

View from the Top

One of the worst statistics in South Africa is that of unemployment. Among under 35's the official unemployment rate is a staggering 46,3%. The true number is even worse than that. Not surprisingly, one of my favourite social causes is the "Community Bird Guide" initiative of Birdlife South Africa. From time to time, my wife and I have made use of guides qualified through this program, and have found them to be knowledgeable, courteous, and eager to support our quest for unusual sightings. My observation has been that it is more than just a job for them – they actually love the birds, and are very passionate about what they do. Nevertheless, it IS a job, and in a country with so many employment problems, it is very important for us to recognise the importance of the efforts made by Birdlife South Africa. We endorse the training work. We congratulate the guides both for their qualification and commitment. We congratulate Birdlife South Africa for their direction. And finally, we encourage all our subscribers to use the services of the community bird guides whenever possible. george@naturesheart.co.za.

Birding Plant of the Month

Buffalo Thorn (*Ziziphus mucronata*)

This month we present a tree with some hesitation! Indeed, the Buffalo Thorn is a tree with so many entangling thorns that it is known as a "wag-'n-bietjie". It qualifies for this mention only because it has a superb record for bird attraction (not to mention insects of every variety).

It also creates a set of small berries that are really favoured by a number of mammals. Add to that the nutritious value of the leaves, that are utilised by many of our browsers and you have a truly important species.

The tree is common throughout South Africa, grows easily (although slowly), and is typically quite small and bushy, and will suit smaller gardens. A winner if you can accommodate the thorns.



Buffalo Thorn Tree

Nature's Heart

Specials of the Month

It is Seed Month!

This offer is available until 29th September or while stocks last.

1): Small Seed Bell X18 Bulk Pack R450,00

2): Sunflower Bell Small X18 Bulk Pack R450,00

3): Large Seed Bell R45,00

Bon Mots

"Old people like to give good advice, since they can no longer set bad examples." (François de La Rochefoucauld)

Environmental Chirps

It is a great pleasure to me that my octogenarian mother is still with us, and both fit and healthy, and maintaining great mental acuity. Her favourite bird is the secretary bird. The reason is historic, for she grew on a farm in the Clarens district, and was privileged to enjoy a breeding pair that operated there every year in her youth. They fascinated her, and still do so to this day.

I too was able to visit farms throughout much of my youth (albeit not living permanently on a farm). It was on these farms that I found many of the natural world experiences that shape my own thinking – my first horse ride, my first cane rat, my first night adder, my first leguaan – the memories come thick and fast...

Thus, looking back and into the future, how important was (and now is) the role of the farmer in issues of conservation in South Africa. Here I confess to losing objectivity, because I come in with a preconceived attitude that reflects a critical relationship between the farmer, his land, his livestock, and the natural vegetation and wild animals (including insects, amphibia etc.) that occupy the land.

What is true is that 80% of South African land is of an agricultural nature, whereas about 10% resides in Government owned nature reserves (and perhaps a further 3% in private conservation areas). It is easy to imagine that the majority of elephants and lions live within the demarked 10% of Government

nature reserves. However, when we think of birdlife, of insects, of reptiles, of many smaller mammals, it is clear that the majority will find refuge in the huge rural areas that span the country. One has to believe that that is the greatest reason for preventing deforestation and non-sustainable farming practises.

Destruction of habitat for farming purposes may well cause more damage than any formal preservation in a nature reserve does good, because it critically affects the required vegetation, and consequently damages the future of all these smaller creatures.

My observation is that our South African farming community is actually very well intentioned, and do love the land. I do not doubt that they have a psyche that supports conservation. Most importantly, our rural lands definitely do still support a massive number of animals (in our specific case – birdlife). Whereas there is no doubt that our farmers can do better, and increase in their support for the environment, at least we can depart from a reasonable baseline, because there is a genuine love for the land. It really is critical that we do improve in view of current estimates that 2,5% of the world's insect biomass is being lost every year...

Bird of the Month

Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*)

Is this not potentially the greatest hunter in the African wilderness? Having witnessed the efficiency of this bird quite closely, I would argue that it may well be, with amazing capability against all prey, including mice, frogs, fish, and (almost incredibly), doves. Now one has to admit that this fellow is a "common" bird (albeit not commonly a garden bird). All the same, every sighting is actually very special. My personal favourites are watching them hunt, as well as the grey herons coming in for a landing, which is amazingly slow and graceful.

Take your camera and have a leisurely break observing one at your nearest place with open water. It really is a peaceful thing to do in these troubling times...

