

View from the Top

There is no industry that has been hit harder by the dreaded virus than the tourism industry, and those secondary businesses and persons that depend upon it. Sadly, there is no immediate prospect for recovery either – even after the travel restrictions are lifted (not really under discussion yet), one should expect no foreign visitors to these shores. They are the people who really fund and drive tourism. They pay, (and often overpay), for the privilege to see the “real” Africa, and to experience the best we have to offer. Ironically, there is no greater definition of “social distancing” than an RSA Game Reserve – after all, that is where we try to avoid crowds and enjoy the wildlife. For that very reason, it may well be the safest of all vacation activities. It potentially offers an opportunity to the South African “self-drive” tourist. Not only will travel open to locals first (September seems possible), but pricing at the higher end private facilities may even become more reasonable as supply outstrips demand. Perhaps the opportunity to finally target that special bird missing from your lifetime list? george@naturesheart.co.za.

Birding Plant of the Month

Bitter Aloe (*Aloe ferox*)

It would not surprise me if this is the most numerous large aloe in South Africa. Yet if it is the most “common”, it may well be the most beautiful. The colour and absolute splendour at this time of year is something to behold. It (deservedly) gets recognition as “plant of the month” due to an experience my wife and I had earlier in June. About 30 of these have been planted (suitably socially distanced at 1,5m to 2m apart), at our shareblock entrance. In truth I have never experienced double collared sunbirds in such numbers before, or feeding so aggressively. Just get some plants in your garden!



Bitter Aloe

Nature's Heart

Specials of the Month

Our apology – there is no special in July. We will continue with this policy until factory production levels stabilise – they remain affected following the coronavirus lockdown.

Bon Mots

Much is required of those who are happy, especially if they have needed comforting in the past, and have received it. (Giovanni Boccaccio – The Decameron)

Environmental Chirps

We have recently seen re-opening of golf courses. Nevertheless, the statistics are really frightening, with some predicting that 50% of all golf courses in South Africa will permanently close their doors. That is an obvious disaster for golfers, and for all those who depend upon the courses for their livelihood (a total of about 50000 people apparently). Perhaps less obvious is the disaster to all non-golfing urban dwellers, who inadvertently depend upon golf courses as a green area within the cities. They are truly necessary for that purpose. I often take my camera along during golf games and see many beautiful creatures. Yet golf courses have a bad reputation due to exclusivity and “members only” arrangements that may be viewed as being “elitist”. Rightly or wrongly the mantra has stuck, and is projected to golf club members. It is my view that golf clubs and golf as a sport has to change immediately to become more relevant and accessible in South Africa. Bird watching is a possible means to that end.

With these thoughts in mind, I was excited to learn that Birdlife SA invited two great golfers (Tony Johnstone and Mark McNulty) to a recent “Conservation Conversation”. They have both become keen birders, and are active in bird photography. As always, they were entertaining. More importantly, both clearly identified the tangents between golf and birding. There honestly are great opportunities of mutual benefit to be exploited!

Apart from a few courses that actively encourage birding (Immediately to mind is Country Club Johannesburg), most clubs do little or nothing to support their birds, (or other wildlife), or to support human enthusiasts (birders, and even the scientific community).

My proposal: All golf courses in South Africa to provide a birding site on the course (or more than one), as identified with support from Birdlife SA. Birdlife SA to establish a programme to provide good hides on the courses. All hides to be freely accessible to Birdlife SA members, and to club members, as well as approved visitors, and school bird clubs. In addition, golf clubs should actively encourage birding and bird photography, both as a means to increase course utilisation, and even to generate additional secondary revenue. The intention is not to charge a fee for bird hide use, although a small fee may be acceptable. Many details can be thrashed through. Golf courses will be very short sighted if they do not identify the benefit in this.

Bird of the Month

Red Headed Finch (*Amadina erythrocephala*)

Since the bird of the month in June was the cut-throat finch, it is fitting that this month sees it's most closely related cousin – the red headed finch. In June we had plenty of both species on the feeder, and in the melee, it was sometimes not so easy to identify them without support from the binoculars. All the same, when seen through a high gain lens, the difference becomes immediately apparent. How do you attract these to your garden? The secret is a good feeding/watering area, good quality seed, and a little bit of luck! If you do not get them in your garden, try a visit to Pilanesberg where they are very plentiful.

The very good news is that these finches are under no sustainability threat, and are found virtually everywhere in South Africa.

