

View from the Top

A very happy new year to all our friends and subscribers. We at Nature's Heart hope that 2021 brings better things to you, and even though Covid-19 is rife, we have to believe that it will improve.

Secondly, we look to 2021 to be a better year for conservation. It has started well with very good rains, for which we thank God. Yet we know that much is required to change hearts and attitudes of our populous to radically reduce pollution, to clean our rivers and to educate the children. It is never a bad time to start, even from a departure point of "the worst of times".

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Birding Plant of the Month

Natal Mahogany (*Trichilia emetica*)

This KZN bushveld specimen is a large tree, but may be cultivated through most of the country, although it will not take well to frost. It is rare that we stress the human uses of a tree above the birding advantages. In this case however, the tree has a very interesting set of purposes, including as food for indigenous people. The wood is used to carve for a variety of bowls, instruments and implements. The bark is used for medication, and the seed oil extract for cosmetic application. There is even potential for use to make dye! Yet animals and birds do love the tree. Various mammals eat the fruit and seeds, as well as the flowers. Insects are attracted due to the aroma. As for the birds, it commences with sunbirds and nectar feeders attacking the flowers, and later on a broad spectrum of birds feed on the fruit and seeds. Pretty much a "tree for all seasons". No really – it may be planted at any time of the year!



Natal Mahogany

Nature's Heart

Announcement:

Nature's Heart reopens on 11th January 2021. However, we will still be operating in an environment of constrained supply, particularly for terracotta products, and our previous announcement of shipping delays of up to a week remain in operation. Please be patient.

Bon Mots

"It is lamentable, that to be a good patriot one must become the enemy of the rest of mankind." (Voltaire)

Environmental Chirps

This year I received a truly super Christmas gift – a "trail" camera. By 10am on Christmas morning it was already set up, and in operation for the evening of the 25th! And the first captures? Well, we caught a genet, followed by a water mongoose!

I was pretty sure we would have genets, but a water mongoose? Amid the excitement, a thought occurred. What is out there that we do not see?

Simultaneously, we experienced a remarkable reawakening in our nearest river. It has been badly polluted due to criminal municipal neglect, and the direct disposal of sewerage into the river. We had seen dead fish and experienced the terrible odour. Nothing seemed to be able to survive that abuse. And yet there it was after good rains cleaned the river somewhat – cape clawless otters, plenty of waterbirds, and clear evidence of fish!

It is a message of hope. Despite our worst attempts at perversion, Mother Nature was not completely down and out, and was able to recover given just a small respite. It is also message of thanks to those who spend their time and resources to make it better. Your work is not in vain, and we (those who care) really are grateful.

Against this background, the urban birder should realise that there really is a superb experience out there waiting for you! In 1998 we monitored the bird species that visited our Irene garden over a three month period. The result – 79 species! This truly is astounding, considering that we were simply

recording the birds that we saw when we actually sat in the garden and clearly missed many others. It should be possible to replicate that result in most Highveld gardens. If you live in the Lowveld it is easy to imagine that there will be an even larger variety.

Whereas we are not only interested in birds, they are the "easiest" to attract. We would love to see many other creatures making use of our small patches of turf. It is quite simple to attract bats, especially using bespoke bat houses. Similarly, it is possible to attract insects and spiders. In the latter case the creation of special areas in your garden is to be encouraged - rather simply by laying chopped tree boughs (including the bark) in suitable areas. It is worth noting that Elaine's Birding and Wildlife do offer bat houses and insect houses. Although Nature's Heart does not advertise these on our website, we are able to supply them (please email us if you are interested). The bottom line is that we encourage you to make 2021 the year that you discover the wildlife in your garden!

Bird of the Month

*African Paradise Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone viridis*)*

From time to time we have seen the rare privilege of this bird breeding in our garden. It constructs perhaps the most petit of all nests, and creates very special photographic opportunities sitting on that nest.

The natural flash of colour as it darts around the garden is certainly something to remember. Yet it is just sufficiently unusual to draw questions and comments from visitors who are less au fait with South African birds.

Yet the question to ask is how one attracts these birds to your garden. Suet is not used by them. In fact, apart from creating a garden conducive to their presence, with plenty of protective cover, our experience is that it seems to be a matter of pure luck. Considering the natural beauty of this bird, we wish you all the best of luck!

