

View from the Top

It is that time of year again. Spring! Our garden is a veritable hive of activity. Most specially, our breeding pair of white-throated swallows are back! They arrived exhausted (who knows how far they had to fly), and will need a short feeding and recovery time before breeding action can start in earnest. It struck me that we are in a similar position after the recent lifting of lockdown restrictions. A short breather, followed by a return to action. (A note – please do not misconstrue - Nature's Heart is supporting economic rebirth!)

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Birding Plant of the Month

Scented-pod tree (acacia) (*Vachellia nilotica*)

A tree that is a boon to all our bushveld browsers (who eat the leaves and pods). However, (surprisingly), it is not so commonly seen in gardens. The tree reaches up to approximately 10m, and is better suited to large gardens. It will thrive in most of the country from the karoo and north, but does not tolerate very severe frost. As the name suggests, the summer flowers have a sweet fragrance. The tree bark is used by various burrowing insects. It will thus attract insect eaters such as woodhoopoes. But be warned, it is a slightly "messy" tree, and is best placed in the indigenous garden where the plan is not to regularly clean up.



Scented-pod

Bon Mots

A word for spring after a trying winter...

"Men must endure

Their going hence, even as their coming hither.

Ripeness is all."

(William Shakespeare)

Nature's Heart

Specials of the Month

The month of September will not have any specials. Sadly, production supply remains constrained for many product lines. As a result, Nature's Heart is operating on a notice period for orders from the factory of up to one week. We will resume with specials once this improves.

Environmental Chirps

Shortly before lockdown, we had the privilege to spend a few days at the Karoo National Park. We loved it for all the "normal" reasons – the stark landscape, the mountain zebras, the photo opportunities of those gemsbok against arid hills... Naturally, there are plenty of birds, and possibilities for new sightings. Yet a lasting memory was that the place was very well run. That should actually be the expectation, and should therefore not register on the consciousness, yet it does because so many of our national and provincial parks are badly run, neglected, and in some cases, falling to pieces. Another observation was the number of foreign visitors (essentially Europeans fleeing from those colder climes), easily outnumbering locals. Many of them were birders. I had to wonder whether the quality of management was due to the presence of the foreigners, or whether the foreigners were there because the management and facilities were good. I suspect the latter. We commented on this in the January newsletter.

And then we discuss the total collapse of capacity known as Hwange National Park! To be clear, this is not South African, but rather a park occupying the western part of Zimbabwe.

We have been blessed to visit a number of times. The blessing comes from the fauna, and definitely not any effort by the Zimbabwe Government. The infrastructure has effectively collapsed. Hwange survives due to boreholes. These would not operate or exist if it were not for well-wishing donors. But worst of all, the Chinese coal mining.

We drove through one such area just outside Main Camp. It was dark for 6km due to coal dust. The pollution was beyond understanding. Now mining inside the reserve near Sinamatella is being planned. It is a jolt to the system.

Tying it all together, we have to ask whether these nature reserves are actually not simply "Eurocentric". Are they relevant within the African context of largescale poverty, under-development, terrible governance, and poor education. In July we posed questions about the relevance of golf courses in South Africa. It really is a related question. If we are unable to establish relevance to the majority of the population, we are going to lose our wilderness areas. I believe accessibility is the key.

Bird of the Month

Red-headed Weaver (*Anaplectes rubriceps*)

It is springtime, and there are multiple candidates for "Bird-of-the-Month" as they all show up in their greatest finery. We felt this little fellow pipped the others for cuteness. Perhaps it had been hand-reared because it showed no fear of humans.

One would think that so beautiful a creature would be rare or very special, but no, the red-headed weaver is very common and found throughout South Africa. One reason may be that they are very versatile and will feed on seed and berries, as well as insects, and will also take nectar from aloes and other suitable plants.

Although they do occur in all our provinces, the best place to catch one of these beauties remains the bushveld and lowveld. You need to be alert however, because this fellow tends to operate alone and could be more difficult to spot than one would imagine! Good luck, this weaver is worth the effort!

