Friends of the Helderberg Nature Reserve

July, 2025

Newsletter

Protea Neriifolia by Freda Bonthuys

A Week of Adders: Six Serpents in Five Days

By Louis van Wyk (Biodiversity Area Coordinator)

The week of 12 May 2025 turned out to be an unforgettable one for the Helderberg Nature Reserve team — and not just because of the creeping chill in the autumn air. As temperatures began to drop and animals sought the last few warm spots before winter, the team had six different adder interactions in just five days — a rare and remarkable streak of sightings.

Five of the interactions were with the puff adder (Bitis arietans), a familiar yet always respected presence in the Cape's fynbos landscape. Each encounter was safely managed and documented, and in most cases, photographed as well. These snakes, known for their cryptic colouring and sluggish movements, were likely basking in patches of sun or relocating to warmer microhabitats — a typical behaviour as colder weather sets in. Two of them were observed in a concrete storm water culvert – possibly absorbing heat from the surface or following potential prey scent trail.

But the most surprising encounter came when a berg adder (Bitis atropos) was spotted along the lower slopes of the Reserve. This species is notoriously elusive and seldom recorded in this part of the Helderberg. Its presence is not only a rare and valuable sighting, but also a reminder of the rich and sometimes hidden biodiversity thriving within our borders.

These snake sightings, while causing a few moments of excitement, offer a fascinating glimpse into the seasonal behaviour of our reptilian residents. As always, we encourage visitors to remain aware and respectful of wildlife — and to let the Reserve team know if they spot something interesting. Keep an eye out... nature always has surprises in store!

Puff Adders

Berg adder

More Reserve News

by Louis van Wyk and Vuyokazi Rubushi

Fauna Management

On the 31st of January 2025 Reginald Booysen spotted and captured a Karoo tent tortoise at the Pete's Pond picnic area and took it to the office to inform Louis Van Wyk. The species was identified and a way forward was established. The species is Near Threatened (NT) and not indigenous to Cape Town. As these tortoises are naturally at home in the succulent Karroo regions in South Africa and Namibia, the animal was at risk of not surviving here in the Reserve. Reginal Booysen contacted K. Beda from CapeNature to report the find, and then handed the animal over to CapeNature's care. CapeNature later reported the tortoise passed away, possibly as it was not able to adapt to the new environment.

Unfortunately it is not uncommon for people to collect tortoises throughout the country. It is then realized that they cannot care for the animal and occasionally these animals are brought and released at local nature reserves. This is of course illegal as legislation prohibits the unauthorized capture and relocation of wildlife. It is not known how and when the release of this tortoise was carried out.

Karoo Tent Tortoise: Psammobates tentorius

An old oak being felled near the Visitor Centre / HEC

The Polyphagus Shot Hole Borer Menace keeps invading the Reserve

Helderberg Nature Reserve has been identified as a Polyphagus Shot Hole Borer (PSHB) hotspot and the felling of infested trees has been ongoing. The devastating impact of the PSHB cannot be overstated.

During this quarter a contracted professional tree feller felled trees infested with the PSHB. The biomass was transported to a facility where it was incinerated. The infected trees were located in the picnic areas, the Keurboom forest and the management house. It is sad to see these trees go as they have provided beauty and shade for our visitors for many decades. *By the end of February 2025 twenty-one trees were felled in the Helderberg Nature Reserve which included 16 English oaks and 5 Keurbooms.*

HNR Field Ranger Vuyokazi Rubushi Completes the 2025 Comrades Marathon!

Vuyokazi grew up in Khayelitsha with no running training or interest at all. But after she decided to run in a 10 km Youth Day race in Gugulethu, she commented, "That's when the running bug bit me!"

Since then she has competed in many marathons including the Two Oceans Ultra Marathon and recently the Comrades Marathon. She considers that her greatest achievement was running in the 2019 Sanlam Cape Town Marathon (422 kms). She participated on behalf of the 'Running Tree Campaign'. Each participant ran with saplings strapped to their back. She commented that "we created a moving forest throughout Cape Town". She did a similar run in 2022. These runs contributed towards planting many trees in selected Cape Town townships.

Vuyokazi is an active member of HNR's Field Ranger team. They engage in many activities on the Reserve like animal and bird surveys and counts, clearing invasive plants, trail and picnic area maintenance, fire-fighting and more.

History of the Friends during the 1980's and 1990's

by Elaine Harcombe, based on Friends of the Helderberg Nature Reserve archives

In the March newsletter of this year we published a brief history of the Reserve. This article provides a brief history of the Friends from its inception.

As you may remember from the previous article, the Reserve was first open to the public in 1960.With help from the Rotarians and other parties the Reserve developed well in the 60's and 70's.

In the 1980's Anne Bean of the University of Cape Town's Bolus Herbarium was instrumental in inspiring many groups, often called the Friends of... to assist Nature Reserves in the Western Cape. (Many of these Friends groups are still functioning today). The Wildlife Society (WESSA) heard of this, and asked Laurie and Vivienne Hilton to meet with Anne Bean at the Bolus Herbarium.

Inspired by these meetings, the Hiltons approached the current Curator of the Reserve, Nico Myburg, as well as the Mayor of Somerset West, Walter Stanford. Both parties enthusiastically supported the idea of a support group for the Reserve, and attended Friends meetings regularly.

On 17th February 1987 an inaugural meeting was held at the Bolus Herbarium attended by 45 prospective Friends. Laurie Hilton (see right) was elected as Chair, and Vivienne Hilton was elected as Secretary and so the Friends of the Helderberg Nature Reserve came into being. The Hiltons remained as Chair and Secretary from 1986 to 1991.

Nico Myberg

Friends Activities in the 1980's

Some of the first members included Patsy Way, Jes Mathews, Dot Smith, Gladys Hulse, Sheila Walker, Jenny Walker, Ben Kabebeeke, Mike Woods, Innes Koker and Marga Hofmeyer.

One of the early tasks assigned by Nico Myburg to the Friends was picking and naming various plants. They also collected protea seeds and rubbed down and varnished the many benches in the Reserve at that time.

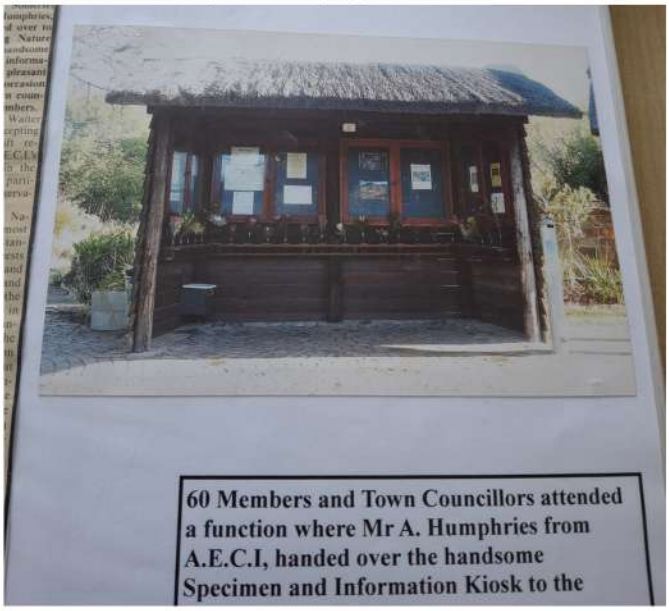
Friends Activities in the 1990's

From 1990's onwards the Friends contributed to the development of the Reserve in many ways. They decided early on to do fundraising. Fundraising projects included Burns evenings, Halloween dinners, concerts. talks, flower shows and more.
(Left: Flower show and Right: a Burns evening) .

Friends History continued...

As another fundraising project, the Friends opened an indigenous plant nursery in 1995.Various Friends helped with the planning, propagation of seeds, growing and selling of the plants.

When the Information Centre was opened in 1995, many volunteers helped with visitor interface. Eventually it was decided that volunteers would make goods for sale in the Centre. Both these efforts were successful in raising funds, along with the other events mentioned on the previous pages.


60 Members and Town Councillors attended a function where Mr A. Humphries from A.E.C.I, handed over the handsome Specimen and Information Kiosk to the

In addition to fundraising, Friends volunteers hacked once a month; monitored regrowth after fires; conducted expert talks/walks for foreign botanists and interested parties; labelled trees; ringed birds; helped with the Reserve's Environmental Education Centre programmes during school visits and more.

Reserve Projects funded by the Friends during the 1990's

The Friends had the Specimen and Information Kiosk built with a donation from the African Explosives and Chemical Industries in the Strand. Other projects included equipment for the Reserve staff like dart guns, 2-way radios, holding cages for animals as well as board walks in some areas.

Friends keep on supporting the Reserve!

As the years pass, the Friends have continued following in the footsteps of our illustrious forbears. Our support of the Reserve includes volunteering and fundraising. Volunteers help with visitor interface and sales at the Visitor Centre, communications, hacks, trail management, and interpretive walks.

The employment of interns and much needed equipment as well as various projects such as the board walk around the duck pond and the renovation of the restrooms have all been funded by the Friends. Each person's membership fees and some events helped provide funds for these projects.

Upcoming talks at the Reserve's HEC, Saturdays at 14h30

16th August 2025 –Steve Chadwick: A life lost on Sneeukop: How Maclear proved or disproved the earth to be "pear-shaped"

20th September 2025-Brett Wood and Connie van Niekerk: Running the Hottentots Holland Rim in 25 hours

See Facebook and our website for more information on these and other upcoming talks and interpretive walks.

The Friends want to sell this Brother (MFC). It is in tip-top condition, hardly used.

Please Call 021 851 4060 for more information or view it at the Visitor Centre

Helderberg Nature Reserve Proteas are in full bloom at last!

Right now there are many different protea species are flowering bountifully in the Reserve. They include include P. burchellii, P. laurifolia, P. coronata, P. repens, P. eximia, P. mundii, P. nitida, P. aurea, P. neriifolia. It is wonderful to see this since the mountain was reduced to ash 3 years ago.


P. Laurifolia above and P. Burchelli below

Most of them are accessible to everybody, for example along the Sugarbird trail, such stunning displays! The Mongoose trail is also a shower of proteas. You can also follow the jeep track from the far side of the dam up the western side of the reserve and down alongside the Erinvale fence to the lower parking areas for more viewings.

For the more energetic, the trails higher up the mountain offer even more flowers, especially the P. nitida that grow all the way up the slope. There are also many natural hybrids on the mountain which can sometimes make identifying the species difficult. *Many thanks to Freda Bonthuys for roaming the mountain to get these superb pictures*

Left: P. Burchelli cross P. Laurifolia
Above: P. Eximia

Below Left: P. aurea cross P. mundii;
Middle: P. Coronata; Right: P. repens

Proteas:Born in Fire

by Steve Chadwick, some photos too

June 2022
Steve C and well known local guide
Andreas Gronevald begin to survey fire damage
Pic courtesy of Stu Summerfield

Over the 11th / 12th June 2022 a severe fire burnt its way across the eastern flank of the Helderberg hills, causing damage to topography, flora and fauna. This article focuses on how proteas benefit from such fires.

Fires can harm some fynbos plants, help other plants' seeds germinate, and help protea seeds to disperse. Proteas consist of many small flowers (florets) firmly attached to the flower head and enclosed by colourful petals (brachts). After fertilisation, florets develops into seeds, which mature slowly over a few months. But when then the seeds are ready for dispersal most of them remain firmly attached to the flower head, so normal seed dispersal agents like wind, water and animals don't distribute the seeds very well. But fire burns the protea flower heads, which loosens all the seeds and they fall to the ground. Optimal seed dispersal!

Proteas also benefit from the smoke and ash generated by fires. Smoke stimulates seeds to germinate, and ash fertilises the ground.

Humanity versus nature

We have of course intervened and messed up nature's finely balanced harmony by our introduction of alien flora. Alien flora, one example being Australian bush, create much hotter 'burns', compared to our flora's less intense burns. So when there is a mix of alien and indigenous flora, the intensity of the burn means that our native flora / seeds are often burnt up and struggle to establish themselves again. As the aliens have adapted to the high heat, they thrive well after fires. In some cases the fast-growing aliens often overwhelm the less robust growth of the indigenous plants, which can totally eradicate them.

Acacia mearnsii

This is one reason why it is so important to eradicate alien growth, so that when veld fires come, the burn is relatively cool thus allowing the native seeds to survive and germinate. Black wattle (Acacia mearnsii) from Australia is one of our most invasive trees as they form seed banks in the soil that germinate rapidly after fire. Eradicating wattle in the Reserve will continue to be a long process that will take years to achieve.

The first Nitida Waboom bud

A single glorious reasertion of life

A single 'bloom' atop a Nitida Waboom
A promise of life to come
Green cotton trail marker lower right

Observations after the fire at the Reserve

As time went on, observations near the Waboom trail revealed that the lowly wild asparagus was one of the first to sprout. Soon after we saw shoots coming from the Waboom Proteas (P.Nitida).

It seemed that all the Waboom Proteas had survived, and looking at their burnt trunks, it became obvious to us that they had survived many previous fires. They were survivors, whereas it seemed that nearly all other types of proteas had perished.

Later, I was happy to find out that I was wrong, as when November 2023 came around we were graced by the bloom of several absolutely beautiful King Proteas on the White Eye trail (see left).

King Protea (Cynaroides) on HNR's
White Eye trail November 2023
Pic courtesy Hayley-May Wittridge

Reserve staff and Friends volunteers also scattered protea seeds in areas where aliens had been cleared after the fire. So both fire and human hands contributed to the Reserve blooming with protea flowers right now!

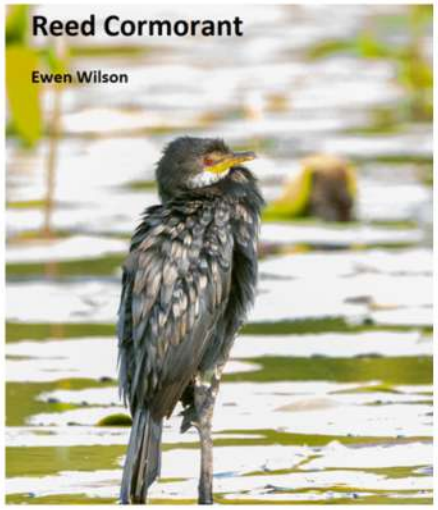
Birds sighted in the Reserve during April - July 2025

By Charles Britz and others.


Charles Britz leads an interpretive walk - Elizabeth Britz


In July, a white-backed duck was seen on the Duck Pond - not often seen here in the Reserve

During the season ((Spring, Summer, Autumn) Charles Britz conducts monthly interpretive walks for anyone interested in birds. Here are some of the more unusual birds (insect) observed at the Reserve during the autumn and early winter.



Helderberg Environmental Centre: Education Report

By Esmay Josephs, Conservation Coordinator, and interns Dante Mehr and Amy Stoffels

During the second quarter of 2025, the Conservation staff taught conservation-related subjects to 12 schools (various adult training was also conducted, but we focus on schools here).

Esmay Josephs and her very able team of interns, Dante Wehr and Amy Stoffels, designed and facilitated activities on birding, fynbos preservation, and water conservation. Each subject included presentations, guided hikes and related fun activities.

Please see below for pictures of some of the educational events. The Friends provided some funding for equipment such as binoculars as well as lunches for some under-privileged schools.

Somerset West Girls Brigade accompanying Amy Stoffels on a guided hike

Amy Stoffels taking Ekhaya Pre-schoolers for a guided hike

Dante Wehr presenting to Blouberg High School learners left and Blouberg H S learners doing a water activity, right

Vergezicht Private School learners making bird feeders and birdwatching

Wolfgat Community Skills Development Group on a guided hike

Phillipi Library Outing

JustSpace Academy learners presenting posters- right

Eco- Rangers Report

by *Wendy Norris* *who has been inspiring young people with a love of nature conservation for many years at the HNR.*
Contact Wendy at eco-rangers.co.za

Celebrating Life, Learning from Nature, and Growing Together was our theme for the second quarter of 2025

We began our second term with a heartfelt celebration of Mother's Day, a perfect opportunity to reflect on the life-giving role of both our own mothers and Mother Earth.

We explored the deep connection between motherhood and nature, learned about amazing animal mothers in the wild, and created something special as a tribute to our own moms.

Above: Beetles studied under a microscope and Below: Harmless beetles to take home!

Meet Poly: The Tree-Destroying Beetle

One of the most eye-opening sessions was our deep dive into the world of the Polyphagous Shot Hole Borer (PSHB). This tiny beetle is having a huge impact on South African trees, including those in our very own nature reserve and Somerset West. No one can escape the fact that our natural landscape has changed forever.

The Eco-Rangers studied it under microscopes, made beetle crafts, and learned how to spot and prevent infestations.

Tree Detectives in the Nature Reserve was the next step. Our mission: Find out if any of the reserve's trees were under attack by beetles like Poly. Eco-Rangers stepped up as young scientists and conservation heroes, inspecting bark, leaves, and tree trunks for signs of illness and infestation. It was real-world science in action!

Rainbows were also studied as they are a perfect subject during winter conditions and the fact that we've been lucky enough to spot a few out and about lately. Rainbows beautifully demonstrate how light and water come together to create something truly magical - the bright and colorful arc in the sky.

After looking at how rainbows occur, the Eco-Rangers grew a rainbow, created take home rainbow light shows and more- enjoying some bright, messy and fun experiments together!

Daisy the Rhino Orphan talk was a highlight of the term by Mila of the Caracal group. She shared her unforgettable visit with Daisy, a rhino orphan cared for by *Care for Wild Rhino Sanctuary*. Through videos and photos, we learned about the tragedy of poaching, how sanctuaries help and the heart-warming bond between Daisy and her zebra friend. We also made Rhino & Zebra decorations, not just as crafts, but as lasting
reminders of Daisy's story-and the countless lives saved through wildlife sanctuaries and anti-poaching programmes.

FHNR HACK REPORT

By James Silberbauer (photos too)

The May hack had to be cancelled due to strong rain, but in other hacks we worked along the White-eye trail (large black wattle in thick bush) and above the house (eucalypts and a large batch of pearl acacia).

Upcoming hack dates:

-

9 August 2025 starting at 8h00
13 Sept 2025 starting at 8h00
11 Oct 2025 starting at 8h00

Left: - Lisa Figenshou and Ian Findlay about to tackle aliens in ideal hacking weather
Right: Working hard!

Christy de Witt clearing pearl acacia

Below are some photos of flowers currently blooming in the Reserve by Freda Bonthuys and Louis van Wyk

The next FHNR Newsletter will be published in November, 2025

Issued by Friends of the Helderberg Nature Reserve I NPO No. 062-777-NPO PBO No. 130 002 827
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