story...



Sycamore

Nature's Heart

Specials of the Month

Check out our super specials!
Available until 13th December or while stocks last.

- 1): Terracotta Seed Bell Holder (incl. Bell) R95,00
- 2): Seed Bells (Small / Large) R25,00 / R42,00
- 3): Bird Grub Suet Bits (800g) R60,00
- 4): Beaded Mealworm Feeder R55,00

Bon Mots

"God wants us to help animals, if they need help. Every creature in distress has the same right to be protected."

— St Francis of Assisi

Environmental Chirps

It is time for a sober review of 2019. We end the year with a cumulative 77 million people more on planet earth than when we started 2019. This equates to an additional food load of around 30 million tons. We sit atop a food pyramid, and the total impact is far higher – the often quoted number is 7kg of grain to produce 1kg of beef.

We (permanently) lost 5.6Mha of rainforest in 2019. We are losing 15000ha of forest per day. It boggles the mind! That is the size of Hluhluwe-Imfolozi every week. The knock-on effect is almost incalculable. This is a direct result of the human population crisis.

Based on computer modelling, it is estimated that above 7000 insect species went extinct in 2019. Reports claim that half a million insect species face extinction by 2070. The problem is not only species extinction. Total insect biomass (largely species not immediately threatened by extinction), has reported decreased by 75% over 25 years.

There are currently about 1.2×10^9 tons of vertebrate biomass on earth. More than a quarter is human biomass, and a further 70% is domesticated animal biomass (intended to feed the humans).

Mathematician Vaclav Smil estimates that the global carrying capacity (ie. sustainable level) is (arguably) a maximum human population of only 10 billion beings (7.7 billion at present), implying that we are pretty close to theoretical limits. Considering the strain we place on the environment, we are probably already over the breaking point.

All of the problems listed here are actually well known. The effects are competition for food and resources, global warming, and military and economic conflicts. The greatest effect is on the other creatures of planet earth who are the silent observers of our folly. There are no short-term solutions. All the same, we can improve the position by better awareness, care, and love for our natural heritage.

Bird of the Month

Crimson Breasted Shrike (*Laniarius atrococcineus*)

It is no secret that this bird is the all-time Nature's Heart favourite!

Recently, on a trip to the Pilanesberg Game Reserve, we came upon the single most gregarious specimen ever – snapped here for your pleasure.

Despite being particularly curious, this specimen was far from atypical to the not-so-shy behaviour of all crimson breasted shrikes.

They are seen hopping about and destroying the local insect population. Our toughie tore away a large piece of bark, and then systematically eliminated half a dozen hiding spiders. The good news is that they are in Pretoria and further north as well as many other dry bushveld areas in South Africa. And they are drawn in by Elaine's bird food. If you are fortunate enough to have a garden visitor, try them on a few Luv Bugs...



Nature's Heart closes on the 13th December, and Re-opens on 13th January 2019. We wish you a Happy Christmas.