



Newsletter

THE HIDDEN LIFE OF ANTLIONS

By Louis van Wyk (Biodiversity Area Coordinator)

As a child, I often noticed small, perfectly conical pits scattered across sandy patches of ground, yet paid them little attention. One day, I watched a friend gently coax a strange insect from one of these pits—a moment that sparked a quiet fascination. It was remarkable to realise that such a simple yet effective trap was the work of a tiny predator beneath the sand.

Years later, in December 2018, I photographed an antlion for the first time. Then in January 2025, I identified and photographed a delicate, winged adult form. Since then, I've had several opportunities to observe and photograph these extraordinary insects, each encounter deepening my appreciation for their unique and captivating life story. All adult phase encounters were at Helderberg Nature Reserve.

Antlions, (Mierleeu in Afrikaans) belonging to the family Myrmeleontidae, are among the most fascinating yet often overlooked insects in our natural environments. Their lifecycle is a striking example of transformation, patience, and predatory ingenuity.



The Adult Stage – A Brief, Elegant Finale

On emerging from its cocoon, the adult antlion is a strikingly different creature from its larval form. Now it resembles a delicate damselfly with two pairs of narrow veined wings. They fly fairly weakly mostly at dusk or night. Some of the adult antlions feed on nectar or pollen, while some species may not feed at all. Their very brief lives of a few weeks are aimed at reproduction. They remind us of the various ecological roles some animals can evidence during their different life stages.

PS See references for this article on Page 10



Top right: Antlion pit **Right:** Larval stage
Top Left: Adult antlion wings closed
Bottom left: Adult antlion wings open

The Larval Stage – Nature's Sand Trap Engineers

The stage most people unknowingly encounter is the larval phase. Antlion larvae are also called "doodlebugs" due to the winding trails they leave in sand as they search for suitable trap sites.

- The larva constructs a conical pit by moving backwards in circles, flicking sand out with its head to create a steep-sided trap (Griffiths, 1980).
- These pits function as highly effective traps for ants and other small arthropods. When prey slips down the loose slope, the larva uses its powerful, sickle-shaped jaws to seize it.
- If prey attempts escape, the antlion flicks sand upward to destabilise it and force it back down (Eisner et al., 1991).

Remarkably, antlion larvae can survive for extended periods without food—sometimes weeks or even months—thanks to a very low metabolic rate (Badano & Pantaleoni, 2014).

Pupation stage – A Hidden Transformation

Once the larva has grown sufficiently (this stage can last from several months to a few years depending on conditions)

- The larva starts its metamorphosis by spinning a silk cocoon, incorporating sand grains for camouflage and protection.
- The insect transitions into its pupal stage in its cocoon buried beneath the surface

This phase typically lasts around 3–4 weeks, though environmental factors such as temperature can influence its duration (Badano & Pantaleoni, 2014).

Friends of the Helderberg Nature Reserve News

Helderberg Nature Reserve Trail Run

By Steve Mendes

The much anticipated Helderberg Nature Reserve Trail Run in aid of the Friends of the Helderberg Nature Reserve, took place on Saturday, 21 March. Participants could not have asked for a better morning, with cool, clear weather and magnificent 360-degree views, made even better by a gorgeous Helderberg sunrise.

257 entrants enjoyed the 3km, 5km and 7km routes, with the latter being challenged as they conquered the Nasty ENRG Hill climb to be rewarded with a flavourful ENRG experience at the top. A variety of flats, wide open trails, and sweeping single tracks kept the routes interesting, and the views majestic, no matter which direction you looked.

Coca Cola made sure that everyone was well hydrated at our drinks stations, and every finisher was rewarded with a bottle of water and a juicy apple, courtesy of Vergelegen Food Lover's Market.



Our little ones weren't left out as they took part in the Bug Hunt around the lower pond, facilitated by pupils from Somerset House Primary School and our Helderberg Environmental Center warriors, Amy Stoffels and Zizo Madolo (Conservation Interns).

All in all, a magnificent morning, full of laughs, fun and magical moments! A huge thank you to all who attended, and of course to the many volunteers, the Reserve staff and the team from Myriad Events for making everything run so smoothly.

Thanks also go to the many business community participants who came to the party and provided amazing prizes for our winners and, of course, for the lucky draw.

By coming on board this year, **our title partner, Rawson Properties**, Helderberg, enabled us to ensure that all monies from the entries went directly to the Friends of the Helderberg Nature Reserve. These considerable funds will help the Friends to continue doing the amazing work they do for the Reserve.

Other participating partners included Axis Event Solutions; Nasty ENRG, Food Lovers Market, Vergelegen Plein; Ground Central; Merkava; Peninsula Beverages; Sportsmans Warehouse; Lourensford wines; Virgin Active Padel, Lourensford; BodyTech; Giuseppe's; Ginologist; Sanook; Whizzo; Asics; Spar, Lion's Square. **Thank you to each and every one of them. Please support them in the future, just as they have supported us.**



Steve Mendes



The Friends of the Helderberg Nature Reserve
invite you to attend our
Annual General Meeting
on 13 May, 2026

Members and Non-Members are welcome to attend
PS: Emails will be sent with more details shortly

Friends of the Helderberg Nature Reserve News

Apologies for the online membership portal glitches

It has come to our attention that the new improved online renewal system is not working as it should. For this we apologise. Situations like these are not ideal, and we thank you all for your patience and understanding of the situation. Please keep reporting any further issues you may have to Mary Koekemoer: membership@helderbergnaturereserve.co.za or else call the Visitor Centre. We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to those of you who have contacted us to pay any outstanding fees owed because of the system glitch. We appreciate your honesty and the action taken to rectify the issue.

The following issues have been reported to us:

- *Members are selecting all required memberships and being issued all relevant cards, but being charged for only half of the membership fees
- *Members are unable to add additional persons to their profiles
- *Payment for memberships are unable to be finalised as the payment button is missing
- *Membership data is incorrect or persons cannot be found in the system

We have received confirmation from our IT system provider that these errors have been rectified and that the online system is again working as it should. The system is being monitored and further issues will be dealt with as they arise. We would urge members to return to the membership portal and renew their memberships as soon as possible to avoid any further delays to their access to the Reserve.

As a secondary precaution we have negotiated with the City/ Reserve Management for an extension of the free entry period allowed for membership renewals at the Visitor Centre. The extension period lasts until the 30th April, 2026. To take advantage of this concession, members need to comply with the following:

- 1: Present their out-of-date card/s to the staff member on duty at the Reserve entrance and explain that they intend to enter for the purpose of membership renewal at the Visitor Centre
- 2: The card details including the membership number of each member will be recorded by the staff member
- 3: On exiting the Reserve, members must proffer their renewed cards to the staff member, so the renewals can be recorded.

We would like to thank the City of Cape Town / Reserve Management for their understanding of the situation and their willingness to accommodate this process as we finalise our memberships for the coming year.

Penny Clifton Smith
Chair



Many thanks to the Visitor Centre Volunteers

This last month has been hectic at the Visitor Centre! Fortunately our volunteers are a very calm and able bunch and they were able to deal with the many reports of online glitches very helpfully, as well as renewing an unusual number of renewal applications all at the same time. Very well done, volunteers!

Left : One of the busy times at the Visitor Centre during the renewals rush

Friends of the Helderberg Nature Reserve Interpretive Walks for April to June 2026

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 as the guides explain 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 will improve your walk! And of course, binoculars will enhance your experience. Finally, if you are going on night walks you will also need torches and warm clothing.

Bird Walks

Wednesday 13 May Meet at 08h00 at the Information Centre
Saturday 23 May Meet at 08h00 at the Information Centre
Saturday 6 June Meet at 08h00 at the Information Centre



Above: Eye to eye with one of our eagle owls by Linda McPherson



*Amaryllis Belladonna native to the Western Cape, bloomed here early March
Elaine Harcombe*

Day Walks

Sunday 26 April Fynbos Identification - Meet at 08h00 at the Visitors Centre

Sunday 24 May Protea Identification - Meet at 08h00 at the Visitors Centre

Night Walks

Saturday 18 April New Moon Walk - Meet at 18h30 at the Visitor Centre

Saturday 16 May New Moon walk - Meet at 20h00 at the Reserve Gate

Bookings are essential for all walks

It is easy to book: Just send an email requesting a booking form to info@helderbergnaturereserve.co.za. Then complete the form and return it along with proof of payment to the same email address. Your tickets will be returned by email which confirms your booking and gains you access to the Reserve (no further payment needed). But best to book well ahead of the time, as walks fill up quickly (only 24 persons per walk).

NB: The walks depend on the weather, so walks are occasionally cancelled. If the weather is inclement, you will be notified by phone. You are then entitled to book, via email, another upcoming walk without further payment. 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).

The iNaturalist City Nature Challenge takes place this year from April 24-27, over the May Day long Weekend. Everyone is encouraged to participate. More information will be available shortly on our Facebook page/ Visitor Centre.

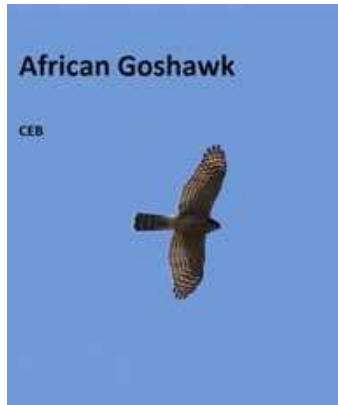
Birds observed in the Reserve from January to March 2026

by Charles Britz (Charles has been a keen birder for many years and currently guides the Friends -sponsored interpretive Bird walks)
Photos obtained from various sources including Charles

From my observations over the last three months I have some good news to report along with some rather daunting news!

Some birds rarely seen in the Reserve were sighted recently:

- *A first sighting of a **Juvenile African Goshawk**, and later an adult bird was seen floating over the Reserve. These sightings are encouraging as raptors are rarely seen these days due to the recent loss of big trees and wooded areas in the Reserve
- * An **Olive Woodpecker**- a welcome sight as woodpeckers are also seldom seen in the Reserve due to tree loss.
- * **Acacia Pied Barbet** could be a first in the Helderberg Reserve, but there seems to be an increase in numbers in our area.
- ***Amethyst Sunbird**, also a relatively new arrival in the Helderberg Basin.



From left to right: African Goshawk; Olive Woodpecker; Acacia Pied Barbet and Amethyst Sunbird.

Other interesting birds sighted in the past three months:

- * **The Little Bittern** is a shy and secretive bird, and though reported by Hayley Wittridge, not often seen these days.
- * **Hamerkops** have been seen a few times recently.
- * The **Brown-backed Honeybird** is a shy secretive bird, mostly alone unless ready to breed. It's a brood parasite, like the Cuckoo family. It has an olive brown upper body which is contrasted with whitish below, as well as white outer tail feathers, and a sharp pointy, slightly drooped beak.
- * **African Black Ducks** seem to have made a regular return to the Reserve, but it maybe due to the habitat change along the banks of Lourens River at Radloff Park.



Left to Right : Little Bittern and Hamerkops Below Left: Brown-Backed Honey Bird and Below Right: African Black Ducks



Walking with Andreas Groenewald in the HN Reserve

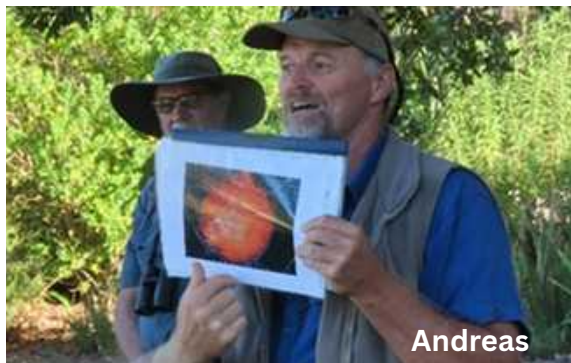
By Marion Herholdt (text) and Frieda Bonthuys (photos)

Have you thought about joining one of the Reserve's interpretive walks? We did just that. We joined Andreas' recent Protea Identification Interpretive walk. We learnt a lot and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. Here is what happened:

At 8am, Guide Andreas Groenewald introduced himself to us, an enthusiastic group of about 15 on a beautiful, bright and still day. Andreas is a registered Field Guides Association of South Africa (FGASA) guide who was born and bred in the Helderberg, and who considered the mountain his playground when a child.

Andreas started by giving us an overview of the Protea family, which was full of interesting facts from why the family is so named (after the Greek god Proteus who was a shape shifter – because there is so much variation), its range (across all the southern continents, not just Africa), to its age (back to the time of the dinosaurs). This was given in just in the first few minutes, and set the tone for a walk full of information and fascinating stories as well as the beauty of the plants themselves.

Proteas are one of the three groups that make up fynbos, and you may be surprised that the group also includes the Wild Almond, Macadamia and Bottle Brush trees. Andreas explained that scientists know this from shared characteristics such as the stems having radial lines like spokes as well as year rings, and the arrangement of petals. There was quite a bit of Latin and maths involved. Throughout the walk we referred to Tony Rebelo's definitive Proteas book, which was regularly passed around the group. Andreas also encouraged us to use and record on iNaturalist app, which provides vital information to scientists.



Andreas



Protea Repens (Sugarbush)

As we digested what we had learnt so far, we took a walk on a side trail with just a bit of bundu bashing to view a sugarbush protea. Being on an 'official' walk we were allowed to pick and even taste leaves – a bit of a thrill as this would usually be strictly prohibited. We learnt how the plant protects itself from the sun and from predators. The very important subject of fire also came up – a theme that continued through the walk. Proteas have evolved to cope with, and eventually actually need fire, but the amount and frequency of fire these days is a problem, as many of the plants take years to mature. It's an even bigger problem in dryer areas, such as the Cederberg, where proteas can take nine years to flower.

We next headed to the 'garden' and, with the sun getting hotter, enjoyed a ramble on the Batis and White Eye walks, where we learnt more about the Honeybush, Wild Almond, Ground Proteas (pollinated by rodents), Cone Bush and one of my favourites, the Pincushion. And of course we could not leave without visiting the King - the magnificent King Protea - although not in flower at the moment (most Proteas flower April to August), we learnt that the plant is easily recognized as the only Protea with a long leaf stalk.

We looped back to the Visitor Center at about 10:30 and reflected on an experience that combined a lesson in Latin and Greek, history, botany, fire management, and even gardening tips for anyone that fancies trying growing Proteas at home. With the background of the beautiful Helderberg, superb weather, an engaged group and a guide with such wide knowledge and passion for his subject, I can't think of a better way to spend a morning.

More than 3 glandular teeth on the leaf identifies the *Leucospermum* (pincushion) when not flowering.



P. cynaroides (king protea) is the only protea with a long leaf stalk



Scorpion taken by Andreas at the Reserve on a night walk



Andreas Groenewald
Wildlife / Trees & Succulents

Helderberg Environmental Centre: Education Report

By Esmay Josephs, People and Conservation Coordinator, and Dante Mehr, Amy Stoffels and Zizo Madola

Farewell Dante

In January, Dante Wehr handed in her resignation as a People and Conservation Officer at the Helderberg Nature Reserve to pursue a career in teaching English to foreign students. Dante worked with the City of Cape Town for 5 years mostly in her position as a People and Conservation Officer. On her last day, Management organised a farewell party for her to celebrate her time at Helderberg where a few speeches were given by Louis van Wyk (Biodiversity Area Coordinator) and Esmay Josephs (Conservation Coordinator). Zizo Madola was also welcomed in place of Dante.

Below left: Dante; Middle: Dante and Louis Right: Esmay. Dante and Amy Stoffels, (People and Conservation Officer). Far Right: Zizo Madola.



Conservation Education conducted by HEC staff (January to March)

Fundi Rainbow Educare children visited the Reserve for a guided walk, play, and a picnic lunch.

Somerset House (Grade 6 and 7) visited The Reserve in February and early March. They learned about the importance of Wetlands as well as participating in a guided interpretive walk.

In March **Somerset College** learned about pollination and seed dispersal as well as going on an interpretive hike.

Also in March both **Beaumont Primary School and Blouberg High School** visited for Conservation education. Blouberg High School's Grade 10 Tourism class was accompanied by Elzette Krynauw, Senior People and Conservation Officer at Blouberg Nature Reserve. Elzette wrote afterwards to commend Amy's communications with her before the event and as well as commending her on her preparation for and management of her presentation and the debate session. As Louis van Wyk commented: "@Amy you are setting a very high standard and we are incredibly fortunate to have you on board. I'm incredibly proud of the product that we deliver at the HEC. That goes for all the P&C staff. Thank you for all the effort and keep up the fantastic work."



Amy presenting on the importance of wetlands to Somerset House

Below: Somerset College learners preparing for a debate



Zizo guiding the educare children

Eco-Schools Report

by Freya Brett who has mentored and lobbied for Eco-Schools for many years.
Contact Freya for more information at 082 708 1016 or helderberg.ecoschools@gmail.com

The 2025 Eco-School year ended on a high note. Eco-schools received awards for their continued dedication towards spreading the conservation message over many years. This message includes empowering learners and teachers with practical real-world skills and inspiring a deep understanding of sustainability.

Beaumont Primary School has set an exceptional high standard for environmental education. Over the years they have done various conservation informative projects on sustainability which included both practical and theoretical strands. Some of their practical work was done at the Helderberg Nature Reserve.

Recently Beaumont School was awarded an Outstanding Evaluation Report by the Schools Evaluation Board for their outstanding academic achievements as well as their 17-year long journey as an Eco-School.

Newberry House Montessori School has also made an outstanding effort of encouraging conservation education in the school and the community. A recent project by the Eco-Committee of the Middle School involved designing a walk and running trail at Lourensford Estate to promote a healthy lifestyle and appreciation of nature. They also arranged a Fire-Fly Walk and a visit from the staff of a reptile farm staff.

Sir Lowry's Pass Primary School has also been an Eco-School for many years. Currently they are initiating a drive against the dangers of littering and the positive effects of recycling. A fashion show was arranged, demonstrating students' talents at designing garments made from recycled articles.

Lastly, Strand Secondary School's Eco-Club project this year involved improving their Indigenous Garden with more trees and plants. This project included the recycling of large plastic bottles into containers for seedlings. Students were also involved in repurposing discarded articles into something still usable.

Congratulations Eco-Schools! You are helping to save the Earth!

See right: Some learners from Sir Lowry's Pass Primary School with their teacher, Ms Rachel Krige, at their Fancy Dress parade.



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

The Helderberg Eco-Rangers are off to a wonderful start in 2026! Our nature group continues to explore the outdoors, inspire curious young minds, and give children the opportunity to make new friends while learning how to care for the natural world around them.

This year our groups are smaller, which allows for more meaningful learning experiences for each child. We still have space for a few more young nature enthusiasts to join us, so please get in touch if your child enjoys nature, plants, animals, and outdoor adventures. Parents and grandparents are always welcome to join our sessions free of charge.

NB: We are also looking for enthusiastic individuals / volunteers to join our team - people who love children, nature, crafting, outdoor exploration, and natural science.



Eco-Rangers continued

The Eco-Rangers learnt a lot this quarter with great enthusiasm. Each learning experience was supported by exploration in nature as well as relevant craft projects. The younger ones learnt about how wild life is rehabilitated by vets and other experts. Much interest and fun as well as empathic feelings were generated as they practiced being vets.

They also learnt with great interest about spiders, how many different kinds and their different habits. There was much interest in the South African rain spider which can grow as large as a person's hand. The craft spiders made were almost as varied and amazing as their wild examples!

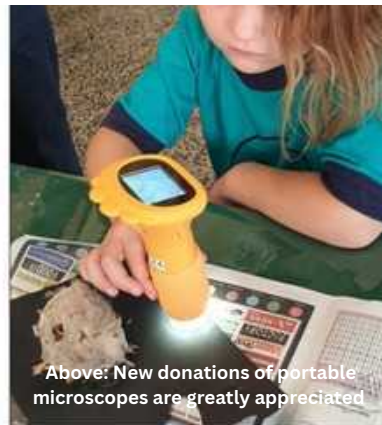


The older rangers learnt about the large varieties of wild animals that inhabit urban areas and how to help them to be safe. Birds flying into windows was a special concern, and decals were made to stick on windows to help birds become aware and hopefully then avoid flying into them.

Finally the rangers went to Paardevlei to examine this urban wildlife, living as they do surrounded by houses, offices and shopping areas. They had a very exciting time there as the area was bursting with healthy wildlife! They saw many varieties of animals that live in and around the lake including greater flamingos (see far left) and spoonbills (see below left). They also observed a few raptors circling overhead.

Many thanks were expressed to the Reserve staff and the Friends for their continued support of the Eco-Rangers.

For our part we are thankful that the Eco-Rangers, the HEC staff and Eco-Schools are all helping our young people to care for the earth.



Above: New donations of portable microscopes are greatly appreciated



Paardevelei

FHNR HACK REPORT

By James Silberbauer (photos too)

The December to February 2026 hacks saw us clearing scattered invasives in the area above the house, between Hillcrest Road and the Duck Pond as well as concentrating on french broom on the western border, roughly adjacent to the entrance of King's Kloof farm. This is a new target for us (this plant is new to the Reserve).

NB: If you are interested in hacking please contact James at 078 306 1660.



Hackers work through a patch of french broom



Marianne Parker at work

Below: Historical picture showcasing king proteas and the mountain

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The next FHNR Newsletter will be published in July, 2026

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