



Newsletter



UPDATE FROM THE FRIENDS OF THE HELDERBERG NATURE RESERVE

By Penny Clifton-Smith (Chair)

This has been a busy beginning of the year. We have been gearing up, with the help of the Visitor Centre volunteers and our data base company, to get ready for membership and Early Riser renewals (see further on for more details). Our volunteer Trail Maintenance team is still working in the grinding heat to improve our trails. Our Hacking group, coordinator James Silberbauer, is also hacking away persistently at our many invasive aliens. At last our new board walk is tested and completed! And finally we welcome our new Biodiversity Area Coordinator, Louis van Wyk.

RESERVE NEWS

The Reserve is the proud owner of the World's first fire-rated, carbon neutral boardwalk !

Since the boardwalk needed to be replaced, it was decided by City of Cape Town (COCT) and Helderberg Nature Reserve (HNR) to look for a more durable and eco-friendly alternative. So they consulted NES Consultancy, experts in sustainable engineering and it was decided to use BRIC as the building material.

BRIC (Biomass Recycled Insulate Concrete) is an engineered blend of alien woodchips, recycled building rubble, plastics and paper, all bound together with a special binder developed by NES. Structures built with BRIC are almost completely fire-resistant, damage-resistant and eco-friendly (i.e. structures made of BRIC will not harm the the environment).

The Friends' membership fees and funds raised in other ways have paid for this boardwalk. Thanks to all these people! Thanks go also to Alistair Munday (Friends' Treasurer) for assisting with the management of this project.



Reserve News Continued



New Biodiversity Area Coordinator for Helderberg Nature Reserve and surrounds

My name is Louis van Wyk. Born and bred in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. I have worked in the biodiversity management field for just over 12 years where I've gained experience in working on and managing sensitive ecosystems in close proximity to urban areas. I hold a N. Dip in Nature Conservation, obtained through CPUT and would like to further my studies in 2026.

In my free time I love to explore, whether it be other natural environments or the surrounding wine farms. I value time with family, friends and my 2 dogs. I love sports, both watching and competing. I'm also a keen birder and have already ticked 4 "lifers" during my time at Helderberg.

Helderberg Nature Reserve is such a special place and it is therefore fantastic to see what it means to the community. I look forward to lead, learn and face new conservation challenges with my team as well as the community and stakeholders. Our protected areas have never been under bigger threat, these threats will continue to increase. We (Biodiversity Management staff) as well as Interested and Affected Parties) play a vital role in preserving these special places, not only for us, but the generations to come.

Rare Eurasian Nightjar found in the Reserve: By Charles Britz, Interpretive Bird Walks guide

I was leading a Bird Walk on the 6th February, when we discovered a nightjar, perched on a burnt protea branch under a young eucalyptus tree. I assumed it was a **Fiery-necked Nightjar**, which is a known resident of the Helderberg Reserve.

Much later that day, when we posted photos of the nightjar, some respondents queried my identification, due to its coloration and its position off the ground. Later on, Cape Town regional experts identified it as a **Eurasian Nightjar**, for a few reasons, one being that it showed the long flight feathers of a migrant bird. The Eurasian Nightjar is a summer migrant to Africa, travelling as far as Southern Africa and our Northern Provinces. It's extremely uncommon in the Western Cape, let alone the Cape Metro. So a mega tick for the Reserve! This led to a flurry of Birders coming to the Reserve to view the stranger.

When Louis (our Reserve manager) and I found the Eurasian nightjar again on 28 February, we posted it on the Cape Rarebird Group. Once again, the Reserve was inundated with Birders trying to log this species! A very interesting time was had by many at the Helderberg Nature Reserve!



Friends' Membership Renewals: By the time you receive this Newsletter, many people will have renewed their memberships and Early riser entries. Members who have not renewed yet, can still do so anytime, BUT FROM THE FIRST OF APRIL, *all members who have not renewed will have to pay normal Reserve entry fees.* **HNR Security will not let unrenewed members in without payment.**

Visitor Centre and Volunteers: The Centre has had a busy season with many local and overseas visitors. To remain open on a regular basis, volunteers are urgently needed, particularly on weekends. Volunteers liaise with the public and Friends' members. Volunteers often say how interesting it is to work here, as they meet people from all over the world, as well as enjoying the tranquility of the Reserve. If you can spare a half or full day (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.

Volunteer is needed for shadowing Penny Clifton-Smith with regard to purchasing stock for the Visitor Centre.

FHNR AGM: Date: 14th May, 15h00 to 21h00. All members are welcome! You will receive a notification by email closer to the date.

NEW EMERGENCY NUMBER: 061 081 4413 A call to this number enables you to be put in touch with the service you need, such as accidents/injuries on the trails, fire, ambulance, Reserve staff, snake alert etc.

Friends' volunteers and Reserve staff make the Protea Trail safe for hikers in January, 2025.

By Ingbert Misselhorn (Pictures too)

The May/June 2024 landslide wiped out part of Leopard's Loop Trail, which our Friends' volunteer team helped Reserve staff to repair late last year. **This landslide also damaged a section of the upper Protea Trail**, leaving a large chasm that was impassable and dangerous.

This major obstacle was tackled in mid-January this year when a small team of volunteers and Reserve Staff **partially filled in the chasm, cleared the access path and constructed stone steps** through the damaged section of the upper Protea Trail. People who have walked the Protea Trail since the repair reported that it is not only easily passable now but significantly safer.

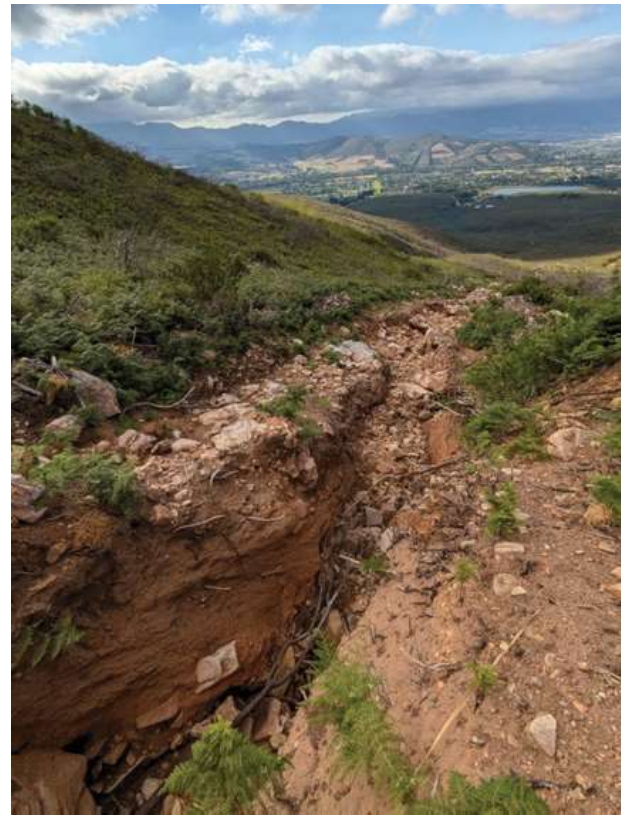
If you are interested in helping with trail maintenance, call us at 076 099 7858



Planning the repair

If you are interested in helping with trail maintenance, call us at 076 099 7858

See more work done by this dedicated team on Page 12



The Protea Trail chasm!



Tales of slithering predators: The Flying Cobra by Steve Chadwick

Steve has a fondness for adrenalin rushes, so catching snakes helps scratch that itch! Being a certified snake catcher, he has many hair-raising (often very funny) true tales of his snake-snatching adventures, including Cape cobras (see right).

The Flying Cobra

It was back in 2018 in Tre Donne estate, when a couple's enjoyment of their garden on a warm sultry Sunday afternoon was somewhat disturbed by the **appearance of a Cape cobra.**

The bikini-clad lady shouted in alarm, the gentleman jumped; at which **the cobra, also alarmed, disappeared under a pile of yet-to-be placed garden rockery stones.**

Hedging their bets, and needing a quick service, the couple called two people – myself, and the Tre Donne security provider amongst whose offered services was that of snake removal.

I turned up dressed in **shorts, T shirt and trekkies.** Soon to be followed by the Security snake catcher who was wearing **leather boots, thick camouflage army-style troos, a bullet-proof vest and a steel helmet**.....I was seriously underdressed!

Together we surveyed the scene. We were assured that the snake was under the pile of rugby ball-sized stones. So working together, using our snake hooks, we removed the rocks one by one and rolled them well away. Four rocks left and still no snake. **One more rock removed, and we saw the tail.** But no body on which to use our tongs. Security removed rock three with his hook, whilst I stood by with my clamp. **Cobra head now visible, and not being a happy chappie, the snake bolted.**

What happened next was a kinda blur. **The Security guy got a hook under the fleeing snake, probably with the intent of hooking and tailing it, but it was too fast, and rather than let it go, he used his hook to toss the cobra up into the air.** And go up...it did!

I well remember looking up into the sky and **seeing this wriggling cobra ascend skywards** and thinking to myself – 'seeing a flying cobra has got to be somewhat unusual'.

The airborne snake reached its high point and then with gravity kicking in, the snake began to descend. **We did not know where exactly the snake would land,** which led to some very quick evacuations from the rough landing pad. My wife who had been calmly filming the catch, also ran as we all radiated away from the epicentre. Her filming was calm, until suddenly the video goes all shaky as her hand was still on the 'record' button as she ran away.

Once it landed, the snake was still for a second, probably winded. As it happened, the snake landed closest to the bulletproof Security catcher, who had the presence of mind to **put his foot lightly on the back of the cobra's head.**

After that excitement, it was a bit of an anti-climax, **as I caught the cobra with my tongs and secured it** in my bin. Lid clamps on. all done!



Cape Cobras (Wikipedia)

Cape cobras (common names include geelslang, bruinkapel) are considered one of the most dangerous species in all Africa, due to their **very neurotoxic venom** and **their fondness for foraging in human spaces.** They occur all across Southern Africa, from mountains to plains.

Cape cobras can grow up to 1.7 metres long, and range in colour from yellow to brown to black, with variations in between. **They have a very distinctive hood which they raise when they feel threatened.** They eat rodents, birds, snakes, lizards and carrion. Their enemies include birds of prey, honey badges and mongooses.

They like to hide in wood piles, holes, rocky walls, etc. and when chanced upon, **will immediately raise their upper bodies up, spread their hoods and hiss.** If the threat does not move, the cobra will try to escape, instead of striking.

So if you meet or see a cobra close, remain calm and back slowly away! Or if you find one in your garden, stay away and call Steve!



A brief history of the Helderberg Nature Reserve

By Peter Blaine, mostly based on Somerset West Rotary Club history



Peter was asked for some history of the Reserve by an Australian whose parents had been involved around 70 years ago. His account was so interesting as most of the history is unknown to us volunteers, so we thought our members would be interested too.

Land Bought: In 1947, the Somerset West Municipality bought a piece of land on the original Vergelegen farm from Mrs. Catharina Louw. Part of the land was sold for township development. As regards to the remaining 245 ha with valuable water rights, Mr. Stuart Radloff, Councillor and Mayor of Somerset West at the time, had the idea of turning it into a nature reserve.

Council Debate: There was a debate in Council on what to do with the recent acquisition. One suggestion was to make it a hill climb course, others a mountain race track, or sports grounds. The Rotary Club of Somerset West strongly lobbied for it to become a reserve. Eventually, these other ideas fell away for various reasons, and the Council confirmed the land would become a nature reserve.

To facilitate the development of the Helderberg Nature Reserve (HNR), the Somerset Town Council established the **Helderberg Nature Reserve Advisory Board**. This first Advisory Board included members from the Council, the Rotary Club, the Mountain Club and a few others. From then on, there has always been Rotary Club representatives on the HNR Advisory Committee, Peter Blaine being the current representative.

Reserve Boundaries Defined: Many questions about the extent and management of the Reserve were discussed, but eventually on **12 August, 1960**, Provincial Proclamation No. 147 made the provisions of the Nature Reserve Ordinance applicable to the Somerset West municipal area; and on 23 September 1960, the boundaries of the HNR were defined in Proclamation No. 3268.



The Rotary Club donated funds for the gates of the Reserve, which were designed by John Williams, artist. They were then fabricated by Muelembergs Steel Works and erected by D.F. Kleyn. Funding was donated by the Rotary Club.



Helderberg Nature Reserve history continued.....

Gardens planted:As time went on Rotarians facilitated the collection of their first donation of £2000 which was used to lay out the gardens of the Reserve. The Rotary Anns contributed the avenue of flowering shrubs and trees leading to the old oak plantation. Basil Maskew-Miller (Somerset West Councillor) also helped to establish the flower garden in 1960.



Finally, in September, 1960, the Reserve was opened to the public for the first time!



Tea Kiosk opened:The next project taken on by the Rotary Club was building a tea kiosk to serve light refreshments. They first donated R60 for a temporary structure in August 1966.

Then in **November, 1966** R500 was allocated for a permanent structure to be erected (with help from the Round Table organisation). These funds were raised by a golf day and a film show ('Bridge on the River Kwai').

Finally, Ale Fransbergen put up the building, electricity was installed, and furniture provided. Then on November 10, 1967, the kiosk was officially opened by the Mayor of Somerset West, Councillor Roelofse.

Basil Maskew-Miller and his wife donated the building of the **Maskew-Miller Herbarium** after the death of their daughter in 1970 (now mostly referred to as the Visitor Centre).



Over the years, the Rotary Club has been involved in generating funds for many HNR projects, as well as liaising with the ongoing activities of the *Friends of the HNR* organisation. A favoured project was the notion of an **HNR Environmental Education Centre**, which was supported by many Rotarians over time.

Eventually in February, 1996, with Rotary's help in various ways, the HNR Environmental Education Centre was opened.

PS. Pictures supplied by Peter Blaine and Friends' archives

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.**



Interpretive Walks : April to June, 2025

Bird Walks

Wednesday 16 April Bird Walk - Meet at 06h30 at the Reserve Gate

Saturday 10 May Bird Walk - Meet at 08h00 at the Reserve Gate

Saturday 07 June Bird Walk - Meet at 08:00 at the Reserve Gate

Day Walks

Sunday 13 April Protea Walk – Meet at 08h00 at the Visitors Centre

Sunday 25 May Fynbos Walk – Meet at 08h00 at the Visitor Centre

Sunday 22 June Protea Walk - Meet at 08h00 at the Visitor Centre

Night Walks

Saturday 12 April Full Moon Walk – Meet at 19h00 at the Reserve Gate

Saturday 10 May Full Moon Walk - Meet at 18h00 at the Reserve Gate

Saturday 24 May New Moon Walk – Meet at 18h00 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**

3) **On receipt of emails that include the completed forms and proof of payment, we book your places** and email your tickets back to you. **Booking well ahead of the walk date** 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 if the weather is inclement. If a walk is cancelled, you are entitled to book another upcoming walk without payment by informing us by email.

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



Left: *First Somerset West Cubs night walk with Andreas*

Helderberg Environmental Centre Report



Esmay Josephs, People and Conservation Coordinator manages the Helderberg Environmental Centre (HEC) which includes interns Dante Wehr, Amy Stoffels and Qhawekazi Samson (see left)



The HEC staff work is mostly aimed at teaching learners from the schools that surround the Reserve about the conservation of our environment. In February and March this year they have been/ are fully booked .

Themes: They reported that in February their theme was Wetlands, as February 2 is Wetlands Day. The learners attended a presentation, engaged in a debate activity and a guided walk. The younger learners did a colouring activity, a guided walk and outdoor games.

The theme in March is planned around celebrating World Water Week. This programmes involves a water presentation and a guided hike to see some of the water bodies in the Reserve, followed by water-centred games and activities.

Esmay is looking for assistance with the sewing of “fitted” tablecloths for the HEC. All materials will be supplied. Please contact her on 021 4442572,



Amy and Qhawekazi taking Fundi Rainbow Educare on a guided walk.



Sunflower Day Care playing games on the lawn at the HEC.



Somerset House engaging in a debate activity



Dante giving a presentation on wetlands to De Grendal Skills School

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

Dear Eco-Rangers and Friends,

As we stepped into 2025, we faced unexpected challenges, that tested our adaptability and resilience. Despite these hurdles, we persevered. Our main challenges are securing a stable venue and acquiring a reliable data projector.

Unfortunately, we lost several dedicated Eco-Rangers, and our numbers have dwindled. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our loyal members who have stood by us, offering support and understanding. A huge thank you to the Helderberg Nature Reserve for allowing us to use the Oak Café as a meeting point and to the Friends of the Helderberg for offering the Info Centre as a backup venue.

Despite the early-year teething problems, our Eco-Rangers enthusiastically participated in our 2025 program. Everyone had a wonderful time exploring nature, sharing holiday stories, and catching up.



Left and right: Examining fleas with a microscope and the magnified flea



Making komodo dragons



Exploring the river especially crabs!



Genet group hugging a yellow wood tree



Long-headed grasshopper found by the Genets

*Our subsequent sessions covered fascinating topics often requested by the learners:

- **The tiny yet feisty Flea**, including their life cycle and a surprising relationship with tapeworms.

- **The majestic Komodo Dragon**, the world's largest reptile.

- **Outdoor exploration, including a river excursion** where we spotted terrapins, dragonflies, and best of all, lots of crabs! The mud from Pete's pond was another huge attraction with many Eco-Rangers enjoying some squelching, muddy fun to keep cool on a hot day.

- **Sunflowers**, where we learned about their history, uses, and unique characteristics. We even got to explore a sunflower field in Vergelegen and meet a Bontebok and her calf. Quite a few of the children had never seen a Bontebok before and none of them were aware that the Helderberg Nature Reserve used to have Bontebok grazing on the green grass in the picnic area.

-**Giraffes**, with their incredible height, unique anatomy, and fascinating facts.

As we near the end of Term 1, we look forward to exploring more topics, including birds, maps, sea urchins, and abalone. Our holiday outings will feature a visit to see giraffes and a trip to an abalone farm.

If you're interested in joining us, learning more, or becoming a member, please contact Wendy:

Email: wendy@eco-rangers.co.za

Whatsapp: 0608 550 754 (no calls)

Eco-Schools Report

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

As we start the New Year the question has been asked why join the WESSA Eco schools programme(ESP)?The answer is: todays school curricula incorporate many environmentally related subjects like climate change, food security, interaction with nature etc. Joining the ESP helps give life to these topics, as the skills development embedded in their materials help build capacity and gain knowledge to lead and become ambassadors for the environment. Part of the programme involves honouring participating schools with a certificate at a ceremony. A brief survey of the activities of each school in the Helderberg Node follows:

Strand Secondary School received their 4th Platinum award for improving their school environment and engaging with the community on environmental issues. One of their projects was making vegetable gardens, from soil preparation to plant propagation, with an emphasis on sustainability. Learners were encouraged to cultivate their own veggie gardens based on the one they made at school.



The sustainability emphasis included making useful articles from recycled cardboard, paper and glass, such as toilet roll holders, flower vases, and sparkly cup holders bear testimony to their ingenuity in fashioning objects from discarded waste.



Left: Bottles and tins used for recycling
Right: Attractive recycled vase and pen holders



Sir Lowry's Pass Primary School (SLPPS) received their Global Decade award for 16 years of dedicated environmental teaching and maintaining excellence in the implementation of the ESP (WESSA).

Some recent activities included an **educational visit to the HNR** which helped strengthen the message of climate change and global warming.

SLPPS teachers also introduced a project to **help improve waste management** (Bingo). The whole school collected recyclable plastic and other materials for the manufacturing of various usable items, helping learners to feel they are contributing towards a cleaner environment. Other projects included an introduction to **the dangers of littering** and the importance of proper waste disposal.



Left and below: Visit to HNR re Climate Change :Grade 7

Right: Bingo the Anti-Waste mascot: Grade 3



Eco-Schools Report continued...

Newberry House Montessori School (NHMS) received the Diamond Decade Bronze Award for 11 years of maintaining an outstanding Eco Schools programme. The school is community driven and their holistic approach to environmental education prepares learners for the future.

Water and soil pollution is investigated, and beach clean ups are regular events. And the dire effects of E-waste and plastic pollution on climate change is studied. A week long E-waste drive resulted in 6 boxes of e-waste!

The school ethos promotes being kind and helping the needy. For example, beanies and scarves were donated to the Little Star Crèche. To consolidate what their learners were being taught, outings to nature reserves (HNR and Newlands Forest) were organised where the wonders of nature could be experienced.



Left: Visit to Helderberg Nature Reserve
Above: Donating to Little Star Crèche



Grade 5e3 enjoying the Fynbos Garden!
#Geog #NaturalVegetation



Beaumont Primary School (BPS) was honoured with a Global Decade Platinum Award for 16 year of continued dedication to environmental teaching and equipping learners with skills to navigate future challenges.

Since 2009 Beaumont has shown great diligence in maintaining outdoor classroom gardens, which enhances their school environment. These gardens teach respect for nature and creates awareness about the impact of biodiversity. Each garden has eye-catching and attractive boards that inform about water-wise gardening, the role of pollinators, sustainability, and the value of herb and vegetable gardens.



The rehabilitation of the White Eye trail

By Steve Chadwick (pictures too)

White Eye is a much loved trail, and gives the fastest access to the higher trails. But during the winter, the trail becomes **a rushing stream** (see right). So the decision was made to rehabilitate the trail by re-routing it using higher ground to aid drainage.

The HNR staff and Friends' volunteers Heiri, Ingbert and Steve, painstakingly and laboriously **cleared the new White Eye trail in three weeks**, finishing on March 14, 2025. Great work done by this dedicated team!

Going up, the **new White Eye trail is clearly marked** (and the old trail blocked off). But coming down, the beginning of the new trail is marked by a **White Triangle**.

As you tread dry-footed on the White Eye trail this winter, think some thankful thoughts about our hard-working team!

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FHNR HACK REPORT

By James Silberbauer (photos too)

The last few months' hacks have been evenly split between working below the reservoir and working above the house in the Reserve.

Hacks covered a range of invasives. Below the reservoir we targeted mostly red Sesbania and St John's Wort, while above the house we cleared mostly eucalypts (blue gums).



Left: Marion Parker removing longleaf wattle and
Right: Des Lynch removing red sesbania



Upcoming hack dates:

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12 April 2025 starting at 8h00

10 May 2025 starting at 8h00

14 June 2025 starting at 8h00

12 July 2025 starting at 8h00

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Lisa Figenschou removing eucalypts



The next FHNR Newsletter will be published in July, 2025

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