



*Helderberg Friends* November, 2024

# Newsletter



## UPDATE FROM THE FRIENDS OF THE HELDERBERG NATURE RESERVE

**By Penny Clifton-Smith (Chair)**

The past few months have seen the Friends busy with a number of projects in the Reserve. Firstly, a big thank you to the volunteer Trail Maintenance team who have worked tirelessly with Reserve staff to rehabilitate the trails that were damaged during the winter storms and rain (see article on page 3).

We also erected a gatehouse for the use of the security guards when on early morning or late night duty. The security guards commented they were very pleased to have protection from the weather.



The entire boardwalk around the pond, which was damaged during the fire, is being replaced and will hopefully be completed by mid-December. The composition of the boardwalk is innovative, being composed of biomass and recycled materials. When completed, the walk will be fire-resistant and environmentally-friendly. It will also provide access for people using wheelchairs/walkers/prams, so helpful for those who cannot manage the higher trails in the Reserve.



## Friends Updates Continued

Repairs have been made to the ablution blocks and the floors have now been tiled. Blue Mountain Hygiene Solutions have very generously sponsored the installation of new soap dispensers above the basins.

The Visitor Centre gift shop is stocked with a variety of items at very competitive prices so do pop in when looking for nature-inspired gifts and souvenirs for the up-coming holiday season.

Would you like to win the painting pictured below on the right? Tickets are available at R20 each from the Visitor Centre. The draw will occur on December 20, 2024. Proceeds are in aid of the Helderberg Nature Reserve.



### VOLUNTEERS URGENTLY NEEDED

The Visitor Centre is manned daily by a dedicated team of volunteers who liaise with the public and our members. We need additional volunteers, especially at the weekends and to stand in when volunteers are away or ill. If you can spare a half or full day on a regular basis (10h00 – 16h00) please contact us on 021 851 4060. It would be regrettable if the Visitor Centre is unable to open due to lack of volunteers.

***Here are some birds recently seen seen on our interpretive Bird Walks taken by Charles Brits (Guide) and Cornelia van Zyl***





## Friends volunteers repair trails after recent floods and resultant landslides By Steve Chadwick (and photos)

The past few years has seen the Reserve battered by flood and fire, which adversely affected trails and habitats. The most recent heavy rain and high winds in July this year caused even more damage.

On the 7th July, the Reserve's hillsides were so saturated by floods of rain that many landslips occurred. One particular landslide started high on the slope of West Peak and surged down to wipe out a section of Leopard Loop trail. It did not stop until it had crossed the Caracal and Sugarbird trails.

Along with the Reserve staff, a group of Friends' volunteers helped restore some of the damage. One section of the Leopard Loop trail was a particular problem as the traverse was rather dangerous. So as some of the Friends team was assessing the situation, Ian van Breeder stated, "You know Steve, this needs a bridge!"



Picture courtesy of Stu Summerfield



From then on things moved reasonably quickly. Adenco donated two 8m poles. HNR supplied the planks, and the tech team of Johannes and Christo set about designing and prefabricating the bridge, including handrail stanchions.

All parts were carefully numbered to ease erection on site, and the day came to move the heavy main support beams up the mountainside.

Danny, of HNR management (who also greatly helped the enterprise in many ways) organized transport of the main beams to up to Disa Gorge.

We then high-jacked some fit young guys from the Mountain Rescue team and Helderberg Hill runners to manhandle the beams up to Leopards Loop





## Friends volunteers repair trails continued

Thursday 24th Oct was set as D Day for construction of the bridge. Having laid the beams across the washout, we ensured all was level, then reconstruction, led by Johannes, went like clockwork. Beams were bolted together and were then pinned by rebars deep into the ground. Planks were then screwed onto the beams, and by the end of a long day all was complete except for the stanchions and handrail, which were delivered to HNR that evening.

The next day saw us up to another early start with a mission to finish! We erected the stanchions and hammered home the rope pegs. The fine handrail rope was supplied at a discounted rate by RopeWorx and looks very handsome. Using a few ropework skills picked up from years of mountaineering and mountain rescue, I tightened up the handrail. Heiri completed the day with some of his fine stonework at the end of the bridge – and suddenly – it was done! **If you are interested in helping with trail maintenance, call us at 076 099 7858**



*Perhaps, as you pad across this bridge, you would care to cast a thought to those who created it. In a small way we are kind of proud of it.*

Steve has written an informative book on the Hottentot Mountain Rim. He spent over ten years researching in detail this area's historical stories, legends, caves, rock art, trails and rock climbs. This exploration involved many hours reading archives as well as spending many nights out on remote hard to reach high places!

*His book is on sale at the Visitor Centre.*

## What goes on in the Reserve at night?

By **Bradley Braaf**, a Nature Conservation intern at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology

**Faunal nocturnal activities** are documented at the Reserve with Scheduled Night Count activities as well as with Camera Trap Sightings for the more elusive and rare species.

Throughout this year, to help with these activities, **camera traps have been installed** in the locations within the Reserve where nocturnal faunal species frequent. So these days we have a very good idea about which animals are occupying our Reserve at night! Some of the nocturnal animals that have been sighted recently:

### **Felis caracal**

More commonly known as Caracal or "Rooikat", it is quite broadly spread within the Reserve. From our camera trap footage, we have determined that there is a healthy population of Caracals on the Reserve with those at the upper reaches of the Reserve and on the mountain being visually smaller than those at the middle or bottom reaches of the mountain.



### **Mellivora capensis (Honey Badger)**

The mighty Honey Badger, which is often associated with the presence of honey, is found in all areas of the Reserve. They prefer the regions that contain more bulbs, sedges and an overabundance of rocks. At night, they are mainly active in areas that are frequented by humans but will come out during daylight hours. These little devils are quite resilient to even the most poisonous of snakes.

### **Sylvicapra grimmia (Common Duiker)**

The Common Duiker frequents the bottom sections of the Reserve where the picnic area is. They mainly come out after closing hours until the early morning hours. Sometimes they are still out after the Reserve has opened. There is currently a fairly healthy population of Common Duikers on the Reserve that is steadily increasing.





## Faunal Nocturnal Activities continued....



### Papio ursinus (Chacma baboon)

Feared and respected, these prominent baboons that frequent the Gordon's Bay region are also present on the Reserve. Very few sightings of them are currently reported but our camera traps suggest that a population of about 10-20 individuals of varying ages occupy the topmost regions of the Reserve.

Luckily, the population on the Reserve is not accustomed to human presence and we hope to keep it this way as they play a very important role on the Reserve.

**Please take note: NEVER feed the baboons and avoid them at all costs.**

### Cape Polecat (Ictonyx striatus)

Cape Polecats are one of the rare and exciting sights that our camera traps have picked up during this year. The presence of Cape Polecats remains rather undocumented on the Reserve but increasingly more camera trap sightings suggest that a small healthy population of them are present in pocketed portions of the Reserve.

Cape Polecats resemble skunks, and have a similar stink spray used for defending themselves. They are carnivorous and must eat often due to having very small stomachs.



## Conclusions

So far, **the most common species found** that frequent the Reserve are the Caracal, Baboon, Porcupine, Common Duiker, Cape Grysbok, Cape/Shrub Hares and Cape Mongoose. **Rare species** captured on camera so far include the Honey Badger, Cape Polecat, and Water Mongoose. **Additional sightings** by other methods include the Spotted Genet, Cape Fox and Cape Gerbil.

**What these findings have taught us** is that even though you don't see them during the day or spot them on camera traps at night, does not mean that they aren't present on the Reserve. This is very true for **the Cape Leopard** that historically has been spotted on the Reserve but have not been confirmed during recent monitoring efforts. We do hope that we can confirm the presence of these wonderful felines and other rare and undocumented finds in the future.

**We ask the public to please respect the apparatus** that we use in the Reserve by not tampering, removing, or moving it to different areas. We also ask that you only use the designated paths on the Reserve, which leaves the animals' habitats undisturbed, so that they can thrive.

**Our goal on the Reserve** is to allow as many native mammal species as possible to find their place amongst the fynbos and to provide space for "new" undocumented species to return to their historical roaming grounds.

## Friends of the Helderberg Nature Reserve Interpretive Walks for January to March 2025

The Friends of the Helderberg Nature Reserve (FHNR) regularly offer interpretive walks for which a small fee is charged (R50 for FHNR members and R80 for non-members). The walks are conducted by experienced and knowledgeable guides namely **Andreas Groenewald** (day/night walks) and **Charles Britz** (bird walks).

Interpretive walks tend to be slow strolls from one item of interest to another and are not strenuous. Children and grandchildren are very welcome, in fact encouraged to come! **Shoes that have a good grip, as well as plenty of water** and some snacks are necessary when walking! And of course, binoculars will enhance your experience. If you are going on **night walks, you will also need torches and warm clothing.**



### Bird Walks Dates

Wednesday **22 January Bird Walk** - Meet at 06h30 at the Reserve Gate

Saturday **08 February Bird Walk** - Meet at 06h30 at the Reserve Gate

Saturday **08 March Bird Walk** - Meet at 06:30 at the Reserve Gate

Wednesday **16 April Bird Walk** - Meet at 06:30 at the Reserve Gate

### Day Walks

Sunday **26 January Fynbos Walk** - Meet at 08h00 at the Visitor Centre

Sunday **23 February Protea Tree Walk** - Meet at 08h00 at Visitors Centre  
This walk is a slow walk past proteas and then up to the Gorge where there are many interesting trees

Sunday **30 March Medicinal Plant Walk** - Meet at 08h00 at the Visitors Centre

### Night Walks

Saturday **25 Jan Waning Moon Walk** - Meet at 20h00 at the Reserve Gate

Saturday **8 February Sunset Supper Walk** - Meet at 18h00 at the Reserve Gate

Saturday **22 February Waning Moon Walk** - Meet at 20h00 at the Reserve Gate

Saturday **8 March Sunset Supper Walk** - Meet at 18h00 at the Reserve Gate

Saturday **22 March Waning Moon Walk** - Meet at 20h00 at the Reserve Gate

### Booking How-To

1) **Bookings are essential for all walks. A completed booking form and proof of payment secures your booking.** To obtain this booking form you can either email the address below or download it from our Facebook page.

2) **Email the completed form and proof of payment to [info@helderbergnaturereserve.co.za](mailto:info@helderbergnaturereserve.co.za)**

3) On receipt of emails we book your places and email your tickets back to you. Booking well ahead makes sure that you get places in the walks, because many of them get booked up quickly.

**Please email your booking applications before 10:00 on Fridays to enable processing and emailing of necessary tickets. We are all volunteers so only work at certain times.**

NB: The walks depend on the weather, **so walks are occasionally cancelled.** You will be contacted on the day usually, if the weather is inclement. If a walk is cancelled, you are entitled to book another upcoming walk without payment by informing us on email.

Or if preferred, you can apply via email to get your cash back at the Visitor Centre (as a small agency we cannot reverse credit card payments).





## Helderberg Environmental Centre: Environmental Education Report

*Esmay Josephs is the Conservation Coordinator situated at the Helderberg Environmental Centre (HEC) and she is ably assisted by two interns, Dante Mehr and Olothando Mshweshwe*

From July to September the HEC staff have assisted with many ecological projects, mostly educational. For example, from July to the end of September they engaged with at least **1050-odd individuals**. Participants came **from 11 schools** as well as other organisations who are interested in preserving our environment.

**The subjects they dealt with** included guided walks, indigenous tree planting, learning about the fynbos, plastic waste training, water conservation, biodiversity in the HNR, climate change, knowing about and clearing invasive plants, the heritage of the HNR and more.

Below and to the right are some pictures of their activities from the last few months. *The information and pictures are taken from the HEC's Quarterly Report for July to September, 2024.*





## Eco-Schools Report

by Freya Brett, Coordinator of the Helderberg Node (WESSA). For more information, contact Freya at [helderberg.ecoschools@gmail.com](mailto:helderberg.ecoschools@gmail.com)

The Wildlife and Environment Society(WES) is an international organisation. Part of their agenda focuses on environmental education. Their Eco-Schools programme offers a variety of disciplines in environmental and educational areas to help learners to become aware of positive conservation options. WES is also active here in South Africa (WESSA). Freya acts as WESSA coordinator for the schools in the Helderberg area.

**This year an exciting new partnership** was arranged between WESSA and **Children in the Wilderness**, a non-profit organisation supported by ecotourism company *Wilderness*. *Wilderness* aims to facilitate conservation through leadership development and education of children in Africa. This partnership aims to support the implementation of WESSA Eco-School programmes in Zambia. Recently a **Children in the Wilderness** team attended a 3-day WESSA course on eco-education for children, as well as visiting a few Zambian schools in order to understand the various challenges for implementation.

**Locally, some Eco-Schools in the Cape Town area** joined the **International Coastal Clean-up** initiative. On this occasion the focus was on how river waste impacts oceans. During the day some high school learners monitored the health of the Liesbeek River. In addition, learners collected waste from the river. All together 699 kilos of waste were collected, as well as 299 kilos of plastic separated and earmarked for recycling.



WESSA team member showing how to gather samples from the river. She later taught the learners how to analyse and record their findings

The picture below shows the beginning of the trash 'treasure hunt' !



As the end of the year is rapidly approaching, Eco-schools across the country are concluding their eco-projects.

Please turn the page to read about exciting projects done by the Eco-Schools in our Helderberg Node



## Eco-schools continued....

### Newbury House Montessori School

Newbury House did the following projects as part of the WESSA Environmental Education curriculum:

#### \*Coastal Clean-up Participation

On the International Coastal Clean-up Day, learners and their parents gathered on the Strand beach to help clear the beach of trash. They also helped to complete a massive mural on the beach walls. The mural depicted the community's commitment to a cleaner and healthier planet.



\*High school learners took part in the **Limbovani Project** (linked to Stellenbosch University). This project uses nature as a platform to develop practical scientific skills. The young people learnt how to capture, study and classify the different ant species on the Lourensford Estate.

Finally to conclude, Newbury House Middle school learners **helped the Lourensford ground staff with their organic produce garden**. Then using some harvested produce from the garden, learners made lunch for the staff to thank them for their hard work.



### Beaumont Primary School

As part of their WESSA environmental education curriculum, the staff implemented a project **to enhance learning about the indigenous gardens** that have been planted a few years ago.

This included interesting, **eye-catching information boards** explaining how indigenous plants help to enhance our eco-systems.

Part of the curriculum project included **improving the school grounds**, especially a long area of eroded slopes that needed retaining walls. These blocks also helped provide extra seating for sports spectators





## Eco-Rangers Report

by **Wendy Norris** who has been inspiring young people with a love of nature conservation for many years at the HNR. For contact information see below

As the year comes to a close, we reflect on an exciting and eventful journey. During this year our Eco-Rangers demonstrated adaptability, flexibility, and a passion for learning. As well as having a lot of fun!

### Highlights from the last 2 terms:

\*Cleaned up Oak Café after flooding and **learned about mud, mudslides, and geology**

\*The cold snowy weather provided a context for exploring **snow, ice crystals, and Polar Bears**

\***Learnt about critically endangered African Penguins** and visited SANCCOB, an organisation centred on saving seabirds, including penguins). Then created papier-mâché models of penguins



\***Met Marine Law Enforcement officer Rowan Ferreira and K9 Bo** -the highlight of the term! There was a great deal of excitement when the Eco-Rangers met tracker dog K9 Bo (a Belgian Malinois). They thoroughly enjoyed being involved in a fun-filled, informative activity where Bo was able to demonstrate his incredible tracking abilities.

\***Planted trees at Radloff Park** and learned about the Shothole Borer

\***Assisted with White Eye trail maintenance** - this involved clearing foliage and repairing a water bar. The Eco-Rangers enjoyed this, and would like to do more!

-\***Learned about Bird Identification, Camera Traps, and reptiles.** Some of the girls were privileged to have the opportunity to join Bradley Braaf where they learned about Cameras Traps. Each girl was given the opportunity to set up and place their own camera in the veld. The most exciting day was when they checked the cameras. They were very excited to see photos of genet, porcupine, mongoose and many birds including a Sweet Waxbill and Black Crake.

\*The Eco-Rangers also assisted with **the rescue** of a Goshawk and some owls





## Eco-Rangers Report continued.....



### Group Projects:

**\*Genet group:** Explored Tortoises, Terrapins, and Turtles, creating a habitat chart

**\*Caracal and Leopard groups:** Participated in a bird ID competition, made bird Christmas decorations, and went on a night walk and picnic

**\*Three Leopard group** girls earned their African Reptiles and Venom Snake Handling certification! Well done!



### Community Outreach:

\*Hosted school groups from Shalom Pre-Primary and Little Stars

\*Provided a Snake and Reptile show for Helderberg Kids (with the support of our preferred zoologist and snake handler)

### Contact Wendy as follows:

Whatsapp: 0608 550 754 E-mail: [wendy@eco-rangers.co.za](mailto:wendy@eco-rangers.co.za)

Web: [www.eco-rangers.co.za](http://www.eco-rangers.co.za)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/helderbergcorangers](https://www.facebook.com/helderbergcorangers)

## FHNR HACK REPORT

By James Silberbauer (photos too)

We have had three cancelled hacks this year - one due to the heavy rain in July, one due to ill health in August and one due to the long time it took to enter the Reserve due to the new gate entry system in October.

The two hacks we have carried out were held below the reservoir, working on Port Jackson, Beefwood, Sesbania and St John's Wort.

Christy de Witt removes a eucalyptus



**The next FHNR Newsletter will be published in March, 2025**

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